Power, Lies, and a Crippled Society: Propaganda in The Third Reich

To create a fire, one needs only three ingredients: tinder, a spark, and a fan for the flames. In fact, anyone who has ever built a fire learns quickly that without the last ingredient, the other two are rendered useless. The fire that consumed Germany in the 1930s was no different. In this analogy, the tinder is the historic prejudices of Europe that many Germans happened to share, the spark Hitler himself, and the fan for the flames the propaganda machine. Throughout the 1930s, Nazis in Germany encountered numerous failures in their attempt to gain power and support. Not until Hitler appointed Joseph Goebbels— a young, angry propagandist— was the Third Reich successful in its seizure of political, social and economic control. Though Hitler manipulated previously established European prejudices, he was able to sway an entire nation’s will towards his vision by establishing a competently managed and ubiquitous propaganda machine and used it not only to assume power but also to wield power. This paper will trace the evolution and the impact of this propaganda machine. First, it will outline the principles of propaganda. Second, it will provide a short biography of Joseph Goebbels, the chief architect of Nazi propaganda, and his instrumental role in the rise of Hitler. Third, it will illustrate the methods the Ministry of Propaganda used in following the principles of propaganda. Finally, it will provide an assessment of the impact of the propaganda in the development of Nazi Germany.

What is Propaganda?

In discussing the role of propaganda in the Third Reich, it is important to determine what propaganda actually is. It is not a commandment to believe a certain fact,
nor is it a reasoned discussion filled with tortuous logic. It is neither blatant lies nor is it untarnished truth. Propaganda lies somewhere in the gray area of all these extremes. At best, it could be described as a heightened form of persuasion or a presentation designed to elicit a desirable conclusion from the audience. However, propaganda does contain certain prominent features. Though no one feature is sufficient to classify something as propaganda, each one is required in any reasonable definition of the term.1 First, propaganda must appeal to a large audience. It must reach enough people to build up momentum and effect a large-scale change as a result. Second, propaganda targets the lowest common denominator of the intended population, both demographically and emotionally. Messages are presented in their simplest form in order to prompt the desired reaction. Third is an element of repetition. This not only erodes any resistance or questioning to the accuracy of the message, but also helps elevate the message to the status of unquestioned maxim. Finally, propaganda must be believable. That is not to say that it is true or even ought to be believed, but propaganda must be acceptable to the belief system of the target audience.2 Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson – two professors of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz – clearly delineated four techniques that maximize the effects of propaganda. These maneuvers are: pre-persuasion, source credibility, and message and emotions. Pre-persuasion involves structuring the debate and the social atmosphere so as to be conducive to one’s goals. It involves establishing the rules and pre-conceptions, whether stated or unstated, that dictate the terms of the issue. For example, envision the difference between a TV newscast opening with “Today we are discussing immigration”, or “Today we are discussing the problem of immigration.” Source credibility entails constructing a
trustworthy image of the communicator. The third maneuver effectively distills to the concept of staying on message by either presenting the message in a way to prevent any distraction from it, or in a way that diminishes all distractions to where only the message is left. The final tactic of propaganda is to control the emotions of the target audience. By encouraging the audience either to reduce a negative emotion or to maintain or increase a positive emotion, the propagandist can provide a course of action that correlates with the desired outcome. In assessing the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda it will be helpful to keep these four criteria in mind as the principal metrics. Often the II most successful campaigns involved an acute awareness of all four criteria not only by Hitler but also by his chief propagandist Joseph Goebbels.

*Who is Joseph Goebbels?*

In hindsight, Joseph Goebbels is the perfect candidate for extremist causes. Born with a physical deformity of his foot, Goebbels felt like an outsider in most social circles. He attempted to become a fiction writer, but his first novel Michael: A German Fate was an utter failure. By 1925 he had become the secretary of the National Socialist Working Association in the northern and western parts of Germany, one of the multitudes of Nazi factions that emerged following the failure of the Beer Hall Putsch and the subsequent imprisonment of Adolf Hitler. Goebbels and Hitler differed so much that Goebbels even called for the expulsion of Hitler from the National Socialist Party. By mid 1926, however, Goebbels had made an about-face in his perception of Hitler and had become a fervent, perhaps excessive, admirer of Hitler. Goebbels became so mesmerized by Hitler that he wrote in his journal entries such as, “How I love him! What a man!” and “I want Hitler to be my friend. His photograph is on my desk. I could not bear it if I despair
of this man.”8 At the same time however, Hitler recognized the intelligence and
capability of Goebbels and increasingly placed Goebbels under his wing both within the
political party structure and within the craft of propaganda. From 1925 onward Nazi
Party leadership was unquestionably in the hands of Adolf Hitler, who would, with the
aid of Joseph Goebbels, construct a mythos around Hitler to elevate him to the
chancellorship of Germany.9

Hitler and Goebbels both worked tirelessly to construct an image of Hitler as a
messianic figure coming forth to resurrect Germany. By 1926, the obligatory “Heil
Hitler” had become standard party practice.10 On Hitler’s fortieth birthday, Goebbels had
taken an ad out in the Nazi Party paper saying, “Fate has chosen [Adolf Hitler] to show
the way to the German people. Therefore we greet him in devotion and reverence, and
can only wish that w he may be preserved for us until his work is completed.”11

