

Controlling Information with Propaganda: Indoctrinating the Youth in Nazi Germany

Abstract: Propaganda was a powerful tool used by Nazi Germany to indoctrinate and control its citizenry prior to and during WWII. This paper examines how Nazi propaganda was effectively used, and the results it achieved, especially in regards to the German youth. It reveals how the harsh terms dictated by the Treaty of Versailles created an impoverished and disgruntled German nation vulnerable to the ideologies promoted by the mass propaganda. This paper concludes that Adolf Hitler's rise to power, as well as the commitment and loyalty shown to him from the German citizens, is a direct result of his effective use of propaganda.

About the Author: Danielle Appleby is a Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) candidate at Dalhousie University's School of Information Studies. She graduated from the University of Victoria in 2012 with a Bachelors of Arts degree in Greek and Roman studies. Danielle wrote this paper during her first term as a MLIS student for her class "Information in Society." Email address: kda@dal.ca

In 1933, Adolf Hitler, the leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), also known as the Nazi Party, was named Chancellor of Germany, the equivalent of the Canadian Prime Minister. The NSDAP, although forming a minority government, soon became a dictatorship under Hitler's rule (Bouhler, 1939). The party's impressive rise to power was essentially due to its effective use of propaganda. With Hitler at the helm, the NSDAP used propaganda to express its desire to re-educate the German people in the way of "true" German values. These values were namely racial purity, national supremacy, and the ability to consider oneself not as an individual but rather as a member of a national community. The NSDAP promoted the ideas of peace, freedom, and prosperity for all Germans. This was a highly appealing proposal for a nation which still felt oppressed, burdened, and resentful about the outcome and aftermath of World War I (WWI). By appealing to the nation, and establishing what he considered to be true German values, Hitler endeavored to create an obedient, unified, and prosperous nation fully devoted to his ideologies. Hitler's ideal world included the creation of a superior master race: the Aryan race. Those who were excluded from the master race for being deemed inferior and lacking in physical and mental purity included such people as the mentally and physically disabled, homosexuals, Jews, Slavs, and non-whites ("Nazi state," 2010; "How did," 2010).

Hitler took dictatorial actions to create his ideal world. He banned all books, films, or paintings that did not support the ideology of Aryan superiority, as well as anything produced by Jewish artists and scientists regardless of the content ("Nazi state," 2010). To achieve his ultimate goal of a national community of pure Aryan Germans who conformed unquestionably and completely to his ideologies, Hitler recognized that he had to appeal to the German youth. Although recognizing that he also needed support from the men and the women of Germany he was aware that it was the influential youth who would grow up and develop under his regime and populate the new Germany of his perceived ideal world. Hitler believed that the indoctrination and the assimilation of the German youth would ensure the continuation of his ideologies. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the distribution of information in German society was influenced by the use of propaganda during Hitler's regime to indoctrinate the German population, particularly the German youth, with his ideologies. This paper will discuss the use of propaganda, how the Treaty of Versailles created a nation that was susceptible to propaganda, and how the educational school system, including teachers, textbooks, and various youth organizations, was censored and utilized in the promotion and delivery of mass propaganda in Nazi Germany.

Propaganda is a multifaceted weapon. As propaganda was invented to promote the advancement of a cause, or conversely has the ability to discredit an opposing cause, the original facts are inherently subject to potential manipulation (Nordquist, n.d.). Appearing in such formats as books, films, posters, flyers, and even cartoons, propaganda can be adapted to suit a variety of audiences. Joseph Goebbels was a German National Socialist

propagandist who Hitler, once he became Chancellor in 1933, appointed as the Minister of Propaganda (“Goebbels,” 2008). Goebbels was exceptionally skilled in the creation and delivery of effective propaganda. In 1928, he spoke to fellow party members in Berlin at a series of training talks, discussing the necessity of versatility and flexibility for effective propaganda:

Propaganda is always flexible. It says different things here than it does there...I talk differently on the streetcar with the conductor than I do with a businessman. If I did not, the businessman would think I was crazy and the streetcar conductor would not understand me. (Goebbels, 1934, para. 21)

Goebbels further stated that propaganda is “winning people over to something that [you] have recognized as right,” and that “it is the forerunner to state control” (Goebbels, 1934, para. 20). Propaganda is a necessity for those wishing to convince a population to accept their leadership and conform to their ideologies. During the Nazi regime, “its task was to spread the knowledge of National Socialism to the people” (Goebbels, 1934, para. 27). This statement demonstrates how propaganda was used as a means to an end, and not as an end in itself.

