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Wolfgang König. *Volkswagen, Volksempfänger, Volksgemeinschaft: "Volksprodukte" im Dritten Reich: Vom Scheitern einer nationalsozialistischen Konsumgesellschaft.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2004. 310 S. + 21 Abb. EUR 36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-506-71733-7.

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Propaganda and Illusion

In his study of so-called "people's products" in the Third Reich, historian of technology Wolfgang KÃÂ¶nig impressively deconstructs die-hard myths concerning pretended mass consumption under Nazi rule. "People's products" were defined as inexpensive goods and services of high quality for the broad masses. Presenting, for the first time, a consistent history of these products, which were initiated by NS politics and jointly produced by industry or party- and state-owned companies, KÃÂ¶nig does pioneering work. He not only covers technical consumer durables like radio receivers, television sets, refrigerators, and motorcars, but includes social housing construction and mass tourism as well. The stated purpose of the book is to evaluate the function of "people's products" in the context of national socialist policy. The author understands the promotion of these goods as an attempt to establish a particular Nazi version of consumer society. But the effort was complicated by conflicting goals: armament and an orientation towards autarchy actually limited the possibilities for consumption. Since it proved impossible to advance both massive armament and mass consumption, the vision of a consuming *Volksgemeinschaft* could not be realized.

In addition to drawing material from several archives, KÃÂ¶nig relies extensively on the discussion in party and trade journals. Thus, his well-researched study is distinguished by an impressive command of different sources. But, above all, KÃÂ¶nig's argumentation really makes sense: he succeeds in convincing the reader of his interpretation of Nazi politics of consumption as "propagandistischer Fremdbetrug und illusionistischer Selbstbetrug" (p. 260). The conception of "people's products" had been established long before the 1930s, and was adapted by the Nazi government to the ideology of *Volksgemeinschaft*, *Lebensraum*, and autarchy. Its main proponents were the ministry of propaganda and the German Labour Front, institutions that represented the different goals of the conception: on the one hand, "people's products" were designed to win the German people for the regime. On the other hand, they had to secure an appropriate standard of living for the *Volk*. Industry partly co-operated in production and marketing of "people's products" to avoid a loss of control in the consumer

goods market. However, in several cases the low prices and large series prescribed by politics threatened central business goals. According to KÃÂ¶nig, the Nazis tried to realize their version of consumer society not by augmenting incomes but by promoting extreme production efficiency. As the author underlines, the strategy was unsuccessful because main obstacles to the diffusion of consumer goods were not the acquisition costs but the running costs. Taking this failed approach into account, KÃÂ¶nig understands the Nazi misconception of "people's products" as a combination of propaganda and illusion.

The book's concise introduction gives an overview of the goals, organization, and sources of the study. Unfortunately, important secondary literature is only named, but not discussed. The framework of consumption under national socialist rule is analyzed in the second chapter, which could be identified as a weaker part of the work. At first KÃÂ¶nig deals with ideology and politics of National Socialism and clarifies how the Nazis conceptualized *Volksgemeinschaft* as a community of consumption. It would have been useful for KÃÂ¶nig to make more balanced use of the rich secondary literature on National Socialist ideology. After that, KÃÂ¶nig briefly explores the development of purchasing power in Germany and refers to a slightly positive tendency until 1939, which was exceeded in the United Kingdom and the United States. He does not mention new approaches that have explored the negative effects of autarchic politics on the standard of living, as early as the 1930s, by emphasizing alternative indicators.[1] Altogether, one could imagine a more comprehensive analysis of the framework of consumption, but brevity in this part of the study might be caused by the fact that KÃÂ¶nig has already done this job in another book.[2]

