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A Psychological Analysis of Nazi Propaganda and Its Audience

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Abstract

What truly gives an ideology power? More specifically, what gave the Nazi Party the power to dismantle Germany's republic under such a substantially radical, abhorrent platform? Looking at Nazi propaganda's goals and effectiveness, the rationality behind Germany's inexplicable compliance becomes clear and propaganda's notable responsibility reveals itself. This paper will argue that while factors like potent high-ranking Nazi figures and Germany's post-war condition certainly held tremendous influence, none would be relevant without propaganda's contextualizations and psychological maneuvers. Investigating its overpowering presence in the typical German's day-to-day life and evaluating the ways in which it appealed even to skeptical listeners, this paper will reexamine propaganda's imperativeness in constructing and sustaining the Third Reich.

Introduction

In 1901, Irmgard Huber was born to an average German family in Hadamar. With aspirations of being a successful medical practitioner, she entered the field of medicine and shortly became the head nurse of a local psychiatric clinic. In 1945, she was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for crimes against humanity during her involvement with the Aktion T-4 program (the euthanasia organization that experimented with methods of extermination during the first half of World War II) and the

murder of hundreds of people.¹ How could an individual with such an ordinary upbringing and such an innocent career passion become so directly involved with the deaths of more than four hundred people? How could somebody who set out to help people end up harming them so inhumanely instead?

In a speech to the German people in 1928, Josef Goebbels declared that “propaganda shows that it is good if, over a certain period, it can win over and fire up people for an idea.”² Although justly held responsible for them, Nazi figures like Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring, and Heinrich Himmler did not personally carry out the bulk of the Third Reich’s crimes. They appeared onstage with vigorous speeches, orchestrated events and rallies, developed logistics and procedures, made plans, and ensured that they would happen. They did not get their hands dirty, but prompted others, like Huber, to. They “fired up” the common person to the nature, goals, and ideas of Nazism, violent and unsettling as they were. So, how did they do it?

Goebbels claimed that the most successful movements simply “unify their followers under a short, clear theme.” He mentioned the importance of supplying followers with a pithy idea, one that they may easily cite and live by, using Christianity’s “Love your neighbor as yourself” as a memorable example.³ But there must be more to this. What was it about the Nazi message that allured the common person? Surely, it must be more than the fact that it was easy to refer to.

This brief study, by examining the roots of Germany’s assent to Nazism, will explore the psychological effects and maneuvers employed by the Nazi propaganda machine and the cognition behind the receptive individuals who accepted the ideology and then carried it out. Through its cunning techniques, its ubiquitous presence in everyday life, and its success in complementing Germany’s circumstances, propaganda perhaps was the key that opened the door to one of the darkest moments in history.

Nazi Propaganda and Its Power Source

From the beginning of Nazism’s power in Germany to its end, the German people were exposed to propaganda in numerous ways: through posters, films, radio, the press, and live speeches. Many

¹ Ron Laytner, “Hadamar town of mass murderers,” *The Deseret News* (Salt Lake City), January 11, 1984.

² Josef Goebbels, “Knowledge and Propaganda” (Speech, 1928).

³ Josef Goebbels, “Knowledge and Propaganda.”

historians have drawn comparisons between samples and have studied both the subtle and obvious aspects that Nazi propaganda continuously exhibited. As expected, the same themes come up constantly.

In her psychological analysis of Nazi posters, Karthik Narayanaswami summarized the three main goals that Nazi propaganda strove to fulfill: to deify Hitler, to define the enemy, and to rally the masses.⁴ To methodize the interpretation of propaganda pieces technically, she associated common strategies (like the glorification of Hitler, the uglification of the racial enemy, and the exaggeration of social bonds) with cognitive biases (like the halo effect, in which one's impression affects his overall opinion; the superiority bias, in which one's supremacy is heightened by another's imperfections; and the in-group bias, in which one prefers those who belong in his group, respectively) that they evoked. She noticed how Nazi propaganda's focal points did not rely on the impairment of memories but on the fabrication of social and individual pressures and responsibilities. Looking at Narayanaswami's analysis, one may see that while many assume Nazi propaganda's intentions to brainwash the public's understanding, they underestimate its intentions to change the public's function, to unify and mobilize the German people under a common ideology. Propaganda did not focus only on distorting the existing, but on using this distortion to forge the necessary mindset that would ensure a future for Nazism. It did not seek to create a people who understood, but a people who believed and did, a people who acted without question.

