The New Criterion

Reflections December 2019

The importance of being Ernst

by Andrew Stuttaford

On A German Officer in Occupied Paris: The War Journals, 1941–1945 by Ernst Jünger.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

Ernst Jünger

A German Officer in Occupied Paris: The War Journals, 1941-1945 (European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism)

Columbia University Press, 496 pages, $40.00

The more you study history, the less you know. Straight paths turn into labyrinths. So it is that, in the Paris journals of Ernst Jünger (now translated into English by Thomas and Abby Hansen as A German Officer in Occupied Paris), we learn that in July 1942 Jünger, who had previously swapped books with a fellow author by the name of Hitler, dropped in on a future Stalin Prize winner, one Pablo Picasso.1 The artist was an exile, Jünger a captain in the Wehrmacht, an occupier. The meeting passed off agreeably. Picasso declared that the two of them "would be able to negotiate peace over the course of [that] afternoon."

Just five days later, works by Picasso were among the "degenerate art" burned by the Germans in the gardens of the Jeu de Paume gallery, an event that, like many infinitely greater abominations, goes unnoted in the journals.

"Some people," jeered Jean Cocteau from his glass house, "had dirty hands, some had clean hands, but Jünger had no hands."

In October 1943, Jünger calls on Georges Braque (another "degenerate" artist). Possibly the only person both to have met the Kaiser and taken lsd with the drug's creator, Jünger is struck by a picture "of a black table; its surface reflected the vessels and glasses standing on it in a way that etherealized rather than simplified it." The appeal to a man who toyed with reality in his mind, in his writing, and in his public persona is obvious. At one point, the discussion turns to camouflage.

Born in Heidelberg into a prosperous and clever family in 1895, Jünger evolved into "something . . . of a non-conformist." He joined the Wandervogel, a back-to-nature movement containing elements of scouting and an early 1960s Newport Folk Festival, as well as glimpses of a darker atavism. Signing up in 1913 with the French Foreign Legion at a recruiting office in—history likes its jokes—Verdun was a bigger surprise; that Jünger deserted was even bigger still. He was caught, but his father secured his release. Jünger had escaped the French army. Within eighteen months, he would be fighting it.

Jünger not only survived the Western Front but also was made by it. Among other trophies, he won the Iron Cross (First Class), the Hohenzollern Knight's Cross with Swords, and the Pour le Mérite, Germany's highest military decoration. He also emerged with the notebooks that were to be the basis of *Storm of Steel* (*In Stahlgewittern*). This extraordinary memoir first appeared in 1920, but, like quite a number of his books, was heavily revised in later editions for reasons (at different times) of opportunism, prudence, and perfectionism.

Josef Goebbels praised *Storm of Steel* as a "war gospel," and it is often seen as having glorified and aestheticized a bloodbath, which is too crude a critique. But when taken alongside Jünger's other more explicitly bellicose writings about the Great War, and then war itself, it's easy to understand why Thomas Mann maintained that Jünger's "saber rattling" had helped the Nazis, and he was hardly alone in thinking so. Jünger compared such accusations to blaming a seismographer for an earthquake, a disingenuous defense. For Jünger to write in that way, at that time, and in that place was a profoundly political act.

While Hitler was wooing the bourgeoisie, Jünger was roaming in the ideological space where far Left and far Right meet, championing a machine-age Sparta.

As nationalists reacted to defeat and to Weimar, Jünger developed into one of their most prominent intellectuals, a frequent contributor to publications of the far Right, including (briefly) those of the Nazis, a party he not only declined to join, but also repeatedly snubbed, if often in honeyed terms. After their *Machtergreifung*, he retreated to the provinces in a formal of internal emigration. Even before then, the first (1929) version of Jünger's intriguing and surreal *The Adventurous Heart* (*Das abenteuerliche Herz*) had disappointed Goebbels, who dismissed him as a "writer, closed off from life, just ink, literature!" As National Socialist realism went, Jünger just didn't have what it took.

Jünger's principal objection to the Nazis, at least initially, stemmed, unusually, from their pragmatism. While Hitler was wooing the bourgeoisie, Jünger was roaming in the ideological space where far Left and far Right meet, championing a machine-age Sparta.

Nazi anti-Semitism was less of a problem for him. To be sure, Jünger mocked both its paranoia and its "science" ("sheer nonsense"). He also argued that anti-Semitism was "not an essential issue" for nationalists, but this cagey formulation fell far short of outright condemnation. That should not have been a surprise. Jünger may have resigned from his regimental association after it barred Jews, but he wrote for a newspaper published by the Stahlhelm, a veterans' organization that had excluded them too. In a 1930 article for the Süddeutsche Monatshefte, Jünger conceded that Jews could be German, but only if they abandoned their Jewishness. This was a notion, despite some ugly phrasing (brushed off in 1982 as "sins of youth"), irreconcilable with Nazi doctrine, but more poisonous than Jünger would acknowledge even half a century later: "The whole question changed because of the concentration camps." Really?

