Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War

Aristotle A. Kallis

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Also by Aristotle A. Kallis

THE FASCISM READER (*ed.*)

FASCIST IDEOLOGY: Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany 1922–1945

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palgrave
macmillan

Transferred to digital printing in 2006.

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Abbreviations

AA	*Auswärtiges Amt* [German Foreign Ministry]
APA	*Außenpolitisches Amt*
BA	*Bundesarchiv* [Federal Republic of Germany (Berlin)]
BDO	*Bund Deutscher Offiziere* [League of German Officers]
DACHO	*Dach organisation der Film schaffender Deutschlands* [Umbrella Organisation of German Film-Makers]
DAF	*Deutsche Arbeitsfront* [German Labour Front]
DD	*Drahtlose Dienst* [Wireless News Service]
DFT	*Deutsche Filmtheater-Gesellschaft*
DGFP	Documents on German Foreign Policy
DNB	*Deutsche Nachrichtenbüro* [German News Agency]
DRZW	*Das deutsche Reich und der zweite Weltkrieg* [The German Reich and the Second World War]
DW	*Deutsche Wochenschau GmbH* [German Newsreel]
FO	Foreign Office
IMT	International Military Tribunal
KA-R	*Kulturpolitische Abteilung-Rundfunkreferat*
KPD	*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* [German Communist Party]
MGFA	*Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt*
NA	US National Archives
NKFD	*Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland* [National Committee of Free Germany]
NS	National Socialist
NSDAP	*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* [National Socialist German Workers Party]
OKW	*Oberkommando Wehrmacht* [Wehrmacht High Command]
OKW/WPr	*Oberkommando Wehrmacht/Wehrmacht-Propaganda* [Wehrmacht High Command/Propaganda Division]
PK	*Propaganda-Kompanien* [Wehrmacht Propaganda Troops]
PO	*Politische Organisation der* NSDAP [Political Organisation of the NSDAP]
PRO	Public Records Office (London)
RFD	*Reichsfilmdramatung* [Reich Film Dramatist]
RFK	*Reichsfilmkammer* [Reich Film Chamber]
RGB	*Reichsgesetzblatt*
RKK	*Reichskulturkammer* [Reich Culture Chamber]
RMVP	*Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda* [Reich Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda]
RPA	*Reichspropagandaämter* [Reich Propaganda Offices]

RPK	*Reichspressekammer* [Reich Press Chamber]
RPL	*Reichspropagandaleitung* [Reich Propaganda Head Office]
RRG	*Reichsrundfunkgesellschaft* [Reich Radio Company]
RRK	*Reichsrundfunkkammer* [Reich Radio Chamber]
RVDP	*Reichsverband der Deutschen Presse* [Reich Association of German Press]
SA	*Sturmabteilung* [Storm Division]
SD	*Sicherheitsdienst* [Security Service]
SPD	*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* [Social-Democratic German Party]
SPIO	*Spitzenorganisation der deutschen Filmwirtschaft* [Parent Organisation of the German Film Industry]
SS	*Schutzstaffeln* [Protection Troops]
UFA	*Universum-Film AG* (later renamed as UFI)
VB	Völkischer Beobachter
VDZV	*Verein Deutscher Zeitungsverleger* [Association of German Newspaper Publishers] (later prefixed with 'Reich' – RVDZV)
VfZ	*Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*
WB	*Wehrmachtberichte* [Wehrmacht Reports]
WFst	*Wehrmacht Führungsstab*
ZSg	*Zeitgeschichtliche Sammlungen* (Bundesarchiv)

Acknowledgements

Bristol were equally supportive and willing to share their expertise. I would like to thank especially Jim McMillan, Tim Cole and Ian Wei. Finally, I owe a very special thanks to Jill Stephenson who has always been my academic *guardian angel*, willing to impart her humbling knowledge on National Socialism and offering her unqualified support at all stages of my academic trajectory.

Archival and bibliographical research in Germany was greatly assisted from two generous grants: one from the Faculty of Arts Research Travel Fund, University of Bristol in 2003; and the other from the Faculty of Arts Small Projects Fund, Lancaster University during 2003–04. During my work in the Bundesarchiv (BA), Berlin, I received a lot of support and guidance from Jana Blumberg, especially in terms of locating relevant material and gaining swift access to them. I should also acknowledge my gratitude to the staff of the British Library, the National Library of Scotland, and the libraries of the universities of Lancaster, Edinburgh, Manchester and Sheffield for granting me access to their resources at very short notice and meeting requests beyond their call of duty. In an age of increased availability of excellent web resources, I feel that the study of NS propaganda has been greatly enhanced and crucially democratised through a series of online material. Apart from the convenience of consulting electronic publications whenever (and wherever) needed, I should also acknowledge a very big debt to Randall Bytwerk of Calvin University (University of Michigan) for creating a real gem of a website on NS propaganda. The material featured there provided me with a compass for the arduous task of charting the territory of primary sources, acting as both a point of reference and an incentive for further archival enquiry that enhanced the empirical aspect of this book.

A number of people very close to me were forced to endure my long working hours, volatile mood, rambling fascination and occasional anguish with this project – a project that became part of their lives far more than they would have wished for or I would have intended. My apologies to them come with my gratitude for helping me maintain a more balanced perspective on life and work alike. My parents and close friends have a share in this book to which I could not possibly do justice with words.

During the time I spent on this project, Iain 'Robbie' Robertson died very unexpectedly and prematurely. I had always admired his intellectual *élan vitale*, his eagerness to engage any subject and his ability to turn any conversation into a process of unconditionally sharing his extraordinary life and thought. He, his wife, Hilary and his family have made Scotland feel far more like my second *home* than I would have ever imagined. When he hastened to buy my first monograph, I promised to give him a copy of this book once it was published. It seems that, regrettably, I ran out of time. To dedicate this work to him is only a partial and belated redress.

Whilst this book owes so much to the kind help and advice of others, I alone am responsible for any error of fact or judgement in it.

