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Hugo Boss, 1924-1945. A Clothing Factory During the Weimar Republic and Third Reich

(abridged version)

The following study on the history of Hugo Boss – from its establishment in 1924 to the end of the Third Reich in 1945 – is an abridged version of the company history written by Roman Köster and entitled "Hugo Boss, 1924-1945. The History of a Clothing Factory During the Weimar Republic and Third Reich." Published in German by C.H. Beck of Munich in 2011, the work covers the period from 1924 – when the company started operating – to the end of the Second World War. As such it also touches upon critical issues such as the company's actions during the period of National Socialist rule in Germany. The work was designed to investigate these issues in depth and summarize the results of the research.

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1. The Early Days

Hugo Ferdinand Boss was born on July 8, 1885, the fifth and youngest child of Heinrich Boss and his wife Luise, who jointly owned a lingerie and linen shop in the Swabian town of Metzingen. As only one of his siblings – a sister – survived infancy, he was chosen as the heir to his parents' shop. He began an apprenticeship as a merchant before enlisting in the army during World War I, and completed his period of service without being promoted. Generally speaking, his entire career prior to the establishment of his company suggested a marked lack of ambition, possibly because he knew he would eventually take up a post in his parents' business.

Hugo F. Boss opened his clothing factory in 1924 with financial support from two other manufacturers in Metzingen. During its first years the factory employed between 20 and 30 seamstresses. It made all kinds of garments by hand – from shirts to traditional southern German loden jackets. One of the company's first major commissions was for a large batch of shirts for the Munich-based textiles distributor Rudolf Born, which also included brown shirts

for the National Socialist Party. While most likely unaware of the shirts' intended purpose, Hugo F. Boss advertised his company during the mid-1930s as a "supplier of Party equipment since 1924."

Hugo F. Boss (National Socialist Party membership card photo)



Starting in 1929, the global economic crisis caused enormous problems for the textile industry and, by 1931, the Hugo Boss clothing factory was facing bankruptcy. However, following protracted negotiations with the factory's creditors, production was provisionally able to continue. During that same year, Hugo F. Boss became a member of the National Socialist Party which then placed orders with him for uniforms. Later, at his hearing during the postwar denazification process, Hugo F. Boss declared that he had joined the National Socialist Party because it had promised to do something about the rampant unemployment afflicting the country. Subsequently he expanded on this point by stating that he would never have received the orders that rescued his company had he not been a member. While this may have been true, one must not interpret Hugo. F. Boss' comments as suggesting he was hostile to the Nazi Party. That was clearly not the case.

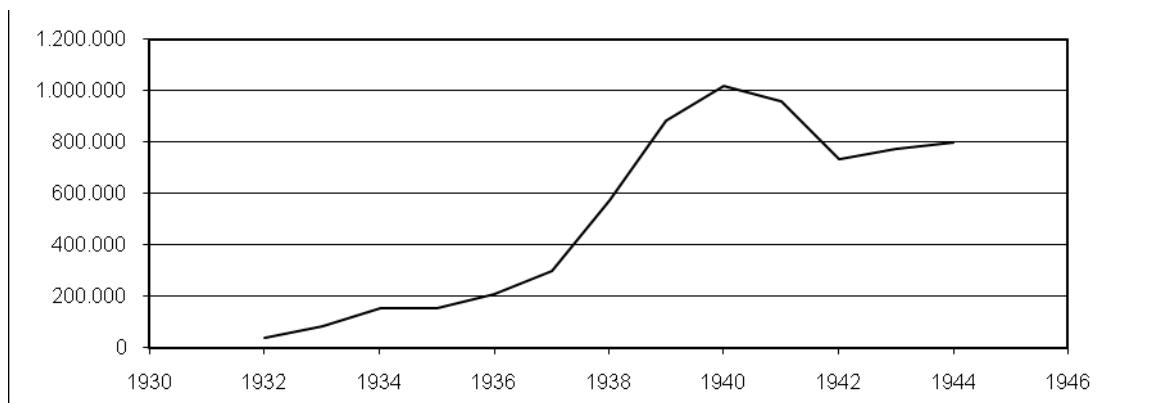
2. Hugo Boss and clothes manufacturing during the Third Reich

The German textile industry, which had been hit very hard by the global recession, slowly began to recover in 1933, despite the constraints imposed on it by the country's National Socialist leadership. These included restrictions on exports and the mandatory inclusion of

synthetic fibers in products etc. During the Second World War, clothes manufacturing in general was reduced in Germany, with uniform and workwear production being correspondingly increased. These were basically the only products for which the general restrictions could be circumvented. Hugo Boss had therefore established himself in a segment where conditions for production were still favorable, materials and staff still available and, in some cases, the potential for expansion still existed.

