The Power of Propaganda

Guiding Questions

- How did the Nazis use propaganda to influence individuals' attitudes and actions and to cultivate public support for their idea of a "*people's community*"?

- How do explicit and implicit messages in the media influence people's beliefs, feelings, and actions?

Learning Objectives

- Students will analyze several examples of Nazi propaganda to determine how it communicates powerful messages about who should be included in and who should be excluded from German society.

- Students will recognize that the effects of propaganda are more complex than simple brainwashing, and that Hitler succeeded because many German people shared some of the beliefs that were transmitted through Nazi propaganda.

Overview

In the documentary The Strongmen (*Love, Hate, and Propaganda: Episode 1*), students were introduced to the Nazis' idea of a "*people's community*" (*Nazi Volksgemeinschaft*) shaped according to their racial ideals, and the way the Nazis used laws to define and then separate those who belonged to the "*people's community*" from those who did not.

Students will continue this unit's historical case study by considering the nature of propaganda and analyzing how the Nazis used media to influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of individuals in Germany.

While the Nazis used propaganda as a tool to try to condition the German public to accept, if not actively support, all of their goals (including rearmament and war), you will focus specifically on how they used propaganda to establish "*in*" groups and "*out*" groups in German society and cultivate their ideal "national community."

After carefully analyzing several propaganda images created by the Nazis, you will consider the ways in which this material influenced individuals, and how the effects of propaganda are more complicated than simple brainwashing.

Historical Context

> Propaganda Defined—*information that is intended to persuade an audience to accept a particular idea or cause, often by using biased material or by stirring up emotions.*

Propaganda was one of the most powerful tools the Nazis used to consolidate their power and cultivate an "*Aryan national community*" in the mid-to-late-1930s.

Hitler (Leader of Nazi Germany) and Goebbels (Nazi Minister of Propaganda) did not invent propaganda. The word itself was coined by the Catholic Church to describe its efforts to discredit Protestant teachings in the 1600s. Over the years, almost every nation has used

propaganda to unite its people in wartime. Both sides of World War I used propaganda, for example. But the Nazis were notable for making propaganda a key element of government even before Germany went to war again.

One of Hitler's first acts as chancellor was to establish the *Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda*, demonstrating his belief that controlling information was as important as controlling the military and the economy. He appointed Joseph Goebbels as director. Through the ministry, Goebbels was able to penetrate virtually every form of German media, from newspapers, film, radio, posters, and rallies to museum exhibits and school textbooks, with Nazi propaganda.

Whether or not propaganda was truthful or tasteful was irrelevant to the Nazis. Goebbels wrote in his diary, "*No one can say your propaganda is too rough, too mean; these are not criteria by which it may be characterized. It ought not be decent nor ought it be gentle or soft or humble; it ought to lead to success*." Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* that to achieve its purpose, propaganda must "*be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan. As soon as you sacrifice this slogan and try to be many-sided, the effect will piddle away*."

Some Nazi propaganda used positive images to glorify the government's leaders and its various activities, projecting a glowing vision of the "*people's community*." Nazi propaganda could also be ugly and negative, creating fear and loathing by portraying those the regime considered to be enemies as dangerous and even sub-human. The Nazis' distribution of antisemitic films, newspaper cartoons, and even children's books aroused centuries-old prejudices against Jews and also presented new ideas about the racial impurity of Jews. The newspaper *Der Stürmer* (The Attacker), published by Nazi Party member Julius Streicher, was a key outlet for antisemitic propaganda.

Notes on Propaganda and Stereotypes

- *The poster The Eternal Jew and other images in this lesson portray inaccurate, offensive stereotypes of Jews. We all have the responsibility to acknowledge that these images contain stereotypes and to discuss the material in a thoughtful and respectful manner.*
- Devoting time to an analysis of *The Eternal Jew* provides the opportunity to set an appropriate tone and underscore the dangers of a single story.

The Pervasiveness of Nazi Propaganda: An Important Reminder

We need to understand that propaganda pervaded every aspect of society—radio, the press, feature films and newsreels, theatre, music, art exhibits, books, the school curriculum, sports, and more. Propaganda was not a separate stream of information; it was embedded in all of the existing information streams in German society (i.e., the concept of *Butter Propaganda* as discussed in class … it coats and permeates everything).

It is also important to note that the Nazis created propaganda for a variety of other purposes as well, most notably to encourage adulation (i.e., excessive admiration and praise) of Hitler and, eventually, to encourage support for war.

ADAPTED from *Facing History and Ourselves* <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-holocaust-and-human-behavior/power-propaganda>.