

Principles of nazi propaganda under the third reich history essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

January 30, 1933 was a momentous day for Germany and its future, as Adolf Hitler was appointed the Chancellorship of Germany. Less than two months later an almost equally important moment for the Third Reich occurred; March 13, 1933 Hitler and his newly ruling Nationalist Socialist government founded the Ministry of Enlightenment and Propaganda. The primary purpose of creating this body was to mobilize, manipulate, control, direct, and educate the population[[1]] which ultimately worked to impress upon Germans the social, economic and political principles of the Nazi party. Hitler selected Dr. Joseph Goebbels to lead this division of government, under which he would oversee 350 employees. One of the first major acts that the ministry undertook was on April 6 that same year, when Goebbels proclaimed that there would be a nationwide cleansing of “ un-German” literature famously known as the burning of books, making the published pages of prominent Jewish authors the first victims of the Third Reich. Goebbels would be responsible for managing public opinion through the use of many information mediums. Films, news publications, posters, artwork, radio broadcasts, adult and children’s literature, and plays all were successfully used to sway the masses, bringing the Fuhrer’s message to them.

Many horrible things have been written about the actions of the Nazi regime, the German military and its citizens. Though nobody will contest whether or not heinous acts were committed under the Nazi banner, it is important to understand the events through the lens of Goebbels propaganda machine; the German people governed by the Third Reich were under the captivating power of persuasion and were not the monsters they are portrayed to be.

They were fed a very minimal amount of carefully selected information from which to think and act upon, information that was extremely polarizing with very little middle ground on which to stand. Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to survey the various principles of Nazi propaganda used from the inception of the Ministry of Propaganda to the end of the Second World War. Through these aspects we will begin to see the effect it had on German society as a whole, gaining insight how a seemingly moral country could throw their support behind Hitler and his extreme ideology. It is my contention that Goebbels and his tactics proved a tremendous success under the Third Reich, and even though Nazi propaganda lost most of its effectiveness and credibility after the fall of Stalingrad,[[2]] from 1933 to 1943 the department was enjoyed huge success in keeping the Germans misinformed and on the side of Hitler.

The earliest traces we see of the Nazi brand of propaganda starting to form is in Hitler's own book, *Mein Kampf*, written in prison while he served time for an unsuccessful coup in Munich in 1923. One of the most important parts of the book in regards to this paper is his reference to the use of propaganda in the First World War. An excerpt from his chapter on War Propaganda sums up his thoughts on its use in WWI;

“ What we failed to do, the enemy did, with amazing skill and really brilliant calculation. I, myself, learned enormously from this enemy war propaganda.”[[3]]

He dedicates a substantial amount of ink to his envy of the English and American use of propaganda, and how they represented the Germans to

their populations as barbarians and Huns, all the while preparing the individual soldiers for the terrors of war^[4] and the civilians for support. They skillfully attracted the attention of the crowd, aiming primarily at connecting to the emotions of the masses while confining it to a few key points that are constantly repeated.^{[[5]]} In direct contrast of these techniques Hitler spells out what he feels were Germany's fatal mistakes in its use. Instead of appealing to the lowest common denominator in society, early German war propaganda offered an unparalleled example of an enlightenment service working in reverse, since any correct psychology was totally lacking.^{[[6]]} He cites their major error as not taking enough of a "one-sided" approach toward everything that is projected.

In addition to his discussion on the art of propaganda, we can also begin to see his growing sense of anti-Semitism, one of the main pillars of German WWII propaganda. Hitler sees the Jewish people as the root of society's problems, calling them bloodsuckers who have repeatedly sinned against humanity. He fears the growing problem of the "Marxist weapon of Jewry" and that no one should be surprised if among the Germans the personification of the devil as the symbol of all evil assumes the living shape of the Jew.^{[[7]]} This would prove to be what Hitler and Goebbels perceived to be the greatest threat to the racial purity of the Aryan race, and when combining this concept with the lessons outlined in *Mein Kampf*, the resulting actions became a deadly force against Jews in Europe.

