On 14 November 1938, four days after the nationwide “Kristallnacht” pogrom had wrought devastation on the Jews of Germany, the chief of the Gestapo office of the northwest city of Bielefeld circulated a memorandum to the local secret police offices in the region. He was interested in collecting keys pieces of information about the pogrom and its consequences. Which synagogues had been destroyed by fire? Which had suffered severe damage? Which Jewish-owned businesses had been destroyed or damaged, and what was the financial extent of the damages? Which homes of Jews had been vandalized? Which Jews had been killed or injured? What property had been plundered from Jews? In all, the inquiry listed fourteen sets of questions. The last of these related to “responses to the action in the population.” The Gestapo wanted to know who had uttered criticism of the pogrom, where they lived, and precisely what it was that they had said. Scientific surveys of popular opinion of the sort that we take for granted today did not exist in Germany in 1938. But this did not mean that the Nazi regime made no effort to keep track of what the population was thinking about a wide variety of questions, including the persecution of the Jews.

One of the responses to the inquiry from the Bielefeld Gestapo office came from the mayor of Amt Borgentreich, an administrative district consisting of several communities located in the triangle between Paderborn, Kassel, and Göttingen. Writing on 17 November, the mayor summarized the situation in the following way:
Large segments of the population did not understand the operation, or rather, they did not want to understand it. Some people felt sorry for the Jews. In particular, they felt sorry for them because their property was damaged and because male Jews were sent to concentration camps. To be sure, these sentiments were not shared by the entire population, but I would estimate that around here at least 60 percent of the population thought in this way. [See Appendix E.]

On its surface, this document provides a useful piece of information in a fairly straightforward way. But there are several respects in which the document points up the difficulty of assessing the responses of “ordinary Germans” to the persecution of the Jews. First, it is probably impossible to ascertain whether the mayor’s quantitative estimate rested on shoot-from-the-hip speculation or from a more serious consideration of the facts. Second, it is extremely difficult to adjust for the possible biases that lay behind the mayor’s estimate. Was he understating the extent of popular criticism of the pogrom to avoid creating the impression that he had failed to instill sufficient enthusiasm for Nazism in his population? Or was he exaggerating the extent of the criticism because he had considered the pogrom a foolish mistake by the regime’s leadership? If we were to presume that his estimate was accurate, then what are we to make of it? Do we emphasize the 60 percent majority of the population that reacted to the pogrom disapprovingly, or do we focus on the very sizable 40 percent minority that did not respond negatively? Then there is the question of whether and to what extent Borgentreich may be considered typical, and, if not, what peculiarities of the community may account for the actions and attitudes of its citizens? Even when we have a detailed, contemporary document purporting to report systematically on public opinion, historians remain confronted by perplexing questions of interpretation.

At the time of the Kristallnacht, Lore Walb was a nineteen-year-old woman living in Alzey, a town located about thirty-five miles southwest of Frankfurt. Walb, who possessed literary and journalist ambitions, kept a diary in which she recorded her impressions of the major events of her day. She was an admirer of the Nazi regime. Decades later she would observe that she had been convinced that “everything the Nazis did is correct, the National Socialist behaves honorably, is a good person, righteous, reliable, truthful.” She had embraced the truth of the Nazi slogan “The Jews are our misfortune” and had acknowledged the necessity of marginalizing and persecuting them.
After World War II, Walb became a journalist, retiring in 1979 after twenty years as director of the Women and Family Department of Bavarian State Radio. She published her diary in 1997. Rather than let the document speak for itself, Walb engaged critically with her own record of events from the Nazi era. One question she put to herself almost sixty years after the event was why her diary for 1938 ended with an entry for 6 November. In retrospect she recognized what had been her inability at the time to confront the “the terror against the German Jews.” She had possessed full knowledge of what had taken place during the Kristallnacht and sensed that a great crime had been committed, but she could not process the information lest it undermine her “entire orientation system,” which had been based on a positive attitude toward Nazism. The dissonance between her ideology and her instinctive grasp of the wrongness of the pogrom generated feelings of shame, and the shame, in turn, resulted in silence. The momentous events of November 1938 simply remained absent from her diary.

