
Reviewed for H-German by Alexander Peter d'Erizans, Department of Social Science, Borough of Manhattan Community College

**Media Dynamics in the Third Reich**

Recently, scholars have increasingly challenged the totalitarian theories of National Socialism prominent in the immediate postwar period, which presented the Third Reich as a finely-tuned "top-down" system of control.[1] In this book, Clemens Zimmerman contributes his own vigorous critique of the totalitarian model in the realm of mass media. He contends that the evolution of media in Nazi Germany did not epitomize the establishment of a perfect, monopolistic system for manipulating public opinion. Instead, he bolsters recent studies arguing for a more nuanced, differentiated view of how media developed, one that has effectively questioned the notion of complete "control" from the top and simple reception of messages by a passive, uncritical populace.[2] Instead, Zimmermann points towards a more complex dynamic between a leadership limited in its ability to determine the emerging mass media's agenda and an increasingly assertive, critical public that exhibited energetic feelings of entitlement. An underlying assumption of his analysis is that in order to understand the nature of propaganda in the Third Reich, one must not only investigate media that explicitly propagated Nazi ideas and goals, but also the many subtle, sophisticated, and "modern" ways through which the regime ambitiously sought to enhance the effectiveness of its dialogue with its citizens.[3]

Although the Third Reich clearly emerges as the focus of his study, as the title implies, the author nonetheless embraces a comparative framework with which he hopes to elucidate not only similar developments, but also contrasting trends. The author argues that National Socialism, Italian fascism, and Francism all represented ambitious governmental systems of control that constructed specific organizations and legitimizing strategies for mass media. All three cases characterize an epoch in which actors in the media were nonetheless able to act (at least partially) independently from "central" control. In all three nations, political decision-makers had to come to terms with media developments that occurred according to their own logic. This comparison facilitates Zimmermann's interrelated goals. First, instead of just describing similarities and differences, he aims to focus on particular causes and conditions leading to the development of mass media by looking at particular political, social, and cultural contexts. Second, he strives to capture the various actors, variables,
and spaces free of regime control during the rise of media. Third, he seeks to delve into the issue of public reception of, and contribution to, growth of mass media. Finally, he wishes to determine the particular links between media evolution with wider processes of "modernization." Zimmerman covers the years of Nazi rule (1933-45) in Germany. For Italy, he begins with 1922 (Benito Mussolini's assumption to power) and ends in 1943 (his removal from power)—after which the domination of the media by the Third Reich prevents effective comparison. For Franco's Spain, the author studies the Civil War years (1936-39), although he does outline the rise of mass media during the Republic (1931-36) in order to adequately establish a context for later Nationalist media policies. The study of Spain extends to 1951, when the "first," most repressive, period of Francoist rule ended social and media gradually loosened up and self-differentiated.

Zimmermann's second chapter analyzes production, distribution, and censorship of books. Convinced that all literature should conform to "appropriate" political, social, and moral criteria, all three dictatorships established formidable censorship institutions quickly. Antisemitism, for example, quickly emerged as a guiding principle for the German censors. Similar policies in Italy emerged only in the years immediately before the Second World War, and never reached the brutality of National Socialist laws. In Spain, the more easily monitored book market meant the censor made himself felt, but in a less radical way. In all cases, Zimmermann argues, regimes were unable to maintain control from the "center" since they had to take into account significant non-ideological factors in the execution of censorship policy. Largely in Italy, but also in Germany, publisher's economic needs remained significant. Indeed, in the former regime, the cultural-political climate ultimately provided relatively autonomous spaces within which to operate. Even as Mussolini's government increasingly cracked down on opposition, a spectrum of meaningful literary and even political reading material remained available. Even Nazi Germany permitted the translation of a certain variety of foreign works. Although Franco ultimately placed his country in "spiritual quarantine," especially during the Civil War and its immediate aftermath, and the post-1939 period represented a significant break with the varied popular book culture of the Republic, the country nonetheless maintained significant international literary ties, particularly with South and Central America (p. 83). Especially in Italy and Germany, "modernity" exhibited itself repeatedly in book industries that harnessed innovative strategies of publishing and production, employed direct marketing and advertising, and issued a variety of book series. New techniques flourished as private businesses often cooperated closely with official institutions and mass party organizations in order to enhance book manufacture and distribution. Throughout the war, these regimes tightened censorship, but never obtained complete control. Even as publishers lost some autonomy, dictatorships nonetheless made tactical alliances and ideological concessions. In both cases,
readers could always choose from a variety of content. While certain Nazi "bestsellers" certainly dominated the market in Germany, "lighter books" nonetheless proliferated. Indeed, in Italy, the author argues that an antifascist counterculture continued to operate.