The following six case studies of important "people's products" are accurately researched and fluently written. Much of the space is dedicated to the *VolksempfÃÂ¤nger*, since radio receivers, in fact, were produced in quantities worth mentioning. At first glance the enhancement looks impressive: whereas in 1933 only 25 percent of German households had radio receivers at their disposal, this number increased to almost 75 percent in 1941. But an international comparison reveals that this increase was not such a great success: Denmark and Sweden had substantially higher rates of radio ownership, and Norway and France achieved higher growth rates with less investment. Moreover, the sale of name-brand receivers was undermined by the *VolksempfÃÂ¤nger*. Firms participating in the project made only small profits and some faced bankruptcy. In spite of the low prices for collaboratively produced receivers, private radio ownership still was a middle-class phenomenon in the 1930s. KÃÂ¶nig reveals that the main hindrance to wider diffusion were the high broadcasting fees that financed the ministry of propaganda. Nevertheless, the *VolksempfÃÂ¤nger* and its little brother, the *Deutsche KleinempfÃÂ¤nger* were proclaimed to be "Flaggschiffe im Verband der politischen GemeinschaftsgerÃÂ¤te" (p. 70), since they were dedicated to transforming Germany into a "gigantisches ParteitagsgelÃÂ¤nde" (p. 94). Such effectiveness was not expected in case of the "Einheits-Fernseher E-1" (pp. 100-114), so that the honorable epithet "Volk-" was not used to denote the television set. Daily television broadcasting started in 1936 on the occasion of the Olympic Games; reception took place in public television rooms. Prototypes of devices for the home viewer were presented in 1939, but prohibitively high initial costs and World War II impeded any appreciable diffusion.

Even in social housing construction, Nazi politics built on traditions of the Weimar Republic, but in the first instance reduced public support. In this case study the author particularly explains the inconsistencies of ideological input and impossible realization. The labor ministry preferred the rationalized construction of small apartments, but this housing policy clashed with the national socialist ideal of rural settlement, which was promoted especially by the German Labor Front. Austere furnishing and smallness of the planned flats aroused the indignation of Goebbels, the "HÃÂ¼ter der nationalsozialistischen Volksprodukte" (p. 117). Since small dwellings lacked the requirements for the national socialist ideal of a family with four or more children, grand scale "FÃÂ¼hrerwohnungen" were planned during the war years. Actually, housing construction had to be postponed and the left-over shells ended up as shantytowns. "Volkswohnungen" were meant to be equipped with a "VolkskÃÂ¼hlschrank." Unlike the United States, diffusion of refrigerators was in its early stages in Europe in the 1930s. Not more than one percent of German households were furnished with iceboxes in 1939. Scientists and industry took the initiative in development of the people's fridge and the project harmonized effectively with the campaign "Kampf dem Verderb" which was started as part of the "Vierjahresplan" in order to achieve autarchy.

The *Volkswagen*, however, was the people's product most related to the person of Hitler. In speeches regularly given at the Berlin automobile exhibitions, Hitler usurped the project and announced in February, 1933, as

one of the first administrative measures of his regime, a tax exemption for new car licenses. Motorways became "pyramids of the Third Reich" and the tripling of automobiles between 1933 and 1939 looked like a breakthrough towards mass motorization. An economic boom was emerging as early as 1932, as KÃÂ¶nig underlines. The idea of a people's car had been popular in Germany since the *Kaiserreich* but increases in motorization remained small. Plans for the *Volkswagen*, which had belonged to the competence of the German Labor Front since 1937, included a small three-wheeler for a while. Changes in planning were not followed by a necessary adjustment of prices. As a result, it would have been impossible to produce the complete vehicle for the price proposed by the regime: RM990. Mass motorization, even at this low price, was hardly a practical scheme, since the monthly running costs of about 70 RM were only reasonable for the middle classes. Megalomaniac production plans for 1.5 million units annually was contrasted with the rather small number of 340,000 customer orders between 1938 and 1945. Autarchy projects financed by high petroleum taxes undermined mass motorization. Whereas the civilian version of the Volkswagen only existed as a prototype, it was declared fit for military service. In contrast, publicity frequently presented the "Kraft-durch-Freude-Wagen" as a means to foster tourism. However, Nazi promotion of tourism initially concentrated on all-expense tours and group excursions in order to put travelling *Volksgemeinschaft* on stage. Even the mental barriers of laborers were opposed to classless cruises. Because journeys were financed by membership fees of "Kraft durch Freude," the typical dominance of the middle class meant redistribution at the expense of the lower classes.

