



CORRUPTED NEWS: WORLD WAR II ANTISEMITIC GERMAN PROPAGANDA AND ITS EFFECTS THROUGH THE LENS OF COMMUNICATION THEORY

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Abstract

The ideology and purpose of the Third Reich's propaganda campaign was to establish and promote an anti-Jewish racist ideology that scapegoated all European Jews in an effort to rally the German people against a common enemy and take the focus from Germany and its involvement in World War I as a leading cause of the collapse of the German economy and social stability. The shifting of blame and an allying of the Nazi military and German public against a social enemy both internal and external led to a re-contextualization of social focus within a nation reeling from military defeat and faced with continued economic collapse. The Reich Ministry of Propaganda but, more broadly speaking, the entire German government used anti-Jewish propaganda that was spread throughout all levels of German society, touching all aspects of the Reich. While the use of propaganda undoubtedly involves a smattering of communication strategies in order to be successful, the Third Reich's construction and utilization of propaganda embodies what would come to be known to communication theorists as agenda-setting, social judgement cultivation, and cultivation theories. An analysis in hindsight demonstrates the German government's control over the public conversation and the German people's need to exist within an effective and meaningful stratum of society. What ultimately became a self-reinforcing loop of propaganda dispersion and positive social response created an atmosphere that allowed for the unchecked expansion of anti-Jewish plans. There was little to no outside counterpropaganda in play; the Allies either did not know about, did not believe in, and/or did not prioritize the Holocaust and anti-Jewish sentiments compared to the overall war effort in Europe's focus. Modern communication theory shows why the German people and the Nazi military accepted the propaganda outright or did little to argue against it which led to its nearly universal adoption in Germany and precipitated the Holocaust and other atrocities.

Keywords

Propaganda, Agenda-Setting, Social Judgement, Cultivation, Communication Theory

The Atmosphere of Effective Propaganda Generation: Germany and Antisemitism

After assuming power, Adolf Hitler created the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in order to direct public opinion in an effort to shape civic behavior in a pro-party direction. On its face, this seems like a simple and overt use of propaganda, one that should be obvious in terms of its implementation and goals. Why, then, was it so successful in galvanizing the German public and instilling an undercurrent of antisemitic sentiment to the point that genocide became a foregone conclusion? The answer lies in the complexity of German socio-economic failure alongside a ripeness for susceptibility to situational and external influences; in other words, Hitler employed propaganda at the right place and at the right time for maximal effect in swaying minds and subtly influencing the German public into radical action, actions that they themselves would have decried just years or even months before. German culture was inextricably linked to propaganda; cultural symbolism became hate symbolism in a kind of "Iron Romanticism" (Dennis, 2002).

To illustrate the point of insidious influence over time as a tool of maximum effect (over a quick and decisive attempt at social change), the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda was created and given over to the control of Joseph Goebbels in 1933, approximately eight years before the Holocaust would begin in earnest. Anti-Jewish sentiment had been present in Europe since the Middle Ages, leading to pogroms, expulsions, economic ostracization, extra-judicial killings, and other atrocities over the course of centuries; there

existed precedent in Europe. Germany had, within close living memory, fought a catastrophic conflict that nearly killed an entire generation of young German men and led to social and economic disaster in the post-war period. The background was set for social ostracization and scapegoating with a populace wracked with currency devaluation within a deeply devastating recession and separated from the rest of the world.



Figure 1: A display of Der Stürmer (The Stormer or Attacker) in 1935

Propaganda was employed strategically by the Ministry in order to make the public at large amenable to coming changes, both legal and social. A popular strategy was the public display of antisemitic information disguised as a typical newspaper periodical. (See Fig. 1)

It wasn't until 1935 that the Nuremberg Race Laws would be passed in two stages, the Reich Citizenship Law and the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor. Playing on racially derived pseudo-science from the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Reich Citizenship Law barred all non-Germans by "blood" from being recognized as German citizens; this included a special supplementary decree describing what constituted "Jewishness." The Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor banned marriage between Jewish Germans and non-Jewish Germans while also criminalizing sexual contact

between them. *Der Stürmer* and other publications capitalized on these new legal pushes by publishing lurid (and untrue) stories of supposed Jewish depravity (Bytwerk, 2015).

The goal of this campaign was, of course, to inflame public sentiment against Jewish Germans by drawing on historic biases and exceedingly poor scientific rationale in order to pave the way for future more extreme measures. Throughout the early 1940s, the antisemitic propaganda became more explicit and moved from print and poster to the inclusion of film in the arsenal of tactics.