In a famous poster by Hans Schweitzer, aptly captioned "*Ein Kampf, ein Wille, ein Ziel: Sieg um jeden Preis!*" (or, in English, "One Battle, one Will, one Goal: Victory at any Cost!"), all aspects of society, from women, to those working in the factories, to those fighting on the front, were addressed.⁵ This unifying approach gathered the responsibility of Germany's war effort and assigned a patriotic obligation to every member of German society. Collectivizing society, it also pushed individuals to project their situations onto others subconsciously, further inducing people to take up the perceived duty to do their part in the war. Besides posters, Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 film *Triumph des Willens* is a prime example of German Nazi propaganda.⁶ Complete with national insignia, footage of rallies, and appearances by prominent Nazi leaders like Josef Goebbels, Julius Streicher, and Hans Frank, the film sought to "instill an emotional response in the audience" and to "forge a symbolic

⁴ Karthik Narayanaswami, "Analysis of Nazi Propaganda: A Behavioral Study" (Harvard University: 2001).

⁵ Hans Schweitzer, *Preis*, 1942.

⁶ *Triumph des Willens*, dir. Leni Riefenstahl (1935).

link between Adolf Hitler and the German people.”⁷ Examining such wide-reaching works, one can just begin to fathom Nazi propaganda’s tremendous extent, especially as it sought to connect all sectors of the public.

But propaganda did not only attempt to move the general society. It also concentrated on specific audiences, as well. Many speeches and images strove to mobilize particular individuals by emphasizing the aspects of Nazism that most applied to them to make the ideology relevant to their respective lifestyles and identities. For instance, *völkisch* beliefs and “blood and soil” campaigns, underlining the importance of simplicity and agricultural living, were especially stressed to rural audiences, inciting support in the small-town, well-removed populations of Germany, support that was critical to Nazism’s initial rise to power.

Another common subject of Nazi propaganda was women. The prominence of a German woman’s support to the Nazi Party is often overlooked; nevertheless, having the essential role to grow Nazi Germany’s population and to impress National Socialism upon future generations, women were heavily targeted when it came to propaganda campaigns.

Particularly, Gertrud Scholtz-Klink was a helpful tool for Nazi leaders to demonstrate the standards of the ideal German woman. Speaking publicly and appearing alongside other leaders, she advocated that women should become “mothers of the nation,” committed not only to the “calling of motherhood” herself but also to the service of children around her and the service of her society as a whole.⁸ Using black-and-white logic and collective terminology, speeches like those by Scholtz-Klink hyperbolized the inevitability of each woman’s duty to Germany while making such liability heroic and exemplary. Along with rewarding motherhood with recognition (like the Cross of Honor of the German Mother, which was awarded to women with over four children) and compensation (for example, a 1,000-mark loan for couples existed whose repayment dropped 25% every time a child of theirs was born), Nazi ideas represented child rearing as a divine and selfless act to bolster Germany, coaxing women into advocacy and practice. Furthermore, a newsletter addressed to Nazi women leaders during the latter years of the war reveals some insight into the strategies speakers used to move their audiences. Advising leaders to put “things in the right context so that they do not seem greater than they in fact are” and to “ensure that

⁷ Russel Lemmons, review of “*Bewegende Bilder*”: *Repräsentation und Produktion von Emotionen in Leni Riefenstabs “Triumph des Willens”*, *German Studies Review*, October 2008.