Together, Hitler and Goebbels would use the mythology of Hitler to sway massive
crowds. Goebbels would even engage in speaking tours with Adolf Hitler and Hermann
Goering, having spent his formative days perfecting his speaking technique. He even
went so far as to buy a three-sided mirror so that he could pose in front of it for hours to
script every movement and analyze the impact of the performed gesture.12 As a speaker,
Goebbels was known as a theatrical and charismatic spectacle, whose every movement
and gesture was infused with meaning. At one point Hitler declared Goebbels II the only
man he could listen to without falling asleep, and described Goebbels’ audiences as “a
witches’ cauldron of excitement.”13 By 1929, Joseph Goebbels soon held the office of
Reichspropagandaleiter.14 When, in 1933, Hitler became the elected chancellor of
Germany, he appointed Goebbels Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment, both
as reward for his instrumental role in the Nazi Party’s success and as a guarantee for the party’s future growth. It is no surprise, then, that Goebbels has gone down in the records as the mouthpiece of the Nazi propaganda regime.15

*Birth of The Third Reich*

In 1923 Hitler was rotting in a prison as a conspirator in a failed coup d’etat.16 The National Socialist Party had splintered into various factions and had a treacherous image. Ten years later no other party was as well coordinated or growing as quickly, and a former prisoner was now chancellor of Germany. Such a radical turnaround did not occur accidentally. Instead, it was the byproduct of a systematic campaign of propaganda. The meteoric rise of Adolf Hitler developed from a cultivated exploitation of charismatic speaking techniques, a cult development strategy, and the willingness of the German people to construct a personality cult. If reaching a large audience is one criterion of propaganda, then Hitler and Goebbels followed it to the letter by making their speaking engagements a form of mass entertainment. Most of the events were pre-planned to the extent that a sense of pageantry could be displayed. As a Catholic, Goebbels was inspired by the spectacle of the church ceremony. In all cases speakers were placed on a high platform with little to no adornment around it, other than a large, looming, pristine representation of the swastika. With the stage set and the audience enthralled simply by the presentation, the Nazi Party could literally put forth an army of speakers before spectators. Under the head office for Speakers’ Affairs, party spokesmen were carefully organized into the low-level constituency speakers, district speakers, regional speakers, theme specific speakers, and the Reichsredner – “Reich’s Speakers.” The Reichsredner were promoted as pop stars and paid a commensurate salary. Of course few of these
professional orators could match the panache of the Fuhrer himself. One spectator described a Hitler speech accordingly: “Hitler began in low key, quiet, almost diffidently, as if he were candidly presenting his anxieties about the future. Gradually the appearance of shyness gave way to tones of urgency, which swept his audience... now an almost tangible wave of enthusiasm was born among the hearers. In such an atmosphere, skepticism died, an opponent would have sounded like a temperance campaign appealing for sobriety at a Bacchanalian orgy.” In this light, the inspiration of Goebbels is understandable. A Nazi Party speech would have the same atmosphere as the riotous jubilation of a Sunday morning Baptist service. Once drawn into the party ranks by charismatic speeches, a Nazi party member would be made to feel exceptional and privileged. Professors Pratkanis and Aronson define this tactic as the granfalloon technique. Granfalloons – proud and meaningless associations of human beings – encourage people to accept strangers as close kin. As a corollary to the social status of those included in a selective group of granfalloons, anyone who lies outside that group is either ostracized or dehumanized. Obviously, the Nazi regime was known for its dehumanization of particular social groups, especially the gypsies and Jews. Yet, the Nazi system of scape-goating was more subtle than simple blanket attacks on ethnic groups; Nazis would tailor their message depending on their audience. For lower class groups Nazis railed against capitalism and vowed to protect workers from “International Finance.” For middle class groups, Nazis championed private property and warned of the looming specter of communism. For small business owners, they would attack large department stores as being an evil branch of a larger conspiracy. However, once outsider groups were targeted, party officials would actively try to
encourage the unity of the Nazi Party either by appealing to the principles of the family or to the principle of the Volksgemeinschaft (national community). The sense of community had to percolate down to the level of individual Nazi recruits. Early adherents were often asked to show their loyalty to the Nazi Party by donning a brown shirt. Early German reaction was ridicule for these brown shirts, which in turn would cause members to turn inward to the party for support. Eventually, this tactic of rabid inclusion would escalate in the philosophy of genetic exceptionalism and Aryan superiority. The larger success of the propaganda campaign was its sheer volume and intensity. Potential audiences were often inundated by the wide spread speculation of the Nazi Party’s newspaper. The Volkisscher Beobachter, with such headlines as, “Grandiose Progress of the Hitler days” or “A Mighty Show of Confidence in National Socialism on the Part of Lower Bavarian Peasant”, increased its circulation by over 400% between 1929 and 1932. When Hitler and the Nazi Party engaged in speaking tours, the people would already admire the Nazi leader and be familiar with Nazi doctrine. Hitler and his contingent of speakers would be sure to not disappoint the awaiting audience. In the early stages of the Nazi Party’s rise to prominence, a predisposed district II could expect anywhere from 70 – 200 rallies crammed into two weeks. With such saturation the Nazi message was translated into political power. In 1930, the Nazi Party won 107 seats in the Reichstag, a startling increase from its 12 seats two years earlier and enough to make the Nazi Party the second largest in Germany. All this energy culminated in what has been described as the “great propaganda journey of the Fuhrer.” In the 1932 presidential election, Hitler himself spoke in 148 mass rallies, often three times a day and before crowds of 30,000 Germans. The driven and consistent rhetoric of the Nazi Party
propelled Hitler to the chancellorship by 1933. With a near majority, within five weeks of taking the oath of office, Hitler and the Nazi Party had won 288 seats. In ten years Hitler was able to progress from convict to chancellor because of a concentrated propaganda campaign.

