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# The Effect of Nazi Propaganda on Ordinary Germans

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Germany during the Nazi regime under Adolf Hitler contained many incredibly unique aspects, which lend to the author's desire to gain a better understanding of the actions of both the regime and ordinary Germans in the 1930s and 1940s. One of these aspects was the implementation of Hitler's racial ideology through propaganda, resulting in a number of different programs, including a hotly protested euthanasia program, sterilization programs, and, most famously, the Holocaust. Hitler highly valued propaganda as a means to reach the masses, and he did so with aplomb, founding the Reich's Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in 1933, and placing Joseph Goebbels in charge of the Ministry.<sup>1</sup> Due to the extreme emphasis placed on propaganda by Hitler and Goebbels, the Nazi regime presented masterful doctrine that permeated the psyche of the German people. Nazi proselytization, including blaming the Jews for Germany's defeat in World War I, assisted in convincing the German population that the extermination of specific groups was the correct course of action to ensure the preservation of the German race.

Hitler served as a corporal in the German army during the First World War, and, in doing so, saw firsthand the horrors of trench warfare. World War I was a formative experience for Hitler and many of the Nazi Party leadership, as most fought in the war.<sup>2</sup> Like most German soldiers and citizens, Hitler was dismayed about the manner in which the war ended. The Treaty of Versailles named Germany as the sole aggressor in the "war-guilt" clause, Paragraph 231, forcing Germany to give up territory and pay an exorbitant amount in reparations.<sup>3</sup> The Nazi Party had "revolutionary" aims, and sought to create a "national" or "people's community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*), an ideal that the Nazis disseminated to all Germans in order to accomplish their goals. Because of this, the Nazi regime's propaganda aims were extraordinarily ambitious.<sup>4</sup> Part of the development of the new German *Volk* was finding a scapegoat for the Treaty of Versailles and the economic problems that surfaced during the Weimar Republic, including out of control inflation and mass unemployment. In Hitler's eyes, a number of culprits contributed to Germany's problems, but at the top of the list were the Jews. Hitler

believed strongly that Germany suffered from a “stab-in-the-back” inflicted from within Germany by Jewish traitors and their left-wing collaborators, paying no regard to the high number of Jews who served honorably with the German army during the First World War.<sup>5</sup> The Nazis levied hate-filled charges against the Jews, blaming them for the devastation of the First World War, the devastating armistice in 1918, the Treaty of Versailles, the 1923 inflation, Marxism, and world communism as a whole.<sup>6</sup> This may seem like a great deal to place on the shoulders of one group, but Hitler did so successfully, and helped to propagate the “stab-in-the-back” myth to the German public through his propaganda program.

Hitler highly valued propaganda and the effects it could have on a population. He served as the propaganda official in the German Workers’ Party prior to the development and founding of the National Socialist Party, and regarded it as the most important department.<sup>7</sup> As well as being a very charismatic leader in his own right, Hitler knew that propaganda was the best way to sway the masses to support his views, and was cunning in his dissemination of propaganda. Hitler was also an avid learner, believing that the best propaganda of the First World War came from the English and Americans, who dehumanized the Germans by portraying them as barbarians and Huns. In his memoir, *Mein Kampf*, Hitler consistently criticized intellectuals, and showed that he felt propaganda was effective because the masses were of limited intelligence as a whole, stating, “All propaganda must be popular and its intellectual level must be adjusted to the most limited intelligence among those it is addressed to.”<sup>8</sup> In his aim to create a feeling of a “national community,” Hitler also knew that he had to concentrate on those who were already “national-minded” to begin with, and tailor his propaganda from that point.<sup>9</sup> This knowledge led to anti-Semitic propaganda that focused on strengthening the national community by singling out and ostracizing those he deemed “undesirable.”

