

[Montesclaros on Lyman, 'Under a Darkening Sky: The American Experience in Nazi Europe: 1939-1941'](#)

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Robert Lyman. *Under a Darkening Sky: The American Experience in Nazi Europe: 1939-1941*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2018. 336 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-68177-736-8.

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Robert Lyman's *Under a Darkening Sky* provides an insightful narrative of Europe during the early years of World War II, as seen from a uniquely American perspective. Based largely on personal observations and commentary from a broad cross-section of Americans who lived or worked in Europe between 1939 and 1941, the author's effort is reminiscent of other works that cover aspects of life on the home front during this period. Among these are Nicholas Stargardt's *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-1945* (2015) and David Drake's *Paris at War, 1939-1944* (2015). While less in-depth than either of these excellent efforts, *Under a Darkening Sky* nonetheless effectively captures the essence of the American perspective on what was happening on the Continent both before and after the onset of war in Europe. Unfortunately, the prewar warnings captured in the book went unheeded, as America chose to follow an increasingly difficult isolationist path altered only after the events of December 7, 1941.

The author arranges *Under a Darkening Sky* chronologically as well as thematically in fourteen chapters, focusing on American expatriate views during the transition from peace to war in Europe. While his primary emphasis is on the years 1939-41, the author reaches back to 1933 in his first chapter, largely to highlight the multitude of warnings emanating from Americans—reporters as well as diplomats—about the burgeoning threat of Adolf Hitler and the rising illiberalism of his Third Reich. An exemplar is the highly influential *Harper's* journalist Dorothy Thompson, who in 1934 reported seeing a banner above a Hitler Youth summer camp in Murnau that proclaimed, "You Were Born to Die for Germany" (p. 11). Unfortunately, like virtually all warnings regarding the Nazis in prewar Europe, Thompson's, too, went unheeded. Those who sounded such alarms of fascist Germany were either met with disinterest or dismissed as warmongers; the American public was in no mood for entanglement in a second war on the European continent.

Subsequent chapters provide valuable insight from a broad swath of American observers in Paris, London, Berlin, and other crucial nodes beginning temporally with the appeasement of Hitler up to America's declaration of war on the Axis in late 1941. Lyman identifies his American expatriates in a useful *dramatis personae* appearing after the preface; this is essential to following the author's discourse. As can be expected, many of the author's subjects are those trained to observe and report—William Shirer and his seminal *Berlin Diary* (1940) come to mind. Shirer was one of quintessential journalist Edward R. Murrow's "boys" who cut their teeth during early wartime

reporting from Europe. Others working for Murrow, such as Howard K. Smith and Eric Sevareid, figure prominently in Lyman's narrative and would later become fixtures on American nightly news broadcasts.

The author also includes much commentary from the American ambassadors in London and Paris—the epicenters of much of the activity *Under a Darkening Sky* describes. These were William “Bill” Bullitt and Joseph P. Kennedy, respectively (John G. Winant would later replace Kennedy after the latter's falling out with Franklin Roosevelt). Lyman also incorporates observations from an eclectic mix of entertainers, socialites, physicians, entrepreneurs, members of private organizations, and military personnel. Among them are American-born entertainer Josephine Baker, who later worked for the French Secret Service; Etta Shiber, an American widow who ran an escape line for British combatants still in France; and Lothrop Stoddard, a writer who sympathized with the Nazi view on eugenics and whose interviewees included none other than Adolf Hitler. From this cross-section of the American diaspora in Europe emanates the insights and commentary that form the basis of *Under a Darkening Sky*. The list reflects Lyman's premise that one can learn as much from the personal views of those experiencing history “as it happens” as from official or historical accounts written after the fact.

Under a Darkening Sky has its noteworthy aspects. It provides a readily accessible survey of American expatriate attitudes toward a number of important themes and issues, especially from those skilled at observing and writing. It contains multiple viewpoints from across the American social strata, which provides breadth and difference of perspective. At the same time, it includes insights not just on the seminal political events of the time, but also on daily life in occupied Europe. Lyman provides an example of such commentary from Janet Flanner, a Paris-based reporter for the *New Yorker* magazine, who noted that Parisians in 1940 had two words to describe their German occupiers—“corrects” and “emmerdeurs” (p. 218). The former, derived from English, indicates that the German military was always polite and forthcoming to their subjects, while the latter (translated as “troublemakers”) shows that the French considered their occupiers' Teutonic and militaristic outlook to be ...“boring to a malodorous degree” (p. 218). Flanner's comments are particularly insightful; at this point early in the German occupation, Parisians did not see their conquerors as particularly malevolent or interesting. *Under a Darkening Sky* is replete with such observations, many of which have not been published previously.

The book is not without several shortcomings. First among these has to do with editing; there are multiple misspellings that detract from the quality of the work. Perhaps most noticeable is the misspelling of American diplomat George Kennan's surname as “Keenan” in the section on dramatic personae (p. xxiii); unfortunately, this mistake is repeated throughout the entire text. Kennan, author of the “long telegram” which served to underpin American containment policy during the Cold War, is a highly recognizable figure in American diplomatic history. In another instance (p. 17), there are two different spellings of a surname (“Hanfstaengl” and “Hangstaengl”) within a three-word space; “Putzi” Hanfstaengl, a confidante of Adolf Hitler, was half-American, attended Harvard University, and for a while served as Hitler's chief of the foreign press bureau. In another example—the Treaty of Versailles is misspelled “Treay” (p. 24). Aside from these mechanical errors, the book could benefit from a broader conclusion. The author ends with a short epilogue that includes some important insights from the aforementioned George Kennan, posted to the US Embassy in Berlin at the time. Perhaps readers would be better served by a broader commentary on the overall contribution of

American expatriates in Europe between 1939 and 1941, summarizing some of the key themes Lyman effectively explores in the core of his text. As it stands, the author's conclusion is overly concise and ends a bit abruptly.

Overall, *Under a Darkening Sky* serves as an important supplement to other works that explore the experiences of Americans in Europe during the two years prior to US entry into World War II. Lyman includes depth and commentary that most likely are not present in other histories or treatments of the period. The book's accessibility and clear narrative will appeal to the novice, while scholars of the period will appreciate the breadth it provides from the observations of the American diaspora at the time.

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