Two Dubious Third Reich Diaries

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DIARIES justly rank among the most valuable sources for historians. Committed to paper soon after the events and thoughts they record, diaries are free of the knowledge about what occurs afterward or only later takes on significance that adulterate memoirs and render them far more problematic for historians. It is therefore worthy of a cautionary note when historians confuse examples of the two genres. That has frequently occurred in the case of Bella Fromm's *Blood and Banquets: A Berlin Social Diary*. Published nearly sixty years ago in the form of a diary, it has been used as such in numerous historical studies of the Third Reich. A more recent book that poses problems similar to Fromm's and that has also been used by historians as a source for the Nazi period, is *The Berlin Diaries, 1940–1945*, attributed posthumously to Marie "Missie" Vassiltchikov.

Fromm, who died in 1972, initially published her work in New York and London in 1942, and it has been reissued in several editions, including a German translation that appeared in 1993. Before immigrating to the United States in 1938, Fromm had been a fashion and society columnist for Berlin magazines and newspapers. Her career flourished during the Weimar Republic, when foreign embassies and prominent figures in the German government sought her attention in order to gain press coverage for the formal receptions and dinners that constituted the official social life of the capital. It obviously became de rigueur for hosts to arrange for reports on such gatherings in her column in the respectable, liberal *Vossische Zeitung*. Fromm therefore received invitations to many such events, as is attested by the facsimiles on the overleaf of the cover of the book's first edition as well as by photographs therein. On other occasions she was apparently provided by hosts with invitation lists or informed afterward about who had attended and, in some instances, who had been seated next to whom. Her columns consisted largely of name-dropping and presumably commanded close attention from the publicity-seeking circles that comprised the cast of characters whose after-hours activities she chronicled. Despite being a "non-Aryan" by Nazi standards, Fromm was able to continue her column well into the Third Reich.

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Blood and Banquets has been accepted at face value by numerous scholars, who have drawn information and verbatim quotations from its gossip-filled, dated entries. There are, however, abundant grounds to doubt the claim, in the 'Author's Note' that the "parts of my Diary which are contained in this book stand just as they were originally written," aside from the translation into English and the insertion of "background information" unfamiliar to the American public. This doubt must grow more substantial upon scrutiny of Fromm's private papers, now located in the library of Boston University. This sizeable collection comprises many items Fromm brought with her to the U.S., including albums containing an extensive collection of clippings of her Berlin society columns. Also among her papers is a fragmentary manuscript of what appears to have been an abortive attempt at a German-language memoir of her years in Berlin. There is, however, no trace of a diary written in Germany.

The bulk of the manuscript portion of Fromm's papers consists of typed German-language drafts, dated in diary form, describing events in Berlin prior to her emigration. These drafts were, however, typed in America, not in Germany. The typewriter that was used lacked German diacritical marks and the paper is of standard American 8 1/2–by-11–inches, with the watermark "Atlantic Bond 20." The typed drafts fall into two categories, one — apparently a preliminary effort — lacks sequential numbering; the other is numbered. The two sets of drafts frequently contain significantly varying entries for the same dates or disparate dates for entries covering the same events. Some drafts include handwritten insertions and emendations in pencil. Still other passages were added by hand on lined stenographic pads of standard American format, the sheets of which are interspersed among the typed drafts. The contents of many of the dated draft entries correspond closely to those of clippings of Fromm's society columns in her albums. The names of those present at the social events described in the book frequently replicate those so identified in the clippings. In some instances, a clipping of one of Fromm's columns is attached directly to a page of typed draft dealing with the event described in the column.

Some of the drafts contain notations indicating reliance, for background information and chronology, on back issues of Berlin newspapers that would have been available in America in the early 1940s. Other background material could have been obtained from books on recent events in Germany that had been published in the U.S. by then. Reliance on these publications presumably explains a revealing factual error in *Blood and Banquets*. In the entry for 29 January 1932, mention is made of Hitler's speech to the Düsseldorf Industry Club. "What induced him," Fromm wonders there, "to choose January 27th, ex-Kaiser Wilhelm's birthday, for the spectacle, God knows." Anyone who had read the newspapers of that week would, however, have known that Hitler's speech had taken place not on the 27th, but a day earlier. Only several months

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later, when the Nazis published the text of the speech, was it erroneously dated as the 27th. That mistake was then consistently repeated in books in print in the U.S. in 1942, including the ghostwritten memoir of the industrialist who arranged for Hitler's speech, which had been published the previous year.[1]

Fromm's papers contain no German-language manuscript corresponding to her book's contents and no English-language manuscript, so that crucial stages in the composition of *Blood and Banquets* cannot be reconstructed.[2] But a comparison of the two typed drafts with the text of the book reveals that the latter differs from the former in many respects. Much vivid detail, including verbatim quotations attributed to prominent persons, was added at some point prior to publication. Who was responsible for these alterations remains unclear. No translator is identified in the book, although Fromm stated in the "Author's Note" that she had "helped to translate" her diary entries. The possibility that a translator, or a ghostwriter, had a hand in formulating the final version thus remains open.

