

Introduction

In the United States and most other industrial countries, we take our roles as consumers very seriously. We speak regularly of “consumer choice,” “consumer protection,” “consumer rights,” and “consumer advocacy.” The consumer price index is a key measure of economic health, and the provision of goods and services is a multibillion-dollar industry and, arguably, the foundation of any market economy. We recognize that support for political systems can wax and wane on the basis of consumer satisfaction and that even the health of the planet depends on the monitoring of our consumption habits. In short, “consumption” and “consumer” are important keywords in the modern lexicon.¹

If the economic, social, and political importance of consumption is obvious to most people today, it was not so during much of the twentieth century, when elites throughout the West were trying to make sense of the democratization of the economy and the rise of mass society. At the center of this society was a new figure: the modern consumer. How important was he or she to the economic well-being and political stability

¹ For critical introductions to the terms “consumption,” “consumerism,” and “consumer society,” see Frank Trentmann, “Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 3 (July 2004): 373–401; and Trentmann, “Knowing Consumers – Histories, Identities, Practices: An Introduction,” in *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World*, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Berg, 2006): 1–27. For introductions to consumption in Europe, see Wolfgang König, *Geschichte der Konsumgesellschaft* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000); Hannes Siegrist, Hartmut Kaelble, and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Europäische Konsumgeschichte: Zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Konsums (18. bis 20. Jahrhundert)* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1997); Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton, eds., *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

of the nation-state and the global economy? Did everyone need to have access to the same goods and services for economies and political systems to function effectively? These questions were common in Europe and the United States during the twentieth century, but they took on a particular resonance in Germany, which witnessed the end of an empire, two democratic republics, and two dictatorships in the course of seventy years. The political upheavals of modern Germany challenged politicians and economists to provide both necessities and luxuries to their citizens during times of rapid transformation, while also binding them to their visions of a correct economic and political order.² The twelve years of National Socialism stand out in this regard, wedged between the Great Depression and the democratic and socialist settings of West and East Germany. For the Nazis, the rejection of liberalism and Marxist socialism, combined with a racist, imperialist mission, demanded a rethinking of the basic relationship between people and the economy. The consumer played a decisive role in the Nazi economic vision. From 1933 to 1945 politicians, company leaders, and marketers devoted intense energy to learning how consumers gained material gratification and to determining the political and social implications of consumption. This book explores these elite investigations into consumers and their world of goods. What role did “getting and spending” play in National Socialist ideology and in the work of business and economic elites?³

In a period defined by persecution, war, and genocide, a focus on the consumer economy might at first glance seem trivial. This book argues, however, that to understand the dynamics of Nazi Germany – its racial ideology and its visions of a thriving economic order – we must place consumption and commerce squarely in our analysis. Examining what companies manufactured, what consumers bought, and what people said about their purchasing habits sheds light on the economic priorities of the Nazi state, the relationship of the economy to political violence, and the everyday lives of Germans under a dictatorship.

² On consumption in Germany, see Hartmut Berghoff, ed., *Konsumpolitik: Die Regulierung des privaten Verbrauchs im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999); Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Claudius Torps, eds., *Die Konsumgesellschaft in Deutschland, 1890–1990: Ein Handbuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2009); and Alon Confino and Rudy Koshar, “Régimes of Consumer Culture: New Narratives in Twentieth-Century German History,” *German History* 19, no. 2 (May 2001), 135–61.

³ Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt, eds., *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute/Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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This is not the first study to consider consumption, commercial culture, and fascism together. Since the 1980s scholars have explored modern states' use of mass media, leisure, and shopping opportunities to both appease and regulate their populations.⁴ Historians of Nazi Germany have looked at the regime's creation of travel programs for working and middle-class Germans, as well as its promotion of consumer products that would allow the public a measure of comfort and an appreciation of its racial mission.⁵ We are also gaining a clearer picture of how the Nazi years were shrouded in a surface normality. If one was not a racial, political, or religious enemy, one could go about one's daily business more or less unmolested by the state. Germans, argued one historian, lived with a "split consciousness," experiencing both the allures of American-style consumerism in a "state-free sphere" and the radical prescriptions of Nazi racial ideology.⁶ Rather than providing a site of political resistance, this world of consumption helped bolster Hitler's regime and facilitate its crimes.⁷

