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Patrick Merziger. *Nationalsozialistische Satire und "Deutscher Humor": Politische Bedeutung und Öffentlichkeit populärer Unterhaltung 1931-1945.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010. 407 pp. $87.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-515-09355-2.

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Published on H-German (December, 2015)

Commissioned by Chad Ross

Is Anybody Out There Laughing?

Plunging into a book titled *Nationalsozialistische Satire und âDeutscher Humorâ* one has a right to expect the occasional chuckle. There are almost none. Its style is so *streng wissenschaftlich* (severely scholarly) that it won the Ernst Reuter dissertation prize at the Free University of Berlin. How is it possible to publish a book on humor and satire in the Third Reich without including a few cartoons, when the graphic arts were such a staple of Nazi propaganda? Yet there is not a single illustration in the entire book. So how are we to get the joke? Well, in the first place, it all depends on what you mean by âhumor.â And by the way, satire is not humor. The author defines these and many other related terms with such fine degrees of distinction that oneâs head begins to swim a little. One of the surprising revelations of his study is the sheer number of theoretical articles published by commentators and authors during the period worrying about whether the public was getting the point. To his credit, he has slogged through whole deserts of arid nonsense of this kind. And he has ploughed through hundreds of third-rate, once popular, and now long-forgotten plays, since one of his central interests is the theater. Perhaps that alone deserves a prize!

One of Patrick Merzigerâs principal aims is to discredit the common perception that humor in the Third Reich was largely expressed in *FlÃ¼sterwitze* (so-called whispered jokes), often directed against the Nazi leadership. These, he claims with some justification, have been foregrounded to emphasize that there was âanother Germanyâ of sensible people who did not follow their leaders uncritically. He also points out that their authenticity as contemporary jokes is frequently questionable, since some editors only started to collect them after 1945. In addition, since many were related in Nazi Party circles and especially among adolescent Hitler Youths, they cannot be cited as evidence of anti-Nazi sentiment. Merzigerâs main focus is on the theaterâhe claims there were sixty thousand stages in Germany in 1933âand on booksâthe Wehrmacht alone had sixty-five million books printed during the Second World War.

The first half of the book deals with satire, which

many authors felt to be an appropriate tool to damage the enemies of the new Reich. Their enthusiasm is curious, and perhaps reflects the fact that few people actually read *Mein Kampf*, where Adolf Hitler had rejected the use of satire in propaganda, mindful of examples in the First World War that portrayed the British as cowardly or stupid. That led German troops to underestimate their enemy, leading to defeats in battle. However, Joseph Goebbels felt that satire was just what was needed, and his own books in this genre easily outsold his rather feeble novel, *Michael* (1929). The goal was to destroy the enemy by making him ridiculous, through laughter to hatred. We are all familiar with grotesque cartoon drawings of Jews, but Goebbels even went to the trouble of touching up photographs, for example, making the nose of Berlin Political Police Chief Bernhard Weiss look bigger in one of his books. The trouble was that heavy-handed satire could provoke sympathy for the target. Already in 1932 one commentator had asserted that, unlike French or Jewish jokes, German humor was characterized by love, tolerance, profundity, and idealism. That could hardly be said for the derision heaped on the opponents of the Nazis. Not all the targets were Jews, of course, and various victims began to protest. In one scene of the 1933 film *Hitlerjunge Quex*, a Communist is shown, reading a popular fashion magazine. Its circulation dropped immediately, and the editors demanded that the scene be cut out. The play, *Die endlose StraÃe*, with successful runs since 1930, made a mockery of an army paymaster. Now that a government more supportive of the military was in charge, the Association of German Paymasters lodged a complaint in 1933 that the play was falsely suggesting that this was âan exemplary representation of frontline experience in the Second World Warâ (Merziger means the First World War) (p. 116). Other plays gave rise to regional outcries against the portrayal of stupid Saxons or boorish Bavarians. Merziger sees this not as a sign of real rebelliousness (*Renitenz*), but rather as a desire to fit in and belong, not to be viewed as the outsider. *Konjunktur* was the big hit of the 1933-34 theater season. The play examined in a comedic fashion the rush of millions of Germans to join the Nazi Party, thus treating the issues of inclusion and exclusion.

In 1933 alone, thirty dissertations on satire and caricature were produced in university departments of journalism. And throughout the book, Merziger emphasizes the importance of such theorists and critics in subsequently effecting a shift away from satire. The negativity was causing damage. In February 1936, the SS newspaper *Das Schwarze Korps* ran an article calling for âMore Humor!â It referred to complaints the editors had fielded from civil servants, tailors, doctors, valets, bakers, accountants, and even lion tamers, all of whom felt they were being ridiculed. Merziger sees this article, directed more at writers than the general public, as a turning point in the shift away from satire toward âGerman humor.â Serious discussion moved from seeing satire as the wave of the future, to conceding that the problems it was causing required some modification, and finally to rejecting it as too destructive. In the late 1930s, satirical magazines duly ran fewer distorted cartoons of Jews, and more of naked women. Even that could not save their plummeting circulation numbers. Some clung to satire rather longer, such as the wartime magazine *Signal*, which initially printed a color cartoon on its back cover, for example, satirizing the British plutocracy. Yet this quickly gave way to pictures of womenâs bare legs in 1941.

