“Propaganda is a truly terrible weapon in the hands of an expert.” —Adolf Hitler, 1924

During the course of two decades, Nazi propagandists skilfully used their “terrible weapon” to win broad voter support in Germany’s young democracy, implement radical programmes under the party’s dictatorship, and justify war and mass murder.

State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda examines how the Nazis sought to manipulate public opinion in order to attain their goals, the end result of which was a war that cost the lives of some 55 million people, including the systematic murder of 6 million Jewish men, women, and children in the Holocaust.

As you explore these posters, consider what propaganda is, what makes people vulnerable to it, and what responsibilities producers and consumers of propaganda bear for its consequences.
PROPAGANDA

is biased information designed to shape public opinion and behaviour.

Its power depends on

- message
- technique
- means of communication
- environment
- audience receptivity

Propaganda

- uses truths, half-truths, or lies
- omits information selectively
- simplifies complex issues or ideas
- plays on emotions
- advertises a cause
- attacks opponents
- targets desired audiences
The National socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP or Nazi Party) emerged from the turmoil that followed Germany’s defeat in the First World War. During the decade after its founding, the Nazi Party and its extreme nationalism, racist, and antisemitic platform attracted relatively few adherents in the country’s young democratic republic. Before 1929, it was a negligible factor in German politics.

Democracy in Germany virtually collapsed when the Great Depression struck in 1929. Disagreements over economic policies rapidly polarized politics between left and right. Millions of Germans found the simple and concrete messages of Nazi propaganda appealing in times of economic hardship and political instability, and they abandoned centrist mainstream parties to support Adolf Hitler. In summer 1932, the Nazi Party won nearly 40 percent of the seats in the German parliament (Reichstag) and became the largest political party in the legislature. While the Nazi Party never succeeded in winning a majority of voters to its cause, its meteoric rise from obscurity to prominence was an unparalleled feat, assisted greatly by its propaganda campaigns.

Above: Nazi Party rally, Weimar, Germany, 1932
U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Alan D. Milstein
PROPAGANDIST AND PUBLIC IMAGE

The Nazi Party’s success in the final years of the German republic was due in significant part to the appeal of its leader, Adolf Hitler, and his political messages. The Austrian-born Hitler joined the party in September 1919 at age 30 and quickly rose through its ranks, becoming its first director of propaganda. His skills as a public speaker increased the party’s profile and attracted new members. Hitler’s fiery speeches denounced the young German republic and blamed Germany’s Jews for the nation’s problems. He fervently condemned the Versailles Peace Treaty of 1919 that had compelled Germany to admit guilt for causing the First World War, surrender territory, and pay massive reparations to the victorious Allied powers. His speeches found a growing audience with the collapse of the economy in 1929 and the resulting widespread hardships.

Adolf Hitler understood the importance of crafting a strong public image. He rehearsed gestures and poses to enhance his presence, and he tailored his dress and speeches to particular audiences. He portrayed himself as a man of the people, an “unknown soldier” who fought for Germany in the First World War and rose to head a political movement due to talent and will alone—outliers that were appealing in Germany’s democratic politics.

Photos by Heinrich Hoffmann, 1927

Austro-Turkish War (November–December 1923), Munich, Bavaria
ELECTION CAMPAIGNS: TARGETING AUDIENCES

To prepare for its electoral campaigns, the Nazi Party conducted grassroots public opinion research to probe the needs, hopes, and fears of blue- and white-collar workers, the middle class, women, farmers, and youth. Nazi propagandists then carefully tailored their messages accordingly and hired professional graphic artists to create eye-catching posters with appealing slogans that were posted in well-trafficked areas.

Nazi propaganda sought support for the party from all Germans regardless of region, class, or religion—except Jews. Nazi ideology defined Jews as a separate, unwelcome, and alien “race” and they became targets for vicious political attacks.
Work and Bread through List 1

During the Great Depression, which left about 7 million Germans without work, the unemployment rate of about 30%, the Nazi Party sought votes for its list of candidates by portraying itself as the only political party capable of creating jobs and putting food on German tables.

Unknown artist, October 1932

Vote List 10
This blow must hit home!

Antisemitism was a central theme of Nazi ideology, which falsely accused “the Jew” for contaminating the “German race”, exploiting the working class, and conspiring to gain world economic and political power. Nazi propagandists played upon common prejudices with crude caricatures of Jewish stereotypes in order to advance the Nazi Party’s antisemitic ideas.

Eva (Philipp Rupprecht), artist, 1928

Mothers
Working Women
We are voting
National Socialists
List 8

Nazi propagandists attempted to win over newly enfranchised women voters by portraying the party as the defender of traditional German womanhood and the family.

Felix Albrecht, artist, 1932
Why Did Many Germans Buy Into Nazi Propaganda?

