Hitler's Propaganda Machine


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About the Author: The New York Times is a daily U.S. newspaper, which was founded in 1851. It is published daily in New York City and is distributed to many other countries. The newspaper printed this additional information at the top of the article, revealing the author's insight into his topic: "The writer of this article has had unusual opportunities of studying the Nazi movement in Germany at first hand and of obtaining the views of the outstanding leaders in private and informal conversations with them, rather than by questioning them in set interviews."

INTRODUCTION

The article reveals the ways in which the National Socialists (Nazis) under Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) were so effective in using propaganda to build support for their party and its preparations for war. In the early 1930s, Germany was suffering from the devastating effects of a worldwide depression, a humiliating defeat in World War I, and the equally degrading impact of the Versailles Treaty, which had required Germany to return huge areas of territory gained during the war to their former owners. It had faced steeply rising inflation and high levels of unemployment. Social and economic policies were failing, and the morale of the people was low. Adolf Hitler, the leader of the Nationalist Socialist party, swept into power in 1933. He became Chancellor of Germany as a result of a bargain made with President Hindenberg by a group of influential landowners and industrialists, who were fearful of the growth of support for the political left.

Within weeks of taking power, the Nazis established the Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda, with Joseph Goebbels (1897–1945) as its head. This Ministry developed a program of propaganda that infiltrated every area of German life and that was cleverly tailored to appeal to the weaknesses and aspirations of various groups in the population. All forms of media, education, industry, and scientific activity were used to propagate National Socialist ideals, while Hitler himself frequently appeared in circus-like mass rallies to arouse nationalist fervor by delivering the propaganda in person.
The key themes of National Socialist propaganda were the supremacy and racial purity of the German people and their betrayal by both foreign aggressors and enemies who had infiltrated their country. All Germany's recent troubles could be blamed on these groups. The German people had been stabbed in the back following World War I, it was claimed, and their domestic fortunes had been ruined by the actions of groups such as the Communists and, above all, the Jewish people. The Jews were singled out as the scapegoat for many of Germany's problems and for any of the Nazi party's failures. Anti-Semitism became the key tool in the party's efforts to unite the German people.

At the same time, the Nazis embarked on a massive rearmament program that created many jobs, thereby addressing the unemployment problem and securing the support of the working classes. In addition, the Nazis were able to appeal to the lower middle classes, whose businesses had suffered under the difficult economic conditions, by blaming the Jews for their problems, and to the middle classes by promoting the idea of a racially pure, powerful nation. In doing so, they cleverly manipulated the fears and weaknesses of each group with targeted propaganda tools.

The rebuilding of Germany's military strength appealed to all Germans who wanted their nation to regain its former power and glory. Military themes permeated the Nazi party, and their uniforms, ranks, and hierarchy formed an important part of the propaganda program. The military style of organization appealed to the people's need for order and authority, which had been lacking in recent years, and the uniforms and ranks gave a much-needed sense of identity, pride, and self-importance to party members.

War itself was glorified as the way of avenging Germany against its enemies, and once Hitler took power he focused on preparing the nation for another conflict. He was able to secure the support of the German people by promoting the idea of a "Thirty Years War"—a war that had started in August 1914 and would only be over when Germany was restored to its former glory—and by encouraging the belief that foreign aggressors were planning to attack Germany. When Hitler attacked Poland in 1939 and World War II started, he could, therefore, justify his actions to the German people in the name of self-defense.

PRIMARY SOURCE

Most observers have been amazed by the speed and thoroughness with which the National Socialist German Labor (Nazi) party has reorganized the government apparatus of Germany, in eliminating opposition and in transforming the entire social and political landscape of the Reich—and all this after the Nazis' fortunes had been buried deep last December by most of the foreign correspondents and the overwhelming majority of their opponents at home—Democratic, Catholic, Socialist and official Communist.

Why did German fascism grow and triumph? Was it a result of the Versailles Treaty? Was the victory a byproduct of the weakness, blundering, confusion and division of its enemies? Is it the outcome of the economic crisis? All these are fundamental factors and have received their merited
consideration.

But the mechanics of popularizing fascism among the German people has been completely overlooked. A special, carefully planned technique of propaganda and agitation has enabled the National Socialists to sell their comprehensive and ambitious program with an ease which might well make America's most brilliant publicity agent envious. This propaganda involved the skillful exploiting of German psychology.