In chapter 3, the author zeros in on the development of journalism. He notes that Germany sought to direct the press through a formidable, detailed censorship apparatus. Mussolini and Francisco Franco would seek to replicate such a system, but never reach the same level of monitoring. In Italy, the Party press remained in competition with small, yet potent, Catholic newspapers and journals. In addition, older urban-rural and north-south rifts in newspaper readership persisted. Fractured tendencies similarly characterized the Spanish press. In the aftermath of the civil war, for example, while the Nationalists rigorously eliminated republican press organs, Franco was unable to enact fundamental changes to the nature of the Spanish press. Ideological resistance to his government and its policies survived in the literary public, few papers circulated outside the big cities, and media distribution remained decentralized like the government itself, and was forced to cater to the various wings of the ruling authorities. In all three cases, stiffening censorship of the traditional bourgeois press coincided with the party media's increasing loss of credibility with the public. Zimmermann adds that modernization in production, layout, and circulation took place. Germany was the most "progressive" of the governments in pursuit of the goal of spreading newspaper reading as an everyday social practice of all citizens. Finally, he argues, in all three regimes an "active" public often thwarted the goal of a controlled press from "above." Citizens expressed frustration with the monotony of reading material. Suppression of citizen concerns in the press led to mistrust of print media and a drop in readership. As papers lost credibility, readers searched for their "real" information elsewhere. The contradiction between efficient and effective control of print media and the actual place of the press in citizens' everyday lives was most pronounced in Germany, where the relatively strong centralization of the press did not lead to consolidated control. Thus contemporary newspaper readers took notice of multiple deviations in available information, discerned subtexts, and derived varied conclusions from their reading.

In his discussion of radio (chapter 4), Zimmermann explores the manner in which all three dictatorships harnessed the medium to disseminate dramatic if selective propaganda reports and talks. Again, the most intense and determined of the governments was Germany. Even in the Third Reich, however, centralized control and a "top-down" determination of radio programs proved illusionary. The Nazi leadership quickly recognized that in order to resonate with an increasingly "active" and discriminating public, radio programs had to convey ideological priorities and goals more subtly than direct propaganda could. Eventually, the dictatorship catered to the demands of an increasingly
assertive public of entitled consumers. Although the Nazis prohibited the broadcast of music by Jewish and avant-garde composers and filled the airwaves instead with their preferred classical pieces, they remained responsive to citizen demands for "lighter" and "progressive" music. Indeed, with regard to jazz, a bitter battle raged even within the party "center," as cultural conservatives and "forward-thinking" cultural consumers fought for influence. Like print media, radio programming in all three case studies exhibited definite "modern" tendencies, especially in technical training of personnel involved (where fascist Italy and Francoist Spain proved less able) and production of transmissions. Radio revealed itself "progressive" in its production of a varied program of innovative entertainment, such as emcee-style political discussions, live transmissions, comedy programs, melodramas, and children's shows. Such diverse broadcasts responded to the preferences and demands of an increasingly astute and vocal public. More than Italy and Spain, the Third Reich sought (and, for the most part, succeeded) in establishing one unified community of radio listeners. Italy and Spain left room for Church transmissions; moreover, ongoing poverty and slower urbanization hampered the extensive spread of radios. In all three cases, despite governmental efforts, the increasing determination of the public to discover the "truth" led to extensive word-of-mouth communication, widespread emergence of rumors, and rampant listening to prohibited foreign broadcasts.

Cinema (chapter 5) was another branch of mass media in which all three regimes sought to direct development. Zimmermann's attention focuses here on the dictatorship's provision of a multitude of sophisticated documentaries, feature films, and melodramas with "indirect" ideological messages. These productions exhibited a variety of nuanced biases, modulating social roles, and even "transgressive" behavior. In films, "total" politicization, control and the forging of a compliant public ultimately remained unfulfilled. To be sure, the regimes often succeeded in removing control of cinematic production from traditional elites (although Spain remained a notable exception in this regard). In addition, the dictatorships were able to stamp out the most overt avant-garde influences in filmmaking (Italy being the least able and willing in this case). Despite these moves, however, film production enjoyed considerable freedom. Discontent at home and competition from abroad hampered aims for direct and total politicization of filmmaking. In Italy, for example, too much antifascist influence in the industry remained; too few artists devoted themselves to the ideological goals of the regime, and many oriented themselves to international standards. In addition, the overly ordered, sanitized, and prosperous worlds of explicitly propagandistic films hampered audience reception because such environments remained too far removed from the harsh, poverty-ridden realities of everyday life. In the end, such productions failed to produce sympathy for the government. Appealing to the popular mood, regimes provided popular "lighter" productions instead. Domestic and foreign competition hindered the establishment of more homogenous film industries. In both Italy and Spain, the Church continued to wield considerable influence,
especially in the countryside. Audiences maintained their enthusiasm for French and American films. This last development would concern the Chief of the Ministry of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment, Dr. Joseph Goebbels, in the Third Reich as well. Although Nazi Germany certainly produced some significant key production successes, the author contends that it was nonetheless unable to harness enough creativity to reach beyond a few blockbusters to compete effectively with foreign, especially Hollywood, films which were available in better quality and larger numbers. Germany and Italy, more than Spain, conscientiously exhibited and succeeded in achieving the "modern" goal of "nationalizing" the people through film as a consumer good to which all citizens were entitled.

