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REVIEW – GERMAN SAINTS AT WAR

Reviewed by Zachary Ray Jones

Robert Freeman and John Felt, eds., *German Saints at War* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort Inc., 2008), Hardbound: \$29.99.

With World War II studies remaining highly popular among readers and scholars, Freeman and Felt bring something valuable and new to the historiography with *German Saints at War*. This book consists of twenty gripping firsthand accounts by LDS Germans, both soldiers and civilians, and their stories of living and surviving inside Germany during the World War II era. With detailed information on how German Mormons lived under Nazi rule during the war period, this book will not only find favor among its primary audience of faithful Latter-day Saints, but also among scholars of religion during the Second World War period.

Although Freeman has written on this topic before,¹ *German Saints at War* is actually the fifth book produced by Freeman examining Mormonism and world wars, though I would rate this book as his best to date. Freeman, who has a J.D and comes from a legal background, is a professor at Brigham Young University where he teaches religion and history and heads the Saints at War Project, a project that encourages publications and films on the Mormon experience during wartimes. John Felt is not a professional historian, but rather served a LDS mission in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, and assisted with the project because of this background. In regards to Freeman, his first book was *Saints at War: World War II* (2003) which examined nearly all American soldiers who served in World War II, and contains primarily published oral history accounts of their service. *Saints at War* was produced in conjunction with a veteran's research project conducted with Brigham Young University's L. Tom Perry Special Collections department. Freeman's second book, *Saints at War: Korea and Vietnam* (2006), did not stray far from this

¹ Robert Freeman, "When the Wicked Rule, the People Mourn: The Experiences of German Saints During World War II," in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History*, ed. by D. Cannon and B. Top (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2003), pp. 89-108.

mold and amounted to another book of primarily published oral history accounts of LDS American veterans. Both of these books have since been made into documentary films. Prior to *German Saints at War*, his two most current books, *Nineteenth Century Saints at War* (2006) and *Saints at War: I'll be Home for Christmas* (2006), both departed from the structure employed in his previous two books in that they contained accounts from written primary source materials, as opposed to oral histories. Freeman is currently working on book to document the Mormon experience during the First World War.

Although *German Saints at War* employs the use of oral histories as with Freeman's first two books, this volume effectively breaks the mold and ventures into new territory by including civilian and female accounts. In this study Freeman and Felt present nineteen oral history accounts of LDS German citizens and soldiers, and one transcribed diary, seven from women and the remaining from men, to document the lives of twenty LDS Germans during the war. It appears most all the individuals interviewed for this publication resided in Utah at the time while the authors were collecting sources. Thankfully, the individual accounts in this book are much longer than in previous books, such as in *Saints at War: Korea and Vietnam* where Freeman often only included a short and incomplete one or two page account from an individual. In this book he grants a more free-reign and includes lengthy accounts from individuals, sometime up to forty pages or more. This increased amount of text grants the reader the ability to see the depth and gravity of ideas and emotions found in the German population endured during the Second World War and Mormonism's place in this scenario.

The book is arranged with a short Preface and Introduction, and then eighteen chapters with individual accounts. In the Preface the authors assert that this "volume attempts to convey something of the impact of the war on German Saints. While most of the stories in this volume derive from firsthand accounts of Latter-day Saints who fought for the German forces, it also provides glimpses into the trials endured by civilian Latter-day Saints who bore such heavy burdens both during and after the war" (ix). The authors also assert that the book "endeavors to commend the faith of German Latter-day Saints who lived through the war and relied upon their Heavenly Father to see them through this terrible time" (ix). In this respect, the authors have done a laudatory job of following this goal. This study is also important because as World War II began, Germany had one of the largest population of Mormons compared to other European nations, approximately 15,000, and accord-

ing to the authors' sources, and 85 percent of LDS Germans were left homeless at the conclusion of the war (xiv).

Many Christian faiths and religious scholars have published works on religious topics concerning the Second World War period, and studies on Mormonism during this period are growing. Perhaps the most examined topic of this period for Mormon studies consists of books and essays on German Latter-day Saint youth Helmuth Hubener, and his small Nazi resistance movement, for which Hubener was executed by the Nazis. Other studies on Mormonism in Germany during this period have also discussed missionary work surrounding the wartime period, the lives of LDS Germans during the war, and some on how LDS Germans and the Church in general reacted to Nazism and World War II. Although some of the existent studies are not scholarly and many topics still remain unstudied by scholars, nearly all publications have sought to demonstrate how the LDS Church did not cooperate or support the Nazi Party and prove that some LDS Germans fought against the Nazi regime. In 1972 a scholarly study confirmed these findings,² and based on what Freeman and Felt present in their book it appears LDS Germans were not swayed by the Nazi message. Based on accounts in this book, Freeman and Felt have sought to portray Mormons as victims of Nazism and that Mormons eschewed the Nazi message.

