

F. K. M. Hillenbrand. *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany, 1933-1945.* London and New York: Routledge, 1995. xviii + 297 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-09785-7.



Reviewed by John Perkins

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A specific sense of humor is the product and means of communication within social groups, nations, and "ethnicities" that share a common historical experience and an expression of antipathy towards other such categories. It is impossible to imagine the humour of Monty Python (or the Goons before them) without a growing awareness of the absurdities of the British class system. Irish jokes in Britain, which become Polish jokes in Germany (in more recent times supplemented by Turkish jokes) reflect a sense of superiority that the latter nationalities feel in relation to the former. Humor is also a product of adversity and a means of coping with a hostile world, as in the case of what is known as "Jewish humor." Humor in the Soviet Union reflected all of these elements and there are those, even within the successor states, who regret the passing of that socio-economic formation on this ground alone. The quality of humor, as is the case with living standards, has certainly deteriorated with the demise of the Soviet system. Capitalism seems yet to have yielded an adequate replacement.

There are those who take the view that Germans uniquely among peoples lack a sense of humor, and the book under review would seem to prove their point. It is a collection of political jokes and "asides." While some come from the author's recollection, most are derived from a variety of German-language works published after 1945. They are set within a quite comprehensive outline of the context to which they belong, which makes the work accessible to someone with no knowledge of the Third Reich--although one assumes that even in such a case, the inclusion of the years of the Reich's existence in the title would be unnecessary.

The book's overall objective is "to make German humour not just accessible but also acceptable to the English way of thinking." From a personal perspective as an Englishman cum Australian, with a claim to a sense of humor, the occasional joke raised at most a smile. Perhaps humor is also an evolutionary phenomenon. Few English people today, even with a thorough knowledge of the context, would find the jokes in the Punch of

the nineteenth century actually funny; or for that matter, what passed for humor before the 1950s.

Perhaps the problem here is that it is difficult to find anything funny about the Third Reich. On the other hand, from historical experience dating back to the 1850s, the German people were well aware of the existence of undercover police agents in their midst, and the prevalence of denunciation with the advent of the Third Reich, and acted accordingly. A lot of the jokes are double entendres and most are brief, but it is hard to imagine a person uttering any of the jokes presented here and risking imprisonment in a concentration camp.

It is also difficult to support the author's claim that the collection represents "a means of protest against the police state in which [Germans] lived." A substantial proportion of the "jokes" are derived from emigre German-Jewish and non-German sources, or are from the early postwar era. As the author admits, many of the authentic ones are derived from Berliners, and perhaps made viable by the cohesion that had evolved in the working-class neighbourhoods of that city.

The author seems unwilling to concede that the great majority of Germans shared the values expressed by the leading proponents of the Nazi ideology, albeit generally in not such an extreme form. On the Nazi attitude to women, for example, we are informed that the "imagination of anti-Nazi wits occasionally ran wild." Here, in a four-page section, examples are presented which are hardly funny, especially from a feminist perspective.

For the serious scholar of the Third Reich, this work is of very limited value. He or she will possess a more thorough knowledge of the context than accounts here for a very large proportion of the book. In the meantime, no serious attempt is made to analyse the nature and functions of what passed for humor in Hitler's Germany, or its changing character over the course of the Third Reich.

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