



Jaap van Ginneken

Kurt Baschwitz

A Pioneer of
Communication
Studies and Social
Psychology

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‘We want to hope, that practical politics will also acknowledge [...] the rediscovery of the overwhelmingly large majority of *decent* people’.

(Final sentence of Kurt Baschwitz’s key work *Du und die Masse*, published in the fateful year 1938)

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Most personal pictures have apparently been taken by Baschwitz and his immediate relatives. They were loaned or given to the author and the Baschwitz archives at the Special Collections Department of the Amsterdam University Library to further his legacy through publications such as these. A few more general pictures and other illustrations on topical affairs have been selected due to being free of copyright, and in the public domain.

Preface

Kurt Baschwitz was one of the founders of the social science disciplines of mass communication and mass psychology – not only in The Netherlands, but also on the European continent as a whole. He had been a prominent journalist under the Weimar Republic. Then the Nazis stamped him an ethnic Jew and forced him to flee to Amsterdam in The Netherlands, where he became an early ‘private lecturer’ in newspaper studies. He narrowly escaped deportation to the east under the occupation, and then survived the war in hiding.

Immediately after Liberation, he helped found a new political and social science faculty and a multi-faceted Press Institute within it, which introduced journalist education and media research to the country. But he also reached out to colleagues (first to Germanophones and then others) to build a first international society for (what they initially called) ‘publicistics’ – with near-annual international conferences during the early fifties.

When similar Francophone networks and UNESCO in Paris were considering founding the International Association for Mass Communication Research IAMCR, he (and his immediate successor) offered the Amsterdam Press Institute as its secretariat, his trilingual/English-language *Gazette* as its scholarly journal, and to add the bulletin of the new association as its supplement. This made Amsterdam university one of the strongest clusters for the new discipline of Communication and Media anywhere. (Today No. 2 in the latest QS world university rankings by subject).

From the late 1970s onwards, it received a further boost from the appointment of British Denis McQuail as the main professor. McQuail further reinforced the links with the Anglo-American worlds, and co-founded the *European Journal of Communication*. His handbook *Mass Communication Theories* became a global standard, and sold more than 80,000 copies.

So there is every reason to try and find out how all this came about.

This study takes me half a century back, to my roots as a graduate student of social psychology, with press studies as a collateral subject. I then became a young assistant at its small twin institute for ‘Mass psychology, public opinion and propaganda’ – later temporarily renamed ‘The Baschwitz Institute’ after its original founder.

His mass psychology successor there challenged me to do archival research and my Ph.D. on the intellectual and social origins of the main theories that Baschwitz had so harshly criticized, and which dated from late 19th century Italy and France. This led to my Ph.D. dissertation on *Crowds, psychology*

and politics; and later to a belated sequel on *Mass movements* concerning its further British and Germanophone roots. I also wrote a chapter on the emergence of public opinion and attitude research in the U.S., and a third book, *De uitvinding van het publiek*, on 'The invention of the public' in The Netherlands. So, in a sense, this is the fourth book in a longer series.

This study on Kurt Baschwitz was officially realized in slightly over one and a half man-years, with financial support from the University of Amsterdam historiography fund, the 'Stichting Democratie en Media' fund (originally created by the former resistance paper *Het Parool*), and a small fund for research and documentation about pioneers of the behavioural sciences. But the study could not have been realized within this limited amount of time if the ground had not been prepared before me.

First there was the Dutch graduate thesis by Vera Ebels-Dolanová in Amsterdam, who also did the first sorting of many of Baschwitz's left papers and interviewed his family and colleagues some thirty-five years ago. Second, there was the subsequent German graduate thesis by Dieter Anschlag in Münster, who also delved further into some specifically German parts of his early and late career. And third, Joan Hemels, a professor of communication science and especially communication history at the University of Amsterdam, did detailed research about the origins of the field in both the Germanic world and the Netherlands.

Fortunately, I was able to discover large amounts of new information, and to fill in many of the blanks on his personal and intellectual history. But I had to limit my ambitions. This is surely not the final word on Baschwitz's life, works, and thought: there is ample room left for a four-year project by a Ph.D. student. Especially as more material gradually becomes more easily accessible through an ever-rising number of digital scans, data banks, and Internet links – including even pre-war materials.

My main goal is to stir further interest in his significance among the new generations, and among an international audience – in a readable, narrative form. Because his was a life of struggle and drama. Which resulted in half a dozen books, with original approaches to some of the most eternally fascinating social phenomena. As well as in a number of major institutions that survive today – even on an international scale.