Aristotle A. Kallis

Introduction: 'Totalitarianism', Propaganda, War and the Third Reich

Propaganda, propagandist and the audience

What exactly is *propaganda*? Nowadays, the word is usually associated with deception, lies and manipulation. And yet, propaganda did not always have such a clearly negative meaning. In the first decades of the twentieth century, it was deployed generically to indicate a systematic process of information management geared to promoting a particular goal and to guaranteeing a popular response as desired by the propagandist. As such, propaganda remains a sub-genus of mass communication and persuasion, developed in the context of modernity to deal with two parallel developments: on the one hand, the increasing expansion and sophistication of the 'public sphere' with its ever-growing thirst for information and opinion-forming; on the other hand, the exponential proliferation of available information, making it very difficult for the individual to identify, absorb and analyse the material. As one of the leading theorists of propaganda and communication, Jacques Ellul, noted,

> [i]t is the emergence of mass media which makes possible the use of pro-paganda techniques on a societal scale. The orchestration of press, radio and television to create a continuous, lasting and total environment ren-ders the influence of propaganda virtually unnoticed precisely because it creates a constant environment. Mass media provides the essential link between the individual and the demands of the technological society.[1]

Propaganda arose out of a need to prioritise, organise, correlate and then transmit information to the interested public, thus making full use of the opportunities offered by technology (mass media) and modernity (aggrega-tion of population, access to media) to that effect. State propaganda possessed sufficient legitimacy to make such choices on behalf of its citizens and then perform its function of supplying information as an expression of its *raison d'etat*; in other words, apart from simply informing the public, state

propaganda also became the vehicle for the promotion of communal desired objectives and of the state's own continuity. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the debate about the formulation of a systematic approach to 'propaganda' emerged in the context of the First World War, in Germany and elsewhere. At a time of full mobilisation for the attainment of a national goal (such as victory in the military confrontation), the need for methodical and efficient information strategies that would bolster the morale of the home front and mobilise society was particularly highlighted.[2]

Thus, propaganda did not simply provide information; it performed a wide variety of further functions – many of which were on behalf of its recipients. It was intended to respond to fundamental societal needs, such as *integration, correlation, guidance, motivation/mobilisation, adaptation, continuity* and even *diversion/relaxation*. 'Integration', in particular, is one of the most fundamental functions of propaganda, even more so because the modern mass society has an inherent tendency for fragmentation that runs counter to the functioning of society as a 'system'.[3] By promoting a common cognitive environment for information acquisition and interpretation, as well as a constant 'cultivation' of perceptions of the world, propaganda aims to integrate the person both as an individual and a member of a social group into a shared context of symbols, meanings and desired objectives. The existence of such a common and widely accepted anchor helps the other functions of 'correlation' or 'emplotment' (i.e., linking information in intelligible ways and thus bridging past, present and future) and 'guidance' (namely, indirect orientation of the audience towards particular patterns of predisposition, expression and often action). But the rest of the functions are also vital: 'motivation' refers to the provision of justifications and incentives for internalising the propaganda message, whilst 'mobilisation' is more directly geared towards propelling people into modes of individual or collective action as desired by the propagandist; 'adaptation' pertains to the bolstering of the audience's psychological ability to adjust to changing circumstances; 'continuity' of cognition and perception helps the public correlate the present with both the past and a desirable future; whilst diversion or relaxation constitute the essential punctuation of propaganda, providing a controlled respite for the audience and thus avoiding the danger of weariness.

Systematic application of the above elements of propaganda thus entails both providing and withholding information. Sometimes, the continuity of the wider context of reference is best preserved through omission (e.g. by withholding adverse information), distracting attention (through displacement of responsibility or focus) or by providing necessary relaxation (e.g. by avoiding an overflow of information). Entertainment and leisure are essential punctuations of modern life, providing stress-releasing valves for the individual and society. But even in this case, the audience remains the recipient of cultural symbols which it then processes with reference to its overall perception of reality. Therefore, it is impossible to separate mass

information from mass entertainment. Again, the demands of deploying the full media technological apparatus at the service of state propaganda functions led the leaders of wartime Germany in 1917 to enlist cinema, to the effort of providing a combination of news and entertainment to the home front. By that time radio broadcast had already started to find its place inside the households and thus to attract the attention of state authorities as a medium of communication between authorities and citizens. In the 1920s and particularly during the 1930s, technological advances and systematic state policies led to a rapid expansion of the number of appliances used inside German houses, as well as in cinema infrastructure across the country.

The Nazis were not the instigators of the process that saw broadcasting and cinema – in addition to the already established press – as potential purveyors of dominant symbols and images geared towards societal integration; nor were they innovators in perceiving media, in their dual function of providing information and entertainment, as crucial for shaping and/or bolstering attitudes in the longer term. Attitudes, unlike perceptions (that relate to short-term events), concern value-systems and fundamental beliefs. In this respect, effective propaganda anchors incidental arguments in the wider environment of attitudes and values; and altering the latter necessitates systematic but subtle cultivation of the desired alternative. In 1940, the National Socialist (NS) regime commissioned a film about euthanasia at a time when its own secret operation against the mentally ill (code-named T–4) had already been secretly underway. The film, a social drama (and not a documentary) titled, *Ich klange an*, premiered in 1941 and was received with mixed audience reactions – as for many, it dealt with a taboo issue that ran counter to the notion of the sanctity of human life.[4] In commissioning a film that broached the subject of an operation that it had already started in utter secrecy, the NS regime recognised the immense difficulty of effecting a swift attitudinal change on this issue and chose an indirect way to initiate a change ('subpropaganda'),[5] by correlating the taboo issue with other, widely shared values (e.g. merciful termination of a tortured life as an act of utter humanism). The conclusion it drew from audience reactions (as well as by vocal criticisms from the Catholic constituency) was that it still had a long way to go before effecting a real change in societal perceptions on the matter. By contrast, the negative depiction of 'the Jew', in the press and films such as *Jud Süß* or *Der ewige Jude* (both released in 1941) was far more acceptable to a public long-steeped in dominant anti-Semitic images.[6] Understanding and acceptance in this case was easily and convincingly performed without necessitating changes in broad attitudinal norms.[7]