Anti-Semitism was already widespread throughout Europe before the rise of Nazism, due, in part, to extreme religious views in Europe throughout the Middle Ages. Though extreme anti-Semitism waxed and waned, the European consciousness had the sentiment ingrained into their psyche. In Rothenburg ob der Tauber, a town that has a literal treasure trove of medieval architecture and a long and proud history, the citizens still harbored strong anti-Semitic sentiment. In the Middle Ages, Rothenburg, like most of Europe, victimized Jews through repeated persecution and pogroms, resulting in the complete expulsion of its Jewish

community in 1520. Rothenburg also barred Jews from returning until after German unification in 1871, when Jews received full citizenship.<sup>10</sup> The citizens and leaders of Rothenburg were proud of this achievement, and assisted in the transformation of the town from a normal German town to an ideal Nazi community. Anti-Semitic propaganda was widespread in Rothenburg, as it was a popular tourist destination for the Nazi *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through Joy) workers' program designed to garner support for the Nazi party from laborers by providing benefits like paid vacations to various tourist spots in Europe.<sup>11</sup> On the gates of the town, plaques emblazoned with anti-Semitic slogans reasserted the strong local history of a German community's struggle against Jewish intrigues, and tourists could buy these images on postcards.<sup>12</sup> Though not directed by the Reich's Ministry of Propaganda, this was still an effective form of propaganda. These postcards, though seen as tourist fare, undoubtedly carried anti-Semitic messages, however subtle, to many of the tourists' family and friends both in Germany and abroad. Because of the extreme anti-Semitism present in Rothenburg, by October 24, 1938, all of Rothenburg's Jews relocated elsewhere, due to a night of supposedly spontaneous mob vandalism and violence. The town's leaders framed the expulsion of the Jews in historical terms, hearkening back to their medieval roots.<sup>13</sup> Rothenburg's history provided an ideal framework for Hitler to build on in creating an ideal Nazi community; one that the Nazis attempted to imitate to supplement propaganda that called for Germans to come together as one large idyllic German community, stressing the glory of Germany and the "master race."

The idealism of Rothenburg's manufactured Nazi community reflected Nazi propaganda, stressing the transcendence of social and class divisiveness through a new ethnic unity based on "true" German values.<sup>14</sup> The Nazis recognized that propaganda had to reinforce values and prejudices that already existed within the German community. Manufacturing a new value system created friction, and undermined the Nazi regime's efforts in creating a perfect *Volksgemeinschaft* (peoples' community).<sup>15</sup> By playing on preexisting values and prejudices, there was a better chance of achieving a consensus in thought because the people already held those thoughts, though not to the extreme that Nazism required. Because the Nazis attempted to reflect the roots and antecedents of *völkisch* thought, they focused on four major themes. First, was to appeal to national unity based on the principle of "community before the individual." This

was important to further the agenda of a sense of social responsibility to every German rather than focusing on one's own needs. Second, was the need for racial purity. Jews, as well as other ethnic groups, "tainted" the purity of the German race, and thus were a detriment to German society in the eyes of the Nazis. By stressing racial purity, German citizens would grow in their national identity, and support the ideal of the "national community." Third, was a hatred of enemies, which increasingly centered on Jews and Bolsheviks. The Nazis felt that Jews, in particular, were a conniving race who would stop at nothing to achieve world domination, and would crush any in their path. This idea also tied into the "stab-in-the-back" myth surrounding the Treaty of Versailles. If Jews and Bolsheviks were the cause of Germany's demise during World War I, there was no stopping them from completely destroying German society. Finally, Nazi propaganda should hinge on charismatic leadership, or *Führerprinzip*. Hitler recognized the value of charisma in leading a people, and chose charismatic individuals to lead in the different *Gaus*, or regions, in Germany. Leaders with excellent public speaking skills could enthrall and excite a crowd, which in turn had the ability to enhance the importance of community. Overall, the central goal of Nazi propaganda was to restructure German society so the prevailing class, religious, and sectional loyalties would be replaced by a new and heightened national awareness, creating the ideal national community.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the focus on anti-Semitic propaganda played an important role in creating this new national awareness, as the number of voters who were not anti-Semitic was not so large as to deny the Nazis their required level of national support.<sup>18</sup>

