

**Richard J. Evans, *Le Troisième Reich. L'avènement*,
vol. I, Paris, Flammarion, 2009, 800 p. et
Le Troisième Reich, 1933-1939, vol. II, Paris,
Flammarion, 2009, 1000 p.**

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The famous British historian, Richard J. Evans, the current Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge, is best remembered for having demolished the reputation of David Irving, the sinister Holocaust-denier, in the 2000 libel trial brought by Irving against American historian Deborah Lipstadt. It was during this period that Evans first became aware of “the growing fragmentation of knowledge on Nazi Germany” (vol. I, p. 25).

With remarkable speed, Evans remedied the lack of an overall account of the Third Reich¹. Within five years, he published three exhaustive yet readable volumes covering not only the period of 1933-1945, but also the Bismarck, WWI, Weimar periods (vol. I) and even the legacy of Nazism in Europe after 1945 and on to the present (vol. III). The first two volumes going from 1871 to 1939 have recently been translated to French, the third being in preparation.

“These three books are addressed in the first place to people who know nothing about the subject, or who know a little and would like to know more” (vol. I, p. 8). The original English edition of the books contain numerous photos, posters, cartoons and paintings, thus helping the targeted unspecialised readers visualise the period. Some of them are highly interesting: Röhm posing as a bureaucrat behind his desk at home or a Nazi cartoon distilling a positive image of the “re-education” camps. Why the present French edition systematically cut all these valuable visual aids is no less than a riddle.

Evans went on saying that he hopes that “specialists will find something of interest in [his books], but they are not the primary readership for which the books are intended”. This is the crucial sentence that a specialised historian ought to keep in mind if he intends to review Evans’ trilogy.

Among others, British historian David Cesarani reviewed the first volume². In an otherwise laudatory review, he complains about “the absence of Hitler” throughout

¹ One may cite some broad accounts such as William L. Shirer’s best-seller, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960), or *Deutschland 1933-1945* edited by Karl Dietrich Bracher, Manfred Funke and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen (1992). The first is rather flawed by its historical determinism as regards German history. The second, too technical for an unspecialised reader, is not translated to English. Moreover, the recent discovery of new materials, e.g. the Goebbels diaries or the appointments book of Himmler, has been requiring a new synthesis.

² *The Independent*, 24 October 2003, (<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/>).

the pages dealing with the behind-the-scenes political intrigues during the Weimar period. Cesarani is certainly right. However, any historian specialised in one or another aspect of the Third Reich could find an unelaborated point in Evans' books. The author of this present review, as a young and modest researcher on Nazi propaganda, could point out in the same volume the scarce use of Goebbels' magazine *Der Angriff*, without which "the Berlin NSDAP may have perished"³.

Yet doing this would mean to ignore Evans' warning. This is a comprehensive account addressing to curious persons. That is why the renowned British historian Ian Kershaw is right when he describes the books as "the most comprehensive history in any language of the disastrous epoch of the Third Reich".

Evans' approach is indeed "comprehensive". He did not only go into details of the political and military, but also economical, social and cultural aspects of the period. No wonder in that to the extent that Evans is a social historian.

Evans has also interested in the historiography of the Third Reich. Relating the torturous relations between historians and the Nazi establishment, he criticises their backward – rather than forward – history reading (vol. II, p. 353). Evans might be implicitly criticising some of his own colleagues, for whom the German political culture inherited from the 19th century unavoidably made of the 20th century Germans easy preys for the Nazis.

Throughout the first volume, Evans shows that this historical determinism is unfounded and that at some crucial moments German history could have taken a completely different turn. The first volume is perhaps the most innovating one. It is indeed revolutionary to devote 350 odd pages to the period prior to 1933, encompassing the Bismarck, Wilhelm and Weimar eras.

The reader is told how the anti-Semitic, eugenic and racist fantasies had been formulated and circulated throughout the end of the 19th century Germany. However Evans is quick to introduce some important nuances: these ideas were far from forming "a coherent or unified ideology", e.g. not all the social Darwinists were anti-Semites (vol. I, p. 69). Yet these ideas were in the air not the least because of their adoption by the mainstream parties for electoral concerns (vol. I, p. 62). "Many of the ingredients that would later go into the potent and eclectic ideological brew of National Socialism" were already swirling well before WWI (vol. I, p. 64).

Yet Nazism was "an avoidable catastrophe"⁴. According to Evans, the two matrixes of Nazism are WWI and the 1929 Stock Market Crash, which radicalised the political options. The author of *The German Unemployed: Experiences and Consequences of Mass Unemployment from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich*⁵ (1987) gives rather a lively description of the tragic consequences of the Great Crash in Germany (vol. I, p. 291-311).

³ Russel Lemmons, *Goebbels and Der Angriff*, Lexington, 1994, p. 128.

⁴ Expression coined by Dennison Rusinow in his 1995 essay to describe the break-up of Tito's Yugoslavia.

⁵ Richard J. Evans, London, C. Helm, 1987.

For the sake of nuance, Evans goes perhaps too far as he argues that a military dictatorship in 1932-1933 could have prevented Germany from lapsing into Nazism (vol. I, p. 524-525). While he admits that the generals would have been as willing as Hitler to make out of Germany a leading European power through war, at least, he contends, this war would have been a conventional one – without Auschwitz and Treblinka. Even though Evans himself concedes in a footnote that this is a mere speculation (vol. I, p. 617, n. 120), his admission should have rather been inserted into the main text.

