

# The Rise & Fall of the Third Reich



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# The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich

A History of Nazi Germany

William L. Shirer

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*I have often a bitter sorrow at the thought of the German people, which is so estimable in the individual and so wretched in the generality...*

—Goethe

*Hitler was the fate of Germany and this fate could not be stayed.*

—Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch, Commander in Chief of the German Army, 1938–41

*A thousand years will pass and the guilt of Germany will not be erased.*

—Hans Frank, Governor General of Poland, before he was hanged at Nuremberg

*Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it.*

—Santayana

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## FOREWORD

THOUGH I LIVED and worked in the Third Reich during the first half of its brief life, watching at first hand Adolf Hitler consolidate his power as dictator of this great but baffling nation and then lead it off to war and conquest, this personal experience would not have led me to attempt to write this book had there not occurred at the end of World War II an event unique in history.

This was the capture of most of the confidential archives of the German government and all its branches, including those of the Foreign Office, the Army and Navy, the National Socialist Party and Heinrich Himmler's secret police. Never before, I believe, has such a vast treasure fallen into the hands of contemporary historians. Hitherto the archives of a great state, even when it was defeated in war and its government overthrown by revolution, as happened to Germany and Russia in 1918, were preserved by it, and only those documents which served the interests of the subsequent ruling regime were ultimately published.

The swift collapse of the Third Reich in the spring of 1945 resulted in the surrender not only of a vast bulk of its secret papers but of other priceless material such as private diaries, highly secret speeches, conference reports and correspondence, and even transcripts of telephone conversations of the Nazi leaders tapped by a special office set up by Hermann Goering in the Air Ministry.

General Franz Halder, for instance, kept a voluminous diary, jotted down in Gabelsberger shorthand not only from day to day but from hour to hour during the day. It is a unique source of concise information for the period between August 14, 1939, and September 24, 1942, when he was Chief of the Army General Staff and in daily contact with Hitler and the other leaders of Nazi Germany. It is the most revealing of the German diaries, but there are others of great value, including those of Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda and close party associate of Hitler, and of General Alfred Jodl, Chief of Operations of the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW). There are diaries of the OKW itself and of the Naval High Command. Indeed the sixty

thousand files of the German Naval Archives, which were captured at Schloss Tambach near Coburg, contain practically all the signals, ships' logs, diaries, memoranda, etc., of the German Navy from April 1945, when they were found, back to 1868, when the modern German Navy was founded.

The 485 tons of records of the German Foreign Office, captured by the U.S. First Army in various castles and mines in the Harz Mountains just as they were about to be burned on orders from Berlin, cover not only the period of the Third Reich but go back through the Weimar Republic to the beginning of the Second Reich of Bismarck. For many years after the war tons of Nazi documents lay sealed in a large U.S. Army warehouse in Alexandria, Virginia, our government showing no interest in even opening the packing cases to see what of historical interest might lie within them. Finally in 1955, ten years after their capture, thanks to the initiative of the American Historical Association and the generosity of a couple of private foundations, the Alexandria papers were opened and a pitifully small group of scholars, with an inadequate staff and equipment, went to work to sift through them and photograph them before the government, which was in a great hurry in the matter, returned them to Germany. They proved a rich find.

So did such documents as the partial stenographic record of fifty-one "Fuehrer Conferences" on the daily military situation as seen and discussed at Hitler's headquarters, and the fuller text of the Nazi warlord's table talk with his old party cronies and secretaries during the war; the first of these was rescued from the charred remains of some of Hitler's papers at Berchtesgaden by an intelligence officer of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division, and the second was found among Martin Bormann's papers.

Hundreds of thousands of captured Nazi documents were hurriedly assembled at Nuremberg as evidence in the trial of the major Nazi war criminals. While covering the first part of that trial I collected stacks of mimeographed copies and later the forty-two published volumes of testimony and documents, supplemented by ten volumes of English translations of many important papers. The text of other documents published in a fifteen-volume series on the twelve subsequent Nuremberg trials was also of value, though many papers and much testimony were omitted.

Finally, in addition to this unprecedented store of documents, there are the records of the exhaustive interrogation of German military officers and party and government officials and their subsequent testimony under oath at the various postwar trials, which provide material the like of which was never available, I believe, from such sources after previous wars.