This book builds on these insights, but it differs from recent studies about consumption in the Third Reich in two ways. First, it looks at non-state and non-party actors. While it takes as its starting point Nazi economic policies, its central concern is how business elites and market professionals approached buying and selling under a dictatorship. Although historians have devoted attention to the consumer, there has been little concentrated focus on the set of actors who had perhaps the greatest stake in commerce, namely company owners, marketers, and salespeople. More specifically, while we do have insight into the purveyors of mass

⁴ See, e.g., Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Corey Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics in Germany from the Empire to the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵ See Shelley Baranowski, *Strength through Joy: Consumerism and Mass Tourism in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Kristin Semmens, *Seeing Hitler's Germany: Tourism in the Third Reich* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005); Wolfgang König, *Volkswagen, Volksempfänger, Volksgemeinschaft: "Volksprodukte" im Dritten Reich: Vom Scheitern einer nationalsozialistischen Konsumgesellschaft* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004); Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); Hartmut Berghoff, "Enticement and Deprivation: The Regulation of Consumption in Pre-War Nazi Germany," in *Politics of Consumption*, ed. Daunt and Hilton, 165–84.

⁶ Hans Dieter Schäfer, *Das Gespaltene Bewußtsein: Über deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit, 1933–1945* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1984), 114.

⁷ Baranowski, *Strength through Joy*, 38–39; Semmens, *Seeing Hitler's Germany*, 11–15.

culture in the interwar years, notably newspaper editors and filmmakers,⁸ we have yet to explore the individuals who participated in one of the key aspects of commercial culture – the selling of manufactured products, foodstuffs, and luxury goods. This dearth of studies about commerce and consumption is due partly to historians' legitimate interest in the more obviously damning examples of corporate behavior in the Third Reich, namely the Aryanization of Jewish businesses and the use of forced and slave labor.⁹ A wealth of research in the past two decades has revealed how much Hitler's crimes depended on the active help of Germany's companies, many of which are still functioning today.¹⁰ This book does not overlook the theme of corporate complicity, but it does proceed from the premise that even as companies supported the regime's racist and genocidal aims, they also engaged in the everyday acts of manufacturing and selling to a targeted customer base. This engagement provoked a number of questions: What was the meaning of mass consumption in an economy famous for high-quality products? What was the relationship between consumption and the Nazis' racial priorities? How could investigations into consumer preferences help elites and politicians understand the meaning of individuality and social responsibility under a dictatorship? How could companies reach consumers during a period of economic regulation and total war? These are a few of the questions that German

⁸ See, e.g., Bernhard Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Klaus Kreimeier, *The Ufa Story: A History of Germany's Greatest Film Company, 1918–1945* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996).

⁹ See Frank Bajohr, "Aryanization" in *Hamburg: The Economic Exclusion of Jews and the Confiscation of Their Property in Nazi Germany* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002); and Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany under the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Among the many studies see Paul Erker, *Industrie-Eliten in der NS Zeit: Anpassungsbereitschaft und Eigeninteresse von Unternehmern in der Rüstung- und Kriegswirtschaft, 1936–1945* (Passau: Rothe, 1994); Peter Hayes, *Industry and Ideology: IG Farben in the Nazi Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Hayes, *From Cooperation to Complicity: Degussa in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Hans Mommsen and Manfred Gieger, *Das Volkswagenwerk und seine Arbeiter im Dritten Reich* (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1996); Neil Gregor, *Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1998); Gerald Feldman, *Allianz and the German Insurance Business, 1933–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Harold James, *The Deutsche Bank and the Nazi Economic War Against the Jews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Johannes Bähr, Axel Drecoll, Bernahrd Gott, Kim C. Priemel, and Harald Wixforth, eds., *Der Flick-Konzern im Dritten Reich* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008); and Norbert Frei, Ralf Ahrens, Jörg Osterloh, and Tim Schanetzky, eds., *Flick: Der Konzern, die Familie, die Macht* (Munich: Karl Blessing, 2009).

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economic leaders asked themselves in the 1930s and 1940s and that this book, in turn, takes up.

