German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Bd. 34

2012

Nr. 2

IAN KERSHAW, *The End: Hitler's Germany, 1944–45* (London: Allan Lane, 2011), 592 pp. ISBN 9 780713 997 163. £30.00

The topic of Kershaw's book is, no doubt, of the utmost historical significance. For one, there is the stark discrepancy between the end of the First World War and that of the Second World War: armistice and revolution in November 1918 with the German army still occupying large tracts of enemy territory, and unconditional surrender in May 1945, after the whole of the Reich had been conquered by the victorious powers. More disturbing still is the statistical evidence for the extent of destruction produced by the senseless struggle up to the bitter end during the final phase of the war. After the Western allies had established a firm foothold in Normandy as a result of their invasion on 6 June 1944 with overwhelming forces and resources, Germany's defeat was only a matter of time. Yet the agony of the Nazi regime dragged on for another ten months, accompanied by ever growing misery for the German people. There were more civilian casualties than during the preceding four years of the war, mainly because of area bombing and the chaotic flight of millions from the Eastern territories; as many soldiers lost their lives (2.6 million) as during the whole war up to July 1944 (2.7 million). Towards the end of the war, between three and four hundred thousand soldiers were killed in action every month, mostly on the Eastern Front. The question WHY is so obvious that one wonders why no German historian so far has felt the need to tackle this problem comprehensively. The interest of the ordinary reader is, apparently, rarely at the forefront of German academic historians' minds. In the development of history as a modern discipline in Germany, the idea that historiography is nevertheless the art of storytelling has been eclipsed. Since British historians have never forgotten this lesson, they now have the edge over their German colleagues in explaining German contemporary history to the German reader. Ian Kershaw's present book demonstrates once again that this approach is perfectly compatible with the highest standards of research.

Kershaw is fully aware of the many books on specific, often regional, aspects of the military struggle. But there was no plausible explanation linking the military disaster with both the power structure of the Nazi regime and the reaction of the German people under stress. Above all, no interpretation presented in a narrative style was

available that could have explained to the reader of a later generation how and why it was possible for the Nazi regime to turn its murderous war machine against its own people at the very moment when the war was lost. For Hitler and many of his generals, preventing a break-down in military discipline was the most important lesson to be learned from the end of the war in 1918. This obsession with the experiences of only twenty-five years ago was widespread, even in Britain. John Maynard Keynes felt that 'Ministers should not suppose that the chief thing that matters was to avoid the mistakes made last time'. This time German troops, utterly exhausted and demoralized, were seized by a widespread fatalism. Nor was there a conspiratorial network of organized resistance left after the plot of 20 July 1944 had failed. What motivated the officer corps towards the end of the war was a misguided sense of duty and a desperate desire to defend their homeland, especially against the Red Army in the East. Although Kershaw is aware of the ordinary German's narrow-minded resilience in the face of incredible hardship, he does not believe that the much hyped idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft* explains the survival of the regime against all odds. Nor does Hitler's personal charisma furnish a satisfactory answer; by the end of the war most Germans had lost faith in their *Führer*. For Kershaw, however, the regime's extraordinary power structure, culminating in Hitler's authority and his final word, as it were, which remained unchallenged until his suicide at the end of April 1945, provides a convincing answer to an otherwise incomprehensible phenomenon.

The title of the concluding chapter says it all: 'Anatomy of Self-Destruction.' Here Kershaw offers a final analysis of his findings. He is quite right to dismiss the Allied demand for unconditional surrender as an explanation for the continuation of the war, or, for that matter, as a crucial handicap to the German resistance movement. After all, Italy accepted the same terms without suffering unduly. It is important to stress this point because after the war unconditional surrender served the German officer corps as a useful alibi, a timely excuse, in that it seemed to blame the Western Allies for extending the war unnecessarily. Not loyalty to Hitler and his government motivated the Germans to carry on, but sheer fear of the ever more brutal henchmen of the Nazi regime, which at the end of its life showed no mercy, thus displaying its true character to its own people. That the role of terror can hardly be overestimated is one of

Kershaw's most crucial explanations. The *levée en masse* (*Volkssturm*) introduced in the final months of the war resulted in the total militarization of society and the widespread application of martial law; summary justice, or rather injustice, was a daily experience. The Nazi Party ruled supreme in organizing a last stand wherever an enemy attack was to be expected. Kershaw singles out four leading characters whose grasp on power and administrative efficiency kept the regime on the road to disaster longer than necessary: Martin Bormann, Heinrich Himmler, Josef Goebbels, and Albert Speer representing the Nazi Party, the police (especially the Gestapo), the propaganda machine, and the war economy. Apart from party stalwarts who knew what was in store for them, there were two other groups which helped to prolong the agony by their misguided sense of duty: the civil service, right down to the last postman, which made sure that the machinery of state kept functioning right up to the last hour, that is, until the handover of power to the new masters; and the officer corps, many of whom felt bound by their oath of loyalty to Hitler regardless of whether they trusted him or not, as though the *Führer* represented the monarch of earlier times.

Ian Kershaw established his reputation with his outstanding biography of Hitler, in the same way as his fellow countryman John Röhl has done with his three volumes on Wilhelm II. Kershaw's concluding remarks therefore touch upon Hitler's role in prolonging the war. In the end, his authority was so undisputed that he could even appoint his own successor, Admiral Karl Dönitz. The four leaders mentioned above were neither united by a common goal, nor in command of a power base strong enough to prevent Hitler from leading Germany to disaster. The *Führer* was no doubt driven by his obsession with avoiding a sudden collapse as in 1918; no 'stab in the back' this time. This is Kershaw's final verdict and I would not disagree with it. But perhaps there is room for further speculation as to why so many Germans followed their leader to the bitter end. They belonged to a generation of Germans who still read Felix Dahn's *Ein Kampf um Rom*, which ends with the heroic downfall of the Ostrogoths at Vesuvius. Nazi propaganda had encouraged a mythical view of history which honoured those who would dare to make a last stand and go down with flying colours. It is to Kershaw's credit, however, that he refrains from all explanations which might link the final disaster with the idea of a German national character influenced

by the morbid *Nibelungen* saga. Historians have to content themselves with the evidence available to them. In this case, the sources do not allow Kershaw to claim that Nazi ideology motivated ordinary soldiers to fight on. He demonstrates, however, that they acted as much out of fear of an increasingly repressive regime as of the enemy.

LOTHAR KETTENACKER was Deputy Director of the German Historical Institute in London until his retirement in 2004. Recent publications include *Germany 1989: In the Aftermath of the Cold War* (2009).