'In the Garden of Beasts,' by Erik Larson
Glenn C. Altschuler, Special to The Chronicle
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In the garden of beasts

Love, terror, and an American family in Hitler's Berlin

By Erik Larson

(Crown; 448 pages; $26)

In September 1933, soon after he became U.S. ambassador to Germany, William E. Dodd met with Minister of Foreign Affairs Konstantin Freiherr von Neurath to lodge a formal protest against assaults on American citizens by Nazi storm troopers and press for more humane treatment of German Jews. If the violence continued, Dodd warned, his country might issue a statement that would damage Germany's reputation throughout the world. "Shall we have a war?" he asked Neurath. "Never!" the foreign minister replied.

Dodd believed him - for a time. A professor of American history at the University of Chicago, a Jeffersonian Democrat and a biographer of Woodrow Wilson, he believed that the Germans had a right to self-government: "other peoples must exercise patience even when cruelties and injustices are done." Although he loathed Hitler and his gang of "criminals and cowards," he told President Franklin Roosevelt that "all liberal Germany is with us - and more than half of Germany is at heart liberal." They might well see to it that Germany came to its senses, he thought.

Long before he stepped down as ambassador in 1937, however, Dodd had concluded that the country of Goethe and Beethoven had reverted to barbarism. When he returned to the United States, he campaigned against the appeasement of the führer by European democracies, and he denounced American isolationism.

In "In the Garden of Beasts," Erik Larson uses the experiences of Dodd and his family in Germany to tell the story of Hitler's rise to power and America's response to it. The author of "The Devil in the White City," Larson prides himself, with good reason, on his "ability to mourn tragedy and at the same time appreciate its narrative power." Although "In the Garden of Beasts" traverses familiar terrain, it does, quite vividly, surveil "the breadth and depth of the landscape" created by Hitler and remind us that the world did virtually nothing as the skies darkened and the nights grew bloody.

Larson celebrates Dodd, a bit hyperbolically, as "exactly what Roosevelt had wanted, a lonesome beacon of American freedom." Ahead of his time, and well ahead of the appeasers in the State Department who dismissed him as "Ambassador Dud," ignored by the "brown-shirted brethren of blood and steel," Dodd was not the only, the most vocal or the most militant critic of Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Consigning himself to "the delicate work of watching and carefully doing nothing," Dodd expressed disapproval of the "New Germany" mainly through historical parables about despotic regimes and a refusal to attend Nazi Party gatherings. He did not advocate - and may not have supported - forcible intervention, which, in any event, was a political nonstarter in the United States. But he advanced no policy alternative and did not resign to protest the passivity of the administration.

Even more puzzling is Larson's characterization of Martha, Dodd's daughter, who gets too much attention in this book, as "a woman of principle." Martha was, in reality, what a Soviet intelligence officer said she was: a shallow, "sexually decayed woman ready to sleep with any handsome man." Entranced by Nazi Germany during her affair with Rudolf Diels, the first chief of the Gestapo, she transferred her allegiance to the Soviet Union when she attached herself to Boris Winogradov, a Soviet spy stationed in Berlin.

Larson is at his best, it seems to me, when he sets the Dodds in the garden of beasts as America's everyman and everywoman, witnesses to deportations, putsches, random and revenge killings. As time passed, he writes, an "amorphous anxiety" suffused their lives, and the ambassador began to suffer from headaches and bouts of digestive distress. Family members spoke with care even in casual settings, becoming adept at der deutsche Blick (the German glance) - a quick look in all directions to see who was standing or sitting nearby. They distrusted their butler, and suspected, after returning from vacations, that listening devices had been installed in their apartment. They were appalled when, after hundreds of "enemies of the State" were murdered during "The Night of the Long Knives" in 1934, Hitler declared that he would order anyone conducting secret meetings shot, even if the only subjects discussed were the weather and old coins - and his popularity skyrocketed.
After Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, Dodd wrote to Roosevelt that the war could have been avoided if the Allies had acted in concert to stop Hitler. He was right, of course. Nonetheless, an atmosphere of fatalism permeates "In the Garden of Beasts." The story of Hitler's consolidation of power, Larson acknowledges, infiltrated his "own soul" and deepened his "spiritual malaise." Does he believe, one wonders, that we can agree on how to rid our garden of beasts only in hindsight?

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