⁸ Gertrud Scholtz-Klink, “To Be German Is to Be Strong” (Speech, 1936).

the behavior of German women is worthy” by acting like a role model, the letter endeavored to help restore order to Nazi women organizations (specifically, the NSF-DFW) as the war took a turn for the worse. Mainly, the letter highlights the success in diluting problems while promoting the desirable character a Nazi woman should have, ultimately to “keep in mind the significance and purpose of [the] war” instead of making matters more difficult.⁹

However, while it is apparent that Nazi propaganda certainly aimed to convince and recruit the German people using cognitive cues, none of it would have been successful if its pervasiveness did not exist. It is true that some posters effectively employed the halo effect to deify Adolf Hitler and that some speeches used universal pronouns to collectivize Nazi ideology into society’s entirety. But without the perceived commonness of propaganda – without insignia lining the streets, without events and rallies inciting neighbors and family members, without speeches prevailing on the radio – society could not have accepted the radical philosophies of Nazism in the magnitude that it did.

A recent Princeton study revealed the remarkable correlation between public opinion and radio stations’ portrayals of Nazism. Using regional factors like radio availability, electoral measures, and NSDAP membership, the researchers found that during periods (1930-1932) of anti-Nazi exposure, support for Nazism in numerous towns was relatively small, while during periods (1933) of pro-Nazi exposure, the support for Nazism was much larger, especially as the radio’s popularity increased. They also determined a similar trend for anti-Semitic emotions. Looking at the numbers of denunciations of Jewish citizens, synagogues destroyed, and letters mailed to *Der Stürmer* (an anti-Semitic, pro-Aryan newspaper), the study revealed an overall growth in the frequency of anti-Jewish expressions, especially in towns with histories of anti-Semitism (with past pogroms, for example), after increased exposure to Nazi propaganda via increased radio availability.¹⁰

It can be concluded that the radio was a significant platform to spark public support for Nazism. But the most interesting finding of the study was not that pro-Nazi messages appeared to shift the people’s opinion. The researchers compiled several models that displayed how with an expanse in radio availability and listenership as more Nazi

⁹ Dr. E.H., “The Test,” *Nachrichtendienst der Reichsfrauenführung Sonderdienst* (September 1941).

¹⁰ Maja Adena, Ruben Enikolopov, Maria Petrova, Veronica Santarosa, and Ekaterina Zhuravskaya, “Radio and the Rise of Nazis in Prewar Germany” (Princeton University: 2013).

propaganda filled the media came an expanse in support for the party, shown by both augmented NSDAP membership numbers and Nazi-favored electoral results. Therefore, the mere presence of pro-Nazi messages, not just their content nor their psychological maneuvers, lent substantial success in ensuring public support for the regime.

Moreover, the study underlined the apparent relevance of a region's historical and cultural context in its receptiveness to Nazi ideology through propaganda. Investigating the circumstances of growing pro-Nazi radio propaganda and regional anti-Semitism, the researchers concluded that while intensifying anti-Jewish messages appeared to correlate with increased violence and discontent with local Jewish populations, towns that already had such sentiments deeply rooted in their civilians tended to exhibit the most dramatic escalations in anti-Semitic expressions. Hence, it is critical to study the predispositions and contexts of Germany and its local cultures to explain Nazi propaganda's success. Anti-Semitism certainly was not uncommon in the early 1900s, and its presence in Nazi propaganda was not revolutionary. People were exposed to what they had grown up with. Goebbels claimed Germans thought that Nazism finally "put in words everything [they had] been searching for for years."¹¹ Even if such a presumptuous statement is false, the mindset of the ordinary German is certainly revealing in how Nazi propaganda messages were received overall.

The People Who Heard It

Examining any random sample of Nazi Germany's population, those who actively participated in its atrocious crimes and those who merely witnessed or stood beside them, before and even during the rule of the regime, one cannot help but notice a normality. When set aside from their crimes, aspirants pursuing their careers, like Irmgard Huber or Carl Clauberg, whom both sought success in medicine, World War One veterans who had fought for their nation, like Karl Otto Koch, who was held as a British prisoner of war until its end, and even children, like Alfons Heck, who participated in Nazi Youth organizations along with thousands of his peers, potentially seem quite average.¹² So how could such a historical anomaly stem from such a typical populace?