Figures 2 & 3 (L to R): A film poster for Der ewige Jude, "The Eternal Jew" (1941) and a propaganda post insinuating Jewish conspiratorial association with the Allies (1942)

The effect of the escalating propaganda campaign against first Jewish Germans and then Jewish persons in all German occupied territory was ultimately exacerbated by the failing Nazi war effort as the 1940s dragged on to the inevitable conclusion of the war. An increasingly afraid and then apathetic and drained citizenry cared little for the plight of the Jewish citizens under the control of the Reich thus ultimately indirectly increasing the effects of the propaganda in its effort to dehumanize and demonize the European Jewish population at large.

Theoretical Analysis of Nazi Antisemitic Propaganda

At the heart of the Nazi propaganda apparatus lies a desire to persuade through any means necessary; it is persuasion both in imagery and language that provided the backbone to an altering public perception of German Jewish persons.

A driving element of successful wartime propaganda of any stripe is a focus on nationalism and an over representation of patriotism as both moral virtue and ultimate civic obligation. We can see (including in Fig. 3) the association of the European Jewish populations at large with enemy nations, a further expansion on and evolution of the Jewish man or woman as other, codified in law in the above cited legislation and made actively dangerous through Allied association. The German Jew has transformed from un-German to less than human to, finally, outright opponent of Germany in league with armed assailants. The core element of nationalistic propaganda is a reliance on supposed civic duty, for good or ill a kind of flag waiving group thing with service to country as a goal. This is consistent with the Yale Studies' grouping of research into *consistency theory* as a body of theoretical examination that explains an individual's desire to remain internally consistent and to have this consistency reinforced externally or somehow have dissenting information mitigated (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019). Jowett and O'Donnell go on to discuss Leon Festinger's 1957 research describing cognitive dissonance (felt as psychological discomfort) being created when an individual encounters stimuli at odds with held beliefs; this discomfort must be lessened or done away with entirely by rationalizing, avoidance, and/or seeking new support (2019).

In other words, a German populace facing historical and recent pressures and a culturally entrenched element of antisemitism may have had moral pangs when encountering the propaganda machine of the Reich, but ultimately sought solace and psychological relief (and consistency) from a wider national focus equally enforced by a civilian population dedicated to a consistent nationalism spurred on by a unifying war effort. Conflict makes it difficult to dissent, especially when others have already fallen in line and have become part of the machine barreling ever forward.

The tendency to fall in line and accept the propaganda's messages was further influenced by the scapegoating of the German Jews as cause of broader German economic and social woes. *Social judgement theory* examines the degree of ego involvement relating to a specific phenomenon, chronicling a person's acceptance or rejection of (or noncommitment to) a specific message as it relates to their positioning (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019). Gradual ascensions to acceptance make a message more likely to be digested by an individual and ultimately incorporated into their world view via assimilation. The closer a person can identify themselves with a message, the more likely it is to be an acceptable and, in the case of the German public in the mid 20th century, actionable. The association of the average German citizen with socioeconomic collapse and, in turn, the association of that collapse with the German Jewish population created a kind of social judgement transitive equation that, by degrees, was presented and was eventually adopted by the average German viewpoint on both the past and the present, a present that precluded questions due to the urgency created by global conflict (as we discussed above).

Operating as a social overlay and unifying theory to all the above analysis describing the eventual adoption of abhorrent ideas by an otherwise benign population is the *theory of exposure learning*, a theory stating that the more people are exposed to an idea, the more likely they are to accept that idea (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019). This is an enduring truism of propaganda and propaganda studies as a discipline of communication, and it is no less true (and effective) when applied to the study of Nazi propaganda in the mid 20th century.

It seems somewhat trite to stop the explanation without a matchingly in depth analysis comparable to the above theoretical analyses, but the fact stands that the German propaganda machine was relentless in its application, evolution, and escalation of antisemitic propaganda. A key point of Goebbels' strategy was repetition through repeated exposure, and exposure along varying axis (film, print, visual, etc.). This served the purpose of reinforcing the cancerous growth of antisemitism on the German state as a whole. Like throwing gasoline onto a fire, the repetitive nature of exposure only made the strategies of the Reich's propaganda designs more effective and lasting (and deadly). The spread of the propaganda would ultimately breach German borders and pit an "innocent Germany" against an "international Jewry" of supposed interconnected and globalized anti-German sentiment (Herf, 2005).

