

# Christian Bock, “What are People Reading?” A Questionnaire in Berlin Book Stores (1940)

## Abstract

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Despite the Nazis’ attempts to dominate the German cultural scene throughout the Third Reich, Germans’ desire for lighter forms of entertainment never disappeared. In fact, as this report on book sales in Berlin makes clear, if anything, Germans were actually consuming more entertainment as the war began, not less. The merchants surveyed indicated that sales had increased—in one case by as much as 50 percent—and furthermore, that Germans were buying even the most expensive books on offer. These were all signs that books were in high demand even during the war. As Germans faced growing consumer shortages, they turned to books as a replacement for other forms of entertainment that were disappearing from everyday life.

The titles listed in this report are illuminating, as they reflect the genres, themes, and topics of interest to consumers—and it is worth noting that the most popular themes did not always align with explicitly propagandistic or political messages. For instance, already in 1940, books about the First World War failed to sell well. Instead, Germans appear to have been more interested in the current war, highlighted by the particularly sharp increase in purchases of books about Great Britain during this time period. Particularly fascinating—and rather ironic—was the growth in sales of *Das andere Ufer* [The Other Shore] by Alba de Céspedes, an Italian antifascist feminist who had been arrested by Mussolini’s regime. To be certain, Germans still purchased some political materials, such as the biography of Hermann Goering. Yet the emphasis in this report on popular literature, and the relatively minor share of political titles, suggests a trend toward entertainment. For instance, William Hubertus von Simpson’s *Der Enkel* [The Grandson], part of a family drama trilogy, also proved quite popular, suggesting that Germans sought relatable and exciting stories and were not readily consuming more overtly political titles.

## Source

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The enquiry, the results of which are reproduced here, took place only in Greater Berlin. From the beginning the intention was not to produce complete figures; instead, a sample survey was carried out. The result is accordingly typical in individual cases, but not totally valid in general terms. (The survey could not otherwise have been limited to Greater Berlin.)

*What are the best sellers?*

In a bookstore adjacent to the Zoo railroad station, where two-thirds of the customers are those who simply drop in while regular customers comprise one-third, the following books were the ones most sold recently:

Céspedes: *Das andere Ufer*

Simpson: *Die Barrings*

Simpson: *Der Enkel*

Harsanji: *Ungarische Rhapsodie*

Harsanji: *Mit den Augen einer Frau*

Wiechert: *Das einfache Leben*

Gullvaag: *Es begann in einer Mittsommernacht*

Mungenast: *Der Zauberer Muzot*

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Knittel: *Via Mala, Therese Etienne, Amadeus*  
Philipp: *Scotland Yard*  
Kluge: *Der Herr Kortüm*  
Seidel: *Lennacker*  
Caldwell: *Einst wird kommen der Tag*

Sales in this bookstore have increased by about 50 percent since the beginning of the war.

The increase in turnover in the book trade is clearly not to be attributed to regular buyers now buying more books; it is, rather, that new buyers (people, in other words, whose literature consumption in times of peace was so low that they could not be included in the statistics of regular book buyers) are now being added to the regulars. One might be forgiven for assuming that this would lead to a certain lowering in the quality of books in demand. It is quite astonishing that this is not the case. The demand is in every respect for good literature, and this is confirmed in all regions. Moreover the buyers are not stingy and pay a good price for their books. Expensive books are selling better than ever.

In a bookstore in Friedrichstrasse the following books were listed as most in demand (as in the above list, they are not in rank order):

Gritzbach: *Hermann Goring, Mensch und Werk* [sic]  
Kuni Tremel-Eggert: *Bard* (novel)  
Philipp: *Scotland Yard*  
The Reich Press Chief Dietrich: *Auf den Strassen des Sieges*  
Céspedes: *Das andere Ufer* (novel translated from the Italian)  
Simpson: *Der Enkel*  
Eugen Roth: *Ein Mensch*  
*Deutscher Geist* (an anthology of literature from two centuries)  
Emil Strauß: *Lebenstanz*  
Günter Prien: *Mein Weg nach Scapa Flow*  
Dr. Johanna Haarer: *Die deutsche Mutter und ihr erstes Kind*  
Dibelius: *England*  
Trevelyan: *Geschichte Englands*

Colonial literature

Books from series such as the Insel Library, Kroner Paperbacks, Dietrich Collection

The drop-ins of buyers at this bookstore comprise only about 40 percent. From a conversation with the owner, a number of remarkable facts emerged. War books about the last war are hardly ever in demand. But, yes, the interest in the present war is such a current and strongly political interest that, at this stage, people are asking almost exclusively for literature about England. Books about the war in France (and, of course, the campaign in Poland) are no longer selling at this point. To be sure, this interest will reappear, but as long as the battle against England continues, the interest in military and political events that have ended will remain weak.

Literature on England, on the other hand, from the standard works to the brochures, is still being bought. The bookstore in question is selling three times the number of books monthly it sold in peacetime. The increase varies in other bookstores from 50 percent to 300 percent.

