

Joachim Zeller

The Vossische Zeitung 1617 to 1934

The end of era

When on 31 March, 1934 the *Vossische Zeitung* ceased publication due to increasing censorship and the employment ban on editors who were not to the system's liking, many of them Jews, this marked the end of an era in the history of the German press. No other newspaper had been continuously published over such a long period of time, and no other newspaper had achieved such international recognition. Many, on hearing the news of the demise of the *Vossische Zeitung*, felt that it represented a historical turning point. On Sunday, 24 March 1934, the Ullstein-Verlag declared: "... The task of a newspaper such as the *Vossische Zeitung* has, in our opinion, come to an end. We have consequently of our own accord taken the painful but correct decision to once again renounce the *Vossische Zeitung* and to cease publication at the end of this month."¹ Seven days later, on 31 March 1934, Erich Welter² as the last editor-in-chief, took leave of his readers, and in doing so referred to the anonymous series of articles entitled "Three Hundred Years – From the History of the *Vossische Zeitung*" that had been published in the preceding days: "The history of a newspaper ... comes to an end each day. [...] This being the case, we deeply regret, alongside our readers, that the old framework in which we have been active, and which allowed us to be in contact with tens of thousands on a daily basis, is now breaking up. We particularly regret that the group of people surrounding the *Vossische Zeitung* is in danger of being blown apart. [...] The time of this newspaper, as we see it, is not at an end, even though we are forced today to bid farewell to our readers by its discontinuation."³ Georg Bernhard, living in exile in France, expressed his opinion more clearly and directly in the *Pariser Tageblatt* on 21 March 1934 under the heading "The Voss is dying": "Sad news for German culture. On the day the '*Vossische Zeitung*' finally ceases publication, not only will it mark the end of one of Germany's oldest newspapers, but also that of a newspaper whose tradition – starting with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's editorship and taking in others such as Theodor Fontane and Remarque – is closely linked with all the transformations and changes in German literature and the splendour of German science and civilization. While there have certainly been fluctuations and aberrations in the political history

1 *Vossische Zeitung* no. 71, 24 March 1934, front page.

2 Erich Welter (* 30 June 1900 in Strasbourg; † 10 June 1982 in Frankfurt am Main), German journalist and economist, joined the *Vossische Zeitung* from the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1932, rejoined the *Frankfurter Zeitung* as a financial editor until 1943, in November 1949 one of the founders and publishers of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

3 Abschied vom Leser, EW [i. e.: Erich Welter], *Vossische Zeitung* no. 77; Sunday, 31 March 1934

of the ‘Vossische Zeitung’, the fight it undertook until 1931 for political freedom and democracy fills a whole series of honourable chapters in the book of German history.”⁴

The “Vossische” – the history of a newspaper’s name

Beneath the title of the last published edition of the *Vossische Zeitung* stands “Berlinische Zeitung von Staats- und gelehrten Sachen / Gegründet 1704” – and in 1904 the 200th anniversary of the newspaper was indeed celebrated with a ceremony and commemorative volume.⁵ In actual fact, on 28 August 1704 King Frederick I had only granted royal endorsement for the Berlin newspaper privilege bought by the printer Johann Lorenz from him. He bought this together with the printing works of Christoff Runge’s widow Maria Katharina. Christoff Runge in turn was the son and business heir of Georg Runge, printer of the “Botenmeisterzeitungen” since 1626. One of the duties of the “Botenmeister”, i. e. the electoral postmaster, was to gather news from the entire empire and distribute it in the form of a weekly newspaper. Christoff Frischmann’s *Avisen* and *Berliner Botenmeister Zeitung* from 1617 and 1618 have survived to this day. After his death, his brother Veit Frischmann took on the role of postmaster, who in turn handed over publication of the newspaper to its printer, Runge, in 1655. Runge’s widow sold the printing works to Johann Lorentz in August 1704, who then acquired the Berlin newspaper privilege. The publishing company wrongly assumed that this had been its founding date right up until the twentieth century.

