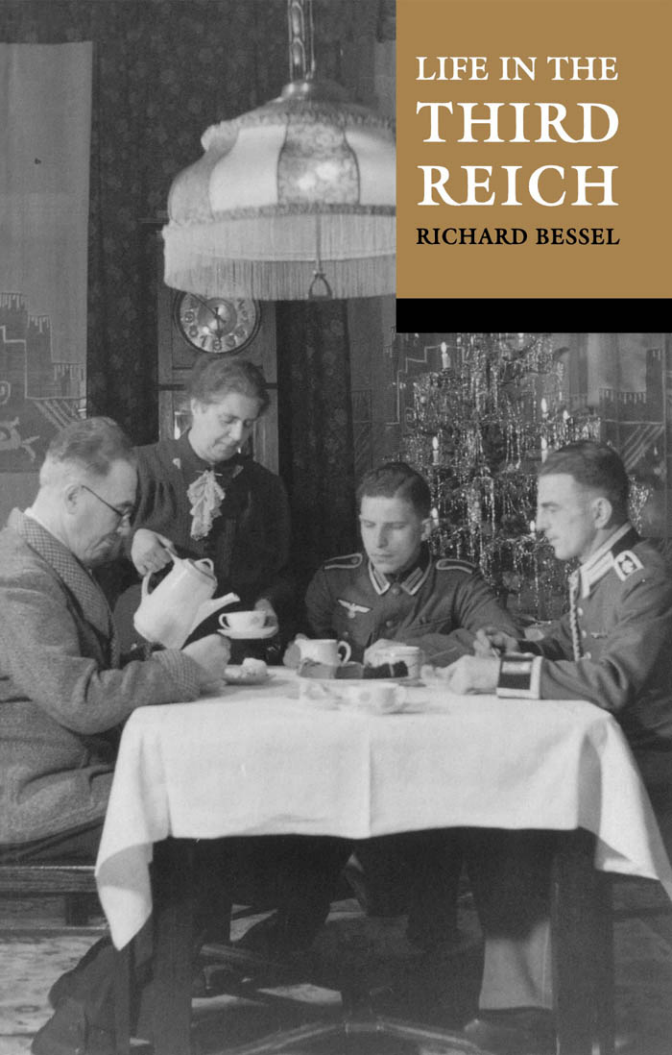


LIFE IN THE THIRD REICH

RICHARD BESSEL



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Edited, with an Introduction, by

RICHARD BESSEL

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PREFACE

THIS book contains eight essays originally published between October 1985 and February 1986 in *History Today*, together with an extended and updated introduction. I would like to express my gratitude to the people who helped make this book possible: Sabine Phillips, who typed the original manuscript; Richard Deveson, who translated the articles by Detlev Peukert and Ulrich Herbert from the German; Juliet Gardiner, the former editor of *History Today*, who originally commissioned the articles; and the late Jacqueline Guy, who was Art and Production Editor of *History Today* and who made tremendous efforts in gathering the illustrations.

RICHARD BESSEL

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CONTENTS

Abbreviations	ix
List of Illustrations	xi
INTRODUCTION	xiii
<i>Richard Bessel</i>	
POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND THE NAZI SEIZURE OF POWER	1
<i>Richard Bessel</i>	
VILLAGE LIFE IN NAZI GERMANY	17
<i>Gerhard Wilke</i>	
YOUTH IN THE THIRD REICH	25
<i>Detlev Peukert</i>	
HITLER AND THE GERMANS	41
<i>Ian Kershaw</i>	
THE NAZI STATE RECONSIDERED	57
<i>Michael Geyer</i>	
NAZI POLICY AGAINST THE JEWS	69
<i>William Carr</i>	
SOCIAL OUTCASTS IN THE THIRD REICH	83
<i>Jeremy Noakes</i>	
GOOD TIMES, BAD TIMES: MEMORIES OF THE THIRD REICH	97
<i>Ulrich Herbert</i>	
Suggestions for Further Reading	111
Notes on Contributors	115
Index	117

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ABBREVIATIONS

BDM	<i>Bund Deutscher Mädel</i> , League of German Girls
Gestapo	<i>Geheime Staatspolizei</i> , Secret State Police
KPD	<i>Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands</i> , Communist Party of Germany
NSDAP	<i>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei</i> , National Socialist German Workers Party
OKW	<i>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht</i> , Military High Command
SA	<i>Sturmabteilungen</i> , Storm Sections
SD	<i>Sicherheitsdienst</i> , Security Service
SPD	<i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> , Social Democratic Party of Germany
SS	<i>Schutzstaffel</i> , Protection Squads

