special recognition being given to veterans from the Korean and Vietnam wars. The keynote speaker was Hartman Rector Jr., a Seventy emeritus. He expresses a hint of his almost “Catch-22” conversion story during the Korean War in these words: “They’re trying to kill me out there. And if they do, I’ll bear testi-
mony against you at the last day that you kept me out of the Church!” (142) Then he records a vision he had as a pilot bombing North Korean railroads. But I’ll let you read that story.

Opening the Fiery Portals: World War II and the Saints

Donald Q. Cannon and Brent L. Top, eds., Regional Studies in Latter-day Saints Church History. Vol. 4: Europe (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, Department of Church History and Doctrine, 2003), 207 pp., index, $19.95.

Reviewed by John Sillito, professor of libraries, Weber State University, Ogden, Utah

Not long after learning of the cancer that would ultimately take his life, my father faced a difficult course of experimental radiation and chemotherapy. As I drove him to the hospital to take his first treatment, I asked him if he was frightened. “Yes,” he admitted, “and I have only been this scared once before in my life—June 6, 1944.” D-Day in Eu-

rope.

If I hadn’t known it before, our conversation confirmed that, like the Vietnam War for my generation or the Great Depression for my grandparents, World War II was the defining moment for my parents’ generation. Over the years we have called it the “Good War” and characterized those who fought it and defeated Fascism as the “Greatest Generation.” Without the efforts of that generation, no doubt the world would be a far different and much worse place. Yet despite our hopes that the world would emerge from that terrible war free of conflict, we still know all too well the suffering and costs in human life, resources, and psychic trauma that war brings.

For Latter-day Saints, World War II presented a unique set of challenges. After a century of missionary efforts in Europe, it was inevitable that Mormons would be involved on both sides of that conflict as civilians and combatants, and would feel, especially in Germany, but elsewhere as well, the horror of war personally.

The four essays dealing with World War II in this volume of Regional Studies in Latter-day Saints Church History, edited by Donald Q. Cannon and Brent L. Top, help us better understand those realities and the impact they had on the people involved. The topic makes this volume especially appropriate for review in this is-
sue of Dialogue. In addition, Cannon and Top have included in this eclectic volume excellent studies of the Mor-
mon Tabernacle Choir’s European tours; missionary work in difficult fields like Iceland, Estonia, and France; and temple building in Germany and Switzerland. Scholars and general readers alike will gain from these other essays as well.

Drawing on the letters her father wrote while serving a 1935–38 mission in Germany, Jessie L. Embry explores an important question: was Adolf Hitler a “deliverer or oppressor”? In the 1930s, Mormons, both leaders and rank-and-file members, held differing views. While Bertis Embry had a negative view of Hitler, saying he was against religion and had introduced “a day of the anti-Christ” in Germany, Jessie Embry found that some missionaries had a more favorable impression. They pointed to Hitler’s oratorical skills, commitment to order and efficiency, efforts at political stability, and support for marriage, motherhood, and the family. He even emphasized genealogy, which seemed to parallel Mormon concerns, although they seemed unaware that it was used for the sinister purpose of identifying those of Jewish descent. Other missionaries, however, recognized the reality of the Nazi regime noting the arrests, suppression of free speech, and general fear that permeated German society. As Embry’s father expressed it, the German people were held down “by an iron hand” (56) and hesitated even to take a tract from missionaries. As much as he loved the German people, he anticipated returning to his homeland where people “don’t have to be scared to death all the time” (56).

Still, missionaries and Church officials, both locally and from Utah, tried to make the best of a difficult situation. Seeing the “troubled times” as conducive to spreading the gospel, General Authorities like John A. Widtsoe and Richard R. Lyman, and even President Heber J. Grant urged missionaries to avoid politics in favor of purely religious discussions.

Clearly, as Jessie Embry realizes, our more “complete picture of history” validates those missionaries who saw Hitler negatively, even though for “those missionaries who grew to love the German people and wanted to share the gospel with them,” tolerating Hitler may have “seemed the best course of action at the time” (60). Such tolerance may have been a useful policy for those American missionaries; but as war loomed on the horizon, they were evacuated to the States, while local Latter-day Saints were left to deal with the reality of war.

David Boone explores the story of these historic evacuations. During 1938 and 1939, missionaries were first removed from Germany, but over time they also left other places in Europe and Scandinavia. Ironically, by the time of Pearl Harbor, the only missionaries laboring outside of the continental United States were in Hawaii.