Jünger's growing disgust as he begins to discover the extent of Nazi genocide manifests itself in the journals from late 1941 onwards, meaning that, if his chronology can be trusted, this well-placed and acute observer was unusually slow on the uptake. After all, his colleagues included Werner Best, an old friend who had worked for Reinhard Heydrich, under whom Best had helped organize the *Einsatzgruppen*. Best only merits one mention in the journals—for giving Jünger a book.

What's more, Jünger had been under no illusions about the Third Reich's almost boundless capacity for brutality even before the war. His *On the Marble Cliffs* (*Auf den Marmorklippen*, 1939) was opaque and allegorical (he once remarked that "censorship refines one's style"), and its tale of a civilization destroyed by marauders under the command of a monstrous leader was not directed solely at Hitler's regime. Not solely. In the journals, Jünger is less circumspect, and even the allegorical has lost its mystery. When he refers to "Kniébolo" (a name that combines the German for kneel—*knien*—and Diablo), there is no doubt whom he means.

Jünger had been under no illusions about the Third Reich's almost boundless capacity for brutality even before the war.

On June 7, 1942, Jünger encountered "the yellow star for the first time in my life. . . . I was immediately embarrassed to be in uniform." In July, he commiserates with the "unfortunate pharmacist" "Potard" (Silberberg), a "good fellow" whose wife had been deported, and adds that he never allows himself to forget that he is "surrounded by sufferers." Fortunately, he is able to make his way to a bookshop. There this obsessive bibliophile examines an "illustrated volume" from "about 1870": "Looking at pictures does me good when I'm upset."

Jünger, a "statue of ice" (in the words of one acquaintance), was not known for empathy. "Good old Potard" makes one last appearance. After that, silence. In an interview after the war, Jünger implied that he had perished. Silberberg's plight was of interest; his fate, possibly, not quite so much.

As the journals move further into 1943, Jünger (who writes little about the horrors unfolding in France) has apparently heard enough from "the East" to write that the "atrocities perpetrated against the Jews . . . enrage the cosmos against us." He talks of "our shared guilt": "By robbing ourselves of our social bonds, we unleashed something subterranean."

Yet Jünger still hobnobs with those who cheered on, or even enabled, that unleashing. The sinister jurist Carl Schmitt makes regular appearances in these pages, episodes in a close intellectual and personal relationship seemingly undisturbed by Schmitt's anti-Semitism, about which Jünger writes nothing.

Those friendships were not just with Germans. Jünger had been attached to the Military High Command in Paris since his participation in the invasion of France (covered in a volume as yet untranslated into English, although a French edition was already selling well . . . during the occupation). The journals disclose little about his vaguely defined official duties (which included acting as a censor and keeping an eye on rival enforcers sent to Paris by the Nazi hierarchy and unloved by many in the Command) but reveal rather more about his considerably more significant role as an envoy to the local intelligentsia promoting a mirage of "Europe"—in which he himself might have believed—very different from the New Order that Hitler really had in mind.

While some of the company Jünger (a "good German" trading on his reputation as a writer and a Francophile) cultivated was apolitical, indifferent, opportunistic (Cocteau for one), or, in rare cases, opposed to the occupation, others were more enthusiastic—and made no secret that anti-Semitism was part of its appeal, something to which Jünger almost never alludes. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, an extremist's extremist, however, went too far in December 1941, complaining, wrote Jünger, "that we soldiers were not shooting, hanging, and exterminating the Jews" in the course of a "rant" doubtless made more infuriating by Céline's assumption that "we soldiers" would do such filthy work.

At about the same time, Jünger was (probably) starting an affair with Sophie Ravoux ("La Doctoresse"), a pediatrician and a German-born Jew. Whatever Jünger may have thought about anti-Semitism by this stage he does not seem to have let it infect his personal relationships. In the journals he records both assisting and socializing with "Fernand Husser" (the artist Friedrich Heinsheimer), a half-Jewish German veteran living in Paris under an assumed name. Moreover, in his foreword to the journals, Elliot Neaman, a history professor at the University of San Francisco (and the author of a fine study of Jünger), writes that when Jünger saw an opportunity to "help save Jews at an acceptable level of risk, he did act."

Jünger's assessment of risk came into sharp focus as plans to overthrow Hitler began to take shape in early 1944. The Paris command was key to the plot, a plot of which Jünger was, despite overtures from the conspirators, more in the know than in the game: he reckoned that removing Hitler was pointless, writing in March 1944 that "if Kniébolo falls, the hydra will grow a new head," a prediction that owed more to his fatalism than to any genuine insight. Two months before, his elder son Ernstel, a naval cadet, had been arrested for allegedly expressing a more optimistic view on what the Führer's demise could mean. He was sent to a penal battalion and killed in combat (or quite possibly shot by the SS) in Italy in November.

Jünger's assessment of risk came into sharp focus as plans to overthrow Hitler began to take shape in early 1944.

