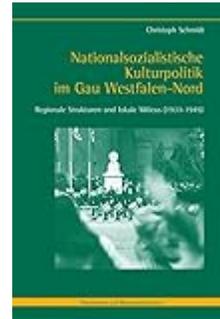


Christoph Schmidt. *Nationalsozialistische Kulturpolitik im Gau Westfalen-Nord: Regionale Strukturen und lokale Milieus (1933-1945)*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2006. 511 S. EUR 49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-506-72983-5.



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Nazi Culture Wars

Radical political movements have typically sought not only to overthrow or reverse existing relationships of political and economic power but also to abolish old forms of culture and create new forms aligned with their ideological principles. This tendency was no less true of National Socialism than it was of its arch-nemesis, Bolshevism. Christoph Schmidt's massive study of National Socialist cultural policy in northwestern Germany is a welcome addition to a growing literature about Nazi efforts to transform cultural practice across the Reich. A major work of regional history, Schmidt's book examines the trajectory of Nazi cultural policy in three cities in the Gau Westfalen-Nord—Gelsenkirchen, Münster, and Detmold—from Hitler's seizure of power in January 1933 until September 1944, when cultural activities were halted due to the increasingly dire military situation. In this administrative district, local NSDAP leaders faced several regionally specific dilemmas which, in Schmidt's analysis, illuminate larger questions concerning the regime's goal of forging a new *Volksgemeinschaft*.

The book consists of eight lengthy chapters. In the first three, Schmidt locates his research against the recent

historiography on Nazi culture, provides an overview of municipal cultural policy during the Weimar years, and analyzes the NSDAP's approach to cultural questions at the Reich level. This section of the monograph confronts some of the perennial topics in the historical literature on Hitler's Germany: the polycratic power structure of the Third Reich—especially the bitter rivalry between Josef Goebbels and Alfred Rosenberg over control of German cultural life, the tensions between modernist and anti-modern attitudes in Nazi ideology, the relationship of the German working class to the regime, and, most prominently, the durability of the classic conceptions of culture cherished by the *Bildungsürgertum*. He engages there the work of scholars such as Hildegard Brenner, M. Rainer Lepsius, Karl Ditt, Volker Dahm, Thomas Mathieu, and Jeffrey Herf. From Lepsius, Schmidt borrows the notion of a "social-moral milieu," which defines a process in which several coinciding factors, such as confession, economic context, and existing regional-cultural tradition, allow a sense of identity and unity among people to develop. Drawing on Dahm's study of the distribution of power in the Nazi system, he applies this concept to the study of the formation of cultural policy in one region

under Nazi rule. Schmidt's synthesis of this literature is the basis for his challenge to arguments that exaggerate the centralized character of Nazi policymaking and his emphasis on semi-autonomous local and regional interpretations of key tenets of Hitler's ideology.

Of particular importance in these chapters is the fine overview of Nazi conceptions of culture in chapter 3. There, Schmidt emphasizes how lack of clarity in Nazi thinking about a cultural revolution and implementation of the "leadership principle" throughout German political life left in place an unresolved duality of party and state. While Hitler, Rosenberg, and Goebbels had all denounced most of Weimar art as "degenerate," "un-German," and "Jewish," a clear counterconcept of culture did not really emerge, a point he makes especially with reference to Rosenberg. A new Aryan culture was demanded, but the question persisted about how new it was to be. As Schmidt notes, Hitler frequently praised classical notions of beauty, artistic, and architectural form. He spoke, too, of the need for a "German art" rooted in "eternal values." Conversely, Goebbels, as Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, while naturally contemptuous of many "Judeo-Bolshevik" currents of Weimar modernism, believed that certain forms of modernist culture could be salvaged for the Nazis' national revolution. Schmidt mentions, as an example, Goebbels's early interest in the development of a "Nordic Expressionism." Less ideologically rigid than Rosenberg on these issues, the propaganda minister also recognized immediately the potential of new types of mass entertainment to contribute to radical cultural change.

The internally contradictory character of Nazi attitudes toward modern culture, though, remained unresolved. One of Schmidt's major contributions is to show how these fundamental ideological tensions overlapped with the inter-organizational struggles within the NSDAP leadership. Goebbels, who had control over the Reich Chamber of Culture as well, battled with Rosenberg, head of the Combat League for German Culture, for the direction of Nazi cultural policy at the Reich level. This frequently vicious competition ended with Goebbels's victory in 1937, leaving the latter with mastery over policymaking on cultural concerns until the end of the Second World War. Rosenberg's organization, much to his chagrin, was absorbed into Robert Ley's Strength Through Joy group. It is one of Schmidt's major claims that the ambivalence regarding cultural transformation, compounded by institutional turf wars, gave rise to a series of unforeseen problems when the Nazis encountered strongly held predispositions toward culture

at the regional and local levels.

