

**Wolfgang Benz, Deutsche Herrschaft.
Nationalsozialistische Besetzung in Europa und
die Folgen, Freiburg i. Br. (Herder) 2022, 480 S.,
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Taking a broad and comprehensive approach, this edited volume surveys and evaluates the impact of German occupation regimes in Europe during the Second World War. The esteemed historian of National Socialism, Wolfgang Benz, positions the book in the context of the German Bundestag's October 2020 decision to establish a documentation centre on German wartime rule in Europe. As part of its mission, this centre aims to better recognize and embed segmented national memory streams in a European context, to strengthen memorialization, and to extend it to hitherto unrepresented or under-represented groups¹. The present volume synthesizes recent scholarship, seeking to decenter military events and instead highlight, as indicated on the back cover, »the fate of the civilian population, everyday life under occupation, resistance by occupied people and the terror of the occupying power«.

A short foreword and three early chapters by editor Benz establish the book's interpretive framework. First, Benz identifies terror, practiced by Wehrmacht members as well as SS and police units, as the fundamental underlying principle of German wartime rule and the central theme of the book. A second chapter delves into structures of domination, summarizing both the international legal and a more differentiated political-historical approach to establishing a typology of occupation regimes. These regimes ranged from outright annexation, through military and civil administrations, to various »special forms of domination between annexation and occupation« (p. 31). In a third chapter somewhat later in the volume, Benz examines several states that were Germany's friends, allies and satellites during the war, including Italy, Slovakia and Hungary. The bulk of the volume then comprises a series of contributions by specialists on territories ruled by Germany, for the most part divided up according to today's political boundaries, and presented in rough chronological order by date of conquest or assimilation to the Reich.

One challenge of writing a history of occupied Europe stems from the conjoined problems of what to include under the rubric

¹ Gedenken an die Opfer des deutschen Vernichtungskriegs stärken und bisher weniger beachtete Opfergruppen des Nationalsozialismus anerkennen, proposition of CDU/CSU and SPD, 6 October 2020, approved 9 October 2020, Deutscher Bundestag 19. Wahlperiode, Drucksache 19/23126, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/19/231/1923126.pdf>.



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»occupied«, and how to label the lands thus classified. Readers will not argue over the inclusion of a chapter on occupied Norway, nor debate the landmass such a chapter should cover. Other decisions seem more arbitrary, such as the omission of a chapter on de facto annexed Alsace and Lorraine while there are two separate chapters on the »Reichsgau Sudetenland« and the »Protektorat Böhmen and Mähren«. This volume gives welcome attention to Eastern Europe, with especially thorough and differentiated treatment of occupied areas in the Balkans and Baltic, as well as the former Soviet Union.

The book is limited, to some degree, by the decision to foreground terror as the defining characteristic of National Socialist rule in Europe. Random terror, calculated terror and the threat of terror were omnipresent in occupied lands, but National Socialist rule was more complex than this focus might suggest. Terror was often, if not always, exercised as a means to an end. Putting terror in the foreground may make sense as a way of characterizing occupation regimes and emphasizing their devastating effects, but it tends to truncate analysis of how occupations functioned and the larger purposes they served. Terror furthered National Socialist objectives like racial domination, the pacification of conquered lands and the extraction of resources for the war effort, each of which was an important goal in and of itself. Furthermore, within Germany as well as abroad, National Socialism functioned not only by exercising terror, but also by fostering consent. In satellite countries and in certain occupied areas, such as Ukraine, some greeted the German forces as liberators from Soviet rule. These areas are ideal laboratories for analysing the combined action of terror and consent in occupied Europe.

In practice, the volume's contributors vary in their adherence to the notion that terror was the main feature of National Socialist rule in Europe. Most are subtle in their analyses and many explore passivity, consent and outright support for National Socialism on the part of occupied people. A typical chapter briefly describes how a specific occupied, annexed or allied area came to be part of German-dominated Europe, summarizes the type of administration applied there, and then discusses collaboration, resistance and the persecution of local people, especially the Jewish population. Many chapters offer capsule descriptions of shocking local events that have rightly come to symbolize Nazi terror in Europe, such as Oradour-sur-Glane, Lidice, and Babi Yar, alongside lesser-known tragedies like that of the village of Lipa, in today's Croatia, where 269 people were killed and 172 houses and barns burned on 30 April, 1944 (p. 372–373).

Based primarily on first-hand narratives and post-war interviews, Natalja P. Timofeeva's chapter on the Woronesch area reflects the perspective of local people, but on the whole, despite the avowed desire to highlight everyday life, the book offers a bird's eye view rather than perspectives from the ground. Contributors attend to centrally-ordered policies, persecution and open terror, and with notable exceptions, such as two chapters by Sabine Rutar on Yugoslavia, they devote less attention to underlying



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violence and the longer, slower processes of labour exploitation, resource extraction, penury and hunger. The volume underlines German responsibility for oppression and terror, but its generally top-down approach means that, with the exception of heroic resisters, local people tend to appear as a mass of victims, their individuality, not to mention their often-shifting roles as bystanders, collaborators, or supporters of resistance, slipping into the background. Greater attention to cohabitation and the multi-layered interactions of occupiers and occupied populations in a »Besatzungsgesellschaft« (occupation society) might have enriched the book².

In collected works, it can be difficult to bring individual chapters into conversation with one another and draw out overarching themes. Here, occupied areas tend to come across as separate satellites, rather than interacting elements of a larger system. With the exception of a well-known figure like Werner Best, a key military administrator in Paris and later top German representative in Denmark, readers gain little sense of how German personnel, let alone deportees, forced labourers, or *Volksdeutsche* settlers, moved in, between and among various regions. The volume misses an opportunity, perhaps in a concluding chapter, to offer readers a better sense of the German-occupied lands as a vast, interconnected European region. A conclusion might also have reiterated and drawn attention to overriding patterns and shared experiences across this occupied landmass, such as the radicalization of racializing hierarchies, exploitation and hunger, growing resistance to German rule, and the pervasive escalation of violence. Finally, it could have opened up issues of memory, which are addressed in a limited and rather uneven way throughout the volume.

Of course, it is impossible to detail every aspect of German rule in wartime Europe in a single work. This ambitious and valuable reference work's extensive and readable coverage will be welcomed by students seeking an introduction to German-occupied Europe and more advanced scholars trying to make sense of the myriad jurisdictions linked to the Third Reich in wartime.

² Tatjana Tönsmeier, *Besatzungsgesellschaften. Begriffliche und konzeptionelle Überlegungen zur Erfahrungsgeschichte des Alltags unter deutscher Besatzung im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, in: Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte, 2015.



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