

Christian Taaks. *Federführung für die Nation ohne Vorbehalt?: Deutsche Medien in China während der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2009. 664 pp. \$132.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-515-08739-1.

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Marketing Nazi Propaganda in a Cosmopolitan Media Environment

With the publication of *Federführung für die Nation ohne Vorbehalt? : Deutsche Medien in China während der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, Christian Taaks addresses several questions about a key expatriate community and the ability of the Nazi regime to influence and inform Germans abroad. How did agencies of the Nazi Party and state attempt to propagandize German expatriates in Shanghai—a place where they exercised no military or police control? And how did the producers of local German media, as well as newspaper readers and radio listeners who had access well into the Nazi era to all international media, respond to those attempts? One might argue that the very distinctiveness of the situation that Taaks investigates is at the root of the strengths and the limitations of this media-historical study.

Taaks has produced a detailed, carefully periodized history of a German expatriate community. Driven by commercial relations—import and export—between the Weimar Republic and the Republic of China, the numbers of Germans living in China grew throughout 1920 to 1932. Shanghai and several smaller Chinese cities witnessed the establishment of German consulates, German stores, German parishes, German schools, and a range of typical German associations (*Vereine*). Each expatriate community also had its own *Deutsche Gemeinde* and *Deutsche Handelskammer*—institutions not to be found in local communities inside the *Heimat*. The existence of these associations reflected sets of distinctive business and commercial connections with the Chinese popula-

tion and other expatriate communities.

The roughly 4,500 Germans who lived in Shanghai during the National Socialist era comprised by far the largest community of German expatriates in China.[1] In this context, the membership numbers for the Nazi Party's "Overseas Organization" (NSDAP/AO) are instructive. The Nazi Party in China had eighty-three members in January 1933; the party membership peaked at seven hundred immediately after the outbreak of war in Europe. The zeal of the German Shanghai business community for the National Socialist revolution was bounded—according to Taaks—by a temperament that placed greater importance on profits than on politics. Nazi ideology, the author concludes, played a subordinate role in the life of the community.

Taaks's exhaustively detailed description of the very crowded Shanghai media sphere which was sustained by this community of 4,500 German expatriates—a sphere which included newspapers (printing roughly one thousand copies of each edition), magazines, and a radio station—repeatedly points to one of the central facts in his thesis: this particular media environment was extremely porous. The producers of local German media, as well as their readers and listeners, were tolerant of and receptive to a range of international media, media to which they had open access well into the Nazi era. Central to Taaks's argument about attempts to propagandize German expatriates through locally produced media is the fact that,

in contrast to Nazi propaganda efforts inside the *Heimat*, state and party authorities were unable to exclude foreign wire news sources from either the newspapers or the radio broadcasts.

Without the ability to directly threaten or intimidate the expatriate community or to seal off their media environment from its surroundings, the main means by which the German Foreign Ministry and the Propaganda Ministry attempted to gain leverage was through the funding of local papers. But the realities of the relatively open media environment compromised the effectiveness of these efforts. In the case of the *Deutsche Shanghai-Zeitung* (1932-35), editorial content that was read as the voice of the Nazi Party and the German government appeared alongside the broadcast schedule of the Anglo-American Shanghai radio station XMHA, and alongside content from both Chinese and Japanese wire news services. While the *Ostasiatischer Lloyd* (1936-45), which took money from all quarters—including the Foreign Ministry, the Propaganda Ministry, and the *Deutsche Handelskammer Shanghai*—was widely dismissed as a Nazi publication of the lowest editorial quality, the *Noon Extra* (1939-45), the paper's subsidiary intended for English-speaking German readers, regularly carried feeds from the American wire news agencies until the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

By 1937, the political and military realities on the ground rendered the German expatriate community even less receptive to Nazi propaganda. The monthly publication of the NSDAP/AO, the *Ostasiatischer Beobachter* (1933-41)—one of two heavily funded magazines which were aimed at readers throughout East Asia—explicitly promoted the German-Japanese alliance. In fact, German residents in China were strongly sympathetic to Chinese resistance to the 1937 Japanese invasion. Taaks notes that the story of John Rabe—the director of the Nanking Siemens branch and NSDAP/AO *Ortsgruppenleiter*, who rescued over two hundred thousand Chinese civilians during the Nanking Massacre in 1937—was not typical of German expatriate responses but was entirely typical of German attitudes. After the Nanking Massacre, the magazine's editorial content gained no traction among readers. Promotion in the *Ostasiatischer Beobachter* of Nazi racial theories found little resonance in a community where German marriages to Chinese were not uncommon.

