

## 12. Germany

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Having been arrested on November 11, 1923, after the failure of the "beer hall putsch," Adolf Hitler was imprisoned at Landsberg Castle, in a "large, airy, and comfortably furnished" cell, where he dictated an account of his life and "worldview" (*Weltanschauung*) to Emile Maurice and Rudolf Hess in 1924. The manuscript he produced was published as *My Struggle* (*Mein Kampf*) in 1925. In it, Hitler firmly stated his beliefs on a wide variety of topics, including education. Even at this early date, education formed a key component in Hitler's designs for the future of the German nation. For example, he stated that "[f]rom all the innumerable great names in German history, the greatest must be picked out and introduced to the youth so persistently that they become pillars of an unshakeable national sentiment." Hitler's ideas on education came to underpin the Nazis' goals for transforming German society once they came to power. In a speech to representatives of the press on March 15, 1933, Josef Goebbels, Minister for Propaganda and Popular Enlightenment, asserted that "[i]t is not enough to reconcile people more or less to our regime, to move them towards a position of neutrality towards us, we would rather work on people until they are addicted to us."<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explores the centrality of education to the Nazi regime, highlighting the social construction of ignorance in Germany during the period from 1933 to 1945. It examines both the perpetuation of ignorance by the Nazi administration through the use of censorship, propaganda, and disinformation, and the efforts of the Nazi leadership at various types of miseducation of German children in schools, which were designed to generate unquestioning faith and belief in the Nazi system. As such, it contributes to the study of ignorance and its social construction by examining the policies of the National Socialist government, which disinformed the German population in a variety of ways. Recent

scholarship has begun to explore the active engineering of ignorance, the kind of ignorance that can be "made, maintained and manipulated" as a "strategic ploy" or "active construct." This was undoubtedly the case on the part of the Nazi regime. The creation and preservation of ignorance by the Nazi government covered a wide range of aspects of German life, many of which were interrelated. It was purposefully orchestrated in order to deter any large-scale resistance or even non-conformity to the regime and its ideology.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of this chapter is on three key areas: the promotion of Nazi ideology and the perpetuation of myths; the censorship of artistic and cultural life; and the control of the content of school textbooks. The first part of the chapter illustrates how the Nazi regime utilized miseducation or disinformation in order to promote its ideological imperatives of "racial purity" and anti-Semitism. In addition, it shows how the Nazi administration employed disinformation to legitimate its racial hygiene policies to "improve" the quality and quantity of the German population and how it sought to promote the "national community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*) and nationalism more generally. It illustrates how the Nazi regime perpetuated (through the use of propaganda) all types of myths, which were accepted by the German population for much of the Third Reich--using the myth surrounding the "leader" (*Führer*) and his infallibility and the perpetuation of the myth of the omniscient and omnipresent secret state police, the Gestapo, as key examples. The next part of the chapter considers how the Nazi government clamped down upon and censored entire realms of artistic and cultural life that did not conform to its attitudes about German art and German literature. The last section of the chapter examines the Nazi censorship of school textbooks, in order to create homogeneity in what was taught. An analysis of these three broad areas illuminates the determined use of disinformation and miseducation by the Nazi government in Germany between 1933 and 1945.

### **The promotion of Nazi ideology and the perpetuation of myths**

Nazi ideological imperatives lay at the heart of the regime's attempts both to construct its ideal society and to promote its worldview to the German "national comrades" (*Volksgenossen*). The regime disseminated its ideology, using film and other media to spread its message about anti-Semitism and the eradication of the "unfit." Similarly, it employed such channels of information and knowledge to advocate its nationalist ideology and to perpetuate myths to convince and instruct its population. Racial purity, the concept of the "master race" (*Herrenvolk*), and anti-Semitism were core aspects of Nazi ideology. The regime built upon and created popular mistrust towards the Jews by means of propaganda--in particular, through the use of posters, as well as *The Stormer (Der Stürmer)*, an anti-Semitic journal published under the aegis of Julius Streicher, the regional leader (*Gauleiter*) of Franconia. The front cover of the September 1943 issue, for example, featured a photograph of a Jew with the caption "Satan." In addition, a trilogy of films about the Jews was screened in 1940--*The Rothschilds (Die Rothschilds)*, *Jew Süß (Jud Süß)*, and *The Eternal Jew (Der ewige Jude)*. These films sought to instruct the German population about the "threat" posed by the Jews. The first of these, *Die Rothschilds*, was an attempt to explain the rise to power and wealth of the Rothschild family and the emergence of the "Jewish British plutocracy." It revealed the "historical fact" that Jewish financiers had profited from the death of German soldiers. In doing so, it rationalized the extermination of the Jews as expressed in Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and in his speeches. In *Die Rothschilds*, the Jews were portrayed as a racial and economic threat.<sup>3</sup>

