

Neither Perpetrators nor Victims: Civilians Facing Mass Violence

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REVIEW OF: Mary Fulbrook, *Bystander Society: Conformity and Complicity in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). 488 pp. (hardback) USD 34.95 ISBN: 978-0-197-69171-7.

Mary Fulbrook's *Bystander Society* is a milestone in the study of the Holocaust in particular, and the role of civilians in the face of genocide and mass violence in general. It is the first book that systematically examines all those who, in Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1945, neither directly perpetrated violence nor were targeted for persecution.¹ To date, that vague definition has reflected more the lack of in-depth studies than the historical record. Fulbrook convincingly tackles the making of this group, comprising the vast majority of non-Jewish Germans between 1933 and 1945. Standing by acts of discrimination and violence towards Jews — not acting, not protesting, not speaking up — became socially required, Fulbrook argues, and participating in such acts was widely tolerated, if not openly encouraged. By not acting, not speaking up, and going along with new, racialized norms, which Nazi authorities ferociously enforced but that they also quickly adopted, at least publicly, most ordinary Germans contributed to the Holocaust. Based on personal accounts, *Bystander Society* is an excellent book not only for its key insights into the social conditions that, unwillingly but always inexorably, paved the way for what happened after 1939. The book is also a warning, demonstrating how a repressive state undoes existing ties and destroys the very possibility of social interactions from the bottom up.

To make her case, Fulbrook explores the rich collection of some 250 personal accounts, 'My life in Germany before and after January 30, 1933'. Probing what was an essay competition run by three Harvard professors in 1939-1940, and which is now available at Harvard's Houghton Library, Fulbrook avoids the benefits of hindsight by chronicling how these émigrés perceived the growing racialization of social identities after 1933. Indeed, most Germans were neither perpetrators nor vic-

1 For recent critiques upon which Fulbrook expands, see *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History*, ed. by Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018).

tims, but what she aptly calls the ‘muddled middle’ (pp. 18–20). In the absence of direct acts of harm on the one hand, and generalized social exclusion on the other, scholars often relied upon the static, one-size-fits-all label of *bystander* that was popularized by Raul Hilberg’s 1992 book.² Yet the term captures neither the changes in behaviours nor the range of personal implications in Nazism.³ *Bystander Society* makes the best case to date for distinguishing between degrees of complicity, from willing facilitation and functional complicity to constrained conformity. The twelve chapters, chronologically organized, capture well this threefold process, from fearful consent and passivity in the early 1930s (part I, ‘The Slippery Slope: Social Segregation in Nazi Germany’, pp. 27–170) and constrained conformity and willing facilitation after 1935, to, lastly, what she dubs functional conformity, defined as all behaviours that furthered Nazi policies (part II, ‘The Expansion of Violence at Home and Abroad’, pp. 173–368). While most chapters dwell on Germany, chapter 9 probes these aspects for Lithuania and Latvia (pp. 268–309). Up to 1935, the speed of this process depended on pre-1933 relationships, social class, and status. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws represented an important milestone because they codified the racial distinction upon which ‘Aryans’ were expected to act and perform. Racialized differences, invented and enforced from the top-down, and however despised in private, had become a public reality.

After 1935, seemingly small shifts in private — such as not inviting a friend to a social event — evolved alongside, and often followed, public performances of conformity. Like venom, the racial difference proclaimed from above slowly penetrated the local fabric and reshaped the private sphere, a depth rarely acknowledged after 1945 under the umbrellas of fear, ignorance, or inner resistance. Here, Fulbrook connects *Bystander Society* to her 2018 book on postwar justice (or injustice), winner of the 2019 Wolfson Prize.⁴ ‘Far greater numbers,’ she astutely notes, ‘may never have truly acknowledged the degree to which they had become contaminated by their involvement in Nazism, even when challenged more explicitly in differing contexts after the war’ (p. 383). By the time the war broke out in 1939, and the victims had disappeared

2 Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

3 Tellingly, a search of the term ‘bystander’ in this journal renders six results, most of them (naturally) associated with perpetrating a crime or describing it as such.

4 Mary Fulbrook, *Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi Persecution and the Quest for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

from one's circle (or view altogether), remaining passive and uninvolved in Nazism, whatever one's private feelings about the regime or Jews, had become impossible.⁵

Considering bystanding as a social process allows Fulbrook to make three contributions that are particularly relevant for readers of this journal. First and foremost, we ought to overcome any remaining temptation to explain conduct in Nazi Germany and other cases of mass violence through the sole lens of motivations and beliefs. Whereas scholars traditionally explained behaviours by examining belief systems — or what appeared as such to observers then and today — personal accounts point to many contradictions, shaped by often inaccessible inner worlds.⁶ Yet, as Fulbrook shows, one acted upon a public script, then talked oneself into and, more often than not, made a truce with the performance not simply because of the fear of repression and standing out, but because there were considerable benefits, materially and socially, to moulding oneself on what was expected. Such behaviours 'certainly both hurt the victims and actively assisted in the process of separating out communities along lines desired by the Nazi regime. Nor can it be brushed away in terms of "only obeying orders" (p. 111). The process was both insidious and subtle.' Using the notion of 'normal community', adopted from sociologist Erving Goffman, Fulbrook moves beyond the old debates about the origins of public acceptance of Nazism rooted in either imposed terror or willing support.^{7:8} 'From the perspective of the muddled middle', Fulbrook sums up, 'the mere fact of such widespread outward conformity—for whatever range of reasons—led to the perceived fiction of unity and consensus, making it even harder for wavering souls to risk standing out from the crowd or to challenge dominant views' (p. 395). The latter conveniently helped solve any arising or remaining moral conflicts. Thus, most did not so much 'learn to hate' than 'to comply, to conform, to demonstrate in daily behaviours identification with the dominant, "racially" defined national community' (pp. 377-378).