The Walb diary offers important lessons for historians. Even such a so-called ego document, which was not intended for publication at the time it was created, can contain significant discrepancies between what was witnessed and what was recorded. People withhold the truth not only from others, but also from themselves. And when they report on events in their diaries, correspondence, or memoirs, they can do so in ways that are distorting, self-serving, or based on faulty memory.

The reliability and biases of source materials will arise time and again in the following chapters. Scholars and students of all historical events should, of course, remain conscious of the strengths and limitations of their sources. But special vigilance is in order when examining the questions at the heart of this volume: How did ordinary Germans respond to the persecution and mass murder of the Jews between 1933 and 1945? What did they know, when did they know it, and how did they react? From the time of the Holocaust into the present day, these questions have generated intense and often emotional disagreements. When carried out in the public arena, such disagreements have often been based more on emotion and the received wisdom of collective memory than on a sober examination of the historical evidence. Communities of memory in many countries and across several generations have had a strong emotional stake in the question, and their perceptions have often been shaped by anger, guilt, and shame. As the Nazi period recedes into the past, however, the passing of generations offers the opportunity for a more sober and nuanced appreciation of this difficult history.
The discrepancy between the historical significance of the topic, on the one hand, and the fragmentary nature of the evidence that is available to analyze it, on the other, has posed a continual challenge to scholars. Fortunately, historians have persisted in their efforts to find new and previously overlooked sources. Serious scholarship in this area has accelerated, rather than slowed, in the past few years. The aim of this volume is to encapsulate some of these recent findings and to present some new, original work that is still in progress. The chapters that follow reflect the enormous sophistication with which contemporary scholars have been approaching a controversial subject.

When considering German responses to the persecution and mass murder of the Jews, it is important to remain very cognizant of the chronology and geography of the Holocaust. Between January 1933 and September 1939, Nazi measures directly affected only German Jews as well as those who lived in areas annexed by the Reich in 1938—Austria and the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia—and in the Reich “Protectorate” established over the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia in 1939. Accounting both for the emigration of German Jews as well as for the acquisition of these new territories, the number of Jews subjected to direct Nazi control hovered at around half a million throughout the prewar period. It was only with the advent of World War II in Europe in September 1939 that the number of Jews under German control grew from the hundreds of thousands into the millions.

During the prewar period, Nazi Jewish policy radicalized over time. After the Nazi takeover of the German government in 1933, Jews were subjected to economic boycotts, expelled from a variety of professions, deprived of their citizenship, and placed under pressure to have their property Aryanized, that is, transferred to non-Jewish Germans. This process of marginalization was carried out in a legal and bureaucratic fashion, although it was accompanied by a good deal of humiliation, intimidation, and waves of genuine violence. The Kristallnacht pogrom saw violence on an unprecedented level, with the mass destruction of synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses, widespread physical attacks on Jews in their homes and on the streets, and the arrest of about thirty thousand Jewish men, who were transferred to concentration camps.

After the outbreak of war in September 1939, the Jews who remained in Germany were removed from their homes and compelled to live in segregated apartment buildings or other facilities. They were also subjected to forced labor. Beginning in 1941 and extending into the following year, the majority of German Jews were deported to ghettos and
camps in Poland and the Baltic region, where most of them died or were murdered. German Jews who survived the Holocaust fell mainly into several categories: those who lived in mixed-marriages with their so-called Aryan spouses and could thereby avoid deportation; those who managed to go underground and escape deportation; those who were deported initially to the Theresienstadt (Terezin) ghetto but managed to avoid subsequent deportation to Auschwitz; and those who were selected for forced labor in the east and remained fortunate enough to escape the gas chambers. The deportation of most of Germany’s Jews was common knowledge throughout the German population.

The measures targeted at German Jews after the onset of the war unfolded roughly in parallel with the persecution of Jews in countries occupied by or allied with Germany. By the early summer of 1941, about two million Jews were subjected to compulsory ghettoization and forced labor in German-occupied Poland. Policies of persecution were implemented across German-dominated Europe. Information about these developments was by no means kept secret from the German population.