Specific, peculiar German conditions were systematically capitalized. The strategy was always to find the weakest link in the bourgeois democratic and working-class revolutionary chain of opponents and there to apply the greatest pressure. This is what Leopold Pleichinger, chief asset in Hitler's unadvertised "brains trust," meant when he said "We National Socialists have learned much from the Russian Bolsheviks." In view of this, it is interesting to speculate why Hitler did not proscribe Lenin's books, *The Infantile Sickness of Communism* and *The Proletarian Revolution of 1917*, when he ordained a nation-wide burning of Marxist literature.

In the color, spirit and drama of the Nazi propaganda technique, or Fascist "salesmanship-kultur," is to be found the soul and vision of German fascism.

The German Fascists have learned to dramatize their talk, their deeds, their very existence. It is the drama of Fascist propaganda and the smooth functioning of the Nazi propaganda machine, under the direction of Joseph Goebbels, that have generated the phenomenal rise of Hitler's party.

Above all, the Nazi promotion machine emphasizes good acting. Millions of Germans, of all classes, like to play at soldiers and office-holding. As Herr Scheller of the *Angriff* staff told me, "The masses want it. We can and must give it to them. It can only help our movement. We must see through the eyes of the masses." Hitler and his aides-de-camp well understand how much the soldier spirit, the military spirit, has been bred into the German people for many generations.

That is why military pomp pervades the Nazi organization and its propaganda. Hence the handing out of offices and "titles" to large numbers in the party. Even the office of doorkeeper in a party building becomes coveted once it is conferred by the Nazi party leadership. A doorkeeper, let us say in the Berlin district office, no longer considers his services menial. Has he not been given a party uniform and charged with the guardianship of party headquarters! He has "military" orders. He has been made to feel that he is a soldier in the cause, with power to give as well as to execute orders.

The form of Nazi party organization is built around this idea of "playing soldier." The regular army, the Reichswehr, has its uniform. The party Storm Troops (*Sturm Abteilung*) and Safety, or Security Squad (*Schutzstaffel*) have theirs. At one Nazi mass meeting I asked a leader of the Security Squad: "Why do you all salute each other so much? And why do you throw your shoulders back and click your heels so often?" He automatically threw back his shoulders, clicked his heels, stood erect and said: "Our party salute, the raised, forward-stretched hand, and our 'Heil' (hail) infuse us with
solidarity, impress upon us all our feeling of 'soldiership,' our fighting comradeship in our great cause, the rebuilding of a strong and beautiful Germany."

This very profitable game of soldiers goes on zestfully in every Nazi party headquarters. In the Berlin party building one sees uniforms continuously rushing and strutting from room to room. The Nazi clerk in the book shop, collecting small change from a customer, acts as if he were working in the commissary of any army division. Every wall is plastered with the *Hakenkreuz* (swastika), the party emblem. Post cards, pins, uniforms, neckties, flags, pennants, standards, banners, charms, posters, watch-chains and boots, all bear the sign of the *Hakenkreuz* and are for sale in the book store. Here one can also buy paintings, book-ends, silhouettes, plaques, and post-card pictures of Hitler, Goebbels, Rosenberg, von Epp, Goering and other Nazi chiefs. Pictures of German national heroes of the past are very cleverly confused with Nazi heroes of today. On one wall there is Hitler posing as Bismarck. Beside him is Goebbels masquerading as Frederick the Great, and Captain Goering aping von Moltke.

Certainly, these leaders, these firstline performers in the Nazi show, know how to drape themselves. They are past-masters in exploiting "the callings-up of the dead upon the stage of universal history."

The Nazi concept of leadership, discipline and organization and the attitude toward party propaganda work are military to the core. Party discipline is based solely on formal orders from above. The leader, *der Fuehrer*, is all-powerful in himself. Today in Germany the leader is Adolf Hitler. He is above all, but not of all. Let Joseph Goebbels explain this concept of leadership: "It is an old lesson of history that when a young party sure of its aim wrecks the rule of a corrupt and inwardly foul system, when it takes into its own hands the power of the State, it gives the responsibility to a dictator, who must conquer the State with new ideas and put them through. That is what we are going to do." When Wilhelm Frick, the first Nazi to take over a ministerial post, assumed office in Thuringia, Hitler grasped the occasion to show who is who in the party and whose party it was. He declared himself: "I have selected Party comrade Frick to take over the post of Ministry of Interior and Education *** only to represent the ideas of our Weltanschauung (world philosophy)."