First, a current heavily disputed debate on Nazi Germany's origins discusses the possibility that Germany's upbringing and cultural context bred the feasibility for the regime to take hold. The proposition

¹¹ Josef Goebbels, "Knowledge and Propaganda."

¹² "Nazi Perpetrators of the Holocaust." *Jewish Virtual Library* (1998).

holds that while other European nations, like France and Great Britain, followed a path that led them to democracy, Germany diverged onto a different fate, one that enkindled Nazism and dictatorship. Numerous historians, like Daniel Goldhagen, have invoked such explanations. His acclaimed yet controversial book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, explored the possibility that Germans, predisposed to the irregularity of their society, “might have killed or been willing to kill others, in this case, Jews, in good conscience.”¹³ In other words, Germany’s heritage may have lent its people a mindset that permitted them to consider their despicable actions necessary, or even righteous. Propaganda that tapped into themes in line with said conscience therefore may have seemed believable and worthy of one’s attention and respect.

Psychological theorists have used humanity’s different backgrounds to explain variations in decision-making across numerous countries. A 2001 study on cross-cultural moral rhetorics explored such a phenomenon. Surveying students from universities in the United States and the Philippines, responses were compared on three ethical grounds: autonomy, community, and divinity. Based on the national characters of both nations (the United States being more concerned with matters of “harm, rights, freedom, and justice” and the Philippines being more or less balanced between individualism, community, and religion), researchers predicted that more Americans would emphasize autonomy-related judgment over the other two rhetorics. In the end, after thoroughly examining the personal codes and emotional responses of participants in five separate sub-studies, researchers concluded a clear difference between both countries’ moral tendencies.¹⁴ When looking at the two nations more generally – the United States’ individualistic, “pursuing the dream” mindset and the Philippines’ family-centered, religious-driven mindset – considering that their respective citizens think differently when it comes to labeling which transgressions are wrong and why should not be surprising.

The same idea may be used to look at Germans and their individual decisions during the Third Reich. Ever before Germany’s unification in the early 1870s, Germans characterized themselves as a superior civilization, honing their regular military victories with a fervent national sentiment. But so did many other Europeans. Where Germany seemed to diverge was in the way it responded to democracy. While it seemed to be following Western European civilizations with the Weimar

¹³ Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

¹⁴ Kristin Vasquez, Dacher Keltner, David H. Ebenbach, and Tracy L. Banaszynski, “Cultural Variation and Similarity in Moral Rhetorics: Voices from the Philippines and the United States,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32, no. 1 (January 2001): 93-120.

Republic's birth in late 1918, Germany experienced much hardship. Laden with public discontent, economic turmoil (peaking after World War One with the Great Depression), and humiliation by the Versailles Treaty, the Republic predictably posed little threat for the Nazi Party – or any radical party, really – to take root. In sum, while the victorious Allied powers triumphed under democracy, Germany, burdened with demoralization by the lost war, the inefficiency of its political system, and the distress caused by its failing economy, foundered under it. In 1933, Julius Streicher, an essential figure of the Nazi propaganda machine, passionately celebrated the Nazi Party's victory over the "misled 'mass men'" who had taken Germany's "faith in the strength of its blood, its faith in the strength of its soul, and thus faith in its very self."¹⁵ Nazi officials and propaganda used the dissatisfaction with the Republic to draw out memories of Germany's past, and confident self before the war and to incriminate those (political and racial enemies) who would be held accountable for its failure. Its despondent position after World War One, juxtaposed with its prior supremacy and the pictures of future supremacy painted by Nazi propaganda, convinced many that a change was necessary and that the Nazi Party could provide such a change.

