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***1939: A People's History of the Coming of the Second World War*. By Frederick Taylor. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 2019. ISBN: 978-1-324-00679-4. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp. xi, 434. $30.00.**

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British historian Frederick Taylor, author of several previous works on Germany and World War II, has turned his attention here to the coming of war in Europe. It should first be noted that the book is not entirely about 1939, for as Taylor states on the first page of his introduction, the period he addresses begins with the autumn of 1938 and Hitler's machinations leading to the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and carries through the autumn of 1939, culminating with the invasion of Poland. A second point about Taylor's approach is also worth noting at the outset. Any work of this sort, which deals with a topic of such complexity as the convoluted path to world war must necessarily include an account of the belligerents' travels along that path. In that regard, much of the book is a standard treatment and not precisely "a people's history," as the title implies. Taylor does an excellent job weaving in first-hand accounts to provide a sense of how the events playing out on the world stage might have affected individual people, and though he achieves a good balance, the effect does not live up entirely to the book's sub-title. However, much as a good account of a battle relies on the use of first-hand accounts by participants to add color and clarity to the narrative, the "people's history" segments of Taylor's book do accomplish that and more.

Taylor was wise to begin with the fall of 1938, for the discussion of British and German perspectives on the prospect of war over Czechoslovakia provide the groundwork for the evolution of those views in the post-"peace for our time" era after the Munich Accords. By the fall of 1939, Britons were no less fearful of a war than in 1938, but they had used the intervening time to recognize that Europe was dealing with an insatiable despot bent on territorial acquisition, suppression of dissent, and persecution of Jews. The personal accounts of Britons help to illustrate the decline of appeasement as a political tool, and readers can sense a distinct shift in attitudes as the fate of Poland hung in the balance.

One can also follow the shift of opinion among Germans, whose initial skepticism and fear of war in 1938 were mitigated by 1939. This was a result of a growing confidence in Hitler's ability to achieve his aims without warfare, and to Goebbels' propaganda efforts justifying intervention in Poland as necessary to stem Polish abuses of the German population there. In the course of describing the historical events, Taylor illustrates the differences between British public opinion and that of a manipulated German populace. In his view, the events of 1939 mark a watershed for Germany in which the attitude of many citizens was transformed "from passive, even sullen, accepters of the Fuhrer's will to accomplices in genocidal horror" (13). The influence of Nazi propaganda on that transformation is one of the book's key themes.

As the personal accounts illustrate, many average Germans were conflicted about the events of this period. Many acknowledged that obtaining the Sudetenland would be a good thing, as would be the reversal of injustices inflicted at Versailles in 1919, such as eliminating the Polish Corridor separating Germany from East Prussia. Yet they were somewhat skeptical that Hitler could achieve those ends without dragging the nation into another war at a time when things were going so well for much of the population. Relieving that skepticism fell in large part to the German press, which abnegated its responsibility for impartiality and whose correspondents who rarely believed their own stories nonetheless dutifully reported precisely what Goebbels' Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda fed them. While average Germans could hardly verify what was happening on the Czech or Polish frontier, the news coverage after Kristallnacht in November 1938 clearly illustrated the extent to which the media was suspect. At Goebbels' insistence, the press reports alleged that violence against Jews on that night of broken glass resulted from a spontaneous outpouring of wrath from the general population and had not been orchestrated by the government. The population was not so gullible as Goebbels' believed, however. The press versions were met with widespread derision, yet ultimately such evidence of manipulation was ignored. Hitler's frank admission soon afterwards that he was working to shape the German people psychologically in order to prepare them for a time when violence and force would be required to achieve his goals illustrates the start of a transformation from a relatively pacifistic attitude to one in which the people would become "a hardened, militant mass who would follow him into war" (103).

Taylor attempts a good balance between his coverage of Germany and Britain, but the events on the Continent prove ultimately more fascinating. Both populations were enjoying the benefits that attend a consumer culture and no one wanted war. Britons were clearly more uneasy, however, as their preparations for possible air raids showed. Many busily constructed private shelters in their gardens, while a plan to evacuate children from areas vulnerable to bombing showed the trepidation with which city dwellers faced the reputation of Goering's vaunted Luftwaffe. Conversely, average Germans did far less—almost nothing—to prepare for war. Only in building their army did the British fall short, with the May 1939 Military Training Act constituting a weak substitute for the compulsory military service required by most European armies. For rural bumpkins, it was quite the lark.

One minor criticism is that Taylor sometimes gives readers insufficient background on the sources he draws from, which, where it is relevant, would permit readers to better understand the context of their statements. This includes some individuals, but it becomes more important when relying on Sopade reports for example. There is no mention of the role of the German Social Democratic Party in Exile (Sopade), which naturally might be expected to report unfavorably on conditions in Nazi Germany. It would undoubtedly be senseless to draw on the accounts of die-hard Nazis who swallowed Goebbels' poison, but the views ranging from those provided by lukewarm supporters to outright opponents of the regime would be an even greater strength if more context was provided. Similar to Sopade, there is no information provided on the nature of Britain's Mass-Observation project, which generally drew its results from a limited segment of the population. In short, despite their evidentiary value, Taylor misses some opportunities for a more critical evaluation of the sources used.

Those observations aside, the work is an enjoyable, readable, and succinct history of the events that led to the Second World War, and it is greatly enhanced by the first-hand perspectives of individual witnesses. Taylor achieves his main purpose of illustrating what ordinary people experienced as events unfolded, and most importantly he admirably highlights how turmoil in the German psyche led its citizens along the road from passivity to “accomplices in genocidal horror” (13). The book should enjoy a wide audience with an interest in this period of history.

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