
Recent years have seen a renewed interest in the history of German media. Placed in the broader context of modern mass society, they are now conceptualised as means of communication in which entertainment and political messages were closely intertwined. The decades between the 1880s and the 1930s are seen as a period of transition in which new technologies, along with an emerging mass market and the effects of the First World War, brought about a visualisation and dramatisation of media culture. Bernhard Fulda’s study seeks to combine this novel approach with the more traditional question
of what impact the media had on the ultimate demise of the Weimar Republic. Focusing on the press—the still predominant medium of information as well as entertainment during the Weimar years—he rightly argues that previous scholarship simplified the relationship between press and politics by asserting a direct link between press campaigns and voting behaviour. Fulda instead sees this relationship as characterised by two interconnected features: a self-referential symbiosis of journalists defining themselves as political actors and politicians overstating the impact of these journalists’ opinions on the political attitudes of the population at large, on the one hand, and the pressure created by the sensationalism of the new tabloids that no longer relied on subscribers but on street sales, on the other. As a result, Fulda argues, a highly fragmented press, where ideological differences were further exacerbated by dramatised reporting, ‘contributed significantly to the polarization of Weimar society and the escalation of political conflict’ (p. 223).

Based on a case-study of Berlin and its vicinity, Fulda explores the features and effects of this relationship between press and politics. Giving an overview of the development of the Berlin press from 1918 to 1932, he identifies the lack of entertainment value and the pronounced political messages as the chief reasons for the falling circulation of the traditional Gesinnungspresse, but emphasises that the Generalanzeiger, as well as the new tabloid press, were far from being non-partisan. Mixing negative opinions on the Weimar parliamentary system with sensationalism, papers of the political extremes, such as Willy Münzenberg’s Communist Welt am Abend and Goebbels’ Angriff, made much more effective use of the tabloid style than did their pro-republican counterparts. The subsequent chapters discuss the coverage of key persons and events from 1918 to 1932. Arguing that, as a consequence of the abdication of Wilhelm II, newspapers gained sufficient room for manoeuvre to be able to build up politicians as villains or heroes, Fulda shows how Matthias Erzberger came to be portrayed in the first, and Adolf Hitler in the second, role by the right-wing press. In both cases, trial reports played a crucial role. Coverage of the Barmat scandal in late 1924 and early 1925 provided another example of anti-republican reporting that thrived on the sensationalism of a wide readership, while being fuelled by leaks coming from a state prosecutor with rightist views and ties to the Hugenberg business empire. Taking the 1925 presidential election campaign as his principal evidence, Fulda points out that in the rural vicinity of Berlin most of the seemingly apolitical Generalanzeiger papers, by assuming an explicit pro-Hindenburg stance, reflected the broad bourgeois mobilisation against the republic based on nationalism and anti-socialism that Peter Fritzsche and other scholars have described. The years 1928 to 1930 saw an inflated coverage of the Communist threat fed by actual and alleged preparations for violence, and leading, as Fulda contends, to fatal police over-reaction during the first days of May 1929. At the same time, the NSDAP gained prominence and the image of a dynamic new political force through its own violence, dramatised coverage of the Sklarek scandal, and its determined and unified resistance to the Young Plan—whereas a deeply divided DNVP was unable to reap the benefits from Hugenberg’s massive press campaign (that placed himself, not Hitler, centre-stage) against the plan. Fulda sees the highly-charged political atmosphere of 1931 and 1932 as the result of a ‘massive media panic’, created by extremely partisan reporting which exploited fears of a civil war and eluded government attempts to tone it down.

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Fulda’s study, which is well grounded in archival and published sources, including 53 newspapers, confirms the argument of previous scholarship that a fragmented political culture was a main cause of Weimar’s demise. But it deserves praise for throwing the differentiated structure of the press and its complex relationship with politics into sharp relief. By identifying the sensationalism of the tabloids as a major driving force in the development of the press in general, the author has provided a reconceptualisation of Weimar media and political history on which further research will have to build. The study could have profited, however, from a more systematic development of its argument. Fulda does not explain his selection of press topics. As the focus is on clearly divisive issues, Rathenau’s murder and Stresemann’s death, to name but two events that lent themselves much less to partisan reporting, are not discussed. While the importance of the tabloid press is pointed out, in particular for the second half of the 1920s, there is no detailed examination of its coverage of political and non-political topics that would allow commonalities and differences among papers of different political leanings to be identified and an assessment to be made of their respective capabilities of catering to metropolitan consumers in search of entertainment. While Fulda is right in pointing out that the political violence of the final Weimar years was greatly amplified by the media for partisan purposes, he overstates his case by neglecting other causes of this violence such as the militarisation of street politics and the cult of masculinity which recent studies have emphasised, including Sven Reichardt’s work on the Berlin SA that is even absent from Fulda’s bibliography. His findings therefore could have been better situated in the broader context of political culture. These critical points notwithstanding, Fulda’s study will serve as an inspiring contribution to Weimar scholarship.

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