

Propaganda and Its Use to Influence and Control the People of Nazi Germany

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Abstract

In this paper the reader will see how the German people were influenced by the propaganda of the Nazis. They were so influenced that they allowed the leadership of their country to carry out atrocities in the name of the Third Reich. The propaganda used was not the only contributing factor that lead to the rise of the Third Reich. Through misinformation and fear they took a people from wanting an independent German state to believing that the Third Reich could and should take over the world. The Nazis did not concentrate their campaigns of propaganda to a single form of media, they used several. They used print, radio, newsreels, public addresses, and motion pictures as vehicles to move their messages to their people. The examples of the propaganda used in these various forms of communication are at times very offensive and often extremely anti-Semitic, but when examined they show how the Nazis played on the fears and the prejudices of the German people. It is very important to learn from how the Nazis controlled their people, so that people can be vigilant in the fight to keep such things from happening again.

Keywords: propaganda, persuasion, information control, political influence

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It is difficult to imagine the atrocities of World War II. It seems even more unbelievable to understand how the people of Germany went along with what their government was doing. Over the years, many people have wondered how the events that happened in Europe during that time could have happened. Why did the German people hate the Jewish people? How much did they know? Why did they feel that their country should take over the world? Over the last 80 years people have learned the answers to many of these and similar questions. Many interviews have been conducted with the survivors of the Holocaust, as well as the German citizens and former military. There are also eye-witness accounts from the Allied soldiers and the video footage that the Allies filmed, there is a plethora of historical data captured from this timeframe. The historic events have been well documented, so it is known what was done, the question that will always linger is why was it done. It truly took a “perfect storm” of events for the Nazis to rise and for their actions to be allowed. Some might blame the mitigating events that lead to the rise of the Third Reich, but it was the Nazi Party’s use of propaganda that allowed them to control the German people by using their fear, prejudice, and pride against them.

Contributing factors to the rise of the Third Reich

It is not likely that anyone would look to excuse the actions of the Nazis during World War II, and while there is no excuse there is still a why. Why did they murder so many people? The World War II Museum (2008) notes, “The Holocaust was Nazi Germany’s deliberate, organized, state-sponsored persecution and machinelike murder of approximately six million European Jews and at least five million prisoners of war, Romany, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, and other victims.”

How did that become acceptable in their minds? To start to understand the how or why, one must first look at the historical events that worked as contributing factors to the rise of the

Third Reich. Before looking at World War II, a brief look at the region many years before gives some background.

Historical Context

When looking at the evolution of Europe from the beginning of recorded history, an interested person would see kingdoms rise and fall all over the continent. Empires conquered others and were also defeated. Over the years many of the countries evolved from states into nations and their borders were redrawn many times. Germania was one of these ancient countries that over many years became parts of many countries. As the concept of Nationalism swept Europe, this influenced many people of German descent to believe that they should be a large nation (Mitcham 1996). This belief was a major contributing factor to the declaration of war in the first World War. It was this declaration of war that made the Third Reich possible. One of the most famous pictures in the world captured this moment. The picture presented in Figure 1 is of the masses gathered to hear the declaration of war in Munich on August 2nd 1914, included in the picture was the image of a young Adolf Hitler. Peter Fritzsche notes this moment as the beginning of German Nazism and the genesis of the Third Reich.

Historians of Germany have tended to pass over the nationalist promise of 1914 to begin their accounts of Nazism with the nation's traumatic military defeat in 1918. Thus they understand Nazism as the outcome of extraordinary hardship more than of popular mobilization, and Nazi voters as more victims of circumstance than willful participants. Yet, to my mind, 1914 is the crucial date because it set in motion tremendous political aspirations. The triumph of National Socialism has to be sought as much in the realm of ideas and loyalties as in the convergence of economic and military crisis. Because the war so thoroughly revised the national imagination and recombined 60 million people in novel and often dangerous ways, 1914 is the appropriate point of departure for an account of why and how the Nazis came to power. (Fritzsche, 1998, p. 7)

