



Tatjana Tönsmeier. *Unter Deutsche Besatzung: Europa 1939-1945*. Munich, Germany: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2024, 665 pages

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Numerous books have been published about the German occupation of Europe during WWII, as evidenced by the some 1,000 books in the secondary source section of Tatjana Tönsmeier's book, *Unter Deutsche Besatzung: Europa 1939-1945* [*Under German Occupation: Europe 1939-1945*]. So what makes Tönsmeier's book *Unter Deutscher Besatzung: Europa 1939-1945* stand out? It explores how the German military occupation in Europe during 1939 to 1945 affected occupied people. Tönsmeier divides the book into eleven chapters to address life thematically from the period of invasion to the new social order under occupation, which enables the reader to explore how life, on a human level, was for occupied peoples under German occupation. As such, it differs significantly from an arguably contemporary competitor book, Aviel Roshwald's 2023 published *Occupied: European & Asian Responses to Axis conquest, 1937-1945* (Cambridge University Press). For example, whereas Tönsmeier includes the impact on women and girls, and devotes a significant part of a chapter to a gender analysis of the relationship between women of occupied lands, men of occupied lands, and German male occupiers (pp. 76-99), Roshwald's index contains only two entries under the listing for *gender* (p. 444) and two for *women* (p. 451), despite women and girls making up at least 50 percent of the occupied population.

But beyond history, why should we care? Why is this book important for today? A lesson to be learned for today from Tönsmeier's book is that the occupation could not have ruled without the *indigenous* people acting as employees and extensions of the occupiers (p. 353). She addresses how the occupation resulted in the occupied turning on each other, be it through denunciations because of jealousy, seeking better opportunities, or financial enrichment; for example, a kilo of sugar as the *prize* for denouncing a Jewish person (p. 351).

The essence of Tönsmeier's book goes into the psychological and physical power of the occupier over the occupied. A leitmotif throughout the book is fear. The book cover shows a 1940 photo of a young man in uniform with a metal helmet and carrying weapons, inspecting papers of an equally young woman in a dress with a bicycle. A Frenchman, when encountering a law enforcement officer inspecting papers, contended that France became a concentration camp (p. 344). Fear appears to have varied depending on geography. As Tönsmeier reinforces throughout her book, the German occupiers treated the occupied in the *West* much better than those in the *East*. As evidence, the photo

Tönsmeier chose to represent the 1940 German military occupation of Guernsey (a part of the UK) creates the impression of lighthearted interaction between teenagers (p. 94). In contrast, a 1943 photo from the *East* shows a male in uniform overseeing, with a pointed finger, Ukrainian female forced labourers as they stack wood (264). Fear, however, might not have been a constant in the *East*: the book also contains a photo from the rural Soviet Union of five young shirtless males, one with military headgear, posing with two women in scarves (perhaps a mother and her young adult daughter), all with varying expressions of genuine-looking smiles (p. 223). And the author highlights that occupier impositions did not always result in subjective distress. One example was the prohibition against school attendance for Jewish youth. When a Jewish council in Amsterdam asked a young Jewish male about what his non-Jewish former classmates said about Jews being prohibited from attending school, the Jewish youth reported, "They would also like to be Jewish" (p. 121). But these *lighter moments* appear to be exceptions. A constant in the book are examples of occupier brutality, including the East using cold and shame to kill: male occupiers forcing occupied women to not only take off their clothes in front of males, but subsequently making the then naked women use their disrobed clothing to clean streets (p. 408) and barracks (p. 497). The physical and psychological brutality had consequences. In the second example, a male journalist reported that the forced woman, as a result of the cold and of the shame, died two days later (p. 497).

Fear included not only of the occupiers, but also of neighbours (p. 352). And perhaps most frightening, of fathers (p. 277). For example, fathers might not help their sons escape forced labour. Why? Not only did such fathers fear loss of their pensions or their own positions, but also because fathers who had served in WWI might believe that forced labour was a small price for their children to pay for not experiencing WWI (p. 277). Of interest is Tönsmeier's observation that sisters and aunts were more likely to help relatives to escape forced labour (p. 277).

Given that *culture* is often used as an excuse to denigrate others, Tönsmeier's book enables reflection regarding signatures of different *cultures*. As such, she uses the lens of the bureaucratic nature of the German occupation. In a chapter titled *Papiere, Papiere, Papiere* (Paper, Paper, Paper), Tönsmeier devotes over 50 pages (pp. 301-356) with subtitles such as "At the office: Waiting in line, paperwork, arbitrariness" (p. 342). Given that one of the complaints voiced by an occupier was that of needing to register at the

local courthouse within eight days after moving (p. 343), this Reader wondered whether that requirement was one imposed solely on the occupier, or whether such might be the norm for all individuals living in Germany, even today. A quick internet search found that in Germany today, individuals, be they German or foreigners, are required to register with the local registration authority within two weeks of moving (see Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, [bmi.bund.de/EN/topics/administrative-reform/registration/registration-node.html](https://www.bmi.bund.de/EN/topics/administrative-reform/registration/registration-node.html)).

The strengths of this book, in addition to its focus on occupied people as human beings, is its incorporation of numerous primary resources, including contemporaneous accounts (like from a journalist, for example, p. 497), and memoirs (like Simone de Beauvoir's, for example, pp. 46, 50, 73, 76, 77, 82, 89, and 136). The range of archives utilized (to include those in Latvia, Belarus, the Czech Republic, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany) enables this book to go beyond what is reported in secondary sources. The book further provides visualization aids to convert understanding of words into understanding of geography. At the height of Germany's power in WWII, some 230 million people lived under German occupation, north to south from Norway to Greece, and west to east from the British Channel Islands to the inner Soviet Union (p. 14). The colour-coded 1942 map on its inside covers, including North Africa and the Middle East, enables the reader to grasp (and gasp at) the extent of Germany's geographical influence. And photos from archives in Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Belgium, and the Czech Republic (p. 651) similarly help in translating words into visceral understanding.

Regretfully, this fantastic book does not appear to be currently available in any language other than German. It needs to be translated, at a minimum, into English. Translation grants can make that happen. Indeed, this book emerged from Tönsmeier's co-edited two-volume English language *Fighting hunger, dealing with shortage: everyday life under occupation in World War II Europe: a source edition* (Brill, 2021), a treasure trove from archives throughout Europe (p. 22). When the book is translated, to enhance its accessibility and usefulness, modifications are needed. One would be converting endnotes into footnotes. The German language edition contains endnotes, rather than footnotes. Endnotes are less conducive to unobstructed in-depth reading than are footnotes. A second would be, if the author and publisher determine to continue with

endnotes, creating page number headings for the endnotes. Finding endnotes was difficult, given that the endnote section, divided by chapter, did not lighten the task of finding a particular endnote by providing page number headings for the endnotes. This created an additional barrier. A third would be to include an index or to make an e-index available. The hardcover book, like many German-language publications, contains no index. If the lack of an index is a cost-saving measure, a potential solution is to provide each purchaser of the book with a word-searchable accompanying e-book licensed to only one computer per purchaser. This book deserves no less.

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