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Matthias Lau. *Pressepolitik als Chance: Staatliche Öffentlichkeitsarbeit in den Ländern der Weimarer Republik.* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2003. 441 S. EUR 78.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-515-08071-2.

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This is a heavy-going but nonetheless worthwhile contribution to the history of official communications and press policy in Germany during the Weimar period. Its focus is on the press offices of the individual German states (*Laender*) between 1918 and 1933 and their role in creating a new form of communication between the state and the privately owned press below the level of the Reich. The press offices of six *Laender* are chosen: Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, Wuerttemberg, Braunschweig and Hamburg. Together, they accounted for almost 90 percent of the population of Weimar Germany and for almost the full range of the party political spectrum, from the left-leaning coalition governments in Braunschweig and Prussia to the conservative/bourgeois-dominated governments in Bavaria and (after 1924) in Wuerttemberg.

As Lau shows, only Prussia and one or two of the war ministries in other states had developed a systematic, bureaucratized relationship with the press before the end of the *Kaiserreich.* Otherwise, press offices at *Land* level emerged only after 1918, partly because the collapse of the monarchy and the establishment of parliamentary democracy made it necessary for the new rulers of Germany to redefine the relationship between the government and the governed. In particular, the new *Pressestellen* could not simply develop old contacts with the pro-government press, as this would open them up to charges of propaganda or press manipulation. On the other hand, they needed to develop a new means of legitimizing the state in the eyes of the masses, not least because of the refusal of some sections of society to recognize the authority of the new republican regime or its right to set normative rules of political behavior. Finally, of course, public expectations were greater and popular cynicism towards the media and government more widespread as a result of the war and the failure of municipal as well as imperial authorities to find an adequate solution to the food problem. Politics more than ever were legitimized by reference to the *Volk* or the national interest, defined more often than not by journalists reporting on events taking place outside parliaments, on the streets and sports fields, in the pubs and on the shop floor.[1]

The new approach was summed up by Edgar Stern-Rubarth in an article in 1927: "In Metternich's time we bought the journalists, in Bismarck's time we appointed them, today we have to win them over" (p. 26). How was this to be done? Firstly, the new *Laender* had to pay particular attention to the type of people they appointed as experts to direct their *Pressestellen.* By and large they had to come from outside the old established bureaucracy, which still looked upon the republic with distaste and sought an aloof position "above politics." They also had to be people who were willing to work with anti- as well as pro-government newspaper editors. This was in spite

of the fact that most *Pressereferenten* had specific party political affiliations, for instance Hans Goslar, director of the press section in the Prussian ministry of state, who belonged to the Social Democratic Party (SPD), or Alexander Zinn, head of the press office for the Free City of Hamburg, who was close to the left-liberal German Democratic Party (DDP). Finally, they had to be people who could dissociate themselves from controversial policies, and in particular from the failures of past administrations, but who would also be willing to counter the *Hasstiraden* of the extreme right and the communists while following a moderate line which represented the views of all possible coalition partners. Ironically, this was at a time when overt propaganda itself was seen as a highly effective tool for communicating with and mobilizing the masses, especially by the extreme right.

How successful were the various *Pressereferenten* in establishing a modern, effective, democratic press policy which legitimized itself by establishing links with all sections of society while fending off the attacks of anti-republican forces? As Lau shows through the examples of the Social Democrats Hans Goslar in Prussia and Gerhard von Frankenberg in Braunschweig, and the right-wing Catholic Hans Eisele in Bavaria, the different press chiefs were often outsiders, mavericks even within their own parties, committed in theory to a new way of doing things, but nonetheless holding widely differing views on the role of political journalism in a democratic state. All three employed a mixture of open and authoritarian methods to give the impression that the policies of their respective state governments enjoyed widespread support among the masses. For instance, Goslar, although a Social Democrat, often resorted to underhand practices, such as publishing anonymous pieces in bourgeois newspapers calling on readers to vote for the Catholic Center Party, which he favored over other bourgeois parties. Under his own name he penned articles propagating unlikely causes, such as Zionism (which at that time was opposed by most German Jews) and abstention from sex before marriage (which alienated the various sex reform movements). He repeatedly engaged in polemics against anti-Zionist German-Jewish groups, including liberal assimilationists and German nationalists, much to the discomfort of the Zionist movement itself. After 1930, he also called on Prussian Social Democrats to direct their attacks on the moderate right-wing German People's Party (DVP) rather than the new Center party Reich Chancellor, Heinrich Bruening. His relationship even with outstanding democratic newspapers like the *Berliner Tageblatt* suffered as a result (p. 110).

