

Witamwas, Birgit: *Geklebte NS-Propaganda. Verführung und Manipulation durch das Plakat*. München: de Gruyter 2016. ISBN: 978-3-11-043808-6; 292 S.

Rezensiert von: Paul Moore, Stanley Burton
Centre for Holocaust and Genocide Studies,
University of Leicester

How pervasive was Nazi propaganda? The question has acquired new impetus thanks to the 'voluntarist turn' (Neil Gregor) of historians emphasising acclamation and approval for the Nazi regime, as well as new histories focusing on space, sound and vision as objects of historical analysis. Studies of society in the Third Reich now speak of „Nazi soundscapes“ and of Germans being „assaulted“ by audio-visual propaganda as „radio [and] film turned Nazism into spectacle“.¹ Detractors of such approaches are quick to point out the agency Germans retained in their relationship with the output of the regime. One could avoid the cinema, decline – as increasing numbers did – to buy a newspaper, turn off or tune out the radio. Posters, the study under review notes, were different: more abundant than their closest analogue, the leaflet, and not dependent on willingness to pay attention – in short, unavoidable („unausweichlich“, p. 11).

Histories of Nazi propaganda are increasingly inclined to agree. Jeffrey Herf's study of anti-Semitic propaganda during the Second World War examined 'Parole der Woche' wall newspapers as „the most ubiquitous and intrusive aspect of Nazism's visual offensive“ precisely because, unlike newsreels, „one could not avoid“ this poster-newspaper hybrid. Herf linked this to the rhythm of daily life in Germany, „a nation of pedestrians“ where car ownership was relatively low and public transport the main alternative to walking.² Nicholas O'Shaughnessy's interdisciplinary examination of Nazi propaganda, drawing upon insights from the marketing world, likewise saw posters as key to the Nazi „sensory assault“.³

Certain images from Nazi poster propaganda remain familiar in our own time, and can inform debate around political communication still.⁴ Birgit Witamwas' art-historical study thus represents a welcome addition to

the literature on mass communication in the Third Reich. Taking a broadly chronological approach to the topic of Nazi propaganda posters, it focuses on the Weimar years and the pre-war Third Reich and analyses in detail 150 posters, mostly drawn from the Bundesarchiv's collections. Witamwas focuses on the visual strategies, designs, and themes represented, but also discusses individual artists. Reflecting her own methodological approach, a historiographical chapter discusses previous studies largely on the basis of whether these discussed the posters as historical or art historical documents. Witamwas notes a reluctance, lasting into the 1970s, to treat these as artworks, and a reluctance to take them seriously as art historical documents lasting twenty years more. Tellingly, much of her historiographical chapter comprises discussion of exhibition catalogues as among the few sustained examinations of Nazi posters. Even central historical studies, such as those by Gerhard Paul (cited frequently throughout), regard aesthetic analysis as secondary, she notes (p. 27).

The first analyses of Nazi posters were, of course, undertaken in the Third Reich itself. Sharing the dim view of the masses held by Hitler and Goebbels, these studies for internal use could be remarkably critical of the regime's propaganda output, while also identifying an unconscious impact on the passerby due to the posters' permanent presence on the street (p. 17). Witamwas is clear that posters represented the central medium of mass communication both before and after 1933, and devotes her book to the question of the „aesthetic-formal means [by which] Natio-

¹ Carolyn Birdsall, *Nazi Soundscapes. Sound, Technology and Urban Space in Germany, 1933–1945*, Amsterdam 2012; Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich*, Cambridge and London 2006, p. 65.

² Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust*, Cambridge and London, 2006, pp. 14, 29. On Schweitzer p. 29 (involved with Parole from 1937); his two wartime posters pp. 222f. Discusses Schockel book at pp. 32f., Madebach at p. 33–4.

³ Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, *Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand*, London 2016, p. 26.

⁴ See for example the discussion of anti-terrorism posters at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/07/anti-terrorism-posters-nazi-propaganda> (26.01.2016).

nal Socialist ideology was disseminated" (p. 13). The „Machtergreifung“ was, she argues, the central political event for NS-Plakatkunst, pre-1933 posters having been largely dedicated to electioneering, and posters produced under the one-party state were primarily intended to promote party events and organisations (p. 14).

