

Chemie und Politik: Die Geschichte der Chemischen Werke Hüls, 1938–1979 [Chemistry and Politics: The History of Hüls Chemical Works, 1938–1979]. By *Bernhard Lorentz and Paul Erker*. Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2003. 461 pp. Photographs, tables, figures, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, €34.90. ISBN: 3-406-590962-2.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Lewis

In recent years, class-action suits filed on behalf of Nazi victims have drawn attention to the complicity of German businesses and the Nazi government. One response of German firms has been to spend considerable amounts of money on historical research, which has resulted in a wave of high-quality publications by leading scholars in German business history. *Chemie und Politik: Die Geschichte der Chemischen Werke Hüls, 1938–1979*, by Bernhard Lorentz and Paul Erker, falls into this category. Emerging from discussions over the role of forced labor in the history of the Degussa-Hüls AG, *Chemie und Politik* is one of three works (including Ralf Banken's study on the gold trade and Peter Hayes's forthcoming study of Degussa) that collectively explore these firms' behavior in the Nazi period and after. Although financially supported by Hüls, Erker and Lorentz are no partisans, and in fact the picture they paint of its activities during the postwar era is often a negative one, in which poor decision making by Hüls executives, as well as an unnecessarily complex network of interbusiness and business-government cooperation, offset innovations such as the firm's relatively early switch to petroleum-based feedstocks.

Hüls makes for a fascinating case study because the Third Reich was the beginning, not the end of the story. The firm was founded in 1938 to produce synthetic rubber as part of the Nazi government's four-year plan for the preparation of war. The fact that this creation of the Nazi war economy was able to transform itself into a major player in the economy of the Federal Republic of Germany makes *Chemie und Politik* a work whose value extends beyond the business history community to all those interested in West German history more generally. The authors use three lengthy thematic chapters to explore the intricacies of their subject: the first covers the relationship between the state and the chemical industry; the second, the relationship between Hüls and I.G.

Farben; and the third covers Hüls and its local environment. The second chapter is the most detailed, and it draws upon Erker's experience in handling corporate records to explain the process of entrepreneurial decision making. Hüls certainly requires such a level of expertise, for the contractual arrangement that created the firm was anything but normal. Initially, the I.G. Farbenindustrie AG controlled 74 percent of Hüls, and the Hibernia mining company, 26 percent. Thus, from the outset, the firm's governance consisted of an uneasy tension between two different entrepreneurial cultures: chemistry and mining. Furthermore, I.G. Farben sought to limit the influence of Hibernia, while at the same time attempting to curtail Hüls's ability to compete with other Farben subsidiaries. Add the role of the Nazi state, whose goals often conflicted with the ambitions of the entrepreneurs, and the result was a system of corporate governance that was byzantine in its intrigues and complexities. The situation was not much clearer after the war, as the renamed Chemische Werke Hüls AG was divided among Hibernia, which kept 25 percent, the Chemie-Verwaltungs AG (essentially a holding company consisting of the disglomerated IG Farben successors), which held 50 percent, and Kohleverwertungs GmbH, which held the remaining 25 percent. Erker's handling of this element of the story is deft and authoritative, but, like his previous work on the Continental AG, it is often overwhelming in its detail.

A further strength of the book is the authors' extensive use of technical details in describing Hüls's manufacturing processes and product lines. There is still a tendency in business history, even in the history of chemical firms, to treat research and development as a kind of black box. However, one cannot understand the relationship between Hüls and neighboring firms, including their contractual arrangements and decision making, without learning which materials were exchanged between the firms and why and being told which the products (and byproducts) emerged as a result. Hüls in particular was forced to revamp its product line drastically during the postwar years, as its main product, Buna synthetic rubber, was temporarily banned in Germany. Only by understanding the production lines and the processes through which Buna was produced can the reader grasp the possibilities for product diversification that were open to Hüls in the late 1940s.

The threefold thematic division of the book parallels a division of labor between the two authors, whereby Lorentz wrote the sections on the Nazi era and Erker covered

the postwar years. While the thematic organization of the book seems appropriate, this second division is a mixed success. In the first two chapters of the book, the transition from author to author is relatively seamless, and they are able to illustrate strong continuities across the divide of 1945. Chapter Three, however, is relatively short in comparison, and the sections by the two authors are poorly integrated. Lorentz has written a strong section on the use of slave labor by Hüls, concluding that Hüls executives took the initiative, not only in incorporating the use of slave labor in the construction and running of the new firm, but also in creating a system of coercion and punishment to manage this labor force. Required to build a massive new factory in an isolated area right as the war was beginning, Hüls executives embraced slave labor as a solution to a logistical problem—meeting production quotas in a time of labor scarcity. Obviously this is a significant element of the firm’s history, but it is not mentioned in Erker’s subsequent discussions of the postwar era. Instead, Erker takes up the subjects of automation and the relationship between Hüls and the local community. It seems to me that there are some very important lines of continuity that warrant exploration. In particular, did Hüls approach both slave labor and automation as technical solutions to the same problem, that of an unstable labor supply? Erker’s chapter on automation seems to imply such continuity, but I would like to have seen this issue examined more explicitly. Ultimately this is a minor criticism, and I raise it to demonstrate the overall significance of this study and to indicate that we still have much to learn from the history of firms like Hüls. *Chemie und Politik* is thus both a fine, insightful history in its own right as well as a point of departure for further research.

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