In Munich, Hans Eisele was even more underhanded, and his commitment to the republic–as opposed to Catholic federalism and Bavarian particularism–was wavering at best. His press office was widely believed to act not as a channel of communication between the government and the people, but rather as the servant of the dominant party in the state administration, the conservative Bavarian People's Party (BVP). Eisele himself is believed to have been a monarchist at heart, and indeed Lau describes him as such (p. 103). In particular, he seems to have spent a lot of his time briefing against the left-liberal DDP, the BVP's main rival among middle-class voters for much of the 1920s. He also encouraged right-wing attacks on liberal newspapers like the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and the *Berliner Tageblatt*, which he believed to be too pro-centralist and too pro-Berlin. At *Land* level, Eisele presented BVP policy to the Bavarian press as if it were government policy, while the differing views of the DDP and other moderate parties hardly got a look in. Any relationship of trust that might have existed in the early days soon broke down, or, as Lau puts it: "Newspapers editors became increasingly hostile towards the press office because they saw how the *Bayerische Volkspartei-Korrespondenz* was always able to carry more detailed and up-to-date reports on government measures" (p. 164).

With respect to the Nazis, who were a menacing presence in Munich from 1919 onwards, Eisele's policy was simply to minimize press coverage of their activities by ensuring as little information as possible was sent to the pro-Nazi *Voelkischer Beobachter* or to the left-wing press. BVP and center-right newspapers like the *Muenchner Neueste Nachrichten* could generally be relied upon to follow Eisele's line, which was that Nazi provocations against the Bavarian government were best ignored (p. 160). This policy began to backfire, however, once the Nazi party grew in electoral support. Accusations of censorship and authoritarian handling of the press came flying at Eisele from all shades of public opinion, undermining the authority of his press bureau and of the Bavarian government in general. Even so, Eisele stayed in office until the Nazis finally removed him at the end of April 1934 (p. 346).

As for Gerhard von Frankenberg, Lau's main charge seems to be that he, like other press experts, underestimated the threat from the Nazis until it was too late to do anything about it. This was all the more surprising as Frankenberg belonged to the left-wing of the SPD, both during his time as press chief in Braunschweig in the first half of the 1920s, and thereafter as a prominent

member of the state assembly (*Landtag*) and of the pro-republican *Reichsbanner* paramilitary organization. In fact, Frankenberg's political views were hardly liberal or tolerant, and his authoritarian style of leadership made it impossible for him to continue as press chief after the victory of the bourgeois parties in the state elections in December 1924. Rather alarmingly, he was also a passionate supporter of eugenics and wrote articles supporting the sterilization of "asocials" and other "inferiors" (p. 120). In March 1933 he resigned from the SPD and sought an accommodation with the Nazis, so that he might at least rescue his position as director of the Braunschweig natural history museum. His arrest a few days later sealed the end of his career on this front too (p. 123).