With the onset of the Great Depression, millions of Germans abandoned their previous political allegiances to vote for the Nazi Party. Bad economic times, coupled with the inability of Germany’s political parties to form a viable coalition government, led to widespread voter dissatisfaction. Some turned to Hitler out of fear of impoverishment and revolutionary communism. Farmers responded to Nazi promises to save their homesteads. Hitler’s extreme nationalism resonated with many audiences, including young Germans who wanted to restore Germany’s lost territories and military might.

The Nazi Party’s antisemitism appealed to right-wing radicals, but not to all of Hitler’s supporters. Regional Nazi groups gauged local public interest in the “Jewish Question” and tailored their propaganda accordingly. The Nazis’ antisemitic platform may not have gained the party huge mass support, but neither did it frighten off large numbers of voters. They were willing to overlook its anti-Jewish ideology and racism.
“Freedom of the press, expression in general, freedom of conscience, personal dignity, intellectual freedom, etc., all the liberal fundamental rights, have now been eliminated, without even a single expression of outrage.”
—Robert Musil, Austrian writer, Berlin, March 1933

Within months of Hitler becoming chancellor, the Nazi regime destroyed the country’s free press. It shut down hundreds of opposition newspapers, forcibly transferred Jewish-owned publishing houses to non-Jews, and secretly took over established periodicals. Daily directives from the government’s new Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda dictated what could or what could not be published under punishment of reprimand, loss of position, or imprisonment. The propaganda ministry spread the Nazis’ ideology through radio, film, newsreels, theatre, and music by controlling their production.
THE ‘NATIONAL COMMUNITY’: PROPAGANDA & PERSECUTION

A cornerstone of Nazi propaganda was the ideal of the “national community” (Volksgemeinschaft), an organic union of all “Aryan” Germans. Nazi propagandists continually stressed that the new Germany would have no class, religious, or regional differences, and the political strife and dissension that characterized the Weimar parliamentary democracy would end. In theory, neither birth nor economic status would be obstacles to social, military, or political advancement.

The vision of the “national community” enjoyed genuine mass appeal, but it masked persecution. The regime made it increasingly clear that not all Germans would be permitted to participate in the new community. The Nazis denied admittance to some on the grounds of “race”, which included Jews, African Germans, and Roma (Gypsies), or because of undesirable “biological” traits such as physical or mental disabilities. Others were excluded because of their politics or their behaviour, such as male homosexuals, social non-conformists, or individuals deemed to be “work-shy”. An “Aryan” German could change his or her politics or behaviour and gain entry, but those denied because of “race” or biology were categorically and unequivocally excluded.

Nazi propagandists contributed to the success of the regime’s policies of exclusion by publicly identifying the unwanted groups, justifying their pariah status, and inciting active hatred or, at a minimum, cultivating indifference toward those who did not belong. Many Germans, swayed by the “positive” allure of unity, overlooked the glaring inequalities and abuses in Nazi Germany, which became known as the Third Reich.
From the 1920s onward, the Nazi Party targeted German youth and educators as especially important audiences for its propaganda messages. Its organizations for youth, university students, and teachers emphasized that the party was a dynamic, disciplined, forward-looking, and hopeful movement. By January 1933 the Nazi Party had recruited tens of thousands of students along with thousands of young teachers.

Once in power, the Nazis passed laws that purged Jews and individuals deemed politically unreliable from the civil service, which included the public school and university teachers. Independent youth organizations were prohibited or dissolved in the 1930s, and membership in the Hitler Youth was made mandatory for all “Aryan” Germans between the ages of 10 and 18 in 1939.

The goal of education in the Third Reich was not to encourage independent thinking but to inculcate students with Nazi ideology. Classroom and Hitler Youth instruction aimed to produce obedient, self-sacrificing Germans who would be willing to die for Adolf Hitler and the Fatherland.
Why we fight—
for our children’s bread

This poster conceals the Nazi’s aggressive foreign policy and war behind an emotional assertion that the German regime justly stands to protect and defend the survival of the nation’s future.

Nazi Party Central Propaganda Directorate, Propaganda der Woche (Slogan of the Week), March 11, 1940

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection

Just as propaganda served a critical role in shaping the Nazis’ domestic plans for a new Germany, it became an integral weapon in Hitler’s expansionist military strategy. Persuading Germans less than a generation away from the fighting of the First World War to take up arms again meant disguising military aggression as necessary. Nazi propagandists continually emphasized that the nation’s enemies had instigated the war, victimized Germany, and were planning to enslave or destroy the German people. They also prepared Germans to accept increased hardships at home and to shut their eyes to brutalities against the peoples of occupied territories. For those Germans who expressed doubt with these arguments, the penalties for dissidence, defiance, and military desertion were severe.
ANTI-JEWISH PROPAGANDA AND NAZI POLICY AND LAW

From 1933 to 1939, Nazi Germany officially pursued openly anti-Jewish policies that evolved from segregation to forced emigration. In support of these goals, Nazi propagandists played on existing negative stereotypes and denounced Jews as an “alien”, “parasitic” presence responsible for Germany’s cultural, political, and economic “degeneration”. To Nazi minds, “the Jews” represented the polar opposite of the culturally creative “Aryan” Germans, and only the removal of Jews would permit the Third Reich to thrive.

