



by Peter Merseburger
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Rudolf Augstein. Biography

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review

Rudolf Augstein, or 'Mr. Spiegel' as he came to be called, founded the internationally acclaimed news magazine *Der Spiegel* at the tender age of twenty-three: perhaps he'd have become a writer or playwright (he always showed a deep interest in art and theatre, literature and opera) had it not been for the particular encouragement of an eccentric British Major with a passion for magazines whom he encountered in Hanover. Only twenty-three years old in 1947, yes, but older in terms of experience, having been in the war and, at a very early age, seen through the lies of the Nazi propaganda machine. He emerged, as did many, though not all, of his generation, with a deep-rooted sense of 'Never again'. But he took the process one stage further, choosing, indeed finding it fundamental, to question everything, to distrust, to probe, and thus one of the most influential, critical journals of the twentieth century was born.

Der Spiegel became a weekly 'institute of disrespect', a polar opposite to toeing the line of any political party or state, left leaning rather than right, anti-authoritarian in its stance, seeking out corruption and bearing up sometimes under immense pressure which culminated in 1962 in the *Spiegel-Affaire*. Augstein went to jail for 103 days on charges of treason stemming from a series of articles about corruption involving the German defense minister Franz Josef Strauß – a state scandal from which the defendant emerged the victor. Later he formed a close alliance with Willy Brandt, supportive of his *Ostpolitik* and vision of a unified Germany. He died in 2002, a

strong presence at the magazine to the end.

Augstein's life thus spans a critical and fascinating period of post-war German history and this biography does it full justice. Peter Merseburger knew his subject personally, and obviously admired him, while not losing sight of the flaws that made him so intensely human (his five wives included). Such a prominent, fiercely bright individual, who could be wonderful company but also had his shadows, fears and flaws, has been accorded a worthy mirror of his life, achievements and struggles, both professional and personal.

press quotes

'A brilliantly written biography...reads in part like a sensitive introduction to German post-war mentality...deals with Augstein's vivid private life with admirable elegance.' – Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
'To pursue the thousands of details that make up the complex existence of this complicated man without being engulfed by them is a tough test of intellectual clarity: this biography succeeds... This is a melancholy description of a life that invites compassion: the fatally "definitive" biography.' – Süddeutsche Zeitung

about the author

Peter Merseburger was born in 1928. From 1960 to 1965 he was an editor and correspondent with *Der Spiegel* and in 1969 he became television editor-in-chief of NDR (Norddeutscher Rundfunk). In the 1970s and 1980s he was head of the ARD television studios in Washington, East Berlin and London. He now lives in Berlin and the south of France.

Previous works include:

Willy Brandt (2002); *Mythos Weimar* (1998) – both DVA

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