The virulent anti-Semitism that seemed to pervade the national consciousness did not really build steam until after the Nazi Party successfully gained a wide voter base. Though anti-Semitism and elimination of the Jews was never really a primary goal of Hitler or the Nazi Party, the racial ideology of the Nazi regime has come to the forefront due to the resulting Holocaust. There has been much debate on the responses of German citizens as well as the actions of the Germans concerning the killing of approximately six million Jews, mostly in speculation of how a civilized nation could have overlooked killing on such a massive scale. In order to understand how the Nazi regime was able to justify various pogroms and violence towards the Jews, it is important to understand the history of anti-Semitism in Europe. As mentioned in the case of Rothenburg, anti-Semitism was very prevalent in all areas of Europe, as has been confirmed by

many reputable historians on the subject.<sup>19</sup> When one considers the long reach of the Catholic Church throughout Europe's history, this should come as no surprise. Alfons Heck, in his book *A Child of Hitler: Germany in the Days When God Wore a Swastika*, states, "All Catholic children knew that the Jews had killed Christ."<sup>20</sup> This has long been a key belief in Catholicism, and Martin Luther carried this belief forward into Protestantism. As the Protestant Reformation gained support, Martin Luther felt that the Jews would convert to Protestantism, and when they did not, he wrote a number of extremely virulent anti-Semitic treatises, including *The Jews and Their Lies* written in 1543.<sup>21</sup> In the days when the church was the center of the community, these prejudices firmly sunk their claws into the European consciousness. Even if prejudices against Jews were not necessarily overt, they nonetheless existed in the collective European subconscious through the teachings of the Church. While there were definite anti-Semitic undertones through religious channels, anti-Semitism did not take on a religious tone in Hitler's mind, as he saw them as a specific race; even Jews who converted to Christianity could not be trusted.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1800s, a number of anti-Semitic political theorists and philosophers helped to further ingrain anti-Semitic sentiments into the population. This is when some of the metaphors describing Jews as a pestilence took root. One anti-Semitic political theorist, Paul Anton de Lagarde, stated, "One does not have dealings with pests and parasites; one does not rear and cherish them; one destroys them as speedily and thoroughly as possible."<sup>23</sup> In fact, one of the most widespread slogans used by Nazi propagandists was, "*Die Juden sind unser Unglück*," or, "The Jews are Our Misfortune." The Nazis used this slogan on banners at Nazi rally parties, as well as on posters in the streets.<sup>24</sup> The fact that anti-Semitism was so widespread before the Nazis came into power was certainly a contributing factor in the European community's apathy towards anti-Jewish policies that eventually led to the Holocaust.

Control over Nazi propaganda was tight and disseminated in very specific ways. Early on, the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda took over print media in an attempt to control the release of news to the public. As early as 1931, the *Munich Post* reported that it knew of a secret Nazi plan to deprive Jews of civil rights, confiscate their property, and achieve the "Final Solution" for the "Jewish Question" by removing Jews from German society through slave labor.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, the Nazi regime did not accept these types of stories. In 1926, Joseph

Goebbels founded *Der Angriff* (The Attack), a Berlin newspaper and organ of the Nazi Party that helped to incite violence against German Jews. Julius Streicher, the editor and publisher of *Der Stürmer* (The Attacker), played on fears by reviving the medieval accusations that Jews murdered Christian children and used their blood for perverted religious rituals.<sup>26</sup> Of course, these types of accusations were permissible, and often encouraged. The Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda quickly took control of newspaper censorship. Each morning, the editors of the Berlin daily newspapers and the correspondents of those published elsewhere in the Reich gathered at the Ministry. Goebbels or one of his aides dictated what news to print and suppress, how to write the news and headline it, what campaigns to call off or institute, and the desired editorials for the day.<sup>27</sup> All foreign news had to come from the German Press Agency, the ministry determined which press conferences journalists could attend, and provided complete articles for the newspapers to use.<sup>28</sup> By controlling print media, the Nazis had an incredible advantage when deportations and exterminations began. The Ministry of Propaganda was able to black out all facts or information relating to deportation or extermination, as well as other types of persecution that would have led to any questioning of Nazi policies.<sup>29</sup> In addition to formal censorship positions, the Nazis also ensured that local press would not oppose them through the creation of a system of terror. Those newspaper editors who opposed the policies of the Nazi regime had to look over their shoulders for the Gestapo. Despite the critical importance of controlling mass media, newspapers were not the only Nazi method of garnering support. Mass demonstrations were an important tool to gain support from the general population.<sup>30</sup>