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These Nazi propagandists are superb salesmen. They do not overlook anything. When they push the sales of their own cigarettes they pack in Nazi publicity. Here is a package of ten, called "Kommando," with a lusty *Hakenkreuz*-breasted eagle on its face. On one end is printed the fighting slogan, "Struggle Against Trust Rule"; on the opposite end the name *Kameradschaft Zigaretten* (Comradeship Cigarettes). Inside is a premium-coupon bearing more Hitler propaganda. This time it is in verse and closes with an appeal and a lesson in Nazi economics: "And do not forget—*Kameradschaft Zigaretten* are hand-packed to help overcome German unemployment. *** Smoke K.Z. everywhere, all the time." Here is another package called *Sturm* (Storm), with more Nazi insignia on its face and another call to action on its sides; "Against the Trust and Corporations." And
inside, a beautifully colored picture, one of a series portraying types of soldiers and uniforms in the
days of Frederick the Great. Then there are cigarettes called "New Front," "Alarm" and "Drummer." All these cigarettes proudly emphasize in their pleas to be smoked that "a virile nation can never go
down, because at the right time there comes to it the right leader, who, fearless of whatever fate
may befall him, raises new armies (neue Fronten) to deliver and save it."

The same all-inclusive propaganda is used with candy, gramophone records, stationery and other
articles of consumption. On all sides the Nazi cause is being promoted and streamers proclaim: "All
power to Hitler, the Leader, the Deliverer!"

From platform and street corner, in movie and pulpit, from broadcasting station and airplane the
Nazi propagandists have pounded away at the misery, the confusion and corruption of German
parliamentary democracy. Every Nazi orator has time and again proclaimed that "it is the Versailles
Treaty and the 'system' it forced upon Germany that has brought all the trouble." And the Nazi
editors have emphasized and re-emphasized that "it is the 'November Men,' the Marxists, the
Red-Black (Social Democratic-Catholic Centre) coalition who stabbed us in the back during the war,
signed the degrading peace, disgracefully agreed to the tribute payment of the Dawes and Young
Plans and let in the Jews, bolshevism and international high finance." To such propaganda the
jobless students, bankrupt storekeepers, poverty-stricken professional workers, hungry housewives
and slum proletarians not only lent a ready ear but soon added a powerful fist. The Nazis never
missed the slightest chance to coin this misery, growing out of a lost war and a world-wide
economic crisis, into political capital for themselves. To a defeated Germany they glorified
nationalism and raised the banner of a new Germany. Hitler's aim was to impound these nationalist
tides so that they might generate a current which would energize his followers and paralyze his
opponents.

"The People," as a sort of mythical, all-stirring and all-vanquishing concept, was dinned into every
Nazi propagandist, great and small, into every Nazi political stagehand and star. Every election
manifesto proclaimed: "You, the people, in your hands lies the future. You have to decide whether
Germany should continue as a paradise of money speculators and swindlers or should again
become a land of honor, well-regulated life, and conscientious responsibility. ***You, the people,
look up and act. Drive the bureaucrats out of their easy chairs. Give Hitler the power and
responsibility!"

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The mistakes and difficulties of other parties became grist for the Nazi mills. The arrogant
bureaucracy of the German republican government was generally abhorred. No one exploited this
in the workers’ ranks with greater cunning and with more deadly effect than Hitler. Here was an
excellent entering wedge for the Nazi propagandist into even the class-conscious proletariat. The
bureaucrats must go! This became the battle cry of the Nazi agitators in the industrial sections of
the country. Recruits were thus gained in new strata of German society—in the proletarian camp. Nor were they ordinary recruits. They soon proved to be most militant, especially in the Storm Troops.

Again let Goebbels show us how the Nazi propaganda machine works. Addressing himself to the pick of the Storm Troops and Security Squad, massed in the Lustgarten of Berlin, he waxed eloquent in masterly demagogy: "We do not want to think any more in terms of classes; we are no proletarians and are no bourgeoisie. We do not ask whether you are manual laborer, worker or prince. A great common cause welds us together. The day of freedom and bread is drawing near. ***Now they [the Social Democrats] are out on the streets calling for freedom. For fourteen long years they had the opportunity to achieve freedom, but, instead, they took away the bread from the people; instead of providing work they slugged the German workers with hard rubber clubs (Gummiknueppel)."

The Nazi propaganda machine has been quick throughout to steal whatever it could use from the camp of the working-class revolutionists. The Nazis were taught to fight bolshevism with some of the weapons of communism itself. Thus, the Fascist storm banners bear this symbol and song: "We are the army of the Hakenkreuz. Wave the red banners high. We shall bring the German workers to the road of a new liberty!"