This observation leads us to another significant point, relating to reception of the propaganda message by the targeted audience. The suggestion that any form of effective propaganda results in 'brainwashing' fails to take account of the recipient's ability to resist a particular message, however successfully this may be presented to them. As in the example used above, although the

treatment of the 'euthanasia' issue was highly sensitive and careful, the majority of the population resisted the allusion, as they were reluctant to challenge their long-embedded beliefs and values. The active complicity or even passive consensus of the audience cannot be taken for granted, even in putatively 'totalitarian' systems where individual issues become related to a one-dimensional world-view. This is because, even in a 'revolutionary' situation[8] of break with the past, the replacement of traditional values with attitudes derived from a 'revolutionary' ideology requires a long-term process of careful, step-by-step cultivation. In the interim period, propaganda cannot afford to assume that such values have lost their emotional and psychological significance for its target audience; otherwise, it risks losing the latter's attention and encounters a far stronger resistance. In this context, the most effective propaganda is one that maintains a dialogue between traditional social principles and its own alternative prescriptions by using some of the vocabulary, terminology and fundamentals of the existing value system. This would indeed suggest to the audience that the propaganda anchor is firmly fixed in the sea-bed of social fundamentals. In this way, the audience can be brought to believe that the way the propagandist adresses a particular pressing issue of the day either accords with convictions and attitudes that have long been held within society, or at least does not violate them. Such congruence is, of course, often illusory. By undermining the validity of entrenched attitudes very slowly and in interconnection with other values that the society also shares, successful propaganda opts for long-term, gradual attitudinal change through sustained exposure to an alternative.[9]

Once an attitude has been seriously subverted or overshadowed by an alternative set of values, the behaviour that was originally associated with it would also change accordingly – and at this point, propaganda may become more aggressive in providing the necessary guidance for translating attitudinal change into behavioural adjustment. Interestingly, Goebbels had always operated on the basis of a distinction between *Stimmung* (sentiment, morale) and *Haltung* (observable behaviour),[10] underlining their correspondence and also a crucial difference: the latter was more difficult to change, whilst the former remained far more volatile and vulnerable to short-term news. Goebbels realised that behaviours emanate from fundamental beliefs and may change only after a long-term attitudinal shift.[11] Therefore, effective propaganda requires constantly addressing both, but with different strategies and tools, in order to maintain their correspondence or to channel their conflict in the desired direction.[12]

Tensions between profound attitudes, *Stimmung* and *Haltung* may arise in a host of contexts and forms. For example, in the light of the impressive military victories of 1940 and of the first half of 1941, NS propaganda capitalised heavily on the improvement of the population's *Stimmung*, in order to effect changes in their deeper attitudes towards the war (which from the beginning had been at best circumspect). By contrast, in the aftermath of

the Stalingrad defeat, in the winter of 1943, propaganda efforts were concentrated mainly on shielding attitudes and behaviour from the adverse effect of short-term morale disintegration. Then, in 1944–45, when belief in victory or even in the alleged infallibility of Hitler began to crumble, Goebbels used different strategies aimed at bolstering the *Haltung*, even if morale continued to collapse. Whilst he found that the breakdown of the *Stimmung* was virtually irreversible in the absence of positive developments in the military field, he strove to maintain a broad correspondence between population attitudes and behaviour, noting that a positive psychological identification with the regime's war goals was no longer an option. So, instead of the confident, triumphalist and self-congratulatory discourses that had characterised NS propaganda output in the first three years of the war, he resorted to what may be described as 'fear appeals' and 'negative integration'.[13] This rested on the premise that, whilst the majority of the German population would no longer identify positively with their previous attitudes (many of them forged under the influence of earlier NS propaganda activities), they should remain attached to them through fear of the consequences of defeat. This tactical, pragmatic shift in propaganda strategy expressed itself in negative discourses – such as 'betrayal of the fatherland', anti-Bolshevism, anti-Semitism and 'anti-plutocratic' themes against the western Allies – that had been consistently articulated in the past (hence their plausibility) but now had to be strengthened in order to make society remain psychologically ready to resist as a lesser evil than defeat. Propagation of a positive commitment to National Socialism and to the active defence of its alleged achievements largely faded in the background; safeguarding the Vaterland against the prospect of 'collapse' (*Untergang*), and 'chaos' increasingly became the common denominator of resistance, fighting power and integration.

   Overall, the propagandists have an array of *techniques* at their disposal that they may use for formulating a message. They specify the content of day-to-day communication with their audience, run campaigns lasting for weeks or months, provide guiding principles for understanding the events presented, use ideological referents to supply meaning to the fragments of information that they have chosen to impart and thus maintain the consistency and continuity of their specific message. The latter's resonance with the public depends on a number of variables that, whilst nearly impossible to diagnose accurately in their full complexity, require the propagandists to take calculated risks about the most appropriate form(s) of communication, based on both good identification and deep knowledge of the target audience. Broadly speaking, any propaganda campaign addresses four interconnected needs: to bolster the moral validity of the state's actions and at the same time minimise knowledge or embellish perception of the less pleasant aspects of its own side's behaviour; and to exaggerate the alleged immorality or errors of the opponent(s) whilst consciously underestimating their more positive

attributes.[14] At any given moment the goal of audience integration is performed by a combination of 'positive' and 'negative' themes, depending on the circumstances and the desired psychological effect. Shifts in the techniques of propaganda are often dictated by variables beyond the control of the propagandists; but the latter may still achieve a desirable reaction from their audience by making effective choices from their panoply of available techniques. Thus, whilst the propagandists' control over what actually happens is seriously limited and their response often reactive, the power of their position lies in their ability to organise the information and present it through a plethora of versatile techniques and devices to their carefully chosen recipients.