Mass demonstrations were a hallmark of the Nazi regime. There were many advantages to these public meetings, as they drew large crowds and developed an air of excitement among the spectators that was unmatched by any other form of propaganda. Public marches were very common, and ritualistically submerged all individuality. These marches were a publicly visible community of indistinguishable human beings ordered by a will that was exterior to themselves, and a perfect visualization of the Nazi goal of establishing a tight-knit national community.<sup>31</sup> Hitler felt that mass meetings were crucial in developing *esprit de corps*, and felt they were necessary to help individuals overcome an innate fear of being alone. In watching a mass meeting, that individual gets the picture of the larger community that they have entered, thus strengthening and encouraging

them.<sup>32</sup> Mass meetings were also a straightforward way to direct propaganda to the masses and in doing so appeal to emotions rather than reason.<sup>33</sup> Crowds are easier to incite than individuals are, and Hitler was well aware of this phenomenon, so he took advantage of appealing to crowds as often as possible. In Northeim, Germany, the Nazis designed mass demonstrations to convince Northeimers that they were entering into a new era.<sup>34</sup> Alfons Heck also recounts a time when Hitler came through his small town of Wittlich in the Mosel Valley of the Rhine. Heck claims that the town was ecstatic because Hitler symbolized the promise of a new Germany, and a proud Reich that had found its rightful place.<sup>35</sup> Nuremberg became the center of the Nazi universe for a week each September when the Nazis came to put on massive parades to exhibit the solidarity of the German people.<sup>36</sup> Mass meetings were highly choreographed events, and the propaganda department from each *Gau* ensured speakers and topics were in tune with local conditions and economic circumstances in an effort to ensure support.<sup>37</sup> The focus of mass demonstrations was to garner public support for Nazi policies, but they also disseminated anti-Semitic propaganda throughout Germany via public meetings to support anti-Jewish policies as well as euthanasia and sterilization programs. The Nazis spread anti-Semitic propaganda throughout many different areas, quickly indoctrinating the schools to target Germany's youth.

The Nazis quickly discovered that one portion of the population that was particularly receptive to the notion of a "national community" was the German youth. Because of this, the Nazis moved quickly to teach service and obedience, stamping out the individualism and enthusiasm of German youth by instilling a sense of belonging to an exclusive racial community.<sup>38</sup> The move to convert schools into centers of Nazi ideology was surprisingly easy, as most teachers were already hostile to the Weimar Republic, and already sympathetic to the Nazis. In fact, they were overrepresented in the Nazi Party with thirty-six percent of teachers belonging to the Nazi Party by 1936. In 1933, the Nazis purged all Communist, Socialist, and Jewish teachers, and proceeded to restructure the curriculum to spread their propaganda to children.<sup>39</sup> History classes focused on the Nazi revolution and reinterpreted history based on racial principles, especially the significance of the Aryan race in world history. Biology centered on the laws of heredity, racial breeding, and the need for racial purity.<sup>40</sup> In addition, many children's books of the time had overtly anti-Semitic tones. The anti-Semitic book *Der Giftpilz* (The Poisonous Mushroom) highlighted the medieval theme of the

