



Hainer Michalske. *Die Gutenberg-Reichsausstellung 1940: Ein Beitrag zur national-sozialistischen Kulturpolitik.* Stuttgart: Steiner, 2007. 382 pp. EUR 44.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-515-08756-8.

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Between Propaganda and Reality

Hainer Michalske's book is devoted to the exhibition planned for 1940 to celebrate the invention of printing. The event was to take place in Leipzig, a center of book production and the Reich's "fair city" (*Reichsmessestadt*). The exhibition was planned as a large-scale international event, whose aim was not only to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Johannes Gutenberg's invention but also to propagate the achievements of National Socialist Germany. The book is an additional, interesting contribution to our understanding of how various elements of the Nazi state functioned.

The exhibition, at least as its organizers planned it, never took place. Instead, a memorial festivity for Gutenberg on a much smaller scale was carried out in Leipzig in 1940. Michalske's book examines the reasons for the failure of the planned exhibition. According to Michalske, the main reason for this failure was the gap between the ambitions of Reich authorities and their ability to translate them into reality. While Goebbels's Reich's Ministry for People's Education and Propaganda (RMVP) envisioned a grand project for which a completely new exhibition area with pompous showrooms should be built, those directly responsible for the design of the exhibition—especially Gutenberg's Reich Exhibition's manager—realized that numerous problems would be attached to such an ambitious project. These problems were mostly financial and also related to the difficult accessibility of the exhibition's area for the visitors; to arrive at the event venue, visitors were supposed to march a kilometer from Hindenburgstraße to the entrance. The

distances between the exhibition's separate showrooms were also too grand. Michalske also mentions the contradiction between the propagandistic glorification of the average worker (*schaffender Mensch*) by the German Labor Front (DAF) and plans to destroy parts of Leipzig's original buildings to make room for the new exhibition's showrooms, a plan that also contributed to the failure of the exhibition. The rivalry between Leipzig, Mainz, and Cologne, three cities with historical interests in influencing celebrations of the 500th anniversary of Gutenberg's invention, also did not aid the success of the event.

As Michalske demonstrates, the real problems began in the realization stage of the project, when rivalries between various institutions of the Third Reich were exacerbated. The central institutions of the Reich that proclaimed their interest in the exhibition were eager to place the financial burden of the exhibition upon municipal authorities of the city of Leipzig and the state of Saxony. The Reich Air Ministry, Financial Ministry, and Ministry for People's Education and Propaganda refused to participate financially in the exhibition. Procurement of the necessary building materials was also hampered by the general plenipotentiary for management of iron and steel, as these materials were essential to the rearmament program. Fritz Todt resolved the issue with the compromise that the exhibition should take place in a more modest space than originally planned, at the facilities for Leipzig's Technical Fair, while the necessary iron was to be procured from the iron stocks of Leipzig itself or by the Mannesmann factory.

Michalske contextualizes the preparation for the Gutenberg's Reich's Exhibition in German cultural foreign policy of the 1930s, especially the period before and after 1938. Although in 1935, with the inauguration of the Four-Year Plan, the Third Reich adopted a clear plan for rearmament and began preparation for war, Germany still outwardly transmitted the image of a "peace-loving nation." The intention of making the Gutenberg Exhibition a "world exhibition" with wide international participation reflects this tendency clearly. Practically no foreign trade union of the book industry (with the exception of Finland) that received an invitation to participate declined it, or noticed the contradiction between the nature of National Socialism and the liberal and tolerant image the Nazi Germany wanted to transmit to the outside world. Only a few individuals and private firm owners openly pointed to this contradiction. Even among those countries that formed an alliance against Germany during World War II, few objections were broached in advance against participating.

Michalske claims that the turning point in the preparation for the exhibition fell in 1938. In this year, Germany adopted an open course toward war and dropped

the image of a "peace-loving nation" that it had been eager to cultivate previously. At the same time, the Nazi regime escalated the mobilization efforts of the German population for war after the Sudetenland crisis indicated that German popular opinion indicated fear of war. After 1938, attempts to make the exhibition an international event faded into the background. Even so, it was not abandoned altogether. On the contrary, those responsible for the exhibition increased their publicity efforts in countries such as Great Britain, the United States, and France, in order to increase participation in the exhibition.

Michalske shows that the main problem of the exhibition was the gap between attempts by Third Reich rulers to envision it and the realities of diverting the necessary materials away from rearmament; in this sense, the image of Nazi Germany as a cultured, enlightened country was necessarily juxtaposed with the barbarous, criminal nature of the Third Reich. At the same time, however, the work destroys the assumption that the Third Reich was a rigidly centralized state and shows the degree of freedom of action that the lowest levels of the state had.

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