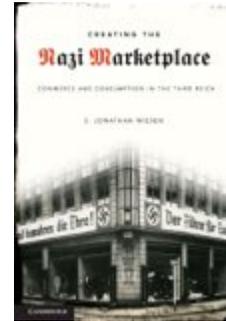


S. Jonathan Wiesen. *Creating the Nazi Marketplace: Commerce and Consumption in the Third Reich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 288 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-76253-3; \$26.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-74636-6.

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## Case Studies of the Third Reich's Consumer Culture

The study of the social, economic, and business history of the Third Reich has been in vogue for the last two decades. Apart from the “Aryanization,” which mainly affected retail trade and consumer goods industries, economic and business historians have largely focused on the armaments and autarky industries, that is, big industry. However, the debates about (big) business in the Third Reich have also included discussion about the standard of living of the “ordinary German.” A clear conclusion has not been drawn regarding material conditions, but the majority of the participants argue that the Third Reich was a “failed consumer society.” The prewar per capita income barely reached the Weimar levels, while the quality of many consumer goods fell sharply because of import restrictions and ersatz products. During the war, per capita civilian consumption declined—after one year of war by 11 percent! These findings stand in stark contrast to the observation of overwhelming support for the regime among the German population, which was real and not simply the matter of censorship and manipulation.

S. Jonathan Wiesen’s starting point is the realization that a discussion of the material conditions must be supplemented by the cultural dimension of the marketplace. The Nazi marketplace has to be understood as an explanatory model that is characterized by bourgeois ideals, such as commitment, effort, and competition, but perverted by ethnic (“völkisch”), that is, racist content. The business conduct of the Weimar years was not sim-

ply superseded by “National Socialist” business ethics as had been claimed in soapbox speeches by even liberal businessmen. Instead, Wiesen claims that “at a moment when the liberal order was on the defensive—associated as it was with financial speculation, greed, and the horrors of the global economic crisis—the Nazis revived its key features and gave them a racial imprimatur” (p. 62). In addition, the aims of private business and of the regime often aligned. But even in those cases where this was not true, information asymmetries between market professionals and the authorities opened up room for maneuvering as complete control of the marketplace was impossible to achieve. The author’s documentary evidence is based primarily on three case studies that try to approach the problem from different angles. Market research and consumerist values are scrutinized by a study of the Society for Consumer Research, which was founded shortly after the Nazi’s accession to power; advertising strategies are exemplified by the firm Kaffee HAG and its director Ludwig Roselius; and, finally, insight on business leaders’ attitudes is given by a study of the German Rotary Clubs.

Wiesen’s argumentation focuses on the idea that despite censorship and suppression the Nazis took the “consumer” seriously as “a new political and economic force” (p. 37). Businessmen like Roselius realized the potential of Nazi propaganda methods for selling their products and adapted to the Nazi marketplace. Before the First World War, Roselius, the heir of a coffee import

house, had invented a procedure for the decaffeination of coffee. He founded the coffee roasting house Kaffee HAG and began to market his caffeine-free coffee, a cocoa drink, and a decaffeinated soda as contributing to individual (and public) health. Roselius, an early marketing visionary and a stout nationalist already before the Nazis had come to power, managed to market his products as if his business goals overlapped the National Socialist aims of promoting nutrition and health. By the middle of the 1930s, Roselius had built a company that, according to Wiesen, “embodies all the elements of the Nazi marketplace. It protected its own business, but it also sustained the ideals of the Volksgemeinschaft. It built a visual world of products that nurtured high-functioning social elites and consuming masses and also took advantage of publicity methods that the Nazis themselves could support” (p. 115). However, this strategy did not help Roselius very much as his business came quickly into conflict with other, more important goals of the regime. Coffee was no strategic import good and so advertising of Kaffee HAG had to be stopped in 1938, and by the end of the next year the company even had to cease producing its decaffeinated coffee altogether. The reign of the ersatz products, in this case malt, had run down Roselius’s marketplace adaptation.

The same fate was suffered by the German Rotary Clubs. In the early days of the regime, the party issued decrees banning membership in Rotary for party members and civil servants as it was seen as a secret society ruled by an internationally minded, mainly Jewish, bourgeoisie. Rotary Germany reacted by adapting to Nazi ideology and dismissed its Jewish members, while at the same time accepting newcomers who were well known as being close to the National Socialist ideology. As a result the ban was reversed in July 1933 when the Nazis realized that the Rotarians helped to “present Germany’s cosmopolitan face to the rest of the world.” And indeed, the German Rotary Clubs maintained “bourgeois” values, such as free enterprise, competition, and personal success, but they also toed the party line so that Wiesen labels them as the “bourgeois manifestation of the Nazi marketplace” (p. 148). In the end, however, when the camouflage of international commitment had become redundant and unnecessary to the regime, Rotary Germany dissolved itself in 1937.

Most fascinating is Wiesen’s interpretation of the interviews conducted by the Society for Consumer Research (GfK). Contrary to Gallup and other polling firms, GfK rejected the method of posing “yes or no” questions and instead conducted time-consuming face-to-face interviews. The surprising result was a striking openness

on the part of the interviewees who complained about the quality of many products. Rather than the interviewees it was the GfK that suffered the problems related to the negative outcome of certain studies. On the one hand, the Gestapo was irritated by the interview activities of GfK’s correspondents, and authorities regularly challenged GfK’s work by questioning its adherence to National Socialist principles. Instead, it was argued, the GfK only served business interests. On the other hand, despite its maintenance of a basic intellectual autonomy, the GfK was saved the unkind fate of both the Rotary Clubs and the coffee roaster Roselius and continued interviewing even during the war years. During this time, consumer discontent was even more striking than in the prewar years so that the GfK had to downplay the significance of its own findings. In all, the GfK story clearly proves Wiesen’s assertion of “the consumer” as a “political and economic force” that had to be taken serious even during the war.

These findings contradict Götz Aly’s notion that the loyalty of the “ordinary German” to the regime was the result of access to material goods and a developed welfare state that was made possible by the looting of occupied areas. No doubt, the material standard of living in Germany, the food supply in particular, was much better during the Second World War than during the First World War, but, as GfK’s interviews show, the relative improvement did not prevent popular discontent with the level of consumption. In Wiesen’s words, “nationalism, belief in the Führer, racism, concern for loved ones on the battlefield—a constellation of emotions and commitments—explains more about the origins of consent than any ill-begotten riches” (p. 240).

Although I am also critical of Aly’s assertions, I doubt that he or his supporters will be impressed by Wiesen’s theory of a Nazi marketplace. The empirical basis is much too thin for a consistent image of the Nazi marketplace. Wiesen presents three interesting case studies, the GfK story is excellent even, but they are not more than sketches of the marketplace. Roselius’s Kaffee HAG was an exception rather than the rule of business in the Third Reich, even of the consumer goods industry, and from the perspective of a National Socialist, the Rotarians can at best be seen as the “lunatic fringe” of the marketplace. Its members were as atypical for the businessman in the Third Reich as the members of Himmler’s Circle of Friends at the other end of the marketplace. However, Wiesen’s study is a good starting point for further research into the culture of the marketplace supplementing the discussion on its material features.

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