



The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany

William L. Shirer

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Hitler boasted that The Third Reich would last a thousand years. It lasted only 12. But those 12 years contained some of the most catastrophic events Western civilization has ever known.

No other powerful empire ever bequeathed such mountains of evidence about its birth and destruction as the Third Reich. When the bitter war was over, and before the Nazis could destroy their files, the Allied demand for unconditional surrender produced an almost hour-by-hour record of the nightmare empire built by Adolph Hitler. This record included the testimony of Nazi leaders and of concentration camp inmates, the diaries of officials, transcripts of secret conferences, army orders, private letters—all the vast paperwork behind Hitler's drive to conquer the world.

The famed foreign correspondent and historian William L. Shirer, who had watched and reported on the Nazis since 1925, spent five and a half years sifting through this massive documentation. The result is a monumental study that has been widely acclaimed as the definitive record of one of the most frightening chapters in the history of mankind.

This worldwide bestseller has been acclaimed as the definitive book on Nazi Germany; it is a classic work.

The accounts of how the United States got involved and how Hitler used Mussolini and Japan are astonishing, and the coverage of the war—from Germany's early successes to her eventual defeat—is must reading

The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany Details

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William L. Shirer

From Reader Review The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany for online ebook

Joseph says

Listened to as an Audible audiobook.

A very detailed history of the entity of the Third Reich. It is not a biography of Hitler or a war history, but a comprehensive study of the entire organization. Shirer was witness to many events as a reporter and uses original source material. The resistance to the Third Reich is also covered in great detail along with the many deeply disturbing aspects of the concentration camps. A definitive history of one of mankind's greatest evils.

Roy Lotz says

Reading this book is an ordeal. It is very long and very depressing. Charting the Third Reich from the birth of Hitler to the collapse of Germany, Shirer tells the whole story with the sweep of a novelist and the detail of an accountant. He wrote the book after having access to huge stores of documents captured by the Allies after the war. Diaries, schedules, testimonies from the Nuremberg trials, the minutes of meetings, and much more were the raw material marshalled to create this tome.

As is often noted, Shirer was a journalist, not a historian, a fact that helps to explain much about this book. He lived in Berlin as a foreign correspondent from 1933 to the end of 1940, reporting on the rise of Hitler and the beginnings of the war, until the threat of the Gestapo forced him to return home. This firsthand experience lent color to his narrative, but also focused his attention on readily observable events. Rather than talk of larger trends—social shifts, economic pressures, cultural developments—Shirer focuses almost exclusively on the doings of individuals in power, such as he had been reporting on.

This focus makes the narrative vivid and pleasingly concrete, but also results in a superficial analysis. A historian would naturally spend more time on the rampant inflation of the times, the institutional weakness of the Weimar Republic, the wider political trends in Europe, the mechanics of a totalitarian state, and so on. Further, Shirer's explanation of why Germany embarked on such a destructive enterprise boils down to: because it is peopled by Germans. That is, he locates a kind of cultural essence in the German people, an essence stemming from the Reformation and especially Martin Luther, added to by Hegel and then by Nietzsche, which came to full fruition in National Socialism. But this sort of cultural essentialism is, for me, just intellectual laziness. It can be used to explain anything or everything, since these posited cultural qualities are vague and unobservable.

In any case wider historical analysis plays a very small part in this book, which is mainly a record of the decisions and actions of the leading men of the Nazi regime. That is to say that this book is a political and not a military history. The Second World War is discussed, of course, but only insofar as its developments affected or were caused by the Nazi leaders. Shirer is mainly concerned with charting the rise to power of these ruthless men: how they outsmarted the Weimar Republic leaders, fooled the international community, bullied and threatened their way to conquests, and finally instigated a war that resulted in their own ruin.

The balance of the book is tilted heavily towards the rise of the Third Reich. This can make for some dreary reading. In retrospect it is stupefying to witness how blind, inept, and spineless were Hitler's opponents, first within Germany and then beyond its borders, until the final crisis spurred the world into action against him. Though Shirer's sturdy prose is normally quite plain and unadorned, he has a steady instinct for the dramatic

and writes several unforgettable scenes. Nevertheless the scale of detail Shirer saw fit to include sometimes weighs down the narrative into benumbing dullness. The endless, petty diplomatic maneuvers that preceded the beginning of the War—negotiations, ambassadors, threats, ultimatums, calculations, second thoughts, and so on—made it a relief when the soldiers finally started shooting.