*In a Lending Library*

Since a portion of the trade will involve books bought as gifts, it seemed appropriate to examine the same questions in a lending library, where those who are buying books intended for gifts or to be sent to

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servicemen at the front would be absent.

This lending library acquires all new publications immediately so there are no limiting factors that need to be taken into account. The most frequently borrowed books in the recent past are the following:

Simpson, *Die Barrings, Der Enkel*  
Mungenast, *Der Zauberer Muzot*  
Caldwell, *Einst wird kommen der Tag*  
Boerner, *Das unwandelbare Herz*  
Holzach, *Der goldene Rahmen*  
Langenscheidt, *Königin der Meere*  
Varé, *Der lachende Diplomat*  
Prien, *Mein Weg nach Scapa Flow*

Here, too, more books are sought out and borrowed than earlier, and here, too, it has become obvious during the war that light reading is no longer in such demand. Overnight, the good book has been discovered.

#### *Questionnaire*

In a bookstore on Friedrichstrasse a questionnaire was displayed for several hours; the answers provided much that is of interest. Questions included whether the buyer was a man or a woman, and whether the book was purchased for the buyer as a gift for someone else or for someone in the military. A further question asked what led the buyer to choose that particular book, whether the buyer had heard or read about the book and come to the store to buy this specific work, or whether the decision had been made only after the buyer entered the store. Then there was the question as to whether the limited availability of other items because of the war had led to the decision to buy a book instead, or whether one would have bought the book no matter what.

Now, a questionnaire like this is somewhat rudimentary. Some buyers who bought Goethe's "Iphigenie," for example, did answer the question whether they had previously heard of this book with a "yes" and responded to the other question, whether they had made their decision while in the store, with a "no."

Sometimes a questionnaire had to be discarded for the purpose of our investigation: if it was a student buying Schillers play *The Robbers*, or a dictionary, or if it was an office worker buying a "Duden" or some such reference work. A number of questionnaires that were inadequately filled out were also discarded. We ended up with 53 questionnaires.

Of the 53 book-buyers, 36 were men, and 17 were women. Twenty-seven books were bought as gifts (of these seven were to be sent to the battlefield); 26 of the purchasers bought the books for themselves.

Of the 53 buyers, 43 came in order to buy a specific title. A mere 10 made their decision only after entering the store. Only 6 answered the last question by saying they would not have bought a book but something else, had this possibility not been limited because of the war. In these cases the purchase was intended as a gift.

The books purchased were all of literary value.

Of course, this, too, was only a random survey, and the result has no general validity. The questionnaire was conducted in mid-November

#### *Debit and Credit*

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This bookstore on Alexanderplatz looks so typical—a bookstore like any other—but everything changes as soon as one is on the second floor and, flanked by the floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with books, enters the office of the owner as if through a portal. Suddenly you are standing in a tiny room totally lacking in all modern office splendor. Desk, bookcase, chairs—they are, to be sure, all there, but just as they stood there 20 years ago, when the bookstore was founded—a wonderful, homely permanence, as if taken out of [Gustav] Freytag’s novel “Debit and Credit.” Even the telephone seems to cower in deference.

The owner talks about how they decided 20 years ago, after reading Hamsun, to order 2,000 copies—at a time when Hamsun was still relatively unknown. It was a huge risk. Of course, a bookseller is not obliged to undergo such risks. He can let the opportunity slip, or he can wait to see whether Mr. Hamsun achieves success and then place an order. But if he wants more than assured business success he will risk all his cash for a book that impresses him, with the same idealism as the publisher.

Of the businesses that risk the greatest losses the book trade is in second place. (There are good and convincing reasons why glass and porcelain are in first place.)

Up here in this tiny room proofs of many a book have been read, and the three people who pronounce their verdicts—the owner, his son, and the business manager—have, with more idealism than realism, run many a risk. The owner speaks highly of the business manager, who is today on the battlefield, as it was he who stood up for Hamsun back then, and he was right: Hamsun sold.

One might have expected that here on Alexanderplatz the best sellers would be totally different, but they are more or less the same as those in the west of Berlin or on Friedrichstrasse:

Goebbels, *Kampf um Berlin*

Tremmel-Eggert, *Bard*

Gritzbach, Hermann *Göring, Mensch und Werk* [sic]

Céspedes, *Das andere Ufer*

Philipp, *Einst wie jetzt*

Harsanji, *Ungarische Rhapsodie, Deutscher Geist* Fried,

*Männer der Weltwirtschaft*

Schenzinger, *Metall*

Winschuh, *Manner, Traditionen, Signale*

Kluge, *Der Herr Kortüm*

Knittel, *Therese Etienne Vare, Der lachende Diplomat*

Prien, *Mein Weg nach Scapa Flow*

Source of English translation: Appendix 1, “What Are People Reading? A Questionnaire in Berlin Bookstores,” by Christian Bock. Translated by David Scrase, University of Vermont; in Jonathan Huener and Francis R. Nicosia, eds. *The Arts in Nazi Germany: Continuity, Conformity, Change*. New York: Berghahn, 2006, pp. 189-94. Republished with permission.

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