In view of the available evidence, it seems clear that *Blood and Banquets* was based on words committed to paper not in Berlin at the times of its dated entries but instead considerably later and in America. Fromm's claims to the contrary notwithstanding, the book is thus not a diary. It is rather a memoir and thus must be approached by historians with the caution appropriate for that much less valuable category of sources.

With the question of authenticity resolved, there remains the problem of the reliability of *Blood and Banquets*. As is revealed by entries reporting first-hand observations of Joseph Goebbels by Fromm, there are grounds for grave doubts in this regard. At least one such entry locates Goebbels on the day in question at a place where his presence was disclosed in a book available in the U.S. in 1942: a published version of his own diaries for 1932 and 1933 — which has itself since been shown to have been considerably "doctored."[3] Some significant discrepancies become apparent, however, when other reports on his whereabouts in the Fromm book are compared with entries in the subsequently published, more authentic versions of Goebbels' diaries, which were unavailable to her. For example, the *Blood and Banquets* entry for 7 June 1936 describes in vivid detail rowdy behavior on Goebbels's part — complete with verbatim quotations — at a "gala soirée" hosted by the Italian ambassador. The propaganda minister's now available diary places him, however, at home that

1. Cf. Fritz Thyssen, *I Paid Hitler* (New York, 1941), 100. On the origins of this book, see my article, "Fritz Thyssen und das Buch 'I Paid Hitler'," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 19 (1971): 225–44.

2. In the absence of a German-language manuscript of Fromm's book, the editor of the German version published a translation of the English text of the book: "Nachwort" by Thomas Karlauf to Bella Fromm, *Als Hitler mir die Hand küsste* (Berlin, 1993), 312.

3. Cf. Goebbels, *Vom Kaiserhof zur Reichskanzlei* (Munich, 1934),153f., and *Blood and Banquets*, 55.

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evening, reading.[4] Nor could Fromm have observed Goebbels's gesticulations while attending a Reichstag speech by him on 10 February 1931, as recorded in her book's entry for that date, since the stenographic proceedings reveal that he did not address the parliament that day or at any time that week.

In the absence of other independent evidence, most entries in the Fromm book cannot be so conclusively discredited, but even where this is the case, some entries contain accounts of such implausibility as to awaken grave skepticism about their veracity. Such is the case with the numerous entries in which prominent persons are depicted as unburdening themselves to Fromm on sensitive matters. Thus, on 12 February 1930, the president of the Reichsbank, Hjalmar Schacht, is quoted as having said to Fromm, "Why not give the National Socialists a break? They seem pretty smart to me." At that time, however, the Nazi Party was still only an insignificant fringe phenomenon in national politics. Its spokesmen had, moreover, recently denounced Schacht, who developed an interest in the Nazis only after he had left the Reichsbank in March 1930 and they had emerged as a significant political factor in the national election of September 1930.[5] Similarly improbable is an entry in *Blood and Banquets* for 5 May 1933, which depicts a grandson of the former kaiser, Prince Wilhelm, confiding to Fromm that day his intention to defy both his father and his grandfather by entering into a morganatic marriage. The entry of 12 October 1933 quotes the recently arrived American Ambassador, William E. Dodd (who died in 1940, prior to the publication of *Blood and Banquets*), as having denounced the government to which he was accredited as "a horde of criminals and cowards" — this in the presence of Fromm, a German society columnist.[6]

Particularly implausible are the entries in *Blood and Banquets* that portray a close personal relationship between Fromm and Hitler's predecessor as Reich Chancellor, General Kurt von Schleicher. According to her book, Fromm crossed paths with Schleicher, whom she had met years earlier at a reception at the Argentine Embassy, at a racetrack on 6 June 1932, shortly after his appointment as Defense Minister. "He took me by the arm," the entry for that day reads, "impatient for my congratulations and asserted his immutable friendship for me." Schleicher thereupon reportedly confided in Fromm: "We are going to remain friends forever," urging her to come and see him whenever she wished. "You have been my faithful comrade all these years. My office has orders to admit you at any time without previous appointment," Schleicher

4. Elke Fröhlich, ed., *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels: Sämtliche Fragmente* (Munich, 1987ff.), Teil 1, Band 2, 621f.