The Nazi regime initiated the systematic mass murder of Jews upon its invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. These killings took the form of mass shootings carried out by mobile killing units across a large swath of territory in eastern Poland, the western Soviet Union (Ukraine and White Russia), and the Baltic States. In this first phase of the Final Solution, German special task forces organized and carried out the killings, often receiving significant assistance from local militias whose members were motivated by a combination of anti-Semitism and an eagerness to ingratiate themselves with their new German overlords. These killings were officially carried out in secret, but it has been well documented that information about them leaked back into Germany. This was recently confirmed again dramatically by the publication of the wartime diary of Friedrich Kellner, a court civil servant in the small Hessian town of Laubach. On 28 October 1941, Kellner made the following entry in his diary:

A soldier on leave reports to have been an eyewitness to horrible atrocities in the occupied region of Poland. He watched as naked Jewish men and women, who were lined up in front of a long, deep ditch, were shot at the base of their skulls by Ukranians at the order of the SS and fell into the ditch. The ditch was then shoveled closed. Screams still came out of the ditch!
Kellner was convinced that “99 percent of the German population bears indirect or direct guilt for the present situation. One may only conclude: ‘it will serve us right’ [mitgegangen – mitgefangen].”

The information about the massacres that was available to Kellner, who lived in a small, provincial town, was also available to millions of other Germans. So the debate revolves not around whether German could have known, but more around other questions: How widespread was such knowledge? Did the information suffice for Germans to understand that the massacres were part of a systematic program of mass murder? To what extent were Germans distracted by other war-related issues? Through what kinds of psychological mechanisms did Germans avoid, repress, or deny such information?

In 1942 the mass murder program expanded to include all of the Jews of Europe. In this new phase of the Final Solution, the killing was shifted from mass shooting by mobile task forces to a more centralized, industrialized process, based at extermination camps in German-occupied Poland. A team of German officials, coordinated by Adolf Eichmann, organized the deportations of Jews from their home countries to the killing sites. Deportations on such a scale could hardly be carried out in secret, and knowledge about them was widespread across Europe. The key question for historians is not whether ordinary Germans knew of these deportations—they obviously did—but rather whether they comprehended the ultimate fate of the deported Jews and, to the extent that they did, how they reacted. In Germany after World War II the refrain “Davon haben wir nichts gewusst”—“We didn’t know about that”—was often invoked when the subject of the mass murder of the Jews was raised. This assertion can be assessed on the basis of concrete historical evidence.

Four of the six essays in this volume focus on the period from 1933 to 1945, while the other two essays frame the Nazi period within the broader context of modern German history. Chapter 1, written by Richard S. Levy, is titled “Anti-Semitism in Germany, 1890–1933: How Popular Was It?” Levy’s definition of anti-Semitism will strike some readers as unconventional. Levy distinguishes between anti-Jewish prejudice, on the one hand, and anti-Semitism, on the other—the latter, in his opinion, being an actual willingness to act on the basis of anti-Jewish animus, politically or even through acts of violence. According to Levy, from the 1890s through about the midpoint of World War I, anti-Semitism—as he defines it—was not especially widespread in Germany. To be sure, “most Germans did not like Jews,” but few Germans
were prepared to act on that sentiment. German Jews enjoyed legal equality and prospered economically and professionally, even though they suffered under various forms of social exclusion.

World War I, Levy argues, and especially the German defeat in 1918 constituted the turning point. After November 1918 there was a significant increase in the number of Germans willing to join or support political movements that advocated concrete anti-Jewish measures. Levy cites evidence for this transformation in a variety of places, including growing membership in the Nazi Party and other right-wing political associations as well as a dramatic rise in the desecrations of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries. There was also a notable intensification of rhetorical attacks against Jews in public, which must be considered as part and parcel of the coarsening of Germany’s political culture during the Weimar Republic. As Levy points out, when fourteen million Germans voted Nazi in July 1932, they lent their support to a political party that had quite openly advocated anti-Semitic positions since 1919. While not all of these voters were anti-Semites, they were also not willing to defend the rights or the dignity of Germany’s Jewish citizens. By the time of the Nazi takeover in January 1933, a large number of Germans had abandoned any commitment to the equality of Jews.