In 1721, however, Soldier King Frederick William I prohibited Johann Lorentz from printing the *Berlinische Ordinaire Zeitungen*. The sole publisher of the *Berlinische Privilegierte Zeitung* was subsequently Johann Andreas Rüdiger, who took over the title numbering from his predecessor and continued publication. After Rüdiger’s death in 1751, his son-in-law, bookseller Christian Friedrich Voss, inherited the privilege and thereby became to a certain extent the founding father of the *Vossische Zeitung*, published until 1775 as the *Berlinisch-privilegierte Staats- und Gelehrte Zeitung*, and thereafter as the *Königlich privilegierte Berlinische Zeitung von Staats- und gelehrten Sachen*, with just an editorial note stating: “Published by the successors of the Voss family” – referred to even in the 18th century as “Tante Voss” (“Aunt Voss”).

The history of the *Vossische Zeitung* can accordingly be traced back – be it along winding paths – to the *Berliner Botenmeister Zeitungen* of 1617/1618. Only in October 1910 did *Vossische Zeitung* become its main title and *Königlich privilegierte Berlinische Zeitung* its subtitle.

⁴ Pariser Tageblatt, 2nd year, 1934; ed. 99; 21 March, front page.

⁵ Die Vossische Zeitung: geschichtliche Rückblicke auf drei Jahrhunderte; 29 October 1904 / by Arend Buchholtz. Berlin, 1904

From a newssheet to an advertiser

Whereas the suppression and harassment of politically-oriented newspapers had become the norm under the Soldier King, his son and successor Frederick II was inclined to relax the reins a little.⁶ Famous quotes include: "... to write what he wants without it being censored ..." and Minister Podewil's: "[His] Majesty retorted however that newspapers, if they are to be interesting, must not be impaired." Despite the young king's good intentions in 1740, censorship was in fact set to increase during the Seven-Years' War. Following the accession to the throne of Frederick II, the *Vossische's* sole privilege came to an end with the publication of the *Berlinische Nachrichten von Staats- und gelehrten Sachen* by Christian Voss' bookseller friend Ambrosius Haude. The competing publication, later called the *Spenersche Zeitung*, only lasted until 1874, however, and the promising motto in the cartouche of the first editions, "Truth and Freedom", remained a noble and unfulfilled desire.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing came to Berlin in 1748 during Rüdiger's time. He first of all worked in Rüdiger's newspaper publishing company, then from 1751 under Christian Friedrich Voss took over the editorship of the "Gelehrter Artikel", and expanded it to include the monthly insert "Das Neueste aus dem Reiche des Witzes" ("The Latest from the Realm of Humour"), dedicated to scholarly current affairs, "which concern those arts and sciences that, for most, serve more as a source of pleasure than activity." In just a few years as editor, Lessing turned the publication, which had previously been purely a newssheet, into a newspaper with a mindset and a cultural and political will. Lessing's brother Karl Gotthelf was married to Voss' daughter, and therefore the Lessing family came into the possession of the *Vossische Zeitung*, holding on to it until its sale to the Ullstein-Verlag in 1914, without this ever being revealed in the title pages. Instead, the following line was included until 1913: "Published by the successors of the Voss family". And it was indeed family property, dating back to Voss's daughter Marie-Friederike.

The first Berlin daily newspaper to appear was the short-lived *Berliner Abendblätter*, edited by Heinrich von Kleist and published between October 1810 and March 1811. The *Vossische Zeitung* only followed suit in 1824, becoming first of all a daily newspaper, appearing each day with the exception of Sunday, and from 1879 onwards, twice daily, as a morning and evening edition.

Between revolution and reaction

At the beginning of the 19th century, the growth of Berlin's newspapers was sharply curtailed by censorship laws and practices, forcing them to concentrate on printing banalities. The situation remained unchanged even after Napoleon's defeat in 1813 the implementation of the reforms of Stein and Hardenberg and Frederick William IV's welcome

6 Oschilewski, Walther G.: *Zeitungen in Berlin*. Berlin, (1975), p. 26.

accession to the throne in 1840. In 1843, the *Vossische Zeitung*, with Willibald Alexis as its spokesman, called for “freedom of opinion, constitutionalism and the opening up of the municipal colleges”⁷. However, it was the 1848 March Revolution that finally shook the dogmas of absolutism and brought them crashing down. Censorship was lifted, and Frederick William IV issued an amnesty “pardoning all those who, because of political acts and crimes, or acts and crimes carried out by the press, have been prosecuted or condemned”.

