

Despite these criticisms, this is an extremely valuable addition to the historiography that sheds new light on the Wehrmacht's complicity in Nazi crimes. Effectively organized, appropriately cited, and elegantly written, this is a must-read for German scholars.

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Prevail until the Bitter End: Germans in the Waning Years of World War II

By Alexandra Lohse. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. Pp. 208. Cloth \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1501759390.

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The German experience in the closing months of the Second World War continues to captivate both professional and popular audiences. The alleged self-destruction in the face of unprecedented violence and certain defeat has produced a rather macabre fascination with what Michael Geyer has called “catastrophic nationalism.” (“There is a Land Where Everything is Pure: Its Name is Land of Death’: Some Observations on Catastrophic Nationalism,” in *Sacrifice and National Belonging in Twentieth-Century Germany*, eds. Greg Eghigian and Matthew Paul [2002], 129) The question remains, why did so many Germans continue to fight with such tenacity until the final moment? Were they motivated mainly by fear and desperation, or was it a certain obedience to an ideology and a leader? Alexandra Lohse’s book contributes much to the topic by examining rumors, gossip, and dissonant reactions that circulated among soldiers and civilians during the final two years of the war. She does not offer a simple answer to what the prevailing mood of the time was, nor does she seek one, but instead communicates with impressive inquiry the “stories Germans told themselves to make sense of their world in crisis” (149).

Lohse’s source base is rich and largely original, which in itself makes her study important. She draws from private diaries and letters, OSS surveillance studies, and Nazi censorship reports, but much of her analysis is of surreptitious recordings of German POWs held in Western captivity, mainly at the British War Office’s Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre. These transcripts are not representative but still offer thousands of mostly unfiltered stories shared among soldiers. The sources undoubtedly support Lohse’s claim that the German response to the losing war was both diverse and malleable, and that “there was no single German experience of defeat” (132). During the closing months of the war, many soldiers and civilians remained hopeful that Hitler would somehow salvage the dire situation, but others became disillusioned with the regime and distrusting of its assertions.

The book begins in the opening weeks of 1943, when the country was struggling to make sense of the defeat at Stalingrad. Chapter 1 relies largely on Nazi and Allied army morale monitors, which interpreted popular opinion using various measures. While most Germans did not recognize the defeat as permanent, Lohse believes that the shock of Stalingrad resulted in a widespread questioning of national leadership, including its authority as a source of accurate war information. This caused a “serious and enduring rupture between the people and the regime” (26).

Chapter 2 focuses on Joseph Goebbels’s inflammatory Sportpalast speech (February 18, 1943), as Lohse wonders if the population did, in fact, desire *totaler Krieg*. Often depicted in the

scholarship as a unifying moment for the nation, the home front population, according to Lohse, did not rush to join the “warrior community.” This was not just due to war fatigue and a growing distrust of state-provided information, but also a general dislike of Goebbels himself and the moral and material corruption of the Nazi leadership that he represented. This is an unexpected revelation in the book, that Germans, during the final months of the war, became increasingly concerned with government corruption and the inequalities within society more generally. Lohse suggests that many citizens were reacting to the failure of the Nazis’ promised social revolution.

The topic of the Holocaust, specifically the dissemination and reception of information related to mass atrocities in the East is tackled in chapter 3. Journals, letters, SD reports, and POW recordings reveal that antisemitism was prevalent among civilians and soldiers and that many Germans “knew something” (74) about the killings. Rumors of mass executions were common, but stories of death camps and gas chambers were exceedingly rare. Nearly all rumored atrocities were attributed to the SS and its much-disliked leader, Heinrich Himmler.

Chapter 4 investigates the popular response to the July 20, 1944 plot against Hitler and the early stages of the Allied invasion of Germany. Again, reactions were mixed. Some citizens expressed their sustained loyalty to the regime, while others grew more resentful of the leadership. No meaningful insight is gained here, simply that German morale continued to decrease alongside internal regime radicalization and home-front mobilization.

The final chapter continues to resist a singular view of the German experience of defeat. The tragic battles of 1945 were met largely with desperation, but an enduring faith in Hitler and his messianic qualities inspired many citizens to continue fighting. Total defeat did not slow down the rumor mill, as gossip spread about the Führer’s declining health and refugees from the East delivered stories of violent acts carried out by the advancing Red Army.

In the book’s conclusion, Lohse reminds us that there is no single story of Germans at war, and that it was not her intention to “forge one out of the chorus of voices” (150). While she does not attempt to assess the human condition or make any broad sociological claims, Lohse’s study is ultimately about how individuals, and their communities, make sense of wartime tragedy and hopelessness. German citizens were heavily influenced by the Hitler regime and its propaganda, but ultimately they constructed their own reality, in large part by collecting informal information from family members, friends, colleagues, and comrades. They talked a lot about the war and actively built and negotiated narratives of their own experiences of it. *Prevail until the Bitter End* offers a myriad of rich firsthand accounts, many of them never “heard” before, and is accompanied by meaningful analysis. Furthermore, Lohse’s work contributes to the still emerging and highly promising field of rumor culture.

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Aftermath: Life in the Fallout of the Third Reich, 1945-1955

By Harald Jähner. Translated by Shaun Whiteside. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2022. Pp. xv + 394. Cloth \$30.00. ISBN: 978-0593319734.

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Journalist Harald Jähner’s sweeping study—a bestseller in Germany—seeks “to explain how the majority of Germans, for all their stubborn rejection of individual guilt [for the