These political dealings of the Nazis constitute the vast bulk of this book. It is a masterclass in how far a little cunning, shameless lying, and absolute ruthlessness can get you. It is also a lesson in the need to cooperate to take decisive action against common threats. In the years since Vietnam, many have concluded that the main lesson to be drawn from America's foreign policy is the folly of interventionist wars. After the First World War, the Western powers were understandably ever more chary of violence. And yet, at least in Shirer's telling of the history, a timely show of force could have nipped Hitler's rise in the bud. If England and France had upheld their treaties and defended their territories and their allies, Hitler could not have amassed so much power at a time when the German military was still small. (Though it must be said that Shirer's intellectual weakness appears here, too, since he attributes this inaction to pure cowardice.)

In any case, this does bring out an interesting dilemma in foreign policy concerning the benefits and risks of violent intervention. In the case of Hitler, timely action could have prevented a disastrous conflict. And yet in many other historical cases, such as with Saddam Hussein, the threat of non-intervention was vastly overestimated, while the cost of intervention vastly underestimated. The word "estimate" is key here, since these decisions must necessarily be based on guesses of future threats and costs—guesses which may easily be wrong. Since it is impossible to know with certainty the scale of a threat that a situation may pose if left unchecked, there is no surefire way out of this dilemma. This, of course, is just a part of a wider dilemma in life, since so many of our everyday decisions must necessarily be made based on guesses of what the future holds.

You can see that this book, though a popular account, is not lightweight in its details or its implications. Yet it does show its age. Published in 1960, it was written before many valuable sources of information became available, such as the French archives. It also shows its age in its occasional references to homosexuality, which Shirer treats as a perverted vice. This is, of course, morbidly ironic, considering the Nazi persecution of homosexuals (something that Shirer fails to mention). But all in all *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* remains a gripping popular overview of this nightmarish time.

Julie Christine says

Three years ago I implemented a personal tradition: to read a "Monster Classic" each year. This is my term, referring to a piece of writing that is great in reputation and girth. The how and when of it is to begin the Monster mid-summer and read it in fits and starts over the course of several months, with a goal of finishing before the end of the year. The why of it isn't so simple. Most avid readers I know have daunting lists of books they want to or feel they should read. I'm no different, but life is too short for *shoulds*. I'm after something that will change the way I look at writing, at storytelling, at the world.

Without intention, my Monster Classics have been built on the premise of, or are greatly informed by, war. Two years ago I read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, an allegorical tale shaped largely by Mann's reaction to World War I; last year, Tolstoy brought me *War and Peace*, that gorgeous and profound tale of Russia during the Napoleonic era.

This summer I turned from fiction to narrative non-fiction. World War II has long fascinated and disturbed me. I've sought, without success, to reconcile the incongruous romance of this war - the films, music, literature that conjure a sense of the heroic and of solidarity, the "Greatest Generation" united as Allies - with

its human suffering so incomprehensible that the mind struggles against its limits to accept what the eyes witness in words and photos.

I selected *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* for perhaps the same reason that millions before me have: to understand how one man created a machine of slaughter out of a country in shambles. After 1264 pages in six weeks, I am still bewildered. Of course I knew the external conditions: the carving up of Germany after WWI, the political disaster that the Treaty of Versailles put into motion, the desperate economic conditions in Germany as the Depression ground what little economy it had left into grist. But this diminutive Austrian who so captured the imagination and bent the will of a once-proud nation -- how did he do it? Why did he? And why did so many follow him into the hell of his creation?

William Shirer, a longtime foreign correspondent, worked in the Third Reich from 1934 to 1940, leaving only when it became clear he and his family were no longer safe. He returned to Germany in 1945 to report on the Nuremberg trials. *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* was published in 1960, barely a generation after the end of the war.

Because of Shirer's proximity and access to the majors players of the Third Reich and certainly because war was exploding all around him, the book has an immediacy and intimacy that sets it apart from a traditional historical examination of events. It also contains Shirer's interpretations, suppositions and ruminations.