The Third Reich under Hitler was structured on the leadership principle, which was to be replicated at every level. The idea of a leader was seen in every aspect of society, but most of all and most importantly, it was cleverly
<https://assignbuster.com/principles-of-nazi-propaganda-under-the-third-reich-history-essay/>

connected to the military brand of leadership; ideas of supreme bravery and heroism were attached to the concept of leadership and the popular narratives in posters, radio, and movies constantly celebrated this. [[8]]

Emerging leaders in Germany did not necessarily have to be political or military champions - they could be found in every corner of Germany, from the Hitler Youth to a worker at a munitions factory. The fact that Goebbels emphasized the heroic advantages of leadership and idealized role models throughout Nazi media, one can see how it worked together to back support for the military and its mobilization objectives. Nazi Germany essentially became one gigantic military training manual. [[9]]

The role models of the Third Reich were critical for the militaristic attitudes of Germany, but none more vital than the very portrayal of Adolf Hitler himself. For almost ten years after 1933, Hitler had a high amount of popularity among the great majority of Germans. However dramatic his career and bizarre or aggressive his behavior, it fails to explain why Germans gave him his podium. [[10]] For the thirteen million Germans who voted Nazi in 1932, Hitler symbolized the various facets of Nazism which they found appealing. In his public portrayal, he was a man of the people, his humble origins emphasizing the rejection of privilege and the sterile old order of the Weimar Republic in favour of a new, vigorous, upwardly-mobile society built upon strength, merit, and achievement. He was a man who was both physically and symbolically seen as strong, uncompromising, and ruthless. [[11]] He embodied the triumph of true Germanic virtues - courage, manliness, integrity, loyalty, devotion to the cause - over the effete decadence, corruption, and effeminate weakness of Weimar society. [[12]] It

is imperative that for propaganda to serve its purpose in full, the deification of Hitler had to take place before Germany would believe anything to do with the “ Jewish question” or his desire for lebensraum.

In order for the Hitler Myth to take root, there needed to be a united front; a cohesive sense of solidarity and community that would give Germans a place of belonging and purpose. Blood ties and cultural history would help unite them for a cause, and this would provide the perfect answer to the “ problem of Jewry”, a passionate antagonism towards the biggest threat[[13]] to the very core of Aryans everywhere. In this way, the strength of Germany rested not on the individuals but on their reliance on their fellow soldiers, neighbours and friends.[[14]] This strength in solidarity and social cohesion under the mythical Fuhrer is what gives us our basis for an explanation into the transformation of 70 million rational Germans towards Hitler’s two personal goals – racial purity and merciless expansion. To manufacture a consensus where one previously did not exist, the ministry would constantly urge the population to put the community before the individual and to place their faith in short, simplified slogans such as “ One People! One Reich! One Fuhrer!”[[15]] The psychological mobilization of civilian and armed forces therefore only become attainable through a restructuring of values based upon several areas of socio-political consciousness. The need to remove class, regional, denominational and party loyalties would coincide with selfless service to a “ united community.”[[16]]

The Treaty of Versailles together with the economic woes of the Great Depression created a climate of hardship and struggles in the decade

following the First World War. As a response to these years, Nazi propaganda
<https://assignbuster.com/principles-of-nazi-propaganda-under-the-third-reich-history-essay/>

under the pretense of Aryan superiority sought the ultimate goal of societal perfection. In exchange for conformity, a utopian place could be achieved. Notions of perfection and perfectibility underpinned Nazi rhetoric: their obsession with hygiene, their constant use of metaphors of health and disease, is very clearly a part of their hatred of others as a necessary stage towards a perfect world.[[17]] Under the condition that an Aryan utopia was the end goal, the slow process of coercion worked to pollute the morality of Germany, and through propagandistic means they managed to instill hatred towards political, racial and anti-social enemies[[18]] inside and outside the country.

