

Bertelsmann im Dritten Reich Introduction (p. 9-18)

For some years now, the activities of large German firms between 1935 and 1945 have been the focus of historical research.¹ This necessary—indeed overdue—confrontation with a long-neglected aspect of the National Socialist past has been met with broad and attentive public interest. This book is itself the history of a German company during the Nazi period—when it was still a modest provincial firm that nonetheless played an important role within the Third Reich. Today, Bertelsmann is one of the world’s largest media companies. What were the reasons for its opening this part of its past to independent historical research?

I.

On June 10, 1998 Thomas Middelhoff, newly appointed chairman of Bertelsmann AG, was awarded the Vernon A. Walters Award in New York; this prize was established by the Atlantic Bridge, an organization formed to promote German-American relations, and the Armonk Institute, founded by the president of the American Jewish Committee. A few months earlier, Bertelsmann had taken over Random House, thus becoming the largest American publishing company. On the award’s occasion, Middelhoff delivered a talk in part addressing the firm’s history during the Third Reich. He described Bertelsmann as “one of the few non-Jewish media companies closed down by the Nazi regime.” In his words, the reason for the Gütersloh-based publisher’s closure in 1944 was that “We had been publishing books that were banned by the Third Reich as subversive. Bertelsmann’s continuing existence was a threat to the Nazi attempt to control freedom of expression.” In pointed fashion, Middelhoff here articulated a self-perception and self-description by the company regarding its history in the Nazi period that had become fixed over the previous decades. It had already been formulated immediately after the war and had also stamped—not without controversy—the extensive festschrift marking Bertelsmann’s first 150 years.²

Middelhoff’s historical interpretation received sharp public criticism, in particular by the journalist Hersch Fischler, whose objections had a broad resonance.³ After a first effort to clarify the matter inside the company, Reinhard Mohn and Thomas Middelhoff decided to have its history during the Nazi years examined by an independent commission of historical experts. On December 23, 1998 Middelhoff thus contacted the historian Saul Friedländer and asked him to direct such an Independent Historical Commission for Investigating the History of the Bertelsmann Firm during the Third Reich (IHC). Friedländer linked his consent to three conditions: the commission’s chairman was to be responsible for naming its members; the commission was to have full access to the firm’s archives covering the period being studied; and both the commission’s work and the publication of its findings were to proceed without any influence or control by the firm. Middelhoff confirmed acceptance of these conditions on the same day, and shortly after the social and political historian Norbert Frei, the theologian Trutz Rendtorff, and the specialist in both literary and book-trade history Reinhard Wittmann agreed to participate on the commission. At its onset, the commission’s chief task was addressing some central themes in the public debate over the firm’s past: Heinrich Mohn’s membership in the SS patrons’ organization, the closure of C. Bertelsmann in 1944 and Der Rufer in 1943, specific titles from the theological program, and the firm’s production for the Wehrmacht. The IHC presented its first findings on these themes in a January 2000 press conference.⁴

Nevertheless, the commission soon recognized that adequate answers would only be possible through consideration of both a complex historical background and manifold historical interconnections. For this reason, it expanded its research goals to take in the broader history of the Bertelsmann publishing house during the Third Reich. To this end, it was necessary to extend the chronological framework of the research to cover the years before and after the Third Reich—namely, from 1921, when Heinrich Mohn took over responsibility for the firm, to the first years after 1945. In addition, an approach was needed going beyond company-history in a narrow sense, since the history of a publishing house involves more than simply business. Rather, C. Bertelsmann's history had to be embedded in a context of political and religious-ideological developments in Germany between roughly 1920 and 1950, as well as those connected with publishing history per se. On the one hand, this involved a comprehensive analysis of the firm's publishing activities and its book-production program. On the other hand, it involved a systematic examination of the firm's wider goals and options—that is, a history of policies enacted within the local and regional setting, and in the context of its various mentalities. In this regard, one question that had to be addressed in particular was the extent and intensity with which the firm helped spread antisemitic ideology.

The history of the Bertelsmann house during the Third Reich emerges as illuminating in respect to the interaction between market rationality and political opportunity, between a firm's room for economic maneuver and its ideological profile. This is not only the case for the Nazi period, but also for the phase of political transition from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich and from then to the period of occupation. Precisely its behavior during systemic political caesuras furnishes insight into the firm's self-understanding, as well as both its political vantage-point and its ideals—its readiness to conform, its ideological affinities, and its will to economic action. But it was equally important to consider the theological, ecclesiastical, and intellectual-historical traditions that had been at work in the Bertelsmann house since its founding in 1835.

