

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Enterprise in the Period of Fascism

Review Number:

324

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 April, 2003

Editor:

Harold James

Jakob Tanner

ISBN:

754600777X

Date of Publication:

2002

Price:

£42.50

Pages:

284pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Place of Publication:

Aldershot

Reviewer:

Philip Morgan

This interesting and important book shows how far we have come in the historical treatment of the relationship between the business world and fascism in the mid-twentieth century. Once upon a time, the connections between capitalism and fascism, sometimes taken to the point of reducing fascism to the 'expression' of capitalism in a particularly nasty phase of its development, were seen as providing the grand structural explanation which the general theorising about fascism seemed to demand. As Gerald Feldman tells us in his gentle and ironic introduction, the declining use of Marxist tools of analysis of fascism has not meant any loss of momentum in the investigation of the relationship between business and fascism. But now the study of that relationship is driven by legal action for recognition and recompense by organisations and groups representing Jews and other victims of Nazism and Nazi occupation during the Second World War; the response to which has been official governmental commissions of inquiry and 'in order to enable such investigations' the opening up of previously inaccessible public and private archives.

It is tempting, also, to see this reinvigorated area of study as part of a more general late twentieth-century move towards the 'globalisation' of morality (or should it be the morality of 'globalisation?'), a kind of subsidiary or spin-off of the process of 'globalisation' itself. This move involves the attempt to define and apply international criteria which will act as both guides and constraints on the behaviour of individuals and

communities. Another sign would be the very rapid indictment before an international war crimes tribunal of those held responsible for 'crimes against humanity' in the 1990s break-up of Yugoslavia. This litigious trend, if there is one, is certainly putting historians back to work. The two editors of this book are globe-trotting consultants of official historical commissions. This is not meant unkindly. The international, or supranational, protection of human rights is a highly desirable indicator and measure of the emergence of an international 'morality', in train since 1945. Given the source and impetus behind the current researches into business and fascism, a moral and ethical dimension is inevitably being written into the historical investigations of twentieth-century European political economy.

The book is an edited collection of papers given to a conference of the Society for European Business History, and poses the usual unenviable challenges of publishing conference proceedings: how to be as inclusive and comprehensive as possible; and how to bring order and consistency of theme(s) to contributions which may differ in quality and range. Generally, the editors make a pretty good fist of an always difficult job. I particularly liked the way in which something of the immediacy and freshness of a conference, and of the open-endedness of historical research, was captured in the brief but often stimulating critiques which conclude each sub-set of contributions. But why is there no such 'comment' section for the final part of the book, which deals with business during the Nazi occupation of west European countries?

A few contributions seem to be answering different questions to the rest. This, I thought, was the case with the essay on Spanish businessmen from the 1920s to the 1940s, which deals in very general terms with the effects of autarky and state intervention on the performance of the Spanish economy, and the 'contribution' of business to the 'rise' of Franco's dictatorship. It lacks the well-worked case studies that dominate the contributions on Fascist Italy and inform those on businessmen in Nazi Germany. But this probably (and understandably) reflects the current state of the historiography on these matters for Spain.

Less understandable is the claim made in a couple of the other contributions, that there is no 'proper' definition of what constituted economic collaboration with the German occupier during the war, and that the historiography of such collaboration is inadequate. This view justifies the author of the essay on Denmark ruling out any sustained discussion of economic collaboration with the Germans, beyond the off-the-cuff remark that 'the frontier between collaborating and just trying to survive is not an easy one to define' (p. 140). Quite? What we get instead is an interesting account of how the Danish economy performed during the war. Whatever one makes of the clunking and over-literal categorisations of 'collaboration' contained in a book like Werner Ring's *Life with the Enemy: Collaboration and Resistance in Hitler's Europe* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson; London, 1982), there are any number of recent studies of the wartime occupation experience of France and the Low Countries which have reshaped the conventionally polarised treatments of 'collaboration' and 'resistance'. Anyway, one would expect in a book of this kind to find attempts to fill the alleged gaps in the definition and historiography of collaboration, rather than capitulation to their apparent inadequacy. It must be said that the former is precisely what Richard Overy does, among other things, in his piece on the *Grossraumwirtschaft*, squeezing out the meaning of economic collaboration from the most unpropitious of contexts for it, the forcible colonisation and 'Germanisation' of occupied Poland and western Russia, where one might imagine the collaboration of local business to be largely irrelevant or immaterial to Nazi occupation.

The section on the neutral countries is potentially the most interesting but actually the most disappointing of the book. The chapter on Switzerland is a tantalising introductory survey, which ends abruptly, just as the reader's interest is mounting. Again, this might reflect the stage the research has reached. The planned contribution on Portugal did not materialise at the conference, and one wonders why the editors did not commission something after the conference for this publication, which is the usual recourse when a conference does not come up with the goods. I also wondered about the logic of pairing Switzerland with Denmark in this section, when the continued existence of a semi-autonomous government system probably made Denmark's position in the patchwork Nazi 'New Order' in northern and western Europe more analogous to that of Vichy France. A similar nit-picking point might also be made about the pairing in another section of contributions about Fascist Italy and authoritarian but not fascist Spain.

These quibbles about the near-impossible editorial decisions that have to be made about the organisation of any multi-authored collection of essays, should not detract from the important things which emerge from the book as a collective effort.