Veit Harlan's *Jud Süß* showed the inherent rootlessness of the Jewish people and their ability to assimilate into any society. Süß, the elegant and fashionable Jewish lawyer, personified "the Jew in disguise." Eric Rentschler has shown that in "constructing a malevolent other, Nazi propagandists insisted that they were serving the public good by

revealing the Jew's true face." The rest of the Jews in the film were portrayed as dirty, hook nosed, and physically repellent. They represented "authentic Jewry." In contrast, the true "Aryan" prototypes were depicted--for example, Dorothea, the classic German maiden played by Christina Söderbaum. This film unquestionably contributed to the anti-Semitism already prevalent in Germany, for it brought together archetypes and themes that created the desired antipathy towards the Jews under the guise of entertainment that resulted in great box office success. Rentschler notes "it not only confirmed existing prejudices; it agitated, militated, and called for action." This was intentional engineering on the part of the National Socialist government and its propaganda machine.<sup>4</sup>

In its efforts to "educate" the German population, Fritz Hippler's *Der ewige Jude* covered the entire gamut of Nazi allegations against the Jews. It was one of the most virulent and effective propaganda films ever made. A large part of its strength lay in its pretence of documentary objectivity. Whereas *Jud Süß* was a period costume feature whose message was, nevertheless, crystal clear, *Der ewige Jude* claimed to be a documentary film about world Jewry. The substance and message of the film very much reflected the idea that the Jew had cunningly assimilated himself into European society. Furthermore, by associating Jews with rats, the audience was led to believe that they were disease bearers and subhuman. Next, statistics were produced to show that Jews figured predominantly in the world of crime, out of all proportion to their number in the population, but no source was given for the figures. The film showed images of Jews with beards, long hair, and skullcaps. Each shot faded into one of the same man "disguised" in European clothing. In this way, the Jews were portrayed as an almost invisible threat to the health of the "Aryan" race. By showing pictures of Jews in prominent positions of world power, for example, the financial houses of Jews such as the Rothschilds, the Warburgs and the Montefiores, the film played on the myth of the "international Jewish conspiracy." It also exacerbated sentiments of jealousy, indignation,

and resentment by showing the disproportionate number of Jews in the upper echelons of society during the Weimar Republic and their corresponding disproportionate absence from the more menial strata. Finally, after this great profusion of images and rhetoric, the viewer was confronted with the slaughterhouse scene--anti-Semitic propaganda at its most extreme. The inflammatory scenes were immediately followed by shots of Hitler's Reichstag speech of January 30, 1939, in which he prophesied that a forthcoming war would bring about "the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe." A sequence of blonde Aryan stereotypes concluded the film. These three films were intended to teach a particular message about the Jews to the German population at a time when the Nazi leadership sought increasingly drastic "solutions" to "the Jewish Question." They formed a central component of the efforts of the Nazi government to demonize the Jews and to assert a whole array of allegations against the Jews that misinformed the German populace.

