

Hitler - Who Voted For Him?

David Welch attributes the Nazi leader's electoral success to much more than slick propaganda.

In January 1933, von Schleicher's government, which had attempted to conciliate both Centre and Left interests within the Weimar system, was unable to secure a majority in the Reichstag and resigned. On 30 January the President, Field Marshal Hindenburg, accepted a cabinet with Hitler as Chancellor, von Papen as Vice-Chancellor and nationalists including Nazis in other posts. There is little mystery about the electoral success in 1933 of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). Hitler became Chancellor constitutionally. The suggestion that Hitler and his party somehow 'seized' power is rather misleading. The Nazis themselves are largely responsible for perpetuating this myth by continuing to refer to a *Kampfzeit* (period of struggle) and to their *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power). Admittedly having gained power the Nazis used the Reichstag fire of 27 February 1933 as a pretext for suspending civil liberties and holding elections in circumstances highly favourable to themselves. In the elections of 5 March the NSDAP made further gains, winning 288 seats but failed to secure an overall majority (43.9 per cent).

In this article I want to look at the means employed by the Nazis that led to their electoral success and, particularly to reappraise the view that they somehow 'conquered the masses' and that propaganda alone had 'brainwashed' the German people into electing them. Merely to talk in terms of the 'conquest of the masses' implies the manipulation or seduction of millions into voting for the Nazi Party in apparent disregard for their own best interests. The assumption is that these voters, who might otherwise have resisted Nazism, were 'mesmerised' by a well-functioning propaganda machine. The danger of such an approach is that it concentrates on the 'techniques of persuasion' at the expense of detached analysis of the programme put forward by the NSDAP to solve fundamental economic and social problems. Such an approach leads to the inevitable conclusion that to vote for the Nazi manifesto was an 'irrational' act. This does not solve the problem of why millions of Germans acted in such an apparently irrational way. It seems clear that many groups rather than being 'seduced' by Nazi propaganda, perceived voting for the NSDAP as being in their own interests and that Nazi propaganda served to reinforce such beliefs. Similarly, other groups remained stubbornly resistant to the Nazi message, and no amount of skilful propaganda could persuade them otherwise. To over-emphasise the importance of propaganda would be to diminish the failure of the Weimar system to solve prevailing economic and social problems and of political opponents of the NSDAP to provide viable alternatives. If, as seems likely, many Germans reluctantly voted for the Nazi Party because there seemed to be little credible alternative, then that is not necessarily the outcome of propaganda alone but the failure of the Weimar system. It is therefore imperative to re-examine the manner in which propaganda disseminated the Nazi programme and to distinguish between supporters and opponents of the NSDAP and those who remained indifferent.

The role of propaganda

I would suggest that propaganda played an important part in mobilising support for the NSDAP in opposition and maintaining the party once in power. But propaganda alone could not have sustained the Nazi party and its ideology over a period of twelve years. There is now considerable evidence to suggest that Nazi policies and propaganda reflected many of the aspirations of large sections of the population. Propaganda in Nazi Germany was not, as is often believed, a 'catch-all' process. The 'revolutionary' aim of the Nazi regime to bring about the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the true harmony of classes, highlights the remarkably ambitious nature of its propaganda. Nevertheless, the 'success' of propaganda should not be measured purely in terms of its ability radically to change opinions and attitudes. Propaganda is as much about confirming as converting public opinion. Propaganda if it is to be effective must, in a sense, preach to those who are already partially converted. Writing before the Second World War, Aldous Huxley observed: 'Propaganda gives force and direction to the successive movements of popular feeling and desire; but it does not do much to create these movements. The propagandist is a man who canalises an already existing stream. In a land where there is no water, he digs in vain'.

If we look at propaganda as a means of reinforcing existing attitudes and beliefs, then the continuing 'success' of propaganda during the Third Reich in creating a largely acquiescent public points to the conclusion that a 'consensus' of sorts had been achieved. In this sense, the regime's propaganda was pragmatic enough to recognise that its policies could be maintained provided sections of the community who were opposed to Nazism remained quiescent. Coercion and terror would play an important restraining role here. But nevertheless, it is my contention that, once in power, the economic programme put forward by the Nazis and the insidious use made of propaganda in a 'closed' environment was enough to ensure at least 'passive' support for the regime.

