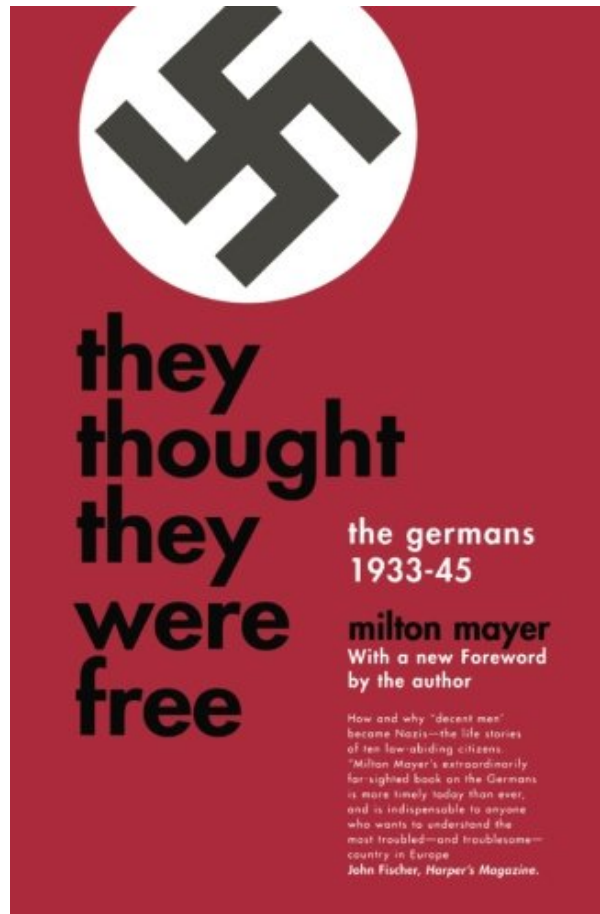


# THEY THOUGHT THEY WERE FREE: THE GERMANS, 1933-45 BY MILTON MAYER



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**they  
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they  
were  
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**the germans  
1933-45**

**milton mayer**  
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How and why "decent men" became Nazis—the life stories of ten law-abiding citizens.  
"Milton Mayer's extraordinarily far-sighted book on the Germans is more timely today than ever, and is indispensable to anyone who wants to understand the most troubled—and troublesome—country in Europe."  
*John Fischer, Harper's Magazine.*

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## Review

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"Once again the German problem is at the center of our politics. No better, or more humane, or more literate discussion of its underlying nature could be had than in this book." (August Heckscher New York Herald Tribune)

## About the Author

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First published in 1955, *They Thought They Were Free* is an eloquent and provocative examination of the development of fascism in Germany. Mayer's book is a study of ten Germans and their lives from 1933-45, based on interviews he conducted after the war when he lived in Germany. Mayer had a position as a research professor at the University of Frankfurt and lived in a nearby small Hessian town which he disguised with the name "Kronenberg." "These ten men were not men of distinction," Mayer noted, but they had been members of the Nazi Party; Mayer wanted to discover what had made them Nazis.

"What happened here was the gradual habituation of the people, little by little, to being governed by surprise; to receiving decisions deliberated in secret; to believing that the situation was so complicated that the government had to act on information which the people could not understand, or so dangerous that, even if the people could not understand it, it could not be released because of national security. And their sense of identification with Hitler, their trust in him, made it easier to widen this gap and reassured those who would otherwise have worried about it."--from Chapter 13, "But Then It Was Too Late"

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## Most helpful customer reviews

37 of 37 people found the following review helpful.

**Illuminating Perspective, Excellent Analysis**

By Paul B. Dunlap

I've always been interested in German history, particularly the most eventful, tumultuous, and tragic period between 1918 and 1945. In the western world, the question so often is, "how could it happen," with the implied clauses of "in modern world," "in the civilized west," and so on. I must admit that though I've read some good analyses of the Weimar period, I've never found a satisfactory answer to this important question. Mayer provides one, and his answer is incredible in its simplicity and common sense.

The brilliance of this book can best be summed up with the familiar platitude, "don't tell me, show me." Mayer doesn't describe the mood of the Germans, the feel of the time or the period, or what have you. Like any good interviewer, he gets out of the way and lets the Germans tell their own story. By him doing so, the reader gets to see history through the eyes of the Germans, the way saw it (or the way they remember it), though poignant (even ironically humorous) anecdotes.