In addition, the Nazi government employed disinformation to legitimate its racial hygiene policies to "improve" the quality and quantity of the German population. The regime introduced eugenic measures to this end, including compulsory sterilization. Policies directed against the physically and mentally ill, eventually culminated in their mass murder (Operation T4) during the war. Nazi educational and propaganda material showed the high costs of welfare for people the regime considered to be "inferior" or even "unworthy of life" that could be saved and spent instead on more "worthy" or "valuable" members of the German "national community." In October 1939, Viktor Brack, one of the creators of the T4 scheme, commissioned Hermann Schweninger to make propaganda films on the subject of "euthanasia." These too were educative in nature. The aim was to juxtapose the expense put into maintaining "ballast existences" with the limited therapeutic results achieved. In 1935, 21 million people watched these films that stigmatized the mentally ill and this number rose to 40 million in 1939. They contrasted the most shocking cases of children and adults with

physical disabilities and mental illnesses with the luxuriously appointed, expensive and modern asylums with attractive gardens and grounds, in order to appeal to the "healthy" instincts of the German nation and to convince ordinary Germans that this money could be better spent on more deserving causes. After 1940, a different approach was taken to achieve this end: the production of a feature film instead of documentaries. The feature film *I Accuse* (*Ich klage an*), on the subject of "euthanasia," was released in August 1941. Eighteen million people watched this film. Nazi reports compiled by the Security Service of the SS in January 1942 suggested that the film was "favourably received and discussed" and "enthusiastically received." The film showed a medical professor named Heyt, whose young wife had multiple sclerosis. He killed her with a morphine overdose and was subsequently tried for murder. The aim of the film was to show that the law should be changed in order to permit "mercy killings" and clearly audiences were encouraged to take this view. Goebbels was astute in his judgement that messages could be effectively taught through the medium of feature films, not just through overtly propagandistic films.<sup>5</sup>

Hitler's government wanted to instruct the population in other ways too, such as the Nazi propaganda effort that sought to promote the "national community" and nationalism, in line with another central aspect of Nazi ideology--the resurrection of the fortunes of the German nation. Educational and propaganda material emphasized the greatness of Germany as well as the need for people to put the national interest before their own interests. This manifested itself the use of nationalistic slogans captured in the poster "One People! One Reich! One Führer!" The concept of "the community before the individual" (*Gemeinnutz vor Eigennutz*) sought to encourage a sense of nationalism and pride of homeland. Another illustration of this was the way in which the Nazi government linked home economy to the national economy, and encouraged German housewives to think about their duties to the nation in their purchasing decisions. Historian Nancy Reagin has shown how the regime

"persistently linked women's frugal use of available resources to the national interest," especially after the introduction of the Four Year Plan and during the war. A further instance of this was the Nazi concept of health as a responsibility towards the "nation" (*Volk*), not just as the concern of the individual. The close relationship between "individual and collective physical health" was a central component of the state and society in the Third Reich. The "national community" was central to concepts of German society under National Socialism and a vast array of educational and propaganda material highlighted its importance to the German populace.<sup>6</sup>

The Nazi regime perpetuated a number of myths, which were accepted by the German population for much of the Nazi period. Prominent examples include the following: the "Hitler myth;" the myth of a "classless society," in which the working class could gain access to the privileges that were previously restricted to the middle and upper classes, and which convinced the workers that the regime benefited them; and the legend of the omniscient and omnipresent Gestapo, which created fear among the German population and thus inhibited criticism of the regime or its policies. Furthermore, the Nazi propaganda machine was used to conceal the nationwide impact of Allied bombing, to convince the Germans that they were winning the war and to persuade them to continue fighting until the bitter end. Propaganda was far removed from reality by this time.<sup>7</sup>

Propaganda, in particular the use of radio, posters, films, magazines, and newspapers, as well as education at all levels--both formal and informal--contributed to the continued belief in such myths. To this end, rallies, parades, posters, feature films, newsreels, the press, and the radio were all employed to generate consent for the regime and its aims. Nazi propaganda addressed itself to large masses of people in order to create uniformity of opinion and action and a re-education of society based upon National Socialist principles. David Welch has shown that Nazi propaganda was "as much about confirming as about converting

public opinion." In this sense, Nazi misinformation and disinformation was a way of perpetuating ignorance in the German population. Welch shows how Nazi propaganda reinforced "existing trends and beliefs, to sharpen and focus them" for its own ends.<sup>8</sup>

