This book fluently tells the story of the rise of the Quandt family’s industrial empire from its modest beginnings in the textile industry of northwest Brandenburg during the 1880s to its important position in the West German economy in 1954. In the process, Scholtyseck’s study joins the lengthening line of books that refute the glib suspicions frequently expressed about commissioned corporate histories. The author, a professor of modern history at Bonn, was asked by the Quandt family to examine the past of their commercial holdings, given preferred access to otherwise inaccessible documentation in their and other archives, and granted both financial support for the project and complete independence in stating his findings. These demonstrate that Günther Quandt (1881–1954), the builder of his family’s fortunes, and his son Herbert (1910–1982), one of the heroes of the German economic miracle after World War II, were complicit in the Nazi regime’s persecution of Jews, spoliation of occupied Europe, and exploitation of slave labor. Both men exhibited “ethical indifference” (p. 850) not only during the Nazi era, but also in retrospect. Of the elder Quandt, Scholtyseck remarks, “expanding his property took such precedence in his thinking that no room remained for fundamental questions of justice and morality” (p. 849).

These men’s deep implication in Nazi criminality stemmed almost inexorably from the business interests that Günther Quandt assembled during the 1920s, after he realized that his hitherto chief source of income, making uniforms for the German army, had little future under the terms of the Versailles Treaty. In rapid succession, he turned his accumulated revenues into major shareholdings in the Wintershall potash and chemicals firm, the Accumulatorenfabrik (AFA; later Varta) that manufactured batteries, and the Berlin Karlsruher Industriewerke (BKI), a once formidable munitions and weapons producer (one of its subsidiaries was the Mauser-Werke) that got by in the 1920s by making gears, kitchen appliances, sewing machines, hunting rifles, and aluminum alloys. These enterprises were predestined to play central and lucrative roles in the Nazi drives for armaments and autarky, AFA as producer of the units that powered U-boats, BKI (renamed the Deutsche Waffen- und Munitionsfabriken, DWM) as maker of tank cannons, anti-aircraft guns, field artillery, mortars, carbines, pistols, and ammunition, and Wintershall as fabricator of aluminum and magnesium for the Luftwaffe’s planes and a leading producer and refiner of fuel.

Given the acute shortage of labor in Germany once World War II began, this militarily vital production palette also assured that the Reich and Quandt’s firms became eager partners in allocating some 50,000 forced (conscripted and poorly paid) and slave (camp inmates who were paid for, but not paid) laborers to his factories. Both father and son were well aware of the frequently wretched working conditions of such
people and made no demonstrable effort to improve them. Some of the slave laborers in Berlin were non-Jewish women drawn from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and attached to a subsidiary for which Herbert Quandt was responsible. At AFA’s plant in Hannover-Stöcken, 1500 inmates from Neuengamme and 3700 forced laborers worked under the vicious oversight of the SS, often with hazardous metals and no safety gear. Another 400 inmates from Mauthausen labored for AFA in Vienna.

Scholtyseck takes pains to explain that avoiding these forms of complicity was difficult for any industrialist or enterprise that wished to remain in business in Nazi Germany, let alone to flourish. But he also makes clear that the Quandts showed little hesitation or reticence, even in private, about taking advantage of Nazi policies and cultivating political connections. Though a few Jews who were particularly valuable to his firms’ operations were kept on as long as possible, Günther Quandt swiftly dismissed most »non-Aryans« in compliance with Nazi demands and joined in the expulsion of Jews from business associations in Berlin. He also was an enthusiastic and aggressive »aryanizer«, not only in Germany in 1937–1938, but also in France in 1940–1941 and in Croatia in 1942, and Scholtyseck says of his conduct in these transactions, »human decency and commercial honor […] played no role, rather he seized opportunities unscrupulously« (p. 847). Although Herbert did not join the NSDAP until 1940, he became a »sponsoring member« of the SS five years earlier.

The Quandts cooperated with and sought advantage from Nazi policies primarily out of self-interest, but a certain amount of personal intimidation also was at work. Günther Quandt emerged victorious from a political intrigue that led to his brief arrest in 1933 and the appointment of a »commissar« to manage AFA from May to September of that year, but this brush with Nazi power likely left a legacy of caution and willingness to conform. Knowing that Joseph Goebbels, the husband of Quandt’s former wife Magda, hated him and could exploit any opportunity to bring him down probably had a similar effect.

After the war, these circumstances provided the pretext for the elder Quandt’s brazen claim that he had »been severely persecuted for years« by Hitler’s regime. Of course, he had not been. But like all his – and most of his industrialist colleagues’ – recollections about the Nazi years, this one had a central attribute: an inability to acknowledge the harm his decisions had done to others, only what their decisions supposedly had done to him. This suggests that one might go a bit deeper in explaining his behavior than Scholtyseck’s emphasis on Quandt’s myopic obsession with »expanding his property«. The man’s greed was a subset of a more sweeping character failing: self-centeredness (to his credit, Scholtyseck refers to Quandt’s »Selbstbezogenheit«, but only in passing). That failing was widespread not only among Quandt’s fellow executives, but also among Germans of his era. It was, I daresay, the most profound source of their misfortunes from 1919 to 1949, and it remains the strongest barrier to sympathy for them.

Admirable as this book is in many ways, it could have been more forceful in treating several major issues. Scholtyseck is excessively reticent about assessing whether forced and slave labor ultimately paid off for the Quandts and whether their postwar fortunes rest on their complicity with Nazi crimes. The answer to both questions cannot be other than »yes, to some degree«, even if one cannot calculate exact figures with certainty. Most localized studies of the labor question have concluded that (a) slave labor was seldom
economically efficient in the short run, but (b) slave and forced labor often were indispensable to sustaining a company’s output, and (c) both forms of compulsory work proved profitable in the longer term, if used to preserve machinery and repair buildings that were vital to production after the war. If one applies these findings to Quandt’s holdings (and I can find no reason in this book not to do so), the exploitation of unwilling laborers surely contributed to the value of Quandt’s properties in 1945 and after, especially because relatively few of them lay to the east of what became the iron curtain and thus were lost.

The answer to the second question must be even more unequivocal, though equally imprecise. If one counts production for a German war of conquest as participation in Nazism’s crimes, surely the Quandt holdings benefited greatly. Even after deducting for bomb damage, Quandt firms’ earnings from supplying the German war effort undoubtedly contributed substantially to what Scholtyseck calls the “comfortable starting position” (p. 848) of Quandt’s holdings after the currency reform of 1948. That Scholtyseck provides only a few, unanalyzed statistics to describe that starting position is unfortunate and difficult to understand. Most German enterprises made elaborate attempts to estimate their net worth on the eve of the currency reform and even to compare that value to pre-Depression levels. If Quandts’ holdings did not, that fact warrants comment; if they did, the measurements deserve close examination.

These reservations aside, Scholtyseck’s book is a judicious and remarkably readable account. It is also well designed to engage the multiple audiences that will be interested in it, from professional historians specializing in the Nazi era and/or business history to people affiliated with formerly or currently Quandt-owned enterprises or living where they are located. That is in itself an estimable accomplishment.