Effective propaganda and the limits of NS 'totalitarianism'

In one of the classic accounts of wartime NS propaganda, Edward Herzstein described the overall record of Germany's efforts in this field as 'the war that Hitler won'.[15] This description encapsulates the essence of wartime propaganda as psychological warfare and makes an unmistakeable judgement about its overall effectiveness. How does a regime win a propaganda war, especially in the context of a situation whose outcome is largely and crucially determined in distant battlefields? Propaganda cannot and does not win wars, at least not in the literal sense of the word. Besides, it is ironic that Herzstein uses this categorical judgement for NS Germany – that is, for a regime and system that suffered a crushing defeat in the Second World War. Could it be that propaganda may be effective *regardless of the military situation* – that in fact its degree of success is irrelevant to military realities?

The benchmarks for success or failure of propaganda activities remain extremely hard to define in unequivocal terms.[16] What might appear effective in swinging short-term attitudes does not necessarily influence dispositions in the long-term; equally, failure of a particular theme, slogan or campaign does not necessarily entail a wider shift of population attitudes. Wartime propaganda is primarily concerned with sustaining and enforcing long-term integration, as well as facilitating mobilisation along desired lines of behaviour. But a rigid separation of short- and long-term propaganda dimensions is impossible: whilst a single message is not in itself enough to effect fundamental psychological changes (desired or undesirable), short-term techniques blend with long-term strategies and vice versa. In ideal-typical terms, successful propaganda anchors specific perceptions on desired psychological attitudes, emplots convincingly the particular in the desirable broader narrative, maintains its psychological authority by corresponding to its audience's perception of reality – which it has helped to shape in the first place – and manages a favourable set of developments. In the specific circumstances of war, the effective functioning of a propaganda network also depends on the

centralisation of the whole operation, which ensures overall control of the sources and the flow of information, in order to maintain unity and coherence.

War effects fundamental changes in the organisation and functioning of any propaganda network, regardless of overall political orientation. As Michael Balfour has shown in his comparative study of German and British wartime propaganda, the two countries' strategies to information control converged substantially from September 1939; and this happened more because of the adoption of aggressive information management techniques by the latter, rather than due to the radicalisation of practices employed by the former.[17] Whilst before 1939 propaganda in Britain operated in a more pluralistic context in interaction with a developed 'public sphere' (in a way that the NS regime had rejected ever since 1933), the needs of the war caused a profound inhibition of plural public discussion and a parallel tightening of the official handling of information. Although the convergence should not be exaggerated (for example, the British shift towards control and centralisation was incidental and tied to the exigencies of war, while for NS Germany it was the default and desired mode of operation), clear distinctions between allegedly free and controlled information flow became increasingly blurred and problematic.

The NS propaganda network had long before developed a trend towards ideological *co-ordination* and administrative/political *centralisation*, in tandem with a demobilisation of the developed 'public sphere' that it had inherited from the Weimar Republic. The outbreak of the war supplied opportunities for stepping up a gear or two and bringing the system closer to an ideal-typical mode of mono-dimensional operation. Unlike the case of Britain or the USA, this was no deviation or temporary concession; it made possible a permanent, ever-evolving alignment of propaganda with a totalitarian management of information, subjecting to its rigid logic every other aspect of societal activity, from mobilisation and education to entertainment. In this crucial respect, NS authorities had a head start in 1939 – capitalising on previous achievements and operating in a largely familiar territory. No wonder then that they were better placed to play the game and indeed 'win the war'.

Or did they? Against the conventional wisdom of a tight, Machiavellian monopoly exercised by the Minister of National Enlightenment and Propaganda, Dr Joseph Goebbels, some historians have detected ambiguities, divisions and contradictions. Their Goebbels remains a supremely able manager of propaganda, a central agent with clear views and strategies, who was however operating in a plural, non-normative decision-making process and was not always capable of translating his ideas into practice. Such an analysis serves as a cautionary tale that is relevant to all accounts of NS rule from the viewpoint of 'totalitarianism' – that reality was often substantially different from intention or rhetoric.[18] Thus, when Friedrich and Brzezinski talked of '[a] technologically conditioned, near-complete monopoly of

control, in the hands of the party and of the government, of all means of effective mass communication, such as the press, radio, and motion pictures'[19] as evidence of 'totalitarian' rule, he was referring to an organisational process of 'co-ordination', bringing all information and leisure networks under the full control of the authorities, eliminating pluralism and the possibility of alternative versions of 'truth' reaching the public.[20] Concentration of authority, however, in the state does not necessarily mean effective exercise of power. Even in Brzezinski's statement above, the dualism between 'government' and 'party' was extremely problematic in NS Germany, since Hitler had resisted a definitive normative regulation of relations between state and party after the seizure of power.[21] But even within each of these two domains, power was neither crystallised nor exercised in mono-dimensional terms, as will be demonstrated in this book. Therefore, to talk of a fully-fledged 'totalitarian system' of propaganda in the Third Reich would involve a troubling confusion between intentions or rhetoric, on the one hand, and a fluid reality, on the other.

In fact, even the word 'system' is misleading in the context of NS propaganda. It conveys an impression of organisational clarity and division of labour, integration and coherence that eluded the NS system of rule almost immediately after the *Machtergreifung* and simply became even more convoluted in subsequent years. In this respect, war accentuated pre-existing centrifugal tendencies in the whole organisation of the NS regime that affected adversely the conduct of propaganda. This book places the whole debate on NS wartime propaganda into the analytical framework of *polyocracy* that undermined from within the project of producing a genuinely 'totalitarian' propaganda 'system'. Whilst ideological co-ordination and accumulation of jurisdictions proved easier to achieve, drawing firm lines of authority amongst the competing state and party agencies was another matter. Hitler's charismatic leadership proved impervious to bureaucratic rationalisation, creating a network of semi-autonomous 'networks' that often cancelled each other out in terms of achieving centralised control over propaganda. It is argued that the output of NS propaganda cannot be adequately understood in terms of a Goebbels monopoly over strategy and output; the result was more akin to a tangle of threads, guidelines, discourses and initiatives that were bound together only by vague objectives: to ensure NS domination and 'cultural hegemony' (qua Antonio Gramsci); to support the psychological structures of Hitler's charismatic authority (qua Kershaw's scheme of 'working towards the Führer'); to sustain or even bolster the staying power of the domestic front; and to win the war. Beyond these broad elements of convergence, there were indeed multiple *propagandas*, managed by different agencies ('networks') to different short-term goals, that cumulatively (through their joint effect but often through their profound contradictions) made up what we may schematically call NS propaganda.