Jaap van Ginneken
Nice, late 2017

1 Introduction

Kurt Baschwitz (1886-1968) had a lifelong fascination for ‘the riddle of the mass’ in both its visible and invisible forms. He was a major pioneer of *communication and media studies* on the European continent, an early student of the *social, political, and mass psychology* of crowds, publics, audiences, and public opinion, as well as a versatile *social historian*. Half a century after his death, however, he risks being forgotten and misunderstood, falling through the cracks of history.

Baschwitz’s significance

Baschwitz was one of the many founders of the social sciences who came from a Jewish background, and who were forced to flee the Hitler regime. Fate dictated that he made it no further than The Netherlands: then still neutral, later occupied anyway. He did not reach the Anglo-American world, which came to dominate the global linguistic, cultural, intellectual, and scientific spheres after the war.

After Baschwitz’s death, one commemorative article noted: ‘Unlike colleagues like Karl Mannheim, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Paul Lazarsfeld and Kurt Lewin, he did not end up in [the United Kingdom or] the United States’.¹ This contributed to his unique contributions being overlooked. In 1986, upon the centenary of his birth, his successors from both press history and mass psychology joined together to claim that ‘Baschwitz’ work deserves a good English translation, or at least a summary’.²

Upon a later jubilee, one of those successors repeated: ‘Had he fled to the U.S. [from Nazi Germany in 1933], he would have been world famous today’. So ‘His publications deserve to be reprinted and translated’.³ This present book is an attempt to fulfil part of that wish by providing an outline of Baschwitz’s life and times, as well as summaries and brief excerpts from his half-dozen books, for English-language and international readers.

1 Wieten, p. 523.

2 Marten Brouwer & Joan Hemels upon his centenary, in the daily *NRC Handelsblad*, 4 February 1986.

3 Brouwer upon the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Press institute in Amsterdam, in the daily *Het Parool*, 19 April 1988.

Figure 1

In the 1950s, Baschwitz lived alone. But his children got children, and occasionally visited. This picture shows him happy and contented, with a grandchild.

Baschwitz was a liberal. Unlike in North America, in Western Europe political liberalism is usually represented by secular parties that emphasize individual responsibility in moral matters and gradual social reform, but largely free markets. They may join different coalitions: some parties are more progressive or centre-left, others more conservative or centre-right, at least in economic matters.

Throughout his life, Baschwitz was a defender of constitutional rule and law and order against authoritarianism, intimidation, and civil violence. This was especially true during the two World Wars and the Inter-War years, when those values were alternately assaulted by both the radical socialist or communist left, and by the radical nationalist or fascist right.

Three of his major dictums illustrate his stance. One: Mass delusions are best stopped by preserving freedom of expression (meaning critical discussion) at all times. Two: The most important part of a newspaper is formed by the mass of its readers (meaning a group of citizens), not by the institution itself. Three: Practical politics needs to rediscover (i.e., put trust in) the large mass of *decent* people if they are to stand up to tyrants. He wrote this in the 1920s and 1930s, when Europe and the rest of the world began to slide toward another major conflagration.

What kind of man was he? I shall later return to characterizations of him during the Weimar years, when he was a young journalist. Up to those years, he had been relatively adamant and self-assured, as such young professionals often are. But the sudden coming to power of Hitler and the Nazis, his being forced to quit and flee, probably profoundly sobered him, made him a 'sadder and a wiser man' during the rest of his life. Someone who knew him well during the most difficult years of his Amsterdam exile, just before he was forced into hiding, said he remained a man 'with a natural nobility, simplicity, modesty and great personal force. With very outspoken opinions; taking much clearer stands than for instance [German writer and Nobel prize winner] Thomas Mann'.⁴ Mann had a similar background to Baschwitz, and also fled the Nazis into exile.

One of Baschwitz's close assistants later recounted that he was 'a human scholar. His erudition rested on a certain wisdom, deriving from his mild persona. Many before him had dealt with mass psychology. But for him the mass was not a dehumanized horde, but [simply] a group composed of individuals'.⁵ In this, he went against the elites of his day, who tended to simply blame all that went wrong in society on 'The revolt of the masses', the semi-literates, and the occasional derailments of the ordinary folk.