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Christmas market in the Berlin Lustgarten, 1934 (Ullstein)
2. The Café Kranzler in Berlin, 1939 (Ullstein)
3. Workers assembling to start building the first Autobahn, September 1933 (Stadtarchiv Frankfurt am Main)
4. A picnic at the side of the Autobahn between Berlin and Stettin (Ullstein)
5. German family scene from 1937: 'The SA uniform is ironed' (Ullstein)
6. Poster of the 'Strength through Joy' organisation (Bundesarchiv/Weidenfeld Archives)
7. A butchers' singing association's outing along the Rhine in the mid-1930s (Gerhard Wilke)
8. Poster of Hitler: 'One People, One Reich, One Leader' (Bilderdienst Süddeutscher Verlag)
9. Public face of the Führer: Hitler with young children (Weimar Archive)
10. Photos from a book on youth criminality, published in 1941 (Bundesarchiv, Cologne)
11. A youth gang, the Navajos from Cologne, arrested during Easter 1940 (Bundesarchiv, Cologne)
12. Public hanging of twelve Edelweiss Pirates in Cologne-Ehrenfeld, 1944 (Bilderdienst Süddeutscher Verlag)
13. Conscripts undergoing medical tests in Berlin, June 1937 (The Photo Source)
14. Street scene on the Kurfürstendamm in Berlin, October 1941 (Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz)
15. Visit from the Front, in the village of Körle, 1943 (Gerhard Wilke)
16. Young women from Körle visiting injured soldiers in hospital, 1942 (Gerhard Wilke)
17. A collection in Körle for the victims of Allied bombing raids (Gerhard Wilke)
18. Roll-call at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, April 1933 (Ullstein)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

19. Tailors' workshop at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, February 1941 (Popperfoto)
20. Nazi activists affixing signs to the windows of Jewish shops, April 1933 (Weimar Archive)
21. A sign in front of Berlin allotments: 'Jews are not welcome here' (Ullstein)
22. Cleaning up in Berlin after the pogrom of November 1938 (Ullstein)
23. Round-up of Jewish men in Oldenburg, November 1938 (Yad Vaschem, Jerusalem/Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz)
24. Herding of Jews into a ghetto in Kielce, October 1939 (Ullstein)
25. Women and children shortly before their trip to the gas chambers at Auschwitz (State Jewish Museum, Prague/Weidenfeld Archives)
26. An arrested Gypsy family with German military police in Russia, 1942 (Bilderdienst Süddeutscher Verlag)
27. A mother wearing protective clothing during an air raid in Berlin, 1943 (Bilderdienst Süddeutscher Verlag)

INTRODUCTION

Richard Bessel

FEW historical subjects are so emotive as the Third Reich, and few have stimulated so much general interest. The reasons for this are many: the Nazi regime unleashed the most destructive war in the history of the modern world, laying waste to much of the European continent and, through Germany's defeat, ensuring the dominance of the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, in European affairs for nearly half a century. Its flamboyant, theatrical style of politics—passed down to us through contemporary newsreels (which had reached a level of considerable sophistication, not least with sound recording, during the 1930s)—continues to fascinate and to horrify. Its creator and leader, Adolf Hitler, still commands widespread interest—as evidenced most recently by the deservedly enthusiastic reception of Ian Kershaw's mammoth new two-volume biography.¹ And its sheer barbaric criminality—culminating in the murder of millions of innocent human beings during the Second World War—remains one of the central historical and moral problems of the twentieth century. The Nazi regime fortunately is dead and buried, but the questions raised by its appalling history continue to demand explanations.

The main outlines of the history of Nazi Germany are well known: the collapse of Weimar democracy, the rise of Hitler, the erection of a brutal dictatorship, rearmament, the launching of the Second World War, the persecution and mass murder of European Jews, the total defeat of the German Reich. Few, if any, political regimes have been sub-

¹ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (London, 1998); Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis* (London, 2000).

jected to such close scrutiny, not least because Nazi Germany's military defeat left its governmental records available to researchers remarkably quickly. Yet in the past couple of decades the interests of many historians of modern Germany have gone beyond the familiar contours of that country's recent past. The remarkable changes which have taken place in the approaches taken by historians of modern Germany have brought new perspectives to analyses of the Nazi regime. Local and regional studies, examinations of social and cultural questions, investigations into how people lived their daily lives under Nazi rule, as well as new analyses of the policies of applied racism, persecution, and extermination, have done much to enrich and alter our understanding of 'the course of German history'.