The highly porous nature of NS 'totalitarianism' in the field of propaganda extended beyond the mere sphere of administrative control. The absence of

a truly internally centralised and normative decision-making process established parallel networks of information-gathering and dissemination. In every classic propaganda schema, the role of 'the propagandist' is crucial in terms of making short-term decisions about *what*, *when* and *how* to say (and, by implication, to omit); of maintaining the correlation between the specific and the generic; and of working out long-term strategies of communication and persuasion. The propagandist stands on the crucial junction between gathering of raw material and transmitting the propaganda message. Their central position ('gatekeeper'[22]) theoretically ensures a wide appraisal of the available data, a careful choice of themes and strategies, as well as a co-ordinated diffusion of the propaganda message through a combination of available resources (in this case, mass media and events, such as speeches, public gatherings etc.). They make choices on the basis of his profound knowledge of their audience (knowledge supported by frequent assessment of the effectiveness of propaganda through opinion reports) and then are responsible for revisiting their overall strategy in the light of the message's reception. The division of labour should emanate from a clear delegation and exercise of partial power within the parameters of a single overall strategy, as defined and articulated by the head of the system and carried out through a clearly defined hierarchical structure. At the same time, the propagandist himself is integrated in a wider hierarchical schema (the state), in which he becomes the recipient of delegation of power by his superiors in a structure that extends from the highest echelon of political power downwards. In other words, the propagandist functions as the crucial mediator between the overall orientation of the regime as communicated to him from above and the ancillary work of agencies under his administrative control.[23]

According to the administrative hierarchy of the Third Reich, this person should have been Joseph Goebbels, with his institutional power-base in the Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda [*Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda* (RMVP)] acting as a sorting-house working towards the fulfilment of its figurehead's strategy with the rest of the relevant agencies following its lead. Yet in NS Germany, this pattern of division of labour never worked. On the one hand, the non-normative character of Hitler's 'charismatic' power and, on the other, the polycratic nature of decision-making, even within allegedly separate and specific spheres of jurisdiction, rendered centralisation and continuity practically impossible. The roots of this administrative confusion and ambiguity reach deep into the time before the outbreak of the war; the military conflict simply aggravated the trend through proliferation of information sources and data, as well as through an even less normative exercise of power from above. That it became more visible from 1941–42 onwards and damaged the effectiveness of the whole propaganda operation had more to do with the rapidly deteriorating fortunes of the Third Reich on the battlefield. In early 1943, Goebbels

had predicted that,

> [t]o praise a Blitz campaign needs no toughness … [W]e must prepare our minds and hearts for bitter experiences.[24]

At that point, the whole NS leadership was only starting to realise the practical significance of a diachronic truth: that propaganda alone does not make victories or defeats.[25] The striking contrast in the Third Reich's military performance between the initial period of triumph (1939–41) and the subsequent wave of defeats on all fronts (1942–45) constituted the raw material of reality that no propaganda apparatus could ignore, silence or twist beyond recognition without losing credibility or effectiveness. During the 1942–44 period, the dramatic reversal of fortunes on the military front and the cumulative effect of the war on the civilian population within the Reich (restrictions imposed by 'total war', destruction by Allied air warfare, drop in standards of living) served to illustrate the inability of the regime's propaganda network to juggle a plethora of conflicting expectations and ambitions: to convince public opinion of the gravity of the situation whilst upholding morale; to warn of the dangers whilst rallying public enthusiasm for the war, the regime and the Führer; to display sensitivity to the privations of German soldiers and civilians whilst continuing to spread the gospel of eventual 'victory'; and, even more crucially, to forewarn the Reich's citizens of the trials that lay ahead at the same time that it still strove to keep the longed-for triumphal conclusion of the military effort in (visible) perspective. Setbacks forced the regime to change its propaganda effort, in terms of both discourse and method, by trading triumphal optimism for a mixture of stark realism and a fair amount of escapism. However, propaganda remained essentially bound to the reality that it was meant to embellish, celebrate or mitigate, depending on the situation. In this respect, its degree of success depended on many complex factors, only some of were directly under the control of the regime.

The result was that, little by little after 1941, the official regime propaganda discourse became discordant with the perceptions of the vast majority of the German civilian population. National Socialism had established a hegemonic control over communication – what I refer to as 'monopoly of truth' – and upheld it through an equally hegemonic handling of communication devices. This monopoly operated on two levels. First, it described a system of information exclusively directed by the regime authorities after a period of ideological and institutional 'co-ordination'. Second, by virtue of its 'total' signification of reality through references to its one-dimensional ideological core, NS propaganda was able to mediate in a wholesale manner between 'reality' and population, thereby establishing a filter through which the former would be viewed and assessed by the latter. This resulted in the cultivation of a 'substitute (*ersatz*) reality'[26] that often (and increasingly after

1941) lay in dissonance to the actual developments, but could be sustained in the absence of alternative sources of information. The case of the sinking of the passenger liner, *Athenia* in early September 1939 provides a case study of how this 'monopoly of truth' operated and how it could nurture an 'ersatz reality'. After an initial period of confusion about the circumstances of the incident, the NS propaganda authorities found unequivocal evidence that responsibility lay with one of their own U-boats. Nevertheless, the authorities continued to accuse Britain of sinking the boat. In the November bulletin of the *Reichspropagandaleitung* (RPL) – Reich Propaganda Head Office, to low-level party propagandists, it was claimed that,

> [n]o means is too evil for these puppeteers and warmongers. They even sink their own ships, as in the case of the 'Athenia', letting innocent people perish.[27]

In the case of the *Athenia* incident, an 'ersatz reality' completely divorced from the facts was actually created at the upper echelons of the NS hierarchy and then distributed as 'truth' throughout the propaganda network (even Hans Fritzsche, the then head of the Home Press Division of the RMVP, maintained at Nuremberg that he had no idea about the truth until he discussed the issue with Admiral Raeder in prison[28]) and to the public. The German population, shielded from enemy counter-propaganda and alternative sources of information, were expected to believe the official version of the story – and in this case they duly did.