In three concluding chapters KÃÂ¶nig applies the findings of the case studies to systematic questions and controversies about the Third Reich. A presentation of results organized in this way underlines the analytic attitude of the study, but involves some redundancies. Nevertheless the reader surely will profit from KÃÂ¶nig's well-balanced conclusions. Reactions of private industry to "people's products" hold the spotlight. KÃÂ¶nig emphasizes the primacy of politics in the command economy without neglecting the fact that companies had wide latitude to act. On the one hand, the consumer goods industry faced competitive pressure from inexpensive "people's products" and the prize freeze imposed in 1936: private enterprises lost substantial market shares. Highly subsidized large-scale enterprises, owned by the state, substituted when prescribed prices could not be realized by private industry. On the other hand, some companies tried to benefit from the popularity of "people's products": they marketed goods under this respected label against politicians' intentions. Subsequently, the author stresses the polycratic nature of National Socialism by depicting disputes among national and party officials concerning "people's products". In alternating constellations, several ministries and the German Labor Front fought each other, each claiming to preserve the National Socialist utopia. In the end Goebbels won controlled access to the label *Volksprodukt* via the Werberat der deutschen Wirtschaft, which inspected quality and price standards.

Finally, KÃÂ¶nig examines critically the rational elements of NS politics. Because of failed strategies to spread "people's products", the doubtfully "rational" qualities of rationalization, and megalomaniac production plans, the author rejects interpretations that locate instrumental rationality in National Socialist economic policy.[3] Although small successes in symbolic fields like radio broadcasting and tourism were credited to the regime, the desire for consumption aroused by NS propaganda had destabilizing effects as its realization was impossible. Additionally, KÃÂ¶nig rejects theses concerning the supposed dominion of technocrats in the Third Reich. Rather, he suggests, technophile promoters of "people's products" interpreted technology as a means to reading their ends. Inconvenient expert advice was refused in a virtually religious manner. The declared goal of consumption policy was a racially defined approach to consumer society. Its realization required enlarged *Lebensraum* to be achieved by winning a war of aggression.

To the ongoing and intense discussion about the modernizing effects of National Socialist economic policy, which has been dominated by the definitive comments of Hans Mommsen, KÃÂ¶nig contributes in a restrained fashion.[4] His way out of this morass is to declare the whole concept of modernization unsuitable as an explanation for Nazi politics of consumption. In my opinion, however, the older literature reveals that the concept has its heuristic value if released from normative implications.[5] Compatible with KÃÂ¶nig's findings would be an interpretation that accepts modernization on the mental level as an unintended side-effect of Nazi politics of consumption. Desires for consumption aroused in the 1930s were actualized in post-war society. Under National Socialist rule, Germans mentally prepared for mass tourism and mass motorization. This modernization was symbolized later on by the Volkswagen Beetle. Despite these marginal differences of opinion, how-

ever, the reader must admit that Wolfgang KÃÂ¶nig has written a state-of-the-art book that sets important standards for future research in national socialist politics of consumption. Furthermore, the study makes accessible numerous primary sources. Since KÃÂ¶nig mainly concentrates on the social, economic, and political history of "people's products", numerous areas of research remain, especially for investigators who focus on the cultural aspects of consumption under Nazi rule.

Notes

[1]. JÃÂ¶rg Baten and Andrea Wagner, "Autarky, Market Disintegration, and Health: The Mortality and Nutritional Crisis in Nazi Germany 1933-37," *Economics and Human Biology* 1 (2003): pp. 1-28.

[2]. Wolfgang KÃÂ¶nig, *Geschichte der Konsumgesellschaft* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000).

[3]. See, for example, GÃÂ¶tz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 2005).

[4]. Hans Mommsen, *Der Mythos von der ModernitÃÂ¤t. Zur Entwicklung der RÃÂ¼stungsindustrie im Dritten Reich* (Essen: Klartext, 1999).

[5]. Horst Matzerath and Heinrich Volkmann, "Modernisierungstheorie und Nationalsozialismus," in *Theorien in der Praxis des Historikers*, ed. JÃÂ¼rgen Kocka (GÃÂ¶ttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), pp. 86-116.