

# Promises, Promises

Nick Mamatatas

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A review of

*Promise Me You'll Shoot Yourself* by Florian Huber. Little Brown/Hachette 2019

"Follow Your Leader!" reads the joyous anti-Nazi sticker portraying Adolph Hitler blowing his brains out with a pistol. And in 1945, as the Soviet Army rolled in from the East and Allied forces held the West, thousands upon thousands of "ordinary Germans" did just that in wave of mass suicide. They turned their guns upon themselves, prepared nooses for their entire families, and gobbled up the widely available cyanide ampules distributed by Nazi Party functionaries. Historian Florian Huber finds the suicide wave fascinating, and the widespread allegiance to Hitler and the Reich inexplicable, but the resultant book, *Promise Me You'll Shoot Yourself*, falls flat—it's the German historian equivalent of the 93<sup>rd</sup> *New York Times* feature article about white Midwesterners who like Donald Trump.

Only the first half of the book focuses on the suicide wave. With a journalist's careful eye for detail and a historian's grasp of primary sources, Huber paints a harrowing picture of Demmin, a town surrounded by rivers on three sides. When the Red Army comes, the Nazis blow up the bridges as part of their retreat and leave the town to its fate. Terrified and demoralized by years of propaganda depicting the Soviets as a "Bolshevik Mongol horde" of rapists (the propaganda was two-thirds accurate) entire families liquidated themselves rather than face the rage of the Red Army. Mass militarized rape was a tool of the Soviet Union, and there was clearly no way the Nazis were going to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into any post-war order, not in Eastern Germany anyway. For many, suicide was the only rational response to the end of the history Hitler claimed for Germany, and the future he promised the nation. A democratic Germany can only be betrayed from within, an immortal Reich can only be murdered from without.

But Huber is rather too sympathetic to the plight of his grandparents' generation. He is struck "by the number of suicides involving children," but that phrase covers up the fact that the children weren't committing suicide—they were being killed by their own parents in preparation for the adult suicides. He claims that the suicides were terrorized by the Nazi propaganda regarding the viciousness of the Red Army, but it's hardly as though the Nazi media was wrong in that case. The suicides wave in areas where the US and UK were entering Germany is given rather less ink. (By all reports the Western Allies were less aggressive occupiers as they had not faced anything like the years-long Battle of Stalingrad.)

It's also necessarily unclear how many suicides there were. Fastidious Nazi record-keeping collapsed along with the Nazi government, and as Huber claims that suicide was often a way for Germans to retain some semblance of the "honor" Hitler offered them, could it not be the case that accidents, fatal illness and injury, and murder were recast as suicides by coroners and others after the fact? Huber himself offers two different numbers of the Demmin suicides.

*Promise Me You'll Shoot Yourself* is more than just a German *Wisconsin Death Trip* though, as the second half of the book is dedicated to apologia disguised as narrative journalism. Huber examines the 1920s-1930s journals and other testimonies of those "ordinary Germans" who'd kill themselves years later. Many of them were a bit skeptical of Hitler as he rose from the beer halls of Munich to supreme power, but clearly they weren't skeptical enough.

Huber's explanations never rise above the level of a high school term paper: the Germans were embittered and impoverished by their loss in the First World War and subsequent harsh treaty agreements, the Weimar Republic was an immature experiment in democracy, and hyperinflation hurt everyone. Hitler filled the void. But Hitler was not without competitors on the right and the left, so why did "ordinary Germans" suddenly flock to the man in the spring of 1933? Huber acknowledges the ideological pull of that perennial hatred and anti-Semitism, but finds Nazi Party members who privately worried in their diaries about their personal friends who happened to be Jewish. What else is new? Racists of every stripe have always made exceptions for one or two personal acquaintances, or even spouses. And under the Nazi regime, even that exception-making didn't last long: young Renate Finkh made "amends for her transgression" of patronizing a beloved neighborhood Jewish chocolatier by breaking into the shed of a Jewish neighbor and shitting on the floor. (Huber demurely describes this as having "left behind a turd.") But in what type of society is buying chocolate taboo and shitting on your uninvolved neighbor's floor a means of making amends? An utterly insane one, but Nazism was a collective insanity entered willingly, even happily, by millions of middle-class ordinary Germans. Two generations later, the ordinary Germans that made *Promise Me You'll Shoot Yourself* a best-seller still seem unwilling to live up to the fact that fascism is always an excuse for mass death, whether murder or suicide.

Nick Mamatas is the author of several novels, including *Move Under Ground* and *The Second Shooter*, and short fiction in *Best American Mystery Stories* and *Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy*. His essays and reportage have appeared in *The Smart Set*, *Clamor*, *In These Times*, *Village Voice*, and many other places.

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