Electoral success

Before discussing the nature of Nazi propaganda in opposition, it might be useful to begin with a brief outline of the political performance of the Nazi Party during the final years of the Weimar Republic in order to set their political achievement in some sort of context. In 1928, a mere 810,127 electors voted for the NSDAP; four years later, in July 1932, this figure had increased to a staggering 13,765,781. Support for the Nazis in national elections between May 1928 and September 1930 rose from 810,127 (2.6 per cent of the total) to 6,379,672 votes (18.3 per cent) – an 8 fold increase! By July 1932 the NSDAP was the largest party in the Reichstag with 37.3 per cent of the total vote and 230 seats, almost 100 more than their nearest rivals the Social Democrats (SPD). In the elections of November 1932 the Nazis suffered a minor setback when their percentage of the vote was reduced to 33.1 per cent (196 seats). Nevertheless, the combined electoral successes of 1932 helped pave the way for Hitler's assumption of the Chancellorship in January 1933. As economic and social conditions deteriorated between 1928 and 1930, membership of the NSDAP also continued to grow although not to the same extent as the explosion of the Nazi vote. In October 1928 Nazi Party membership had reached 100,000, in September 1930 300,000 and by the end of 1931 membership exceeded 800,000. One can see therefore that the most rapid increase in membership occurred after the election victories of 1930 and was thus the result not the cause of the Party's electoral breakthrough.

Hitler on propaganda

The appeal of National Socialism is understandably one of the most closely studied issues in European history. Historians have been concerned to explain why millions of Germans voted for the Nazi Party (NSDAP) in free elections. As we have seen, their success has been attributed in large measure to successful manipulation by a well-functioning propaganda machine. The skilful exploitation of propaganda techniques has been cited by historians of widely different political persuasions and approaches as having played a crucial role in mobilising support for the Nazis. In this context, attention has by and large been focused on the dynamics of the Nazi party, its parades, its symbols, the uniforms and banners, the bands, the marching columns of the SA, etc., which 'captured the imagination' of the masses. In the light of such consensus, it would appear that one of the most important factors contributing to the Nazis' rise to power was the cumulative effect of their propaganda: certainly the Nazis themselves were convinced of its effectiveness.

In *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), Adolf Hitler devoted two chapters to the study and practice of propaganda. In 1925, when *Mein Kampf* was first published, Hitler's thoughts on war propaganda were largely a reflection of the prevailing nationalist claims that Allied propaganda was responsible for the collapse of the German Empire in 1918. Convinced of the essential role of propaganda for any movement set on obtaining power, Hitler saw propaganda as a vehicle of political salesmanship in a mass market. He argued that the consumers of propaganda were the masses and not the intellectuals. In answer to his own question, 'To whom should propaganda be addressed – to the scientifically trained intelligentsia or to the less educated masses?' he answered emphatically, 'It must be addressed always and exclusively to the masses'.

Hitler made no attempt to hide his contempt for the masses. They were malleable and corrupt, they were 'overwhelmingly feminine by nature and attitude' and as such their sentiment was not complicated, 'but very simple and consistent'. In *Mein Kampf*, where Hitler laid down the broad lines along which Nazi propaganda was to operate, he assessed his audience as follows: 'The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence, all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must 'harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan.' The function of propaganda, Hitler argued, was to bring the

masses' attention to certain facts, processes, necessities, etc., 'whose significance is thus for the first time placed within their field of vision'. Accordingly, propaganda for the masses had to be simple, it had to concentrate on as few points as possible which then had to be repeated many times, concentrating on such emotional elements as love and hatred.. 'Persistence is the first and most important requirement for success'. Through the continuity and sustained uniformity of its application, propaganda, Hitler concluded, would lead to results 'that are almost beyond our understanding'.