Jews as the killers of Christ. A line from the book urges children, “When you see a cross, then think of the horrible murder by the Jews on Golgotha.”<sup>41</sup> Another book titled *Trau keinem Fuchs auf greener Heid und keinem Jud bei seinem Eid* (You Can’t Trust a Fox in a Heath and a Jew on His Oath) helped in disseminating anti-Semitic propaganda to the unsuspecting German youth.<sup>42</sup> Though targeting children is undoubtedly a harsh manner in which to further a propaganda campaign, the Nazis felt it was important to indoctrinate the youth because they were the future of the Reich. Children were also uncommonly cruel, desensitized by Nazi rhetoric, and were quick to turn on their Jewish counterparts.<sup>43</sup> Alfons Heck makes an interesting observation when he states, “Even in working democracies, children are too immature to question the veracity of what they are taught by their educators.”<sup>44</sup> When one thinks about this statement, it is incredibly accurate. Parents teach their children from an early age to listen to their teachers. As a result, children perceive nearly everything a teacher says as fact. This method was so effective that the Nazis used it to encourage children to denounce parents who were hostile to the Nazi Party.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to infiltrating the German education system, the Nazi Party set up a number of different clubs and organizations for children to join. The most well-known was the Hitler Youth, and many young boys aspired to be a part of such a tight-knit organization. Like documented “gang” mentality, the Hitler Youth gave young men a place where they felt like they were a part of an exclusive community. Alfons Heck aspired to be a part of the Hitler Youth, and firmly believed in the two tenets of the Nazi creed: belief in the innate superiority of the Germanic-Nordic race, and the conviction that total submission to the welfare of the state—personified by the *Führer*—was his first duty.<sup>46</sup> The Hitler Youth were highly visible and marched with military units in public demonstrations, giving young men a sense that they wanted to belong to this group. Girls were also able to join Nazi groups, but learned from an early age that their goal in life was to grow up to be prolific mothers.<sup>47</sup> The Nazi Party felt it was incredibly important to indoctrinate children early, as they were central to the ideal of the thousand-year Reich.

While German parents were not widely opposed to the indoctrination of schools, the Nazi policy of weeding out people, including children, who were considered “mentally handicapped,” drew loud protests. A sterilization program initiated by the Nazi regime did not get very far through legal means. In an attempt



to purify the German race, the Nazis attempted to start a sterilization program, and a target of this program was children deemed “mentally deficient.” The Nazis gave instructors in schools guidelines on how to explain to parents the importance of sterilizing their child. Teachers told parents that sterilization of their child was a “necessary offering to the altar of the Fatherland.”<sup>48</sup> These instructors received instruction to stress that the law is a “blessing for the child to be sterilized as well as for the parents and the entire family, for the unborn generation, and for the entire national community,” as well.<sup>49</sup> This program encountered stiff opposition, but the program still carried on in a more discreet manner.

Another program that received a great deal of criticism was the euthanasia program. The Nazis designed this program to eradicate members of German society that could not provide a meaningful contribution to the German community. The Nazis created propaganda to support this program, and claimed that the money it took to feed, house, and clothe one disabled person for a single day could help an entire German family to survive for a year. This propaganda helped to prepare the German people for the murder of those deemed genetically inferior.<sup>50</sup> However, the euthanasia program drew very public protests, mostly from Germany’s Catholic and Lutheran leaders. Widespread protests forced the Nazis to halt operations on August 24, 1941, but they continued to kill secretly.<sup>51</sup> Though the euthanasia program encountered fervent opposition, the anti-Semitic policies leading to the Holocaust did not draw protests at the same level.

