

Reading Germany: Literature and Consumer Culture in Germany before 1933

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Author:

Gideon Reuveni

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Paul Betts

The history of consumerism in Germany is surprisingly new. Unlike other countries, most notably France, Britain, and the United States, the study of consumer culture is a relative newcomer to German historiography. But, having arrived late, it has certainly made its presence known in recent years, inspiring a young generation of scholars to re-read modern—and even early modern—German history through new lenses. Nevertheless, many of the topics explored under the heading consumerism have tended to cluster around certain standard themes, such as food, fashion, youth, advertising, décor, and the coming of the infamous ‘culture industry’ more generally.

Gideon Reuveni’s book, *Reading Germany*, is an original and stimulating departure from this literature. In it he sets his sights on the transformation of Germany’s ‘reading culture’ from the late-nineteenth century through to the Depression. To be sure, there has been many a study over the years on German book life, but none has endeavoured to meet Reuveni’s objective of ‘placing reading culture within the emergence of consumer culture’ (p. 13) in such a sustained manner. Weimar Germany is a rich case study in this regard, given that its shortened work day, compulsory education acts, and improved social welfare for workers assured more time for reading across all social strata; even the terrible bouts of inflation and unemployment that plagued the 1920s played a key contributing—if underestimated—role in Weimar’s burgeoning reading culture.

Chapter 1 frames the discussion of the book, addressing in this case the deeply-felt and widely-remarked ‘book crisis’ after the Great War, which dovetailed with older lamentations of cultural decline and the tragic

collapse of the bourgeoisie as the country's self-appointed cultural guardians. Reuveni persuasively counters that there really was not a crisis at all, either in terms of book sales, distribution, or even quality of reading material. What did happen, however, was that the old bourgeois elites were unable to oversee the book industry, as they once had, as part of their cultural mission of popular enlightenment and cultural uplift. After the war, the German book trade was undergoing radical reconstruction, and the reading public was both expanding and changing. Conservatives were not wrong to note that the book itself was becoming more and more of a commodity, that it was beholden to fleeting fashion and lowbrow popular tastes, and that the industry's move toward mass production, distribution, and retailing was inspired by American 'Fordist' industrial models. Nor did it go unremarked that the book's role as the privileged repository of human knowledge was losing its monopoly in the face of new and competing audiovisual sources, such as gramophones, picture books, and film. Still, as Reuveni is quick to point out, this hardly spelled the end of the book as cultural product; on the contrary, the 1920s witnessed a boom in reading as both book business and its readership were forever transformed.

The next few chapters go on to show how the Weimar book business and reading public had specifically changed. In Chapter 2, Reuveni analyzes household account books from the period, arguing that German households—even those of workers—devoted a surprising amount of the family budget to either the purchase or borrowing of books. Money was even siphoned from the new entertainment industries—record, radio, sport, or cinema—to support reading for all. While some of these savings may have gone on 'colportage' and 'penny dreadfuls', a good amount was also spent on Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse. The book industry responded in kind to this new reading public, in the form of supporting public libraries or issuing cheap paperbacks for an economically-pressed Weimar readership. Chapter 3 then chronicles the ways in which reading was commercialized through new innovations like family magazines, subscription clubs, mail-order book delivery, railway bookshops, and the coming of the street-sold illustrated newspaper. Chapter 4 continues in this vein, illustrating how changing book design, commercial tie-ins to newspapers (including the dawning of author interviews), and the expansion of public libraries (including more specialized holdings established by trade unions, churches and other associations) made the 1920s a kind of Golden Age of book reading across class barriers, providing solace and enjoyment to many beleaguered citizens. At one point Reuveni even goes so far as to suggest that, 'as places frequented by all social strata, they [the public libraries] played an important role in preventing social unrest' (p. 162).

Chapter 5 returns to the themes of crisis explored in the first chapter. Now, however, the emphasis is on how the interwar crusade against 'smut and trash' (Schund und Schmutz) targeted women and youth as dangerously vulnerable to this new commercial literature, and claimed that it corrupted its readers, undermined political and religious authority, offended against good taste, and encouraged hedonism. As Reuveni makes plain, this bourgeois campaign was often less about imagined at-risk readers than their own class's need to invent and assert a new cultural identity in the rough and tumble world of Weimar society. As such, their trumpeted book crisis was actually the result of the very success of reading in becoming a fundamental part of the daily routines of broad sectors of German population after the Great War. But ultimately there was more at stake than simply saying that the Weimar Republic was characterized by a 'democratization of reading'. What Reuveni argues so elegantly in his fine book is that this new reading culture was instrumental in brokering the modernization of everyday life and 'disseminating values of consumer culture' across inter-war Germany in new and enduring ways.

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