In chapters 4 through 8, the reader finds Schmidt's empirical justification of his use of this conceptual apparatus. In chapter 4, he outlines the creation of the Gau Westfalen-Nord and the onset of organizational competition within the NSDAP for hegemony over cultural issues. There, readers are introduced to the district's Gauleiter, Alfred Meyer. Meyer had joined the Nazi Party relatively late (1928), a fact he later tried to suppress. As a latecomer, his status in the party remained unimpressive and, according to Schmidt, other Nazis viewed him as weak. Still, Meyer emerges as a leading advocate for radical cultural change in Schmidt's analysis. Wanting to be the "Gauleiter of culture" and determined to improve his stature within the party, Meyer understood cultural expression in a purely instrumental way and missed few opportunities to deploy cultural events in his district as means of political education. What happened to Meyer's vision of cultural transformation is of great importance to Schmidt.

The last three chapters of the book involve, in staggering microhistorical detail, close examinations of the course of Nazi cultural policy in Gelsenkirchen, Münster, and Detmold. Schmidt approaches each city in the same way: systematically providing a sense of their respective political and economic backgrounds prior to 1933, discussing the NSDAP's assumption of power in each, and then looking at municipal cultural institutions and their transformation under Nazism until September 1944, when Goebbels suspended cultural events and ordered all resources directed to the imperiled war effort. Schmidt focuses on culturally hegemonic institutions such as theater, museums, music and the fine arts, and the book trade. While this formulaic approach does make the book tedious to read at times, it allows Schmidt to elicit compelling questions of comparison and examine how successful the Nazis were in transforming the regional culture of this Gau and the obstacles they faced.

Schmidt points out how, in each city, Nazi arbiters of ideologically correct culture encountered serious difficulties. In Gelsenkirchen, severe financial difficulties stemming from the Great Depression hampered efforts to realign cultural institutions. Moreover, the NSDAP faced a formidable working-class culture with its own alternative organizational structures. This milieu was not quickly overcome, despite the enormous time and energy the Nazis invested in integrating workers. Münster presented a very different problem. A redoubtable bour-

geois Catholic tradition had long overseen cultural life there. In Detmold a powerful bourgeois Protestant culture with its own associational life stood in the way. Nevertheless, the regional NSDAP, under Meyer's leadership, was undeterred. During the phase of cultural experimentation from 1933 to 1937, the Nazis in Westfalen-Nord attempted to coordinate and redirect the major forms of high culture. Some of the topics Schmidt covers here will be very familiar to students of the history of the Third Reich. To mention just a few examples, he discusses the zealous elimination of "un-German" authors from libraries and bookshops, visual artists from museums, and musicians from concert halls. He also discusses plans for a Thing theater in Gelsenkirchen, the book burnings of May 1933 in Münster, and efforts to infuse a heavy dose of *völkisch* playwrights into the theatrical repertoire in Detmold. Schmidt relates as well the history of the Wagner Week in Detmold. The latter, an annual event begun in 1934 with great enthusiasm by Meyer himself, was a particularly noteworthy example of how the Nazis hoped to utilize popular art works as public instruction about the aesthetic superiority of the "Germanic soul."

Schmidt's discussion of the results of the radical approach in these three cities is fascinating. He shows how the proliferation of and competition between party organizations in the Gau during these years hindered the effectiveness of the cultural revolutionaries. The rivalry between these organizations at the regional level mirrored that at the Reich level among Goebbels, Rosenberg, and Ley. Moreover, severe financial problems—Germany lingered under the effects of the worldwide economic downturn—hampered the party's cultural work in the early years, particularly in Gelsenkirchen. In addition, disinterest on the part of the population and the influence exerted by local associations—either bourgeois Protestant or bourgeois Catholic—forced the Nazis to halt their more grandiose plans of cultural "coordination." Many citizens simply did not want to participate in events at which culture was understood as a pretext for the exposition of the Nazi worldview. Workers, a major target of Nazi propaganda efforts, also largely rejected the ideal of the new *Volksgemeinschaft*. These groups did not jettison their pre-1933 notions of art. The Nazis discovered that older understandings of culture did not yield easily to pressures for "coordination." As Schmidt demonstrates, regional structures and local milieus mattered a great deal in this case.

