

READING

Shaping Public Opinion

As the Nazis eliminated civil liberties in Germany and opened the first concentration camps to imprison “enemies of the state,” they were also trying to win public approval for their government. According to historian Robert Gellately,

Hitler and his henchmen did not want to cower the German people as a whole into submission, but to win them over by building on popular images, cherished ideals, and long held phobias in the country. . . . [The Nazis] aimed to create and maintain the broadest possible level of popular backing. They expended an enormous amount of energy and resources to track public opinion and to win over people.¹

The Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda played a key role in the Nazis’ efforts to cultivate favorable public opinion. *Propaganda* is biased or misleading information that is used to influence public opinion. Hitler created the new ministry on March 13, 1933, and put Joseph Goebbels in charge. It was his job “not just to present the regime and its policies in a positive light, but to generate the impression that the entire German people enthusiastically endorsed everything it did.”²

To generate excitement and enthusiasm for the Nazi Party and for Hitler himself, Goebbels and his ministry created new festivals and holidays, such as the celebration of Hitler’s birthday on April 20. They changed street names and other public signage to erase reminders of the Weimar Republic. They organized party rallies and dramatic torch-lit parades to demonstrate public support.

Writing in 1939, journalist Sebastian Haffner described these demonstrations and recalled the effect they had on many Germans.

[O]ne was permanently occupied and distracted by an unending sequence of celebrations, ceremonies, and national festivities. It started with a huge victory celebration before the elections on March 4 . . . There were mass parades, fireworks, drums, bands, and flags all over Germany, Hitler’s voice over thousands of loudspeakers, oaths and vows—all before it was even certain that the elections might not be a setback

¹ Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), vii.

² Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 121.

for the Nazis, which indeed they were. These elections, the last that were ever held in prewar Germany, brought the Nazis only 44 percent of the votes (in the previous elections they had achieved 37 percent). The majority was still against the Nazis.

A week later, Hindenberg abolished the Weimar national flag, which was replaced by the swastika banner and a black, white, and red “temporary national flag.” There were daily parades, mass meetings, declarations of gratitude for the liberation of the nation, military music from dawn to dusk, awards ceremonies for heroes, the dedication of flags. . . . Hitler swearing loyalty to something or other for the nth time, bells tolling, a solemn procession to church by the members of the Reichstag, a military parade, swords lowered in salute, children waving flags, and a torchlight parade.

The colossal emptiness and lack of meaning of these never-ending events was by no means unintentional. The population should become used to cheering and jubilation, even when there was no visible reason for it. . . . Better to celebrate, howl with the wolves, “*Heil, Heil!*” Besides, people began to enjoy doing so. The weather in March 1933 was glorious. Was it not wonderful to celebrate in the spring sunshine, in squares decked with flags? To merge with the festive crowds and listen to high-sounding patriotic speeches, about freedom and fatherland, exaltation and holy vows?³

Goebbels and his ministry also set out to coordinate every form of expression in Germany—from music to radio programs to textbooks, artwork, newspapers, and even sermons—crafting language and imagery carefully to praise Nazi policies and Hitler himself, and to demonize those the Nazis considered enemies. While the ministry’s work included censoring much German art and media, the Nazis also created an environment in which many artists, newspaper editors, and filmmakers censored themselves in order to gain favor with the regime, avoid punishment, or escape the Nazis’ attention altogether.⁴

Victor Klemperer, a college professor who was born to Jewish parents and converted to Christianity, kept a diary of life in Nazi Germany that describes the way the Nazis gave new meanings to hundreds of words and phrases, as in this set of entries from 1933:

27 March. New words keep turning up, or old ones acquire new specialist meanings, or new combinations are formed which rapidly [harden] into stereotypes. . . . Foreign Jews, particularly those from France, England, and America, are today referred to as “global

³ Sebastian Haffner, “Street-Level Coercion,” in *How Was It Possible? A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Peter Hayes (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 122, excerpt from *Defying Hitler: A Memoir*, trans. Oliver Pretzel (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 128–29.

⁴ Doris Bergen to Facing History and Ourselves, comment on draft manuscript, December 23, 2015.

Jews” . . . Equally prevalent is the term “international Jewry” . . . with the global Jew and global Jewry . . . presumably constituting the German version. This is an ominous translation into German: does this mean that Jews are to be found everywhere on earth, except, that is, in Germany? And where are they within Germany itself? The global Jews disseminate “atrocious propaganda” and spread “horror stories,” and if we report so much as a scrap of what happens here every day then we too are guilty of disseminating atrocious propaganda and are punished accordingly. Meanwhile the boycott of Jewish shops and doctors is in the offing. The distinction between “Aryan” and “non-Aryan” governs everything. One could draw up a dictionary of the new language . . .

10 April. You are [“alien”] if you have 25 percent non-Aryan blood. “In borderline cases a ruling will be made by an expert in racial research...”

20 April. Yet again a new opportunity for celebration, a new national holiday for the people: Hitler’s birthday. The term “*Volk* (people)” is now as customary in spoken and written language as salt at table, everything is spiced with a [touch] of *Volk*: *Volkfest* (festival of the people), *Volksgenosse* (comrade of the people), *Volksgemeinschaft* (community of the people), *volksnah* (one of the people), *volksfremd* (alien to the people), *volksenstammt* (descended from the people)....⁵

⁵ Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich*, trans. Martin Brady (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 29–31.

Connection Questions

1. Why do you think that public opinion was important to the Nazis? How did they go about winning support from the German public?
2. Historian Doris Bergen writes, "It must have been a lonely and terrifying experience to be on the outside of a torchlight march looking in. What chance would one feel one had against that monolith of power?"⁶ Compare and contrast Bergen's statement with Sebastian Haffner's description of how Nazi demonstrations affected Germans. What emotions did the Nazis' public demonstrations generate in members of the German public? Which emotions were useful to the Nazis in building acceptance and support for their regime?
3. How did the Nazis use language to shape public opinion? How did they try to influence what Germans thought about, remembered, or forgot through their choice of words? What part did the truth play in these efforts?
4. What do the results of the March 5, 1933, elections tell you about the Nazis' popularity in the first weeks of Hitler's chancellorship? According to Haffner, how did the Nazis attempt to influence the outcome of the elections?
5. How do the actions and opinions of your peer group influence your own actions and opinions? How can you tell the difference between when people are "going along with the crowd" and when they really believe in what they do and say?

⁶ Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 67. Reproduced by permission from Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.