As for some individual accounts from the book, for those familiar with ranking German leaders in the LDS Church, readers will find accounts by LDS Apostle Dieter F. Uchtdorf (and his wife) and Elder F. Enzo Busche. For those also familiar with the book by Patricia Reece Roper, *We Were Not Alone: How an LDS Family Survived World War II Berlin*, readers will find an account by the principle author's brother, Horst Kurt Hilbert, and other characters in the book, which greatly adds to *We Were Not Alone*. As for content, many stories in the book follow the lives of LDS German soldiers; their life at or near the front, being wounded, and during their years of suffering in Soviet and/or East European prison camps. In this volume number of the soldiers discussed how the Nazi regime discriminated against Mormons because of their religion, and in various instances would not allow a soldier to be promoted to a higher officer rank because they were LDS. Walter K. Rohloff experienced this after attending an officers training school, and though his instructors gave him very good marks, his report read that he could

² Joseph M. Dixon, "Mormons in the Third Reich: 1933-1945," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1972), 70-78.

not become an officer because he was a “religious fanatic, belonging to the Mormon sect. Politically not trustworthy” (218). Other stories include eyewitness accounts of the firebombing of Dresden, the mass westward flight of civilians away from the Russian advance during winter, the rape of German women by Russian soldiers, the tragedies of food shortages, and in some cases the death of LDS children to these and other harsh conditions. For example, Martha B. Duckwitz remembered a scene while fleeing, with her children, from the Soviet advance into her town of Stettin (in modern day Poland), “We saw dead people lying in the streets, beautiful homes turned into rubble, and many fires burning in many areas of the city. Yet the Russians did not let up their artillery fire” (64). Overall, these survival stories seek to demonstrate how the interviewed individuals saw God watching over them and their families during the war period and how Mormons reacted to war. These accounts are gripping, terrifying, and help the reader better understand the plight of German civilians and even soldiers drafted into the Nazi war machine. Overall, the book creates a frightening picture of the suffering experienced by German civilians during and towards the end of the war.

Although the overall book is arranged well and the content included is superb, it does suffer from some flaws regarding objective selection. The one main flaw with the book is that the authors were selective of accounts included in the book. As Americans, and with part of its proposed American audience, it appears the authors selected the interviews they felt would appeal to an American audience, which resulted in a rather one-sided view of the war. For example, no German soldiers featured in the book fought against the western Allies; all fought against the Russians and on the Russian front. And nearly all soldier accounts featured in the book consisted of narratives showing soldiers who avoided violence and did not kill enemy soldiers. Additionally, all of the included interviewees explained their revulsion or apathetic attitude toward the Nazi regime and its actions. These methods of selection result in a number of problems. For example, this selective process has functioned to create an overly favorable image of Mormonism during the World War II period, which tends to leave the reader wondering about the wider story and if these accounts were average or exceptional. While I understand why the authors avoided accounts that would possibly offend their intended audience, objectively speaking, selectively withholding historical accounts for these reasons detracts from the full story and distorts history. Surely LDS Germans fought against American, British, or French forces, likely killed soldiers on the Western Front, or

simply killed other soldiers during a military conflict, which is all part of the terrible nature of war. Leaving such accounts out from a scholar's perspective is an injustice to the historical record. It was also rather troubling that the authors saw it as ok to allow accounts discussing Russian and German soldiers dying in combat, but not soldiers serving in the western Allied Forces. Such a bias is troubling in any book examining World War II, but then again, choosing sides is regrettably a problem with many publications on World War II. Lastly, as for providing sources that could have captured a LDS opinion in favor Nazi fascism, and although it's quite possible such an opinion was not found among those interviewed for this study, this selective withholding of accounts gives the impression that the authors were hiding or withholding certain non-flattering aspects of history. Yet in defense of these authors, this book was not meant for a scholarly audience, but rather the majority of the faithful LDS laity.

Aside from these flaws, this book is an excellent read and a publication I would heartily recommend to scholars of Mormonism, German history, World War II, and general religious studies.

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