Recent shifts in emphasis have been due not just to changes in fashion among historians. More than half a century has elapsed since the Third Reich came crashing down. Much archive material, both at local and regional level and in the states of the former Soviet bloc in eastern Europe, has become readily available only relatively recently. Perhaps even more importantly, although the period is still close enough to allow us to question those who lived through it in their youth, enough time has elapsed for such questioning to have lost the personal accusatory overtones which marked discussions during the 1960s and 1970s about the nature of fascism and the responsibility of the older generation (now largely passed away) for the crimes of National Socialism. The issues presented by the history of Nazi Germany are no less highly charged today than they ever have been—something underscored yet again by the heated public debates which arose after the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.² However, we are now able to grapple with them in ways which a generation ago would have been difficult, if not impossible.

One early indication of this was the essay competition among German school pupils, the 'Schülerwettbewerb Deutsche Geschichte' sponsored by the Körber Foundation in the early 1980s, on the subject of 'Daily Life under National Socialism'. This attracted tens of thousands of entrants, and led to local archives becoming inundated with teenagers examining local newspapers and administrative records from the 1930s. Pupils investigated such subjects as the history of their own schools during the Nazi period, life in concentration camps, the persecution of the Jewish minority in their communities, struggles in local church organisations, the activities of the Hitler Youth, working-class resistance; and a number of the studies developed into quite sophisticated and informative articles, which subsequently were published under the title 'Nazis and Neighbours'.³ It would have been difficult to imagine such activity—the public questioning of the generations which had lived through the Third Reich by their descendants, in order to discover rather than to accuse—twenty or thirty years earlier. At that time, during the 1950s and 1960s, the scars left behind by Nazism and war were too raw to allow constructive public dialogue between the generations; the essential task during the immediate postwar decades had

² Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London, 1996). On the debates provoked by Goldhagen's book: Julius H. Schoeps (ed.), *Ein Volk von Mördern? Die Dokumentation zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse um die Rolle der Deutschen im Holocaust* (Hamburg, 1996); Norman G. Finkelstein and Ruth Bettina Birn, *A Nation on Trial. The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth* (New York, 1998); Johannes Heil and Rainer Erb (eds.), *Geschichtswissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit. Der Streit um Daniel J. Goldhagen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998).

³ Dieter Galinski, Ulrich Herbert, and Ulla Lachauer (eds.), *Nazis und Nachbarn. Schüler erforschen den Alltag im Nationalsozialismus* (Hamburg, 1982).

been to integrate the millions of former supporters of Hitler quietly into the new democratic order, not to dig up their often compromised past. More recently, the spotlight has been focused more sharply on the application and the experience of Nazi racism, on the perpetrators and victims of Nazi genocide. Attention has been drawn to the astounding degree to which racism permeated almost all aspects of public life, from the operations of the criminal investigative police to the administration of marriage by the German bureaucracy, and to the sometimes shocking degree of voluntary cooperation with the Gestapo by members of the public willing to denounce their neighbours. And, as the focus has shifted more towards the second half of the short history of the Third Reich, to the war years, close attention has been given to the murderous occupation regimes in eastern Europe,⁴ as well as to the experiences of the more than 17 million people who served in the armed forces of the Third Reich.

The attention given to the ways in which people actually lived their lives during the Nazi period has altered the ways in which many historians view the Third Reich. To be sure, the interest in the history of everyday life, which was the rage particularly during the 1980s, ran the risk of getting lost in the minutiae of day-to-day concerns in one local community after another and of overlooking the fact that the Third Reich was in a perpetual state of emergency and that people's everyday experiences were shaped by a political system which murdered millions of people. However, the recent upsurge of interest in and research on Nazi policies of mass murder has ensured that such has not been the case. In any event, it is clear that the early focus on Nazi politics as

⁴ A sample of this new work may be found in Ulrich Herbert (ed.), *National Socialist Extermination Policies. Contemporary German Perspectives and Controversies* (New York and Oxford, 2000).