First, the book as a whole confirms the 'primacy of politics' in the 'era of fascism'. In Italy, Germany and Spain, businessmen found themselves reacting to, and obliged to accommodate themselves to, fundamental changes of political regime in which they might have played a part, but not necessarily a determining part. In most of continental Europe, east and west, these changes were the result of apparently irresistible and irreversible conquest and occupation by Nazi Germany with its own visions of a racist and imperialist 'New Order' for Europe. But more generally, businessmen had to operate in conditions at first sight extremely uncongenial to 'normal' business activity, which prevailed both in countries that had gone fascist and those which had not. The model of First World War state-directed economic mobilisation and, above all, the impact of the Great Depression, seemed to demonstrate that free market capitalism was dysfunctional, socially and economically damaging, and unpopular. The way out, everywhere, appeared to be greater political or state intervention in the economy, with the state either replacing the 'market' or so regulating its operation as to change its character.

This was the political context for 'economic collaboration', the second important issue addressed by most, if not all, of the contributions to the book. The famous, or rather notorious, aphorism of Giovanni Agnelli, the head of Fiat, quoted in Franco Amatori's contribution, that industrialists are government supporters by definition, echoes throughout the whole volume. This statement of political neutrality, and of political adaptability, was, on the evidence of this book, pretty much the conventional attitude of many businessmen. To protect the business, and to keep the business going, meant coming to terms with whatever political regime was in place; this was 'normal'. But the fascist regimes were not 'normal'; their political leaderships intended to bend their own and occupied countries' economies towards the realisation of ideological and imperialist goals. Businessmen, even though they saw their motivations as 'economic', had to get 'political' in a big way. This is why I think, for example, that Dirk Luyten's dense and closely-argued piece on Belgian business involvement with the occupier's reorganisation of the country's economy, rather overplays the 'primacy of economics' in these businessmen's wartime decision-making. All over conquered western and northern Europe, and in Germany itself, businessmen got themselves co-opted on to the boards of the proliferating agencies and quangos set up to manage the German war economy and the economic occupation of these territories. They (or many of them) did so in order to save what they could of their managerial autonomy; to ensure that they managed a system foisted on them by the occupier; and because they feared being left out or left behind by their business competitors in a world being shaped by others. In so doing, they 'willingly or not' aligned themselves with Nazi systems of economic management that were basically subverting the autonomy they wanted to defend. This was and is the classic inescapable dilemma of 'collaboration', whether it is a matter of dealing with a Nazi occupation regime bent on exploiting the occupied countries' economic resources, or with a gung-ho university administration bent on 'downsizing'!

The book also makes it clear that some businessmen became *de facto* civil servants in Germany before and after the outbreak of general war in 1939, and in occupied Europe after 1940, because they wanted to ensure the businesses from which they came could take advantage of the opportunities for economic expansion which would not otherwise have come their way under 'normal' market conditions. We perhaps underestimate the innate attractiveness of Nazism (and Vichy authoritarianism) as a system to the technocratic and managerial high flyers and high achievers who staffed these governmental economic agencies. Nazism was 'capitalist' in its glorification of initiative, performance, competition, and of 'winners' by whatever means. Exploitation of the resources of the Nazi empire enabled these part-political, part-economic entrepreneurs to innovate and experiment, to develop new industrial processes and products, especially synthetic materials, in ways unimaginable in a market economy.

The book gives us, then, a real sense of the pressures businessmen faced in Nazi Germany and in Nazi-occupied Europe; the narrowness of the choices confronting them, how those choices were influenced by the changing context of the war and occupation policy, and the sometimes inhuman outcomes of those choices.

Many banks and businesses participated in and profited commercially from the 'aryanisation' of Jewish enterprises, pretty much universally applied throughout Nazi Europe. Others did not, or were reluctant to do so, because from a similar perspective of the long-term futures of their businesses, they anticipated legal and other problems to do with ownership both during the conflict and once the war was over. From 1943, as it became clear that Germany was losing the war, preserving what could be preserved of the business for the post-war period meant that many German companies *continued* to use forced and slave labour in inhuman conditions. For some firms in occupied western Europe, it meant keeping more workers on the payroll than was economically justified to prevent their deportation to Germany, and seeking the protection of resistance movements, something which happened in occupied Poland as well.

Thirdly, the contributions on eastern Europe – especially Richard Overy's detailed and meticulous reconstruction of the Nazi economy there – seem to indicate that the Nazis' economic exploitation of occupied Europe was both a short-term plundering of resources to sustain the Nazi war effort, and a longer-term attempt to create the *Grossraumwirtschaft*, a German-dominated continental economic bloc. You will need to read Overy's essay to be convinced of this, since Feldman in his introduction suggests that the priority of winning the war ruled out any long-term economic 'New Order' planning, and Boris Barth's 'Comment' is equally sceptical of Overy's case.

Finally, it emerges from the book that the occupied western European countries were not that badly off, economically. Indeed their economies were certainly not 'destroyed' by occupation, although this would not have been the perception of the Dutch people after the terrible winter of 1944-5. Agriculture did well, there was little destruction or forced transfer of machinery and plant, and German spending and consumption, even when effectively paid for by the occupied countries through the Nazi clearing system, had a Keynesian stimulus on depressed economies, leading to full employment in the early years of occupation. This might suggest that economic collaboration with the enemy was ultimately self-justifying and 'successful'. It is not the only interesting thought to come out of a sometimes patchy, but generally rewarding book.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/324>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1572>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>