There were other significant factors which lead to the Nazis gaining power in Germany. Fritzche stated that economic and military crisis were happening in Germany in the years that followed 1914. Physiologically, it is easy to resort to blame when something unfair happens to an individual. When persistently difficult times fall on a group and they do not believe it is their fault, they tend to blame other groups that they believe are responsible for their plight. While middle-class Germans were struggling during the inter-war period, many Jewish families were thriving. Some of these were bankers who charged high interest rates. The result was that some of the struggling middle-class thought this was unfair. Many of these middle-class Germans were not highly educated. Historically there has been a correlation between low education level and racism (Wodthe, 2018). This made it less difficult for the middle-class Germans to resort to anti-Semitism as they blamed the Jewish people for their economic struggles. Hausheer (1936) agreed saying, “Nazi anti-Semitism is intimately linked with the growing revolt of the middle class” (p. 342). These were all factors that increased the susceptibility of the German people to the propaganda of the Nazi Party, while a closer look at the propaganda used is needed in order to see how it worked against them.

Traditional Propaganda

The Nazis elevated propaganda to a new level. They utilized the most modern forms of communication of that time but did not forsake the more traditional forms of communication such as print and radio. With these, they were able to invade the lives of their citizens long before they invaded a neighboring country.

Printed Propaganda

The most widely known form of Nazi propaganda in print is *Mein Kampf* written by Adolph Hitler in 1925. Translating the title from German it says ‘My Struggle’. The blame and anti-Semitism that drips from practically every page is overwhelming. Hitler blames the Jews for all of his struggles. In essence what he is really doing is to take a topic that the mob agreed with

and run with it. He understood the prejudice of his people, with whom he agreed, and then found a cause to rally behind. That gained the support of some of the people. In 'Sterilization of Incurables', Hitler (1925, 1943) shows that he deals in absolutes, as fanatical extremists often do. "Anyone who refuses to see these things supports them, and thereby makes himself and accomplice in the slow prostitution of our future which, whether we like it or not, lies in the coming generation" (p. 255)

Books were not the only form of propaganda in print, one of the most commonly seen forms were the posters. Many of these were done in an illustration style very similar to Norman Rockwell, as artistic works they are quite striking. They generally consisted of a few words, a picture, and were targeted at particular groups, such as the Hitler Youth.

Propaganda through radio

Radio transmissions brought the Nazi propaganda directly into the Germans' homes. "Again and again, radio transformed Nazi events, providing a parade, a funeral, or a speech with a vast acoustical backdrop that extended over the entire nation" (Fritzsche, 1998, p. 146). This propaganda medium is where they honed their ability to lie, which carried over into their other more modern propaganda forms. They would intentionally delay a story or embellish a part of it, or just make it up so that it served their purposes.

An often cheap but generally effective dramaturgical device is that of the creation of or playing up of previously conceived stereotypes. Stereotypes in all their forms were used by the Nazis to add effect and effectiveness to their news. The Jew, of course, was their favorite target: "dirty, with a long nose, sensual, scheming and plotting to destroy Germany." When he lived in Washington or Paris or London, the Jew was dangerous because of his power. When he was a poor and huddling inhabitant of the Ghetto in Warsaw, he was dangerous because of his lust for revenge. Churchill was generally

stereotyped as a fat old plutocrat with a glass of whiskey in one fist and a big cigar in the other. (Mackey, 1957, p. 32)

Celluloid Propaganda

While film had been invented and was used during the first World War, it was definitely used as a vehicle of propaganda in World War II. The Nazis were very effective in creating fake news, and carried the principle over from the radio waves to celluloid film in the medium of the News Reel. The Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, was not a fan of using blatant propaganda in feature films (Taylor, 1998), but in two films, *Triumph of the Will* and *The Eternal Jew* there is obvious propaganda embedded within.

