Historic Context Hand Out

The history of propaganda and its use is long and complicated. There is a common misconception that propaganda is new and modern, but in fact, the use of propaganda is as old as recorded history. Though lacking the technology we use today such as newspapers, radio, and film, ancient civilizations were just as determined to influence the public through propaganda in the form of games, theater, assemblies and festivals. In ancient Greece for example, Greeks excelled at influencing public opinion through public speeches and gatherings, as well as circulating handwritten books. From that time forward, many societies made use of propaganda means of controlling how and what kind of information the public could access.

A propaganda postcard depicting the British Empire. 1915. British Library.

Mass propaganda started with the invention of the movable type printing press in the time of the Reformation making it possible to reproduce media and distribute information to a large audience rapidly. The use of propaganda dramatically increased in the 20th century, especially during the Nazi era, when hateful ideologies could spread using new technologies, like motion pictures and radio. While almost every country has used propaganda to unite its people in wartime, the Nazis were notable for making propaganda a key element of party formation and the government.

Early on, Adolf Hitler believed that British propaganda during WWI was instrumental and a primary cause of Germany's defeat. One of the earliest pieces of Nazi propaganda is Hitler's 1925 book, *Mein Kampf*, in which he dedicated two chapters to the study and practice of propaganda. He claimed he learned its value as a World War I soldier who was exposed to very effective British propaganda and ineffective German propaganda. In *Mein Kampf* he wrote, "the great masses of the people will more easily fall victims to a big lie than to a small one." Hitler put these ideas into practice in the early years of the Nazi Party's development with the establishment of Nazi newspapers including, *Völkischer Beobachter* in 1920 and Joseph Goebbels's *Der Angriff* in 1927.

A former journalist and Nazi party officer in Berlin, Joseph Goebbels became instrumental in the Nazi propaganda machine. In 1930, Hitler appointed Goebbels as the head of party propaganda. Goebbels

served as the Reich Minister of Propaganda of Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945. As the central office of Nazi propaganda, the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda comprehensively supervised and regulated culture and mass media of Nazi Germany. It was responsible for controlling the German news media, literature, visual arts, filmmaking, theatre, music, and broadcasting.

The Nazis wanted Germans to support and believe exclusively in Nazi ideas and so controlled all forms of communication and media consumption through a combination of censorship and propaganda. One major part of this campaign were the Nazi book burnings of 1933, in which more than 25,000 books that the Nazis categorized as un-German were burned. The Nazi regime centralized propaganda efforts through the Ministry of Propaganda and used a variety of mediums to spread Nazi ideas. Examples included:

- Glorifying Adolf Hitler as a heroic leader by playing his speeches and producing posters and photographs of him as a strong leader;
- Spreading negative images and ideas about Jews in magazines, films, cartoons, posters, and other forms of media;
- Making radios affordable so that more Germans could purchase them to listen to Nazi ideas and broadcasting speeches on the radio;
- Organizing large and celebratory Nazi Party rallies;
- Producing massive propaganda films as tools to distract the public, spread ideas of the "master Aryan race," and portray Jews and other racial minorities as "subhuman";
- Setting up the Theresienstadt model camp to mislead the public and discredit reports of genocide (See our IWalk tour on Propaganda & Antisemitism for further context).

While Nazi propaganda aimed to mobilize Germans under the Nazi party, it most also tried to create a race consciousness among German populations. Films played an important role in presenting the ideal image of a superior Aryan German race, in contrast to non-ethnic Germans who were "subhuman" and inferior. Newspapers in Germany such as *Der Stürmer*, printed cartoons that used antisemitic caricatures to depict Jews and promote racial antisemitism.

Historians have noted that the treatment of African-Americans in the United States, particularly the Jim Crow American South, struck Hitler as an example to be emulated. Anti-black imagery in the form of racist caricatures and the vilification of black men in Hollywood films undoubtedly influenced antisemitic propaganda imagery used by the Nazi party. American eugenicists made no secret of their racist objectives, similar to the Nazis. For Nazi observers, ethnic and racial cleansing was justified and a necessary means to accomplish the Nazi agenda.