The Hugo Boss company took a long time to recover from the Great Depression. However, prior to 1938, production was evidently not limited to uniforms. Rather, all manner of products were also manufactured, the majority of which then had to be sold at trade fairs – an arduous endeavor at the time. In 1938 everything changed: at this point it appears that the company received major commissions for army uniforms. As the former seamstress Edith Poller recalls: "When the large orders began coming in, they were dizzy with relief. They had the feeling: 'We've finally made it.'"

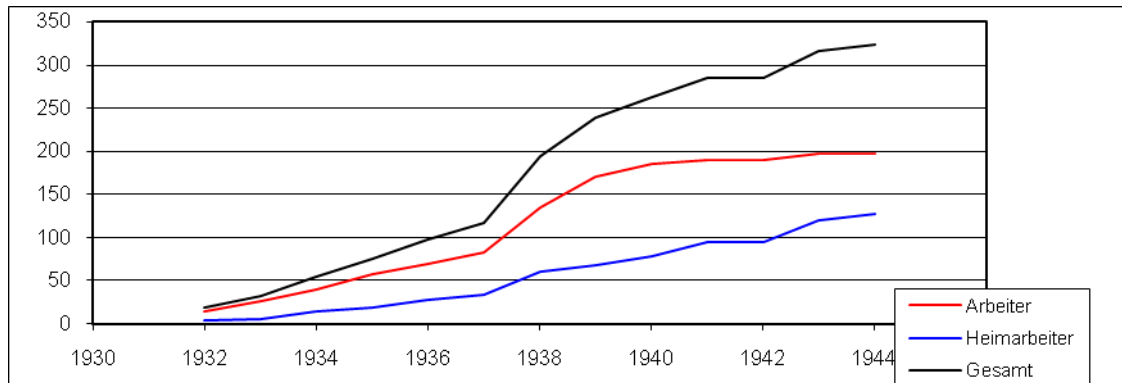
Hugo Boss sales 1932-1945 (in reichsmarks)



Up to 1942 the company's annual turnover rose consistently to peak at just over one million reichsmarks. At that point it suffered a sharp decline due to the introduction of fixed commodity prices. The Hugo Boss clothing factory was classified in Price Category 1: operations with the capacity to manufacture uniforms at the lowest prices, which were then also allocated more employees and materials for their products.

According to witnesses of the time, during World War II the company chiefly produced uniforms for the German armed forces and the Waffen-SS, the armed wing of the SS. Although the company was forced to relocate in 1944, it still had one order pending for the Waffen-SS at the start of 1945.

Workforce at Hugo Boss 1932-1944



Arbeiter = workers

Heimarbeiter = homeworkers

Gesamt = total

On the one hand the company used homeworkers to supplement its workforce, most of whom were effectively no longer available to the regular labor market. On the other, manufacturing was rationalized during the war, a relatively simple process with homogeneous products like uniforms.

Overall, Hugo Boss grew substantially during the Third Reich although it never turned into a major corporation. Rather, the company appears to epitomize the highly decentralized production of uniforms during the period, with small and medium-sized businesses dominating the field. At any rate there is no indication that the Hugo Boss company played any kind of leading role in this sector. Nor do the available sources indicate in any way that it was involved in designing uniforms.

3. Forced Labor at Hugo Boss

During the Second World War Hugo Boss employed 140 forced laborers, the majority of them women. His was the third-largest such workforce in Metzingen, where a total of 1241 forced laborers were engaged. In addition to the 140 employees mentioned above, 40 French prisoners of war also worked for the company during a relatively brief period (October 1940 – April 1941).

The business suffered from a serious shortage of employees. As described above, uniform production at Hugo Boss intensified considerably during the 1930s. And with the advent of the Second World War, demand for uniforms surged. However, the company was already confronted by staffing problems at the very outset of the war, with potential employees becoming increasingly rare or moving into more highly paid industries such as engineering.

