

BOOK REVIEW

Lohse, Alexandra. *Prevail Until the Bitter End: Germans in the Waning Years of World War II*

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Nazi Germany took an extraordinarily long time to lose World War II. Although it is, of course, impossible to mark a date when Germany's defeat was "inevitable," the failure to capture Moscow in the autumn of 1941 and the declaration of war on the United States already made scenarios of German victory implausible. Following the battle of Stalingrad, most contemporary observers assumed that it was only a matter of time before the Allies won. And yet Germans fought on. Most of the soldiers and civilians who died in World War II in Europe were killed during this protracted attempt to hold final defeat at bay.

In her engaging, nuanced, and elegantly written book, Alexandra Lohse examines why German soldiers and civilians continued to engage in an increasingly hopeless war effort. Her investigation is based on a varied range of primary sources. For probing the attitudes of men in uniform, she draws heavily on a collection of more than two thousand transcripts of conversations among German prisoners of war that were surreptitiously recorded by their British captors, specifically the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre (CSDIC). Lohse acknowledges that what prisoners said to one another cannot be taken as an entirely unguarded or unfiltered reflection of their inner thoughts. Remarks would still have been shaped to some degree by concerns not only about British eavesdropping but also by peer surveillance on behalf of the Nazi regime. But these transcripts nonetheless do provide some fascinating and relatively unguarded glimpses of prisoners of war's views of and expectations about the course of the war. Lohse's assessment of civilian attitudes is pieced together from the situation reports of the German security services, Wehrmacht censorship records, Allied surveillance reports, and individual diaries and letters.

The book follows a mixed chronological and thematic organization, tracing the evolution of expectations from the battle of Stalingrad through the final months of the war while also using specific chapters to delve into attitudes toward particular aspects of the war, such as genocide or corruption. Lohse's aim throughout the book is to explore "larger thought patterns that transcended divisions in German wartime society" (9–10). She therefore notes—but does not pursue—references to demographic differences (region, confession, etc.) in attitudes toward the regime and the war. Instead, she focuses on exploring the tensions, ambivalences, and apparent contradictions within the understandings shared broadly across German society and often evident within individual accounts. Lohse's navigation of these tensions is subtle and persuasive, in particular her explorations of how skepticism toward the Nazi regime could be reconciled with continued support for the war effort. Distrust of Nazi propaganda, for example, led many Germans to seek other sources of information to get a "true" picture of the wartime situation. But rather than confronting the reality of approaching defeat, the author argues, they tended to shape these bits of information into a "'bearable' truth about the German chances to achieve a victory in a war of conquest that most deemed legitimate" (39). Lohse further observes that those who grumbled about corruption and inequalities within the putative national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) often welcomed the regime's post-Stalingrad exhortations to redoubled but more equitably shared communal sacrifice and a commitment to "total war." And while widespread awareness of the mass killing of Jews and other atrocities could lead some Germans to

expressions of shame and collective self-criticism, it more often fuelled fears of retribution, which could only be held at bay through an even deeper immersion in the war effort. In short, what drove fighting to the bitter end was “not a suicidal fanaticism”; rather, Germans “fought to see a future in which they would be compensated for their own sacrifices and shielded from the consequences of their crimes” (158).

These observations and lines of argumentation largely go with the grain of recent scholarship on Nazi Germany in World War II rather than offering any radical revisionist departure. The book thus works very well as an accessible introduction for non-specialists, offering light-touch syntheses rather than getting bogged down in the minutiae of narrower historiographic debates. But specialists will also find Lohse’s book an engaging and stimulating read. Her interweaving of rich and varied primary source material with a solid command of secondary literature produces a troubling but beautifully written and psychologically convincing portrait of German society facing—or refusing to face—military defeat.