Propaganda in film

There are two shining examples of Nazi Propaganda in feature films. These are: *Triumph of the Will* and *The Eternal Jew*. Both of these films were a much bolder and obvious use of Nazi propaganda film. *Triumph of the Will* was a documentary about the Nazi rally in Nuremberg. Taylor noted, “The film of the 1934 Party rally in Nuremberg is not a typical Nazi propaganda film. ... it is superb example of documentary cinema art, and a masterpiece of film propaganda” (Taylor, 1998, p. 162). He continued to describe *The Eternal Jew* as that “it ranks as one of the most virulent propaganda films of all time” and “*The Eternal Jew* builds to a climax that can make even a Jew feel anti-Semitic, and it is for this reason that it’s circulation has been so firmly restricted.” (p. 174)

Fake News- Nazi Newsreels

The Nazis did not have a problem lying to the German people nor the rest of the world. They often did through various forms of propaganda and in making up news. One of the best examples of the Nazis completely making up their own news is that of the auxiliary cruiser Thor. Winkel (2003) elaborated on the ship’s history of how during its 324 days out on the water it sank or captured 10 Allied ships. While refueling from a tanker which exploded, the Thor caught

on fire. The fire resulting in the sinking of the Thor and all of its crew perished. However, this was not the end of the Thor as far as the Nazi Newsreels were concerned. They not only did not report the sinking of the ship, but they continued to report that it was still actively sinking Allied ships after it had long sunk.

Propaganda in Public Address

Probably the most powerful form of propaganda that the Nazis used was public address. There is a lot of great footage of various addresses made by Hitler before and during the war. These public addresses were designed to rally the people together behind the cause of the Nazis. Hitler and his high party members did an amazing job of pandering to the masses and telling them what they wanted to hear in order to win over their hearts and minds. When looking at these addresses, one can see that they were gifted orators that knew enough about public address for it to be a very effective form of propaganda. It was both the message that they presented and the way that they delivered the message that made it such an effective form of propaganda.

Public Addresses made by Hitler

Most of the public addresses that are best known are the ones made by Adolf Hitler. Aside from being a genocidal mad man bent on world domination and of the extermination of a people who he deemed below himself because they were different, he was a visionary and a gifted orator that was able to rally the people with his speeches. He built up the German people's sense of nationalism and patriotism while describing a thousand-year Reich. He fanned the flames of discontent of the people, while giving them someone to blame. Hitler praised all that Germany had done since the rise of the Nazis, especially the architecture of the Third Reich. Sinclair (1938) had this to say about Hitler's speech during the Nazi party rally in Nuremberg, "Hitler proclaims that these monuments of National Socialism, like the cathedrals of the Middle Ages, will stand, awe-inspiring, through the centuries as evidence of a belief in something higher than material well-being" (p. 571). He was an evil man, but he was charismatic. His speeches were

the reason that those that supported him rose behind him and those who disagreed grew quiet in fear.

Public Addresses made by Nazi Party Members

Adolf Hitler could not be everywhere during the rise of the Nazis in Germany. He did seem to be everywhere through the use of radio broadcast but others were required to speak when they needed to drum up support for the party. One of the other ways that the Nazis boosted support was to have other Nazi Party members practice pre-written speeches and preform them in the rural areas and smaller towns so that the people would not be able to miss the information that they wanted to imbue within them. Several of the high party leaders also gave many public addresses. Goebbels speech about the Hitler Youth Film Hours was one of such speeches. Geehr wrote about this speech (1984),

During the Third Reich, there was little room for cinematic experimentation, as one would imagine. Goebbels here makes it plain that the earlier Weimar German attempts at cinematic innovation were anathema to the Nazi artistic overlords. Goebbels' efforts in this direction ultimately withered German film art. David Welsh in his excellent study on German cinema from 1933 to 1945, concludes that it took more than a generation for the German film industry to recover from the Nazis. It is an open question how many artistic careers were stifled by the kind of policies Goebbels indicates in his speech. In any event, his words hint at the lengths the Nazis were prepared to go to ensure ideological conformity. This speech serves as a clear warning about the dangers of ideological subversion of the arts. (p. 36)

Through this Goebbels was able to talk about his efforts in Nazi propaganda by speaking on ideological conformity while praising the strides of the Hitler Youth.