5 In this sense, see also Ellen Pilsforth, "I could have slapped myself": The Ethics of the Bystander Perspective in Sebastian Haffner's Memoir', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 5:1 (2023), 1-28.

6 This aspect deserves systematic scrutiny. For a sample, see *Les comportements collectifs en France et dans l'Europe allemande: Historiographie, normes, prismes (1940-1945)*, ed. by Pierre Laborie and François Marcot (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015).

7 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

8 For an engaging summary of these debates, see Robert Gellately, *Hitler's True Believers: How Ordinary People Became Nazis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 3-14.

The book's second major contribution lies in the refutation of 'by-standers' and other labels, instead suggesting a wider spectrum of conformity and compliance that can be fruitfully applied to other cases. While universally applauded, Michael Rothberg's expression of the 'implicated subject' does not capture this spectrum of involvement and complicity with Nazi racism, as Fulbrook's book makes clear.⁹ Similar generalizations have been made about other contexts of occupied Europe — think only of Robert Paxton's debated assertion that most non-Jewish French people were 'functional collaborators'.¹⁰ Clearly, most Germans were not perpetrators, but they were not passive by-standers either: passivity was a learned mechanism of socially acceptable behaviours. This also renders moot the question of lack of knowledge, a classic line of defence after the war and arguably present in the literature until the 2010s.¹¹ Pretending not to piece together various elements about the fate of Jews made one's own perceived powerlessness much easier. A fruitful line of inquiry, Fulbrook suggests, tracks what ordinary people made of such knowledge in specific contexts, which can now be applied to social histories of state-sponsored discrimination and persecution.

The third and related contribution is the exploration of social patterns in the 1930s without foreshadowing the war years. As a historian of victims of mass violence, I applaud her effort to foreground personal accounts and to make out patterns.¹² Instead of focusing on individual perpetrators, Fulbrook describes this process from conformity to compliance at the communal level, with considerable regional variations — from the southern village of Gailingen to Hamburg and Berlin. Future studies should further refine this shift from outward conformity to functional complicity. To what extent did this shift depend on social patterns *among* non-Jewish Germans and pre-1933 factors, such as religion, social class, or voting patterns? Future comparisons will yield deeper insights into this process of racialization of local, regional, and national identities.

9 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

10 Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 235.

11 Two examples are Bart van der Boom, *'Wij weten niets van hun lot': Gewone Nederlanders en de Holocaust* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2011); Adam Rayski and Stéphane Courtois, *Qui savait quoi? L'extermination des Juifs 1941-1945* (Paris: La Découverte, 1987).

12 For an early, excellent complement to such an approach, see Mark Roseman, *The Barbarians from our "Kulturkreis." Nazi Perpetrators in the Eyes of German Jews* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2016).

In the same vein, the notions of performance, roleplay, and public script all deserve more attention in considering this segregation process. Since 99.9 percent of Germans did not rescue Jews in the sense of a long-term commitment, scholars interested in small gestures of help, food, and sympathy that mattered so much in the cracks of a bystander society will find many avenues for exploration. Arguably, inaction, looking away, and silence could also mean fleeting or ever-growing opposition to Nazism — keeping silent about Jews hidden in a cellar or renting out an apartment to strangers, thus offering protection without intending it, at least initially. The more we move into Eastern Europe and the longer the war went on, the more relevant the idea of functional complicity seems to become, which calls to refine further various forms of complicity.¹³ This effort must be collective, interdisciplinary — engaging all kinds of disciplines studying violence — and finally include the vast collections of video testimonies recorded since the late 1970s, amounting to some 20 years of uninterrupted listening.¹⁴ The book's thick descriptions will be a treasure trove for all those interested in examining (anew) cases of state-sponsored violence.

In sum, *Bystander Society* tells a crucial story of falling in line with state-sponsored discrimination, new norms on race violently enforced but also quickly adopted, whatever the personal beliefs and motivations. Aware of the continuing importance of studying this racialization and segregation process at hand, Fulbrook rightly does not shy away from making connections with contemporary events, from Derek Chauvin's trial to American election denialism and recurring, disparaging remarks by Donald J. Trump. Perhaps most frightening to a reader today, certainly to this reviewer, is the fact that 'many Germans found it possible to maintain a sense of their own moral integrity while at the same time furthering the Nazi cause by public conformity' (p. 91). The pace with which this muddled middle did so after 1933 remains indeed stunning. This excellent book is a milestone in understanding civilian responses to mass violence.

¹³ In this vein, see now also *Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism and Beyond. Compromised Identities?*, ed. by Mary Fulbrook, Bastiaan Willems, Stephanie Bird, and Stefanie Rauch (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

¹⁴ For this blossoming field, see *Politics, Memory, Violence: The New Social Science of the Holocaust*, ed. by Jeffrey S. Kopstein, Jelena Subotić, and Susan Welch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023).

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