Nazism advertised an escape from the perceived effeminacy of post-war Germany, from its embarrassing weakness as it grappled with military failure and dismaying dependency on other European countries. Naturally, many Germans perceived such promises as alluring and worthy of their support, or at least their consent. Coupled with optimism and potential for a return to greatness, its ideology, while perhaps radical, did not frighten people away. It did not stray far from what many – even other Europeans – had already assessed. Historian Joseph W. Bendersky stated that the underlying ideas of Nazism "had existed in German and European civilization since the nineteenth century."¹⁶ Rather than devising a unique creed, Hitler built on preexisting anti-Semitic sentiments, *völkisch* ideas, and militaristic discipline and hierarchy, present not only in the past but also in other regions of Europe. And he did so in a manner that drew people to it. Posters portrayed tall, undaunted army men and the peaceful yet critical lives of farmers, speeches highlighted Germany's historical victories and those to come, and rallies demonstrated the allure of congregation and passion. Familiarity and excitement for familiarity – despite the party's radical

¹⁵ Julius Streicher, "The Future Knows Only Germans!" (Speech, City Council Hall, Nuremberg, April 27, 1933), 2003.

¹⁶ Joseph W. Bendersky, *A Concise History of Nazi Germany*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2014). 27

turnings – made it easier to turn the public in Hitler’s favor, or at least under his authority.

Termed the “mere-exposure effect,” this phenomenon establishes that people tend to develop a preference for senses or ideas just because they are already accustomed to them. A (much) less complicated approach to proving such an occurrence was an experiment, which established that a person’s likelihood to vote for a contestant in a competition increased if he or she had been recognized from an earlier round.¹⁷ Numerous similar studies have also demonstrated recognition and familiarity’s role in identifying with certain things over others. Knowing this, hearing Hitler voice well-known ideas was not startling to Germans, at the least. For those who did not follow such ideological points, surely the existence of similar topics persuaded them that nothing more extreme nor dangerous would come of them.

But what made Germans enable Nazi rule as it lingered and intensified? While some were convinced and many were neutral, at least half of Germany’s population voted against Nazism in the Reichstag election of 1932, a perceived success for the Nazi Party. Furthermore, in the predictable 1933 election with a purely pro-Nazi ballot, the party won 92.1% of the vote, meaning some voters (7.9% of them) showed up only to turn in a blank ballot. There *had* to be opponents. So, where were they?

Remembering the suffocating presence of Nazi propaganda, one needs to look no further than what was shown in overwhelming measures to the German public. First, the Nazi Party made it a point to enumerate its perceived success and efficiency, and it started with Germany’s apparent massive economic turnover beginning in 1934. Partly due to Hitler’s public works projects, like the Autobahn (a tremendous undertaking to construct a highway) and various agricultural plans, and mostly due to automatic recovery after the dramatic economic depression, Germans across the classes felt at least some economic relief by the first year of Nazi rule. Naturally, such upturn was boasted across numerous mediums. A 1936 brochure, which celebrated the accomplishments of the first three years of Nazi rule, listed increases in employment, agricultural production, craftsmen production, industry, transportation, public income, savings, and exports.¹⁸ While likely inflated for propagandistic purposes, publicly released statistics like these

¹⁷ Diarmuid B. Verrier, “Evidence for the Influence of the Mere-Exposure Effect on Voting in the Eurovision Song Contest,” *Judgment and Decision Making* 7, no. 5 (September 2012).

¹⁸ *Das ist erreicht* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag für Politik und Wirtschaft, 1936).

psychologically put the public's detected relief into reality, albeit an exaggerated one. Nevertheless, of course, Germans could believe such numbers when they felt them in their day-to-day lives. Why oppose an establishment that brought personal benefit? With improved standards of living, surely many did not see any reason to dismiss the Nazis as completely harmful, even if some did not completely agree with their ideology.

Also, as it grew in its power, the Nazi Party appeared to be an unshakable institution that kept Germany and its government firmly intact. Unlike the Weimar Republic, inefficiently split among separate parties that each had separate agendas, the Third Reich seemed organized, united under a secure hierarchy built under one leader, Hitler. While this was only an illusion, as the regime was greatly laden with inconsistency and power-hungry competition, it gave Germans security and hope in once again becoming proficient. Nazi speakers like Streicher fed on such sentiments, saying lines like, "Only a Germany so united could be victorious in the great battles that had to be fought."¹⁹ Knowing the responsibilities delegated to Nazi leaders and witnessing institutions from courthouses to recreational organizations become Nazified convinced many that they had indeed found a structure that would lead Germany to coherence and dominance.