Nazi propaganda did not only focus on bring the outside in, on linking the demonization of European Jews to the broader world of "enemies" in the Allied Powers. Propaganda of the Reich reached out to influence other countries, especially those that had not chosen a side in the conflict. The Nazi government attempted, for example, to influence Spanish neutrality (Penalba-Sotorrio, 2018) in an effort to further externalize the internalized propaganda of the German nation and the German people. This is the final culmination of all described above, the conquering of the German hearts and minds (or at least their placid acceptance) before spreading German influence across borders through soft power while militarily projecting hard power where those ideas may not take root. There was ultimately a conflation of defending one's nation from the Allies from without while simultaneously defending it from within from European Jews (Bytwerk, 2006), the synthesis of the two aspects of the inward and outward facing black propagandas.

Lessons and Implications

There are considerable social implications bound up in this analysis that are as unsettling as they are obvious. Gregory Stanton, founder of the international organization Genocide Watch, lists ten stages of genocide with only one stage including any actual killing. This is an excellent illustration of the creeping nature of the effects of propaganda as seven of the ten stages involve extensive usages of propaganda. And so it was in Nazi Germany. No matter the obvious nature of the lessons on display, they can be repeated. This is perhaps the most important lesson to take away from this overall analysis. Us/them delineations of populations must be combated with unifying language, hate speech must be outlawed, discrimination should involve legal prohibitions against it, and a culture that is intolerant of racism must be encouraged.

All members of a given public are susceptible to repeated exposure to messages, both good and bad, progressive and regressive. All persons are susceptible to the desire for an internal consistency and an association with those messages that they find proximally close to their own social positioning. The Nazi's propaganda was successful in turning everyday people into mass murderers, and modern Western culture has seen a resurgence of Nazism, pro-governmental authority fascism, and white supremacist ideals and world views; the viewpoints are in place in many places and throughout many Western societies. The key then is to foster equity instead of blind patriotism, to promote unity over meaningless and pseudo-scientific classification of "the other." Recognizing clever propaganda or resisting repeated exposure to it is difficult. It is essential to promote a skeptical and analytical world view, one that ensures a population questions messaging rather than simply accepts it or submits to an echo chamber of idea reinforcement. Most of all, we must teach to be on guard for hate speech and discrimination; this is perhaps the most essential lesson to be taken away from history. Once genocide begins in earnest, only sudden and rapid overwhelming armed intervention can prevent its continuing and escalation. Propaganda can slowly and insidiously lead to such an end, so each bit of discriminatory propaganda must be criticized and socially rejected.

Analyzing this propaganda from a theory perspective, the most obvious tactic of the Nazi government was to use agenda-setting, specifically in guiding the public's perception of importance of certain topics (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002) which is, in this case, the importance of Jewish influence on the German public as well as on the Allied Powers by driving their so-called anti-German aggression.

Coupled with this agenda-setting and ongoing maintenance of the public conversation is the German government's use of what would become known as social judgement theory, particularly regarding the process of the German acceptance of propagated attitudes in the above-described black propaganda. Social judgement theory, by description of Sherif and Sherif, says that ideas are placed on an attitude scale after it is weighed by an individual and compared to the individual's currently existing point of view (Griffin, 2012) and is ultimately accepted or rejected. In this case of propaganda analysis, the anchor belief (previously or currently existing point of view) was already influenced by years of slowly developed anti-Jewish propaganda modified and maximized by the economic and social troubles of early to mid-twentieth century Germany and there was little contrasting effect also due to this propaganda and the existing negatively influencing factors. The German military and public, therefore, assimilated the anti-Jewish propaganda fully enough to enable the Holocaust with little (almost nonexistent) internal pushback or counterargument.

Cultivation theory (though primarily concerned with television media exposure) argues that people being regularly exposed to media for long periods of the time are much more likely to perceive the world as the media propaganda presents it; this in turn affects their beliefs and actions (Nabi & Riddle, 2008). As described above, the German people were exposed over time, for a long time creating a kind of internal community centered around and dependent on this propaganda to make sense of a world in conflict, a dependency that transcended social class and divisiveness and formed a unified society against the other (Welch, 2004). It is important to note that all available media was used to promote the propaganda; print and public speeches were particularly utilized though art, film, and radio were also used with film being nearly completely dedicated to pro-German or anti-Jewish propaganda. The effects of this multi-modal blitz were obvious and are well known to historians: Spanish neutrality and embracing of fascism, the Holocaust, German aggression toward non-Germans, etc. The above evaluation focuses on these. All told, these propaganda techniques, unfortunately, were extremely effective. The unifying key to the use of communication strategies embedded within the propaganda machine of the Third Reich explains its success and contextualizes its pervasive nuance in the context of modern communication studies.

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