As for the answer to the question above, the answer is best summed up by one of Mayer's chapter titles, "What Would You Have Done?" So often we are blinded by the horror and enormity of the Holocaust that we forget the Germans too were ordinary men living ordinary lives. The tendency of the historian is to focus on the events of history that seem most important in hindsight, but lost is the consideration of how important these events were in the lives of the actors at the time.

As one example of many, Mayer discusses the night after *Kristalnact*, the burning of hundreds of German synagogues on November 9, 1938. How did the ten Nazis in his sample feel about this event? Were they glad? A few were (one actually led it in his town). Were they disgusted? Many were. Could they do anything about it? None could, so nothing was done. The next morning, all following orders of direct superiors, the police in the town gathered up all of the Jewish men, who were then sent away "for their own protection," presumably because they were in danger after the synagogue burnings. Only a couple of the ten sample Nazis knew a Jew. What were they to do?

And I may tangentially add that this should be familiar to us in America. We hear about bombing of civilians, or unlawful detainment, or abuse of prisoners, or violation of civil rights. What do we think? "Outrageous! Atrocious! Egregious!" What do we say? "It can't be helped," or "It's a necessary evil," or "I can't stop it." What do we do? Nothing, because of course we're right about the last statement. The lives of the Germans should be eminently relatable to the average American, if he'll admit it to himself.

Back to the book, aside from the interviews with the Nazis, the second part, which consists of analytical essays of the German character, and how it was shaped in modern history. The analysis is good and insightful, and answers a lot of questions, not about the Germans having a culture of obedience, for indeed any course second-rate historian can make such a statement, as many have, but WHY the Germans have a culture of obedience, and how it developed over time and under what conditions.

All in all, the book is excellent, full of excellent analysis and original points, and it answers many crucial questions that are not answered to satisfaction elsewhere. I highly recommend this.

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

Thoughts of Nazi party members - lessons to be learned

By RJM

This is a thought-provoking book that provides anecdotal evidence as to how civilized people can come to accept and support a brutal dictatorship. While it is a portrait of former Nazis, it is also a reflection of universal humanity, frequently causing one to consider how many of us would behave differently.

In 1951, Milton Meyer spent a year in a small German town to get to know local citizens who had been Nazi party members. This book focuses on his extensive discussions with ten of them regarding their experiences and thoughts about Nazi Germany. Their comments and stories illustrate a very different perspective from our own. Surprisingly, as of 1951, only one of the ten viewed Nazism, in any respect, as evil and even he believed in part of its program and practice. (page 47)

The book also contains observations made by Mr. Meyer, such as: 1) Out of seventy million citizens, it only took one million convicts, hoodlums and disheartened job seekers to conduct the Nazi persecution programs (pages 80-81); 2) Nothing was expected of the rest of society, except not to interfere (page 57); 3) Inside the world of National Socialism, they knew only good-fellowship and the concerns of ordinary life (page 52); 4) From 1933 to 1939, they believed their lives were only altered for the better by the party (page 50); and 5) They thought the Nazi party cared about them, as it watched over their lives. (page 222)

A German colleague of Mr. Meyer offered other informative comments: People gradually came to believe that government was dealing with situations too complex for them to understand or so dangerous that its actions required secrecy. Presumed crises, reforms and rigmarole diverted the people's attention and energies so they did not notice how their government was fundamentally changing. (pages 166-169) When they realized things were wrong they took no action, because each act was only a little worse than the prior act. They waited for one shocking occasion, hoping others would rise up with them. You don't want to act alone. You don't want to make trouble. It is not just fear. You are increasingly uncertain of your views when surrounded by an environment that seems comfortable with the status quo. (page 169)

This book gives the reader a candid view into the minds of Nazi party members. It may very well cause you to agree with Mr. Meyer (page XIX) that his subject was much more than the German man of 1930s Germany; Mr. Meyer's subject was mankind in general.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Excellent book very insightful



By ROBERT RICHTER

Excellent book very insightful, it was very interesting to be told by those who were actually there and saw the evolution of evil and until they looked back they did not understand what had happened. It is remarkable that a small group of powerful people can move an entire nation from democracy to monstrosity without the citizens even knowing how it happened. First the press goes along, then the schools begin to teach the prescribed history, then there is only one party in power, then they get the guns, then they close the meeting halls, then the police enforce the curfews and gathering limits, and soon an enemy emerges then they take the brave and those who protest and we're off and running. Keep your eyes open it won't be long now.

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