The appeal of martyrdom rings throughout all Nazi propaganda. At all meetings before Hitler took power members of the party went around with collection boxes urging you to give, to "help the Nazi prisoners and their dependent families"—prisoners as a result of street brawls, fights at meetings with communists and Socialists, attempts on political opponents' lives, and so on. These collection boxes were labeled in big red letters: "Think of Nazi Prisoner-Relief. *** Not a single Nazi prisoner must feel neglected. Loyalty to the loyal." A sketch of a Nazi in his prison cell tops the message. Throughout the period of the struggle for power, every Nazi paper made the most of announcements of party comrades being slain, often with a picture of the dead. Gruesome murder evidence or impressive funeral scenes of their fallen party heroes were constantly featured.

Nazi agitators were provided with pamphlets to teach them how to fire the imagination of their listeners in the manner of Hitler and Goebbels. The pamphlets contained specially inserted loose leaves Hilfszettel (helping notes), each leaf containing an argument with facts and figures either explaining some Nazi plank or setting forth the Social Democrats' voting record in the Reichstag for fifty years or unmasking them as "traitors to the working class," as "lackeys of high finance," and as "vassals of the Stock Exchange."

The middle classes were by no means neglected. The Nazis saw despair turning many of them to astrology, fortune-telling and all sorts of quackery for hope and relief. Poorer middle-class housewives, particularly, were attracted to astrology. From July 31 to Aug. 3, 1932, the German astrologists held a national convention at Stettin. Here such subjects as "Astrology and Education,"
"Astrology, the Press and Criticism" and even "Politics in the Light of Astrology" were discussed. Among the popularizers of astrology, Jan Janussen, recently mysteriously murdered and since discovered to have had Jewish blood in his veins, was the most successful. His weekly paper, *Hanussen's Berliner Wochenschau*, led the field in circulation.

In stepped the Nazis. A middle class in misery is the most fertile field for fascism. Astrology and clairvoyance soon became the best Nazi fertilizers in the ranks of these disillusioned and despairing people. No time was lost to make Hanussen a Nazi prophet, so as to create the impression that the future lay with the Nazis. In Hanussen's weekly the wildest of Nazi dreams, hopes and plans were established as coming and foreseen in the horoscope of von Hindenburg, von Papen, von Schleicher, Hitler and others. In this fashion the lower strata, culturally speaking, were stirred. "Here, at last, is a chance for success," said the middle-class housewife to herself. For the first time she had the stars and planets on her side.

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Time and again Hitler had told the world: "I am convinced nothing will happen to me, because I believe destiny has assigned a task to me." Conveniently the Nazi propagandists mobilized their supernatural department and had Hanussen turn to his crystal with the question: "Will Hitler become Chancellor of the Reich?" On this point Hitler's horoscope was clear: "The sun is big and is in the division consisting of the three signs of Jupiter (Trigon)—the majestic Trigon! With this also comes the three-sign division of Sun-Moon, Moon-Venus and Jupiter-Venus which only strengthens the royal Trigon. All these would be strong signs for Hitler's assuming the post of Chancellor—and later even higher posts."

The keystone of the whole Nazi theoretical arch is the race question. And the race question means anti-Semitism. The Nazis have a special index of individuals in public life whom they suspect of having even the slightest trace of Jewish blood. No effort was spared to make anti-Semitic propaganda effective. Cartoons, caricatures, high-sounding slogans were at a premium. Here is a typical advertisement in *Der Angriff* of Aug. 6, 1932: "Artist Wanted—For anti-Semitic caricatures, talented, current contributions. Also similar literary contributions are wanted. Applicants should forward their replies to B.V. 449 *Angriff* Hedemannstrasse." Anti-Semitism, as a philosophy, was well rooted in Germany, and the Nazis feverishly exploited the prejudice for their own ends. In their propaganda manual they characterized the Jew as the personification of all evil in Germany, the cause of all misery and destitution, the power behind the forces which brought about Germany's defeat in the last war, the mainspring of Marxism and internationalism. Just as astrology drew the backward housewife and the bewildered, hopeless rural middle classes to the Nazi heaven, so did anti-Semitism inflame and capture urban middle-class people, the small storekeepers, standing bankrupt before the growing department stores owned by Jewish merchants.