1937 is the real caesura in the narrative Schmidt offers in these chapters. Goebbels's triumph over Rosenberg that year had dramatic implications for party operations

in Westfalen-Nord. After the notorious "Exhibition on Degenerate Art," Goebbels charted an increasingly conservative course that focused on the continued removal of "un-German" elements from the arts and less on forging new, more authentically "German" cultural forms. Schmidt argues that, with this change of course, the regional Nazi Party beat a retreat to more familiar artistic ground. From 1937 on, Nazis in the Gau largely fell back on a traditional cultural itinerary of Shakespeare (long a favorite with the German bourgeoisie), Goethe, Schiller, Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven. The shift in policy resulted in a relatively depoliticized cultural program, which focused on presentation of timeless masterworks of German culture. This conservative tendency became even more entrenched after the onset of war in 1939. Stability on the home front became paramount. The performance of well-known plays and pieces of music entertained men and women asked to sacrifice and endure increasing hardship. Here, the "classics" of German bourgeois culture were vitally important. While Meyer still worked diligently for a number of years for a return to his early instrumentalist vision of cultural production, his influence on cultural affairs in the larger organizations ended. In Schmidt's words, a "renaissance of the bourgeois in the cultural policy of the Third Reich" can be clearly traced in this district in northwestern Germany in the regime's last eight years (p. 475).

Far short of the original goals of cultural revolution, the NSDAP in the Gau Westfalen-Nord reached an accommodation with classic *Bildungskultur*. In terms of Nazism's tension-plagued understanding of the authentic relationship between art and politics, the accent on "eternal cultural values" displaced, according to Schmidt, yearnings for new, *völkisch* forms of culture. Settling for the extirpation of "cultural Bolshevism," the Nazis achieved only limited success in building a novel "people's community." Still, Schmidt relates how the wartime emphasis on apolitical plays, concerts, and other cultural events carried over into the culturally conservative first decades of the Federal Republic. Many top actors and artists found a new professional life in Konrad Adenauer's Germany. The neo-traditional Nazi cultural policy of the early 1940s in this region had greater longevity than one might expect.

The book reflects exhaustive archival labor. Beyond the enormous amount of secondary literature he has surveyed, Schmidt also cites administrative reports from the three cities, local newspapers, and documents concerning internal debates within NSDAP organizations over cultural programs in this region. For a history of cul-

tural institutions, this work displays, too, a remarkable breadth of quantitative research. Most impressively, he supplies to the reader detailed demographic information about Gelsenkirchen, Münster, and Detmold, statistics on elections, concert and theater performance and attendance, and museum visitation. The book's sixty-one tables demonstrate the thoroughness and methodological ambitiousness of his research.

The work will be of great interest to scholars concerned with studies of locale in modern Germany; it deserves a wide readership especially among historians and political scientists intrigued by Nazi efforts to alter pre-1933 cultural traditions radically. It will certainly resonate also with those researchers frustrated with facile notions of the totalitarian nature of Nazi governance. The depth and breadth of Schmidt's exploration of this region during the Nazi years provokes unsettling questions with a far wider purview than its own line of inquiry. With Schmidt's analysis available, the historian of the Third Reich can gauge how Nazi authorities toned down or adapted their priorities over time. The depoliticized forms of bourgeois culture that won the day in Gelsenkirchen, Münster, and Detmold reveal a Nazi regime not immune to "realism" regarding its cultural policies. Certainly, Schmidt is correct in arguing that this older heritage did not yield to the mediocre, racialist vision of "people's community" propounded by NS-

DAP "culture warriors," but the former's thorough depoliticization allowed it to be effectively instrumentalized. Therefore, Schmidt—and this could have been elaborated more—depicts a NSDAP, although torn by conflicting perspectives on cultural policy, nonetheless capable of deferring its more radical cultural goals in favor of providing entertainment and ensuring compliance with and, at least, tacit acceptance for its wars of annihilation elsewhere. Thus, the Nazis achieved some success, albeit a very different kind from that sought by Meyer and his associates, with their mobilization of culture on the home front.

Schmidt's book is not, however, without its drawbacks. The sheer amount of empirical detail he packs into the book often obscures his larger, very important, arguments about the Nazi regime. Schmidt constantly skirts the danger of losing the forest in the trees. The kind of immersion in the local and regional he undertakes will raise doubts on the reader's part about the immediate transregional validity of his claims. Hence, the book will need to be read together with both synthetic histories of the Third Reich and other examples of German regional history. This evaluation is not meant to denigrate the book's value but, on the contrary, to recommend how it can best contribute to ongoing discussion about culture in Nazi Germany.

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