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Olmsted, Kathryn. *The Newspaper Axis: Six Press Barons Who Enabled Hitler*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022, 328 pp., \$30.00 (Hardcover). ISBN: 9780300256420, Reviewed by Benjamin Goldstein, Fulbright Fellow at Free University of Berlin, bg2572@columbia.edu

Kathryn Olmsted's work provides a timely and incisive analysis of four American and two British press lords, united in their isolationism, appeasement towards fascism, and proclivity to use their media apparatus and larger-than-life personalities to forcefully promote their politics. Using a wealth of archival and secondary sources, Olmsted dives into the operations and influences of British press lords Max Beaverbrook and Harold Rothermere and American press moguls Eleanor "Cissy" Medill Patterson, Joseph Medill Patterson, Robert McCormick, and William Randolph Hearst. As dubbed by Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, the American cases formed the original "newspaper axis" from which this book cleverly draws its title. While acknowledging the differences between these press lords and their sometimes comical overreaches, Olmsted argues for the substantial power these media tycoons exercised in weakening their countries' response to fascism.

The work's beginning offers a fascinating and much-needed critique of the ongoing historiographic debates over the idea of "isolationism" - a term that Olmsted unabashedly and with significant archival backing uses throughout the text. Noting that five of the six press lords self-identified with the term, some quite enthusiastically, Olmsted provides a well-backed challenge to the common argument that "isolationist" was not a term interwar Americans generally used to describe themselves. Acknowledging that conventional elites may have shied away from the term, Olmsted makes a strong case for the need for scholars of American foreign policy and public opinion to pay more attention to the role of the sensational press. A further transnational examination of sensational nationalistic interwar

press lords might also include the cases of the Nazi supporter Alfred Hugenberg and Japanese nationalist Matsutarō Shōriki, both often referred to as the "Hearst" of their respective countries.

The first six chapters offer biographies of the often-intersecting storied lives and careers of the six press lords. They show that a type of right-wing, anti-statist, and pro-authoritarian politics motivated most of the press lords, with the partial exceptions of the Pattersons, who supported New Deal politics throughout the 1930s before their paranoia over Franklin Delano Roosevelt's foreign policy and exercise of presidential power turned them into considerable adversaries. While other figures within the six media empires, particularly foreign correspondents, surface occasionally, the overwhelming focus is on the press moguls themselves and their respective evolutions and exercises of power, lending the work a top-down quality.

Starting with chapter seven, the work closely considers the tycoons' isolationist and appeasement campaigns from 1937. Noting in particular that the giant conservative and anti-statist newspaper empires of Hearst and McCormick had largely failed to accomplish their domestic agendas against the New Deal, Olmsted develops an argument that the magnates had greater success in their isolationist foreign policy. Crucial to this argument is archival evidence from the British and American administrations indicating elite frustration with the perceived influence and irresponsibility of the press moguls. This evidence, combined with occasional anecdotes of the moguls' (often quite outlandish) attempts to intervene in foreign affairs more directly, convinces one of the powers these tycoons had to, at

the least, create a serious headache for Anglo-American political elites. Yet this elite-level analysis, while valuable in its own right, does leave the reader wondering about another fundamental role of the press in this case study: its relationship to public opinion.

Did these papers seriously shape public opinion? Olmsted makes it clear that political elites, particularly the avid media consumer FDR, considered them a threat to shaping the desired public opinion. And Olmsted specifically argues that the media empires informed (or misinformed) the electorate at key points, thus restricting the courses of action available. The work provides some scattered pieces of evidence for the bottom-up reception of these press lords, noting, for example, that an America First Committee secretary remarked to Patterson on the usefulness of his paper. Yet, other intriguing bottom-up evidence, such as a midwestern FDR supporter's frustration with his local Hearst and McCormick newspapers and encouragement of the president's fireside chats, suggests the limitations of the ability of the "newspaper axis" to inflict their will on their readers. Furthermore, when considering the failures of the American press moguls to fight the New Deal and the depth of non-interventionist and isolationist sentiment within the Anglo-American political body, one wonders if their relative "success" in foreign affairs can be attributed more to riding

underlying trends. The cases of Hearst and Rothermere, whose Philo-fascism and abundantly transparent political crusading seemed to cause serious financial problems for their papers, seem to suggest at least the limits of the true influence of the press moguls. While certainly difficult to tease out methodologically, gaining a stronger sense of the relationship between the press tycoons' efforts and public opinion itself would enrich our understanding of the true power of the "newspaper axis."

Olmsted nonetheless presents a compelling portrait of this transatlantic, isolationist, and ethno-nationalist media force, which persisted - and in some ways grew - in its vindictiveness and sense of victimization during and beyond the second world war. The book's final chapter considers the post-war afterlives of these moguls and their empires, noting the fingerprints of their legacies in the modern-day sensationalist and conservative Anglo-American media landscape. In perhaps their greatest legacy, Olmsted notes their ability to commercialize paranoia-steeped, nationalistic, and anti-Liberal mass media campaigns. For all those seeking a greater understanding of the roots of our modern sensational right-wing media landscape, *The Newspaper Axis* is a worthy read. Graduate students and advanced undergraduate students in media studies, journalism, politics, and U.S. history will find this book particularly valuable.