



What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany

By Eric A. Johnson, Karl-Heinz Reuband

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The horrors of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust still present some of the most disturbing questions in modern history: Why did Hitler's party appeal to millions of Germans, and how entrenched was anti-Semitism among the population? How could anyone claim, after the war, that the genocide of Europe's Jews was a secret? Did ordinary non-Jewish Germans live in fear of the Nazi state? In this unprecedented firsthand analysis of daily life as experienced in the Third Reich, *What We Knew* offers answers to these most important questions. Combining the expertise of Eric A. Johnson, an American historian, and Karl-Heinz Reuband, a German sociologist, *What We Knew* is the most startling oral history yet of everyday life in the Third Reich.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The refrains in Germany for many years after WWII were "we didn't know" about the Holocaust, and "if we had known and had tried to do something, we too would have been killed by the Nazis." These claims have not stood up to historical scrutiny. Large numbers of ordinary Germans were involved in carrying out the mass murder of Jews, and knowledge of it was widespread among the population at home in Germany. Moreover, the Nazi elite ruled primarily by consensus, not terror; it was a popular dictatorship. Central Michigan University historian Johnson and German sociologist Reuband confirm these interpretations in their wide-ranging study based on hundreds of interviews and surveys they conducted with both Jewish and Christian Germans. Johnson (*Nazi Terror*) and Reuband don't add much that is new to what we know about the Nazi dictatorship and the Holocaust, but the materials they have gathered are interesting. Roughly two-thirds of the book consists of transcripts of interviews with Jews who had a range of experiences (going into hiding, leaving Germany before Kristallnacht, suffering in the camps) and Germans (those who heard about the murder of Jews, those who didn't, those who participated). The analysis in the book's final third is sober and sobering. But it's the gripping immediacy of the interviews, laced as they are with anger, guilt, sadness and, still among some Christian Germans, pride, that carries the book. (*Feb.*)

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review The authors interviewed nearly 200 people--Holocaust survivors and perpetrators--in researching the book, and more than 3,000 people--Jews and non-Jews--were surveyed in writing about their experiences during the Hitler years. Johnson and Reuband began their research in 1993; 40 interviews were selected for this book (20 were Jews and 20 were non-Jews). The authors posit that "far from living in a state of constant fear and discontent, most Germans led happy and even normal lives in Nazi Germany." They believe that the Holocaust could not have been possible without the complicity of the majority of the German population. Johnson and Reuband conclude that many Germans were quick to concern themselves only with their private lives and tended not to think about what was happening to the Jews. Despite the regime's efforts to keep the mass murder of Jews a secret, news of the atrocities reached a large portion of the German public by the end of the war. The authors insist that about one-third of the population became aware of the murder of Jews while it was taking place, and it is evident that many Germans did not want to know about what was being done. This scholarly work is a major contribution to the understanding of life in Nazi Germany and a compelling narrative that is certain to be the standard work on the subject. *George Cohen*

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Review

'Hypnotic oral history ...This is not an enjoyable story but one that should be told'. -- Western Daily Press 20050219 'A necessary, careful and highly systematic addition to the Holocaust history, compiled by experts' -- Good Book Guide 20050301 'Johnson and Reuband present an unique and important work of oral history' -- Publishing News 20050520 'This is a splendid contribution to many of the questions asked by historians of the 21st century about daily life, complicity, and dissent in Germany between 1933 and 1945.' -- History Today 20050501 'Fascinating ... The strength of What We Knew is its diversity, its vivid detail and extraordinary memories' -- Independent 'The gripping immediacy of the interviews, laced as they are with anger, guilt, sadness and, still among some Christian Germans, pride, carry the book' -- Publishers Weekly 'Vast, truthful, compassionate and illuminating, the most comprehensive study of this kind ... a thorough and worthwhile investigation, substantially gleaned from the words of those who were the participants,

observers, and survivors' -- Jewish Telegraph 'Joltingly vivid testimonies open a shocking window on the mentality of the time' -- Scotsman 'Makes hypnotic and uncomfortable reading' -- Western Daily Press 'A very important book' -- Max Arthur 'Horrifying and moving ... a major oral history of the Third Reich' -- Publishing News 'What We Knew' seeks to address outstanding questions ... The results are fascinating' -- BBC History

Users Review

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