A very European intellectual

In a sense, Kurt Baschwitz remained an arch-European intellectual throughout his life. He was born into the very heart of its modern history, and his life was torn between its contradictions. He was a German patriot, of Jewish extraction. A resolute defender of democracy born in the liberal state of Baden, which was absorbed into the Empire led by the semi-authoritarian Prussia.

He was born opposite Strasbourg, on the other side of the Rhine – after Mainz also one of the cities where printing with movable type had been invented and developed, where modern book and later newspaper culture had originated, to which Baschwitz was to attach such vital importance. The two earliest printed bestsellers had a huge historic impact: Gutenberg's Bible (printed in Mainz 1455) followed by the notorious *Malleus*

4 Anton Bueno de Mesquita, who knew him from their common activities at the cultural centre for Jewish refugees at Oosteinde 16 in Amsterdam. Interviewed after Baschwitz's death, by Vera Ebels-Dolanová for her 1983 master's thesis (p. 169, 202).

5 Dick H. Couvée, opening sentences of his obituary, in the daily *de Volkskrant*, 8 January 1968.

Maleficarum (1487) manual for witch hunts. Both were printed first in Latin, then translated into vernacular languages (i.e., Martin Luther's version in 1522 and 1534) – triggering the Reformation, but also a horrible series of religious wars.

Strasbourg was the capital of the Alsace region: together with the adjacent Lorraine region, it was fiercely contested during most of Baschwitz's lifetime by the two dominant continental powers, France and Germany. This made it the bleeding heart of Western Europe during two World Wars: but after the return to peace, it was also the seat of the hopeful new European parliament.

Baschwitz was also born in the (almost) tipping point year 1886 – toward the end of the era of 'Iron Chancellor' Otto von Bismarck, who had united the country and favoured Jewish emancipation. But it was also on the eve of the ascent of emperor Wilhelm II, who demanded that Germany be accepted as an equal by the other great powers, leading to the competition and struggle that resulted in two devastating World Wars. Meanwhile, the Imperial court preacher Adolf Stoecker founded the Christian Social Party that promoted Anti-Semitism; later, merging with national conservatism it ultimately resulted in the Nazi Party, discrimination, pogroms, and the Holocaust.

In 1933, this threat made Baschwitz flee to the neighbouring Netherlands, which was desperately trying to remain neutral. When the invasion and occupation nevertheless came during the Second World War, he miraculously survived arrest in a raid and a transit camp before going into hiding. After Liberation, during the last decade of his career, he helped found a wide range of institutions, both national and international, and thereby helped create a whole new, large and influential field of study: the science of media and communication. But his half dozen books mostly focused on audiences and public opinion, on social and mass psychology.

Causes of neglect

There seem to be several reasons for the neglect of Baschwitz in the dominant literature on the history of the social sciences. He was an exile and an outlier in more than just one sense: not only politically, but also culturally, intellectually, scientifically. He did not really fit into the prevailing mould of his place and time, or even thereafter.

Baschwitz's native language was German, and he wrote all of his books in German. But after the first book he no longer lived in Germany, and his second and most important book published in German was banned there. Thus he was cut off from his roots and natural environment. That book

was initially published by Dutch publishers in German, but with limited distribution and impact in his country of origin and linguistic region. Several other books were translated and appeared in Dutch – but that is a limited linguistic area, with little dissemination elsewhere.

Baschwitz did not speak English until late in his life, let alone write in it. And, despite various attempts, none of his books were ever translated into English – which became the prime international scientific language after the war. Only his last work was belatedly translated into French. Individual books were also translated into Serbo-Croatian, Swedish, Japanese, and one small one into Malay, but these exerted only a marginal influence. So today he remains largely invisible in global social science and the humanities.

There is a further mismatch between the discipline in which he conducted his institutional activities during his lifetime (first journalism and then newspaper or press studies, which was later called communication and media science) and most of his major books. His six major books cover four main themes, most straddling ill-defined, intermediary disciplines of that time, rather than fitting easily into one. I group them together as the 4P's: press, propaganda, politics, and persecution.

The sciences of man and society had largely remained an interconnected whole during the Inter-War years; it was only thereafter that they separated into clearly isolated disciplines and sub-disciplines. The field of mass psychology (and its sister discipline, collective behaviour sociology), in which much of Baschwitz's published work resides, always remained a rather exceptional and strange field anyway, and had difficulty finding a permanent place anywhere. Because, for instance, preoccupation with the dramatic phenomena that these fields study often flared up only temporarily before quickly waning again.

