
There is a long tradition of studies of the relationship between ‘press and politics’ in Britain. Voluminous books such as *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, by Stephen E. Koss, have shown in detail, drawing on rich archival material, how British newspapers interacted with political parties and politicians. German media historians, by contrast, have traditionally focused on different topics. They used to concentrate much more on techniques of censorship and political control and rarely analysed the political impact of the media and journalists. This has changed in recent years, especially in the context of studies written under such rubrics as the ‘cultural history of politics’, or the ‘new political history.’ This strand of research reminds us that media and politics are not two separate systems trying to influence each other, but are connected in complex and multi-faceted ways.

Bernhard Fulda, whose study is based on his Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, is well aware that the role and influence of the media are not clear cut. Consequently, he begins by observing that the liberal German Democratic Party (DDP) ceased to exist after 1930, although the majority of the press in Berlin supported it. This example warns us against believing in simple stimulus–response models and opens up Fulda’s main question: why did people read what kind of newspaper with what content and effect? He also wants to highlight the role of journalists as political actors and assess their impact within the political system and on politicians. Fulda refrains from theoretical reflections and is much more interested in specific case studies. He does not, as the title of his book suggests, offer a complete history of ‘press and politics in the Weimar Republic’. Instead, he focuses on selected newspapers from Berlin and on examples concerning famous and sensational political campaigns. His main interest is the general political content of the papers and their perception of politicians, but his book offers many arguments and findings of general importance.

The first chapter gives a brief overview of the press in Berlin. Fulda shows the shortcomings of several party newspapers—financial and with regard to readers’ opinions—by comparison with the powerful tabloids, which had a partisan Weltanschauung and political contents. He then looks at the tabloid press in Berlin at the end of the Weimar Republic. As his statistics show, the circulation of the political papers decreased between 1925 and 1930, while that of the tabloids increased. Fulda argues that the strong press of Ullstein’s and Mosse’s publishing houses did not stop the decline of the liberal democrats because they had a rather vague political message and often addressed Social Democratic readers. At the same time, Hugenberg’s successful right-wing newspapers had a ‘decisive electoral impact’, which limited the decline of his conservative party and promoted the rise of the Nazi party (NSDAP) (p. 41).

Subsequent chapters examine the campaigns against Matthias Erzberger and Friedrich Ebert, and the Barmat scandal. The campaigns against Erzberger are interpreted as successful examples of agenda-setting—for right-wing politicians they provided a ‘toolkit for the construction their own political pronouncements’ (p. 73). The campaigns against Ebert are also used to demonstrate cooperation between the right-wing press and the justice system during the Magdeburg trial. Another interesting chapter looks at the provincial press around Berlin. Here Fulda examines coverage of the presidential election campaign in 1925 and the referendum concerning the expropriation of the princes in 1926. Both cases show that the so-called ‘unpolitical’ provincial press openly supported Hindenburg in the 1925 election and avoided reporting on the expropriation campaign (p. 125).

The final chapter of the book attempts to explain the rise of the NSDAP. Here Fulda argues that after the anti-Young Plan referendum it was not Hugenberg’s newspapers, but the constant bad news concerning Hugenberg’s German Nationalist People’s Party (DNVP) that was responsible for the success of Hitler’s party (p. 167). The press coverage of communist violence, the Sklarek scandal, and government indecision had a similar impact. In this context Fulda argues that the scandals indicate the right-wing tenor of the Weimar press because the right wing’s sensation-mongering was successful. Moreover, Brüning’s dismissal is explained as an exaggeration of the existing political violence and crisis in the press. As Fulda states,
even around 1932 there was a ‘war of the words’ produced by the press rather than a ‘civil war’. However, many historians might wonder whether the violence of those years was not more real than a discourse within the newspapers.

The main argument of the book is developed in its conclusion. Fulda suggests that the elite newspapers had little impact on voting behaviour, but a large impact on the political and parliamentary debate. Politicians were professional newspaper-readers, and they were affected more than anyone else by the press because they overestimated the impact of the media on ‘the masses’. The tone of political newspapers was much more polarized and polemical than politics, and this made it much more difficult to find compromises in parliament. Nevertheless, Weimar politicians not only preferred the German partisan press to the much more neutral Anglo-American model, but also advocated laws against the freedom of the press because they were not able to tolerate the partisan polemics of other party newspapers. Consequently, Fulda observes a ‘structural crisis of German Weltanschauung journalism’ (p. 222).

The majority of these arguments are quite convincing. Sometimes they seem a little vague or even contradictory, but this is because the impact of the media is hard to assess. The book leaves many points for further research. One problem is that this book is mainly based on public discourses, conducted either in the newspapers or by observers such as politicians and academics. Fulda argues, for instance, that political speeches in parliament were ‘based on cutting and pasting, put together from a number of leading articles’ (p. 206). This important argument pointing to the strong impact of the press on politicians sounds convincing, but it is based on a quotation from a contemporary article. What we need for a more detailed knowledge of relations between press and politics is, in this case, a systematic comparison of newspaper articles and parliamentary speeches. Also, the relationship between journalists and politicians remains somewhat vague. Of course, comparatively little material on journalists can be found in German archives. However, future research in this field could also examine the archival papers of politicians (such as Erzberger and Ebert in the case of this book) and their correspondence with and about the press. Finally, the book tells us less about journalists, who are rarely even mentioned by name, than about politicians who became targets of the press. Future research on ‘press
and politics’ should also focus on the biographies of those involved. This might reveal in more detailed how the careers and milieux of journalists and politicians were connected.

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