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[Review of: R. Gellately (2020) *Hitler's True Believers : How Ordinary People Became Nazis*]

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Robert Gellately. *Hitler's True Believers: How Ordinary People Became Nazis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 443. Cloth \$34.95.

With his book *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933–1945* (1990), Robert Gellately established himself as a leading historian of the Third Reich. His thesis that the gestapo's power did not lie in a ubiquitous presence but in a fairly small number of officers following up on the denunciations that ordinary citizens submitted for a variety of motives questioned previous assumptions and proved highly influential. In *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (2001), Gellately built on these findings to argue that a majority of Germans were perfectly aware of violent repression due to extensive press coverage yet supported Hitler's regime out of hostility to the political, social, and racial outsiders it targeted. In so doing, he joined a growing scholarly trend to stress the role of willing participation in the Nazi project. Not everyone agreed: Richard J. Evans titled his British Academy lecture "Coercion and Consent in Nazi Germany" (2007) because he felt that Gellately and others had been throwing the baby out with the bathwater. According to Evans, these historians underrated how a minority of devoted Nazis,

substantial though it was, coerced a hesitant or outright unsympathetic majority into submission via the courts the police, and a variety of organizations, such as the German Labor Front, the local chapters of the party, and the Hitler Youth.

Gellately's new book, *Hitler's True Believers: How Ordinary People Became Nazis*, does not enter this or other scholarly debates, save for some points he makes along the way, but does not pursue consistently, for instance, on Nazism's socialist dimension. As one would expect from his previous work, though, he emphasizes the support that Hitler's regime enjoyed among the German population. The early chapters are largely an account of Adolf Hitler's early career and the formation of the National Socialist German Workers' Party. The Nazi party would have lent itself to further analysis, given that the standard book by Dietrich Orlow appeared in 1969, and much research has been published in the meantime. Also, it would have provided an excellent basis for a discussion of the relationship between "true believers" and "ordinary people." Many of its activists doubtless fell into the former category. But its members, numbering more than 10 percent of the population by 1943, cannot be neatly separated from ordinary Germans. Many joined out of an urge to be more than ordinary, whether through career advancement or ideological distinction. Such elitism, however, jarred with the high membership rate and the ambitions of Heinrich Himmler's SS, which strove to reserve elite status for its own men.

To provide a more specific synthesis of this or any other major theme, however, is not the task Gellately set himself. Without clearly explaining the aims of his book, he restates his previously published views and integrates them into a chronological account of the Nazis' rise, establishment in power, and eventual downfall. Little of the content will be new to historians of the Third Reich, but such works can, of course, serve scholars and students of twentieth-century Europe more broadly. How far does this one succeed on those terms? Gellately is not only knowledgeable about Nazi Germany but conversant with the rich historiography of the last two decades. Furthermore, he incorporates primary sources, chiefly reports about the popular mood by the gestapo and the Social Democratic exile organization and diaries, mostly those that record Jewish observations of non-Jews' attitudes and behaviors. These sources are not new to historians of the Third Reich, either, but should be illuminating for a broader readership. What the chapters provide is a clear and accessible account of an atrocious yet widely popular regime. This reflects current mainstream opinion, even if the extent of consensus continues to be debated.

Gellately's book has some weaknesses as well as strengths. In the manner of some older syntheses,

he focuses on the pre-1939 years and only addresses the war in the final chapter. This leaves limited room for a discussion of the relationship between "true believers" and "ordinary people" on the various fronts and in the occupied regions of Europe. As a result, the account of extermination—of European Jews but also of millions of non-Jewish Poles and Russians—remains brief and descriptive. This contrasts with a prominent "competitor book"—namely, Peter Fritzsche's *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (2008), which also stresses most Germans' involvement in the Nazi project but accords far more space to the war and the Holocaust. Moreover, Fritzsche is more imaginative in interpreting primary sources and weaving them into a synthetic account, more astute in his analysis of a complex cultural process, more original in structuring his book along major themes, and more compelling in his writing style. Therefore, his remains the best brief and general book on the Third Reich for specialists and nonspecialists alike. *Hitler's True Believers* is a solid overview written by an expert historian, which conveys some key findings of the past decades. It is, however, unlikely to stimulate further scholarly debate.

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