Furthermore, Baschwitz was a journalist by training and tried to write books for a wider educated audience, rather than studies targeted toward a small circle of university colleagues and meant to circulate only within the 'ivory tower' itself. Most of the time, he did not even give his writings a very elaborate scholarly apparatus. They initially had few strict definitions and few footnotes. They had limited bibliographies, few references to recent learned articles from purely academic journals, no or only a rather modest register or index. This often led them to be neglected by specialist colleagues, even today.

During his later days, a major empirical, quantitative, methodological, and statistical revolution took place in the social sciences: economics, sociology, psychology. He understood and appreciated this transformation, which quickly took hold throughout post-war Europe. But in his books, he had always argued as a comparative social historian. First focusing on a phenomenon and then distilling the psycho-social processes apparent in it,

but primarily through comparative descriptions and analyses of different instances, ages, and places.

Nor did he belong to a well-defined paradigmatic school, as part of which he could later be quoted and discussed within its wider framework – and thus survive by at least being mentioned in the context of that movement in overviews and handbooks, however briefly. He did not organically evolve within a network of sociologists or psychologists, either conceptual theorists or practical researchers. And yet his intuitions and proposals often preceded those of a new generation of wartime scholars of opinions, attitudes, and persuasion in America – who were also often of Jewish and/ or Germanic descent (i.e. Festinger, Katz, Lazarsfeld, and others).⁶

Finally, there is the question of the *Zeitgeist* or spirit of the times. He started out as a German patriot, but as a Weimar liberal he was soon banned by the Nazis. After the war, he only gradually attained a solid university position in social science in Amsterdam, but at a time when it was shedding continental critical traditions and almost exclusively turning to ‘positivist’ Anglo-American examples.

He died in the key year of 1968. Perhaps he could belatedly have been re-discovered by a new generation of students, as many authors of the Frankfurt School were, for instance. But although he agreed with some of Freud’s ideas, he was not a Freudian. The neo-Marxism of the baby boomers was completely alien to him. So he remained somewhat of an outlier, difficult to classify and assign a lasting place.

Approach of this study

The life and work of someone like Baschwitz cannot be understood in isolation. His life spanned two countries and half a dozen places of residence, several political regimes and dramatic crises, even exile and ultimately going into hiding – in the end intentionally disappearing from the face of the organized and official earth. So he needs to be put back into a wider framework to be fully understood.

In my previous works on social science history, I have always chosen to explore the ‘minimal meaningful context’ of such authors, their books, and their theories. That is to say, both the wider intellectual context within the scientific disciplines of their day and the paradigm shifts that were

6 As repeated by his successor Brouwer. Also see Ebels-Dolanová, p. 186-9. (Leon Festinger 1919-1989; Elihu Katz 1926-; Paul Lazarsfeld 1901-1976).

underway, as well as the wider social context in terms of contemporary trends and political events. In the case of this monograph on Baschwitz, I have sometimes chosen to draw even wider circles – as facts about relevant developments in contemporary Imperial Germany and then the Weimar Republic, of the adjacent neutral and then occupied Netherlands, will mostly be unfamiliar to foreign readers and the new generations.

I have found that there are ample reasons to go out of our way to try and put things in the right perspective. On the one hand, authors of other ages often do not mention certain aspects of their immediate context, since they are overtly present and self-evident to contemporaries (i.e., the regular resurgence of widespread Anti-Semitism). There is therefore a risk that we will miss implicit references to them today.⁷

On the other hand, we tend to apply our own present-day hindsight in judging people and their choices in other times and days. In Baschwitz's case, this holds for his original attitudes concerning the First World War, for instance, and its atrocities and propaganda. As a young journalist and foreign correspondent, he strongly identified with the newly emerging Germany, and long stuck to Berlin's version of events. He railed against enemy images held in the allied capitals, including in his first book on 'Mass delusions'. In retrospect, he was partly right and partly wrong, and he later regretted some of the one-sidedness of his earlier positions.

But we should also beware of the naïvely 'perspectivistic' slant, of viewing the First World War through the lens of what we now know about the Second World War. Sure the former contained some of the seeds of the latter, but often in rather indirect and complicated ways (e.g., through the disastrous Versailles treaty). It is too simplistic to depict all German patriots of WWI as the 'bad guys', and all of their enemies as the 'good guys'.