The use of propaganda in Germany did not originate with Hitler, Goebbels, or the NSDAP. Propaganda and political satire cartoons had existed many years before the NSDAP came into power (Coupe, 1998). German propaganda and political satires began in the mid-nineteenth century. At its inception, a variety of competing newspapers and organizations published works of propaganda and satires with contrasting political views and opinions; however, when Hitler became Chancellor, the number of these businesses was decreased and the content of material printed was severely suppressed. It was one of Hitler’s predetermined goals that once he rose to power he would “destroy the ‘so-called’ freedom of the press” (Coupe, 1998, p. 26); therefore, only the publishers who conformed to his vision, and submitted to his will, were permitted to remain operational.

At the time that Hitler commenced his plans and ambitions for the German state, the population of Germany was in a state of unrest, and intensely resentful of the other world nations due to the humiliation and requirements forced on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. In November of 1918, Germany was defeated and WWI was officially ended. The following year, the Treaty of Versailles was signed. In the Treaty of Versailles, many demands were made on Germany by the other nations involved. Germany’s requirements included: reducing the size of its nation; diminishing its military forces; paying the other nations for the cost of the war; not having an army exceeding 100,000 men; and not having an air force, tanks, or submarines (“Treaty,” 2010). The final insult to Germany’s pride was Article 231 of the Treaty, known as the War Guilt Clause. This clause forced Germany to admit that WWI was entirely its fault. The German nation was not permitted to discuss the demands of the

treaty; the only options available to it were to accept the Treaty of Versailles or restart the war. Due to intense hatred and resentment of the Treaty, when Hitler began promising in the 1920s and 1930s that he would “tear up the hated Treaty of Versailles” (“Treaty,” 2010, para. 11) the German people were eager to support him.

Goebbels’ propaganda machine magnificently roused support for Hitler. The success of Hitler’s demands for European territories in the 1930s is largely due to Goebbels’ portrayal of “Germany as an aggrieved ‘have-not’ nation whose leader, a man of peace and vision, sought nothing more than what belonged by right to his people” (“Goebbels,” 2000, para. 4). Goebbels led the NSDAP to produce a vast volume of propaganda primarily directed towards the German youth (Welch, 2004). Hitler believed that to fulfill the ideologies he desired it would be necessary to have the unquestioning obedience and loyalty of the German youth. Hitler recognized that the youth were the citizens of the future and it was the youth who would solidify and pass on the ideas he had for the nation. Hitler’s speech on November sixth, 1933, expresses the importance he placed on the indoctrination of the German youth:

When an opponent says, “I will not come over to your side,” I calmly say, “Your child belongs to us already ... you will pass on. Your descendants, however, now stand in the new camp. In a short time they will know nothing else but this new community. (as cited in Welch, 2004, p. 233)

Hitler’s indoctrination of the German youth was exceedingly swift and effective. An article published only a few months after Hitler became Chancellor details the military games played by children as young as five years old. The children would gather various materials and build a Nazi Party headquarter, completing it with a picture of Adolf Hitler inside. The children would also dress up as the *sturmbteilung* (SA), the Nazi paramilitary faction, and act out the storming of the Karl-Liebknecht-Haus, the Communist Party’s headquarters, as well as acting out the capturing of communists (“Das neue spiel,” 1933). Hitler’s indoctrination of the German youth was so successful that the youth believed that they were fighting for the survival of their nation and that Hitler was the saviour of Germany (Heck, 1985).

The focus of Hitler’s propaganda, both for German youth and the rest of the German citizens, was to increase the idea of national awareness and instill in the population the sense of national community. Propaganda articles with “need to know” information were published for schools and parents to inform them about the goals of the NSDAP for the educational school system. Included in these articles was information about how parents and teachers could contribute to their children’s and their students’ education. The articles, reiterating Hitler’s declarations, insisted that “the German youth [were the] foundation of the rebuilding of the German people and the German fatherland” (“Die erziehungsgrundsätze,” 1936, para. 1). German parents were instructed on how they were to aid in developing their children into

capable and loyal soldiers of Germany. They were encouraged to teach the German youth about the value of a simplistic and clean lifestyle. Furthermore, parents and teachers were expected to teach their children to focus on perfecting their physique through activities such as swimming, hiking, and military exercises, and “not to waste their spare time by dubious or even harmful activities such as card playing, drinking alcohol, and bad music” (“Die erziehungsgrundsätze,” 1936, para. 4).

