

*A Stranger in My Own Country: the 1944 Prison Diary*  
by Hans Fallada, translated by Allan Blunden (Eds. Jenny  
Williams and Sabine Lange)

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Hans Fallada (born Rudolf Wilhelm Friedrich Ditzen on the 21st July 1893) was the author of a number of successful German fictional works from the earlier decades of the twentieth century. His published diary, however, was written illicitly, and therefore somewhat frenetically, in a prison cell in an asylum for the ‘mentally ill’ in Strelitz, northern Germany between the 23rd September and the 7th October 1944. He was incarcerated for a three month period of ‘observation’ after having fired a pistol at his former first wife (Anna ‘Suse’ Ditzen) whilst heavily under the influence of alcohol; at the time of the incident they were divorced but still lived at the same property and both parties were adamant that there was no actual murderous intent. This event, interestingly enough, however, does not make it into the diary text.

It forms a fascinating record of his memories of life in the first part of the twentieth century in Germany, principally under the National Socialist Regime from 1933, as well as his opinions of the same. It was for the author a mechanism of escapism from his current circumstances. This was not the first time he had been incarcerated; nor was it the first time he had taken to writing a journal as a mechanism for mentally coping – this was in 1924 in Greifswald (p.vii). He had already been previously arrested in 1933, and detained in repugnant conditions, and had witnessed at first hand the Nazi disdain of certain human’s rights. After having been permanently under the eyes of his guards and fellow prisoners, on the 8th October 1944 Fallada was given a day’s leave to go home and smuggled the manuscript, written in a form of code, out with him.

Much is made by the publishers of the comment Fallada makes (p.186), that his was an account of the life of ordinary people. As a celebrated author living in a certain manner (an ‘inward emigrant’ who had chosen to stay in Germany rather than go into voluntary exile

from the Third Reich), perhaps this is slightly overblown. Of note, however, is that much that he writes of is of the ordinary people; the schoolmasters, local Sturmabteilung (SA) men, an elderly couple, party and local officials and this is important, for where much is written and recorded of those who were in high places, less is known of these people under the Nazis. But for this volume, these people would be lost to history. This is neither about high-profile Nazis nor high-profile resisters; rather it is about those people who existed by doing only so much as was necessary to go unnoticed by the police or Wehrmacht. Fallada writes about the constant threat of being denounced by ordinary people, the threats to his profession and the activities of many of his colleagues. Much is revealed through the relation of vivid episodes about the toxic and increasingly intrusive nature of the rule of the Nazi state as it occurred on a day-to-day basis. Many otherwise non-political people are reported as being particularly liberally pernicious in their activities, whilst Fallada frequently refers to himself as being apolitical.

Fallada's writing style is perhaps somewhat erratic. Sometimes it flows, so that the text can be read, perhaps unsurprisingly given the nature of the author's milieu, like a novel. Elsewhere, however, there are periods of text which ramble on at length, somewhat tediously. It is perhaps best expressed as being a two-paced piece of work. Perhaps here, the editors could have helped the reader by breaking up the longer sections more, but this is a minor quibble. Being made up of reminiscences running from January 1933, with the burning of the Reichstag and the coming of Hitler to power, to his present incarceration, perhaps such random and rambling passages are not unsurprising

In part, this is a powerful historical document, in part a literary memoir, in part a political testament, in which much is revealed also about Fallada's often flawed, troubled character. Clearly he was possessed of a complicated personality. Known to have suffered from bouts of alcoholism, Fallada is revealed in his narrative to be an individual who struggles with authority, but at the same time was compromised, for example by writing the film *Iron Gustav* for Josef Goebbels and using a certificate signed by him to gain exemption from service in the Wehrmacht. At the same time, he rails against those who left Germany for voluntary exile, while people like him stayed in the country to fight the regime. Furthermore, whilst not being an exponent of the antisemitism of the Nazi Party, many of the statements that he writes about Jewish people he has known are at best negative (indeed, they were toned down for publication purposes), and perhaps representative of the general mood of the period in many German households. Many of his written statements and activities are without doubt

uncompromising, even outspoken. In what he writes, rather daringly or naively given his circumstances, he doesn't hold back when writing about the Hitler state. Also present are his innermost thoughts on his life as a father, husband and author. Perhaps his activities are best explained by the fact that he did as much as he needed to survive. Such insight into the psychological make-up of Fallada is important for understanding the author of reflective novels.

Many unusual things happened to Hans Fallada in his relatively short life (he died in 1947). This volume provides a fascinating, poignant record of some of the more significant of them, written at a time and in circumstances, as he himself admits, where discovery could result in extremely serious measures being taken against him and his family, even death. In addition to the well-executed translation, the editors provide valuable commentary and additional information through the media of an introduction, afterword chapter and note on the manuscript and its production – written on 92 pieces of paper provided to him in prison on the pretext of writing a children's novel. Examples of these form the endpapers of this edition. First published in German in 2009, this first English translation is a welcome addition to the existing literature on the German home front in the Second World War, as well as an important source for understanding the life and writings of this important German writer.