In any event, not all the expectations to which a multifaceted study of this sort is subject could be satisfied. This is true for the broad positioning of the firm within the German publishing landscape. And it is true for its location both in the confessional and literary spectrum and in the Nazi regime's area of political communication. This is because the necessary materials are lacking for differentiated comparisons.⁵ With a few exceptions, publishing archives, whether private or public, are either inaccessible or not yet open; festschriften and firmhistories display mainly palliating tendencies.⁶ On both accounts, the desired comparative evaluation was only occasionally possible.

II.

The commission was composed of representatives from various disciplines; its work was thus understood to constitute an interdisciplinary project aimed at a common presentation and a unified assessment. It seemed sensible to organize the research in terms of individual work groups. Steered by the commission members, these were aligned with four thematic fields: social-political history and general business history; theology; church policies and writings on practical religion; publishing-house history and popular literature; antisemitism. Both the names cited at the end of each chapter and a separate list at the end of the volume indicate the authors and co-authors of individual chapters. Commission-members who are authors or co-authors of a chapter are indicated at its end in first position; otherwise, placement of their names following other participating authors indicates chief responsibility for the chapter. The report is divided into eleven chapters; two of these concern the political, local, regional, familial, and

business contexts; two analyze the publishing house's evolving theological program; and three the program in popular literature and the production of its books—from the light novels to the war accounts, and on to the furnishing of front and home with reading material. A separate chapter examines the antisemitic contents of some of the publications, and the last two chapters treat the legal proceedings against the firm and its closing, along with its licensing and new start following 1945.

Despite the effort to gain a common perspective, the range of methods and research interests at work in the report have left their mark. But taken together, they allow the emergence of an extensive and multi-faceted historical picture. The chronology of events constitutes a basic guiding and structuring element. Embedded in that general framework are the history of the firm, the policies carried out by its directors and employees, and their approach to National Socialist institutions and ideas. From demands for production for the Wehrmacht to censorship to closure, the measures taken by the Nazi bureaucracy concerned with published writings against the firm can only be understood in relation to the surrounding circumstances. The origins and contents of the publishing house's programs of theology and popular literature are linked to their economic preconditions, and a separate appendix furnishes data concerning economic aspects of the firm's production activities. The *Bertelsmann General Bibliography 1921-1951* offers an overview of the publishing production in the period under research.

III.

The present study was necessarily based on sources only supplied by the firm itself to a limited degree. The reason for this is that at the time the contract was drawn up with the IHC, Bertelsmann AG only had a small collection of "historically valuable" documents concerning the firm's history since 1835 at its disposal; it had no systematically arranged archive available for consulting. At the project's start, the question of whether additional documentary material could be furnished by the company was thus fully open. Against this backdrop, one factor was of decisive importance: the binding agreement of the chairman of Bertelsmann AG with the commission to make available all the company's documents from the period under study. On that basis, employees of Bertelsmann were frequently called on to support the commission's work; nevertheless, little additional material could be retrieved through these efforts.

In view of the paucity of documents in the firm's possession, the decision was taken to bring all such material from Gütersloh to Munich, where it was to be ordered, systematized, and transformed into the nucleus of a new companyarchive – the IHC collection. Rearranged according to standard archival categories and supplied with a detailed index, the collection contains—along with a small number of documents concerning activities of the firm's directorship, denazification, and licensing—above all material from the firm's founding period, documents related to individual branches and subsidiary companies, family papers, and journals published by the firm (in total roughly 15 continuous meters of material). In addition, there is material that was brought together in preparation of the 1985 festschrift (roughly 5 meters). Finally, there is a small amount of surviving material—hardly relevant in the present context—from various divisions of the firm found in the old registry in the course of the commission's work.

Alongside individual files, prepared by Heinrich Mohn himself, concerning the firm's economic and personnel development and both tax and administrative matters, as well as a relatively extensive correspondence with the Deutsche Arbeitsfront, mainly advertising material and some printed matter has been

preserved from the Third Reich period. In contrast, authors' correspondence and contracts and correspondence with state offices and organizations is almost entirely absent—in part certainly because of the effects of the war, but also in part because of later neglect and destruction. All this surviving material, most of which stems from the end of the 1930s, had its contents carefully scrutinized and was systematically archived and, to the extent necessary, restored as the separate "IHC collection."

