



Pamela E. Swett, Corey Ross, Fabrice d'Almeida, eds. *Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 307 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-27168-5.



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The Politics of Pleasure

Some three decades ago, shortly before his untimely death, the influential German historian Detlev J. K. Peukert argued that a more nuanced approach was needed when it came to historical explanations of the appeal of Nazism as well as the lack of effective resistance against the dictatorship. In his opinion, the two dominant historiographical trends—what he called “seduction” and “supervision” theories—both had deficiencies. The former, which emphasized such themes as the efficacy of Nazi propaganda and Hitler’s charisma, did not adequately address the various criticisms that Germans leveled at the regime. The latter, which saw the Third Reich as little more than a totalitarian police state that terrorized the populace into compliance, gave short shrift to various types of nonconformist behavior and the many popular social and political actions of the regime. For Peukert, it was of utmost importance to get beyond such “all-or-nothing accounts” and to “explain what were the fundamental needs and activities in which the population’s active consent, or passive participation, took root, enabling the trains to Auschwitz to continue, both metaphori-

cally as well as literally, to leave on time till the bitter end.”[1] Although not explicitly invoking Peukert, *Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany* does just this, and in a refreshingly novel way, by exploring the multifarious connections between pleasure seeking and governmental attempts at social harmonization and political mobilization.

Whereas many books have dealt in one manner or another with the topic of pleasure under National Socialism (e.g., leisure, tourism, fashion, entertainment, sexuality, and sport), this is the first to be unambiguously organized around the theme. The volume emerged from a workshop, “Pleasure, Power, and Everyday Life under National Socialism,” at the German Historical Institute in Paris in 2007. At first glance, the appropriateness of studying notions of German “happiness” or “joy” given the monumental suffering of its victims may seem questionable, but in chapter 1 the editors rightly argue that pleasure, in a variety of communal and individual forms, played an important role not just in Nazi ideology, but also in “building and maintaining the *Volksgemeinschaft*”

(p. 13). Whether one considers aesthetic enjoyment, feelings of belonging, or material comforts, “pleasure ... promised far greater returns ... than outright repression or indoctrination ever could” for the regime (p. 3). Pleasure and power thus became “inseparable, even mutually reinforcing” aspects of the genocidal society of the Third Reich (p. 1). By investigating the interconnectedness of emotion and agency, this collection gives many new insights on the theme of popular consent in the German dictatorship.

Chapters 2 through 12 of *Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany* are organized thematically into three parts. Part 1 explores the linkages between consumption and pleasure, paying particular attention to alterations in consumer practices after the *Machtergreifung* and the extent to which the regime tried to “steer” patterns of consumption. S. Jonathan Wiesen’s opening essay uses the Society for Consumer Research, an organization started in 1934 to study purchasing habits of Germans, to show the complicated, contradictory nature of consumption under National Socialist rule.[2] On the one hand, the regime promised to create a robust consumer society that would give racially pure Germans access to the commodities and services they desired. On the other hand, the diverting of materials toward rearmament, the omnipresent calls for scrimping, and the (attempted) restrictions on items that contradicted Nazi ideology caused much friction between consumers and the government. Wiesen shows that the regime’s anti-smoking and anti-drinking campaigns had, at best, an ambiguous effect, and consumers complained about shortages and the quality of products, especially once the war began.

Pamela E. Swett’s essay uses advertisements for pharmaceutical firm Much AG’s popular erectile dysfunction treatment “Titus Pearls” to show how notions of sexual pleasure both changed and were marketed after 1933. Interestingly, Much AG only gradually phased out product endorsements for Titus Pearls by its Jewish coinventors, sexologists Magnus Hirschfeld and Bernhard Schapiro, suggesting a certain amount of corporate latitude in the Nazi marketplace. Whereas Much AG advertised the anti-impotence pills during the Weimar period as the antidote for a healthy marriage for both partners, Swett argues that marketing strategies shifted under National Socialism to focus on male pleasure, virulence, and physical regeneration, all of which echoed a highly masculinized Nazi ideology.

