



Gideon Reuveni. *Reading Germany: Literature and Consumer Culture in Germany before 1933.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006. xii + 310 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-087-8.



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Books and *Bourgeoisness* in the Weimar Republic

Reuveni's monograph seeks to challenge the view that what Germans read in the early decades of the twentieth century prepared them to accept the Nazi regime and its plans for war and genocide. These conclusions have been improperly drawn, argues the author, from research on reading that assumes readers form a passive audience and that the literary canon is defined by elites alone. This is not a book, however, that focuses on who was reading what. Rather, Reuveni sets for himself the more ambitious task of examining "reading itself as a social and cultural phenomenon" (p. 7). In doing so, the author focuses on the nexus between reading and consumption: the process by which reading became commercialized and the ways in which "reading as a medium nurtures new needs and encourages the consumer culture" (p. 11). Because of its focus on the role of reading within larger developments in Germany's growing consumer culture in the first three decades of the twentieth century, this book will be of interest to historians working on a variety of related topics beyond the history of reading alone.

The first chapter discusses the "book crisis" debate

of the postwar period. According to those in the book trade (as well as academics who studied the industry), the high price of books, the popularity of inferior literature, economic decline and the availability of new leisure activities in the 1920s meant that reading was facing an uncertain future. And if reading—"perceived as a natural resource" (p. 23) to be controlled and encouraged—experienced a decline, German domestic reconstruction efforts would be endangered and international isolation would continue, because books served as nothing less, in their minds, than as the foundation for all culture and research. Reuveni concludes that although there was no agreement about the causes or solutions to the perceived book crisis, the significance attributed to the bourgeois value system that emphasized book reading remained paramount throughout the era.

Reuveni finds (examining data in chapter 2) that no decline in reading habits can be detected across the first three decades of the twentieth century. Rather, Reuveni claims the opposite, arguing that the First World War was a watershed event in the history of reading in Germany. Many more people than ever before turned to

newspapers and other printed sources for information about the conflict, and in the period of political and economic instability after the war, reading remained a relatively inexpensive source of information and leisure activity. Even new republican policies, like the shortened work day and compulsory education, served to increase reading by the end of the 1920s. So why the great concern about the health of the book trade and reading in general? The underlying problem, according to Reuveni, was that women, workers and youths were reading more than before and that everyone, including educated men, was reading a greater variety of texts. This raised concerns for some about the homogenization of society, and for others fears of an increasingly fractured and individualistic society.

In the third chapter, we find out how people were getting their reading material in sections on book peddling, magazine subscription clubs, the mail, railway bookshops, kiosks, street selling and some creative marketing schemes, such as insurance newspapers (libraries, both commercial and public, are discussed in chapter 4). Reuveni's point in detailing this vast expansion of opportunities to purchase reading material is to demonstrate the process through which reading became commercialized. "Targeting the broadest possible audiences ... is symbolic of the victory of a commercial way of thinking which views readers as a reservoir of potential customers who are to be nurtured equally" (p. 132). Of course this democratization of reading raised the ire of critics, who predicted an unhealthy dependency on newspapers and warned of the manipulation of young, female and blue-collar consumers through increasingly sophisticated advertisements in newspapers and magazines.

In the next chapter, Reuveni leaves the world of book purchasing to examine the transformation of the library world. By the end of the nineteenth century, libraries in Germany were no longer important solely as collection sites for books. Libraries were now viewed as providing a public service, like the railway. The reading needs of all social strata were to be attended to in the *Volksbücherei* of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, new libraries were established and local governments prioritized the funding and upkeep of libraries that had once been supported by purely private means. Owing to the endemic unemployment of the Weimar era, borrowing remained popular, and city and state authorities also saw libraries as a haven for the unemployed away from the crime and radicalization of the streets and pubs. Though public libraries were enjoying a "golden age," according to Reuveni, the desire to purchase books was growing as well. New

production and marketing strategies led to lower prices, greater choice and more aesthetically pleasing books. Inexpensive book clubs, in particular, meant that greater numbers of people beyond the bourgeoisie had access to book ownership, which was viewed as a symbol of upward social mobility. Advertisements for books also emerged in this period, the author explains, in part as a response to fears that the new media would put booksellers out of business. Reuveni notes that books and reading were portrayed in advertisements as part of modern daily life, at ease with the speed and mobility of the urban landscape.

Not surprisingly, with this growth in printed matter and the cultural importance accorded to reading, scientific interest in the activity expanded. Twelve research institutes on the press were established in Germany after the First World War and over six hundred dissertations on the topic were produced in the Weimar period alone (p. 221). In the last chapter, Reuveni turns to these academic studies of reading habits, most of which targeted women, workers and young people. It was believed that these groups needed to be led toward appropriate literature in order to strengthen "their sense of social and national responsibility" (p. 229). This is not to say that these groups were encouraged to read the same canon as educated male readers. Instead, specific catalogs were designed to respond to their tastes in a controlled manner. Despite beliefs that workers, young people and women only sought out literature that helped them escape from reality, Reuveni shows through lending records and particularly fascinating excerpts from workers' reading reports that these groups chose a surprisingly varied list of titles. Nonetheless, the assumption that these marginalized groups would only read texts that undermined the social and moral fiber of society caused such concern that legislation to ban trashy literature seemed a logical solution. Ratified at the end of 1926, the Law for the Protection of Young People against Trash and Filth did little to curb readers' enthusiasm for pulp fiction. The law's failure to have an impact on reading habits is of no consequence to Reuveni. He argues instead that the significance of the legislation lies in the bourgeoisie's struggle to have it passed and in their power after 1926 to define certain materials as trash. Faced with an emerging mass culture that blurred the class and gender lines of leisure pursuits, the ongoing struggle against trashy literature allowed the bourgeoisie to retain its place, if largely a symbolic one, as arbiters of culture.

Reuveni's *Reading Germany* is successful on a number of fronts. I did, however, wish for a cleaner trans-

lation. For example, what is the meaning of: “This consumer culture studies point of view also teaches that the process by which society tenderizing in the modern era is inextricably linked to the fragmentation of society” (p. 9)? Further clarification is also needed to understand the point made by a socialist observer in 1928, who claimed that “the materialist nature of the process of proletarianization was the upshot of the social status of the working class” (p. 28). Reuveni displays a broad knowledge of cultural theory and other interrelated subjects, but further elaboration is warranted on some points, such as when he discusses modern book design and the commodification

of the gaze (p. 204). References to the Weimar Republic’s “tendency to interfere in as many areas of life as possible” (p. 257) also do not seem to be substantially supported by the bulk of the book’s evidence.

Beyond these points, however, *Reading Germany* is an ambitious study that convincingly links books, once thought to be above commodity culture, to Germany’s growing consumerism and to the anxieties of a bourgeoisie at once disintegrating and wholly successful in spreading its cultural values—what Reuveni nicely describes as the “shift from bourgeoisie to bourgeoisness” (p. 281).

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