The first of the volume’s four contributions on the Nazi era is Frank Bajohr’s analysis of “German Responses to the Persecution of the Jews as Reflected in Three Collections of Secret Reports.” Bajohr compares and contrasts three published collections of documents that are indispensable to historians working in this area. The first, which Bajohr refers to as the “regime-internal reports,” is a set of slightly under four thousand documents collected from a large number of German archives as part of a joint German-Israeli project and made available in 2003.9 The second collection consists of reports on the persecution of the Jews filed by foreign diplomats stationed in Germany. Bajohr himself led the project that collected and published these consular reports in 2011.10 The third collection, published in 1980, is composed of reports produced during the Nazi era by the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in exile.11

The regime-internal reports, according to Bajohr, distinguish mainly between Germans and Jews, while the diplomatic and SPD reports “present a more complex structure” of German society, differentiating among Jews, Germans, and Nazis. Bajohr also contends that the diplomatic reports tended to offer a “functionalistic” rather than ideological interpretation of Nazi anti-Jewish measures. The diplomats often pointed to the use of anti-Semitism as a nationalistic mobilization strategy, believing
that it had to be understood within the context of the regime’s other priorities. Despite such differences, all three sets of reports converged with respect to the prewar period. They agreed on the existence of “a general anti-Semitic consensus” in German society and at the same time agreed that there was widespread rejection of anti-Jewish violence.

For the war years, Bajohr explains, the comparison among the three sets of documents is more difficult. The SPD collection ends in 1940, and the number of consular reports dwindled as countries broke diplomatic relations with Germany. Only the regime-internal reports offer a substantial body of relevant documentation. From there it emerges, as Bajohr observes, that “many Germans were speaking about the treatment of the Jews in a kind of mélange of bad conscience, fears of future retribution, and projection of guilt.” Many interpreted the bombardment of their cities by the Allies as punishment for the persecution of the Jews. Bajohr concludes his essay by noting that the Nazi regime did not require a popular consensus in favor of mass murder. The general anti-Semitic consensus in German society provided the regime with the room for maneuver it needed in order to plan and carry out the Final Solution.

Chapter 3, by Wolf Gruner, is also focused on documentation, although in this case on a single, unpublished archival source. Titled “Indifference? Participation and Protest as Individual Responses to the Persecution of the Jews as Revealed in Berlin Police Logs and Trial Records, 1933–45,” Gruner’s contribution offers a detailed, richly textured portrait of how non-Jewish Berliners interacted with their Jewish neighbors during the Nazi era. The article is based on research in the log books of almost three hundred police precincts in Berlin, which was both Germany’s largest city and the site of the country’s largest Jewish population. The chapter is also based on an analysis of a large number of cases of Heimtücke (literally: malice), the term used by the Nazi regime to designate the crime of maligning the national leadership and its policies. In view of Berlin’s status as the national capital, the country’s largest city, the focal point of Germany’s Jewish community, and the center of progressive politics and culture, Berlin was, it must be emphasized, by no means a typical German community.

Gruner examines two waves of organized attacks against Jewish-owned businesses in Berlin in 1933 and 1935. These attacks, he contends, created social space and legitimacy for further anti-Jewish violence and contributed to the gradual marginalization of Jews in German society. But, as Gruner emphasizes, the attacks were greeted with disapproval and
disgust by a great many Berliners. The Berlin police recorded numerous instances in which residents of the city expressed compassion for the Jews and outrage over their treatment. This was true not only in 1933 and 1935, but also applied to reactions to the Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938. Negative reactions to the pogrom within the German population have been well documented, but often with an emphasis on popular objections to the destruction of property.\textsuperscript{12} In contrast, Gruner argues that the condemnations recorded by the Berlin police did not focus on property, but rather on moral outrage and humanitarian concerns for the Jewish victims of the pogrom. At the same time, Gruner explains, a significant number of Berliners profited from the misfortune of their Jewish neighbors and did what they could to exploit the situation to their own advantage.