Two other important topics are explored. Robert Freeman examines the experiences of German Saints during the war, while Dennis Wright dis-
cusses the role played by LDS service-
men on D-Day.

As Freeman notes, when war
broke out in Europe in 1939, the
Church "had a strong presence in Ger-
many" (89), ranking third in total mem-
bership behind the United States and
Canada. As missionaries were evacu-
ated, local leaders confronted a situa-
tion where the Church's presence was
problematic. Finding it difficult to
communicate and facing suspicion, in-
digenous leaders balanced loyalty to
country and church. Such a balancing
act was not without irony. In Hamburg,
for example, local German Saints com-
memorated the 100th anniversary of
the founding of the Relief Society, an
event canceled in the United States be-
cause of wartime restrictions. A month
earlier three brave young Latter-day
Saints—Helmut Huebner, Karl-Heinz
Schnibbe, and Rudi Wobbe—were ar-
rested by the authorities for distribut-
ing anti-Nazi propaganda. Eventually
Huebner became a martyr for freedom,
beheaded in prison. Schnibbe and
Wobbe served lengthy prison sen-
tences. Simultaneously, Salomon
Schwartz, a local Jewish convert, was
sent to a concentration camp, while his
branch leaders posted a sign over the
branch building proclaiming, "Jews are
not allowed" (91). Such signs were
found throughout the land, but the
ironic combination demonstrates some
of the difficulties of wartime life.

Even more problematic, hundreds
of German Saints "wore the uniform of
the Third Reich during the war" (91).
Nearly five hundred were killed; many
more were wounded. Civilians also
faced privation and death daily as well.
More than one hundred Church
members died, including mission and
district presidents; many were left un-
accounted for, while even more be-
came homeless. The German Saints,
both combatants and civilians alike,
reached out to each other, relied on
their faith, and hoped for a better day.
And like their fellow Mormons in Eu-
rope and North and South America,
their lives were never the same again.

The lives of those young Lat-
ter-day Saints who found themselves at
D-Day were never the same either. As
Dennis Wright chronicles, they were
there as soldiers, sailors, and airmen.
Some landed on the beaches, while
others flew support in the skies above.
They witnessed death, acts of unself-
ish heroism, even small acts of kind-
ness from local civilians. Many evaded
capture; others did not and spent
months in German prison camps.
More troubling, perhaps, young Ger-
man Latter-day Saint men faced young
American Mormons on the field of
battle. Each was motivated by patrio-
tism and love of homeland. Would
loyalty lead a German Saint to kill an
American or vice versa? Probably.

As Wright notes, the invasion was
chronicled in the Deseret News, which
reported that the news was received
calmly: There were "no noisy recep-
tions in Salt Lake" (125). The paper in-
cluded a photo of Mrs. Samuel W.
Jones, reading her scriptures, under
"three stars in her window indicating
the number of her sons serving in the
military.” One son, Private Sherwood Jones, had participated in the invasion. His mother said, “I do not care to read the headlines today. . . . I pray for the safety of my son, but that is not all I want. I want him, under any test, to be true and truly brave. Also I want him to pray” (125). The paper also contained the comments of one observer that, while D-Day represented the beginning of the final stage of a long and terrible war, for the time being “let’s temper our enthusiasm with caution” (125). Wright’s article captures and preserves the recollections of a score of Latter-day Saint veterans of that decisive day in June 1944, and our understanding of that event is richer for it.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can fault those missionaries who did not recognize the evil of the Nazi ideology and the personal hold Hitler had over the populace. Such a judgement would be somewhat unfair, since we would be asking them to be more prescient in their analysis at age nineteen or twenty than much older individuals, including British Prime Minster Neville Chamberlain and aviator Charles Lindbergh, who also believed the world could work with “Herr Hitler.” Today we celebrate the martyrdom of Huebner and the courage of Wobbe and Schnibbe. But the measure of respect we now have for their action developed only after years of controversy.

War, the poet William Stafford observed, despite our views to the contrary, really produces two losers. Even in victory, even in a cause as noble as defeating Fascism, the world is never the same. The suffering lasts for generations. Perhaps Willy Deters, a district president in Germany, said it best in journal entries toward the end of the war. Faced with death, destruction, and despair he notes: “Hell has opened its fiery portals. . . . No rest can be found at night. . . . Reasoning now has changed to madness” (96–97). It is a sobering thought worth considering at this time of history as well.
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