

Gienow-Hecht, Jessica C. E.: *Transmission Impossible. American Journalism as Cultural Diplomacy in Postwar Germany 1945-1955*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1999. ISBN: 0-8071-2310-2; paper: 0-8071-2409-5; xx + 230 pp.

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The Power of Unintended Consequences

The history of occupied Germany draws together a complex of local, national, and international actors whose connections and interactions at times fall victim to the uneasy divides of sub-disciplinary boundaries. While historians of Germany as well as U.S. diplomatic historians have increasingly looked to culture as an important focus of their analysis of the post-World War II and early Cold War period, the particular ways in which culture can be integrated into debates on more typical conceptions of power deserve closer attention.¹ This 1999 book, explicitly conceived as „one case study of ‘cultural diplomacy’” (p. 4), poses German *Kultur* not as an object of Americanization or even as a contested cultural terrain but as the means with which, in spite of itself, a U.S. project of democratization was best realized in occupied Germany.

Jessica Gienow-Hecht undertakes a detailed examination of the U.S. German-language paper, the *Neue Zeitung* and suggests that a closer look at the „transmitters” of culture offers a needed corrective to overly simplistic debates about whether American cultural policy in Germany was characterized by arrogance („cultural imperialism”) or ignorance (blind anti-communism)(p. 5).² Using records primarily from the American military government as well as an analysis of the *Neue Zeitung* itself, she suggests that the paper functioned as an effective force for democratic reeducation in Germany precisely because it operated independent of American occupation officials’ policy intentions. Concentrating on the period 1945-1949, Gienow-Hecht explores how the paper negotiated differences between German notions of *Kultur* and American understandings of culture as a means of coping with the more basic dilemma of how one goes about (re)educating a society

to think along democratic lines.

At its founding the *Neue Zeitung* faced a fundamental question about its purpose and character, a question which Gienow-Hecht suggests rested at the heart of the continuous tensions surrounding the paper: should the *Neue Zeitung* be the United States’ voice in its German zone of occupation or the mediator of a „cultural dialogue between the two peoples” (p. 29)? That this „overt organ” emerged as the latter had much to do with its evolution under the guidance of an emigre Hungarian, who had taken the name Hans Habe. Habe, previously editor in chief of Vienna’s *Der Morgen* emerged out of the US Army’s Psychological Warfare Division as a powerful proponent of an appealing version of reeducation in Germany. According to Habe, reeducation should be like a movie not a lecture (p. 24). Only thus, he argued, would Americans be able to get through to the Germans („psychologically difficult cases” as he called them) and create an „aristocracy which can really lead Germany into the family of free peoples” (pp. 24-5). In order to facilitate an appeal to the *Bildungsbuergertum*, he proposed to emphasize German *Kultur*. Habe sought out the „best liberal minds among the living German writers” (p. 25) to contribute essays for this cultural elite. Gienow-Hecht suggests that „highbrow” discussion of Picasso or Grant Wood in the familiar context of the *Feuilleton* became a comfortable means

¹. Of particular interest is some recent work that considers political and cultural struggles across the East-West divide. Uta Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) explicitly addresses the extent to which the practices of (American) popular culture constituted political acts in postwar Germany. See also the collection of essays in Konrad Jarausch and Hannes Siegrist, eds., *Amerikanisierung und Sowjetisierung in Deutschland, 1945-1970* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1997).

². Gienow-Hecht provides a lengthy listing of the literature in this debate. Walter Hixson’s book *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997) likely appeared too late for inclusion. Its discussion of the indirect successes of cultural policies criticized in Washington in many ways parallels those made in this book. Gienow-Hecht does cite Hixson in her review essay, „Shame on US? Academics, cultural transfer, and the Cold War—A critical review, *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2000), p. 467, n. 8.

for the German readership to encounter the notion that German *Kultur* was not incompatible with modernity. In the words of Erich Kaestner, it promoted a kind of „nonpolitical democracy“ (p. 66).

Gienow-Hecht asserts that the use of *Kultur* brought home the American message in a way that a more „overt“ approach could not. The interstitial identity of the *Neue Zeitung*’s emigre staff, with one foot in German and one in American culture, helped them recognize this potential connection. In a telling example, she recounts an encounter between Hans Habe and the German writer, Erich Kaestner, the paper’s first cultural editor. According to Habe, „Although I was an American, I wanted to make it clear to him that I was not a ‘real’ American; he, in contrast, was German but thought it necessary to make it clear to me that he must not be counted among the ‘typical’ Germans“ (p. 43). This conscious assertion of ambiguity is the key point upon which Gienow-Hecht’s book seems to rest, the very basis for successful cultural transmission. Indeed, in her conclusion Gienow-Hecht wonders whether, in the service of cultural diplomacy, „the transmitters of U.S. values should never be American-born“ but rather persons „who have gone through a process of assimilation from one culture to another“ and are thus „better equipped to bridge the gulf of understanding between them than are persons who stand on one side or the other“ (p. 186).