Joseph Goebbels and Nazi propaganda

Hitler's theories on propaganda were first put into practice in 1925 in the NSDAP newspaper, the Volkischer Beobachter (People's Observer). The Nazis had bought the newspaper in 1920 with a small circulation in and around the Munich area, but following the failure of the putsch in 1923 the newspaper had disappeared from newspaper stands until 26 February 1925 – the official date of the 're-establishment' of the Party. Within two months of its re-launch it had become a daily newspaper and its circulation began to rise until in 1929 it had reached a figure of 26,715. Unlike the long, detailed articles and academic discussion of economic and social problems which characterised the political presses of the Weimar Republic, the Volkischer Beobachter went in for short hyperboles on topical National Socialist themes; the evil of Jewry and Bolshevism, the humiliation of the Versailles Treaty, the weakness of Weimar parliamentarianism, all of which were contrasted with Nazi patriotic slogans such as ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer (One People, One Nation, One Leader) – later to be used to great effect in 1938 with the Anschluss (the union with Austria). Convinced more than ever that propaganda was a powerful weapon in the hands of an expert, Hitler appointed Joseph Goebbels Head of Party Propaganda in November 1928. In many respects propaganda is easier in opposition than in power, and Goebbels proved a skilled orchestrator of the Party's propaganda resources. However, until 1929, the technical facilities at Goebbels disposal were rather limited and the Party still relied heavily on Hitler and a few other Party figures, speaking at public meetings. The instruments of mass communication which are commonly associated with authoritarian police states – mass circulation press, radio, film and television – these weapons were largely absent from the Nazis' initial rise to prominence. Under Goebbels' direction, however, the Party showed an increasing opportunism for learning and adapting new propaganda techniques.

The situation began to change, albeit it slowly, in 1927. It is probably no coincidence that this is when Goebbels first revealed his skill as a propagandist. In November 1926 Goebbels had been appointed Gauleiter of Berlin and began immediately to reshape the party organisation in the German capital. Although nationally the NSDAP's paid-up membership was only 72,590, in July Goebbels launched a weekly newspaper Der Angriff (The Attack), which, as the title suggests, was set-up to attack political opponents and exploit anti-Semitic feelings by claiming that Jews were responsible for most of the ills of the Weimar 'system'. Its challenging motto on the front page read: 'For the Suppressed Against the Exploiters!' Towards the end of 1930 Der Angriff was appearing daily and had become closely associated with a relentless campaign of personal abuse and criticism levelled by Goebbels on 'establishment' figures (invariably Jewish) associated with the Weimar Republic. A recurring slogan was Deutschland erwache, Jude verrecke! (Germany awake, Judaism be damned!)

The essentially negative anti-parliamentarianism and anti-Semitism of National Socialist propaganda allowed Goebbels to use the paper as a vehicle for the dissemination of one of the most important positive themes in Nazi propaganda, namely the projection of the 'Führer-myth', which depicted Hitler as both charismatic superman and a man of the people. Der Angriff's circulation however was limited to Berlin, and the Party still lacked a national newspaper network. In Beobachter could claim to be a national newspaper with a Munich and Berlin edition. To some extent, this was offset by the fact that it was in 1927 that Alfred Hugenberg, the press baron and leader of the right-wing Conservative National People's Party (DNVP), bought the largest and most prestigious German film company, Ufa (Universum-Film-Aktiengesellschaft). From now on the social and political activities of the NSDAP were captured more regularly by Ufa newsreels and shown to the German public on the large national network of Ufa cinemas. Until this time National Socialist propaganda had been characterised by the comparatively skilful use of rhetoric and controlled manipulation of meetings, which depended for its success on the organisational skills of local Party cells to stage its own meetings and disrupt those of its political opponents.

Therefore in the final stages of the Nazis' rise to power, circumstances conspired to make the rise easier. Not only did Hugenberg's press and film empire help legitimise the Party, but German industry was also providing valuable

financial resources which allowed the Party to escalate its propaganda campaigns. Moreover, the technical means for propaganda had been developed to such an extent that during 1930 microphones and loudspeakers became a standard feature at all Nazi rallies for the first time. As we have already seen, the NSDAP's electoral breakthrough occurred between 1928 and 1930. How can one explain this dramatic increase in the Nazi vote and what role did propaganda play in securing this electoral success?

Who voted for the Nazis - and why?

Recent research into Nazi voting patterns suggests that after 1928 the NSDAP performed best in the predominantly Protestant and rural districts of the North German plain. Whereas the large cities and urban conurbations, together with predominantly Catholic rural areas in the west and south, proved more resistant to the Nazi appeal. These are, of course, broad generalisations and it is quite clear that manual workers in the cities together with Catholics were prepared to vote for the NSDAP as well. The conclusion that can be drawn from electoral figures about social composition shows that despite the disproportionate number of Protestant, rural and middle class supporters, the NSDAP could justifiably claim to represent a wider range of economic and social groups than any other political party.