Assessment of Early Nazi Propaganda Techniques

In assessing the success of the Nazi campaign, it first must be compared with the criteria of propaganda. The campaign obviously reached a fairly large audience of millions of Germans. In its use of the granfalloon technique, it was able to appeal to the least common denominator of the population and play off the simple fears and pride of the audience. With a party newspaper, the party could repeat slogans and skew facts regularly. If election records are any indicator, because of its saturation and ability to intensify popular prejudices, the Nazi message was believable to the majority of Germans. Clearly, the Nazi campaign was a propaganda campaign. By that standard, Hitler’s election as chancellor was one of the most successful and carefully orchestrated propaganda campaigns in history. The success of the Nazi propaganda campaign can be more clearly understood in the light of the four techniques of persuasion. First, pre-persuasion was a key feature of Nazi politics. Rarely would a Nazi speaking engagement occur without some sort of pamphleteering beforehand. Second, source credibility was carefully cultivated. No one would believe the message of a convict; however, bestowing and encouraging the messianic mythology of Hitler established credibility and fear in the public’s eye. In short, Nazis manufactured their own credibility. Third, the Nazis were obviously capable of maintaining a message in a wide variety of venues and adjusting to a wide variety of audiences. The militaristic division of the Nazi
Party’s cadre of speakers ensured that no one member could deviate from party doctrine.

Fourth, the lifeblood of the Nazi Party was the element of repetition. The chief architect of Nazi propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, once stated, “If you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes the truth.”27 The Nazi campaign matched up flawlessly with the necessary elements of successful propaganda. Due to the work of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda is remembered as one of, if not the most, effective propaganda campaigns ever.

**Conclusion**

There are discernible characteristics that distinguish propaganda from mere information, and in a sense these characteristics boil down to packaging and proliferation. Having a hint of believability for even the most obtuse audiences constitutes the packaging while wide-scale repetition constitutes the proliferation. Master propagandists have learned to exploit discreet techniques – pre-disposed audiences to the message, buttressing the credibility of the source, discouraging deviation from the message and utilizing emotion to short circuit logic – to maximize the effects of propaganda. Joseph Goebbels was such a master propagandist, a fact not lost on a Hitler vying for unilateral control over Germany. In fact, Hitler’s recognition of Goebbels allowed the two men to transition from early antagonism toward each other, to mutual admiration. Once this partnership was forged, a fringe political party such as the Nazis was able to sustain a focused campaign on the insecurities of its own members and the biases of the German people. New supporters were garnered through spectacle and pageantry, while existing members were cemented in the party through cult-like tactics. Hitler was and is the epitome of the dangers of concentrated power in a demagogue. Yet accomplishing
this required the management of a division of pseudo-soldiers whose battlefield was the hearts and minds of the German people. Though Hitler’s campaign demanded the right set of circumstances at exactly the right period of time, it was his adeptly managed propaganda trail that led to his success. Even if Hitler had done nothing with his chancellorship and eventual dictatorship, w his rhetorical assault should cause any citizen of a free-standing democracy to be wary. The basic right to the freedom of speech necessitates an even more fundamental responsibility for vigilance against manipulation. It is not the rocks that destroy the ship of state, but rather the sirens’ call.
Works Cited

3 Aronson and Pratkanis, Age of Propaganda.
7 Kershaw, The ‘Hitler Myth’: Image and Reality.
9 Spielvogel, Hitler and Nazi Germany.
10 Kershaw, The ‘Hitler Myth’.
13 Rutherford, Hitler’s Propaganda Machine, p. 45.
15 Kershaw, The ‘Hitler Myth’.
17 Snyder, Hitler’s Elite.
18 Rutherford, Hitler’s Propaganda Machine.
19 Rutherford, Hitler’s Propaganda Machine.
20 Kershaw, The ‘Hitler Myth’: p.52.
21 Spielvogel, Hitler and Nazi Germany: p. 59.
22 Kershaw, The ‘Hitler Myth’.
23 Spielvogel, Hitler and Nazi Germany.
24 Spielvogel, Hitler and Nazi Germany.
26 Kershaw, The ‘Hitler Myth’: p.41.
27 Spielvogel, Hitler and Nazi Germany: p.57