The "Hitler myth," as Ian Kershaw has argued, was "consciously devised as an integrating force by a regime acutely aware of the need to manufacture consensus." Hitler was portrayed as the great leader of Germany's destiny. Yet, this heroic leadership was "as much an image created by the masses as it was imposed on them." Pierre Ayçoberry states that "the construction of the Hitlerian myth resulted from a combination of autosuggestion, deliberate fabrication and a quasi-universal acceptance." After the Night of the Long Knives (June 30, 1934), for example, Hitler's reputation was elevated, despite the illegality of his actions. He was portrayed and regarded as the defender of the "little man" against the "big shots" and as the upholder of public morality. Curbing the excesses of the SA appealed to the desire of the public for law and order, while the murder of its openly homosexual leader, Ernst Röhm, accorded to "the healthy instincts of the people." In addition, the recovery of the nation's economy, the massive public works schemes, such as motorway construction, and the elimination of mass unemployment in the mid-1930s were regarded as the personal achievements of the *Führer*.<sup>9</sup>

Standing above and beyond the day-to-day realities of the regime, Hitler remained disassociated from unpopular decisions and from the avarice and hypocrisy of the Party functionaries. Hitler was popular as a leader among all social groups and was personally exempted from criticisms of the regime. Any blame was directed at other Nazi leaders or officials. The Hitler myth enabled people to voice their quotidian grumbles and concerns, and yet consent to the Nazi regime as a whole. This co-existence of complaint and compliance is significant to our understanding of the nature of popular opinion in the Third Reich. Much of the appeal of the Hitler myth was the yearning for security and leadership by a population in

disarray and despair. While the regime continued to make achievements and restore order, with its visionary leader at its center, popular acceptance persisted. It appeared to offer the German population a solution to its social, economic, and political problems and to this extent it succeeded in its capture of the popular mind and in its manufacture of consensus.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, the Nazi government won people to the national cause by means of its foreign policy successes. A nation brought to its knees by the punitive Treaty of Versailles in 1919 could only rejoice in Hitler's wholesale revocation of its terms. The "bringing home" of the Saarland in 1935 and the march into the Rhineland on March 7, 1936 met with rapturous popular approval. These events signified success and recovery for the German nation under their great "leader." The *Anschluss* with Austria in 1938 was another massive triumph for the "national community" and its *Führer*. While Nazi foreign policy continued to succeed, the sense of "national community" was enhanced. Even a nation hesitant to go to war again in September 1939 accepted Hitler's decision and reaped the benefits during the initial *Blitzkrieg* successes of the Second World War. Popular support reached its high point after the Nazi occupation of Paris in 1940. Hitler was regarded throughout this period as a great wartime leader. Kershaw argues that even on "the eve of the invasion of the Soviet Union... Hitler's popular standing was undiminished, and confidence in his leadership among the great majority of the population unbroken." It was only after the tide of the war turned against Germany, and in particular after the Battle of Stalingrad in January 1943, that both Hitler's infallibility and the strength of the nation began to be called into question. Yet this disillusionment was not translated into any determined resistance or revolt. There were a number of reasons for this, namely: the Nazis' apparatus of terror remained intact until the end of the war; the burdens and strains of the war led people to a reaction of resignation rather than rebellion; and Nazism had created an "atomization of social relations" that stood in the way of a communal resistance effort. In addition, the manufacture of popular opinion

through a manipulation of both information and emotion contributed to this situation.<sup>11</sup>

Before the Battle of Stalingrad, direct, personal criticism of Hitler was extremely rare, but after Stalingrad, the "Hitler myth" began to falter. The Allied bombing campaigns were another significant factor in the decline of the "Hitler myth," particularly from 1943 onwards. The bombing caused considerable demoralization and anger directed against the Nazi leadership for failing to prevent it, despite continued Nazi propaganda directed at the home front. In the months following the July 20, 1944 bomb plot on Hitler's life, the *Führer* retreated from public life. In the last phase of the war, the "Hitler myth" collapsed entirely. Hence, the "*Führer* myth," significant as it was, is not sufficient on its own as an explanation for the continuing acceptance of the Nazi regime, particularly after the tide of the war turned against Germany.<sup>12</sup>