However, the 'monopoly of truth' that the NS regime claimed was challenged and eroded in subsequent years. Although counter-propaganda from within the Reich had been effectively eliminated in the pre-war years, alternative channels of information-gathering and opinion-forming could never be fully eradicated. Radio broadcasts from the Reich's enemies could reach Germany and, in spite of the introduction of severe sanctions for tuning in to foreign stations, a substantial part of the German wartime society did listen – sporadically at the beginning, but more consistently later. Then, when the western Allies achieved superiority in the air warfare and flew over the German skies almost uninhibited in 1943–45, they repeatedly showered the civilian population with leaflets offering a very different perspective on the military developments. In parallel, the exposure of German society to a first-hand experience of the Reich's deteriorating military fortunes (spiralling number of soldier-deaths; reports by soldiers on leave; effects of air raids; deterioration of standards of living) underlined a discrepancy between the official propaganda line and the everyday perceptions of reality (see Ch. 6). As a result, full control over information and perceptions of reality was never really achieved by the authorities, who saw the authority of their propaganda output suffer considerably under the weight of a very different 'reality' that, contrary to their desires, came crushing in on German society. This meant

that during the period of 'defeat' NS propaganda was gradually deprived of its 'monopoly of truth' – if not on a purely organisational level, then certainly in mass psychological terms.[29]

Main premises

This book is about the conduct of propaganda under an aspiring 'totalitarian' state and in the context of 'total war' – a war that started amidst strong reservations and scepticism and entered a period of what appeared as unassailable triumph (1940–41) before sliding into disaster and defeat (1942–45). It aims to revisit two conventional assumptions about NS propaganda: that it operated in a purely totalitarian fashion, whereby ideological/political co-ordination, institutional centralisation and 'monopoly of truth' were taken for granted after six years (1933–39) of radical changes in state and society; and that it remained effective throughout the war period, making a crucial contribution to the mobilisation and staying power of the German population until the very end, even to the point of claiming that this was a war within the war that the regime 'won'. While there are elements of truth in both these statements, the book intends to show that our perceptions of NS wartime propaganda have been shrouded in exaggeration – about the generic role of propaganda in modern societies; about the 'totalitarian' nature of the NS regime in practice; about the degree of central control exercised over propaganda activities by Goebbels and the RMVP; about the attitudes and behaviours of German society; as well as the role of propaganda output in directly shaping them.

For the purpose of the subsequent analysis, 'propaganda' is understood as a standard function of political legitimation[30] and societal integration in all modern environments. It is borne out of the need for communication between state and its citizens, the provision of information for the 'public sphere', the cultivation of shared dominant symbolic patterns that serve as points of reference for processing reality and the channelling of societal energies into modes of action/behaviour deemed by the authorities as desirable. Because of such broad functions, propaganda should be understood not simply in the narrow sense of information-provision through established networks of opinion-shaping, but also in an expanded manner, encompassing and saturating the cultivation of dominant norms of cultural perception through language discourses, art, entertainment and 'media events'.[31]

The impact of a war situation – especially a 'total' modern conflict requiring full mobilisation over an extended period of time – has a 'totalising' effect on the functioning of state and society, hence on propaganda as well, thus placing it at the heart of information flow and shaping perceptions of a reality that the population is ill-equipped to grasp in its entirety. However, even in this context of monopoly and direct opportunities for mass opinion-shaping, propaganda mediates between events and interpretation, without controlling

the former or assuming the effectiveness of the latter. Herein lies the value of Herzstein's provocative statement about NS propaganda: it can be effective and successful in spite of the outcome of the military effort it supports. Military defeat in this domain, when resulting from strategic or logistical factors, does not reflect a failed propaganda effort; and, equally, a war may be won on the battlefield in spite of propaganda per se. Thus, the effectiveness of propaganda should be judged on different terrains: ability to integrate, ideally in positive and voluntary but, if need be, also in negative and even coercive terms; capacity for sustaining its 'monopoly' of truth, in institutional and psychological terms alike; aptitude for intelligible correlation of events that maintains continuity and anchors popular perception in a familiar and resonant common ground of values; ability to manage behavioural and attitudinal patterns amongst the audience in order to generate the desired action; but also unity of purpose and continuity in the propaganda output itself, based on institutional and political coherence.

In other words, *effective* propaganda involves success in a chain of interrelated processes and functions – from data collection to the formulation of the message, the choice of devices for its dissemination, the timing and, finally, the reception of the output as well as its effect on attitude-behaviour.[32] It is not a matter of one-directional communication between the person who transmits the message and passive receivers but a complex process of negotiation, shared knowledge and trust, reassessment and reformulation. It is also crucial to stress that effective propaganda operates on two linked time-frames: one *short-term* and incidental (conducted within a specific timeframe), the other *long-term* (appealing to deeper cultivated attitudes, beliefs and perceptions). In this respect, the successful (as outlined above) conduct of propaganda at any given moment derives from a combination of effective communication per se and equally effective cultivation of generic shared attitudes. And the converse is also true: ineffective propaganda may be the result of inappropriate message-formulation in the short term or of the failure to correlate even the most sophisticated message with established attitudinal patterns or specific audience needs. To put it differently, an appeal to fundamental values and perceptions is more likely to be effective in spite of weaknesses in the handling of short-term issues than a communication – however well planned and well executed – that fails to appeal to deep, shared beliefs or is untimely.