5. See my *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler* (New York, 1985), 144f.

6. A number of the *Blood and Banquets* entries in which Dodd figures echo entries for the same periods in William E. Dodd, Jr., and Martha Dodd, eds., *Ambassador Dodd's Diary* (New York, 1941); see, for examples, pp. 120, 128, 131, 156, 260.

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allegedly instructed her. Subsequent entries depict first-name friendships between Fromm and both Schleicher and his aristocratic wife, as well as unannounced visits by Fromm to their residence and to his office during Schleicher's chancellorship. According to the entry for 28 December 1932, Fromm was among twelve guests partaking that evening of an "intimate dinner" at the chancellor's home at which the political situation was discussed. On that occasion Schleicher, alone with Fromm in his study after dinner, is quoted as saying to her: "In confidence, Bella, I think a lot of Gregor Strasser. National Socialist, but far over on the Leftist side of it. Maybe, if I had him in the cabinet . . ." (ellipsis in *Blood and Banquets*). A first-name relationship — for upper-class Germans of that time a near-ceremonial matter — between Kurt von Schleicher and a society columnist he had met at a diplomatic reception is, to say the least, lacking in plausibility. Even more so is the claim that, as chancellor, Schleicher shared his political thoughts with Bella Fromm at a time when he was maintaining a sphinx-like silence in public about his strategy for dealing with his highly precarious situation. By the time *Blood and Banquets* appeared, there was — as Fromm well knew — no danger of a challenge by the Schleichers to her book's contents, both having been murdered by Nazi thugs in June 1934.[7]

Only slightly less implausible than the entries about Schleicher are those relating personal encounters between Fromm and Adolf Hitler. It is, of course, not wholly inconceivable that while surrounded by some five hundred dignitaries at a reception on the evening of 29 March 1933, recently-appointed Chancellor Hitler might have sought out an unaccompanied and — judging from the photographs in the first edition of the book — less-than-glamorous woman about whom he knew nothing. Or that Hitler might have "cooed" to her: "May I have the pleasure of bidding you good evening *gnädige Frau*?" Or that he might have kissed her hand, and — after such conversational gambits as "Are you having a good time?" and "You enjoy being here?" — again kissed her hand with the parting words: "Hope to see you again soon." But neither is there any way to corroborate this colorful account, which considerably enlivens the book.

To sum up, *Blood and Banquets*, a memoir about events in Germany that was composed in America years later in demonstrably inventive fashion, possibly in part by persons other than the author, should be regarded by historians with skepticism. Except in instances where its passages can be corroborated by

7. The only trace of a possible connection with Schleicher in Fromm's papers aside from the draft "diary" entries is a glossy photocopy of a one-sentence handwritten form letter signed by him, dated 10 February 1933, acknowledging receipt of expressions of sympathy following his resignation as Chancellor and Defense Minister. It specifies no addressee and was very likely sent to anyone who had written to him. It is not a message to a first-name friend, and there is no indication that it was sent directly to Fromm.

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authentic and reliable sources, it has little, if any, value as a historical source. This is regrettable, since Bella Fromm was a bystander to some important events and since parts of what appears in print in her book may accurately record what she remembered about persons who played roles in those events. Unfortunately, however, in most instances there is no way to distinguish between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* in *Blood and Banquets*.

The Berlin Diaries, 1940–1945, attributed to Marie "Missie" Vassiltchikov after her death by her brother George, who published the book in London in 1985, also poses problems for the historian. Now translated into several languages, including Russian, scholars have also used it as an authentic diary. A member of an aristocratic Russian family exiled since the Bolshevik takeover, Marie Vassiltchikov was employed as a *Sachbearbeiterin* in the Kulturpolitischen Abteilung of the German Foreign Ministry from January 1941 until November 1944.[8] The book begins with her arrival in Berlin after fleeing Lithuania, where her family had lived until the Soviet occupation in the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement, and it closes with September 1945. Its dated entries record relationships and experiences shared with coworkers in the Foreign Ministry and with acquaintances in the German capital. An attractive, single young woman of noble ancestry, she enjoyed — as is attested by photographs in the book — access to aristocratic circles in Berlin, including some members of the ill-fated conspiracy to kill Hitler. Far more so than Bella Fromm, Marie Vassiltchikov was thus in a position to have knowledge of great events.