But was *Kultur* as uniquely perceived by these emigre staff members really the key? The common characteristic that Habe and Kaestner seem to demonstrate in the above example is one of general skepticism and a ready willingness to criticize the proponents of any given culture or identity. In other words, they do not act as mediators between two distinct truths but as debunkers of cultural „truth“ in general. For Gienow-Hecht, however, the *Neue Zeitung*’s success in promoting „American values“ depended on its ability to link two icons: *Kultur* and democracy. She explains the *Neue Zeitung*’s focus on the educated middle class as an effort to „democratize“ that segment of German society, which had been most resistant to „modernity“ (p. 65). „*Kultur* would form the bond to unite both antimodern and prodemocratic

elements in Germany“ (p. 68).

The book’s second half turns from a focus on this cultural process to an examination of the paper’s gradual demise in the evolving Cold War. It begins with an account of Soviet seizures of the *Neue Zeitung* in Berlin. Ironically, the fact that the Soviets perceived the *Neue Zeitung* as a threat caused American officials to recognize that the paper could potentially be deployed as a Cold War weapon. Many of these officials felt that the (German) cultural focus of the paper and its failure to present enough „overt“ material about the United States and American life underutilized the *Neue Zeitung*’s propaganda potential. Gienow-Hecht argues, however, that the paper’s focus on the East German SED (as opposed to the Soviet Union) as the real threat to German reconstruction provided a nearly seamless transition from antifascism to Cold War anti-communism. According to the paper, the East Germans used Nazi methods and even welcomed Nazis into their ranks; thus a „new“ battle against that enemy still fit into the *Neue Zeitung*’s antifascist, reeducational project and simultaneously proved an effective way of integrating West Germans into the Cold War. However, under the influence of growing anti-communism at home as well as growing distrust of non-native born Americans, U.S. officials exerted growing pressure on the paper to change its editorial approach. In fact, for all of their criticism of the Soviet German-language organ, this type of „overt“ propaganda organ was increasingly what many Military Government officials desired.

In the end Gienow-Hecht succeeds in her effort to problematize a simple version of how American cultural policy functioned in early postwar Germany. She rightfully criticizes the shortsightedness of much of the American Military Occupation apparatus while at the same time suggesting that a great deal of what happened on the ground took place independent or even in spite of occupation policy. However, her celebration of the *Neue Zeitung*’s emigre staff and its cultural project does provoke some questions. Although the negative effect of the 1948 currency reform on newspaper purchases and the use of newspaper as raw material garner brief mentions, the

pervasive culture of scarcity remains—like the two photos of a woman and children in the midst of rubble (following p.114)—little more than a backdrop. Although Gienow-Hecht points to the number of *Neue Zeitung* staffers who assumed prominent positions in West German society and recounts fond recollections of many readers decades after its publication, the day-to-day functioning of the paper's consumption remain less clear than its production. More significantly, the explanatory power of the paper's use of *Kultur* as a means to overcome the social and political divides of the Weimar Republic depends on too simple a vision of the German past with which the project of antifascist reeducation must grapple. The notion that this project can make modernity and democracy palatable to the *Bildungsbuergetum*, seems to presume a German public, whose members may have had diverse degrees of complicity in Nazi crimes but certainly have a common (cultural) construction of the meanings into which this past must fit. While the *Neue Zeitung* staffers receive wonderfully complex descriptions that challenge any simple notions of identity, the German public (and to some extent, even other American officials) remain much less ambiguous. The simple equation of *Bildungsbuergetum* with antimodern as well as the rather unfortunate translation of Mitlaeufer as „Hitler's willing executioners“ (p. 62) suggest a conceptualization of the prewar German past that doesn't quite mesh with the messiness of the occupation processes on which the book focuses. Still, these criticisms point rather to the stimulating nature of the questions, which the book provokes. Gienow-Hecht has provided a highly readable history that emphasizes the need to focus not just on the policies but also the processes of cultural politics. As such it is certainly welcome.

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