As an American of German-Italian-Norwegian descent, I had a very hard time with Shirer's characterization of Germans as possessing a predilection for cruelty and war. There are few nations that remain exempt from this pointed finger. But it begs the question that even Shirer could not answer: how did the atrocities of the war escape the outrage of the German people? Shirer presents clues and circumstances which serve as a caution to us all. And many of which I recognize in today's socially and politically polarized America that feeds on propaganda and is increasingly indulgent of politicians' idiocy and rejection of facts.

The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich is thick with military history - this is a book about war. That may seem obvious, but do not expect a sociological narrative. Shirer is a great journalist, which assumes certain skill in telling a story that will appeal to a lay audience. But this book, after its introduction to Hitler and his early life, uses the major events, invasions and battles of World War II to show the creation of an empire.

It is a testament to Shirer's skill that I became so caught up in the details of Hitler's conquests and defeats. Although I have read books about individual battles, I have never followed a comprehensive history of the European theatre. It was astonishing to read on-the-ground reports as nearly all of Europe fell at Germany's feet in a short period, then to sit above it all and witness Hitler's increasing megalomania that spelled out his downfall.

It is dense. It is detailed. It is exhausting, exhaustive, overwhelming and shattering. To read *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* is to have your heart broken again and again. Yet, to hold history at arm's length is to guarantee that it will be repeated.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany, William L. Shirer

The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany is a book by William L. Shirer chronicling

standing alone. Enveloping all this is the hatreds of Hitler and the Nazi party; above their hatred of the Jews and then the Slavic and Russian peoples, their hatred of democratic values (what we would now call human rights), their hatred of the Versailles Treaty.

Shirer makes no excuses for these and puts the blame squarely on Hitler and the German people. Versailles was never the humiliation it was made out to be. As Shirer points out this 'stab in the back' myth was also propagated by Weimar as well. Hitler knew how to rally the nationalistic fervor and pagan impulses of the bulk of his people.

All the personalities are in here – and they are a powerful and colourful lot – but sad, as both German and non-German acquiesce to the force of the German leader. Chamberlain's fruitless efforts to achieve peace are overlooked today as he is framed with the word appeasement; but what politician today would be as honest as he was. Shirer quotes Chamberlain's honest and touching 'declaration of war' speech when Poland is brutally invaded by Germany – quite possibly one of the most poignant passages in the book as the world is now stepping over the precipice into war.

Shirer uses many of Hitler's speeches to illustrate how the German people adored their beloved leader. One is struck by how a people could swallow these words so whole-heartedly – words that are so diametrically opposed to the best values of the Western World. The speeches are filled with hatred for Jews and ridicule for the leaders of the Western World. Hitler's reply to Roosevelt in 1939 before the war – though so successfully manipulative – is haunting in retrospect.

There are perhaps a few things left out. One is the destruction of the Polish resistance uprising in Warsaw that Stalin left to the Germans to ruthlessly suppress – with the Russian army just outside Warsaw watching as the Germans slaughtered the Polish resistance movement.

And there is maybe too much, I feel, on the Stauffenberg plot to kill Hitler. But again Shirer is correct in pointing out the hypocrisy of these 'anti-Nazi' conspirators who waited too long (Germany was obviously losing the war at this stage and its cities were decimated). Were they not morally inept – were they doing this to seize political power only? Were they really morally repulsed by the Nazi regime – or just mere opportunists?

As mentioned if one reads only one book on Nazi Germany this has it all. But as a warning – reading over 1,100 pages on Nazism can wear one down – it becomes very depressing. However you are left with a greater understanding of this tumultuous era.