The highly influential German youth were encouraged to consider themselves not as individuals, but as a part of the German state. They learned to value their allegiance to the national community more than their loyalty to their families (Welch, 2004; Heck, 1985). As a result the youth, in a sense, became spies for the state. They would report to officials if they noticed their friends, neighbours, or even parents acting or speaking in opposition to Hitler’s ideologies, or behaving treasonously towards the Nazi regime.

The censorship and control of all propaganda and public information which the German youth received allowed the state to bombard the youth with posters displaying such slogans as: “Youth Serves the Führer. All ten-year-olds to join the [Hitler Youth]”; and “German students – fight for Führer and Volk” (as cited in Welch, 2004, p. 233). Propaganda was indiscriminately directed at men and women, girls, and boys alike. A large portion of Hitler’s plans for how he would utilize propaganda was to convince German boys that there was no greater joy in life than to work, or fight as a soldier for their nation; however, the indoctrination of German girls was also part of Hitler’s plans. Posters were aimed at the League of German Maidens, the female equivalent of the Hitler Youth, with such slogans as: “You too, belong to the Führer” (as cited in Welch, 2004, p.233). In 1937, the historian Stephen Roberts reflected on and described the success of Hitler’s propaganda to increase the new German youth’s desire to be part of the German national community that Hitler was developing:

The children wanted to join the Hitler [Youth]. To be outside Hitler’s organisation was the worst form of punishment...They do not see in Hitler a statesman with good and bad points; to them he is more than a demigod...It is this utter lack of any objective or critical attitude on the part of youth, even with university students, that made me fear most for the future of Germany. They are nothing but vessels for State propaganda. (Roberts, 1937, p. 208)

Contributing greatly to the success of Hitler’s propaganda was his utilization of the existing information infrastructures of the educational school system to support the creation and distribution of his propaganda: the knowledge he wished to convey to the German youth. Using the educational school system allowed the indoctrination of the German youth to the Nazi ideology to begin at an early age (“Nazi state,” 2010). The educational material, such as textbooks, used by the students and teachers, as well as the curriculum taught at the German

schools, underwent severe change when Hitler rose to power. Textbooks became crucial tools for the distribution of propaganda to the German youth. Initially, only slight revisions were made “such as the insertion of swastika flags and Party slogans” (Pine, 1997, p. 23); however, it was not long before the information contained within the textbooks was thoroughly revised and censored. History textbooks “were rewritten to stress the greatness of Germany and reduce the achievements of other nations” (“How did,” 2010, para. 2), and all the criticisms directed at the German state were replaced with words of praise (“How did,” 2010). A predominant topic in the newly published geography textbooks was the suffering and loss of land caused by the Treaty of Versailles. Geography textbooks stated that the land left to Germany after the Treaty of Versailles provided insufficient living space. The textbooks also discussed the subject of the colonies Germany once controlled: how Germany both needed the colonies and had a right to them (Müller, 1943). In math textbooks the examples used for practice questions also were worded in the style of propaganda. Practice questions used examples with “German bombers of Poland” (“How did,” 2010, para. 2). In a standard 1941 math textbook, students were given a list of statistics illustrating how much the German state spent on individuals with various disabilities. The “pupils were to answer questions such as ‘What total cost do one cripple and one feeble-minded person create, if one takes a lifespan of forty-five years for each?’” (Pine, 1997, p. 27). These lessons, overtly discriminating against those people that Hitler and the NSDAP deemed inferior, aimed to further propagate the ideologies of the Nazi regime.