When the Nuremberg Laws were set in place to limit the civil rights of Jews in Germany, there was almost no protest, but it also helped to increase anti-Semitic sentiments because it affected non-Jews. Now it was essential for German citizens to prove their “Aryan” ancestry, and the task of certifying people’s Aryan identities soon fell on priests and pastors, clerks, and archivists.<sup>52</sup> It is difficult to determine the public opinion on these policies, mostly because the Gestapo effectively squashed all public opposition, but one event that affected the German public was *Kristallnacht*, or the “Night of Broken Glass,” which took place on the night of November 9-10, 1938. Joseph Goebbels and several other top party officials encouraged and even directed this event as part of an escalating campaign of anti-Semitic violence.<sup>53</sup> Despite dehumanizing propaganda, the German public witnessed *Kristallnacht*, making it impossible to deny the violence directed towards German Jews. Many Germans were privately appalled at the violence displayed on *Kristallnacht*, but few publicly spoke out against the occurrence.<sup>54</sup>

Many felt that the violence unleashed was unnecessary, but by then, the all-pervasive fear of the Gestapo had taken hold, so most Germans were unwilling to speak out against the violence due to a sense of self-preservation. Despite the disgust felt at the outcome of *Kristallnacht*, when the mass resettlement of the Jews began, most Germans were silent, making it difficult to determine whether they knew what Hitler's plans were for the "Final Solution."

The sheer amount of anti-Semitic propaganda distributed throughout Germany had an incredible effect on the German people. Though most Germans were not fervently anti-Semitic, this propaganda still invaded their subconscious to the point where they simply did not care about the fate of their Jewish neighbors. Already mentioned was the history of anti-Semitism throughout Europe. The latent anti-Semitism, which already existed in the collective minds of the German citizens, had a sad result on the implementation of Hitler's "Final Solution." The years immediately after World War I had a profound effect on the German people as a whole. Many Germans were already disgusted with the outcome of the Treaty of Versailles and the economic troubles that plagued them during the interwar years, and Nazi propaganda played up the myth of Jewish involvement that resulted in Germany's troubles. Because of this, the German people were already susceptible to Nazi propaganda due to a deep sense of national humiliation and frustration at economic problems.<sup>55</sup> No political party demonstratively defended Jewish interests, and the widespread acts of violence against Jews even in the Weimar period point to a very broad tolerance to anti-Semitism at the very least.<sup>56</sup>

Actions such as the boycott on Jewish businesses and the banishment of Jews from the legal and government professions actually garnered a large amount of support for the Nazis, particularly from business owners. Boycotting Jewish shops meant more business for German shop owners. Ejecting Jewish lawyers from courts meant more business for Christian lawyers. In addition, dismissing Jews from government jobs meant more posts available for non-Jewish Germans. Each action showed willingness among non-Jewish Germans to profit from racial and anti-Semitic prejudice.<sup>57</sup> Very few were willing to stick up for their Jewish neighbors, and this was largely due to Nazi tactics of violence and intimidation.<sup>58</sup> The climate of fear helped to perpetrate the increased violence against Jews by the Nazi Party, paving the way for the mass extermination of the Jews in the Holocaust.

In addition to fear tactics employed by the Nazis, the virulent propaganda

portrayed the Jewish people as a race bent on world domination. Propaganda about the evils of race defilement helped to poison relationships between Aryans and Jews. As such, Germans avoided all contacts that suggested traitorous association with the enemies of Aryan blood.<sup>59</sup> Filmstrips portrayed Jews as racial “bastards.”<sup>60</sup> In addition, Nazi euphemisms for Jews included words such as “vermin” and “pestilence,” which helped in further dehumanizing the Jewish people.<sup>61</sup> Christopher Browning, in examining how a group of reserve police officers could coldheartedly kill thousands of Jews, mentions a quote by John Dower from the book *War Without Mercy* which states, “The Dehumanization of the Other contributed immeasurably to the psychological distancing that facilitated killing.”<sup>62</sup> This statement also holds true for the general public. By dehumanizing the Jewish people, the public learned to turn a blind eye to the fate of German Jews.