With a savage purge underway in the aftermath of the plot's failure, Jünger regretted "how our old circle of the Knights of Saint George" (the officers who regularly met at the Hotel George V) had "been drastically winnowed." Their grim fate had, if nothing else, refreshed his fantasy of a Wehrmacht in which chivalry had had a role.

Headquartered in one good hotel and lodged in another, Jünger found Paris very far from the worst of assignments. Seeing him move from soirée to soirée and pursue the occasional fling (and something much more serious with Ravoux), it is hard not to think that, for all his mounting fears for the future ("the days pass over us like the teeth of a saw"), he made the best of a pretty good job. He had plenty of time to indulge in entomology, an appropriate enough passion for someone who regarded his own disorderly species with such detachment.

Then there were books to harvest. From little stalls along the banks of the Seine to specialist shops ("oases in a world of carnage"), Jünger took advantage of a larcenous exchange rate and a battered local economy. "Wars, pogroms, and revolutions," mused Bruce Chatwin's Baron Utz, that hoarder of porcelain, "offer excellent opportunities for the collector." After an excursion to the Eastern Front in the winter of 1942 (included in this volume as "Notes from the Caucasus"), Paris held "a new and incomparable glory . . . despite the fact that scarcity has become more widespread—with the exception of books. I celebrated my return to them by purchasing a beautiful monograph on Turner."

Whether such opportunities gave him pause goes, as with so much else, unmentioned.

The journals may be based on Jünger's contemporaneous notes, but those were only the foundations for what he then refined, polished, and elaborated upon. With Jünger that might be a cause for concern, and not just because of the evident danger that he might rewrite the past. With the notable exception of his First World War writings, Jünger is not renowned for the accessibility of his prose. All too often it is dragged down by abstruse philosophizing or Symbolist self-indulgence sometimes so excessive that it topples over into kitsch.

“Some people,” jeered Jean Cocteau from his glass house, “had dirty hands, some had clean hands, but Jünger had no hands.”

These flaws are all too evident in the journals. Jünger touches a date’s breast in the cinema: “A hot iceberg, a hill in the spring, filled with myriad seeds of life, perhaps something like white anemones.” Sometimes fondling is just fondling. Nevertheless, there’s a discipline to diaries, even ones as reworked as these. Philosophical and mystical musings, astrological calculations, and the accounts of dreams (“From a small rivulet, I picked out a green fish with seven pairs of eyes”) are forced to jostle for space with random observations, aphorisms, recollections of the (relatively) routine, celebrations of bibliophile booty, architectural treats, and nature notes, as well as nuggets, however selectively mined, of an ambiguous past impossible to accommodate within any respectable arc of history.

There are some outstanding passages, from Jünger’s evocation (one of war’s great chroniclers had lost none of his skills) of an unraveling Eastern Front (“you can hear the rustling of the net being tightened”) to his chilling description of the execution of a deserter over which he presided out of “exaggerated curiosity . . . . I have seen many people die, but never at a predetermined moment.”

There’s also the entry for May 27, 1944, in which Jünger recalls watching an air raid from the roof of his hotel at sunset. He was:

> holding a glass of burgundy with strawberries floating in it. The city, with its red towers and domes, was a place of stupendous beauty, like a calyx that they fly over to accomplish their deadly act of pollination. The whole thing was theater—pure power affirmed and magnified by suffering.

There was no sunset raid on Paris that date. While Jünger admitted to conflating some of the experiences described in the journals, his decision to construct a story that no amount of strawberries could sweeten is revealing (despite the nod to empathy). It is not only an expression of the detachment that he fetishized, but it also looks a lot like a boast. Any pity he felt was, quite literally, *de haut en bas*.

In that, it echoed his earlier depiction of fellow guests at the Tour d’Argent feasting on the balcony “on *suprême* of sole and the famous duck.” They resembled, thought Jünger, “tower sculptures looking down from their demonic comfort upon the . . . roofs at their feet, beneath which the starving eke out their living.” “In times like this,” he adds, “eating well and much brings a feeling of power,” a feeling to which he was clearly not immune. Only the reference—more, I suspect, than architectural—to “demonic comfort,” hints at deeper unease.

But however uneven or bizarre some of the entries, the overall structure of the journals—free-flowing, chaotic, and kaleidoscopic—works. Together they act as a mirror reflecting a world where the center had not held.

Jünger left Paris on August 14, 1944, after placing a bouquet of flowers on his hotel room table and "distribut[ing] tips." He returned to Germany (this edition of the journals concludes with American troops arriving in his home village), but for him *Götterdämmerung* was merely an interlude. He re-emerged as a leading literary figure in the new, democratic federal republic, but was never of it. He died in 1998, aged 102.

---

1 *A German Officer in Occupied Paris: The War Journals, 1941–1945*, by Ernst Jünger; Columbia University Press, 496 pages, $40.

Andrew Stuttaford is the editor of *National Review*'s Capital Matters.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 38 Number 4 , on page 40

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2019/12/the-importance-of-being-ernst