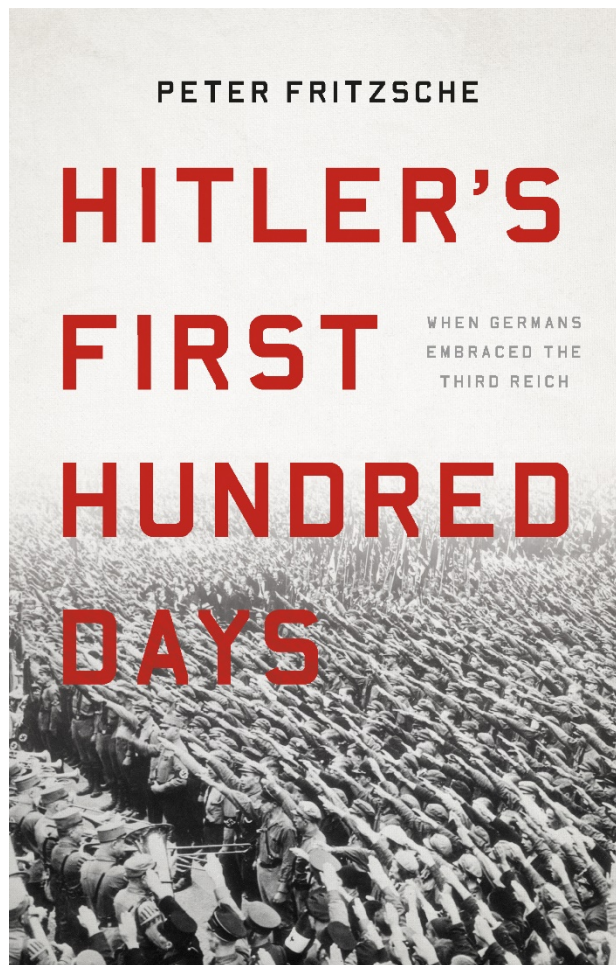


**Review**  
**Peter Fritzsche:**  
***Hitler's first hundred days:***  
***When Germans embraced the Third Reich***  
New York: Basic Books, 2020. 421 p.  
ISBN 9871541697430

*Reviewed by Dietrich Orlow*



Perhaps it is appropriate to start this review by stating what the book is not. It is not a study in “high politics.” There is no discussion of cabinet meetings (which, in spite of the early days of the Third Reich that are described here, did already take place) or the behind the scenes intrigues among Nazi leaders and their Conservative allies. The author is also not interested in the ongoing historiographic controversies about the Nazi regime. And there is nothing factually new in this account of the early Third Reich. These events have been covered before, not least in some of the earlier publications written by Peter Fritzsche, who is a professor of history at the University of Illinois.

Instead, this book is a distinguished, well-written example of *Alltagsgeschichte*, the everyday history of everyday people. The author’s central question is: How did the overwhelming number of Germans turn into Nazis in such a short time, in the proverbial hundred days? Fritzsche’s answer is that the Nazis were able to create a mythical *Volksgemeinschaft*, a people’s community that pitted “us,” the good, the real Germans, against “them,” the aliens, the outsiders, identified primarily as Marxists and Jews. Moreover, as Fritzsche argues, the mythical *Volksgemeinschaft* of 1933 was a recreation of the *Volksgemeinschaft* of 1914 when “we” stood united against “them,” Germany’s foreign enemies.

The Nazis accomplished this feat by a mixture of “positives,” spectacles, rallies, radio broadcasts (the author is particularly good concerning the Nazis’ use of this relatively new form of mass communication), and films. (The career of Emil Jannings takes center stage here.) Equally important were the “negative” aspects of the regime’s activities: The atrocities, torture, and other forms of violence directed at the *Volksgemeinschaft*’s presumed enemies.

The chief villains in this process were, of course, Hitler, although, for the most part, he remains in the background in this account, Joseph Goebbels as the chief architect of the “positive” measures, Hermann Göring, the prime minister of Prussia, who unleashed and encouraged the Stormtroopers’ atrocities, and above all, the Stormtroopers (SA) themselves. They were primarily responsible for the regime’s acts of violence during the first hundred days.