I have not read, of course, all of this staggering amount of documentation—it would be far beyond the power of a single individual. But I have worked my way through a considerable part of it, slowed down, as all toilers in this rich vineyard must be, by the lack of any suitable indexes.

It is quite remarkable how little those of us who were stationed in Germany during the Nazi time, journalists and diplomats, really knew of what was going on behind the façade of the Third Reich. A totalitarian dictatorship, by its very nature, works in great secrecy and knows how to preserve that secrecy from the prying eyes of outsiders. It was easy enough to record and describe the bare, exciting and often revolting events in the Third Reich: Hitler's accession to power, the Reichstag fire, the Roehm Blood Purge, the Anschluss with Austria, the surrender of Chamberlain at Munich, the occupation of Czechoslovakia, the attacks on Poland, Scandinavia, the West, the Balkans and Russia, the horrors of the Nazi occupation and of the concentration camps and the liquidation of the Jews. But the fateful decisions secretly made, the intrigues, the treachery, the motives and the aberrations which led up to them, the parts played by the principal actors behind the scenes, the extent of the terror they exercised and their technique of organizing it—all this and much more remained largely hidden from us until the secret German papers turned up.

Some may think that it is much too early to try to write a history of the Third Reich, that such a task should be left to a later generation of writers to whom time has given perspective. I found this view especially prevalent in France when I went to do some research there. Nothing more recent than the Napoleonic era, I was told, should be tackled by writers of history.

There is much merit in this view. Most historians have waited fifty years or a hundred, or more, before attempting to write an account of a country, an empire, an era. But was this not principally because it took that long for the pertinent documents to come to light and furnish them with the authentic material they needed? And though perspective was gained, was not something lost because the authors necessarily lacked a personal acquaintance with the life and the atmosphere of the times and with the historical figures about which they wrote?

In the case of the Third Reich, and it is a unique case, almost all of the documentary material became available at its fall, and it has been enriched by the testimony of all the surviving leaders, military and civilian, in some instances before their death by execution. With such incomparable sources so soon available and with the memory of life in Nazi Germany and of the appearance and behavior and nature of the men who ruled it, Adolf Hitler above all, still fresh in my mind and bones, I decided, at any rate, to make an attempt to set

down the history of the rise and fall of the Third Reich.

“I lived through the whole war,” Thucydides remarks in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, one of the greatest works of history ever written, “being of an age to comprehend events and giving my attention to them in order to know the exact truth about them.”

I found it extremely difficult and not always possible to learn the exact truth about Hitler’s Germany. The avalanche of documentary material helped one further along the road to truth than would have seemed possible twenty years ago, but its very vastness could often be confusing. And in all human records and testimony there are bound to be baffling contradictions.

No doubt my own prejudices, which inevitably spring from my experience and make-up, creep through the pages of this book from time to time. I detest totalitarian dictatorships in principle and came to loathe this one the more I lived through it and watched its ugly assault upon the human spirit. Nevertheless, in this book I have tried to be severely objective, letting the facts speak for themselves and noting the source for each. No incidents, scenes or quotations stem from the imagination; all are based on documents, the testimony of eyewitnesses or my own personal observation. In the half-dozen or so occasions in which there is some speculation, where the facts are missing, this is plainly labeled as such.

My interpretations, I have no doubt, will be disputed by many. That is inevitable, since no man’s opinions are infallible. Those that I have ventured here in order to add clarity and depth to this narrative are merely the best I could come by from the evidence and from what knowledge and experience I have had.

Adolf Hitler is probably the last of the great adventurer-conquerors in the tradition of Alexander, Caesar and Napoleon, and the Third Reich the last of the empires which set out on the path taken earlier by France, Rome and Macedonia. The curtain was rung down on that phase of history, at least, by the sudden invention of the hydrogen bomb, of the ballistic missile and of rockets that can be aimed to hit the moon.

In our new age of terrifying, lethal gadgets, which supplanted so swiftly the old one, the first great aggressive war, if it should come, will be launched by suicidal little madmen pressing an electronic button. Such a war will not last long and none will ever follow it. There will be no conquerors and no conquests, but only the charred bones of the dead on an uninhabited planet.