Nick T. Borrelli says

Three historical periods always have fascinated me and I usually will read anything published with regard to them. The first is The American Revolution, the second is The Civil War and the third is Nazi Germany/WWII. William Shirer has penned the definitive account of this horrendous time in world history and I believe it is the most comprehensive and compelling telling ever published. I did read Richard Evans' trilogy but I still view Shirer's book as better. I thought that Evans speculated too much and also focused more on Germany itself rather than giving a more expanded view of the entire world stage during this time. Shirer does this while also having the benefit of proximity - The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich was published a mere 15 years after the fall of Germany. Shirer was also a foreign correspondent working inside Germany when the Nazis took power. That's the thing that really grabs you when you read this book. The fact that Shirer actually witnessed the gradual oppression and brutality as it was taking place gives a certain sense of realism to a time that seems so unreal looking back on it now. This book begins at the end of WWI

when Germany was embarrassed and sanctioned mercilessly by the allied powers. Shirer uses this example to define what initially motivated Hitler to restore Germany to greatness - intense love of country and a desire to see that Germany exacted its retribution on the "criminals" of Versailles. Hitler simply could not tolerate the fact that Germany was militarily and diplomatically emasculated after the Treaty of Versailles. He set a course to use any means necessary and to point the finger at any scapegoat he could to begin a campaign of ethnic nationalism. Also contained in this gut-wrenching history book is a thorough description of how piece by piece and country by country, Hitler used his demented vision to take over the entirety of Europe and North Africa. The book ends with Germany's ultimate defeat and The Nuremberg Trials where many of the top Nazi leadership were tried and sentenced for war crimes. Simply a stunning book that is a can't miss for anyone who wants to know how this period of time came about. I read it with mouth agape for large portions as I could not believe that this evil was allowed to grow and thrive for as long as it did. It's not an easy read, but a necessary one I believe.

Erik Graff says

This was the first, really serious grownup book I ever read.

My sole brother being almost eight years younger and no cousins being in the States, I was virtually an only child, condemned to the weekly dinner parties of my parents and paternal grandparents and their friends, most of them held elsewhere than our own home. At one particularly excruciatingly boring party held at Great Aunt Synnove's I was scanning the magazines and bookshelves for something to occupy the time. Being ten, the great swastika on the cover of one otherwise unknown book caught my eye. Nazis! I picked it up, checked out the maps on the inside covers and started to read . . . When, finally, they, the Old Ones, were ready to go, I was far enough into it to not want to stop. Aunt Synnove was kind enough to loan it out.

The reading went on for probably a couple of weeks. I recall reading about the Lutheran pastor, Niedemeyer (not looking it up--it may be misspelled, but I remember this in detail after all these years), who, almost alone amongst German churchmen, stood up publicly against the Nazis--and this in the backyard, at the juncture of our rickety garage and decaying white picket fence amidst the early flowers of springtime. I recall, days later, now on my sun-warmed bed downstairs at grandmother's cottage in Michigan, reading with fascinated horror about the death camps and the "scientific experiments" conducted in them.

Now a thirteen year old friend of mine has picked up Shirer, buying it in hardcover himself at a local used bookstore. He, not normally a big reader (he has a sister, two brothers and lots of cousins and friends), says he likes it because Shirer writes so clearly. Now, while all of us are, as citizens, in moral positions uncomfortably similar to those occupied by Germans sixty years or so ago, it is good to see that a book like this and the story it tells can still be read with interest by the young.

BAM The Bibliomaniac says

I went into this believing I had a well-grounded understanding of Prussian history and a basis of the Hitler regime. Ummm this book is everything I don't know.

I feel way over my head. There are so many layers to peel like some history-containing onion. Shirer wrote an entire college course worth of information. I regret that I will not retain it all. An impressive collection of memories and experience, we should feel so privileged to have this thorough documentation of one of the most horrific eras in modern history to remind us how easily a society can fall prey to manipulation when it believes all hope is lost and all value is expended.

I was startled to find that the experiments discussed in a previous read, Doctors in Hell, were spot on. All of them are delved into more deeply on this book. The horror takes on greater proportion when one hears it in audiobook format.

Nandakishore Varma says

Whew! After six months of exhilarating yet exhausting reading, I have finally managed to finish this massive tome - William L. Shirer's definitive account of the rise and fall of the Third Reich under the evil and mad genius, the warlord Hitler. Hitler expected that the Reich will last for a thousand years - in reality, it lasted just over 12 years. In those twelve, the Fuehrer managed to create hell on earth for the people whom he ruled over as well as in those areas which he conquered; the war he initiated managed to destroy 50 to 80 million people all over the world.

