

William L. Shirer, *Journal de Berlin, 1934-1941. Chronique d'un correspondant étranger*, Laval, Presses de l'université de Laval, 2009, 669 p.

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“The chief of the Air-Raid Protection in Berlin recently advised the people to go to bed early and try to snatch two or three hours of sleep before the bombings start. Some take the advice, most do not. The Berliners say that those who take the advice arrive in the cellar after an alarm and greet their neighbours with a ‘Good morning’. This means they have been to sleep. Others arrive and say: ‘Good evening!’ This means they haven’t yet been to sleep. A few arrive and say: ‘Heil Hitler!’ This means they have always been asleep.” (p. 617).

“In Germany it is a serious penal offence to listen to a foreign radio station. The other day the mother of a German airman received word from the Luftwaffe that her son was missing and must be presumed dead. A couple of days later the BBC in London, which broadcasts weekly a list of German prisoners, announced that her son had been captured. Next day she received *eight* letters from friends and acquaintances telling her they had heard her son was safe as a prisoner in England. Then the story takes a nasty turn. The mother denounced all eight to the police for listening to an English broadcast, and they were arrested. (When I tried to recount this story on the radio, the Nazi censor cut it out on the ground that American listeners would not understand the heroism of the woman in denouncing her eight friends!)” (p. 341).

Without any doubt, it is this kind of anecdotes which makes William L. Shirer’s *Berlin Diary* (first published in 1941) one of the most readable and appreciated first-hand accounts of politics and everyday life in Nazi Germany.

Shirer’s *Berlin Diary* covers the period from January 1934 until December 1940, with the first two years of the war dominating the book. Indeed, the events of 1940 made up virtually half of the entire diary (p. 324-659). The most memorable entries are: *Anschluss*; the Sudeten Crisis; Shirer’s trips as a war correspondent through Poland, Belgium and France; the signature of the *armistice* at Compiègne (Shirer was the only foreign correspondent who witnessed what happened in the historical glade on 21st and 22nd June 1940); and the RAF raids on Berlin from late summer 1940 onwards. Quite surprisingly, Shirer’s diary contains no entry at all for the infamous *Kristallnacht* on 9th-10th November 1938. While the persecution of Jews is related only sporadically, there are two interesting entries on the Nazi euthanasia programme (p. 567, p. 623-629).

The present French edition of *Berlin Diary* is a republication of Albert Pascal’s 1943 translation. Albert Pascal was the pseudonym of Gérard Dagenais, the Canadian journalist and linguist (1913-1981) who is best known for his fierce defence of the French language in Canada. That is why, the old typewriter, rather than

Pascal/Dagenais, must be held responsible for the numberless spelling errors in the book, which is obviously a republication of the 1943 edition without any proofreading¹. The other major problem with this new edition is the lack of explanatory footnotes from the editor, which could have enlightened non-specialist readers about the meaning of official names, titles and abbreviations in German, or given biographical sketches about people mentioned by Shirer. Indeed, a careful editor could have added a spellbinding footnote at page 140 where Shirer, probably deliberately, misquotes the Hitler Youth song, “*Es zittern die morschen Knochen*”, the most famous march after the Horst-Wessel-Lied in Nazi Germany².

An American in Berlin

One of the most renowned American journalists of all time, William L. Shirer first came to Berlin in 1934 as a foreign correspondent for William R. Hearst’s Universal News Service. Three years later, Hearst’s wire services folded up, thereby leaving Shirer jobless in one of the most delicate moments of his life, since he was soon to become a father. As a curious twist of life, however, at about the same time, Shirer received an invitation to dinner from Edward R. Murrow, European manager of Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). The following month, Shirer was hired by the CBS as European bureau chief in Vienna and became a radio reporter –despite his voice which he personally found “bad” (p. 134). The United States heard his voice for the first time on 12th March 1938, relating the first uncensored eyewitness account of the German annexation of Austria³. That was the first scoop of his long and distinguished career.