Results and Kristallnacht

What effect did propaganda have on the German people as a whole? How did these things effect the people to whom it was directed? What were some of the dissenting voices and how were they dealt with? These are important questions that will help people understand the totality of what happened so many years ago.

How did this affect the German people?

The message of the Nazis was strong and easy for the discontent to rally behind, while they may not have agreed with all that the Nazis were saying, many Germans agreed with their message at least to some level as they were gaining power. As Hitler became chancellor and the Nazis started to persecute those who spoke out against them, those that would not risk death or imprisonment tended to give their quiet consent by not speaking against the powerful party. Fear started to take over the masses of those that did not agree with the message of their leaders. It became too dangerous to speak up and to speak out. As stated, it was the position of the party that those who were not with them were in fact against them, which made it harder for the average citizen who might not agree with the party to even quietly disagree, if they didn't publicly support the party, they were labeled as disinters and imprisoned or killed.

Nazi propaganda had an overwhelming effect on the impressionable, such as the young Hitler Youth. As anyone who has worked with youth for a great period of time will tell you, all that a young person needs is a push in the right direction. Unfortunately, the same could be said for how easy it is to push a young person in the wrong direction. Welch (1983) quoted Hitler from a speech in 1937 "This new Reich will give its youth to no one, but will itself take the youth and give it its own education and its own upbringing." Welch added about the Hitler Youth,

Nazi propaganda offered youth a pioneering role: a National Socialist victory would mean the triumph of a rejuvenated Germany, liberated from the outdated fallacies of bourgeois liberalism or Marxist class war. By the way youth took up this call, Nazi

propaganda once more demonstrated its extraordinarily effective manipulation of mass emotions. (p. 65)

Why did Kristallnacht and similar events happen?

Mob mentality can best be blamed for events like Kristallnacht. Once again, the masses blamed a group of people for the actions of a few, or in this case, one. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (1993) gives us a historical background; On November 7th, 1938, a 17yr old Polish boy who was distraught from his family being deported from Germany, Herschel Grynspan, shot Ernst von Rath, a German foreign official. Two nights later, violent anti-Jewish demonstrations broke out. Over the next 48 hours, around 7,500 Jewish homes and business were vandalized. Kristallnacht was a turning point in Germany where the people truly became violent with the Jewish people in their country. Nearly 100 Jews were killed in the demonstration against the Jewish people and their property and almost 30,000 Jews were shipped off to concentration camps following those events. The local police departments were told not to interfere with those attacking the Jews, but to arrest any Jews that resisted and fought back.

There is a picture that is of a Jewish woman during this time frame, Figure 2, the picture was taken in the Ukraine although many people believe that it came from Germany. It depicts a beaten Jewish woman being chased in her undergarments through the streets by kids with batons. This shows that once the mob is behind your cause, regardless of how terrible the cause is, people of all ages will get behind it and join in to be a part of those in power and control.

Conclusion

War is always horrific, as any combat veteran will tell you. The actions of the Nazi party and the German citizens that supported them were beyond horrific. Why did they do the things that we know that they did? Subtle propaganda over time evidently does creep into the minds of the masses to change their view. Nazi Germany is a great example of how well propaganda can work when implemented properly. But why should people care now? It has been 80 years since

World War II. Almost everyone that was either an oppressor, the oppressed, or the liberators have passed away at this point, almost everyone involved is long gone, so why should people care. The reason that people should learn about this era is because evil will triumph when good men do nothing. We must learn from the mistakes of the past to keep them from reoccurring in the future, because nefarious people will always try to control others. Propaganda will always be used to influence and control the masses, and one must be able to identify the propaganda of the past in order to recognize the propaganda of the present and future. When a social media tech company will suspend the account of a sitting US President, but not the accounts of known terrorist organizations, that is Digital Censorship which is a modern form of propaganda, that company just told the world that those terrorists have more of a right to say what they want than that President did. The propaganda of the 21st Century is in the digital realm, and all must be ready for it.

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Figure 1



Figure 2