Second, this book situates business leaders' interest in consumer society within larger discussions about the economy in the Third Reich. Much has been written about the structure and function of the Nazi economy during peacetime and wartime.¹¹ Scholars have found that despite the party's early pronouncements against capitalism, many companies and their managers fared well financially during the Third Reich.¹² A lot depended on whether one was a small entrepreneur or a large industrial manufacturer; the latter found richer economic opportunities with the rearmament and expansion of Germany.¹³ This book, however, is less concerned with either the issue of corporate profitability or the relationship of big business to the crimes of National Socialism. Rather, it focuses on party theorists' and business leaders' attempts to imbue a violent economy with cultural meaning. We have long associated the Nazi economy with the recovery of Germany from the Great Depression, the exploitation of Jewish businesses, and the drive toward total war. But the economy's symbolic value to both the regime and to ordinary citizens demands further exploration. While historians have debated the relative importance of politics and economics in the Third Reich, the reality is that these realms blended into each other. To speak of the "primacy of politics" over economics or vice versa is to underestimate how much Nazi ideology and practice was premised on a broad definition of the economy as a site of social, political, and cultural virtue.¹⁴ As I will argue, the market stood at the center of this vision: companies were asked to sell goods with as much a mind to national well-being as to profits, and the self-sacrificing consumer was supposed to consider the needs of the state and the racial community when deciding what goods to purchase or do without.

¹¹ For an overview, see Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Viking, 2006).

¹² On profits in the Third Reich, see Mark Spoerer, *Von Scheingewinnen zum Rüstungsboom: Die Eigenkapitalrentabilität der deutschen Industrieaktiengesellschaften, 1925–1941* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1996). On the questionable profitability of slave labor, see Spoerer, "Profitierten Unternehmen von KZ-Arbeit? Eine Kritische Analyse der Literatur," *Historische Zeitschrift* 268, no. 1 (February 1999): 61–95.

¹³ See John Gillingham, *Industry and Politics in the Third Reich* (London: Methuen, 1985); and Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, 337–47.

¹⁴ On the primacy of politics over economics, see Timothy Mason, "Der Primat der Politik: Politik und Wirtschaft in Nationalsozialismus," *Das Argument* 41, no. 8 (December 1966): 473–94; and Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems & Perspectives of Interpretation* [4th ed.], (London: Arnold, 2000), 47–68.

This book looks at a “National Socialist” understanding of market relations,¹⁵ but its approach rests on understanding the international context of these ideas. The Nazis’ commercial ideal was a response not just to political and economic events in Germany, but also to a global development: the rise of consumer capitalism. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the emergence of Fordist economies increasingly driven by mass production and mass consumption. This model presented National Socialism with a dilemma. On the one hand, the Nazis’ economic vision was predicated on distancing Germany from the seemingly decadent features of consumer society – competitiveness, rampant materialism, and cultural hybridity. In opposition to an “American,” “Weimar,” or “Jewish” model, National Socialism combined long-standing tropes of German culture, such as a celebration of high-quality, customized goods, with something new: a racist orientation that sought to purge Jews from the economy, the society, and eventually the world. On the other hand, the Nazis recognized that their political appeal rested on promising Germans the prosperity associated with mass consumption. They could not reject consumer society wholesale, nor did they want to. After the devastation of World War I and the Great Depression, Germans were seeking economic stability and the consumption opportunities enjoyed in the United States.

In response to this dilemma, the Nazis sought to create their own consumer marketplace. The Nazi marketplace, this book argues, maintained certain “bourgeois” norms, like a celebration of competition, high performance, and entrepreneurship. But the regime invested these concepts with ideological meaning: private initiative, manufacturing, and selling, the Nazis argued in their publications, all had to serve the aim of engineering a materially abundant, racially pure society. In short, National Socialism relied on developments in consumer capitalism, such as the emerging field of mass marketing, while simultaneously advancing its specific aims, namely biological purity and the conquering of “living space.”

This book explores the Nazi marketplace as a nexus where economic actors sought to work out their relationship to the Hitler regime. It uncovers new insights into the experiences of German consumers, but it sheds a special light on producers – those companies that sought to survive and even thrive in a radically new political setting. What private industry and

¹⁵ On the Nazis’ economic principles, see Avraham Barkai, *Nazi Economics: Ideology, Theory, and Policy* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1990); and Hauke Janssen, *Nationalökonomie und Nationalsozialismus: Die deutsche Volkswirtschaftslehre in den dreissiger Jahren* (Marburg: Metropolis, 1998).

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the government made available for purchase, and how these goods were provided, reflected the broad priorities of the state vis-à-vis its people. Companies, economists, and Nazi officials discussed not only the importance of consumption, but also acceptable forms of selling. They explored the suitable ways of moving a product and promoting a company name. How, this book asks, did companies communicate with consumers in the tightly regulated and ideologically driven economy of the Third Reich?