As popular consensus broke down, the use of terror escalated simultaneously. Within Himmler's vast SS-SD-police complex, the Gestapo, headed by the ambitious Heinrich Müller, became the key link in the system of terror and surveillance in the Nazi state. The Gestapo was certainly an institution that instigated fear and terror among the German populace. Recent research has shown, however, that the popular image of the Gestapo as omniscient and omnipotent is a myth that was instigated by Gestapo leaders and perpetuated in the post-war period by historians who accepted the statements of Gestapo leaders at face value. Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul have shown that the Gestapo simply did not have the necessary manpower resources available to be "omniscient and omnipotent." Its leaders carefully adopted the propaganda image of the ubiquitous Gestapo both to intimidate German society and to conceal its own deficiencies. But in reality, the Gestapo never achieved these mythical levels of repression. Instead, it was an under-staffed and over-bureaucratized organization, incapable of comprehensive surveillance. Nor did the Gestapo comprise ardent believers in Nazi ideology. Many career policemen from the Weimar era

who stayed on and adjusted to the new regime made up its ranks. In the Gestapo, as Robert Gellately notes, they "played the part of loyal enforcers of the dictatorship's will." Most joined the Nazi Party sooner or later, but in 1939, only 3,000 of the Gestapo's approximately 20,000 employees held an SS rank.<sup>13</sup>

In reality, there were remarkably few Gestapo agents on the ground and they relied on both amateur and professional helpers. For example, in 1937, the Dusseldorf Gestapo office manned by only 126 agents controlled a town of 500,000 inhabitants. The Essen Gestapo office comprised 43 agents for a town with 650,000 inhabitants. Gellately has shown the largely reactive nature of the Gestapo and has described the method developed by the Gestapo as "a kind of auto-policing, or at least an auto-surveillance system." With the co-operation of neighbours, friends, acquaintances, and family members, the Gestapo could infiltrate even the private realm of the home, in order to monitor compliance with the dictates of the regime. Without the help of informers, the Gestapo would have been virtually blind. Denunciations were the key link in the interactions between the police and the population. The Gestapo did not have adequate resources to generate its own cases, but relied heavily upon the supply of information from outside. Following denunciations, the Gestapo relentlessly pursued and interrogated individuals--often using torture--in order to extort statements that led to arrests. But on its own, that is, without the help of informers, the Gestapo was not in the position to engage in comprehensive surveillance or perfect repression. Hence, a variety of myths such as these played an important part in the Nazi disinformation and miseducation of the German populace. These myths comprised an integral aspect of the creation and perpetuation of ignorance in Nazi Germany.<sup>14</sup>

### **The censorship of art and literature**

Another key Nazi strategy that contributed to ignorance-making was the use of censorship.

The Nazi regime banned many types of cultural expression, eclipsing opportunities for Germans to learn about and experience, for instance, jazz music and atonal music, as well as Expressionist art. Art forms were censored so that the population was left to believe in the existence of only a particular type of German culture. In particular this section examines Nazi policies towards art and literature. These two aspects of cultural life presented the Nazi government significant opportunities to educate and instruct the German population. The Nazis used the arts to legitimize their rule by posing as the guardians of true German culture. They purged "alien" influences from German artistic and cultural life, claiming that racial degeneration was the main cause of aesthetic deterioration. Alan Steinweis has argued that "the cultural policies of the Nazi regime were inextricably intertwined with the policies of persecution and marginalisation, driven by racist ideology, that were targeted at Jews, Roma and Sinti, homosexuals and other groups." Hence, cultural purification constituted a central component in the development of the "national community" throughout the duration of the Nazi dictatorship and in the broad educative process of the German populace. The Reich Chamber for the Visual Arts closely controlled the work of its 42,000 members. In addition, it strictly monitored membership so that politically unreliable or "racially inferior" artists were ineligible and therefore not allowed to continue to practice their profession. Nazi officials expelled prominent artists, such as Paul Klee and Otto Dix, from their positions. Many artists and painters whose work was disapproved of by the Nazi regime went into exile.<sup>15</sup>

The conveying of a particular type of art and culture played a critical part in Nazi educational imperatives. The desire of the Nazi regime to purify and cleanse society was reflected in its policy towards the arts, with its simultaneous process of encouraging pure and wholesome contemporary German art and purging decadent, "degenerate" or unwholesome art. The Nazi administration aimed to eliminate all forms of art that it regarded as "alien" or