

Bulletin of the GHI Washington

Supplement 8 (2012)

Copyright

Das Digitalisat wird Ihnen von perspectivia.net, der Online-Publikationsplattform der Max Weber Stiftung – Stiftung Deutsche Geisteswissenschaftliche Institute im Ausland, zur Verfügung gestellt. Bitte beachten Sie, dass das Digitalisat urheberrechtlich geschützt ist. Erlaubt ist aber das Lesen, das Ausdrucken des Textes, das Herunterladen, das Speichern der Daten auf einem eigenen Datenträger soweit die vorgenannten Handlungen ausschließlich zu privaten und nicht-kommerziellen Zwecken erfolgen. Eine darüber hinausgehende unerlaubte Verwendung, Reproduktion oder Weitergabe einzelner Inhalte oder Bilder können sowohl zivil- als auch strafrechtlich verfolgt werden.

THE HISTORY OF CONSUMPTION IN NAZI GERMANY

Hartmut Berghoff

DIRECTOR, GHI

Consumption is a matter not only of cultural values, lifestyle, and market transactions but also of politics. Shaped by institutions, laws, and ideologies, consumption interacts with political power to legitimize or delegitimize governments. States can control the supply and prices of consumer goods and define acceptable forms of consumption. Consumer satisfaction or discontent, conversely, can be the making or unmaking of a government's legitimacy. The burgeoning field of consumption studies has devoted relatively little attention to the political implications of consumption, however. This project deals with the very clear case of the politicization of consumption in Nazi Germany.

When Hitler came to power in 1933, he made three promises directly affecting consumer policy. First, he announced that the state would overcome the Great Depression in Germany by instituting a demand-oriented policy. It would create jobs and raise purchasing power and mass consumption to lead the country out of depression. Second, Hitler promised to assuage the German public's discomfort with the emerging consumer society by channeling its dynamic in a politically acceptable direction and then gratifying this redirected consumer demand. Clear ideological guidelines would resolve the contradiction between people's fascination with modern consumer society and their conservative-nationalist reservations. Third, in a great empire ruled by Germany, Hitler wanted to fulfill the people's hopes for prosperity that had been repeatedly and bitterly disappointed since the end of the Kaiserreich. Indeed, he sought to exceed even the most audacious visions of plenty for the German *Volk*.

These promises were broken from the very beginning of Nazi rule, however. The regime's consumption policies operated within a highly inconsistent framework of conflicting principles. Rearmament had top priority from the outset, which in effect meant that the state had to curb private in favor of public consumption. The degree of restriction, however, was never clear and was always subject to tactical considerations. Consumption was thus simultaneously promoted and suppressed. In one of its most successful propaganda ploys, the Nazi regime created a virtual reality geared to the desires of



Advertisement for the department store Kaufhof, ca. 1934: "Every purchase creates jobs."

ation—expanding demand for luxuries without secured provision of basic necessities—was profoundly abnormal in the history of consumption. For years, the regime propagated visions of abundance without ever delivering on its promises of plenty for the masses. One legacy of the dictatorship was the memory of this prolonged experience of expanding but frustrated desires. This explains why consumer politics assumed such a prominent role in both German states—and in their rivalry—after 1945.

This project examines key macroeconomic decisions as well as important sectors of the economy, ranging from the media to the leisure industry. It will look not only at political decisions affecting consumption but also at the ways consumers reacted and businesses adapted to them. More generally, the project will try to situate the Third Reich within the still unfolding history of modern mass consumption.

modern consumers. The regime announced initiatives – most never enacted – to mass market goods and services regarded as luxuries. Thanks to Hitler, so it appeared, cars, foreign vacations, convenience foods, televisions, and refrigerators would be within the reach of all Germans.

German consumers experienced extreme contradictions every day as result of the regime's policies. In the Janus-faced reality of the Nazi dictatorship, they had to grapple with harsh shortages at the same time they were being offered alluring new products. Virtual consumption – the prospect of the imminent availability of eagerly sought products – was intended to offset the widespread discontent fueled the scarcity of everyday necessities. The resulting situ-