In exploring this question, this volume plays off recent debates about material conditions in Nazi Germany. A basic point of contention is whether Hitler provided sufficient comforts to Germans or whether his drive toward war came at the expense of the public's well-being; did the Nazi regime provide guns or butter?¹⁶ At various times, scholars have shown, National Socialism delivered both. Even though the state ultimately favored arms and heavy industry over the civilian economy, especially during World War II, it still cast specific consumer products as ideologically valuable goods that the population should have steady access to. Moreover, the regime took care to ensure that Germans did not experience the deprivations that had led to so much discontent on the home front during World War I. But did the Nazis succeed in providing the necessities and comforts for its population, especially compared with the governments that preceded and followed the Third Reich? Some historians have tried to answer the question by addressing whether the Nazis actually created a consumer society, or indeed a modern society more generally, in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁷ If Weimar Germany witnessed a flourishing of mass leisure and consumer opportunities, what happened when this was interrupted by depression and dictatorship? Was it as the Nazis depicted it and many Germans remembered it after

¹⁶ See Werner Abelshauser, "Guns, Butter and Economic Miracles," in *The Economics of World War II*, ed. Mark Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 122–76; and Fritz Blaich, "Wirtschaft und Rüstung in Deutschland, 1933–1939," in *Nationalsozialistische Diktatur, 1933–1945: Eine Bilanz*, ed. Karl Dietrich Bracher, Manfred Funke, and Hans Adolf Jacobsen (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1983), 285–316.

¹⁷ There is a growing literature on the Third Reich's relationship to "modernity." For good overviews see Riccardo Bavaj, *Die Ambivalenz der Moderne im Nationalsozialismus: Eine Bilanz der Forschung* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003); Paul Betts, "The New Fascination with Fascism: The Case of Nazi Modernism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 4 (October 2002): 541–58; Mark Roseman, "National Socialism and Modernisation," in *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and Contrasts*, ed. Richard Bessel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 197–229; Norbert Frei, "Wie modern war der Nationalsozialismus?" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 19, no. 3 (July–September 1993): 367–87; and Michael Prinz and Rainer Zitelmann, *Nationalsozialismus und Modernisierung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991).

World War II: images of empty shops and long breadlines giving way to restocked shelves, happy travelers on the Autobahn, and a country pulled out of the doldrums of the Great Depression?¹⁸

Two broad approaches to these questions animate the literature on the National Socialist economy. The first posits the view that the population of prewar Nazi Germany had access to a comfortable consumer marketplace and that the Third Reich laid the groundwork for the West German consumer society of the 1950s.¹⁹ “[The] social contract of an acquisitive society,” writes Michael Geyer, “was formed in the consuming passions of the 1930s and 1940s, rather than in the postwar years.”²⁰ With reference to the Strength Through Joy (KdF) leisure programs and the omnipresence of products like Coca-Cola, Dagmar Herzog complements this view, referring to the “modernization of consumer culture” during the Third Reich.²¹ In other words, rather than experiencing a backward interregnum in the otherwise progressive unfolding of a consumer society, Germans in the Nazi years created a commercially advanced society and accustomed themselves to economic comforts after the scourges of World War I, inflation, and depression.

Historian Götz Aly has offered a provocative variation on this theme of material comfort, focusing less on the consumer economy than on broader Nazi policies he sees as having been enormously favorable to middle- and lower-income Germans.²² Progressive tax codes, an expansive welfare state, and the influx of wartime booty gave Germans a high standard of living and ultimately led to their overwhelming support for

¹⁸ Germans during the mid-1930s spoke of the country’s economic comeback as miraculous. For a critical view see Hans E. Priester, *Das deutsche Wirtschaftswunder* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1936). On the contested role of the Autobahn in the German economic recovery, see R. J. Overy, “Cars, Roads and Economic Recovery, 1932–1938,” *Economic History Review* 28, no. 3 (August 1975): 466–83; and the ensuing exchange between G. F. R. Spenceley and Overy in *Economic History Review* 32, no. 1 (February 1979): 100–13.

¹⁹ Hans-Ulrich Wehler portrays the West German combination of planning and market economics as the logical result of 1930s policies. See Stefan Schwarzkopf, “Kontrolle statt Rausch? Marktforschung, Produktwerbung und Verbraucherlenkung im Nationalsozialismus zwischen Phantasien von Masse, Angst und Macht,” in *Rausch und Diktatur: Inszenierung, Mobilisierung und Kontrolle in totalitären Systemen*, ed. Árpád von Klimó and Malte Rolf (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2007), 193–209.

²⁰ Michael Geyer, “The Stigma of Violence, Nationalism, and War in Twentieth-Century Germany,” *German Studies Review* 15, special issue (Winter 1992): 75–110.

