

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Lucjan Dobroszycki. *Reptile Journalism: The Official Polish-Language Press under the Nazis, 1939-1945*. Translated by Barbara Harshav. New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1994. xi + 199 pp. \$22.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-05277-0.

Reviewed by L. M. Stallbaumer-Beishline (Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania)  
Published on H-German (April, 1995)



Lucjan Dobroszycki's monograph was originally published in 1977 under the German title *Legale polnische Presse im Generalgouvernement, 1939-1945*, through the *Institut fuer Zeitgeschichte* in Munich. This is the first time that this book has been made available to an English-reading audience. The term "reptile journalism" has its origins in the nineteenth-century, but here it refers to the Polish-language press that was published by the German occupation authorities from September 1939 to January 1945. Dobroszycki focuses on the occupied region of Poland known as the General Government, which was governed by Hans Frank after a brief period of military administration. *Reptile Journalism* is divided into three chronological periods: September through October 1939, November 1939 to the spring of 1943, and from the spring of 1943 to January 1945. Each stage represents a new phase in German policy towards the Polish press during the war and occupation. While the lines of demarcation between the last two periods are more blurry than Dobroszycki suggests, they are useful.

From September to October 1939, the future of the Polish press was uncertain. Production and distribution of papers were originally affected by the Polish-German war and the impact varied between cities depending on German behavior during the assault. Dobroszycki provides several examples, but the extreme differences are illustrated best by the treatment of the Polish press in Krakow and Czestochowa. In Krakow, the early days of occupation were relatively calm and journalists received permission from the local military authority to publish newspapers, albeit subject to censorship. Therefore, the inhabitants of Krakow went without papers for only a few days. Czestochowa stands in sharp contrast. Here the German assault and occupation produced "a scene

of murder and violence against the defenseless population." Czestochowa went without newspapers for almost two weeks, and when newsprint came into circulation again, it was under the control of Germans, who concealed their participation by preserving the appearance that newspapers (e.g. *Goniec Czestochowski* or *Czestochowa Messenger*) had only been temporarily suspended and that their publishers remained Polish. The absence of sources in some cities makes a full comparison impossible. The availability of sources on the Warsaw experience during these first two months makes for interesting reading. One gets the sense of the joint effort by journalists from numerous newspapers putting aside their pre-war ideological differences and working together to keep the Warsaw public informed. However, the relentless bombing of Warsaw between 23-26 September forced the remaining journalists and publishers to suspend temporarily their activities. They resumed publishing within a couple of days, but on 10 October, the Warsaw Polish press was brought to an abrupt end by General Government authorities. Polish publishers tried to appeal the decision but to no avail.

The next two periods focus on the "reptile" press, which shared common features. As a rule, the management and editorial staffs were composed of *Reichsdeutschen* and *Volksdeutschen*, whose names were often "polonized" to give the appearance that these publications were Polish. The Poles who were employed formed a diverse group which generally had no previous connection with journalism. With a few exceptions, Polish "collaboration was based neither on firm conviction nor on ideological motives." Poles wrote the articles which were not provided by the German Telepress. Within the General Government, only nine newspaper titles were circu-

lated among the Polish population, which differs sharply from Nazi policy in western Europe. As a reliable news source, these papers were limited, but it was possible to glean some news if one read between the lines. For Poles living under the occupation, the “reptile” press was the only legal means to get information.

The major difference in Dobroszycki’s periodization is drawn from a shift in Nazi policy which occurred in early 1943. From November 1939 to the spring of 1943, the Polish-language press existed solely to transmit the orders of the German occupation government and to remind the Poles constantly of their “sub-human” status in the Third Reich. Dobroszycki has no trouble providing sufficient evidence of this policy, which Hans Frank relentlessly pursued on Berlin’s orders. Not surprisingly, this policy fueled Polish resentment and most likely strengthened the resistance movement. The defeat of German forces on the eastern front forced Nazi officials to re-evaluate their press policy in Poland. In February 1943, Joseph Goebbels issued a circular recommending that the Poles be enlisted in the fight against Soviet Bolshevism. Hans Frank was prepared to institute the “reforms” which Goebbels recommended with the hope that this would pacify the Polish population. However, Frank could not obtain Hitler’s support for another year. Subsequently, Frank did initiate minor changes. For instance, he discouraged malicious statements about Poland and its “national character.” In addition, the Polish-language press emphasized the “good, even friendly relations” which the German occupation

powers tried to promote with the Poles. In the spring of 1944, Frank was finally allowed to implement “reforms” along the lines suggested in Goebbels’s February 1943 circular. Yet as Dobroszycki observes, these “reform” efforts rang hollow with recurring labor round-ups and reprisals. Moreover, the “reforms” were attempted at the same time that the Polish resistance was most effective and Russian troops were forcing German troops to retreat.

The most problematic aspect of this monograph is the issue of readership. It is undoubtedly difficult to measure the impact that the “reptile” press had on Poles. Yet the question of readership is crucial for the author’s attempt to bridge the gap between a single element in German occupation policy and the broader issue of Polish-German relations. By pointing to the underground press, failed attempts to boycott the legal press, and circulation statistics, Dobroszycki does suggest that the readership was more widespread than assumed. The evidence he offers is highly suggestive when placed in the context of his comments on the popular post-war notion that Poles boycotted the “reptile” press. Yet though Dobroszycki maintains that this belief is unfounded, he deals with it in a cursory fashion. This criticism aside, the monograph is well-documented with sources from both Polish and German archives. Moreover, Dobroszycki raises a number of important issues which students of German-Polish relations, war propaganda, occupation policies, and party factionalism should consult.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** L. M. Stallbaumer-Beishline. Review of Dobroszycki, Lucjan, *Reptile Journalism: The Official Polish-Language Press under the Nazis, 1939-1945*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 1995.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).