The *Vossische Zeitung*’s position was variable and conflicting during this time: on the one hand it argued for democracy, while on the other it acted as a mouthpiece for a fickle bourgeoisie who considered “peace and order” to be the overriding principle for governing society. Of the many titles established during this time (1848/49: 45 daily and weekly newspapers), only a few like the politically satirical weekly magazine *Kladderadatsch* published between 8 Mai 1848 and September 1848, the *Nationalzeitung* from 1 April, 1848 to 30 September, 1848, and the conservative *Neue Preußische Zeitung* (*Kreuz-Zeitung*), published between 16 July 1848 and January 1849, outlasted the *Vossische*. After General Wrangel proclaimed a stage of siege over Berlin and banned the publication of eight newspapers in November 1848, the *Vossische Zeitung* ingloriously moved to the government’s camp and, together with the *Kreuz-Zeitung*, joined forces with the police in fighting the “wicked democrats”. Only in 1863, when the *Vossische Zeitung* stood side-by-side with the newspapers established since 1848 in protesting against Bismarck’s press decree, which made reference to the constitution and the protection of property, did it once again place itself firmly in the ranks of the democrats and distance itself to a certain extent from Bismarck’s regime.

In the age of mass media

When, as we know, “Tante Voss” wrongly celebrated her 200th birthday on 29 October, 1904, she was still being run by the 77-year-old Carl Robert Lessing. From the outside, her continued survival seemed unquestionable. The *Vossische Zeitung* was the newspaper of the liberally-minded sound, solid middle class.⁸ However, while a large number of outstanding employees meant that the paper’s global reputation remained as high as ever, its publishing and printing operation was no longer viable compared with those of the new, competing publications by newspaper companies Ullstein, Mosse, and Scherl. Despite this, it was unique for a newspaper of such standing to have been run as a family company for more than two hundred years.

In 1914 it was sold to the Ullstein-Verlag. This radical change in ownership, from being in the hands of the Voss family heirs to being in those of the comparatively young but extremely powerful Ullstein-Verlag, reflected the profound changes taking place

⁷ Mendelssohn, Peter de: *Zeitungsstadt Berlin*. Berlin, 1960, p. 50.

⁸ Mendelssohn, Peter de: *Zeitungsstadt Berlin*. Berlin, 1960, p. 162.

in the newspaper industry, which were finally also affecting the *Vossische Zeitung*. Max Osborn describes this in detail: "... the era of the leisurely ... old-style newspaper was finally over ... modern public life ... inexorably demanded new forms of daily journalism."⁹ The entire editorial team of the *Vossische Zeitung*, including the editor-in-chief, Hermann Bachmann, the columnist Dr. J. Levy and the editorial secretary, R. Weber, moved with the newspaper to the new publisher. The latter was supremely organized and managed by Georg Bernhard, who had been director of the company since 1908. Together with Bachmann, he headed the daily newspapers department until 1920. Although conservative and initially critical of the introduction of parliamentarism, over time Bernhard became a vehement defender of the Weimar Republic. Although in January 1919 the entire German press had, following the *Vossische Zeitung*'s editorial line, argued for the granting of the right of self-determination to all nations by the National Assembly, and for recognition of the union between German Austria and Germany as proclaimed by the German-Austrian National Assembly, from 1920 onwards, under Bernhard's chief-editorship, the paper consistently and increasingly made the case for closer relations and reconciliation with France, and asked whether collaboration between the two nations might not benefit or indeed prove to be the salvation of this half-destroyed region of the world. The *Vossische* also took on a constructive attitude towards the League of Nations, with Bernhard stating: "The League of Nations is not an idealistic claim, but a form of politics."¹⁰