Structure and foci of the book

Analysing the structure, conduct and effectiveness of propaganda involves passing through various stages: the ideological context in which it takes place; the question of institutional agency; the specifics of administering a propaganda network; the reasons behind the choice of particular communication techniques and media devices for its dissemination; the nature of the target

audience and its reactions; and, finally, the evaluation of this feedback by the propaganda authorities. This study has an analytical bias towards agency and the conduct of propaganda rather than towards its reception and effect on public opinion. The latter aspect has been meticulously explored in authoritative studies, both classic and recent.[33] Rather than charting population reactions in an exhaustive manner, the book offers insights into the organisation, management and conduct of NS wartime propaganda, whilst at the same time probing the relation between the desired and actual effect on population. Chapters 1 and 2 cover the whole NS period, because one of the methodological assumptions of this project is that wartime propaganda inherited powerful (and often irreversible) tendencies from the first six years of NS rule. In order to understand how the system worked in 1939–45, it is essential to examine its basic organisational principles and processes, as well as to chronicle the ways in which co-ordination and centralisation was (or was not) attained. The notion that Goebbels and the RMVP (or, for that matter, any other single party or state institution) reigned over a clearly delimited and centrally commanded system of propaganda will be revisited and challenged. In fact, it will be shown that war accentuated previous tendencies, intensified inheritances of the past and whetted the appetite of those already involved in the propaganda effort to claim a further stake in the formulation of the regime's propaganda policy. Another powerful assumption that will be questioned is the intentionalist account of political 'co-ordination' (*Gleichschaltung*) as an ideological and linear project; instead, co-ordination will be examined as an open-ended process that often contradicted the parallel goal of centralisation and whose timing and initiatives were largely defined by structural factors (e.g. economic considerations, power-struggle within the regime or the party, etc.).

This discussion sets the scene for the main analysis of NS propaganda during wartime. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the main themes ('discourses') that the regime used throughout the war. Here the focus is on long-term narratives that formed the backbone of NS propaganda until its defeat in 1945, providing its overall message with a gloss of cognitive and psychological 'consistency'.[34] The basic methodological premise is a distinction between *positive* and *negative integration*. By examining broad discourse subjects (such as 'national community', 'mission', 'anti-plutocratic' struggle; 'anti-Bolshevism' etc.), the chapter shows how NS propaganda gradually shifted its emphasis from positive to negative schemes of integration and how it reverted to a 'common denominator' [defending Germany against a concerted campaign by its time-long international enemies] that ensured its coherence and a modicum of integrative success. Chapters 4–7 provide a roughly chronological account of NS propaganda during wartime. Emphasis is placed on how short-term events were communicated to the public and emploted into a broader context of objectives and beliefs. Whilst Chapter 4 deals with the period from the outbreak of the war until the launch of

Operation Barbarossa (1939–41), Chapters 5–7 deal with the management of an increasingly inauspicious 'reality' and with the strategies employed in order to accentuate positive developments, divert attention, justify setbacks and maintain the integrative power of its propaganda message for the domestic front (1942–45).

Chapter 8 deals with cinema. The decision to separate more traditional types of propaganda from a theoretically leisure activity such as cinema is a conscious one. Whilst printed matter, speeches and radio broadcasts had a specific regularity and 'frequency', films were far more complex undertakings, planned over a far longer period, destined for the whole Volk (as opposed to broadcasts or press that tended to include a high degree of regional diversification) and were not weighed down by the need for direct information. Furthermore, celluloid necessitated different communication strategies, as well as a far more complex balance between indoctrination and entertainment, politics and art, and factual accuracy and diversion. Even newsreel – by definition more akin to standard 'news propaganda' – served a bridging function between information and leisure, depicting war as a sort of epic battle in a way that printed propaganda was ill-suited to do. The methodology of this chapter is rather different as it deals with complex questions of art-versus-ideology, entertainment-versus-propaganda etc. Such distinctions, it is argued, existed only on the level of *perception*, not of function; in other words, whilst technically different films were perceived by the public as belonging to different genres (and were labelled as such by the regime), this does not justify a differentiation between 'propaganda' and 'light' cinema. Three interesting trends in the RMVP's cinema policy are discussed in detail: first, the monitoring of every film – regardless of its propagandistic or not content and theme – for cultural symbols and political references; second, the attempt to unify the spheres of indoctrination and leisure; and, third, the effort to align film production to contemporary or projected political prerequisites (e.g. anti-Soviet films after Stalingrad, anti-American films after Pearl Harbour; films about the Jews at the time that a planned radicalisation of anti-Jewish policy was underway etc.).

1
Propaganda, 'Co-ordination' and 'Centralisation': The Goebbels Network in Search of a Total Empire

One of the most unrelenting orthodoxies in the analysis of interwar fascist regimes concerns the alleged commitment of the fascist leaderships to promote an integral 'co-ordination' of the structures of power that they had inherited. Adolf Hitler forced the political establishment of the stillborn Weimar Republic to surrender authority to him and began the process of improvising his NS state. Within three years, the NS leadership had succeeded in appropriating, centralising and establishing an uncontested hegemony over Germany's political, economic, social and cultural life.[1] The existence of a plan behind the legal and political measures, introduced with conspicuous speed by the NS regime immediately after the handing-over of power, was claimed to reflect its 'revolutionary' nature[2] and its wholesale intention to colonise, transform or appropriate the structures of power on the basis of an integral vision of 'total' authority and direction.[3] It was precisely the totality of this vision and the disdain for alternatives not sanctioned by NS world view (*Weltanschauung*) that points to a degree of correlation between intention and political action.