When we see how the Nazis succeeded with their propaganda, it is interesting to listen to G. Stark, the Hitlerite theorist: "Political propaganda is quite different from advertising, though it utilizes in part the same methods. Propaganda on the political or spiritual field is not commercial advertising which
seeks only monetary success, but rather it seeks systematic education to win followers for a world philosophy (Weltanschauung). We always remember the great number of comrades who sacrificed their life for the movement. They were propagandists of the deed until their last breath.” Indeed, even the American advertising experts can learn much from the Nazi publicity technique. And the kings of the underworld can take lessons from the Nazis in the field of “the propaganda of the deed" in which they have been especially effective. The Beuthen incident and the sweeping "achievements" of the Storm Troops against their political opponents and the Jews are notorious. In the Nazi propaganda arsenal, terrorism, demonstrations, parades and raids are the accepted weapons. Often, undoubtedly, terrorism has been the chief and most forceful. The Nazis have elaborated a complicated technique in their preparation of terrorist campaigns to "educate" whole communities, to strike fear into whole towns, to make them swallow their creed, if necessary with castor oil and time bombs.

The Nazis boast of the realism in their propaganda machine. "To be able to see with the eyes of the masses, this is the whole secret of the key to successful political propaganda," asserts Herr Stark. It must be admitted that Nazi propaganda has equaled its highest hopes in weaving generalizations, illusions, promises and prejudices around the everyday interests and activities of the people.

The Kampfschatzmarken (fighting fund stamps), often beautifully printed in the Soviet colors of red and gold and bearing such slogans as "Freedom and Bread" and "The Future Belongs to the People," have circulated by the millions with telling effect. Nazi placards with striking and colorful pictures of farmers, housewives and workers, make a direct appeal. Quite often the posters are copied outright from those of the Russian or German Communists. Nazi leaflets have been rich in simple fighting slogans, with rousing calls to action in picturesquely vague language. In recent months special efforts have been directed to harnessing the movie and the theatre to the Nazi vehicle of propaganda. The Hitler-Schallplatte (phonograph record), taking eight and one-half minutes of playing time, is a big attraction at all meetings in small towns and rural areas which Hitler does not reach in person. Many are glad to pay to listen to the master's voice.

In the big cities where addresses are delivered by such eloquent speakers as Hitler or Goebbels, the admission prices often run as high as $1.75 a seat. The meeting is held in a huge stadium. An aviator in a Nazi plane thrills the audience with dare-devil stunt flying. The Storm Troops march onto the field to the tune of the Frederick Rex March and assemble in a huge swastika formation. The air is charged with a martial spirit—drums, trumpets, bells, cymbals and plenty of brass on every side. While waiting for the speakers to arrive the audience puffs Nazi cigarettes or chews Nazi swastika-stamped candy. Hundreds of Roman-candle fireworks flare through the dark at night meetings. The main speaker advances to be greeted by a torchlight parade. His aim is to arouse a spirit of revivalism which sweeps the vast mass off its feet. At the end of the meeting as many as 150,000 may rise in unison to sing "Deutschland Ueber Alles." They march out in disciplined fashion and find on the streets battalions of Storm Troops who unfurl their crimson banners with the tiny black swastika on them, and sing Nazi songs, now in the melody of a Polish revolutionary peasant song, now in the tune of the "Red Guard March," and finally in the melody of the "Volga Boat Song."
The three maxims of Nazi propaganda success are:

- Dramatize your propaganda. All the world is a stage. Act well.
- Always maintain the initiative. Always spring something new. Always let something loose; let there be something happening, something going on. And always be on the offensive—in your propaganda of the word as well as in your propaganda of deed.
- See with the eyes of the masses, with the eyes of all who should be Nazis. Speak in their language. Give them what they want—in your propaganda. Know your people, the Germans. Be of the Germans. And, above all, learn to draw your followers en masse into your propaganda work. Make every one feel he is an actor on the stage of history building a new Germany.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

After Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, another world war was inevitable. The whole program to rebuild Germany was based on the idea that Germany had been betrayed and that the only way for Germany to avenge itself upon its enemies and put an end to the conflict that had begun in 1914 was through military action. In this context, Germany's invasion of Poland was almost incidental—just the excuse that Hitler needed to go to war against his enemies.

The effectiveness of the Nazi propaganda program can only be understood in the context of the utter demoralization of the German people that resulted from their defeat in World War I, the humiliating peace terms, and the effects of the Depression. In fact, the Depression was already lifting in many nations, and it is likely that Germany's fortunes would have improved in the 1930s even if the Nazis had not been in power. Instead, the Nazis were able to incite in the German people the belief that it was right to punish the groups who they believed were to blame for their troubles. This led directly to World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust and cost the lives of many millions of people worldwide.

**FURTHER RESOURCES**

**Books**