The first forced laborers started work at the company in April 1940. At that point several textile companies from southwestern Germany joined forces to recruit staff from Bielsko in Poland, a major hub in the Polish textile industry. Even at this early stage, the workers were not recruited voluntarily, but rather with the active support of the Gestapo. This is, however, the only incidence in which relatively detailed information is available on the recruitment of forced laborers by Hugo Boss – because considerable time was devoted to it during the company founder's denazification trial after the war.

What were the living conditions like for the forced laborers? With respect to accommodations, the men were quartered in sheds in the company's own camp until 1943. The conditions there were described as rudimentary but hygienic. By contrast, the women lived with local families. This changed, however, following the construction of a dedicated camp for eastern European workers at the start of 1943. Built and operated by major Metzinger companies, the camp segregated the forced laborers from the local residents, a requirement stipulated by the government of Württemberg in a law enacted on August 21, 1943.

This new camp faced serious financial difficulties, which at least partly explain why hygiene levels and food supplies were extremely uncertain at times. In this respect at least, Hugo Boss tried to alleviate the situation at the start of 1944 by applying to exclude female workers from the camp's food regime and give them meals again in the company's own canteen. There is some evidence that the company tried to generally improve the food supplies for the forced laborers. Wage levels also appear to have been relatively fair, although the question of buying power – on the black market or elsewhere – was always an issue.

There are conflicting reports as to how management treated the laborers. While several witnesses, including one former forced laborer, expressed relatively positive views of Hugo F. Boss as an individual, there were some committed National Socialists in the company who treated the women extremely harshly and threatened them with concentration camps etc. Hugo F. Boss was likely not personally involved in these incidents. However, he took no action to stop them either.

What overall assessment can be reached on the treatment of forced laborers at Hugo Boss? First of all it should be remembered that the conditions faced by such workers at Hugo Boss ultimately remained those of forced laborers, i.e. they had no choices as to the duties they performed and, from 1943 onwards, were forced to live in the special camp set up for eastern Europeans, which frequently involved considerable hardship. They also had to work 12 hours a day (although this was also true of the regular German employees). On the other hand, the company set up its own canteen where a midday meal was provided for forced laborers as well. The company also appears to have sought additional provisions for its forced workers— a genuine possibility in a rural and agricultural region. Additionally, the company preferred not to house its female laborers in the eastern European camp, partly because the poor living conditions there affected their performance at work. This in no sense implies that the forced laborers at Hugo Boss enjoyed good lifestyles – the existing sources show that this was not the case. In comparative terms, however, the company seems to have generally treated its forced laborers somewhat properly and fairly.

The difficulties of reaching clear conclusions are demonstrated by the case of one such laborer named Josefa Gisterek. According to the available documents, she was one of four forced laborers to have died while working for Hugo Boss (in the other three cases the municipal documents suggest a natural cause of death). Josefa Gisterek came from Poland and worked at the factory from October 1941 – joining her sister Anna who had arrived the previous year. Their father had written to his two daughters requesting help in supporting the family's remaining eight children. Despite having had a request for vacation rejected (on the grounds that she hadn't been working for the company long enough), Josefa Gisterek traveled home, where she was arrested by the Gestapo. She was subsequently detained in several concentration camps, including Auschwitz and Buchenwald. After Hugo F. Boss discovered her whereabouts through his contacts in the National Socialist Party – a year and a half after her arrest – she was forced to return to the factory, where the foreman wanted to make an example of her. She was denied the right to see a doctor until she had suffered a physical breakdown, at which point she was given a special permit to take three months off. At the end of this period, when she was due to resume her job, Josefa Gisterek committed suicide in the house of the family where she was staying. Hugo F. Boss paid for the funeral and covered the travel expenses of the family members who attended it.

A recent newspaper article criticized the fact that Hugo F. Boss gave no further assistance to the family. On the other hand, it is probably fair to assume that few German business owners would have even paid for the funeral at the time. Even if his reasons for doing so remain

unclear, Hugo F. Boss did rescue Josefa Gisterek from the concentration camp system. Subsequently, albeit only following a breakdown, she was allowed to take three months off work – an extremely unusual option in the context of the period. On the other hand, Boss did not intervene to stop the punishments meted out by his employees. In this way, the case of Josefa Gisterek may be said to typify the company's treatment of its forced laborers: the management was at times harsh and coercive, but it also demonstrated concern for their welfare, rendering simplistic characterizations impossible.