While some Germans shunned this propaganda and disapproved of the increasing anti-Jewish violence, the majority of Germans passively accepted the discrimination against the nation’s Jews.
He is to blame for the war!

The Nazi sought to provoke hatred of Germany’s Jews by transforming the popular perception of them from ordinary neighbor into internal enemy guilty of war-waging and betraying Germany from within.

Münch (Ilse Schwengler), artist, 1943
Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

NAZI PROPAGANDA & THE GENOCIDE OF THE JEWISH

As the German army gained territory during the war, millions of Jews were brought under German control. Nazi anti-Jewish policy shifted radically from expulsion to mass murder. The regime’s Ministry of Propaganda facilitated this evolution by promoting the image of a mythic “Jewish enemy” that aimed at world domination and the enslavement of the non-Jewish population. Echoing Hitler, Nazi propagandists blamed the Jews for starting the war and demanded drastic action to save Germany and civilization from annihilation. While the Nazi regime did not incite Germans to murder their Jewish neighbours, it encouraged the German people to not interfere while the state carried out measures to “protect” the nation from “the Jewish enemy”.

Nazi propagandists did not dictate anti-Jewish policy, but they helped to create the climate of indifference, hate, and fear that made possible the systematic, state-sanctioned mass murder of six million European Jews during the Holocaust.
THE LEGACY OF NAZI PROPAGANDA AND THE 21ST CENTURY

In the 20th century the Nazis showed the world how dangerous propaganda could be in the hands of experts. The Holocaust and the other evils perpetrated by the Nazis altered public perceptions of propaganda by demonstrating the dangers of ruthless state control and manipulation of information, the elimination of free speech, and the demonization of populations deemed to be threats to the “nation”.

Hitler’s propagandists used sophisticated mass communications strategies and the most current technology available to wage deceptive political campaigns in a democracy and to advance their radical goals.

In the 21st century, the information landscape is far different from that of the 1930s and ‘40s. The Internet allows for instant and global mass communications, and today more than 2 billion people get their news and share their thoughts online. While the World Wide Web has become the greatest marketplace of ideas in human history, it is also one of the primary transmitters of propaganda. The growth of the Web and new technologies has created serious challenges, generating debate about how to counter the spread of dangerous propaganda and incitements to hatred without endangering civil liberties.

When is propaganda most dangerous?
What makes you vulnerable to it?
How can you guard against propaganda?

Explore more—
www.ushmm.org/propaganda
In October 1945, an International Military Tribunal established by the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union indicted 24 German officials as major Nazi war criminals; 21 men stood trial in Nuremberg. Two defendants faced prosecution for their propaganda activities: Julius Streicher, editor of the antisemitic newspaper Der Stürmer, and Hans Fritzsche, chief of the Broadcasting Division of the Propaganda Ministry. Both were charged with “crimes against humanity” for inciting the hatred that aided the persecution and murder of Europe’s Jews. Their cases marked the first international judicial action against propagandists for provoking murderous crimes.

The Tribunal ruled that Streicher’s articles in Der Stürmer calling for the “annihilation of the Jewish race”—written when he knew of the mass killings of Europe’s Jews—constituted a direct and criminal incitement to murder. He was found guilty and hanged. The Tribunal found no evidence that Fritzsche’s own antisemitic broadcasts called for the annihilation of the Jews and thus did not constitute a “crime against humanity”. He was found not guilty.

Above: The courtroom of the Palace of Justice, Nuremberg, Germany, circa 1945

Source: NBC News
This poster set was based on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s exhibition State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda, and produced in partnership with the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme in all United Nations official languages.

A living memorial to the Holocaust, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum inspires citizens and leaders worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity. By studying the choices made by individuals and institutions during the Holocaust, professionals from the fields of law enforcement, the judiciary, and the military, as well as diplomacy, medicine, education, and religion, gain fresh insight into their own responsibilities today. In addition to its leadership training programmes, the Museum sponsors onsite and traveling exhibitions, educational outreach, and Holocaust commemorations, including America’s annual observance of the Days of Remembrance in the United States Capitol. Learn more at ushmm.org or follow the Museum on social media at ushmm.org/connect.

The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme was established by General Assembly Resolution 60/7, 2005, to encourage civil society to engage in Holocaust remembrance and education, in order to help prevent future acts of genocide. Its multifaceted programme includes online and print educational resources, seminars, exhibitions, a film series, and the annual worldwide observance of the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, held on 27 January. The Programme provides support to the global network of 63 United Nations Information Centres, enabling them to organize meaningful commemorative activities. Learn more at un.org/holocaustremembrance/ and follow the Programme on facebook.com/UNHOP/.