Not only the apparent structure of the Nazi regime stirred people into support and compliance. Within such a vigorously solid impression was an incentive to keep the opposing silenced and the impartial acquiescent, stimulating an atmosphere of violence and terror. Conditioning Germans into following and even participating in Nazi rule with feelings of certain punishment and threatening, all-knowing forces like the Gestapo, the Third Reich instilled in many the fear to speak and act out against Nazism. Through propaganda and public denunciations – neighbors betraying neighbors, children betraying parents, friends betraying friends – that magnified the Gestapo's presence, Germans became wary of their actions, "the image of the concentration camp and the horrible fate it offered" coming to mind and inducing compliance to Nazi law and principles.²⁰ And aside from the physical terror instilled by the Nazi state police, speeches by Nazi leaders held that all opponents (or deemed opponents) were enemies of Germany and collaborators of Marxism and Judaism. Streicher himself illustrated this idea, warning that "he who dares to injure or insult honest German work with the spirit of a Jewish-Marxist worldview that brought Germany to its grave will be

¹⁹ Julius Streicher, "The Future Knows Only Germans!"

²⁰ Joseph W. Bendersky, *A Concise History of Nazi Germany*. 133

judged by the people.”²¹ Statements like these, followed by zealous affirmations by the assembly, surely pressured many into submissiveness. Not only could people be labeled as enemies of their nation, but also could they be labeled as Jews and Communists, people whom they saw as inferior to themselves (as anti-Semitism and anti-Marxism were quite typical).

Nevertheless, Nazis did not usually intend to place themselves in a horrifying light. If anything, they wished for Germans to consider them “representatives of the united citizenry” and saviors of the inadequacy of Weimar.²² Fear was indeed a major stimulus for Nazi propaganda. But often it was directed elsewhere, towards the enemies of Nazism. Myths of the Jewish population stealing from pure, good German society, businesses, and culture – even the stories of Jews robbing Christian families of their children – filled speeches and publications. Propaganda and publications in magazines like *Der Stürmer* displayed Jews as roguish, evil-looking creatures. Nazi officials condemned the modernism of Weimar which had not sit well with many people as the malignant work of the Jews to destroy and defile Germany and its culture. Much was done to set a stark division between the true, deserving Germans and the mischievous, parasitic racial enemies. Coupling vigorous nationalism with fearful hatred established a stiff black-and-white society in which one may be embraced as part of the in-group (Germans) or rejected as part of the out-group (Jews). With efforts to collectivize German society and demonize undesired individuals, the choice to submit unfortunately was not difficult for most Germans.

Conclusion

Overall, truly understanding the process of Nazi Germany’s establishment lies in closely observing its propaganda and the cognitive tendencies it invoked. Indeed, it is important to consider the conditions and methods in which Nazi leaders like Hitler rose to power, looking at legal processes, personal backgrounds, political instability, and economic turmoil. But what contextualized each condition, connected each event, and induced each success was what spoke to and inspired the general German public.

Nazi officials had understood and acknowledged the importance of moving the people. The people’s permission gave them the authority to remain in control. But the people’s support gave them their influence, and the capability to leave such a tremendous, unforgettable wound in

²¹ Julius Streicher, “The Future Knows Only Germans!”

²² Julius Streicher, “The Future Knows Only Germans!”

German history. And not many would have done so without being convinced.

Propaganda, from the beginning to the end, stirred the public in various ways. It collected Germans together while appealing to their lifestyles and backgrounds, making them feel united and enthused about their new state. It awakened familiar ideas and enkindled hope for a return to prominence. It claimed credit for and brought colorful life to the subtle improvements and innovations that increased the average person's standard of living. It provoked fear. It brought people together under both a love for Germany and a hatred for those whom they believed threatened Germany. And it was everywhere.

In short, propaganda's importance in founding Nazi Germany onto the public's shoulders must not be underestimated. Using words, images, and emotion, the Nazi Party diverted Germany from its path to modernism and democracy, prompting its potential to commit horrors that would stun the world and leave it asking, "How?"

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