In any case, by far the greatest part of the documents brought together for the commission's research was comprised of copies from foreign archives and offices, collected in the course of the work, as well as systematically examined local and regional periodicals. One source that should be stressed is the collection, delivered in its entirety, of files held in the Detmold Staatsarchiv containing state prosecutors' legal proceedings from the 1940s; these files make possible a partial reconstruction of the firm's activities during the war. The Deutsche Literaturarchiv in Marbach houses correspondences that Heinrich Mohn and his editor Gustav Dessin maintained for years with Hans Grimm and Will Vesper. There was also the recipient's side of correspondences between Mohn and some theological authors, including the letter-exchange with Johannes Zauleck in the Bielefeld Landeskirchenarchiv, and with Paul Althaus and Carl Stange in private estates.

Because of the many gaps in the firm's archives, the research had to repeatedly be extended; in the end it covered 43 German state, communal, and church archives, and 14 archives in the realms of publishing, universities, business, and public associations, but also those in Holland, Great Britain, Russia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The question of whether Bertelsmann used foreign slave laborers during the Second World War was carefully examined with the aid of the German occupation files in the state archives of Riga and Vilna. It was also possible to use private testimony offered the commission in the framework of its witness-interview program. Following success in arranging suitable agreements with most of the contributing archives, it will now be possible for third parties to view nearly all documentary copies collected from external sources, classified according to original archive and catalog number. This will be alongside the firm's original files, constituting less than a tenth of the total holdings for the Nazi period. The IHC has thus fulfilled the goal it set itself of tying the presentation of its closing report to the greatest possible transparency regarding its underlying sources.⁷

Since the start of its activities, the commission has worked to locate and interview witnesses. In total, it has been possible to interview 37 people, most former Bertelsmann employees or their descendents and members of the Mohn family; they were contacted through notices in Gütersloh-area newspapers and the IHC website, systematic research with help of Bertelsmann AG's personnel division, and recommendations from individuals who had already been interviewed. The transcriptions of all taped interviews are part of the "IHC collection" and are open for scholarly research along with the other holdings. Bertelsmann publications from the pertinent period formed an essential counterpart to the archival sources. The main publications transferred to the IHC's working library were holdings from the central Bertelsmann library in Gütersloh; that library, however, has many gaps since the original collection was destroyed by fire, then rebuilt through copies from the editorial division and, later, unsystematic bulk purchases. The IHC collection was supplemented by purchases from used book dealers and copies from public libraries; but because of the particular nature of Bertelsmann's publishing program, it was not possible to complete the holdings for the relevant period. Many of the texts published for Evangelical practice and much serial material are only spottily available in public libraries. In view of these difficulties, the commission could not fulfil its

original intent of autopsying all the Bertelsmann titles. Parallel to this study, the *Bertelsmann General Bibliography 1921-1951* thus offers a complete overview. Over a period of thirty years, 2,559 titles appeared with C. Bertelsmann and the Ruffer Verlag (incorporated with Bertelsmann in 1939); of these, 1,528 represented theological and 1,071 popular literature.

IV.

Theology formed the main emphasis of the firm's program since its founding; the analysis of the Bertelsmann publications thus begins in the theological realm. Involving cooperation with the church's institutions, associations, and organizations, a "theology for practice" stamped the profile of C. Bertelsmann in the Protestant publishing landscape. The texts involved were meant for the popular mission, the external mission, and religious pedagogy; there were also hymn books. Within this field between tradition and a changing political situation, the commission's study of the scholarly theological titles Bertelsmann published before and after 1933 had to account for various factors: the role of Heinrich Mohn, who devoted special attention to theology; both political events—especially involving church politics—and ideological and theological discourses in which the publishing house's authors participated, and whose direction they helped to determine. In this context, the report includes an analysis of a selection of exemplary titles and themes presented in the theological program after 1933.⁸ While the history of the *Kirchenkampf*—here especially relevant—has been extensively researched, until now there has been no examination of the role of any single publishing house in the conflict.