For sources to buttress his argument, Fritzsche relies on a judicious mix of (mostly published) diaries, reminiscences, newspaper accounts, and some reports by French, American, and British diplomats stationed in Germany. The author manages to combine this large variety of sources into a superbly written narrative. His skill as a writer has few equals among his peers.

Is the argument convincing? The author certainly thinks so, but some legitimate questions remain. The “spirit of 1914” is perhaps overdone. More recent research has shown that the national unity in Germany was not nearly as absolute as the government’s propaganda portrayed it. Partly to contrast 1933 with what came before, Fritzsche portrays the Weimar Republic in starkly negative ways, but

it should be remembered that until 1932, Prussia, Germany's largest state, was democratically and politically quite stable. The state's minister of culture, Carl Heinrich Becker, also actively resisted the spreading of antisemitism among Prussia's university students.

As is perhaps inevitable, the author relies more heavily on some sources than on others. The diary of Elisabeth Gebensleben is most frequently cited, in part because her diary reveals that she did indeed become a fervent Nazi supporter during the first one hundred days. There is also the contrast with her daughter, who remained a convinced anti-Nazi and eventually moved to the Netherlands to escape the Nazi tyranny. Fritzsche also makes good use of the voluminous musings of Franz Göll, whose writings the author edited in a previous publication (Fritzsche 2011).

There is some repetition in the account. In narrating the Stormtrooper violence, the author attempts to cover as many parts of Germany as possible, but this results in a somewhat numbing, repetitive story. It turns out that the Stormtroopers were not very original in choosing the ways of torturing and humiliating their victims. Fritzsche portrays the German communists as primary victims of Nazi atrocities in these early days and this is certainly true, but he might have pointed out that the communists inadvertently helped the Nazis in the construction of their mythical *Volksgemeinschaft*. The communists really did think they were about to stage a successful Bolshevik revolution in Germany. (The slogan "After Hitler it's our turn" was used by the communists, not the social democrats.) Fritzsche cannot altogether resist the temptation of historicism. The reader is repeatedly reminded that the Nazis' early atrocities against the Jews were forerunners of the Holocaust. There were certainly links, but the author does not allude to the ongoing historiographic debate about when the decision to launch the actual Holocaust was actually made.

In a nod to comparative history, the author includes accounts of what happened in France and the United States at the same time as Germany was suffering through the one hundred days. The French extreme right was noisy and violent, but ultimately unsuccessful in toppling democracy in France. (This chapter also contains brief references to the Dutch Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging and the Belgian Rexist movement.) Regarding the United States, Fritzsche contrasts the Nazis' tribal *Volksgemeinschaft* that divided "us" and "them" with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's effort to unite the whole nation in the face of the Depression. This is a little Pollyannish. The American national unity was pretty much limited to whites. As a recent work has shown again, despite the entreaties of his wife Eleanor, Roosevelt yielded to the demands of the Southern white elite. For the most part blacks did not benefit from the New Deal reforms (Watts 2020).

The book would have benefitted from one more spellcheck. The name of the Bavarian town is Straubing, not Sträubing, and the SA rank is *Sturmbannführer* not *Sturmbahnführer*. The work's version of the Stormtrooper rank would turn the man into an engineer of a stormy train. But these are minor quibbles. Fritzsche's contribution is a well-written example of *Alltagsgeschichte*. Some of the author's conclusions may be questionable, but the narrative is among the best of the genre.

## References

- Fritzsche, Peter. 2011. *The turbulent world of Franz Göll: An ordinary Berliner writes the twentieth century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Watts, Jill. 2020. *The Black cabinet: The untold story of African Americans and politics during the age of Roosevelt*. New York: Grove Press.

## About the reviewer

Dr. Dietrich Orlow is professor emeritus of history at Boston University (Massachusetts, U.S.). He has also been a visiting professor at the University of Amsterdam (Netherlands) and a two-time Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies. He is the author of numerous publications in modern German and comparative European history, including two monographs that deal with Dutch history: *Common destiny: A comparative history of the Dutch, French, and German social democratic parties, 1945-1969* (Berghahn Books, 2000), and *The lure of fascism in Western Europe: German Nazis, Dutch and French fascists, 1933-1939* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009). The eighth edition of Professor Orlow's college textbook *A history of modern Germany, 1871-present* was published by Routledge in 2018.