Following the Reichstag fire and the suspension of civil liberties provisions in the Weimar constitution in 1933, journalist Dorothy Thompson gave voice to her frustration. "I keep thinking what could be done," she writes. "I feel myself starting to hate Germany. ... If only someone would speak."

Thompson's sense of urgency was not shared by most American journalists, expats, artists, politicians and diplomats who visited Germany during Hitler's rise to power. "There were those who saw what was coming and those who were blind to it until the very last moment," Andrew Nagorski, director of public policy at the EastWest Institute and a former bureau chief at Newsweek magazine, reminds us.

In "Hitlerland," Nagorski tells their stories. Informative and interesting, the book often covers ground that has been well-traveled, most recently by Erik Larson's "In the Garden of Beasts," an account of William Dodd, the U.S. ambassador to Germany in the 1930s, and his daughter, Martha.

Reluctant to pass judgment, Nagorski does not explain why so many Americans dismissed evidence all around them. Nor does he mount a compelling case that those who sounded the alarm "gradually eroded isolationist sentiments" in the United States and "prepared their countrymen psychologically for the years of bloodshed and struggle ahead."

At its best, however, "Hitlerland" conveys, often vividly, the difficulty Americans had coming to terms with Nazi terror. In 1941, Nagorski reveals, Howard K. Smith, a young reporter for CBS radio, was visited by Fritz Heppler, a German Jew he had met at an air raid a year earlier. The Nazis had searched his apartment, found nothing, and released him, Heppler said, but he was certain that a roundup of Jews was imminent and begged Smith to help him get out of the country. The reporter offered a cigarette, suggested that Heppler was exaggerating the danger, promised to make inquiries about a visa, and escorted him to the door. Smith forgot about the incident the next day -- and never saw Heppler again. "My callousness on this occasion can hardly be justified," he recalled, much later. "Not that it would have helped him; but it would have helped soothe my own conscience."

Did Smith really believe that Heppler was exaggerating the danger, one wonders, or was he afraid? And what are we to make of...
Ambassador Hugh Wilson, Dodd’s successor, who, in the aftermath of the annexation of Austria, found Nazi Germany "so darned absorbing and interesting," and maintained that "we have nothing to gain by entering a European conflict, and everything to lose"?

"Hitlerland," alas, doesn't provide satisfactory answers to these questions, but provides a significant service in forcing us to ask them.

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