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Diary Of A Man In Despair: A Non-Fiction Masterpiece About The Comprehension Of Evil



Synopsis

One of the most important documents of the Hitler period--the diary of a martyred anti-Nazi Russian aristocrat who describes the horrors of the era with insight. This is the true and compelling diary of an anti-Nazi Prussian aristocrat who lived through mankind's darkest era, only to die in a concentration camp on the eve of the Armistice. The diary is considered one of the most important documents of the period, describing in unforgettable terms how a psychosis enveloped an entire society, enabling Hitler's rise to power, and the Nazi regime. This accurate account of the forebodings of an unsung visionary exposes in chilling fashion the relationship between sentimentality and violence.

Book Information

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: Duckworth Publishing; 1 edition (February 1, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0715630008

ISBN-13: 978-0715630006

Product Dimensions: 8.3 x 5.8 x 0.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.9 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (9 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,084,950 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #96 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Holocaust](#) #869 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Germany](#) #2418 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Historical > Biographical](#)

Customer Reviews

The title is a calumny. As his translator, Paul Rubens, points out, Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen was a prophet - not in the vulgar sense of one who predicts future events, but a prophet after the fashion of Jeremiah, William Blake and Dostoyevsky: one who comments on the present from the perspective of the Most High. As such, even when his own death is imminent, Reck most certainly does not despair. Like the three individuals mentioned above, he is angered, disgusted, saddened and horrified by what he sees around him; his journal is filled with images of Calvary, the plague, and the Apocalypse; yet he continually strives to see his own and his country's ordeal as a time of suffering and repentance which must be endured to make way for a new and better world. None of which is to say that his thinking is "mystical" in the sense of being vague or escapist; indeed, the immense value of Reck's diary, both as literature and as a historical document, lies in its brilliant

combination of sharp observation and lucid analysis. Although he makes the all-too-common error of lumping in the plotters of 20 July 1944 with the many opportunists who tried to dissociate themselves from the regime as defeat began to loom, Reck's analytical passages offer as clear and concrete a picture of the corruption underlying Hitler's Germany as any historian I have encountered. Telling details of life in the Third Reich - the omnipresent thuggery and tale-bearing, the forced barracks-gymnasium atmosphere, the all-pervasive lies and propaganda - spring out of every page through tartly written anecdotes and vignettes. The peculiar detestability of the Nazi functionaries - frustrated schoolteachers and jumped-up mailmen posing as masters of the world - is described and analysed with perception and admirable loathing.

I'm glad to see to see this work coming back into print in a new edition, February 2013, from New York Review Books. It's well worth reading simply for the encounter with a fiery, fascinating mind in a dark time: an old-school, old-world European patrician, a conservative of the kind rarely met today, especially in the US. From a noble East-Prussian family (or so he claimed), Friedrich Reck-Malleczewen (or simply Reck) thought Bismarck at the time of Germany's unification gave too much to the industrialists and financiers at the expense of his class, the landed aristocracy, which consequently in decline became more a parody of itself, and that the nation went downhill from there. Haughty, witty, acerbic, mordant, and finally despairing -- with good reason -- the author, who also wrote art, theater criticism, historical novels, lived in Bavaria, near Munich, from the 20s until early '45 when he was shot at Dachau for disparaging the fatherland. An entry of August 11, 1936 describes his first meeting with A.H. and gives some taste of the whole: ". . . in 1920, at the home of my friend Clemens von Frankenstein [composer, conductor, director of the Bavarian Royal Theatre], which was then the Lenbach villa. According to the butler, one of those present was forcing his way in everywhere . . . he had managed an invitation to Cle's house under the guise of being interested in operatic scenic design. Hitler very likely had the idea that theatrical design was connected with interior decorating and wall-paper-hanging, his former profession." He had come to a house, where he had never been before, wearing gaiters, a floppy, wide-brimmed hat, and carrying a riding whip. There was a collie too.

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