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Culture under National Socialism

As the preface informs us, this edited collection contains six essays based on lectures delivered during the Miller Symposium on “The Arts in Nazi Germany,” held at the University of Vermont in April 2004. The first essay, by Alan E. Steinweis, is introductory in character, providing the less well-informed reader with some essential information on the effect of antisemitism on National Socialist cultural policy and, more importantly, on the lives of Jewish artists living in Germany. The subsequent essay, by Michael H. Kater, examines the impact of American popular culture on German youth between 1933 and 1945. Each of the four remaining essays focuses on a different area of cultural production. Erich Rentschler provides a fascinating account of the making and influence of Nazi propaganda films such as Triumph of the Will (1935) and Jud Süß (1940). Pamela M. Potter explores Nazi attempts to Germanize the performance and creation of music. Frank Trommler examines, as the subtitle of his chapter puts it, ‘the many faces of literature under Nazism.’ Finally, Jonathan Petropoulos discusses aspects of the art world in Nazi Germany. Overall, this thought-provoking volume deserves to find a wide readership.

The volume also contains a number of interesting appendices. Thus, it reproduces, in translation, Wilhelm Furtwängler’s April 12, 1933, letter to Joseph Goebbels, in which Furtwängler spoke out on behalf of Jewish conductors Bruno Walter and Otto Klemperer. As the translation also makes clear, Furtwängler simultaneously expressed apparent support for Nazi antisemitism as long as the “fight against Jews is mainly directed against those artists who, lacking roots themselves and being destructive, try to achieve an effect through kitsch, dry virtuosity and similar things” (p. 165). Other appendices reproduce the laws establishing the Chamber of Film (July 14, 1933) and the Reich Chamber of Culture (September 22, 1933), and provide information on the setting up of the Jewish Cultural League. Excerpts from speeches on culture by Goebbels and Adolf Hitler are also included. Most interesting of all is the translated excerpt from a survey that appeared in Goebbels’s weekly Das Reich in 1940. The survey reveals that overtly Nazi titles were generally not high on the lists of best-selling books: Germans preferred internationally best-selling authors such as Alba Céspedes, Erskine Caldwell, and John Knittel.

The thread connecting the essays is hinted at in the volume’s subtitle, which makes reference to “continuity, conformity and change.” Some of the continuities explored are with pre-1933 Germany; indeed, the essays as a whole argue against the once prevalent, yet increasingly challenged view that 1933 represented a clear watershed in terms of cultural production and consumption. In one major respect, of course, it did represent a watershed. All contributors, particularly Steinweis and Potter in her interesting discussion of the Jewish Cultural League, make clear that the systematic removal of Jews from German cultural life represented an unprecedented act of institutionalized cultural barbarism. Yet, “Dejewification,” to use Nazi terminology, did not automatically lead to Germanization, as Potter also makes clear. The
Nazis met with only partial success in attempting to create a genuinely Germanic art, literature, and music. Neither cultural production nor public taste necessarily conformed to ideological expectations—unsurprising, perhaps, when one considers that Goebbels himself appreciated the need for culture to entertain. Hitler’s predilection for Hollywood films is similarly well known.

In short: the Third Reich was not just a breeding ground for Germanic cultural values, it also witnessed the continuation of previous cultural traditions. Kater shows how American-style popular culture—everything from Hollywood films, the jazz of Al Jolson, and dance-forms such as the shimmy and foxtrot—continued to fascinate Germans well into the 1930s. Clandestine jazz clubs and swing dance groups, at least until the Gestapo imposed a crackdown, operated even during the war. Potter dispels the myth that the Nazis banned all twelve-tone or atonal music, and art jazz lived on, most notably, according to Potter, with the initial success of Boris Blacher’s *Concertante Music for Orchestra*, premiered by the Berlin Philharmonic in 1937. Trommler’s essay on literature draws attention to the fact that, for all the blood-and-soil literature produced under Nazism, its success with the reading public was limited. The excerpt from the survey in *Das Reich* points to the relative success of Nazi (auto)biographies, but reasons for buying these may have been mixed. The apparent success of Erich Gritzbach’s *Hermann Göring, Mensch und Werk* (1938) surely reflects a—by no means specifically German—fascination with the lives of national politicians.

While the volume focuses both on the continuing impact of modernism and international popular culture, and on the limited success of Nazi attempts at “Germanization,” it also points to the enormous success of Nazi propaganda films. Rentschler’s essay makes the point that the “vast majority of films made during the Nazi era ... were not overtly political” (p. 64). Yet the virulently ideological *Jud Süß* certainly was. If, as Rentschler claims, it was seen by one in three Germans—if, too, it can be interpreted as anticipating the Holocaust—what does this tell us about the Germans who flocked to see it? Modernism and America-inspired popular culture may have continued to make an impression in less overt ways, but it was official cultural expressions of antisemitism such as *Jud Süß*, with the Jew as the embodiment of ultimate evil, that drew crowds. One would have wished, perhaps, for an exploration of this simultaneity in the volume. While the essays do address the question of conformity to a degree, it is explored less than the issue of continuity. Certainly, the tense relationship between the two would have been worth more scrutiny.

Continuities, of course, exist not just between pre-1933 and post-1933 Germany, but also between pre-1945 and post-1945 Germany. The essays also address these, none more so than Petropoulos’s prosopographical survey of the biographies of Arno Breker (sculptor), Kurt Haberstock (art dealer), and Ernst Buchner (gallery director). All three benefited from National Socialism. The latter two were directly involved in the regime’s unscrupulous policies of art plunder. Yet after 1945—classified by denazification courts as “fellow travelers”–Breker, Haberstock, and Buchner were able to continue their careers, and successfully at that. Here, too, the question of the relationship between continuity and conformity is important. Were these three men still Nazi sympathizers after 1945, or was the way they publicly distanced themselves from Nazism—charted by Petropoulos—more than a hollow, self-interested tactical gesture? Is conformism always ’outward’ (in this case to the Adenauer government), continuity always more ’of the essence’?

This thought-provoking collection stands at the cutting edge of current research into Nazi cultural life, challenging as it does long-standing assumptions about the Third Reich as a culturally homogeneous entity. The questions it raises are fascinating, and hopefully the editors will explore them further in a future volume.

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