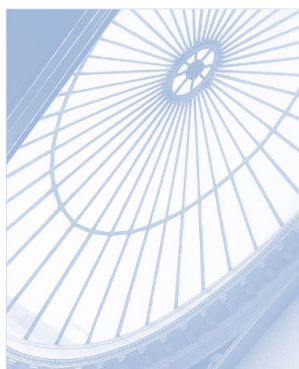


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MARY FULBROOK, *Bystander Society: Conformity and Complicity in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), xiii + 470 pp. ISBN 978 0 197 69171 7. £26.99

History does not repeat itself. But reading Mary Fulbrook's *Bystander Society* while Elon Musk gave what looked like a Hitler salute at a parallel event to Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2025, the book felt less and less like a book about the history of Nazi Germany and more and more like a foretoken of a not-too-distant future. However, Fulbrook stresses that sociological and psychological insights into the behaviour and motivation of bystanders in democracies should not be applied to dictatorships, because the context in which people act is fundamentally different.

Fulbrook argues that summary concepts like 'perpetrator society' are too broad to understand the messy social changes in Nazi Germany, during which bystanding emerged as a widespread social arrangement that enabled social segregation in the early 1930s and eventually facilitated mass murder. At first glance, Fulbrook's approach appears contradictory because, by using the term 'bystander society', she seems to be replacing one essentialist concept with another. A closer look shows that Fulbrook is focusing on Germans 'who were neither enthusiastic supporters nor political opponents or direct victims of Nazism' (p. vii). This 'muddled middle' of society, as she calls it, is her rather large sample. Shifting the view away from perpetrators, Nazi elites, and victims to the wider population allows her to examine how the majority of Germans 'accommodated themselves and participated in an evolving system of collective violence, or the extent to which members of mainstream society were themselves in part responsible for, or complicit in, the ultimately murderous outcomes of Nazi persecution' (p. 6). This approach enables her to differentiate between varying degrees of complicity, to distinguish willing facilitation from forced conformity, and to identify the varying levels of choice available to individuals in different social and political contexts. In the introduction, the author provides a short definition of her concept. In a 'bystander society', 'fewer people are likely to stand up and act on "the courage of their convictions" in face of violence against those ousted from the community and vilified as "others"' (p. 3). In Nazi Germany,

the social conditions that led to the formation of a 'bystander society' were established over the course of several years, rather than being present from the outset. Although her definition illustrates the complex relationship between different forms and spaces of violence and the social figure of the bystander, the concept of a 'bystander society' could have benefited from a more substantial engagement with the rich literature on the history of violence—especially if the manifold insights of the book are to be made applicable 'beyond the specific cases and period of Nazi rule' (p. 386).

By following individual personal accounts and using ego-documents like diaries, Mary Fulbrook aims to uncover patterns of social processes that fostered passivity in the face of different forms of violence in different spaces, such as the home, the street, or the occupied Baltic states. Because the book tells a linear story of the emergence of a 'bystander society' over time, it is chronologically structured and divided into two major chapters. The first covers the period between the First World War and 1938 and looks at how processes of social segregation were introduced, enacted, and internalized. Fulbrook shows that the majority of Germans quickly accepted the fundamental categorization of 'Aryans' and 'non-Aryans' introduced and consolidated by Nazi legislation during the 1930s. This is not a new argument, as Harald Welzer, to take one example, also believes that the social acceptance of a legal framework of absolute and unchangeable exclusion marked a fundamental shift in the way Germans saw themselves and legitimized their behaviour.¹ However, unlike perpetrator researchers, Fulbrook mostly focuses on the majority of Germans who were complicit by conforming, but who were not necessarily directly involved in perpetration.

Fulbrook's main source for the first part of the book is a collection of over 250 essays written for a competition initiated by a psychologist, a historian, and a sociologist at Harvard University in 1939. Participants could win up to \$1,000 with a text on 'My life in Germany before and after 30 January 1933'.² About two thirds were written by educated

¹ Harald Welzer, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), 248.