I am not going to summarise the book here- the story is well known to most, and anyway to do that would mean writing a small book itself! Rather, let me lay down what I took away from the book: the pluses as well as the minuses.

The book is incredibly detailed. Shirer, being privy to most of the secret correspondence in the Reich archives, the majority of which survived destruction at the hands of the Nazis by a quirk of fate, puts his journalistic skills to excellent use as he tells the story of the meteoric rise and even faster demise of Hitler with consummate storytelling skill. The pace never flags and the story never fails to grip - and hardly a facet of this distressing yet fascinating era is ignored. This is the first book you should read if you want a front seat at the Hitler drama.

I found two major drawbacks to the book. One - a lack of maps, in the absence of which following the war spatially was impossible (unless you have an eidetic memory of European geography, that is). Two - the long list of dramatis personae among whom I got lost more than once.

Shirer's book does not have any historical analysis - it's history from a journalistic point of view. However, for a layman such as me, it does not matter, because what matters is the story after all. How Hitler moved in from the lunatic fringe to the mainstream of German politics: how he used all dirty tricks in the political book to backstab his colleagues and steam roll his opponents: how the great colonial powers played hopscotch across the world stage, protecting their interests and cheerfully sacrificing those of others: and how man can be so unbelievably cruel to his fellow human being - these are some of the takeaways I have. And I believe that these are important in today's world, when once again the fringe is becoming the new normal. As Shirer says

In our new age of terrifying, lethal gadgets, which supplanted so swiftly the old one, the first great aggressive war, if it should come, will be launched by suicidal little madmen pressing an electronic button. Such a war will not last long and none will ever follow it. There will be no conquerors and no conquests, but only the charred bones of the dead on an uninhabited planet.

Esdaile says

I have a very strong feeling of enthusiasm and at the same time of aversion for this book, which I read when I was 16. William Shirer wrote a no-holds barred account of the rise of Adolf Hitler from the perspective of a

fanatical (in the full sense of the word) opponent of everything Hitler stood for. Shirer was also a journalist writing as though he were a historian, so his writing reads easily and persuasively but is not necessarily a font of historical accuracy. Whatever one's own position, this is far and away a more honest book than many of the cold cynical assessments made after the events by historians who also have a private agenda but who unlike Shirer do not make it obvious or claim to be objective when they are no such thing. Shirer is however in my opinion, right to stress more than is often stressed, the novelty of the Nuremberg Laws, which essentially disenfranchised a large section of the population on the basis of a postulated alien ethnicity. These laws undermined the fundamental principles of citizenship as understood in Europe since the American and French revolutions and were profound and potentially murderous in their implications. Shirer also laid stress on medical experimentation on human subjects, which in my humble opinion is as close to Hell as human beings are likely to get on earth. I do not think there are any medical experiment "deniers" : of course, medical experimentation on human beings is in no way something unique to the Hitler dictatorship, but Shirer is right to highlight it as a particularly pernicious abuse of power by politicians and doctors, one which should serve as a reminder to us, if we really need a reminder, of the arrogance and ever lethal potential of the notions of so many representatives of both. It is all very well talking about controlling decadence, crime or whatever, but who controls the controllers, is a question that should never be for a moment forgotten.

I give this two stars but the two stars award is misleading in the sense that I would give his work 4 or 5 stars for readability as a breathtaking introduction to the history of the Third Reich, and 4 or 5 stars for highlighting certain aspects of that history so full of suffering and desolation, but 1 star for reliability, balanced view, veracity, objectivity. Shirer will have no track with the notion that Polish fears of Russia could have been justified, that Churchill wanted war, that in a sense whatever one thinks of him, Hitler was right in claiming that the war was between a Jewish and anti-Jewish world view, that Roosevelt was deeply anti-German and pro-Jewish, that the Soviet Union was planning a preemptive strike on Germany, that the Poles had been put up to provoking Germany and did provoke Germany and that Hitler in this case as later, with the British bombing of civilian targets, fell into a trap and allowed himself to be provoked just in the way his enemies planned he should be provoked; Shirer says nothing as I recall, about the appalling conditions which induced many to vote for the NSDAP, and there are plenty more imbalances in this work, and half-truths and untruths besides, for there is plenty of history that Shirer does not mention, but I do not have the book any more and I read it 40 years ago. Shirer's is a book to be read by anyone interested in the time, but to be read with rather more than the proverbial pinch of salt. I was going to award this book three stars but I'll put that down to 2 to counter-balance the wave of quasi psychophantic enthusiasm with which so many Goodreads readers have greeted it. It is a deeply flawed book after all, for readability it is up there in the top rank, for historical balance, down far below.