So in this book I devote ample attention to at least three levels of context that are relevant for understanding Baschwitz's life. The first is the macro-level: the major international and national developments during his day. The first section of most odd-numbered chapters is entirely devoted to this level. The second is the meso-level: the organizations with which he worked, such as the institutions where he studied or worked, or that subsidized him. Third is the micro-level of his private life: his parents, his romantic relationships, his children, his friends and acquaintances. They were also on his mind.

⁷ I have earlier demonstrated this for Tarde (see my *Crowds*, p. 219 a.f. and for Freud (see my *Mass movements*, p. 85 a.f.).

Outline

In planning this book, my central question was how to organize the material about his multi-faceted life and many-sided work into a relatively simple grid that remains transparent to the reader.

With regard to Baschwitz's work, I have chosen to focus on the four incarnations of the 'masses' that he discussed in his six substantial books aimed at a wider audience. In chronological order, these incarnations can be labelled as Mass Propaganda, the Mass Press, Mass Politics, and Mass Persecution. In each case, he explored the interconnections between collective representations and social dynamics: enemy images and nations, news and media audiences, revolutionary attempts, supposed witches and witch-hunts. Some of his minor articles and essays can also be attached to these four major themes.

Closer inspection reveals that all four of these themes were suggested to him by *his own direct experience* of the events of the day, or from the preceding period. Though there was often a lag of a few years: it took some time for the events to sink in, for the first tentative smaller articles and/or speeches to be written about them, for his larger reflections to take form. After that they often coalesced into an overall theme and book, which might go through further editions and revisions, or produce spin-offs. In this way, the four grand themes of his books can be directly connected to four distinct periods of his life.

The present study therefore consists of four pairs of chapters, plus one extra. His experiences with the First World War led to his first book on 'Mass delusions', about mass propaganda and enemy images. His experiences as a journalist under the Weimar Republic led to his second book, 'The newspaper through the ages', which covered the mass press and its audiences. His experiences as a citizen in exile led to his third book, 'You and the mass', which discussed politics and social movements. Finally, his experiences as a Jew in hiding led to his fourth and later books on 'Witches and witch trials', i.e., mass persecution.

I have mostly stuck to a kind of 'sandwich formula', alternating four times between later odd chapters that talk about the relevant periods of his life and times and even chapters covering the books themselves: their inception and production, their publication and reception. Each of these later even chapters contain a brief summary and discussion of the contents of the book, followed by a brief excerpt that provides a flavour of his argument.

In contrast, the eleventh chapter – corresponding to the culmination of his career – does not so concern his theoretical, but rather his practical

work. Namely, his work as a founding father of major institutions that put political science, mass communication, public opinion, and mass psychology on the map. Most of these institutions survive and continue to flourish today.

So these four blocks of altogether eight chapters form the bulk of this study. They are preceded by an opening chapter about Baschwitz's youth and his days as a doctoral student and young professional under the newly unified and rapidly growing Imperial Germany. After a discussion of his international role, they are followed by a final chapter about his retirement activities, and some conclusions about his legacy. An epilogue discusses the further fate of his department and wider field.

The appendix provides a translation of a complete but short Post-War article, which succinctly sums up some of his key ideas in his own words. This serves to illustrate that Baschwitz was indeed an original thinker who deserves to be remembered and reread today.

A note on documentation

Notes. Notes refer to sources for: precise numbers, literal quotes or controversial statements. If such elements are not immediately followed by a note number, then the next number usually applies. Sometimes, notes do also contain a sideline extension of the main argument.

Books. A selection of the books to which I refer more than incidentally is listed in the Bibliography. They are usually just indicated by the (first) author's or (first) editor's name. If there is more than one book under that name, the reference is further specified by a key term from the title, or an original publication year.

Central reference. I have emphatically chosen a combination of reference works on the Empire and Weimar from different national perspectives, to keep an overview and not to fall into the trap of stereotypes. German: Stürmer. British: Kitchen. French: Guillen. Dutch: Boterman.

Journal of record. There are occasional references to current affairs. My main journal of record through the years had always been the *International Herald Tribune*, abbreviated as *IHT*. At one point, it was published by the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* in tandem. Today, the latter has turned it into the *International New York Times*, abbreviated here as *INYT* (and more recently even into *The New York Times/ International Edition*).

Website. I plan to somehow reserve part of one related website (under 'history' at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research ASCoR) to Kurt Baschwitz, his life, times and work. I will also 'park' additional materials there. Such as work files I produced during an intermediary phase, in preparation of the ultimate book.