² G. W. Allport, J. S. Bruner, and E. M. Jandorf, 'Personality under Social Catastrophe: Ninety Life-Histories of the Nazi Revolution', *Character & Personality: A Quarterly for Psychodiagnostic & Allied Studies*, 10 (1941), 1–22.

exiles and refugees who had been classified as Jewish by Nazi policy and were living in the United States at the time. The essays offer a unique perspective on the society of pre-war Germany because the narratives had not yet been shaped by the Holocaust. Although Fulbrook is careful to critique her sources, she does not mention the body of research on the history of these essays, and there is little information about the overall narratives presented in these texts.³ Based on the Harvard essays, she reconstructs the practices and motivations of non-Jewish German bystanders through the lens of marginalized and self-marginalized exiles and emigrants who are, as Fulbrook argues, 'the best barometer of the historical significance of bystander passivity, conformity, and growing complicity' (p. 13). The production of knowledge about bystanding as a social practice is therefore based on what was classified as deviant in Nazi Germany. Fulbrook makes a strong case for the use of personal accounts, as this is the only way to access not only the changing social and emotional relations between Germans and those classified as 'non-Aryans', but also the changing subjectivities. Less convincing, however, is her assertion that opinion polls and surveys 'only provide snapshots, with evidence of specific attitudes on particular issues at certain moments; and the individuals whose views are recorded generally remain anonymous, simply seen as representatives of their class, gender, religion, or region' (p. 12). In my view, there is no contradiction between personal accounts and mass data; indeed, the Harvard study aimed to turn the essays into quantitative data points. By selecting certain essays and ego-documents, Fulbrook also presents her examples to the reader as representative of people of different ages, genders, and political affiliations.

In the second part of the book, when Fulbrook looks at the expansion of violence between 1938 and 1945, with a geographical focus on the Holocaust in the Baltic region, she gets closer to the worldviews and practices of the bystanders. Here she mostly uses letters and diaries written by non-Jewish Germans. Fulbrook manages to show how many Germans professed to feel ashamed at the ways in

³ See e.g. Detlef Garz, *Von den Nazis vertrieben: Autobiographische Zeugnisse von Emigrantinnen und Emigranten. Das wissenschaftliche Preisausschreiben der Harvard Universität aus dem Jahr 1939* (Opladen, 2021); Christian Meyer, *(K)eine Grenze: Das Private und das Politische im Nationalsozialismus 1933–1940* (Berlin, 2020).

which people classified as 'non-Aryans' were treated and at the same time pleaded ignorance long before the war ended in 1945. This combination of admitting to feeling shame while denying any complicity or knowledge became a common narrative in post-war Germany, and was probably most prominently used by Albert Speer. This ignorance had to be actively constructed; it required effort to claim not to have known anything.

At times, the book seems to move away from the bystander category because of the many examples Mary Fulbrook presents. In the end, however, it all ties together, and it becomes clear that the figure of the bystander is crucial because it is through them and their behaviour that we can understand how the participation of most individuals across society was required to implement and enforce discriminatory categories in Nazi Germany. Fulbrook demonstrates that inaction in Nazi Germany was a form of action. In her conclusion, she identifies three factors to explain bystander behaviour: ignorance, impotence, and indifference, which differ in significance depending on the context. The book clearly shows that ignorance was 'actively produced and fostered' (p. 387) in cultural, personal, and structural ways, often entailing a conscious decision to look away. After the war, many Germans claimed that they had had to comply, or they would have been punished. This narrative of powerlessness changed over time, as it became clear from the 1960s onwards that the majority of Germans had agreed with Nazi policies and benefited from them in one way or another. At the same time, terror and repression were an integral part of German society, but also a 'sense of mutual distrust constrained many people into outward conformity' (p. 389). Indifference was, as Fulbrook argues, mostly a way to explain and legitimize inaction at the time rather than an excuse that was used later. For Fulbrook, antisemitism is not a convincing explanation for the inaction of bystanders in the face of violence, but rather the result of processes that 'actively created' indifference (p. 391), such as geographical and emotional segregation.

Mary Fulbrook has written an important and insightful book about the everyday history of violence in Nazi Germany. *Bystander Society* is impressive because it masterfully assembles a huge variety of sources and personal perspectives, binding them together with the concept of

bystanding. I am curious to see whether the bystander concept will be applied to other historical examples and developed further. It remains to be hoped that the contemporary history of the United States and Germany will not turn into case studies of 'bystander societies' for future historians.

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