In addition to the revisions and censorship of information published in school textbooks, new classes were added to the schools’ curriculum, such as race studies, a class that taught the German youth the ideology of Aryan superiority and the inferiority of Slavs, Jews, and non-whites. The changes made to the educational school system’s curriculum highlighted the now censored history classes, and, even more so, the changes to physical education and development (“How did,” 2010). In school, boys were taught that a high emphasis on physical education was expected. Boys were encouraged to be workers and soldiers who would fight to protect their nation. Girls were instructed in lessons on subjects such as motherhood, tending the household, and cooking. These lessons emphasized the girls’ role of bearing children and raising them to be exemplary members of the Aryan master race (“How did,” 2010). To further reinforce their role as mothers, the biology textbooks published for girls taught that an important factor for a species’ survival was the production of a large number of children. Girls were instructed that the purpose of their education was to prepare them for motherhood. Motherhood, they were taught, was the way in which they could do their part and contribute to the preservation and growth of their nation (Harm & Wiehle, 1942).

By 1933, the Ministry of Education began to increase the prevalence of physical activities in the educational school system. More emphasis was placed on physical prowess than on knowledge development (Welch, 2004). *Germany Reports* was a publication produced by the

Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), an organization exiled by the NSDAP for opposing Hitler's views. Within its publication, the SPD noted that the decreased value placed on knowledge contributed to the German youths' attraction to Hitler's ideologies: "The new generation has never had much use for education and reading. Now nothing is demanded of them; on the contrary, knowledge is publicly condemned" (as cited in Welch, 2004, p. 233).

Film propaganda produced during the Nazi regime contributed to further promoting the importance of physical development over knowledge development. In 1941, the *Reichsjugendführung* (Reich Youth Leadership) produced the documentary film *Soldaten von Morgen* (*Soldiers of Tomorrow*). The documentary was created for the Hitler Youth and illustrated that an educational school system based on knowledge development, such as the system employed by the English public schools, was a flawed and degenerate educational school system. The lesson of the documentary was that promoting knowledge development more than physical development produced "effete young English schoolboys [who] turn into British soldiers who are easily captured" (Welch, 2004, p. 234-235). The initial scenes of the documentary, showing the flawed British educational school system creating inferior soldiers, were then contrasted by scenes of young, virile Hitler Youth performing various physical outdoor activities, all with military connotations, resulting in the German youth "joining the ranks of the armed forces" (Welch, 2004, p. 235). The content of *Soldiers of Tomorrow* promoted national unity and the value of physical development.

Another important factor that contributed to the effective distribution of propaganda and the censorship of knowledge and information to the German youth involved the school teachers. Universally, teachers have always been a primary means for providing information and aiding in the development of knowledge for youth. During Hitler's reign, teachers became the forerunners of the NSDAP's propaganda (Welch, 2004). Understanding that regulation of the teachers was crucial in order to successfully indoctrinate the German youth and spread his ideologies, Hitler ensured that the teachers' classroom actions were controlled and that their lecture information was highly censored. In order to accomplish this end, Hitler used his influence to gain control of the National Socialist Teachers' League (NSLB), the teachers' professional association formed in 1929 (Welch, 2004). Membership to this association was not mandatory; however, to ensure job security many teachers joined the Nazi-controlled NSLB, and by 1938 ninety-seven percent of teachers had become members ("How did," 2010).

Not only did censorship and the revision of educational material limit the knowledge youth gained while in school, but select groups of youth were denied all access to even this highly edited source of information. In order to protect their children from abuse, Jewish families began removing their children from school in the early 1930s. Later, in 1935, the Nuremberg Law was created which banned Jews from all German state schools, thereby denying them

any possible access to the educational school system and the knowledge it provided (“How did,” 2010).

Outside of the educational school system, the ideologies of Hitler and the message of the propaganda published by the NSDAP were reinforced by the lessons taught to the German youth by various youth organizations. At age five, German boys joined the Little Fellows. At age ten, the boys then progressed into the German Youth and German girls joined the Young Girls. From ages fourteen to eighteen, boys would become members of the Hitler Youth and girls would become members of the League of German Maidens (“In what ways,” 2010). These youth organizations reinforced the importance of obedience. Children were taught that in order to become leaders they must first learn to obey. It was only by “following the Führer absolutely and without unhealthy carping criticism, without selfishness or opposition, [and learning] to obey so that they, having themselves learned to obey, can believe in and trust their own leadership” (“Die erziehungsgrundsätze,” 1936, para. 5) that they would become effective leaders. Parents were instructed not to hinder their children’s involvement in any of the youth organizations since these organizations provided a most noble and pure form of education on leadership. Parents were informed that when their children were at home, they should assist in establishing the obedience of youth to authoritative figures by strengthening their family authority. The parents were assured that this practice would not suppress their children but provide them with a controlled environment to develop their abilities.