The analysis of the popular-literature program focused first of all on the nationalistic titles with which the firm achieved previously unimaginable commercial success: the issues of the series for young readers *Spannende Geschichten* ("exciting stories"), the dime novels recounting battle experiences in the First World War, the reports from the Second World War, the production for members of the Wehrmacht (what Bertelsmann named "field editions," the "small field-post series," "field-post booklets"). However, a reading of the first four volumes with which C. Bertelsmann entered the business of popular literature in 1928, showed that there were also "normal" titles needing to be examined. The light literature (novels concerned with farmers and peasants or with home and hearth, historical novels, romances) that the firm published did not constitute a neutral counterpart to the military production but was grounded in related ideological premises. Hence that literature was also examined closely. To be sure, the series devoted to moral improvement were only spot-checked; and while naturally all titles cited in public discussions were taken into account, there was a scrutiny of selected examples rather than an accumulation of all the "offensive" passages.

The analysis proceeded less on lines of literary aesthetics, more in relation to the ideological profile of the title, especially between 1928 and 1944. In this regard, reflecting the study's basic purpose, rather than a full assessment of the authors or of work published with other houses there was a selective focus—for instance on the position of the firm's production in the framework of literature in the Third Reich, or on the historical novel between 1890 and 1945. Third Reich popular literature is not one of the best researched areas of German literary history. This has resulted in a marked lack of scholarship concerned with just the sort of literature typically produced by C. Bertelsmann—trivial literature and war-books. Critical monographs about Will Vesper and Hans Grimm, the firm's two most well-known authors, are also lacking.

A separate chapter is devoted to the question of the extent to which the publishing program included antisemitic works, and the nature of the conceptual categories and metaphors through which antisemitism was expressed. Producing antisemitic books before and after the caesura of 1933 had different meanings. In addition, a depiction of the antisemitic motifs in their historical context allows an assessment of Heinrich Mohn's publishing course and a comparison in this respect between the firm's theological realm and that of popular literature. Did traditional anti-Jewish themes alone prevail, or were books also published that can be aligned with volkish or Nazi antisemitism? We have no document of Heinrich Mohn that expresses a personal position regarding the "Jewish question." To this extent, his various decisions to publish works with an antisemitic content can only be interpreted in the broad context of his publishing activities.

Above all else, during the Third Reich C. Bertelsmann remained a business enterprise whose publishing decisions were based on turnover, profit, investments, and other fiscal data calling for suitable treatment in this history. However, not least of all on grounds of readability, detailed information on the evolution of the firm's overall business is offered separately from the main text, in an appendix.

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- 1 See esp.—in the order of their appearance—Gall etc., Deutsche Bank; Mommsen and Grieger: Volkswagenwerk; Gregor: Daimler-Benz; Berghoff: Kleinstadt; Bähr: Goldhandel; Pohl: Philipp Holzmann; James: Deutsche Bank und "Arisierung"; Feldman: Allianz; zur neueren Entwicklung innerhalb des Faches Cf. Pierenkemper: Unternehmensgeschichte.
 - 2 Bavendamm 1835-1985. Gööck, Bücher is in part more differentiated. Der Spiegel, vol. 11, July 24, 1957, pp. 32-41 had already posed critical questions regarding the firm's history.
 - 3 Fischler's remarks were first publicized by Gian Trepp in Die Weltwoche, October 8, 1998, then offered by Fischler himself on October 29 in the same journal. On November 13 the television station 3sat reported on them in the program "Kulturzeit."
 - 4 Cf. "Bertelsmann im Dritten Reich". Zwischenbericht der Unabhängigen Historischen Kommission. epd medien, 2.2.2000, no. 8.
 - 5 The same conclusion was reached in a colloquium on "Publishing History in the Third Reich" organized by the IHC in October 2000; invited participants were Jan-Pieter Barbian, Ulf Diederichs, Gangolf Hübinger, Siegfried Lokatis, and Anne-Margret Wallrath-Janssen.
 - 6 Exceptions in the depiction of their firm's history: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt (Siegfried Lokatis), Suhrkamp (Katalog Marbach), Kiepenheuer (Cornelia C. Funke), Diederichs (Ulf Diederichs). Otherwise, consideration of the Nazi period exhausts itself in formulas such as "hibernation" and "constant weighing of tactical measures" (Piper/Raab, 90 Jahre, p. 145), or in dubious assertions such as "All together only a few unavoidable publications appeared in the vocabulary of the times, which necessarily had to leave its traces in the history of the publishing house as well." (Thus Hohenberg, Westermann, p. 43.)
 - 7 After the IHC has finished its work, its archive will be transferred to Gütersloh where it will be open for scholarly research.
 - 8 As an IHC researcher, Claudia Brauers has prepared an extensive analysis of that program's texts, using the pertinent historical criteria. This work has served as an important foundation for preparing the report; it is stored in the IHC collection for further research purposes.