Germans who lived through the period of the Holocaust have said that they had no concept of the extent of killing that occurred under the Nazi regime. Recent studies have brought new evidence to light showing that news of mass shootings and extermination camps came from the East, but Germans simply did not discuss this news. In a speech to SS officers, Heinrich Himmler openly discussed the evacuation of the Jews to various camps. Himmler stressed the importance of duty to the German people, and tried to ease the psychological damage of killing by arguing that killing a few now would save tens of thousands of German lives later. When speaking of the evacuation of the Jews, Himmler stated, “Among ourselves, this once, it shall be uttered quite frankly; but in public we will never speak of it.”<sup>63</sup> This statement implies a certain amount of secrecy concerning the evacuation of the Jews. It seems clear that the Nazis at least knew what they were doing could be construed badly by the public, and attempted to ensure that the public would not discover the true implementation of Hitler’s “Final Solution.” The Nazis tried to be in tune with the mood and bearing of the German people, and gave extensive reports on the subject. Because of this, it is clear that the attitudes and behavior of “ordinary” Germans were far from uniform on a whole range of issues.<sup>64</sup> Overall, it seems as though there was simply a lack of interest in the fate of the Jews in Europe. It is impossible to determine the number of Germans who knew directly about the extermination of the Jews, and what degree of knowledge they possessed. However, there were most certainly widespread rumors in circulation about the fate of the Jews, and the information contained in the rumors were explicit enough to indicate that there were a great number of Jews

being killed in the east.<sup>65</sup> Hitler referred to these rumors in an attempt to counter them, as did Martin Bormann. Letters from the front even described mass shootings, one of which detailed the shooting of 30,000 Jews in one town.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, evidence shows that information pointing to genocidal policies was widely available in Germany and not contained to a tiny minority of the population.<sup>67</sup>

In light of this evidence, why did the German public choose to ignore the rumors and stand silent? It is possible that many who heard these rumors felt they were simply too outrageous to be true. It is often difficult for humans, as a whole, to grasp the killing of hundreds of thousands of human beings even if one knows the exact number. It is also possible that the years of propaganda effectively dehumanized the Jews to the point where German simply dismissed the rumors as wartime casualties, and, “terrible things happen in war.”<sup>68</sup> Widespread knowledge of shootings met with a number of responses—from overt approval to blank disapproval—but most Germans were apathetic, felt powerless to do anything about it, or turned a blind eye to the horrible truth.<sup>69</sup> Apathy seemed to be the most common reaction, and corresponded to the latent anti-Semitism that had permeated European society since the Middle Ages. One should also consider the need for self-preservation. The Nazis built their regime on fear and intimidation, and in this type of climate, Germans were more concerned with ensuring their individual safety than worrying about events happening in Poland or Russia where the killing of the majority of Jews occurred.<sup>70</sup> The Nazis imprisoned those Germans who did come forward to oppose publicly the shooting and gassing of Jews, so it is no wonder that most Germans tended to mind their own business and learned how to *not* learn about the number of Jews being slaughtered in the east.<sup>71</sup>

In the end, it is clear that the German public did know a great deal about the fate of the Jews, and did nothing to prevent it. There is no doubt that propaganda played a large part in reviving anti-Semitic sentiments from the Middle Ages, in addition to creating a climate of fear where German citizens did not feel it was prudent to stick up for their Jewish neighbors. Though some resistance groups surfaced, mostly against the regime, they were few and far between, and, thus, largely ineffective. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen has blamed the entire German population for the Holocaust by stating that they formed the assenting majority and created pressure for dissenting individuals, making them all party to the killing that occurred in the Holocaust,<sup>72</sup> but this is an

oversimplification and patently untrue. While there were certainly many who were apathetic to the fate of the Jews, there is no evidence to support the assertion that all Germans would have supported genocide on the scale of the Holocaust. There were certainly those who worked the system to their advantage, but most felt powerless to do anything, and the killing of Jews was not an immediate concern. Many who denied the existence of the camps received a nasty dose of reality when the Allied forces discovered them. The Allies declared martial law, and, in many cases, forced local German civilians to personally confront the crimes committed by their countrymen in helping to bury the dead and clean up the camps.<sup>73</sup> However, there is no doubt that propaganda played an important role in dehumanizing the Jewish people, and integrating the German people into a “national community.” The testimony of most of the defendants in the war crimes trial at Nuremberg generally used two base arguments: that they knew nothing about the murder of the Jews and that they were only obeying orders.<sup>74</sup> These answers have great implications on the effect of propaganda on the whole of German society.