A major point made by the author is that the Nazi leadership was in the end unable to control the publicâs taste in humor. He notes that Goebbels never stopped believing that satire and caricature were the most suitable forms of comedy for the regime. But even Goebbels backed off from this at times. In February 1938, one week after Anthony Eden had resigned as British foreign secretary in protest against Neville Chamberlainâs appeasement policies, the Propaganda Ministry issued a press directive, halting any more cartoons of Eden. They would simply fix him more firmly in the minds of the German public, and the man needed to be forgotten. An SS instructional booklet of 1942 rallied its readers with the cry: âWe want to prove to the Bolsheviks, Mr. Churchill, and Mr. Roosevelt that Germany not only understands how to fight better..., we want to prove that it knows how to laugh betterâ (p. 185). That was certainly Goebbelsâs bizarre belief in an article in the *VÃ¶lkischer Beobachter* in February 1939: âThere is enough, and more than enough, humor in Germany.... We believe that in no other European country today is there so much fun as in Germanyâ (p. 186). That was a long way away from the view of authors like Georg Foerster at the dawn of the Third Reich: âWhen itâs a question of to be or not to be, *GemÃ¼tlichkeit* must cease and humor is not appropriateâ (p. 192). It was widely believed, however, that the Germans had an especially fine sense of humor, or as a reviewer of Siegfried Kaderâs book, *Rasse und Humor*, put it in 1939: âEven though the word [humor] is a *Fremdwort* [foreign term], it is only the Germans who possess humorâ (p. 202).

How should we define that concept, though? Some felt that humorists exhibited an affection for their target,

describing it as comical but still belonging to the community, whereas satirists were out to destroy it. A critic in 1935 declared it âdifficult to detach from this umbrella term [humor] subsidiary terms like satire, grotesque, parody, irony and burlesqueâ (p. 215). Theoreticians were invariably not up to the task. Humor was âa mixture hard to define,â you could not provide a formula for it. âHumor is what you never have, as soon as you define itâ (p. 212). Merziger spends probably too much time discussing these sterile debates of justly forgotten authors and critics, drawn from the one thousand books and articles he claims to have studied for his dissertation. And he admits that the Nazi period produced no actual theory of humor, even though pundits drummed on constantly about the marvel of German humor. The fanciful myth was that it was affectionate, forgiving, accepting. Hildegard Demeter felt in 1938 that humor embraced âevery person with healthy feelings,â and their foolishness simply reflected something that was lovable about all human beings (p. 228). Merziger does not mention that this phrase directly reflected *das gesunde Volksempfinden* (the healthy feeling of the people) that was now the flexible backbone of German criminal law, but he does draw the right conclusion: that this would exclude the racially unfit, such as the handicapped and homosexuals. They were presumably humorless and unworthy of protection in benevolent German humor. And indeed the butt of the latter became regular *Volksgenossen*, those who were inside, not outside, mainstream German society. Humor came to treat mostly just the familiar, the lightly aberrant, who were integrated back into the fold in the end. Merziger states that this was the choice of the public, and not directed from above by the likes of Goebbels. This deliberate looking the other way, ignoring outsiders and the persecuted, did not reflect a flight into a dream world, he says; rather, it was a flight into a real but pleasantly fenced-off world that thereby accepted persecution and annihilation. He gets a little carried away in the final pages of the book in describing this as âan enormously appealing feeling that could only be compared with the deep intoxication of alcohol, or regression into early childhood,â but the overall point is sound (p. 368).

What is missing from this study? For all his focus on the theater, he concedes that only some 40 million tickets for the stage were sold in 1942, whereas a decade earlier Germans had bought some 250 million tickets to the movies, and that figure probably rose to 1 billion by 1942. Despite the term âpopular entertainmentâ in the bookâs title, much of the material he parses is rather arcane. He does discuss the attempt to air humorous radio plays, but it turned out that what the public wanted, and therefore increasingly obtained in order to secure their continued support in wartime, was light music. With a regime that placed so much emphasis on the visual arts, this book cries out for illustrations. Merziger does occasionally dissect a cartoon at length, for example, a laborious, twelve-line description of a caricatured Jew (p. 76), but the reader would get the point more readily if able to see it. We are told that a photograph of a performance of that hit 1928 play, *Konjunktur*, shows how awkward the Hitler salute proved to be for some new, would-be Nazis. Then why not show it? Mary Lee Townsendâs book, *Forbidden Laughter: Popular Humor and the Limits of Repression in Nineteenth-Century Prussia* (1992), managed to include forty-four illustrations and is the better for it.

