1933, to destroy “Marxism” (i.e., communists and social-democrats alike), was never called into question by German nationals. On the contrary, the Nazi crusade against Marxism, which was violent by definition, was welcomed by the overwhelming majority of German nationals (and Catholics). To some extent, this is also true with regard to the DNVP’s attitude toward the Jews. Here, the author presents us a detailed and valuable picture of conservative reactions (or the absence of such reactions) to the antisemitic actions of the Nazi regime in 1933. Open protest came, for example, and not by coincidence, from conservative voices in Frankfurt/Main. But they remained the exception. If “a wide cross-section of the party rank and file disapproved of the lawlessness of excesses and the brutality of the attacks,” the mainstream conservative reaction was dominated by “the resentment and prejudice that had traditionally been a component of the DNVP’s anti-Semitic orientation” (205). Here, too, most German nationals felt themselves on the right side of the front.

In order to describe the relationship between Hitler and the DNVP, between Nazis and conservatives, the adequate notion is certainly not persecution but, as has often been observed, “disappointment” and “disillusion.” No doubt, Hermann Beck has added an important and hitherto underestimated element to our picture of the Nazi takeover in 1933. He is right in underlining the fact that, in 1933, a “dramatic change in Germany’s political climate” (107) took place. This change resulted from the excessive use of physical violence and caused an atmosphere of fear. It is to Beck’s credit to have shown that even Hitler’s allies, the conservatives, were intimidated by this change. Yet, the analysis of violence and intimidation needs to be combined with other decisive elements of 1933 like the aspect of “charisma” that has been stressed recently by Ian Kershaw, Hans-Ulrich Wehler, Wolfram Pyta, and others. Other aspects concern the bureaucratic character of the Nazi seizure of power or the strong impact of social and economic interest that caused a host of opportunistic behavior. In the end, the “modification” that is required may not be too heavy.

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Life and Death in the Third Reich. By Peter Fritzsche.

A decade ago, Peter Fritzsche explored the attempt of Adolf Hitler and his followers during the Weimar Republic to turn Germans into Nazis (Germans into Nazis [Cambridge, MA, 1998]). Now he continues his inquiry on through the Third Reich in a book that he might have called Germans into Aryans. He succeeds admirably in explaining to the general reader what much of the public felt that the Nazis offered them in exchange for support on the issue of race. Germans could imagine an altogether brighter life for themselves than they had experienced in the dismal Weimar years. All they needed to do, it seemed, was to endorse the Nazi dream of the Aryan utopia. In his earlier book, Fritzsche wrote: “In the end what the Nazis achieved was not the creation of a new type of German but rather the validation of new social roles which more and more Germans tried on” (Germans into Nazis, 228). He uses this metaphor of trying things on in the present volume, too. The public increasingly tolerated the regime’s measures against Jews: “Antisemitism was tried on, and it often fitted” (121). Fritzsche views the “near total absence of opposition” after 1933 as
deriving from the resignation of opponents in the face of this national acclamation (74). They could see no hope of organizing political dissent, even in the last months of the war, he claims rather dismissively in light of the courageous although isolated resistance attempts that did mature.

The author asserts that, after the initial thuggery of the early months of the regime, at least the Gentile population did not feel terrorized into submission; rather, they came to accept the Nazi admonition to view the world in racial terms. “Hitler did not so much end the revolution as reconceptualize it” (90). Proletarian storm troopers were pushed into the background by educated, ideologically driven professionals who permeated state and party government at all levels, down to the local public health offices. Genetic tests and family trees became routine. And the caressing of the German body by the propaganda machine was not simply limited to the “luscious physiognomies” that have caught Peter Fritzsche’s eye (96). Illustrated publications regularly featured the craggy old faces of farm or factory workers, male and female, or the weary features of ethnic Germans, in an effort to stress the nobility of work and those who performed it. Jews, of course, did not work but were congenitally lazy, as the Nazis stressed ad nauseam.

Students often puzzle over how much the German public knew or even cared about what was happening to the Jews. Fritzsche’s meticulous investigation looks across the spectrum of German society and gives a clear answer: people knew a lot and did little. And the information did not only come from family members who were soldiers on leave during the war. The man who came to read the water meter told one housewife how his relative in the Schutzstaffel (SS) had had to shoot down 500 Jews in Poland (153). Letters from the front talked with great frankness about the mind-set of the murderers. It gave one police inspector pause to have to “exterminate a whole family when only the father is the perpetrator,” and he expected sympathy. “It is not easy if you are such a lover of children, as I am” (202). Yet the toughness demanded by the SS validated even such atrocities as this, in the name of destroying all the enemies of the new order. This book is full of memorable vignettes like this, and Fritzsche shows a magisterial command of his sources. These include older, insightful autobiographies like Ruth Andreas-Friedrich’s *Berlin Underground* (New York, 1947), which I now regret not having glanced at much since I read it as a graduate student, and they go all the way up to the very latest publications by German scholars, who capture superbly revealing episodes that are not available in English.