Gruner provides a detailed analysis of the Berliners’ reactions to the deportation of the city’s Jews in 1941 and 1942. “No one in Berlin could overlook the deportation of tens of thousands of Jews.” Here again, the response was complex. On the one hand, some Berliners were happy to take possession of property and dwellings left behind by the deported Jews. Others denounced Jews who had tried to escape deportation by going underground. On the other hand, many expressed concern about the fate of the Jews and responded very negatively to information about mass murder that had leaked back to Berlin. It is precisely this last issue that lies at the heart of Peter Fritzsche’s contribution, “Babi Yar, but not Auschwitz: What Did Germans Know about the Final Solution?” Through a careful reading of the diaries kept by Germans during the Nazi era,\textsuperscript{13} Fritzsche offers a detailed analysis of popular responses to Nazi Jewish policy against the chronologies of deportation, mass murder, and the Allied bombing of German cities.

Fritzsche grounds his argument in an analysis of the complex interrelationship among four distinct categories of knowledge. The first of these was the widespread knowledge within Germany of the massacres of Jews that took place in Eastern Europe in the second half of 1941. The second was the even more widespread knowledge of the mass deportation of German Jews to that region in late 1941 and 1942. The third was the experience of the Allied bombing of Germany, which over time “eroded knowledge of the Final Solution” and fueled Germans’ fantasies of Jewish revenge. And the fourth was the official propaganda campaign of 1943, in which the mass murder of the Jews was tacitly acknowledged in the regime’s warnings about the potential catastrophic consequences of a German defeat.
Fritzsche arrives at the conclusion that ordinary Germans possessed extensive knowledge of the Final Solution but that this knowledge was incomplete and “deformed” by the convergence of factors described above. Germans, he argues, knew more about the mass executions of Jews by the Einsatzgruppen in 1941 and 1942 than they would learn about the subsequent killings in the extermination camps.

In the volume’s final contribution devoted to the Nazi period, “Submergence into Illegality: Hidden Jews in Munich, 1941–45,” Susanna Schrafstetter shifts the focus to Rettungswiderstand, or resistance through rescue. This term originated from the impulse to recognize those few Germans who came to the aid of Jews as resisters against Nazism. But the term is also problematic inasmuch as it obscures the actions of the hidden Jews as active agents who helped determine their own destinies. The concept of Rettungswiderstand also deflects attention away from the fact that hidden Jews also encountered ordinary Germans as traitors, blackmailers, or robbers.

While stories of hidden Jews have been well documented in Berlin, other regions in Germany have received far less attention. Chapter 5 examines several cases in which Jews from the Bavarian capital of Munich survived the Holocaust in hiding with support from non-Jews. For her sources, Schrafstetter relies on memoirs, compensation claims by Jewish survivors, de-Nazification files, and applications to Yad Vashem for inclusion of rescuers as “Righteous among the Nations.” Individual compensation claims, in particular, form a hitherto underused set of sources for the study of German-Jewish experiences, as survivors had to account for their whereabouts during the war in their applications.

Schrafstetter explains the peculiarities of Munich that determined the patterns of underground life and prospects for its success. When the deportations of German Jews began in the fall of 1941, there were about thirty-four hundred Jews still living in Munich, amounting to only a small fraction of the remaining Jewish population in Berlin. Of these thirty-four hundred, about one hundred survived in hiding inside the city of Munich, in the city’s rural hinterland, or on an odyssey through the entire country. For each of these Jews to remain in hiding successfully, the active support of several non-Jews was necessary. Some of these acted out of altruism, others acted out of greed, while still others acted out of a complex combination of these motivations. Even though the absolute number of Jews who survived underground was relatively small, the cases do underscore the existence of non-Jewish Germans who were prepared to run the considerable risk of lending
assistance. Unlike in Berlin, the overall number of Jews left in Munich in 1941 was small, and therefore organized structures designed both to aid and to exploit fleeing Jews did not develop to the same degree as in Berlin.

The volume concludes with Atina Grossmann’s chapter “Where Did All ‘Our’ Jews Go? Germans and Jews in Post-Nazi Germany.” Any assessment of German popular responses to the Holocaust must also consider the extent to which anti-Semitism persisted in German society after the defeat of the Nazi regime. Grossmann’s contribution examines German attitudes toward Jewish Holocaust survivors, mainly from Eastern Europe, who lived as displaced persons (DPs) in postwar Germany. Most, although not all, lived in camps administered by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), concentrated primarily in the American and British zones of occupation. Despite their status as refugees whose presence in Germany was intended to remain temporary, the Jewish DPs came into close contact with the German population. They interacted on a variety of levels: economic, personal, and even sexual.

