

Spring 1992

Review of *Public Libraries in Nazi Germany*, by Margaret F. Stieg.

Alan E. Steinweis

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, asteinweis1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Steinweis, Alan E., "Review of *Public Libraries in Nazi Germany*, by Margaret F. Stieg." (1992). *Faculty Publications, Department of History*. 80.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/80>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Public Libraries in Nazi Germany. By Margaret F. Stieg.
Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. 1992. Pp. 347.
\$52.95. ISBN 0-8173-0556-4.

Nazi cultural policy has only recently begun to attract a level of scholarly attention commensurate with its importance. Having relied for decades on memoirs, fragmentary documentary publications, and impressionistic accounts, historians are now devoting their energies to systematic, in-depth studies of the experiences of artists, performers, and writers under National Socialism. Margaret F. Stieg's book augments this expanding literature by focusing on an institution that was central to the dissemination of culture and knowledge: the public library. The central theme of Stieg's study is, perhaps not surprisingly, the politicization of libraries and librarianship: "In its fully developed form the Nazi public library defines the political public library" (p. 2).

German public libraries ranged in size from the huge depositories of major cities like Berlin to the tiny collections in rural villages. To her credit, Stieg does not give short shrift to the smaller, provincial collections. One of the book's most interesting chapters describes the National Socialist "Library Development Program," which attempted to bring the peculiar Nazi mix of *Bildung* and ideological indoctrination even to the most remote corners of the German countryside. As Stieg notes, in 1934 Germany had 9,494 public libraries, a number that had grown to 13,236 in 1940. The vast majority of the new libraries opened in rural communities.

To oversee the operations of this library system, the Nazi regime erected a complex network of provincial authorities, all ultimately supervised by Bernard Rust's Reich Education Ministry. Stieg has done an impressive job in reconstructing the structure of this administrative system (although the details do, perhaps inevitably, make for tedious reading). As was so often the case in the Third Reich, this system was improvised, non-uniform in organizational structure, and inconsistent in nomenclature, yet it accomplished its main task.

Here that task was to transform library collections through a dual process of purging and collection development. The major purge took place in 1935. In the case of several big-city libraries, where collection development had in the past catered to the political sensibilities of the working class, the extent of the purge was massive. In Essen, for example, Stieg estimates that 69 percent of the contents of the collection present in 1934 had been removed by 1938 (p. 99). Moreover, the purges did not merely eat away at the margins of library collections. Many of the purged books had been among the most frequently circulated items in collections during the Weimar Republic. Not surprisingly, new additions to library collections conformed to Nazi ideological principles, although Stieg notes that "they also included an impressive array of the best of Western culture," including works by Jack London, Oscar Wilde, Sir Walter Scott, Emile Zola, Leo Tolstoy, and Feodor Dostoevsky (pp. 104–5).

Stieg, who teaches in the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Alabama, characterizes the participation of German librarians in the purge of collections as "spiritual suicide" (p. 107). Only in some cases did some librarians "circulate the banned books from the storage rooms in which the books had been placed to people they could trust" (p. 106). For the most part, however, librarians followed official blacklists "slavishly" (p. 96), and removed the banned books "with their own hands" (p. 107). Although Stieg thoroughly documents her indictment of German librarians for their role in censorship, she has, unfortunately, much less to offer about the purge of library personnel. Even if it was true, as Stieg claims, that "librarianship simply was not a profession that had attracted many" Jews (p. 46), the two sentences she devotes to the dismissal of Jewish librarians are not sufficient. Neither are the three sentences she devotes to the 1938 prohibition on the use of public libraries by Jews (p. 150). For professional librarians, was not submitting to (if not facilitating) such discriminatory policies at least as great an ethical failure as was participation in censorship?

Stieg's explanation of the readiness of German professional librarians to capitulate to Nazi coordination and censorship is also somewhat unconvincing. Stieg attributes the rapid embrace of National Socialism by many professional librarians to conservative cultural impulses, as well as to a desire to break free from a methodological *Richtungsstreit* that had plagued the library world for decades. Yet Stieg provides little detail about the effect of the Depression on librarians' salaries, job security, and political attitudes. In this respect, Stieg would have profited from consulting the extensive recent literature on the German professions during the interwar period. The professionalization paradigm established by scholars such as Konrad Jarasch and Michael Kater might have led Stieg to pay closer attention to the impact of the pre-1933 economic catastrophe on the attitude of librarians to the Weimar Republic and to possible authoritarian alternatives. A brief comparison of librarians to

physicians, lawyers, or teachers would also yield remarkably parallel conclusions about how organized German professions responded to Nazi carrot-stick strategies.

Public Libraries in Nazi Germany nevertheless remains a valuable and highly original contribution to our understanding of the relationship between politics and culture in the Third Reich. The book is impressively documented and presents a wealth of new material on the apparatus of censorship, the role of public libraries in the cultural politics of border regions, and the impact of national library policy on German Catholicism.

ALAN E. STEINWEIS
FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY