



They Thought They Were Free: The Germans, 1933-45

By Milton Mayer



They Thought They Were Free: The Germans, 1933-45 By Milton Mayer

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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They Thought They Were Free: The Germans, 1933-45 By Milton Mayer Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #97802 in Books
- Published on: 1966-05-19
- Released on: 1966-05-19
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .92" w x 5.25" l, .78 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 346 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"Among the many books written on Germany after the collapse of Hitler's Thousand Year Reich, this book by Milton Mayer is one of the most readable and most enlightening."

(Hans Kohn *New York Times Book Review*)

"It is a fascinating story and a deeply moving one. And it is a story that should make people pause and think—think not only about the Germans, but also about themselves."

(Ernest S. Pisko *Christian Science Monitor*)

"Writing as a liberal American journalist of German descent and Jewish religious persuasion Mr. Mayer aims—and in the opinion of this reviewer largely succeeds—at scrupulous fairness and unsparing honesty. It is this that gives his book its muscular punch."

(Walter L. Dorn *Saturday Review*)

"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

Milton Sanford Mayer (1908-1986) was a journalist and educator. He was the author of about a dozen books.

He studied at the University of Chicago from 1925 to 1928 but he did not earn a degree; in 1942 he told the *Saturday Evening Post* that he was "placed on permanent probation for throwing beer bottles out a dormitory window." He was a reporter for the Associated Press, the *Chicago Evening Post*, and the *Chicago Evening American*. He wrote a monthly column in the *Progressive* for over forty years. He won the George Polk Memorial Award and the Benjamin Franklin Citation for Journalism.

He worked for the University of Chicago in its public relations office and lectured in its Great Books Program. He also taught at the University of Massachusetts, Hampshire College, and the University of Louisville. He was an adviser to Robert M. Hutchins when Hutchins founded the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions.

Mayer was a conscientious objector during World War II but after the war traveled to Germany and lived with German families. Those experiences informed his most influential book *They Thought They Were Free: The Germans, 1933-45*.

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