Lyn says

Darkness.

You boil this book down, strip it to the foundations, and what the reader finds is darkness of the human soul. Bred in the alleyways and gutters of Vienna before the first World War, this was the angry and hateful opposite of God's shining light, the ancient shadows that live in the basement of our souls, given life and expression on the palette of a failed artist.

Shirer's scholarly, exhaustive masterpiece paints the portrait of the Third Reich from its beginnings in the back rooms and beer halls of Munich to the terrible, gruesome end in all its grisly, dark detail. The author, a journalist in Germany before and during the early years of the Nazi regime, describes how this political movement began and how it came to power on the backs and in the bloodied fists of brown shirted ruffians.

To draw a modern parallel, it would be as if our country was taken over by a street gang, as if the Bloods and Crips gained political power and ascended the White House and took over. From the September 1938 Sudetenland grab and the failings of Neville Chamberlain, to the horrid crimes that went on behind the lines, to the final days that saw a once proud Europe reduced to rubble, Shirer also details World War II from the Nazi perspective.

Like Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the central figure in this epic tragedy, the most intriguing character, is a villain. But unlike Satan and the House of York English King, Hitler rose from the depths of poverty and mediocrity. Shirer reveals Hitler as intelligent and deterministic, but pathologically, sociopathically twisted to evil. The author also shows the German leader to be hopelessly, and in the end, pathetically, delusional.

Perhaps Shirer's most compelling observation, though, is his uncompromising portrait of the German people who allowed the monstrosity of National Socialism to come to power and to become accomplices with the Nazis in horrors on a scale previously unimagined.

Finally, Shirer begs the question of whether we owe a higher duty than to our country, and his answer is an affirmative and decisive "yes".

Wyatt Nordstrom says

Well, I did it. After two years, I have finally finished this beast. The first 600 or so pages are pretty slow, but it flies after that...

We all know the story- a misanthropic, racist, vegetarian, megalomaniac failed artist writes a book that taps into age-old German prejudices, seizes power, and embarks on a quest for European domination. In the process he starts the biggest war in history leading to the deaths of tens of millions of people, subjugates about a dozen other countries, and systematically exterminates the majority of European Jewry. The "Thousand Year Reich" only lasted a total of 12 years, 4 months, and 8 days, but during that brief span it wrought havoc and destruction on scale never witnessed before or since.

William Shirer was a journalist, *not* a historian, but his narrative style coupled with the fact that he lived in Germany during the majority of the time Hitler was in power lends this book both readability and a level of believability that no historian could possibly achieve. Several parts are indeed personal narrative in which Shirer lends his own perspective on what he saw happening, though he is careful to point out which sections are taken from historical records and which are colored by his own experience. The book is thoroughly footnoted (to the tune of about a footnote per page- it takes almost as long to read the notes as it does the main text), indexed, and overflowing with "I didn't know that" moments. It doesn't dwell on minutiae, nor does it give a blow-by-blow account of the war, but nevertheless it attempts to tell a huge story, and the result is a huge (1300+ pages in the printing I own) book.

The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich was published in 1957, a bare 12 years after the "Fall" that occurs at the end of the story. However, it is very easy to see why it remains today- 50 years after its release- the definitive work on the Nazi regime. I highly recommend it to anyone who shares a passion for history or who is fascinated by the factors that lead to societies devolving into statist forms of government. I also recommend it to anyone who believes that appeasement and "negotiation" is an acceptable means for handling such regimes (that means you, Barack Obama...). Sections of it (if not the entire book) should be required reading

for all high school students. Only by understanding the past may we secure our future.

Michael says

I actually do hate this book, which would earn it 1 star according to goodreads' rating system, but my personal ethics prevent me from going quite so far. The reason I hate it, really, is because it remains wildly popular (you can find it in pretty much any bookstore that has any non-fiction in English at all), in spite of the fact that literally mountains of far better works on the subject have been written.