Witamwas' study is at its best when analysing the design and iconography of the posters, and this is done in some detail, with a paragraph taken for each on average. The art historical approach works well as the author deconstructs the visual language of Weimarer era posters, some of the imagery of snakes and swords drawing upon cultural associations relating to medieval times (p. 47), with even the positioning of human figures laden with meaning – right as positive, left as negative (p. 118). More familiar territory is also covered as the violence of poster imagery is made clear, and the political symbolism of the handshake invoked (p. 119). Even fonts and colours conveyed ideological messages, *Frakturschrift* denoting the national idea (p. 98), while the frequent use of red for text or even background was deliberately programmatic and provocative (p. 37) in intent, as well as visually striking. Both overt anti-Semitic imagery and depictions of Hitler were relatively infrequent in Nazi posters, Witamwas finds, without this necessarily implying that these themes were less important – rather, such imagery was used sparingly to increase its effect when deployed, as for example in the use of Hitler's likeness to get out the vote for the regime's plebiscites (p. 128).

While a few were designed by women, this remained as rare as posters aimed at a female audience: Nazi posters were an overwhelmingly male affair – men depicting men. Three artists provide the focus of the study. Hans Schweitzer, relatively familiar already from the work of Peter Paret, Bernhard Fulda and Gerhard Paul, is discussed alongside Felix Albrecht and Ludwig Hohlwein. The three artists, Witamwas writes, „each defined a [specific] phase of the National Socialist image“ in poster form (p. 194). „Kampfzeichner“ Schweitzer's brutalist output contributed that figure of the „unknown SA man“ so ubiquitous to Nazi election posters, the bur-

ly, square-jawed German everyman towering over the pygmies of Marxism and Weimar democracy, implacable gaze fixed on Germany's future. Such combative and essentially negative imagery was poorly suited to the NSDAP's bid for Volkspartei respectability, to say nothing of the peacetime Third Reich, and Schweitzer's heyday duly came to an end in 1932, although he was able to enjoy a renaissance a decade later, returning to old motifs in the context of the Second World War (p. 72).

The interim saw Felix Albrecht replace Schweitzer as preeminent (p. 76). His election posters targeted specific voter groups, including – albeit still infrequently – women for the first time (p. 77). From 1933 onwards the „self-presentation and idealisation of National Socialism“ was the primary concern of poster artists like Albrecht and Hohlwein (p. 173). Witamwas identifies commonalities in the work of the three artists – not least the ever-present monumental male figures – but also delineates the specific styles of Albrecht and Hohlwein, as well as Schweitzer's more familiar aesthetic. Not a member of the NSDAP until May 1933, Hohlwein's background was in the world of advertising, and his more painterly style was turned towards promoting the regime's social policies and charitable campaigns and, like Albrecht, depicting archetypes of the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft (p. 131). Examples of Hohlwein's political posters are considered alongside his advertising work, the two showing remarkable similarities (p. 148).

This points to one potential criticism of Witamwas' study, namely that it at times considers this material rather in isolation. The discussion of Hohlwein's marketing output is very brief, and it would have been interesting to read more of Witamwas' views on how the two fields of activity related to each other. More broadly, Witamwas's examples, and her analysis, make manifest the „artistic diversity of National Socialist poster propaganda“ (p. 157), with separate styles associated with Berlin and Munich (n. 2, p. 130), but such insights could have been explored at greater length. Passing mention is made of the influence on Schweitzer of Käthe Kollwitz for his iconic 1932 poster „Our last hope“ (p. 69), and of the tactical borrowing of styles from

constructivism (p. 158) or other approaches associated with ideological enemies (p. 174). Most strikingly, the comparison with imagery found in the German Communist Party's propaganda is lacking, and this despite the Nazis' well-known admiration of communist propagandists (p. 18). Other historians have noted the commonalities between the iconography both deployed of muscular arms grasping the enemy and fists raining blows.⁵ Here too, Witamwas restricts herself to observing in a footnote that Nazi posters frequently drew upon elements from KPD and SPD posters (n. 211, p. 101). Some readers may also find the strongly art historical approach frustrating – Witamwas leans heavily on historians like Paul for contextualisation, and the close analysis of each poster does become repetitive at times.

Such minor criticisms aside, Witamwas has produced an engagingly written and insightful study, offering a great deal of illuminating analysis of a wide range of Nazi propaganda posters. Her book will be read with profit by anyone interested in modern political communication and in National Socialist propaganda.

HistLit 2017-1-096 / Paul Moore über Witamwas, Birgit: *Geklebte NS-Propaganda. Verführung und Manipulation durch das Plakat*. München 2016, in: H-Soz-Kult 08.02.2017.

⁵The similarity of imagery and style used by the KPD and NSDAP is noted, amid specific reference to Schweitzer's work, in Corey Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich*, Oxford 2008, pp. 238–40. Ross, for his part, discusses Hohlwein as a leading commercial artist, but not in terms of his political work, p. 103.