The Nazis, whatever else they were, were a self-consciously modernist movement, who claimed that their idiom was the idea of the future, of the coming man.[[19]] Many historians have argued that National Socialists were anti-modernists, seeking to turn back to clock to a simpler time, and which modernization happened to occur during their reign as the time was right for it - not because they wanted to modernize. I disagree with this notion, and according to German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf and American historian David Schoenbaum, the Nazis accelerated the transformation of Germany into a modern, highly differentiated industrial economy by mobilizing vast resources in pursuit of their political goals.[[20]] Their depiction of technology and making good use of it as a means of propaganda was a way to create a sense of cutting edge modernism; a way for Germans to feel yet another reason to explain their superiority above the "others". We must also remember that in light of Great Depression and just ten years removed at the official start of the war, it's easy to see how they latched on to this idea

of technological and scientific achievement. Miracle Weapons were also highly touted in Nazi propaganda. Super technology such as the V1 and V2 rockets were to be the saviors in the latter years of war finding vengeance for all that Allied bombing had done to Germany.[[21]] As terrorizing as they were meant to be, they ended up being fairly useless, unable to target anything specific strategically. And yet, they were a common theme in 1944 to 1945, a last hurrah for the Third Reich and its propaganda.

We now arrive at by and large the most well known part of Nazi propaganda, the portrayal of Jews and Bolsheviks. Prior to operation Barbarossa, there was little propaganda circulating in Germany regarding the Soviet Union and Russians; the two countries had signed a nonaggression pact (Molotov-Ribbentrop) just before the Polish invasion.[[22]] Furthermore, there did not appear to be an immediate need to prepare the population for Barbarossa, as evidenced by the long running tension between the two sides. The very fact that the ministry did not pre-emptively try to stereotype them speaks very loudly on its own. Historian Wolfram Wette mentions several perceptions in which Germans characterized Soviets negatively - cultural, nationalistic, communist, social democratic, and racist, all of which were present before 1933.[[23]] Prior to Barbarossa, Jews had been under attack since the National Socialists took power in 1933. The famous example of early anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany was in 1935, as the Nuremberg Laws defined Jews by race and mandated the total separation of Aryans and "others". On November 9, 1938, the Nazis destroyed synagogues and the shop windows of Jewish-owned stores throughout Germany and Austria known as the Night of the Broken Glass. These measures aimed at both legal

and social segregation of Jews from Germans and Austrians.[[24]] One of the key moments in Nazi propaganda was when Goebbels went ahead and illustrated the Soviet Union as being controlled by “ Jewish Bolshevism”. They cleverly combined all the elements of Jewish people and Soviets that Nazi ideology didn’t agree with, (the two most hated enemies) and used them to show a picture of the USSR. In a well known German propaganda film titled “ The Eternal Jew”, the narrator discusses the nasty filth of rats, and how they spread and take over wherever they go. It goes on to conclude that the Jews are the rats, which “ differ from us in body and soul...for Jews are the demon behind the corruption of mankind.”[[25]] These were typical contemporary portrayals of Jews in Germany.

In order to gain support for Operation Barbarossa at home, and to inspire his military for a ruthless blitzkrieg eastward, Hitler projected his own view of Slavs and Jews as racially inferior Untermenschen (subhumans). In addition to their perceived racial inferiority, Russia was represented as a backward country run by Bolshevists who were intellectually and militarily weaker than Germans.[[26]] Through our contemporary lens it can be very difficult to understand how the German people would allow their own Wehrmacht to reduce Russian towns and villages to rubble and ruins. By attaching the devastation to Hitler’s view, the public’s permission for war continued unobstructed. Here is an entry from Goebbels diary dated June 5, 1941 as he describes his intended guidelines for anti-Soviet propaganda.

“ No anti-socialism, no return to Czarism, no open admission that the country will be divided up...against Stalin and his Jewish masters, land for the

peasants...strong indictment of Bolshevism, attack failure in all fields. And otherwise do what the situation demands.”[[27]] - Joseph Goebbels.