Grossmann describes how these interactions were influenced by “lingering stereotypes and renovated traditional prejudices against Ostjuden” in German society. Given the nature of their situation, many of the DPs were compelled to engage in black-market commerce, which reinforced anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jewish dishonesty and lack of respect for honest labor. When the American military government extended a protective hand over the DPs, some Germans took this as a validation of their suspicion that the Allies had been in the hands of the Jews.

Resentment toward the perceived alliance between Americans and Jews intensified as a result of American support of Jewish reparations claims. Many Germans regarded such claims as further evidence of Jewish “moneygrubbing,” which in this case they saw as threatening the normalization of postwar German society and undermining the nation’s economic recovery. To be sure, Grossmann points out, most postwar Germans denied harboring anti-Semitic prejudice. But, she concludes, “there should be no doubt that the philo-Semitism or shamed silence that tabooized anti-Jewish acts or utterances often attributed to postwar Germany not only coexisted with, but was often overwhelmed by, a strong and entirely acceptable anti-Semitism.”

Taken together, the contributions to this volume convey a broad picture of how anti-Semitism functioned in German society during the first
half of the twentieth century. A broadly based set of prejudices was endowed with political potency by the trauma of war and defeat between 1914 and 1918. Anti-Semitism became a central tenet of the German right during the Weimar Republic, and a large segment of German society, even if not actively anti-Semitic, was not repelled by the Nazi movement’s obsession with Jews. Between 1933 and 1939, the Nazi regime consolidated an anti-Semitic consensus in German society. The consensus did not extend to include anti-Jewish violence, but it did provide the hard-core anti-Semites who governed Germany with the room for maneuver that they needed to pursue their maximalist agenda. Once that regime had been destroyed through external intervention, politically organized anti-Semitism ceased to be a factor, but many of the foundational prejudices persisted in the German population.

More than twice as much time has elapsed between the end of World War II and today than between World War I and 1945. How German attitudes toward Jews have developed since the immediate postwar period is a question that lies beyond the scope of this volume. But we should note that Germany today is a far different—and better—place today than it was in 1945.

Susanna Schrafstetter is associate professor of history at the University of Vermont. Her publications include Die dritte Atommacht. Britische Nichtverbreitungspolitik im Dienst von Statussicherung und Deutschlandpolitik, 1952–1968 (Munich, 1999) and (with Stephen Twigge) Avoiding Armageddon: The United States, Western Europe and the Struggle for Nuclear Non-Proliferation, 1945–1970 (New York, 2004). She has published a number of articles on German compensation to the victims of Nazism and on the post-1945 careers of Nazi-era officials. She has recently completed a book-length study about Jews who avoided deportation and went underground in Munich and the surrounding region during the early 1940s.

Alan E. Steinweis is the L & C Miller Distinguished Professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of Vermont, where he also serves as director of the Miller Center for Holocaust Studies. His books include Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany (Chapel Hill, 1993); Studying the Jew: Scholarly Antisemitism in Nazi Germany (Cambridge, MA, 2006); and Kristallnacht 1938 (Cambridge, MA, 2009). He has been a guest professor at the Universities of Heidelberg, Frankfurt, and Munich.
Notes


4. Ibid., 118–21.

5. Geoff Eley, ed., The “Goldhagen Effect”: History, Memory, Nazism; Facing the German Past (Ann Arbor, 2000).


9. See note 1 above.


11. Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Sopade), 1934–1940, 7 vols (Frankfurt, 1980).

12. For example, Bankier, Germans and the Final Solution, and Kershaw, Popular Opinion. Gruner’s argument in this volume supports the assertion in Longerich, “Davon haben wir nichts gewusst,” that the moral outrage of the German population at the pogrom has probably been underestimated.
13. See also Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), which relies mainly on memoirs and published diaries.

**Selected Bibliography**


