

INTRODUCTION

‘Please, God, Keep Me from Writing a Book about Books!’



So, why didn't I follow this plea by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg? The answer lies in a handwritten inscription in one of my father's books, which he preserved from his youth into my own lifetime: 'Only he who fights for the world attains it!' My grandfather wrote this to his adolescent son, most likely at the beginning of the 1940s. And in 1944, my father, barely 18 years old, did indeed set out to 'fight for the world', in Hitler's Wehrmacht. But the fact that it was not his war rapidly became apparent to the young man. He was lucky and survived, and later this inscription moved me immensely. What could have induced my grandfather to address such a personal motto to his son? At such a time?

The book that had been dedicated to my father was Karl Aloys Schenzinger's *Anilin* (Aniline), which – as I was to learn much later – was one of the genuine bestsellers of the Nazi era. And as a teenage reader, I made a number of other discoveries in my father's bookcase, such as green cloth-bound volumes by Hans Dominik – old science fiction stories in Gothic type that could only be read with great difficulty. I found some of the heroes as disconcerting as the villains, but read on regardless. I also recall very well the stories of the two members of the Hitler Youth who had *Abenteuer in Brasilien* (Adventures in Brazil).¹ At the end of the book, they obey the summons to return to their homeland, where they are needed in Hitler's Wehrmacht. These reading experiences played a significant role in leading me to the books of the Third Reich, and in particular to the works that were widely distributed and read in large numbers: mass literature.

Many important books have been dedicated to the burned and defamed literary works of that period, and with good reason. One of their main

purposes was to revoke the death sentence frequently handed down by the Nazis. These scholarly works brought books and authors consigned to oblivion back into the public domain,² or, in the case of one worthy edited series, made the original texts themselves accessible again to a wide audience.³ Consequently, we can say with some certainty which books and authors were definitely not welcome in the Third Reich.

In contrast, anyone looking for what was widely read in the National Socialist era will encounter huge gaps. No overview exists. And yet people living at the time already realized that just a passing look at mass literature could yield important insights. Indeed, it was this thought that motivated Victor Klemperer in 1944 to read Ina Seidel's *Wunschkind* (*The Wish Child*). 'I said to myself, if a tome more than 1,000 pages long, which appeared in 1930, can sell 350,000 copies, then it must somehow typify the thinking of its time. This is how I justified reading the volume'.⁴ What is more, the question of which books were in fact produced, distributed and read in large quantities under the swastika leads into a core area of the history of German mentalities.

So, why the hesitation to engage with this topic after 1945? For one thing, stories of the victims of the Nazi regime were initially the foremost concern, for obvious reasons. It was only gradually that questions began to arise about the book market in the Third Reich itself or about production and reception conditions under the swastika. The first comprehensive study of the *Literaturpolitik im Dritten Reich* (*Literary Policy in the Third Reich*),⁵ which draws on all available archival sources, came out in 1993. But without precise knowledge of the conditions under which texts were produced during this period, certain questions could not even be posed. Consideration of the mass market was also complicated by the fact that at first no one wanted to assume any real responsibility for this material. If such texts were examined within literary studies, for example, as occurred increasingly from the 1960s onwards, the criticism often focused on ideology. The purpose was to ascertain which political interests may have been served or obfuscated by mass literature. To begin with, the published texts themselves were the starting point. Information about the authors or the market conditions were often not available, or played only a subordinate role in the formulation of specific research questions. But these studies were not dead ends. On the contrary, they were necessary steps for approaching certain phenomena associated with the literary market.⁶

The term 'literature' itself, of course, is also in a constant state of flux.⁷ In this book, the concept is used in its widest sense, encompassing the totality of what was written and published, including non-fiction texts such as factual books, documentary materials and propagandistic writings.

The example of non-fiction highlights the fact that scholarly engagement with this type of text is still relatively new. However, between 1933 and 1945,

non-fiction made up a considerable proportion of the book market, just as it does today. Leaving non-fiction aside would thus render the picture of the mass market for books in those years both incomplete and misleading. Ulf Diederichs' 'Annäherung an das Sachbuch' (Approach to the Non-fiction Book), which did not appear until 1978, and still serves as a point of departure, was the first extensive text to present an overview of 'factual literature' and a discussion of specialist texts in the Third Reich. More comprehensive engagement with this subject matter is ongoing.⁸

Over the years, other publications have provoked discussion of various subcategories of literature in the Third Reich.⁹ However, it was only through a more comprehensive fusion of cultural, literary and media-studies approaches that the book market in its entirety began to emerge, with all its products, actors and conventions.

In this book, the literature of the Nazi era will be viewed from the standpoint of the readers who lived under National Socialist rule. I have examined works that were printed, sold and read in large quantities. In the process, I was guided by a very broad concept of literature, encompassing illustrated books and factual novels (faction), as well as how-to books and pulp fiction. The idea was to include the bulk of mass literature in circulation in the Third Reich. Purely arbitrarily, I set a minimum of 100,000 copies for considering a work a bestseller.