When I come back and look at it objectively, however, I have to admit that it's not really as terrible as I imagine it to be, it's just outdated and flawed. As an introduction to the lay-reader about National Socialism, it's probably a decent enough starting-point. It gives a reasonable chronology and narrative of events which, if you know nothing at all about Germany or World War Two (and I didn't when I read it, really), gives you a pretty good handle on the basics. Beginners have to start at the beginning, and this is pretty much it, so far as most people are concerned.

Shirer was working primarily off the masses of documents collected for the Nuremberg trials, which contained much important material, but had not been properly indexed or sorted, so to a large degree he looked for things he was already familiar with, "where the light was better," as it were and missed anything that would have problematized his account. In fairness, he avoids giving credence to some of the wilder ideas that were current in the fifties and sixties, referring to the death of Geli Raubal as a "suicide" for example and does not completely buy into the theory that the SS planted a bomb at the Bürgerbräukeller that nearly killed Hitler. He states that there is "ample evidence" that the Nazis were responsible for the burning of the Reichstag, but even here he is more cautious than some writers of the period.

The reason that this book continues to appeal to Americans, however, is bound up in its flawed nature. It is written from an extremely biased pro-American perspective that verifies the myth of the "greatest generation" and the heroism of the Allies, and unquestioningly demonizes the other side. Ironically, it manages to do this without really delving into the actual horrors of the Holocaust, presenting a rather more cartoonish version of the evil of Nazism: the bad guys are Darth Vader and his Storm Troopers, while the good guys are Indiana Jones and GI Joe. It's easy enough to see how that would appeal to people looking to be "entertained" by history, but it doesn't constitute actual historical study.

Shirer was an American journalist, who lived in Germany until he had to leave as an "enemy alien" after Germany declared war following Pearl Harbor. He has a certain perspective on events, for that reason, but not necessarily an un-biased one. He often can't help slipping invectives and personal feelings into the text. Ribbentrop, we are repeatedly told, was "stupid", while Röhm is consistently described as a "homosexual pervert." Other redundant tropes include the use of "much-vaunted" to describe the Luftwaffe and, of course "fanatical" to describe the loyalty of Hitler's closest followers. These adjectives add little to our understanding of the time, are not justified by historical analysis, and serve to tell us more about Shirer and his audience than about the Third Reich and its leadership. On the whole I would recommend reading other, less partial accounts, but must admit that this is not the worst one available.

Todd N says

This book was a Christmas present from a friend, though I also bought a copy on the Kindle so that I could read it outside of my house without having to lug around a brick-like book with swastikas on it. The Kindle

version is especially handy if you are not quite at the bring-Nazi-related-stuff-to-the-office stage at your job yet. (The down side of the Kindle version is that the it is horrible at handling footnotes, and this book has many that are important to the story.)

This is a strange and unique book not only because Mr. Shirer lived in Germany for more half of the Third Reich (or Reich 3.0 as we call it in Silicon Valley) but also because he had access to a massive amount of top secret documents that were captured after the war. This included Hitler's own appointment book and many important documents detailing military and political strategy. What do you get the fascist dictator who has everything? A decent paper shredder. That and Moscow.

He also appeared to be on friendly enough terms that he could write to (Nazi) General Halder for points of clarification.

Because this book is about 1100 pages of main text, it's a good thing that Mr. Shirer is one of the so-called "Murrow Boys." He worked closely with Murrow at CBS and did other reporting. These guys are known for their clear, direct prose, though it gets a bit purple here and there in this book. I'm prepared to forgive him for that given the circumstances.

I love reading big, epic histories like this, but here is the main problem I had while reading this one: All of the big histories I have read before this one were all ancient histories. The temporal distance between then and now allows me to detach and think about what happened then abstractly.

So Alexander killed a bunch of Persians and Rome leveled Carthage and sowed their fields with salt, but if I felt anything while reading about these events it was sort of a vague sense of awe. But it isn't really possible to get behind Hitler or Germany in this way.