The Vassiltchikov book makes lively, eminently quotable reading. But its authenticity as a diary remains in question because of the cloudy provenance of the contents. None of the publishers of *The Berlin Diary* had access to a manuscript diary, having relied instead on a typescript provided by George Vassiltchikov. Although his sister was, from all indications, in contact with the sort of people who populate its pages, there are prima facie grounds for doubts about the feasibility of keeping a diary in wartime Germany that recorded numerous conversations of highly subversive nature with prominent anti-Nazis, whose hostile remarks about the regime are frequently quoted verbatim. If such written material had fallen into the hands of someone loyal to the regime, the consequences would have been swift and dire for all concerned, beginning with Marie Vassiltchikov herself, who was not even a German citizen. To be sure, Victor Klemperer, who had been stripped of his professorship as a "non-Aryan," kept a now famous — and authenticated — posthumously published diary throughout the Third Reich in which he regularly recorded his scorn for the regime.[9] But Klemperer lived in obscure circumstances and relied upon

8. This was confirmed in a letter to me from Dr. Maria Keipert, of the Auswärtiges Amt in Bonn, 13 November 1997.

9. *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten*, (2 *vols.*), Berlin, 1995).

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a trusted "Aryan" friend to conceal his diary entries in her home for him. Vassiltchikov, by contrast, worked in a major government agency in the capital and moved in socially prominent circles that included opponents of the regime.

In contrast to Klemperer's diary, where the problems of concealing his entries and transporting them to his friend for safekeeping are repeatedly recorded, there is curiously no mention of such matters in *The Berlin Diaries*. Those logistical problems would presumably have bulked large, however, for someone who — according to the book — repeatedly lost her housing to bombings and was forced to move from one temporary abode to another, taking with her only what she could herself carry. Passages in the book identified as having been written by Marie Vassiltchikov after the war explain that two years of her diary, covering the period July 1941 to July 1943 were missing, some parts having been destroyed by her, some having been concealed in the country home of a friend "in what is now Eastern Europe." This is followed by a note by her brother to the effect that after her death additional diary entries had been found which, together with some of Marie Vassiltchikov's letters to family members, had enabled him to reconstruct her experiences during the missing years in passages that fill twenty-two pages of the book.

Vassiltchikov's brother is the sole source of information on the form of her diary entries. According to his foreword, while his sister was working at the Foreign Ministry in Berlin she used a typewriter there to record her experiences of the previous day in English, a language she had learned as a child, as was often the case with aristocratic Russian families. She kept these typed pages, her brother reported, in a filing cabinet in the office where she worked, "hidden between sheets of official matter." At first, he added, "this was done so openly that more than once her bosses would say: 'Come on, Missie, set aside your diary and let's get a little work done!'" Her brother then went on to write that when the diary material became too bulky to conceal in the Foreign Office filing cabinet, his sister "would take it home and hide it somewhere there or, occasionally, in country homes she happened to be visiting." Following the unsuccessful attempt to kill Hitler in July 1944, he added, she began to record her entries in "a personal shorthand."

Shortly after the war, according to her brother's foreword to the book, Marie Vassiltchikov transcribed her shorthand diary entries into typescript and retyped the entries originally typed at the Foreign Ministry. She then left this "second version" untouched until 1976, when she decided to prepare for publication a "third and definitive version," which was completed only weeks before she died in London in August 1978. In that revision, George Vassiltchikov added, his sister "made a point of cutting out very little and changing nothing of the substance; any modifications were confined to language or the occasional editing of style, and the insertion of names in lieu of initials."

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According to George Vassiltchikov, who published *The Berlin Diaries*, there were thus at least three distinct versions of his sister's diary: the typed and shorthand original entries, and two postwar revisions, the second of which was published in the book. Moreover, he reported having used (to fill in gaps in the final version) some additional diary entries he discovered only after her death. Until these various manuscripts and typescripts can be scrutinized and collated by scholars, the authenticity and reliability of *The Berlin Diaries* will remain in doubt. Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that such scrutiny will soon be possible. In response to an inquiry from me, George Vassiltchikov wrote in a letter of 23 November 1997: "As for your request to see the original manuscripts, this has never been asked of us by anyone before, and were this to happen, it would hardly be fair to give preference to any one person over another. For your information, they, together with all the pertinent correspondence and documentation, are 'under lock and key' with our family. Sorry!"

Use by historians of either of the books discussed here as sources is unlikely to result in serious distortions of the past, since their contents are less than momentous. But unquestioning acceptance of them as authentic diaries and uncritical reliance on their accuracy brings into question the evidential standards of those who employ them in such fashion. The problematic aspects of the two books serve as reminders that application of the time-tested techniques of *Quellenkritik* developed by the historical profession remains the indispensable prerequisite for sound scholarship.

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