

A Startling New Picture Of German Occupation

By CARTER BROOKE JONES

By now we've had more than a few books of the late war from the German point of view, especially novels depicting Germans as their nation faced defeat. We've had a number of novels, as well as nonfiction books, describing phases of the occupation. But this week we have what might be described as a novel that attempts a definitive (if a novel can be definitive) account of Germany in her early years as a conquered country. This is:

OFF LIMITS, by Hans Habe, translated from the German by Ewald Osers (Frederick Fell; \$4.95).

This novel, tremendous in length, with a score of important characters, is, first of all, a remarkable feat of writing and literary co-ordination.

The impressions it conveys are diverse and complex, often confusing and conflicting. But perhaps these turbulent, paradoxical effects are the very essence of how Germany appeared to an informed observer between 1945 and 1948.

Changing Impression

The first impression I got led inevitably, to anger, because the author depicts some deplorable members of the American military occupation—a sadistic pervert of an MP major who came from the New York police department, and two or three other officers who were either venal or stupid or both. Not that there could not be such soldiers among so many, but because of the emphasis on these men, I took it the writer was anti-American, perhaps a German of the old school.

Later I got a different impression. There was an American colonel who was a man of integrity and good will, a major who had been brought up in Germany, was Jewish and naturally had no sympathy for the Nazi regime. The fact that the major's brother, a captain,

was crooked and eventually went over to the Russians does not offset the fine character of his brother and the colonel and of other Americans who treated the German humanely and wanted to heal the wounds of war.

An Accusation

And yet the net effect of the narrative is to accuse the American occupation of ineptness and lack of understanding, of, at worst, hypocrisy, profiteering and bullying.

The conquerors "had made laws for themselves which they could not keep or which they would not keep. . . . They resorted to secrecy. They spoke to Germans, they did business with them, and they slept with the women. . . ."

The Nurnberg war-guilt trials in which, of course, America was joined by her allies, was, as the author saw it, an absurdity, a gesture to cause laughter in Valhalla. "The lunatic idea of collective guilt had turned the stars of the Nurnberg show into extras. Judges, prosecutors, MPs and journalists seemed like conspirators, and the courtesy with which the other judges treated their Soviet colleagues deceived no one about the underlying clashes. It was hardly surprising in the circumstances that the trial dragged on lamely and hopelessly." But, then, there are more than a few Americans who have a similar idea of Nurnberg.

Simply Cleverer

The venal American captain once remarked to his bewildered brother, the major: "Our fellow countrymen are letting the Germans twist them around their fingers. It isn't all corruption. The fact is simply that a German street girl is cleverer than an American colonel."

Is the book, then, written in praise of Hitler, or of his grandiose dreams of conquest? By no means. The most sympathetic German characters are a doctor who did what he could to help victims of Nazi oppression; a colonel who took part in the thwarted plot on Hitler's life, and the wife of a Nazi governor of France, a woman who was so disillusioned she enabled some persons slated for execution or deportation to escape.

"Off Limits" has a compassion for the German people, and the author is at pains to explain that there is no simple answer to the questions Americans were constantly asking: "Why didn't you resist the Nazis, why didn't you revolt?"

Author's Background

I assumed that Mr. Habe was a German, probably a war veteran, and I conceded his right to present the picture as it looked to the conquered. Then, suspicious of his intimate knowledge of the American military setup, I looked in back of the book and saw that he was born in Budapest, brought up in Vienna and became at 21 the youngest editor of a Vienna newspaper. He was blacklisted by the Nazis and fled to Geneva, from which point he was a roving correspondent for a Prague paper. In 1939 he enlisted in the French Army. He was captured and escaped. In 1940 he came to America. He enlisted in the United States Army as a private, went through the Italian campaign, rose to major and received seven decorations. In the occupation of Germany he directed the re-establishment of German newspapers.

His novel, for all its inordinate length and its de-

scription of Americans as fumbling conquerors who delayed rather than facilitated the democratization of Germany, is, I think, worth reading. We see Germany rising from her ruins and moving in diverse directions, animated by conflicting aims—the militarists trying to rebuild their rule; the dealers in black markets; the average people frantic merely for food, clothing, shelter. However accurate Mr. Habe's panorama may be, no one has drawn this scene so thoroughly.

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OFF LIMITS (Frederick Fell) by Hans Habe, author of the wartime best-seller "A Thousand Shall Fall," is a novel of the American occupation of Germany from 1945-1951.

The story itself—and a brutal story it is—is only a device to air the splenetic opinions of Habe. There are no honorable Americans in **OFF LIMITS**; conversely, there are no dishonorable Germans. But this is tame stuff in comparison with Habe's running diatribe on United States Occupation policy. His thesis is that the United States, in treating the German people as a defeated people, erred; the United States should have, instead, treated them as a nation

wronged and misguided. From then on, anything goes.

Some of the author's comments, save to the most rabid anti-American, seem to be willfully puerile and conceived in spite. Habe, who during World War II served in the American Army as a major, lived in Washington for several years, where he was also known as Baron de Bekessy.

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