Merziger is altogether too dismissive of cartoons. They were widely used, for example, as reinforcement for a broad array of instructional pamphlets. The *Reichsverband Deutscher KleintierzÃ¼chter* enlivened its wartime booklet on raising goats domestically âin a humorous yet factual and arresting fashionâ with colored cartoons on every page (*Die lustige Ziegenfibel* [no date]). Even a leaflet on safe and considerate driving, *Nackte Tatsachen!* (no date, but after 1939), was filled with slightly saucy cartoons of nudists Adam and Eve. He could have touched, too, on the vast field of childrenâs literature and school textbooks, where cartoons were sometimes used to make lessons more entertaining. But there he is more out of his depth, insisting at one point that there was no such thing as a âKultusministeriumâ (Ministry of Culture) during the Third Reich (p. 136). He seems unaware that this was the âpopularâ term used for the Reichsministerium fÃ¼r Wissenschaft, Erziehung und Volksbildung (Reich Ministry of Science, Education and Popular Instruction), altogether too much of a mouthful even for Germans.

Merziger writes that during the war, cartoons even vanished from the main Nazi newspaper, the *VÃ¶lkischer Beobachter*, except for special campaigns. That may be true, but there were many other outlets he overlooks. He might have paid some attention to the Ernst Herbert Lehmannâs booklet, *Wie sie lÃ¼gen: Beweise feindlicher Hetzpropaganda* (1939-40), which employs both cartoons and photographs as the basis for its rebuttals. In this vein, he instead uses Fritz Reipertâs *In acht Wochen 107mal gelogen! Dokumente Ã¼ber Englands Nachrichtenpolitik im gegenwÃ¤rtigen Kriege* (1939). He is correct that this book was widely sold (or at least distributed) in the hundreds of thousands (actually, with the copy I possess it had reached 1.1 million!), but he analyzes it as a satire,

and I am not sure that it merits that label, consisting rather of a laundry list of dry disclaimers. Along those lines, he curiously omits altogether the famous collection of foreign cartoons, edited by Ernst âPutziâ Hanfstaengl, *Hitler in der Karikatur der Welt: Tat gegen Tinte. Ein Sammelwerk* (1933), which to our eyes today is hilarious in its feeble refutation of some of the best anti-Nazi cartoons of the time. Despite being âvom FÃ¼hrer genehmigt,â or approved by the FÃ¼hrer (âah, he had a sense of humor!), I imagine it was lapped up by Hitlerâs opponents. Nor am I convinced by the suggestion above, regarding Eden, that one should simply ignore inimical foreign politicians. Cartoons remained a major weapon in the propaganda arsenal during the war. Following the by now exiled Hanfstaenglâs lead in choosing foreign cartoonists, but this time to lend them greater credibility (!), Wolfgang Schaeffer in 1940 brought out *Chamberlainâbeschirmt und unbeschirmt: AuslÃ¤ndische Zeichner demaskieren Englands Premierminister*, with over sixty critical but amusing cartoons from Britain, the United States, France, Italy, and elsewhere. After Americaâs entry into the war, Gerhard Brinkmann published a hardback (and thus fairly expensive) book of over one hundred pages of cartoons, *Die USA von G. Bri gesehen* (1942). From all we know about Nazi propaganda (not least from *Mein Kampf*), these simple pictures would be expected to have a greater impact than any dry text. And were negative portrayals of Jews in fact toned down, as Merziger claims, even after most of the killing had been accomplished? I have a stray copy of *Lustige BlÃ¤tter* from July 1944, which indeed contains the kind of racy drawings of attractive women that Merziger highlights. Yet there are also two grotesque cartoons of âmoney-grubbingâ Jews, one of them full-page and in color. Many newspapers may indeed have shrunk to a mere four pages (p. 185), but this kind of humor was regarded as so *kriegswichtig* (strategically important) that even at such a late stage of the war, this magazine stretched to twelve pages, six of them in color.

To sum up, this is a very thorough study of a great deal of material that you or I would never be tempted to read, which the author could have trimmed down, yet at the same time ventured into still more popular areas of humorous entertainment in the Third Reich. The concluding 6 pages of the book are a positively laudable summation of the thesis that he has just spent over 360 sometimes wearying pages developing. I am reminded of Voltaireâs apology for writing such a long letter because he did not have the leisure to compose a short one. Unfortunately that witty and admirable sentiment never seems to apply to German academic dissertations.

Citation: Geoffrey J. Giles. Review of Merziger, Patrick, *Nationalsozialistische Satire und "Deutscher Humor": Politische Bedeutung und Öffentlichkeit populärer Unterhaltung 1931-1945.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. December, 2015.

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