Similar to the NSLB, enrollment in the youth organizations was not at first mandatory; however, those who did not enroll were accused of being anti-Nazi and therefore regarded as possible threats to the nation (“In what ways,” 2010). The adult population of Germany mirrored the youth in this aspect. At work, men who failed to portray the appropriate amount of patriotism “might be denounced by fellow workers and/or castigated in the media as unpatriotic ‘slackers’ and ‘saboteurs’ of the national community” (Welch, 2004, p. 226).

During Hitler’s regime, many instruction manuals and handbooks were published for teachers and Hitler Youth leaders. These publications provided the information and materials necessary to instruct the German youth on Nazi ideologies. Published in 1937, *Vom deutschen Volk und seinem Lebensraum (On the German People and its Territory)* covered topics such as human inequality, and genetic and racial hygiene. These topics aimed to stress the importance of racial purity, the inferiority of those who were not German, and the genetic policy “to prevent the passing on of ... diseased genes and to promote healthy blood” (Bennecke, 1937, “Chapter IV,” para. 2). Some of the characteristics and conditions that Hitler’s propaganda described as being a direct result of diseased genes were: feeble-mindedness, mental illness, blindness, deafness, club foot, flat feet, obesity, birthmarks, and vision impairments. The teaching guides published for teachers of heredity and racial science in the natural sciences, for grades four to eight, list the four aspects that the continued

existence and growth of the German nation depended on: the law of selection; the elimination of those with hereditary illness; the promotion of genetically strong lines; and the maintenance of pure blood (Bareth & Vogel, 1937).

German children's participation in the various youth organizations, as well as their attendance in school, continually reinforced the idea of belonging to a national community. The German youth were encouraged to be "unquestioning [loyalty] to the Führer" and "[obedient] to the Nazi state rather than to parents" ("In what ways," 2010, para. 1). They were taught that "only a pure member of the German race" ("Die erziehungsgrundsätze," 1936, para. 3) could have a clear understanding of the German people and German traditions. German youth were taught that a pure German is one who thinks not as an individual but as a member of a national community; therefore, a pure German believes life outside the nation to be miserable. A pure German is one who believes "that it is better if he himself die than that his people and fatherland perish" ("Die erziehungsgrundsätze," 1936, para. 3). This wholehearted devotion to Hitler, his ideologies, and the German state can be attributed to Goebbels' exceptionally successful use of propaganda. He described Hitler as:

The infallible *Führer* and inspired genius who embodied the will of the German nation... The Nazi dictator [was a] 'savior of the fatherland,' an 'instrument of divine will' whose hypnotic oratory, heard nationwide through the unifying medium of radio, transformed Germany 'into one big church embracing all classes and creeds.'" ("Goebbels," 2000, para. 4)

Hitler's rise to power may very well be attributed to his effective utilization of propaganda. After becoming Chancellor, Hitler coordinated his efforts to begin the indoctrination of the German nation with his ideologies. The German nation, disgruntled by the harsh and humiliating terms of the Treaty of Versailles, was more than eager to follow a man promising to destroy the Treaty and lead the nation towards a prosperous future. As Hitler recognized the importance of conforming the youth to his ideologies, youth propaganda included education at school, home, and the various youth organizations. Youth were taught, above all else, to unquestioningly believe in and follow Hitler and his ideologies. The German youth were convinced that Hitler was the saviour of Germany, and if his plans and ambitions should fail, the German nation would be destroyed. The Nazi propaganda was so successful that children were willing to condemn their friends and families for speaking against Hitler and his regime. They were so completely brainwashed that scores of children were convinced that they would personally bring honour to the fatherland; therefore, they eagerly anticipated entering into war, and would gladly die rather than see their country perish. Hitler succeeded in rallying a crippled nation to its feet by establishing control over the distribution of information within the society that was Nazi Germany. He accomplished this feat by employing a highly effective mechanism: propaganda.

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