Fabrice d’Almeida’s innovative concluding essay for the section turns attention toward the concept of luxury,

viewing it as a social construction that the Nazis redefined to demarcate it from its frivolous, “Jewish” Weimarer counterpart. Despite Hitler’s well-known rants on decadence as the root of class conflict, d’Almeida argues that luxuries (e.g., fashion, food, and furnishings) were legitimized in the Third Reich only in so far as they benefited the Aryan race. Conspicuous consumption even came to be part and parcel of what it meant to be a member of the new Nazi elite. For the author, luxury “was no longer merely an inert entity tied to goods and services: it became a means for exploring the recomposition of social relationships” (p. 68). This was nowhere more evident than in the camps.

Part 2 consists of four chapters dealing with aesthetic pleasures, namely, theater, literature, radio, and film. David Pan’s essay, certain to conjure up a lively debate, challenges the idea that the Nazis misappropriated Goethe’s *Faust* for propagandistic purposes. Rather, he argues that there was a close affinity between Nazi ideology and the play, especially in its “anti-religious tendencies and affirmation of an ethic based on individual development,” but also the inevitability of violence in society (p. 90). “The structure of aesthetic pleasure in the Nazi period included both a serious acceptance of violence as the price for progress and an entertainment that diverted attention from the real price that was being paid” (p. 103). Pan further reminds readers that popular productions, like that of Gustaf GrÃ¼ndgens, were applauded by contemporary critics for remaining as true to the original interpretation as possible.

Similarly, Patrick Merziger explores the pleasure of laughter, not through satire or *FlÃ¼sterwitze*, but with an analysis of *Deutscher Humor (Humoreske)* because its emphasis on themes like harmony, community, and solidarity struck a chord with the populace and demonstrated the appeal of certain aspects of Nazi ideology. Karl Christian FÃ¼hrer’s analysis of heretofore underutilized general interest magazines, like the *Allgemeiner Wegweiser*, *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, *Deutsche Radio-Illustrierte*, and *Mein Blatt*, shows that Germans were drawn to such publications to fulfill a variety of distinct pleasures. FÃ¼hrer maintains that the publications with the largest readership achieved their standing by offering a combination of escapism and practical advice (i.e., household tips) while avoiding overtly negative propaganda about social or racial undesirables.

Moving on to popular entertainment during the war, Corey Ross wraps up part 2 with a thorough investigation of radio broadcasts and film during the war, positing that

there was a clear “shift of emphasis from mobilization to distraction” between 1939 and 1945 and that “entertainment and pleasure were ultimately conceived as a means of achieving political goals” for the Nazi regime (pp. 171, 156). The victorious early years of the war witnessed record box office sales for cinema tickets and record demand for radio sets. Newsreels and military documentaries (*Sieg im Westen*, 1941) brought the “thrill of victory” to the home front. Aesthetics and politics further fused as Nazi filmmakers released films that cast the National Socialists in an exalted light (*Der Große Krieg*, 1942) or vilified Germany’s enemies (*Jud SÄ¼Ä*, 1940). Revue films like *Wunschkonzert* (1940) or *Die Große Liebe* (1942) delivered not-so-subtle political messages about the importance duty, honor, and sacrifice. Soldiers sending greetings and song requests to loved ones via the radio program *Wunschkonzert für die Wehrmacht* boosted the morale of the entire “national community.” With the deterioration of the military situation after Stalingrad, however, radio and film offerings lost mobilizing momentum and came to be simply forms of escapist entertainment.

The four chapters that comprise part 3 scrutinize the role of pleasure in identity formation at both the collective and personal levels. Using the work of three female photojournalists (Liselotte Purper, Erika Schmachtenberger, and Ilse Steinhoff), Elisabeth Harvey explores the “visual pleasures” of wartime Nazi Germany, demonstrating the interplay of travel reportage, propaganda, and the creation of a Nazi empire. Touring worn-torn Europe and documenting conquered peoples, novel cultures, and German occupiers for various publications, these women not only found pleasure in carving out hard-earned careers in a sector dominated by men, but also saw their work as an important part of the war effort and a mainstay in the “New Europe.” Ultimately, however, Harvey shows that among many things these women were also propagandists for the Nazi regime.