## Notes

1. Jeremy Noakes, “Leaders of the People? The Nazi Party and German Society,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (April 2004): 190.

2. *Ibid.*, 198.

3. Richard Bessel, “The Nazi Capture of Power,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (April 2004): 173.

4. David Welch, “Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People’s Community,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (April 2004): 213.

5. Louis Weber, comp., *The Holocaust Chronicle* (Lincolnwood, Illinois: Legacy Publishing, 2009), 21.

6. Hermann Beck, “Between the Dictates of Conscience and Political Expediency: Hitler’s Conservative Alliance Partner and Antisemitism during the Nazi Seizure of Power,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 4 (October 2006): 611.

7. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971), 579.

8. *Ibid.*, 180.

9. *Ibid.*, 343.

10. Joshua Hagen, "The Most German of Towns: Creating an Ideal Nazi Community in Rothenburg ob der Tauber," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 94, no. 1 (March 2004): 219-220.

11. *Ibid.*, 209.

12. *Ibid.*, 220.

13. *Ibid.*, 221.

14. Welch, 213.

15. *Ibid.*, 216.

16. *Ibid.*, 217.

17. *Ibid.*, 217.

18. Bessel, 170.

19. Mention of widespread anti-Semitism in Europe is mentioned by historians such as Joshua Hagen, Richard Bessel, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, and Laurence Rees, among others.

20. Alfons Heck, *A Child of Hitler: Germany in the Days When God Wore a Swastika* (Phoenix: Renaissance House, 1985), 14.

21. Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Hitler and Nazi Germany*, Fifth Edition (Upper Saddle Creek, New Jersey: Pierson Prentice Hall, 2005), 272.

22. Weber, 42.

23. *Ibid.*, 32.

24. *Ibid.*, 18.

25. *Ibid.*, 26.

26. *Ibid.*, 79.

27. William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1960), 338.

28. Spielvogel, 157.

29. Allan Mitchell, ed., *The Nazi Revolution: Hitler's Dictatorship and the German Nation*, Fourth Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 192.

30. William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1922-1945* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1984), 206.

31. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler & World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 62.

32. Hitler, 478.

168.

33. Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003),

34. Allen, 208.

35. Heck, 2.

36. Weber, 117.

37. Benjamin Sax and Dieter Kuntz, comps., *Inside Hitler's Germany: A Documentary History of Life in the Third Reich* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 99.

38. Welch, 230.

39. Spielvogel, 173.

40. *Ibid.*, 175.

41. Weber, 77.

42. *Ibid.*, 100.

43. *Ibid.*, 94.

44. Heck, 3.

45. Welch, 233.

46. Heck, 8.

47. Weber, 82.

48. Sax and Kuntz, 211.

49. *Ibid.*, 213.

50. Weber, 93.

51. *Ibid.*, 169.

52. *Ibid.*, 55.

53. Hagen, 221-222.

54. Weber, 143.

55. *Ibid.*, 217.

56. Bessel, 171.

57. *Ibid.*, 178.

58. *Ibid.*, 180.

59. Weber, 94.

60. Ibid., 107.

61. Ibid., 215.

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63. Russell J. Barber, Lanny B. Fields, and Cheryl A. Riggs, eds., *Reading the Global Past: Volume Two 1500 to the Present* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 146.

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65. Kershaw, 141.

66. Ibid., 144.

67. Ibid., 142.

68. Ibid., 145-146.

69. Ibid., 147.

70. Ibid., 148.

71. Ibid., 203.

72. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vantage Books, 1997), 417.

73. Weber, 595.

74. Spielvogel, 306.



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