Shirer was the first of “Murrow’s Boys”, who were to be highly acclaimed for their insightful and technically revolutionary broadcasts during WWII and afterwards. The 30-minutes live broadcast from five European capitals (Berlin, Vienna, Paris, Rome and London) the day following *Anschluss* that Murrow and Shirer arranged and produced for the CBS was a major breakthrough in radio journalism. It is indeed very interesting to read the long passages where Shirer explains how they succeeded to produce news round-up with the rudimentary communication facilities of the day. Incidentally, Shirer and his team’s news round-ups are the precursor of the CBS World News Roundup still on air today.

¹ The author would like to remind the alternative translation of Christian de Palaminy: William L. Shirer. *À Berlin. Journal d'un correspondant américain, 1934-1941*. Hachette, 1946.

² The original refrain was “*Wir werden weitermarschieren / Wenn alles in Scherben fällt, / Denn heute da hört uns Deutschland / Und morgen die ganze Welt*”, which means, “We shall march onwards, / even if everything shatters into pieces; / for, today German hears us, / and tomorrow the whole world”. However, some witty Germans were quick to replace “*da hört*” (hears) by “*gehört*” (belongs) to underline the Nazis’ territorial ambitions. Understandably, the Nazis forbade this alternative version.

³ Before March 1938, CBS correspondents were not allowed to speak on the radio themselves.

“Journalism of attachment⁴”

Shirer was a convicted anti-Nazi right from the start: “With my deep, burning hatred of all that Nazism stands for, it has never been pleasant working and living here” (p. 598). Shirer and his wife, Tess, tried to help some Jews flee Berlin *via* the American embassy. To his own peril, Shirer tried to open up with witty remarks and questions the eyes of the Germans he met, sometimes even in public (p. 335-337). He also avoided making the Hitler salute (p. 71). During the war, he secretly prayed that the RAF bombed the Nazis into submission. Upon his return to the US, he immediately published his diary, which was indeed one of the first inside-account unveiling the sinister machination of the Nazi State. The only moments he could escape from the oppressive atmosphere of Nazi Germany was either when he talked with other fellow anti-Nazi journalists or when he entrusted his inner thoughts and feelings to his diary which he smuggled out of Germany right under the Gestapo’s nose under extraordinary conditions (p. 49-53).

Shirer also tried to report events as they were. Although his commentaries were routinely checked and censored by officials from the Propaganda Ministry, the censorship became drastic only by the invasion of Denmark and Norway in April 1940 (p. 565). Despite the Nazis’ relative leniency before the war and during the first eight months of the war⁵, however, Shirer faced the dilemma of every foreign correspondent reporting from a country at war or from a combat zone. An excessively hostile commentary could have led anytime to revocation of his work permit, to expulsion or even imprisonment. Even if Shirer had succeeded to return safe and sound to the US, this would have meant the end of an illustrious career as a foreign correspondent in one of the hottest spots of the world.

Nevertheless, Shirer tried to remain faithful to the reality as he perceived it and he had his own tricks to fool the Nazi censors: “I ask myself why I stay on here. For the first eight months of the war our censorship was fairly reasonable --more so than Severeid and Grandin⁶ had to put up with in Paris. But since the war became grim and serious --since the invasion of Scandinavia-- it has become increasingly worse. For the last few months I’ve been trying to get by on my wits, such as they are; to indicate a truth or an official lie by the tone and inflexion of the voice, by a pause held longer than is natural, by the use of an Americanism which most Germans, who’ve learned their English in England, will not fully grasp, and by drawing from a word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, or their juxtaposition, all the benefit I can.” (p. 565). By September 1940, however, the Nazis saw through Shirer’s tricks: “For some time now my two chief censors from the Propaganda Ministry have been gentlemen who

⁴ The term coined by Martin Bell, the veteran BBC war correspondent, following his own experience in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war (1992-1995).

⁵ Nazi censors were merciless in times of diplomatic crises before 1939. To give an example, Shirer made his first radio broadcast on *Anschluss* from London to escape the Nazi censorship (p. 148-160). It must also be noted, however, that, during the war, foreign correspondents were allowed to listen to foreign radio stations as long as they did not pass on what they heard to Germans (p. 507, fn. 1).