In chapter 6, Zimmerman "steps back" from a study of particular forms of media in order to highlight his main points concerning the dynamics of popular opinion within the public sphere. The author argues that the three dictatorships generally wished to channel the opinions of citizens in definite directions, but these goals remained unfulfilled. In the case of Germany, for example, mass media did quickly emerge as a vital means through which the dictatorship attempted to reach the entire populace and mobilize it for action. It emphasized the removal of "harmful enemies" from the "new" Germany and the forging of one, unified, and harmonious _Volksgemeinschaft_. In the end, however, much of National Socialist success did not rest upon total control and manipulation of information. Popular allegiance to the regime only resulted from resonance between the ideological tenets and goals of Nazism with the local customs, habits, and future aspirations of Germans. Engagement in large, national rituals and mass meetings, involvement in formal and informal communal gatherings on the grass-roots level, and consumption of the products that the burgeoning mass media all provided a unique opportunity for many _Volksgenossen_ to strengthen identifications with their own local solidarities as well as allegiances to the regime. In order to succeed, however, such propaganda had to reflect and bolster personal perceptions and claims in the everyday, or echo and reinforce individual experiences and expectations. The need for such resonance points to audiences that were not passive and uncritical, but demanded much from their media. Even those politically aligned with the Nazis often provided critical voices in this regard. During wartime, frustration and anger at the media grew as the populace demanded more accurate, multi-varied, and lively material from all forms of media. Knowing all too well that the central authorities often engaged in the manipulation of information, people often became critical of the mass media and turned actively to alternative sources, especially as the war progressed. In Italy and Spain, the frequent inability of propaganda to reflect accurately the conditions of harsh everyday life for millions remained even more of a frustrating obstacle for the leadership in mobilizing popular support.

Zimmerman employs a variety of sources in his analysis. For Germany, the author investigates the surviving papers from the Reichsministerium für
Volksaufklärung und Propaganda, the establishment of which in 1933 clearly signaled the National Socialist claim to power over mass media. Other sources include Goebbels’s diaries. Even though his memoirs reveal extensive self-styling and personal bias, Zimmerman reminds the reader that they record thoughts and reflections that are often so explicit, authentic, and spontaneous that, when coupled with other contemporary materials, are ultimately invaluable as an additional primary source. The author draws heavily from the _Meldungen aus dem Reich_, the series of regular, confidential situation reports that the SD compiled for the top Nazi leadership from 1938 to 1945, a significant source for determining public reception and evaluation of particular media products, especially during the war years. Although the information contained in the reports is clearly partial and filtered, the author contends that it nonetheless offers an often blunt and detailed picture of the general mood of the populace, which often influenced the regime’s decisions. Indeed, direct connections arose repeatedly between SD reports and specific decisions made by Goebbels’s Ministry. For Germany, and for Italy and Spain as well, the author employs a wide array of materials and historical analyses on media products (both print and film).

Through an in-depth, well-balanced treatment of a wide variety of archival sources, as well as an energetic engagement with historiographical debates, Zimmermann constructs a formidable critique of totalitarianism as an element of mass media evolution in the Third Reich. He only strengthens his case by comparing Nazi Germany to fascist Italy and Francoist Spain. Despite their varied political systems, contrasting utopian blueprints for change, and differing successes at achieving their goals, all three dictatorships confronted similar social impediments, to a greater or lesser degree, in pushing their agendas forward. In the technically sophisticated, innovative manner the Third Reich used to establish a national network of citizens unified through consumption of sophisticated and subtle products of mass media, Zimmermann thoroughly illuminates the "modernity" of Nazism in the sphere of mass media by describing a process common to large stretches of the West. Most of all, he convincingly argues for a more vibrant dynamic between the priorities and aims of central authorities and an increasingly discerning and critical public. Concerning this last point, Zimmermann could have perhaps emphasized even more the extent to which the rise of such an engaged and active body of citizens, asserting claims not only as fellow _Volksgenossen_, but as "ordinary" individual Germans, ultimately aligned so closely with Nazi visions of social change. As scholars such as John Connelly have recently pointed out, the Third Reich often sought to promote active citizenship from its people rather than mere passivity.[4] In a sense, the Nazis perhaps reaped what they had sown, for the discerning, sophisticated active public that emerged from their efforts developed a powerful sense of entitlement as vigilant consumers of genuine, sophisticated, and varied media products. As Zimmermann himself points out, in its thirst for, and claim to, high-quality media, this discerning and critical citizenry would became well aware of, and often tacitly
or actively support, Nazi atrocities, giving the lie to the victimhood to which many Germans would already start to lay claim amidst the collapse of the Third Reich. This same lively public would also provide the foundations for the establishment of democracy in Germany after the Second World War.

Notes