As in his earlier book, Fritzsche makes ample yet careful and splendid use of private diaries. The harried and perspicacious Victor Klemperer is there, of course, as again are the Gebenslebens, part of enthusiastic Nazi officialdom. Among others, he quotes from the diary of a lifelong opponent of National Socialism, Karl Dürk fend, whose working-class milieu allowed him to observe the disquieting “conversion” of workers to the Nazi cause. These and other first-person accounts inevitably remind one of the similar use of diaries by Saul Friedländer and invite comparison with his own endeavor to understand how Germans could have permitted the Holocaust to occur (*Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* [New York, 1997] and *The Years of Extermination, 1939–1945* [New York, 2007]). I have used the latter volume as required reading in class before, but now Fritzsche will be my preferred choice. To begin with, he succinctly states in 300 pages what Friedländer needed 1,000 pages to explain. And although the latter author’s books are immensely readable, too, they are sometimes based on flawed research. Friedländer suggests repeatedly that Hitler deliberately kept almost or completely silent about the Jews in public speeches early in the war, in the hope of winning over Britain or France. He claims, for example,
that Hitler mentioned the Jews only once in a speech of February 24, 1940. Unfortunately he had not bothered to read the easily available full text of the speech, relying instead on the edited excerpts given by Max Domarus. In fact, Hitler mentioned the Jews eight times in that speech and ranted as much as usual in other speeches in which Friedländer presumes silence. I can find no such carelessness about the use of sources in Fritzsche’s work. To be fair, neither author is perfect, and there are some mangled German words from both of them. Sometimes Fritzsche translates German terms too literally. “Music of the future,” presumably for Zukunftsmusik, will mean little to the English reader and might better be rendered as “pie in the sky” (59).

Each author has basically undertaken a sweeping work of synthesis, and Fritzsche is unusually gracious about acknowledging his fellow scholars, not merely tucked away in endnotes but prominently in the text. He has the edge over Friedländer by including some original archival research on unpublished materials, such as the surveys of the German population carried out by U.S. officials after the end of the war. Friedländer puffs to a halt as Hitler commits suicide, but Fritzsche strides purposefully forward to show how Germans felt about the Third Reich after its collapse and revelations concerning the Holocaust. The results are vivid and alarming about the extent some Germans continued to excuse antisemitism, like the former Red Cross nurse who stated in July 1945: “Most Jews, as you know, fought against National Socialism, and in time of war that cannot be tolerated” (257). The final chapter, “Intimate Knowledge,” catalogs thoroughly the strategies employed by Germans to mask their involvement in the Nazi agenda. Generally they allowed “the active verbs of perpetrators to be exchanged for the passive voice of victims” (296). That began with the disaster narrative of Stalingrad, ignoring the active role of the Sixth Army in Holocaust atrocities, and continued through the attitude of Germans long after 1945 to feel “appalled at how the war had ended rather than how it had started,” as Fritzsche neatly puts it (301). As the Götterdämmerung approached, many immersed themselves in Ernst Jünger’s novels to try to convince themselves of the inevitability of brutality and the nobility of the struggle. Unfortunately, trivial occurrences could now rattle them. The author Heinrich Böll wrote to his wife: “The French have come up with a dirty new trick. . . . They simply write 1918 on the walls, . . . just an oppressive little number” (267). Here as throughout the book, Peter Fritzsche jumps straight to the heart of the matter with a poignant quotation. In Rankean terms, he does not merely explain but helps students to understand the Third Reich. This probing survey will quickly become required reading in many courses on European history.

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Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic. By Eli Rubin.


In this refreshing and original book, Eli Rubin explores the use of plastics in everyday life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the 1960s and the early 1970s. Rubin asks why plastics could acquire such singular importance in East German consumer culture. Indeed, he notes that even in contemporary East German memories of the GDR, plastic utensils, from egg-holders to toilet seats, hold an extremely important place. In providing a persuasive account of the genesis of a critical part of consumer culture, Rubin also provides important insight into how power was con-