In general, the *Laender* seem to have thrown away what chances they had had in 1918-1919 to legitimize and stabilize the new republic. Public opinion continued to view the *Pressestellen* as the organs of an authoritarian and unrepresentative regime which failed to address the actual needs of the German people, and the Nazis were able to exploit such suspicions mercilessly. The fact that Goslar, the longest serving and most prominent of the *Pressereferenten*, was Jewish, and a Zionist as well, was proof enough for Goebbels and other racists that the German press of the 1920s was in the hands of an international Jewish conspiracy bent on destroying Germany from within. Goslar's own approach to running Prussian press policy nonetheless undermined, in a decisive way, the legitimization of state power in the eyes even of liberal papers like the *Berliner Tageblatt*. Without a job after von Papen illegally dissolved the Prussian state government in July 1932, Goslar was forced to flee to Amsterdam when the Nazis came to power in early 1933 and ended up as a prisoner at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where he died just before the end of the Second World War. Interestingly, in September 1932 he had written an article under his own name in the *Israelitisches Familienblatt* defending von Papen and demanding a return to an authoritarian view of the state as the only means of checking the "gigantic wave of fanatical Jew hate" which was sweeping the country (p. 114).

Overall, then, Lau's book succeeds in filling a significant gap in the state of our knowledge of press policy in Weimar Germany. As he shows, previous accounts have largely focused on press policy at Reich level, particularly in respect to foreign and cultural policy.[2] The failure also of state governments to break with the authoritarian practices of the past, even though in many cases they were based on much more stable coalitions than the Reich government, is one of the more depressing aspects of German politics during the 1920s and early 1930s.

Lau's judgements are not entirely negative, however. There were also some success stories. In Hamburg, for instance, Alexander Zinn was able to gain the trust and respect of the leading German and foreign newspapers through a press policy which supported the economic interests of Hamburg to the rest of the world, rather than the partisan interests of the Senate against the opposition parties. Indeed, his circle of supporters extended from the right-wing *Hamburger Nachrichten* to the Social Democrat *Hamburger Echo*, with only the communists, and later the Nazis, opposing his continued stay in office (p. 48). Likewise in Wuerttemberg the government managed to gain cross party support in 1919 for the establishment of a press office under the Catholic Josef Voegele on the basis of protecting the new state against the ongoing threat of revolution and civil disorder. Even here, however, critics of the Weimar regime continued to denounce the press office as an establishment that served the protected interests of politicians rather than the general interests of the *Volk* (it was described by one hostile Landtag deputy as a *Versorgungsanstalt fuer verdiente Parteileute* [p. 81]). By the time of the state elections in May 1924 both the right-wing German National People's Party (DNVP) and the Communist Party (KPD) were calling for the dissolution of the press office. However, when the DNVP won the election, the new Minister-President Wilhelm Bazille performed a spectacular U-turn and decided to keep the press office with Voegele at its head, while removing his liberal and Social Democrat deputies. In this way the press office once again became the focus of narrow partisan struggles rather than communication with the people (pp. 339-340).

The book concludes with a useful appendix listing the press offices of the different *Laender* and the names and party affiliations of those who directed them. Although there is still probably much more to say about the failure of the Weimar Republic to capture the hearts and minds of the German people, Lau has certainly made an important contribution to an on-going debate.

Notes

[1]. See also Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[2] See e.g. Hans-Juergen Mueller, *Auswaertige Politik und Propaganda zwischen Ruhrkampf und Locarno (1923-1925). Eine Untersuchung ueber die Rolle*

der Oeffentlichkeit in der Aussenpolitik Stresemanns (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991); Friedrich Dahlhaus, *Moeglichkeiten und Grenzen auswaertiger Kultur-und Pressepolitik, dargestellt am Beispiel der deutsch-tuerkischen Beziehungen, 1914-1928* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990); Ulrich Heinemann, *Die verdraengte Niederlage. Politische Oeffentlichkeit und Kriegsschuldfrage in der Weimarer Republik* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983); and Kurt Duewell, *Deutschlands auswaertige Kulturpolitik, 1918-1932. Grundlinien und Dokumente* (Cologne and Vienna: Boehlau, 1976).

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