



Pamela E. Swett. *Selling under the Swastika: Advertising and Commercial Culture in Nazi Germany*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. 361 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7355-3; \$65.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-8047-8883-0.

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## How to Sell in the Hardest of Times

In *Selling under the Swastika*, Pamela E. Swett presents an interesting analysis of the role of advertising for both sellers and buyers from the Weimar era to the start of the Cold War. Swett challenges the traditional historiography that divides this period into three separate considerations. She shows that advertising reflected a consumer society that wanted familiar products, in good times and bad, and that the business of selling held onto relative autonomy in the early Nazi era, only being brought under more explicit control by Josef Goebbels's Propaganda Ministry well after the start of World War II. Further, she connects the economic recovery of the Federal Republic to the development of an advertising culture that arose in the midst of the Weimar era and the economic hardships of the Great Depression.

*Selling under the Swastika* fits in with other works on the rise of consumer society in the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. David Ciarlo's *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany* (2011) and the essays in Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton's *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (2001), as well as the volumes coedited by Swett (with Corey Ross and Fabrice D'Almeida), *Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany* (2011) and (with S. Jonathan Wiesen and Jonathan R. Zatlin) *Selling Modernity: Advertising in Twentieth-Century Germany* (2007), present the history of the politics and practices of consumption as a critically important nexus of the individual, the state, and the economy. What Swett brings to the discussion with *Selling under the Swastika*

is an emphasis on the apparent independence of advertising despite the general perception of Nazi-era control of all aspects of the economy.

From the start, Swett acknowledges the limited resources available to her. The ephemeral nature of advertising, such as promotional giveaways and shop window signs, is only one part of her dilemma. The records of advertising companies were not made readily available to her so the sample size of corporate archives is small and limited to a few specific products: Nivea face creams, Sunlight cleaning products, Osram light bulbs, and Mercedes Benz and BMW. The reactions of consumers to advertising or the opinions of the salesmen and saleswomen are hard to assess; this is a general pitfall inherent in *Alltagsgeschichte*. As a consequence, Swett makes frequent qualified comments about probability and likelihood, in particular regarding consumer behavior. She is unable to give firm evidence to conclusions that seem imminently reasonable but unfortunately unprovable.

Advertising in the Weimar era relied on building and maintaining brand loyalty through traditional print media and shop displays but also began to look to film and radio ads. While the conventions of print media maintained consistency from the early days of corporate involvement of American and British "scientific" marketing, ads used in movie theaters and on radio were more carefully controlled by the Werberat (Advertising Council) in terms of both content and form. Film and radio ads were ultimately seen as disruptive to the carefully controlled image of the regime and its mission. Swett finds

that advertisers and sales representatives conformed to Nazi economic aims and image promotion without the need for pressure or demand from the state. The state's aim for a *Volksgemeinschaft* fit well with advertisers' aims to build consumer loyalty reflecting the "new Germany" (p. 160). Whether the cooperative practices of advertisers were compelled or entirely voluntary remains unclear, despite Swett's assurances of the freedom she says was the norm well into the war years.

The early history of advertising for Germany required advertisers to fit a more conservative German market culture resistant to hard sell and appearances of deceptive practices. According to Swett, it was the Depression, not the electoral success of National Socialism, with its call for a new economy, which ended the presence of US and UK advertising firms in Germany. During the late Weimar era, advertising created its own professional organizations and educational programs to create a set of standards and practices that would fit concepts of German "worthiness" and defined the role of advertising and its practitioners as creators of a *Volksgemeinschaft* well before the Nazi regime came to power.

During the earliest years of the Nazi rise to power through to the coming of the war, Swett maintains, there was little overt control of advertisers. Advertisers had to bridge the individual consumer's wishes with the autarchy demands of the new economic plans. The need for recovery from the Great Depression required consumer buying, but the paradox was how to temper individualism with the needs of the state for a classless, antimaterialist society. Balancing the conflicting impetuses meant advertisers had considerable leeway in ads, so long as they did not contain "grasping hucksterism" and did not appropriate the symbols of the new regime; that is, the advertising could not be racially coded or overtly pro-Nazi. Advertising early in the Nazi era was not remarkably different from the practices of Anglo-American firms which sought to encourage consumption of domestically produced goods to help the nation recover from ongoing problems of the Depression.

Swett's discussion of the Werberat is a primary focus, but her assertions about its main leader, Heinrich Hunke, raise questions about the independence of advertising from the principles of Nazi economic plans. Hunke, according to Swett, was "the most influential economic theorist of his day" (p. 56). However, she references Harold James, from Lothar Gall, Gerald D. Feldman, Harold James, Carl-Ludwig Holtfrerich, and Hans E. Buschen's *The Deutsche Bank, 1870-1995* (1995), in which James says

that Hunke was the "most influential National Socialist economist," and to Hauke Janssen who describes him as a "significant party functionary" for Nazi economic doctrine (p. 283n30). If Hunke and, by extension, the Advertising Council were not directly controlled by Goebbels, or anyone or anything else in the Nazi regime, then he might be described as the theorist implied in Swett's text. However, the cited references indicate something altogether different: a theorist intimately connected to the National Socialist vision of a completely controlled economy. His apparent autonomy, and the Werberat's, in the early years of the regime could be argued to be a result of a preexisting affinity with the plans already in the works for German autarchy. This is something that Swett avoids suggesting.

The war economy returned Germany to post-World War I hardships and meant increasingly forceful control by the Propaganda Ministry. Radio advertising had long since been eliminated as the *Volksrundfunk* was not to be used for commercial interests but rather for advancing the regime and the power of the state. Ads in theaters were controlled to encourage confidence in the consumer culture as well as to build support for the state and the war. While overt links to Nazi imagery were still prohibited, coded racial and religious indicators were no longer as tightly restricted. Wartime advertising, according to Swett, was consistent and carried over smoothly from the late Weimar era into post-World War II recovery. Shortages, hoarding, and the black market were well-known economic ills, and the industries for which Swett has evidence worked hard to ensure that their products were loyal to the state, still of the best quality, and not in any way diminished by rationing or ersatz materials. The companies most immediately associated with the Nazi war image, BMW and Mercedes, did not trumpet their war-related production, but instead continued to sell the brand image of luxurious travel for the German community. Swett finds the speed of recovery for brand name goods that held their ground throughout the period, whether Nivea face cream or BMW automobiles, was a function of the continuity of advertising from its earliest appearances in the Weimar era to wartime. This continuity meant that even products associated with the Nazi regime were not stigmatized, and that there was a place for these products in the early Cold War as well.

Swett challenges the prevailing image of the controlled Nazi-era economic system as something quite separate from the eras on either side with her evidence of continuity in the advertising realm from the Weimar Republic to the Cold War. She freely admits that the

archival evidence is slender at best and this is in some sense a serious flaw. But her success at showing that consumer loyalty for everyday products, like light bulbs and face cream, persisted does substantiate her main point. The more serious weakness for some will be the limited historical analysis of whether the advertising community cooperated voluntarily with the increasingly controlled National Socialist economy. *Selling under the Swastika* shows that advertising worked in and with the expect-

tations of the economic system, whether in the Depression or throughout the Nazi era. Swett's conclusion ultimately ties the business of selling to the same sort of corporate culture seen in the United States or Great Britain. It is interesting, though perhaps not surprising, to see that commercial culture stayed tied to its purpose—encouraging consumption—despite any other issues at work, politically, economically, or socially.

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