

Heinz P. Wassermann. *„Zuviel Vergangenheit tut nicht gut!“: Nationalsozialismus im Spiegel der Tagespresse der Zweiten Republik.* Innsbruck, Wien, München: Studien Verlag, 2000. 582 pp. DM 96.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-7065-1421-7.



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The Representation of National-Socialism in Austrian Newspapers after 1945

Concerning the perception of the years 1938 to 1945, a significant change has taken place in Austria in the course of the last twenty years. A more critical view on National-Socialism and the involvement of many Austrians in the National-Socialist crimes has gained weight in the discourse on history in Austria. These discursive changes were also accompanied by increasing research on the Austrian way of dealing with its National-Socialist past. Nevertheless, there are still a lot of blank or underdeveloped research-fields that only a few studies have dealt with so far. One of these fields concerns the Austrian post-war media-discourse on National-Socialism. Only a few researchers have investigated the representation of National-Socialism and the years 1938 to 1945 in the Austrian mass media after 1945. Up until Heinz P. Wassermann's book there had been only selective and very limited studies on this topic, most of them dealing with media-coverage of certain discursive events like the Waldheim-affair (the debate on the war-past of Kurt Waldheim,

former UN Secretary General and candidate for presidency in Austria in 1986) or the commemoration year 1988 (50 years after the "Anschluss").[1] The focus of most of the research conducted was on the first few years after the end of the war.

What Heinz P. Wassermann intended to do in his work is somewhat more ambitious: The aim of his book (which is based on his dissertation) is to mirror the whole period (from the beginning of the Second Austrian Republic in 1945 up to today) of Austrian post-war media-discourse on National-Socialism. Since it is impossible to investigate all of the newspaper-articles dealing with National-Socialism, Wassermann focuses in his research on certain representative discursive events (Eichmann-trial, Kreisky-Peter-Wiesenthal-affair, Waldheim-affair, etc.) and includes in addition also some recurring commemoration days (the "Anschluss", the beginning of the war, the end of the war, etc.). Wassermann's investigation is based on the coverage of seven major Austrian newspapers: *Die Presse*, *Neue Kronenzeitung*, *Salzburger Nachrichten*, *Kleine Zeitung*, *Kurier*, *Arbeiter-Zeitung* and *Suedost-Tagespost*. [2]

Heinz P. Wassermann starts his book with a short and not very informative introduction and some remarks on the term "Geschichtsbewusstsein" ("historical consciousness"). From the introductory chapter it becomes not clear what the methodological basis of the media-analysis is; no analytical categories are made explicit by the author. Besides the fact that the book lacks a clear presentation of its analytical approach, there is also no media-theoretical foundation of the investigation. In addition, since remarks on the specificities of the Austrian-media-landscape are missing, any reader who is not well-acquainted with the history of Austrian print-media, will have difficulties in drawing conclusions from Wassermann's investigation. Of special importance is the fact that the three most widespread of the investigated Austrian newspapers (-Kronenzeitung, Kurier, Kleine Zeitung) *had, from the end of the sixties on, together a market share of nearly seventy percent. Also important to consider is the fact that the two investigated party-newspapers (Arbeiter-Zeitung and Suedost-Tagespost_) lost from the fifties on continuously their importance for the Austrian newspaper market.*

The main part of the book consists of a huge empirical body having the character of a material compilation (rather than an analysis). This empirical part of Wassermann's work is subdivided into fourteen chapters, each one dealing with either a certain discursive event or with media-coverage on certain recurring commemoration days connected with the years 1938 to 1945. Each of the fourteen empirical chapters is again subdivided into an introductory part and a media-analytical part. In the introductory part the author gives a thorough description of the discursive event he analyses and provides a lot of useful background-information that gives the reader access to the historical context of the event under discussion. The media-analysis itself is structured by the seven newspapers Wassermann is analysing, that is Wassermann deals with each newspaper separately. Since the author does not make explicit his

analytical criteria, it is up to the reader to figure them out and give the analysis a comprehensible and transparent character.

The empirical body is followed by the conclusions of the author. As a result of his analysis, Wassermann sees a "Verweigerungsdiskurs" ("discourse of refusal") having taken place in large parts of the Austrian media concerning the National-Socialist past of the country. Only in the mid of the eighties Wassermann notices a change in the discourse on history in some parts of the media. Newspapers like *Salzburger Nachrichten*, *Kurier*, *Arbeiter-Zeitung* and (to a limited extent) *Kleine Zeitung* have started a process of repositioning, establishing a more critical view towards Austria's nazi-past. Still, according to Wassermann, a significant part of Austrian media has remained in a "position of refusal", which is characterized on the one hand by the presentation of National-Socialism as something that had been "imported" to Austria and on the other hand by a tendency to cut out certain parts of history, namely the Austrian involvement in the Nazi crimes and by either the "individualization" (Hitler) or the anonymization of guilt.

The strengths of Wassermann's book are certainly to be found in his comprehensive presentation of particular discursive events and their historical contexts. Furthermore the book contains many interesting and informative quotations of newspaper commentaries dealing with issues of history-perception and works out similarities and differences in the coverage of the seven newspapers under investigation.

The main weaknesses of the book are, on the one hand, the missing theoretical and methodological foundation of the investigation and, on the other hand, the fact that the book has - unintentionally - the character of a reference book, that is a material compilation, rather than that of an analysis. The latter results in a lack of coherence. Points of connection between the fourteen empirical chapters are missing, diachronic devel-

opments and interrelations remain underexposed. For the reader, Wassermann's book "Zuviel Vergangenheit tut nicht gut!" ("Too much of the past does no good!") is, regarding its readability, a piece of research only hard to digest.

Notes:

[1]. See e.g. Heidemarie Uhl, *Zwischen Versoehnung und Verstoerung. Eine Kontroverse um Oesterreichs historische Identitaet fuenfzig Jahre nach dem "Anschluss"* (Boehlaus zeitgeschichtliche Bibliothek 17, Wien-Koeln-Weimar: Boehlau, 1992); Ruth Wodak, Johanna Pelikan et. al., *"Wir sind alle unschuldige Taeter." Diskurshistorische Studien zum Nachkriegsantisemitismus* (Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 881, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).

[2]. *Die Presse* is a conservative broadsheet. The *Neue Kronenzeitung* is famous as the newspaper read by a larger percentage of its country's population than any other newspaper in the world. According to the latest media analysis in 1999, about 2,8 million Austrians read the *Neue Kronenzeitung* every day. Founded in 1900, the *Neue Kronenzeitung* re-emerged 14 years after the end of World War II in 1959. It is not only seen as the politically most influential newspaper in Austria, but also highly criticized for its partly antisemitic and xenophobic articles. The *Salzburger Nachrichten*, once a regional paper with a right-wing orientation, became in the eighties a nationwide distributed paper, with a more liberal orientation. The *Kleine Zeitung* is a regional (Styria and Carinthia) boulevard-paper. The *Kurier* was from 1945 to 1954 the paper of the American occupational forces in Austria. In 1954 it became an independent paper with a market share of between ten and twenty percent. According to the latest media analysis in 1999 about 800,000 Austrians read the *Kurier* every day. The *Arbeiter-Zeitung* had been the newspaper of the Austrian Social Democratic Party until 1989 when the publication of the paper was ceased. The *Suedost-Tagespost* had been a regional newspaper (Styria, Lower

Austria, Burgenland) of the Austrian People's Party until 1987 when the publication of the paper was ceased.

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