²¹ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 16.

²² Götz Aly, *Hitler’s Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (New York: Metropolitan, 2007).

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Hitler's dictatorship. Far from dismissing Nazi Germany as an economic aspirant, Aly sees the material benefits as voluminous and, indeed, as much more decisive a factor than ideology and racism in explaining popular support for National Socialism. In effect, Aly places Nazi Germany on a forward path toward the social market economy and mass consumer society of West Germany.

An alternative approach sees the Third Reich as anything but dynamic and consumer friendly. Adam Tooze, in his definitive study of the Nazi economy, paints a picture of a society beset by shortages and disappointed consumers.²³ As he and others have shown, the Nazis hoped to replicate American prosperity; Hitler declared that Germans “resemble the Americans in that we have wants and desires.”²⁴ But the reality of economic upheaval, ersatz products, and declining quality in the run-up to war undermined this aim. The removal of Jews from business life, the enactment of price controls, and limits on competition revealed the foundations of the economic recovery in the 1930s to be, in Peter Hayes's words, “autarky and armaments.”²⁵ Per capita consumption barely reached Weimar levels, and during the war, shortages in consumer goods challenged Germans' dreams of an economically abundant new order. The Third Reich was, according to Wolfgang König, a “failed consumer society.”²⁶

This historical question about material conditions in the Third Reich is partly an empirical one, and thus we await more nuanced studies of how Nazi policies affected consumers in different regions and from varied social backgrounds. Certainly, class divisions remained in Nazi Germany, and material comforts from 1933 to 1945 differed according to occupation and family wealth. As German researchers themselves noted in the 1930s, consumer opportunities were not distributed evenly under Hitler. But the two broad approaches sketched in the preceding paragraphs can also be tied to different interpretive questions emerging from social and cultural history. Where one historian might be curious about the relationship of the consumer sector to the military sector, or of the German economy to the global economy, the historian of everyday

²³ Tooze, *Wages of Destruction*, 145–65.

²⁴ Alon Confino, Introduction to “Histories and Memories of Twentieth Century Germany,” *History and Memory* 17, nos. 1–2 (Autumn 2005): 4–11.

²⁵ Peter Hayes, “Industry under the Swastika,” in *Enterprise in the Period of Fascism*, ed. Harold James and Jakob Tanner (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 26–36.

²⁶ König, *Volkswagen, Volksempfänger, Volksgemeinschaft: Vom Scheitern einer national-sozialistischen Konsumgesellschaft*.

life might be eager to see what people bought even during a period of shortages, what meanings they attached to these goods, and how they remembered the Nazi years after 1945. This book adheres more to the latter approach by focusing on cultural perceptions of the economy. For even if Germans never enjoyed the living standards of the United States, they still took advantage of a modern economy that provided material comforts. During the Nazi years goods and services were less voluminous than in richer, less regulated economies, but this did not stop Germans from enjoying what they had and trying to attain more. Despite the strictures of the Nazi economy (e.g., price controls and the priority of war production), business leaders sought to create a consumer society, albeit one that both catered to the material needs of the masses and preserved the treasured ethos of high-quality production. They engaged in advertising, public relations, and market research, and they discussed the meanings of mass culture and society. In short, economic elites believed in and strove for a “German” consumer society.

Thus while Götz Aly’s view of the Nazis’ social and economic largesse, his reductive materialism, and his downplaying of ideology have rightfully been critiqued, his focus on the popular resonance of the economy remains essential. The empirical reality of shortages and the ideological demands of the state did not stop German companies from promoting new products or consumers from exulting in them. In short, the problems that the Nazi economy faced in the prewar years did not dispel popular visions of a thriving consumer marketplace. To be sure, as war revealed itself to be a defining feature of National Socialism, expectations of a prosperous society were deferred to an amorphous “postwar” period. But Germans engaged in the “virtual consumption” (to use Hartmut Berghoff’s term) of goods not on the shelf,²⁷ and promises of delayed gratification sustained most people as they experienced imminent military victory in 1940 and 1941 and eventual defeat.

THE NAZI ECONOMIC RECOVERY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

While this book foregrounds culture in its analysis of the Nazi marketplace, the specific details of the economic recovery in the 1930s are crucial to this story. What did the economy look like to the men who were devising

²⁷ Hartmut Berghoff, “‘Times Change and We Change with Them’: The German Advertising Industry in the Third Reich – Between Professional Self-Interest and Political Repression,” *Business History* 45, no. 1 (January 2003): 128–47.