4. Postwar Period (1945-1950)

Metzingen was occupied by Allied troops relatively late in the war – in April 1945 – after which it became part of the French occupation zone. Subsequently Hugo F. Boss was forced to undergo denazification, during which he was initially classified as "incriminated" and fined a sum of 100,000 reichsmarks. That was the second highest punishment imposed in the Reutlingen Chamber of Commerce Precinct. The reasons for this sentence included his early membership of the National Socialist Party, the fact that he benefited financially from National Socialism, and his friendship with Georg Rath, the notorious local leader of the National Socialist Party who had above all made a name for himself in Metzingen with crude and coarse behavior.

What should we make of this verdict? In an authoritative article on the practices of the denazification tribunals in the French occupation zone, Cornelia Rauh demonstrates that denazification affected relatively few business owners because it was primarily keyed to political involvement. The verdict on Hugo F. Boss therefore demonstrates that he was a near-perfect candidate for a verdict based on political criteria. However, it reveals little about his actual contribution to the war economy. Hugo F. Boss appealed against the initial sentence and – as so often in these cases – was ultimately classified as a "follower," a person who complied with the regime without being actively engaged in its politics.

After the war, the company initially continued to manufacture uniforms, albeit for the French occupation forces and the Red Cross. Under the aegis of Hugo Boss' son-in-law Eugen Holy, production was continuously expanded until the end of the 1960s. The company had already begun selling suits during the 1950s. By the end of the 1960s, its total sales had climbed to 3.5 million deutschmarks, although Hugo Boss was in fact on the brink of bankruptcy at the

time. In 1969, the brothers Jochen and Uwe Holy took over the company, and began gradually shaping it into the international fashion group it is today.

Summary and Conclusion

In recent years, the history of the Hugo Boss company has repeatedly been in the public eye. Several articles in German and international publications have discussed the company's past. Very few other small or medium-sized companies have seen their roles during the Nazi period spotlighted so intensely by the media.

There are clearly reasons for this that are not exclusively related to the company's actual past. The so frequent focus on Hugo Boss is most likely due to the fact that observers "project" today's company back into the days of the Third Reich. In reality, the Hugo Boss clothing factory of the early 20th century was not a fashion company at all. Rather it was a manufacturing plant that produced – among other items – uniforms for the German armed forces and the National Socialist institutions (including the SA, SS and Hitler Youth). During this period the company was also far more firmly rooted in its region than is the case today.

While Hugo Boss had just 30 employees at the start of the Third Reich, it became one of the largest companies in Metzingen during the Second World War. However, with Metzingen being a small town, it had still not become a major corporation, not least as uniform production was a highly decentralized process during the Third Reich. Even within this segment, the Hugo Boss company was in no sense a leading player; rather it appears to have been fairly typical among uniform producers. Narratives in which the company is effectively portrayed as "Hitler's tailor" have therefore been revealed as baseless.

Yet other issues – such as the personal responsibility of the participants and particularly of the company founder – still remain. It is clear that Hugo F. Boss did not join the Party solely because of its orders for uniforms, but rather because he was supportive of the National Socialists. Most likely, the fact that the National Socialists placed orders with him – orders which rescued his company from an uncertain fate and then drove its success – did in fact play a not insignificant role in his affinity to the movement.

As far as treatment of the forced laborers at Hugo Boss is concerned, it can be concluded – within the very narrow context of the general treatment of forced laborers at the time – that they received somewhat better accommodation and provisions than the majority. The forced laborers at Hugo Boss were also comparatively well paid. The company also made efforts to

secure sufficient rations, including the acquisition of additional food. And although the living conditions in the Metzingen camp for eastern Europeans were, in some respects, truly catastrophic, the decision to house the female Hugo Boss workers there was mandated by the authorities and not taken by the company of its own volition.

A mixed picture also emerges in relation to the personal behavior displayed by Hugo Ferdinand Boss and his managers towards the forced laborers. While statements from former employees and forced laborers concerning Hugo F. Boss himself seem generally positive, the same cannot be said of their comments on the company's top managers. These included a number of National Socialists who treated the workers – and particularly the forced laborers – badly. Hugo F. Boss was evidently not directly involved in such incidents of maltreatment, but he also failed to put a stop to them. As such we can only repeat that the behavior towards the forced laborers was at times harsh and involved coercion, but that concern for their welfare was also displayed, rendering simplistic characterizations impossible.