⁶ Arnold Eric Severeid (1912-1992) and Thomas “Tom” Grandin (1907-1977) were two CBS journalists part of “Murrow’s Boys”.

understand American as well as I, Professor Lessing, who long held a post in an American university, and Herr Krauss, for twenty years a partner in a Wall Street bank. I cannot fool them very often. [...] Tonight I noticed for the first time that one of the young Germans who do my modulating (call New York on the transmitter until time for me to speak) and follow my script to see that I read it as written and censored was *scanning* a copy of my broadcast as I spoke, making funny little lines under the syllables as we used to do in school while learning to scan poetry. He was trying to note down, I take it, which words I emphasized, which I spoke with undue sarcasm, and so on. I was so fascinated by this discovery that I stopped in the middle of my talk to watch him.” (p. 566).

Infuriated by the ever-hardening Nazi censorship, but also warned by a German friend that the Gestapo had been suspected him of being a spy, Shirer finally left Germany on 5th December 1940 only to return in 1945 to report the Nuremberg trials.

A fine critical eye though distorted by cultural determinism

Berlin Diary contains three remarkable analyses: the first on the political and psychological causes of the French collapse (p. 488-496); the second on Hitler’s uneasy position *vis-à-vis* England’s stubborn resistance and his eventual next military target, Soviet Russia (p. 603-613); and the third on the inner structure of the Nazi State, the motives behind the German support for Nazism and the latent economic problems of Germany (p. 630-649). Even before the war, Shirer had regularly criticised the appeasement policy of Britain and France, and believed that only a strong-arm policy could deter the Nazis. At the end of 1940, he was so disheartened that he even discussed the rumours that Hitler could invade the US (p. 647-649). Although he admitted that the whole debate sounded “fantastic”, he reminded how the American isolationists had laughed at the idea of a German attack on England only a couple of months ago. Shirer’s diary testifies how close the anti-fascists came to despairing in the face of the irresistible advance of the Nazis. For a person who lived during the 1930s-1940s and who, self-evidently, could not know how the story would end, Nazism was indeed like an Old Hag who had sat on Europe’s chest, choking many countries to death: “And now darkness. A new world. Black-out, bombs, slaughter, Nazism. Now the night and the shrieks and barbarism” (p. 286).

Nevertheless, the fundamental flaw in Shirer’s diary is that the author frequently explains the rise of Nazism as a natural consequence of the German national character, rather than as a complex phenomenon provoked by a specific combination of internal and external political and socio-economical dynamics in a given historical conjuncture. Shirer’s view is indeed biased. On the one hand, he praises Austria as a “beautiful, tragic, civilised” country (p. 148) and mentions the existence of anti-Semitism among Austrians and the legacy of Mayor Karl Lueger only as curious anecdotes (p. 143, p. 163). On the other hand, he accuses all Germans of being both “sadistic and masochistic” (p. 68), “militaristic” (p. 78), “cow-like” (*i.e.* servile, p. 344), “natural-born killers” (p. 377), “aggressive” (p. 549), even “stupid” and

“humourless” (p. 381, p. 339). In his fulminations against the German character, Shirer even came to think that the Germans were physically “the ugliest-looking people in Europe” (p. 226, p. 359). Despite the lack of enthusiasm for war, even defeatism among Berliners (p. 248), the acts of symbolic resistance against the regime⁷ and anti-Nazi jokes that he himself notes in his diary, Shirer refuses to see that the crux of the matter was not the German character, but the mass psychosis.

The same cultural determinism also dominates Shirer’s 1960 best-seller *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. The author’s main contention that the German history and psychology inevitably led to Nazism has been unanimously repudiated by the scholars. However, Shirer was a precious witness of the making of the Nazi State, and later of the first two years of the war; he met some key *dramatis personae*, reported authentic statements and anecdotes; he had an immense talent to pick up the revealing details; and, without any doubt, he was an accomplished narrator. Indeed, no scholar has ever succeeded to tell the Compiègne episode as grippingly as he did (p. 473-482).

⁷ During the battle of Poland, Shirer observed that “the official death notices in the papers omitted the usual ‘Died for Führer’ and said only ‘Died for the Fatherland’” (p. 275). After a brief visit to Munich, he noted that Bavarians “completely stopped saying ‘Heil Hitler’” (p. 600).