To classify National Socialism whether as a revolutionary or a reactionary movement is a classical debate among historians. Before establishing a conventional middle-way between the two approaches, Evans clarifies one point: “Many historians have argued that these values were essentially pre-industrial, or pre-modern. Yet this argument rests on a simplistic equation of democracy with modernity” (vol. I, p. 531). “Modern” is after all a neutral adjective. Racial anti-Semitism as opposed to traditional, i.e. religious anti-Semitism, Social Darwinism and the supremacy of the Aryan race were all “modern” ideas emerged at the end of the 19th century (vol. I, p. 58-75). Along with other conservative ideas (blood and soil, return to the golden age, family values, etc.), “Nazism offered a synthesis of the revolutionary and the restorative” (vol. I, p. 544). Furthermore, the techniques used by the Nazis were modern. Hi-tech propaganda was one of them: “Of all the things that made the Third Reich a modern dictatorship, its incessant demand for popular legitimation was one of the most striking. The regime put itself almost from the very start in a state of permanent plebiscitary consultation of the masses” (vol. I, p. 142).

Kershaw has hailed Evans’ trilogy as “impressive, perceptive [and] humane”. The last adjective should be emphasised. In the second volume, Evans goes into a thorough analysis of the Nazi Cultural Revolution after 1933. As a matter of fact, the underlying purpose of all the Nazi enterprises was to remould the German psyche according to Nazi precepts.

In the second volume, the reader finds the merits of a history book written by a social historian. Numerous little anecdotes related by Evans, including not only those from the bigwigs but also those from the common men, give the taste of a fine BBC documentary series. It is essentially through these anecdotes that Evans balances the real efficiency of Nazi propaganda.

The Nazi efforts to win over the youth are analysed in depth and nuanced as usual (vol. II, p. 295-360). One anecdote is especially striking. In 1935, in a working-class district, when the teacher told the students that many Jews had fallen in WWI as well, one young Nazi exclaimed: “They died of fright! The Jews don’t have any German Fatherland!” Another pupil wittily retorted: “If Germany isn’t their Fatherland and they died for it despite that, that even goes beyond heroism” (vol. II, p. 296-297).

Children presents like toy models of SAS, music boxes that played the Horst Wessel Song, or a puzzle that asked them to “put the letters together correctly to make the

name of a great leader: L-I-T-R-E-H” (vol. II, p. 241) confirm Evans’ thesis of “modern dictatorship”. Special schools were founded in order to indoctrinate the young: the notorious Hitler Youth, but also the less known Napolas, Adolf Hitler Schools and the Order Castles. Racial lectures were introduced in schools, racial hygiene institutes established in universities. The Nazis tried to pervert the content of the physics, chemistry, medicine and history teaching. One example of “social arithmetic” gives the shivers: “Sums requiring the children to calculate how much it would cost the state to keep a mentally ill person alive in an asylum” (vol. II, p. 299-300).

“Nazism aestheticized politics; but it also politicized the arts” (vol. II, p. 240). On 4th February 1933, the Nazis already issued a decree which allowed the seizure by the police of any “politically dangerous” books. The fact that this decree came well before the Reichstag Fire Decree should suffice to convince the old-school historians of the importance of social/cultural history.

Evans relates in great length the tragic fate of undesirable authors, painters and musicians. Thomas Mann, Bertold Brecht, Kurt Weill and most of the Expressionists are probably the first ones to come to reader’s mind. Yet Evans also narrates from those less known: Rudolf Ditzen alias Hans Fallada, the author who was “weak but not bad, never bad” (vol. II, p. 176); disillusioned journalist and theatre critic Friedrich Rech-Malleczewen’s amazing courage; the heartbreaking suicide of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, the expressionist painter; Oskar Schlemmer, another painter who was abased to paint camouflage on military buildings.

Controversial figures such as Richard Strauss, Carl Orff, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Arno Breker or Ernst Jünger have also their places in Evans’ second volume. Although Evans makes a clever and nuanced account of Wagner’s works (vol. I, *passim*), he seems to have little sympathy for Richard Strauss: “Despite his huge reputation, Strauss was acutely conscious that he ultimately failed to achieve the standing of his great predecessors like Bach, Beethoven, Brahms or Wagner” (vol. II, p. 215). That Strauss doubted his own talent must not lead to a musical condemnation of the great composer of “Salome” and “Elektra”. Likewise, Evans has a pronounced dislike for Carl Orff’s “Carmina Burana”: “Its crude tonality, its brutal, repetitious rhythms, its medieval texts and folksy tunes, its numbing, insistent pulse, its absence of anything to engage the mind seemed to sweep away all the excrescences of modernity and intellectualism that Nazism so detested and take culture back to the supposed primitive simplicities of the distant, peasant past” (vol. II, p. 227). The controversial attitude of both men during the Nazi period seems to have pushed Evans to condemn their works as well, which is unjust. One cannot help quoting Arturo Toscanini: “To [Richard] Strauss the composer I take off my hat; to Strauss the man I put it back on again”.

The current bibliography on Nazism contains some 40 000 items. Does the reader really need another book? Yes. The recent deplorable incident in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in New York where an 88-year-old racist sparked a shootout that killed a security guard shows that a synthetic analysis of Nazi Germany, one of the darkest moments of mankind, is still more than welcome.