Final blossoming in the Weimar era

Georg Bernhard joined the Ullstein-Verlag as early as 1898 as the business editor of the *Berliner Morgenpost*. From 1909 onwards he acted as the publishing-house editor, or the "editor-in-chief of the editors-in-chief", and in 1920 was appointed sole editor-in-chief of the *Vossische Zeitung*. During the ten years that Bernhard occupied this position at the Ullstein-Verlag, he turned the *Vossische Zeitung* into a left-leaning liberal newspaper and "one of the few intelligent newspapers in Germany." Topical, thoughtful and responsible, it described – and commented on – all the events in this new and crazy time, which, far too late, was recognised as being instable. The 'Voss' described the end of the First World War, the revolution, the attempts to set up a soviet state in Germany, and the beginnings of the Weimar Republic. It reported on the effects of the Treaty of Versailles and on the world economic crisis of 1929 and its devastating consequences for Germany. It shed light on the general mistrust of leading German politicians and the growing strength of the NSDAP. But the *Vossische Zeitung* wasn't just a political newspaper. Its business section was admired nationally and indeed internationally, and nowhere were the cultural developments, complexities and contradictions of the so-called 'Golden

9 Osborn, Max: Die Vossische Zeitung seit 1914. In: 50 Jahre Ullstein. Berlin, 1927, p. 224.

10 Osborn, Max: Die Vossische Zeitung seit 1914. In: 50 Jahre Ullstein. Berlin, 1927, p. 264.

Twenties' – especially in Berlin – reflected more accurately than in this newspaper. In the last few years of its almost 300-year-existence, it not only provided a faithful portrayal of the time, but was also one of its most noble and tragic representatives. When the *Vossische Zeitung* ceased publication, a whole era died with it. It is no accident that after the Second World War no attempt was made to revive it." This was Ernst Cramer's obituary to the newspaper, 75 years after the end of this immensely important Berlin daily newspaper.¹¹

In the 20s, Bernhard brought together a group of outstanding colleagues to form a highly-qualified editorial team that was unrivalled in Germany. It is impossible to provide here anything like a full list of these high-profile editors and colleagues – those interested in their names should consult the bibliography. In the 19th century, Theodor Fontane was for almost 20 years the *Vossische Zeitung's* theatre critic, and published "Irrungen und Wirrungen" in the paper in 1887. In the 1920s, this tradition continued, with authors such as Georg Hermann, Hermann Sudermann, Arthur Schnitzler, Jakob Wassermann, Walther von Hollander, and Erich Maria Remarque all publishing works for the first time in the literature section. The memoirs of Maxim Gorky, published in the Voss, caused quite a sensation at the time. One of the most brilliant employees of the *Vossische Zeitung* in the period after 1924 was Kurt Tucholsky.

Editor-in-Chief Georg Bernhard left the publishing company in 1930 following fraternal strife between the Ullstein brothers, and emigrated in 1933 to Paris, where he co-founded and published the left-wing democratic *Pariser Tageblatt* newspaper. Following the takeover of power by the Nazis, the *Vossische Zeitung* lost many of its employees. J. Elbau, who had taken over from Bernhard as editor-in-chief, was followed in turn by Erich Welter from the old *Frankfurter Zeitung*, to which he also returned in 1934. Later on, after the end of the War, Welter co-published the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The *Vossische Zeitung* was now losing money for the Ullstein-Verlag, and having to be subsidised to the tune of two million marks each year. For this reason, the company decided to relinquish Berlin's oldest newspaper. Moritz Goldstein (pseudonym Inquit, and judicial reporter following Paul Schlesinger alias SLING) summarised the feelings of many: "All of us who worked on the *Vossische Zeitung*, together with its readers, formed a band of supporters. We felt we were working on behalf of an idea, working enthusiastically for its realisation, because only an idea ignites. My poor young colleague, Heinrich Mühsam [...] expressed my feelings precisely when, after our newspaper had ceased publication, he wrote: 'Only now are we homeless.'"¹²

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11 Cramer, Ernst: Als sie nicht mehr erscheinen konnte ... In: Die Welt, 30 March 2009.

12 Goldstein, Moritz: Vom Leben und Sterben der Vossischen Zeitung. In: Hundert Jahre Ullstein, p. 141.

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