For one thing WWII is still very personal. For example, my great-uncle was killed in the attack on Pearl Harbor (which I know was done by the Japanese not the Germans). One of my dad's earliest memories is everyone in his family crying when they got the news. The father-in-law of the friend who gave me this book was in Poland during WWII, and I've heard him tell some chilling stories. And I think everyone has friends whose families in Europe fled or were partially wiped out during the rise of the Third Reich.

For another thing Hitler wasn't that great of a military leader. His major triumphs were mostly political, and aside from the first year or so he didn't appear to have much of a handle on war strategy. In the introduction Mr. Shirer says in the introduction that Hitler is the last of the warrior conquerers in the vein of Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon, but I don't agree with that.

So in 2,000 years -- about the distance between us and ancient Greece and Rome -- the events in this book will probably be seen as a particularly nasty blip in an otherwise unpleasant century, scientific discoveries notwithstanding.

But for people living now this is a thoroughly fascinating and well-written book.

It's divided into six books of unequal lengths. World War II doesn't start until half way through, at the beginning of the fourth book, so there is a lot of lead up and Hitler shenanigans until then.

The first part of the book covers Hitler's background, early life, and philosophical influences. This is where Mr. Shirer lays out his controversial thesis that The Third Reich grew out of something inherent in the German people rather than Germany merely getting caught up in the fascist vibe that was going around Europe in the '20s and '30s. He traces the seeds of Nazism all the way back to Luther. I don't know enough about history to have an opinion on this.

It also covers the early days of the Nazi party. [[[Aside: I didn't realize "Nazi" is an abbreviation for National Socialist. I'm definitely going to start calling people national socialists when they annoy me, as in "grammar national socialists."]]] Reading this part is sort of like watching The Bad News Bears with the knowledge that Walter Matthau is going to be responsible for the deaths of millions of people. The early Nazi party sounds like a bunch of loser-y misfits, and soon enough a lot of them outlived their usefulness so Hitler had them killed.

The big thing with Hitler was the way he understood and could influence politics. So if you found that whole plot line in Star Wars about how Senator Palpatine became the Emperor, then you should probably skip directly to the second half when Germany invades Poland.

Personally I found it fascinating the way Hitler played England and France like chumps and annexed more and more land. You can definitely see the weaknesses of a democratic society compared with a totalitarian society, but this is nothing that isn't already covered in Greek history.

There is a chapter about what day to day life was like during the Third Reich. It turns out that controlling media and propaganda are very important for maintaining a fascist dictatorship. Because I'm slow sometimes, my first thought as I read was that it sure was a lot like 1984.

The last few chapters in the third book are pretty tough going because it contains exhaustive detail about a lot of ambassadors running around making and breaking alliances. This is the only part of the book that is not that well-written and even somewhat repetitive. I did learn this odd fact: At the last minute an executive from General Motors personally flew to Germany to try to prevent war from breaking out. It's unclear what his motives were, but nothing came of it anyway.

The second half is the quickest 500 pages I have ever read. I've never been much interested in military strategy or wars after 1066AD, but this was just fascinating reading. We should all go to bed each night happy that Hitler screwed the pooch so bad in the way he directed the German Army. There are many points in the war where it is clear that the Axis powers could have forced a very different outcome. A few off the top of my head: holding back tanks at Dunkirk, starting the Moscow campaign a few weeks too late, not putting enough resources into Africa, holding back the Navy in the Battle of the Atlantic, holding back the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain.

One chapter that you may want to skip is chapter 27, which is about the New Order. This covers the treatment of Poland, the plans for Russia, the slave labor camps, the concentration camps, the death camps, the Einsatzgruppen, the infamous medical experiments, and many other horrifying things that are associated with the Nazis. One footnote claims that Himmler, the head of the S.S. mind you, almost fainted at the sight of one execution of 100 prisoners. I won't think any less of you if you skip this part. This is the first time I have ever read something that gave me nightmares.

The book ends a few days after Hitler's death. I read this chapter before starting the book, because I was always curious about the bunker and how that all went down. Badly, it turns out. Why did Hitler have his dogs killed? Why did Goebbels do what he did? I got on Wikipedia and was surprised to find that the location of the Fuhrerbunker actually has a marker.

Definitely recommended. It's a very important book. My brain is still digesting this book more than a week after I finished it, and I think it permanently altered my consciousness.