The main objective of the NS regime, immediately after 30 January 1933 was its political and social consolidation. This priority was determined by the very practical deficits of the 'seizure of power' – neither a seizure in revolutionary terms, nor an unchallenged monopoly of power. The pressure of international and domestic respectability, of wider economic necessities, of inter-systemic political bargaining, and of co-habitation with strong pillars of the *ancien régime* vigilantly tolerant towards the new radical NS project and often strikingly lukewarm vis-à-vis Hitler's initiatives, generated a realistic attitude to the goal of 'co-ordination' that (at least in 1933 or in 1934) appeared anything but assured in its scope and direction.

Even in propaganda – a field so vital for an aspiring 'totalitarian' system – the NS regime was confronted with an elaborate network of competing interests

and elites, whose support or co-operation was crucial in three different ways: first, as a structural prerequisite for the consolidation of NS rule in the first difficult years of power-sharing and potential challenge; second, in order to maintain the impression of *voluntary* co-ordination (as opposed to aggressive requisition) as the fastest and least disruptive strategy for 'total' control over information, indoctrination and leisure; and, third, in those cases where the NS movement lacked in expertise, clarity of vision and competitive advantage when faced with the power of entrenched interests in the same field that had been permitted to survive the *Machtergreifung*. A snapshot of NS Germany in 1933 or even in 1934 would have offered the impression of striking continuity in crucial areas such as press ownership and activities, cinema production and cultural patronage in general. With the exception of the swift elimination of socialist-communist activities and the beginning of the process of removing 'Jewish influence' (*Entjudung*) that would gather significant momentum in subsequent years, 'co-ordination' seemed remarkably orderly and consensual. However, even this gradualist and long-term approach to 'co-ordination' was not accompanied by a consistent policy of totalitarian centralisation. The more the 'charismatic' Hitler hesitated to authorise a radicalisation of attitude vis-à-vis traditional elites and interests, and the more he refrained from empowering specific agencies and figures to proceed with the accumulation of the spoils of 'co-ordination', the more centrifugal the system became and the more the internal jurisdictional battle for control over slices of the NS empire was complicated.

Any account of NS propaganda centres on the person of Dr Joseph Goebbels. Appointed minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment in March 1933, he retained his party identity as Gauleiter of the crucial Berlin area and belonged to the select circle of Reich leaders (*Reichsleiter*), courtesy of his long *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP – National Socialist German Workers Party) membership and his political talent. An 'old fighter' with strong organizational skills, he came from the radical wing of the party and had opposed Hitler's centralising and 'normalising' strategy in the mid-1920s; but, unlike the Strasser brothers, he was flexible enough to adjust to the new realities of Hitler's 'charismatic' authority and played an instrumental role in the crucial months between the Führer's appointment in January 1933 and the decisive NSDAP electoral victory two months later. Goebbels shared with his leader a deep appreciation of the potential of modern propaganda and of the importance of establishing patterns of long-term political hegemony, not simply on the basis of coercion but also through positive popular identification with the new regime. He was also quick to grasp the organisational ramifications of Hitler's appointments as Chancellor, hastening to combine his party rank with a clearly defined institutional role in the new NS state. His dual role as RPL since 1930 and official minister with the same remit since 1933 reflected the fundamental process of a party-led takeover of the German state; his subsequent efforts to conduct and co-ordinate

NS propaganda from his ministerial office epitomised the prevalent culture of legalism that inspired early NS policy, concerned with curtailing the more radical forces of 'constant revolution' within the NSDAP and with granting a degree of normativity to the dual nature of party–state relations after 1933.

Goebbels was forced to wage a dual battle throughout the lifespan of the NS regime: first, along with other NS party and state agencies, to bring the broad remit of propaganda activities under the control of the regime in a totalitarian direction that involved the complete elimination of non-NS influences and jurisdictions; second, against these very same NS party and regime institutions that interfered in the domain of propaganda, thus contesting and subverting Goebbels's grip. Technically, the Propaganda minister was right in asserting that a fully co-ordinated and centralised network of propaganda – extending over all involved media and agencies of information, indoctrination and leisure – was the necessary and sufficient condition for the exercise of a fully-fledged 'totalitarian' control over society. For his regime and party opponents, however, co-ordination and centralisation were far from intertwined; in fact, so long as the latter was synonymous with control by the RMVP alone, it was deemed as undesirable. Instead, decentralising the initial 'propaganda' remit of the RMVP by dividing it into distinct spheres of activity (e.g. radio, press, cinema, etc.) and then centralising authority over each of them was the alternative strategy of all Goebbels's competitors. In parallel, this involved a conscious challenging and subverting of the RMVP's authority over all fields of activity as a means for averting full centralisation. The result of this ongoing internecine struggle was not simply administrative and jurisdictional disarray, but also obstruction of the primary process of 'co-ordination' per se.[4]

It is perhaps fashionable to talk of 'waves' of co-ordination ('fascistisation') in the study of NS propaganda.[5] There is, however, an unmistakeable pattern of stock-taking and resumption in the take-over and reconfiguration of hegemonic structures. The first wave coincided with the institutional entrenchment of NS rule immediately after Hitler's appointment – establishment of the RMVP; Reich Culture Chamber; Editors' Law; Cinema Law; re-organisation of broadcasting and so on. The second wave followed in the 1935–37 period – 'Amann ordinances' for the German press; beginning of the financial restructuring of the film industry under the command of Max Winkler; centralisation of broadcasting and so on. In preparation for, and with the start of the Second World War the prerequisites of the military effort effected new far-reaching changes on the network of information and leisure, as well as a closer relation between the two from the regime's point of view. Finally, from 1942 onwards the ultimate phase of co-ordination witnessed a radicalisation of state control over propaganda media – full nationalisation of film industry; control and streamlining of broadcasting, and so on. However, while *co-ordination* (in the sense of administrative subjugation, ideological alignment and political monopolisation) proceeded with rather spectacular – if