The other magazine aimed at readers throughout East Asia was the English-language publication the *XXth Century* (1941-45). The “flagship of *Reichsdeutschen* publi-

cations in China” and what the author identifies as the only “higher-niveau” publication to come out of Shanghai, the *XXth Century* was well received by the expatriate German readership. Under the nominal control of the Foreign Ministry, the editorial content was actually controlled only by the editor, Klaus Mehnert. The content reflected the neoconservative orientation of the earlier Tat circle and Taaks notes that the publication also carried a distinctive sensitivity to the situation of overseas Germans. Twelve thousand copies per edition were distributed throughout Asia.

Taaks provides particularly thorough coverage of the Shanghai “radioscape” circa 1940, with its forty active radio stations (thirty-five of them Chinese). Alongside the Anglo-American station XMHA, the German Foreign Ministry funded the construction, in that year, of a German-language radio station, XGRS. The station, nominally owned by the local *Deutsche Gemeinde*, was administered by Interradio, a joint Foreign Ministry/Propaganda Ministry agency that was not without the usual inter-ministry conflicts which were characteristic of propaganda efforts throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. At the same time, the local branch of the NSDAP/AO objected to programming oriented too much to Shanghai's cosmopolitan audience of international listeners, with insufficient explicit Nazi propaganda.

Extensive German Propaganda Ministry, Foreign Ministry, and Nazi Party engagement with local German media produced modest results. Taaks concludes that despite the relatively strong position of the consulate in Shanghai, these meager results were to a certain extent the result of the kind of inter-agency conflicts that were typical of Nazi propaganda efforts in various other neutral settings, as well as locations allied with, or occupied by, the Third Reich. More decisive, in Taaks's analysis of the inability of these agencies to tailor effective propaganda for the expatriate German reader- and listenership, was the character and situation of the German expatriate community itself, most of whose members—with access to international media, and regular contact with Chinese and other foreign nationals—always considered themselves to be members of an international community, rather than agents of German chauvinism.

To a considerable extent, the distinctive situation of the German producers of local media, and of Shanghai's German expatriate community, which Taaks documents so thoroughly, is key to the strengths and the limitations of *Federführung für die Nation ohne Vorbehalt?*. The volume constitutes a significant and largely

successful attempt to situate aspects of German history in a broader Asian, and for that matter, a broader “global” context.[2] It also stands as a substantial contribution to growing body of “Shanghai studies.”[3] The limitations of this work, it could be argued, are related to the scale of the media-historiographical rewards to be derived from such detailed inspection of Shanghai’s German-expatriate *Rezipientenkries*.

Taaks effectively demolishes Donald McKale’s 1977 argument that “the chances of establishing National Socialism among the expatriate German community, and of winning new members for the Nazi party were ‘excellent’” (p. 17).[4] At the same time, the relationship that Taaks illuminates between Nazi propaganda efforts, the local German media, and the 4,500 people who comprised the German *Rezipientenkries* in Shanghai was, in many respects, unique. It was the product of a set of circumstances that were entirely anomalous for German editors, German readers, and Nazi government and party authorities. Nazi propaganda was less than effective, (indeed, rather, more generally counterproductive) in a situation where the audience had access to non-Nazi media and where the propaganda authorities could not make use of the mechanisms of threat and intimidation over writers, editors, readers, or listeners. In this connection,

Federführung für die Nation ohne Vorbehalt? reaches a media-historiographical conclusion which has rather limited implications for the study of the broader sweep of Nazi propaganda efforts and their impact on the millions of readers and listeners in the *Heimat*.

Notes

[1]. At the same time, it was relatively small in size, compared to German-Jewish Shanghai (with a population by 1939 of seventeen to eighteen thousand German and Austrian Jews), a community with whom the German expatriates had virtually no contact.

[2]. For further discussion of attempts at the *Gleichschaltung* of German communities in East Asia, see Akira Kudō, Nobuo Tajima, and Erich Pauer, eds., *Japan and Germany: Two Latecomers on the World Stage, 1890–1945*, vol. 2 (Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 2009).

[3]. See Joshua A. Fogel, “The Recent Boom in Shanghai Studies,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* (April 2010): 313-333.

[4]. See Donald M. McKale, “The Nazi Party in the Far East, 1931-1945,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, no. 2 (1977): 291-311.

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