In a chapter on “political soldiers,” Daniel MÄ¼hlenfeld sets about the difficult task of assessing the degree to which pleasure encouraged a commitment to the party with an examination of functionaries. He makes the case that during the *Kampfzeit*, “*politische Soldaten*” were attracted to the movement, especially the SA, because of the espoused ideals of camaraderie, moral integrity, and self-discipline, to say nothing of hot meals, nice uniforms, and military-like behavior. While little changed immediately after the euphoria of 1933, the enthusiasm of many functionaries soon diminished given the day-to-day grind. Even the pomp and circumstance of meetings, rallies, and marches lost their shine. As a re-

sult, they turned increasingly to other “sources” of pleasure, such as alcohol, violence, professional misconduct, or even crime. Despite the bad press the regime received and loss of social influence because of it, MÄ¼hlenfeld maintains that most of the National Socialist value system remained in place not so much because of the party, but because the populace largely maintained the *Volks-gemeinschaft*.

Those familiar with Thomas KÄ¼hne’s latest book, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler’s Community, 1918-1945* (2010), will not be surprised by his provocative (and most welcome) chapter on the “pleasure of terror.” Tackling the thorny issue of perpetrator motivations during the Holocaust, KÄ¼hne eschews well-known theories of compartmentalization, cruel pathologies, or psychological coping mechanisms, arguing instead from a sociological perspective that “group pleasure” oiled the machinery of genocide (p. 237). German police officers as well as members of the SS and *Wehrmacht* were not pressured to conform, maintains KÄ¼hne, but rather took pleasure in the sense of belonging and togetherness brought about by their common murderous enterprise. Although this collective identity was experienced in different ways and in different degrees by the perpetrators, even those who would not or could not kill became essential parts of the community. Instead of outright challenging the legality or morality of the group’s actions, dissenters often faulted themselves as being too “weak” to do the job. In this manner their “abnormality” reaffirmed the convictions and self-image of the barbarous majority.

The concluding chapter by Mark Roseman stands markedly apart from the previous essays with an examination of the *Bund*, a small, utopian life-reform group based in Essen. Investigating the group’s “informal sociability,” namely, *KÄ¼rperbildung*, and the cohesiveness it wrought, Roseman gives an example of how pleasure drove opposition to Nazism. The members’ commitment to the organization, to one another, and their principles ultimately politicized the Bund and they became quiet resisters. Risking a stint in a concentration camp or even certain death, some members aided the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) while others helped as many as eight Jews in the *Ruhrgebiet* “pass” and thus survive Hitler’s reign.

Using “pleasure” as an analytical category, this book makes a significant contribution to the history of the Third Reich by giving us a new angle by which to approach it. And although it has great potential for adding needed nuance to problems that have busied scholars for

decades, the editors are quick to note that much work still needs to be done to fully grasp how “pleasure” might help us better understand “the appeal of community and sacrifice, racism and even violence” in Hitler’s Germany (p. 13). Is “pleasure” best approached alone or rather in relation to a spectrum of other emotions? Might theoretical models from other disciplines, such as Michel Foucault’s work on the intersection of power, pleasure, and politics, add new light? These are just a few questions that future scholarship will likely address. In any case, *Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany* is a clever, thought-provoking book that has much to teach anyone interested in the Third Reich or the histories of emotion and culture in general.

Notes

[1]. Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 67-68. The book was first published as *Volksgenossen und Gemeinschaftsfremde: Anpassung, Ausmerze, und Aufbegehren unter dem Nationalsozialismus* (Cologne: Bund Verlag, 1982).

[2]. For a fuller treatment, see Wiesen’s excellent book *Creating the Nazi Marketplace: Commerce and Consumption in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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