

Book Review: Finsternis in Deutschland. Was die Deutschen dachten. Interviews einer Engländerin, 1934-1938 [Darkness Over Germany: What the Germans Thought: Interviews of an English Woman, 1934-1938] by Ernestine Amy Buller

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Finsternis in Deutschland is the first German translation of *Darkness over Germany*, Ernestine Amy Buller's account of interviews undertaken in Germany between 1934-38. Originally published in 1943, this book not only contributes to historical research through a number of key insights, but is also a prescient read driven by a deeply humanitarian message, writes **Till Florian Tömmel**.

***Finsternis in Deutschland. Was die Deutschen dachten. Interviews einer Engländerin 1934-1938.* Ernestine Amy Buller. Edited by Kurt Barling. Elisabeth Sandmann Verlag. 2016. [Darkness over Germany: What the Germans Thought: Interviews of an English Woman, 1934-1938. Originally published as: *Darkness over Germany*. Longmans, Green and Co. 1943.]**

Ernestine Amy Buller (1891-1974) is mainly remembered for founding St Catherine's College at Cumberland Lodge in 1947. Buller's motives behind establishing this institution, where students could meet to discuss spiritual and normative questions, were to a great extent the result of her visits to Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Some of these visits were organised by her as study trips for British academics; others were private visits to personal acquaintances of Buller, who took a strong interest in Germany and had frequently travelled to the country since 1912. After 1933, she came to realise how young Germans were particularly susceptible to Nazi ideology. In *Darkness over Germany: What the Germans Thought: Interviews of an English Woman, 1934-1938*, Buller deplores the 'terrible phenomenon of a German youth in desperate need of a faith' (58) and how, as one of her interlocutors puts it, 'any kind of education which would encourage independent judgement' (119) had been made impossible by the Nazis. Buller's affection for Germany is beyond question, as is her loathing of Nazi ideology.



Darkness over Germany is an account of Buller's talks in Germany between 1934 and 1938. It was first published in 1943, when large parts of continental Europe were still under German control. The most prominent reader of *Darkness over Germany* was Queen Elizabeth, King George VI's wife, who received Buller in 1944 after reading the book. Over seventy years later, it has now been translated into German. A comprehensive new introduction by the editor, Kurt Barling, explains the historical and personal context of Buller's work. Additional explanations are also given in footnotes.

The talks between Buller and her German interlocutors offer a tangible and lively impression of the mentalities, perceptions and self-perceptions of a society under totalitarian rule. To protect them from the Nazi apparatus, Buller changed the names and details of most of those she encountered. While strictly speaking this diminishes the source value of her notes in terms of historical methodology, it is obvious why disguising the identities of people she spoke with was necessary: the majority of her interlocutors were critical of the Nazi regime.



Image Credit: Bundesarchiv Bild 102-13203A, Reichspräsidentenwahl, Wahlwerbung, 1932 (Bundesarchive Bild CC 3.0)

Buller's stated aim was 'to let certain representatives of a limited but very important section of Germans speak for themselves' (57). Her 'interviewees' are not a representative sample of German society. Most belonged to the German upper middle class or upper class; many were committed Christians. Among them were diplomats, military officers, university professors, high school teachers and Church ministers. On several occasions, she also exchanged views with party officials and regime supporters; these talks were, unsurprisingly, the most predictable and least interesting. Buller's notes illustrate, sometimes almost casually, several findings of historical research in exemplary individual cases. These include the following five points.

First, how conservative and liberal elites especially and disastrously underestimated the Nazis, and that many academics in Germany displayed poor judgement in political matters. Several of Buller's interlocutors voiced their astonishment at how quickly the Nazi movement could consolidate its grip on power, despite its intellectually flawed ideology and the vulgarity of its leaders. Buller states that 'Hitler would never have made the progress he has if German teachers in schools and universities as well as in the Church had not so often been purely academic and remote from life, in particular from the life of the young' (239).

Second, for many people rejecting Nazism did not mean disagreeing with all of the policies of the Hitler regime, most notably where overturning the order of Versailles was concerned. Among Buller's interlocutors who were opposed to Nazism, a strong nationalism embittered by the results of the First World War was common. This could lead to a highly problematic – and ultimately contradictory – splitting of loyalties. Talking about a probable future war between Britain and Germany, a self-professed opponent of the Nazi regime declared to Buller in 1938: 'I shall fight as never before for my country – I say my country and not the Nazis to be given a chance [...] if war comes, we who hate the Nazis and love England will fight to win' (114). Strikingly, the anti-Semitic measures in Nazi Germany are mentioned by relatively few of Buller's discussants.

Third, the character of Nazism as a demographically 'young' movement: enthusiasm and support for Nazism was strongest among the young Germans. The older Buller's interlocutors, the more sceptical they tended to be. The ideological infatuation of most young Germans was obviously what most disturbed Buller.

Fourth, Buller's conversations with female academics and teachers who were forced to retire highlight the quick

removal of women from most parts of the German workforce in the 1930s. By the same token, Nazism offered less-educated young men from the lower middle and working classes the opportunity to quickly advance careers that would otherwise have been out of their reach in Imperial Germany or the Weimar Republic: ideological conformism replaced qualifications and experience, and to a certain extent social background, as the most important selection criteria.

Lastly, Buller's encounters with representatives of both mainstream Churches point to another development that is easily overlooked: the unintended contribution of Nazism towards overcoming the deeply-entrenched denominational divide between Protestants and Catholics in Germany. While the Nazis did intend to dissolve the denominational divide in a racialist 'folk community' excluding the German Jews, the gap between Catholics and Protestants was in effect narrowed by the common experience of being confronted by a pseudoscientific ideology with strong neo-Pagan elements.

Darkness over Germany is a highly recommended read. One discovers an author trying to understand the calamitous pathway of Germany by looking at the individual level, rather than through a systematic explanation. Although Buller does not impose her views on the reader, it is impossible to miss her deeply humanitarian message. Buller's argument that overcoming the residues of Nazism after the Allied victory would not require permanent control by the Allies or an international body, but rather a 'healing from within' to create the conditions for a democratic Germany integrated in the West (58), reads as prescient. When the book was published, with Britain at war against Germany, this view had understandably not yet assumed the status of conventional wisdom in Britain and the United States, as it would during the early Cold War a few years later. In reading *Darkness over Germany*, one is inevitably reminded of the extent to which the framework of British-German relations has changed for the better since Amy Buller held her conversations eight decades ago.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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