To ensure that Hitler had sufficient support and justification for his lebensraum conquest, he gave a speech before the German people, stating that though Germany had never tried to impose National Socialism on Russia, the Bolsheviks routinely tried to force their rule onto Europe, with nothing but chaos and starvation to show for it. Now, Britain was trying to restore relations with the Soviet Union and surround Germany as it had in World War I, and the Soviet Union had begun making unfair demands of Germany, which Hitler had not agreed to. In response, Hitler said he could “no longer keep silent” and that “and attack unprecedented in the history of the world in its extent and size had begun.” With Finnish and Romanian support, “this front is no longer the protection of individual nations, but rather the safety of Europe and thus the salvation of everyone.”[[28]]

As the war on the Eastern front waged on, the Germans enjoyed much success, pushing the Soviet line back as they marched towards Moscow. The Propaganda ministry and Goebbels displayed to their military and public the corrupt and inhumane conditions that the Wehrmacht uncovered as they advanced. An entry in the diary of Goebbels states that “this system where Jews, capitalists and Bolsheviks work hand in glove has created a quite inconceivable degree of human depravity.”[[29]] Meanwhile inside the German borders, the Reich was cranking up the pressure on domestic Jews as they continued to drive a wedge between them and German society. In August 1941, as Germany was rejoicing in victories over the Soviets, Hitler declared that Jews be required to wear a badge in public that would
<https://assignbuster.com/principles-of-nazi-propaganda-under-the-third-reich-history-essay/>

stigmatize them.[[30]] This technique neatly allowed ethnic Germans to be able to put a face to their direct enemies that were represented in propaganda. These were now the people that their husbands, brothers, and uncles were away fighting for the protection of Europe. Consequently, just as Goebbels had predicted, the Bolshevist system was beginning to “collapse like a deck of cards”[[31]] and the goal of conquering the USSR was falling into place, however this result would not be sustained. In July 1942 when German forces reached the southern city of Stalingrad, they were met with nasty Soviet resistance. The Russians fought for every square foot of terrain and the Germans incurred terrible casualty rates. Germany failed to take the city and subsequently the Ministry of Propaganda did not make note of this devastating loss in its messages. Goebbels reasons for not making the public aware of this dramatic defeat was that it did not fit with the current slogans at the time. Foreign press agencies had been publishing the true facts of Stalingrad since December, 1942, but it was only in late January 1943 that the German media grudgingly acknowledged the military situation in the east. On February 3, 1943 the announcement that the German forces had been completely defeated in Stalingrad must have come as a complete shock to Germany. They had been led to believe that they had been winning and victory was more of question of when - not if. In propaganda terms, Germany had gone from pushing back the Russians in a victory march to complete defeat in just over a week.[[32]] The delay in alerting Germany of the true nature of the Eastern front was catastrophic in terms of their trust in Goebbels, which was central to morale and support for the war. Goebbels recognized his error, and the tone of the messages put out by the ministry was altered. Goebbels delivered one of his most famous speeches titled “<https://assignbuster.com/principles-of-nazi-propaganda-under-the-third-reich-history-essay/>

Total War” after the defeat of Stalingrad. The entire Reich heard him through film, radio, or by being present at the rally. He made it very clear that Germany had the strength to save Europe from this threat and that “ if they did not act quickly and decisively, it would be too late.”[[33]] The effect of this speech for the time being seemed to rally the country back behind the war, even though the ministry failed to inform them of eastern developments. One soldier wrote home to his wife “ we’ve known about the dangers of bolshevism for years, but didn’t know its true danger until this winter...now we have to be utterly ruthless.”[[34]] A poster in Germany titled “ Victory of Bolshevism” displayed a very “ Aryan” looking woman smiling and holding up her young child who looked to be celebrating, alongside a very sinister looking, homely “ bolshevist Jew” hovering over five starving Germans.[[35]] The polarization of this type of message really only gave Germans one choice; to get behind Hitler’s war and commit themselves completely to the cause.

Though it can be easy to blame Germans for allowing the atrocities to occur under the Third Reich, we must not forget the psychological persuasion that was used against them for continues support. Nazism, regardless whether they belonged politically, gave Germans; a place of belonging through celebrations and symbolism. It helped to distinguish between friends, believers, Jews, and the opposites to each of these. In giving the dedicated a glimpse of a serene life in the Volk, it had similarities to a cult.[[36]] The combination of terrible economic conditions, limitations forced by the Treaty of Versailles, and the highly inflated threat of Bolshevism all came together at the wrong place at the wrong time to affect the country of Germany

during the 1930s and 1940s, effectively turning a previously moral society on its side through the ingenious and sinister works of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, and the Ministry of Propaganda under the Third Reich.