Looking through my 'virtual bestseller list' (an extract of which can be found in the appendix) of around 350 texts, ten 'book types' quickly emerged as particularly successful, repeatedly and with different nuances. The intention was not to comply with criteria set by literary studies but, rather, to approximate as closely as possible the way readers, consumers, booksellers and other actors in the book trade during those twelve years categorized certain works. Many of the boundaries, moreover, are fluid. For example, non-fiction works or factual novels often flow seamlessly into propaganda writing. Also, some books and authors might have been categorized differently. In this respect, many of the classifications are subjective, set arbitrarily by the author. This also applies to the completeness of the account, as I only aspired to include the most important text types and trends. And I placed value on telling the most significant stories about books and authors. Consequently, what was already well known has taken a backseat.

The main section of the book is devoted to the ten most important book types and their authors and readers. I start by looking at the subject from the perspective of bibliophiles – both prominent and unknown ones – and describe the political framework for literature and the book trade within which authors, publishers and readers operated. In addition to concrete statistical investigations into readers' wishes and numbers, as well as the

reading experiences of a few entirely 'ordinary' readers, memoirs of prominent individuals are also included. After all, those who, whether at the time or later, were professionally involved with books frequently devoted a lot of space in their diaries and memoirs to stories about what they liked to read or to defining experiences with literature. Among others, we will hear from Ernst Jünger, Joachim C. Fest, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass.

The diary entries of Victor Klemperer, moreover, constitute an unparalleled source in every respect. Here we experience a man who read as though possessed, a man for whom books were his lifeblood. This philologist from Dresden kept detailed records of his impressions of what he read, and, having set himself the task of documenting and analysing the LTI, the *Lingua Tertii Imperii* – that is, the language of the Third Reich – he regarded books as both a source and a quarry. 'Klemperer the Jew', along with fellow victims, was declared subhuman by the National Socialists, someone to be destroyed, and who was only 'spared' because he was married to an 'Aryan' who did not abandon him. He read all printed matter that fell into his hands, from easy reads to scholarly treatises, with a sense of vocation. And since Jews were gradually excluded from participating in normal social life, he was only able to obtain reading material with great difficulty, and by placing himself in danger. Here read and lived a man who had believed in the nation of poets and thinkers. It took the Holocaust to shatter this belief forever.

This man, whom many National Socialists wanted to have annihilated, commented with a sharp tongue on the regime's published intellectual output until the bitter end. His voice, his judgement and his clear language will provide a brightly shining beacon to anyone who has to work their way through the literature of the Third Reich amid the – frequently ominous – swirling linguistic fog of the time. Klemperer was able to publish his work *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen* (*Language of The Third Reich: Lti, Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist's Notebook*) after the fall of the Nazi regime. Many years after his death, his diaries, which convey much more directly than many a sober scholarly study the crimes against the European Jews, became a veritable bestseller. It was, moreover, a bestseller that moved its readers quite profoundly. Perhaps, in retrospect, the story of Victor Klemperer and his wife is one of the small triumphs of humanity over barbarism in the years 1933–45.

The intention of this history of bestsellers in the Third Reich is not to bring to light any unjustly forgotten 'gems', even if some of the texts possibly merit greater scrutiny. Rather, the history of bestsellers is the other side of the coin, the counterpart to the history of burned and banned books, and their authors. It is, in any event, an exciting and possibly also illuminating story of life under a dictatorship and, ideally, at times, it provides a missing link in the development of the book market between the alleged caesuras of 1933 and 1945.

Notes

1. Dettmann, *Abenteuer in Brasilien*.
2. For example, Weidermann's *Das Buch der verbrannten Bücher*, published seventy-five years after the book burnings.
3. The first ten volumes of the projected 120 also appeared on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the book burnings, under the title of the 'Bibliothek verbrannter Bücher' project, directed by Julius Schoeps.
4. Klemperer, *Die Tagebücher*, 28 June 1944.
5. This work by Jan-Pieter Barbian will be drawn upon frequently; more recently, Barbian published *Literaturpolitik im NS-Staat*. The latter is available in English translation by Kate Sturge, as *The Politics of Literature in Nazi Germany*.
6. For instance, the first comprehensive study of science fiction in Germany, which encompassed the years 1933 to 1945, was published by Manfred Nagl in 1972. The critique of the genre focused on ideology. This area of research has subsequently developed in fruitful dialogue with Nagl. See Nagl, *Science Fiction in Deutschland*.
7. See the concise and precise entry on 'Literatur' in Schütz et al., *Das BuchMarktBuch*, 213–17.
8. Diederichs, 'Annäherung an das Sachbuch', in Radler, *Kindlers Literaturgeschichte der Gegenwart*, vol. 1.
9. Examples include: Geyer-Ryan, 'Trivalliteratur im Dritten Reich', in Schnell, *Kunst und Kultur im deutschen Faschismus*; Troitzsch, 'Technikgeschichte in der Forschung und in der Sachbuchliteratur während des Nationalsozialismus', in Mehrtens and Richter, *Naturwissenschaft, Technik und NS-Ideologie*; Lange, 'Literatur des technokratischen Bewußtseins'; and Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewußtsein*.