German History Advance Access published March 19, 2014

Book Review


This is less a book about the history of advertising in modern Germany, a subject which has recently garnered some attention from cultural historians and those working on the history of consumerism, but rather a collective biography of the admen who pioneered and built the country’s advertising industry. Basing his work on an impressive sample of nearly four hundred independent advertisers and advertising executives in corporations, Hirt tells the story of a somewhat unsuccessful, or at least incomplete, professionalization process between the late Imperial era and the early Federal Republic. The heart of this study, in many ways, is the admen’s complicated relationship with the National Socialist regime, with its regulatory attempts to rein in the advertising market, and with the promise of social recognition some hoped this would entail. Lacking standardized professional requirements, German advertisers, Hirt argues, continuously saw themselves on the defensive against widespread critiques of commercial advertising. In this, they were part of a broader story of Germany’s sometimes uneasy embrace of commercial consumer culture from the late nineteenth century.

From the beginning, advertisers faced a problem of legitimation within the business world (and within society at large) as the impact of their work could not effectively be measured. This caused their work to at some times be belittled, and at others to become subject to exaggerated fears of manipulation. In response, advertisers developed legitimation strategies by creating a ‘community of advertising experts’ which outwardly emphasized both its business savvy and its creative intuition. Hirt traces the origins of the modern advertising ‘profession’ to the Kaiserreich when advertising journals and associations first emerged, comprised of freelance advertisers and a growing number of ad specialists, particularly within consumer goods companies. Yet their professional claims were marred by a lack of specialized training institutions, by dubious business practices, and by a lack of industry-wide standards. By the Weimar years a number of sophisticated agencies had emerged, American ‘full-service’ firms had entered the German market, and German advertisers were part of an international exchange of advertising knowledge, which increasingly drew on consumer psychology, market research techniques and other methodological advances. Despite the developed nature of Weimar’s consumer society, however, advertisers faced profound social criticism of their work and consequently felt a high degree of status anxiety.

Even prior to 1933, many advertisers were thus receptive to the value attached to propaganda by the National Socialists and to the regime’s subsequent efforts to regulate the advertising industry (the effectiveness of which should not be overestimated, as the author cautions). The second part of Hirt’s study adds to recent research by Pamela Swett, Jonathan Wiesen and others demonstrating the entanglement of the ad industry with the National Socialist regime. While even some American commentators lauded new Nazi regulations as an advance towards ‘truth in advertising’, many leading German admen fully endorsed a racialized vision of ‘German’ advertising which also included the elimination of competition from foreign firms and, by the late 1930s, of all Jewish-born advertisers. The forced
organization of the profession and the institution of degree courses, however, did not bring about the status recognition that the admen had hoped for, as Hirt shows. For all their entanglement with the Nazi state, many leading advertising experts such as Hans Domizlaff remained ‘self-made’ men prone to an inflated self-perception, who continually felt the need to vie for recognition from outside the advertising community.

The advertising industry became a central part of West Germany’s so-called ‘economic miracle’ in the 1950s, and numerous successful full-service agencies emerged, as Hirt demonstrates in the third and final part of his study. While firms increasingly embraced the broad set of marketing services offered by US agencies from the interwar years, the author rightly cautions against a narrative of postwar ‘Americanization’ in the advertising business. The personal and institutional continuities to the Weimar and especially to the preceding Nazi era are prominent in his account, as many of the leading ad experts in postwar Germany built on careers that long predated the Federal Republic. Confronted with renewed attacks on their profession as ‘hidden persuaders’ seducing unsuspecting consumers, many advertising professionals persisted in perceiving themselves as slighted and misunderstood prophets of consumer abundance—despite their apparent postwar commercial successes.

Hirt’s voluminous study, based on his dissertation, traces the careers of leading German advertising figures in ample detail and reveals much about their self-understanding within a German economy that underwent tremendous transformations from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The book provides a lot of information about the profession for specialized scholars (a 180-page addendum gives biographical sketches on many of the protagonists), but a more general audience may well be overwhelmed by this detailed account. Aside from a more concise narrative, the book could have benefited from a more multifaceted perspective on the industry to help the reader assess the advertisers’ own perceptions about the precarious status of their profession. The voices of critical observers from the media, industry, academia and the state are not entirely absent, but do not go far enough to counterbalance the at times myopic perspective of his advertising experts. Occasional comparative glimpses at advertisers in the United States and the United Kingdom suggest that, while the problems the profession experienced in Germany were not unique, they were certainly peculiar. The reader is left wondering to what degree this speaks to more fundamental differences in the way that German society in general and German companies in particular engaged with commercial mass consumerism, or whether the status anxieties Hirt traces among the advertisers were owed more to the difficulty of German admen comfortably to define their own niche among business, creative and intellectual elites.

doi:10.1093/gerhis/ghu028

Jan Logemann

German Historical Institute, Washington D.C.