The short explanation for this was that individuals and groups were prepared to desert traditional allegiances (mainly Protestant middle class parties) and vote for the Nazis for different reasons. Most historians would agree however that the Nazi movement, or rather the Hitler-bewegung (Hitler movement), as it was appropriately labelled at the time, successfully integrated the German middle class. First, it won support from the 'old middle class' of small retailers, self-employed artisans, peasant farmers, pensioners and those on fixed incomes. Secondly it also appealed to the 'new middle class' of white-collar, non-manual employees. Under the Second Reich both of these groups had shared a sense of their own identity that made them the backbone of the nation. They were known collectively as the *Mittelstand*, the healthy core in the middle of German society. With the collapse of the German Empire in 1918, the values and assumptions that had shaped and buttressed the *Mittelstand* were suddenly removed. The Weimar Republic represented an acute threat to their status. Some looked to the Nazis as the saviour of old style capitalism that would restore the old status quo. For such groups, the Nazis represented a 'reactionary' force restoring former status and values. While others, particularly among younger white-collar workers, saw National Socialism as a 'revolutionary' movement bent on destroying archaic social hierarchies and replacing them with a new social order. The secret of their success was this 'dual' appeal.

As the economic crisis deepened and class tension increased, the various sections of the *Mittelstand* came together within the Nazi movement. The Hitlerbewegung was the 'mobilisation of disaffection' and as such far more successful than the traditional political parties which had become discredited through their association with the Republic and its failure to redress genuine or imagined grievances. There can be little doubt that under Goebbels' direction the NSDAP exploited these grievances for the purposes of propaganda. By means of an efficient propaganda apparatus that Goebbels had been building up since 1928, the party was in a strong position to make a highly effective response to the growing sense of crisis and through its propaganda to appeal to both the interests and the ideals of the *Mittelstand*. Indeed, some historians have suggested that towards the end of 1927, with the fall in agricultural prices and following its failure in the 1928 Reichstag elections, there was a significant reorientation in the Party's propaganda away from the industrial working class in the urban conurbations towards a series of campaigns aimed at the *Mittelstand* in the rural areas. More recently there have been attempts to look again at Nazi efforts to mobilise the alienated urban proletariat. By the early part of 1932 Goebbels was confident enough to write: 'The election campaign is ready in principle. We now only need to press the button in order to set the machine into action'.

With unemployment exceeding six million and the Weimar Republic sinking into its death throes, the 1932 elections were fought in a growing atmosphere of political violence and disorder. By January 1933 Hitler had obtained the support of the army and sections of industry, and on January 30 he was constitutionally appointed Chancellor by President Hindenburg. The Nazis' political success in opposition has frequently been attributed to Goebbels' manipulatory talents. There can be little doubt that Nazi propaganda was quick to seize its opportunity and that it was firmly based on the principles outlined in *Mein Kampf*. It carried through with a ruthless consistency a campaign of propaganda which appealed directly to the emotions rather than to the intellect, and was reinforced at all levels by terror and violence. But propaganda alone cannot change social and political

conditions. It acts in conjunction with other factors, like organisation. While the Nazis' propaganda machine was important in helping achieve this electoral victory, the NSDAP was in the fortunate political position, unlike almost every other party in the Weimar Republic, of appealing to different groups for different reasons. The Nazi party did not simply recognise the importance of propaganda, but more importantly the need to adapt its propaganda to these different groups. National Socialist propaganda did not destroy Weimar democracy, although it did undermine it.

What distinguished the NSDAP from other parties in opposition was its ability to combine the themes of traditional German nationalism with Nazi ideological motifs. By unifying German patriotism with Nazi ideology Hitler forged a compelling weapon against what he referred to as the 'immorality of Weimar rationalism' and its associations for many (including non-Nazis) with cultural decadence and racial impurity. To this end, the Nazis alone were perceived by many groups to represent certain ideas that appeared to transcend Weimar politics. This not only gave them a wider appeal, but it also set them apart from other political parties.

Key themes of Nazi propaganda

There can be little doubt that the two most important ideas that distinguished the Nazis from other parties and allowed Goebbels' propaganda to mobilise widespread grievances were the notion of Volksgemeinschaft (community of the people) based on the principle laid down in the party programme of 1920, *Gemeinnutz geht vor Eigennutz* (Common good before the good of the individual), and the myth of the charismatic 'Führer'.

The community of the nation was to replace the 'divisive' party system and the class barriers of the Weimar Republic and in effect offer the prospect of national unity without either a bloody revolution or the need to offer too many concessions to the working class. The other element which appears to have been genuinely effective and unique was the projection of Hitler as a 'charismatic' leader. The 'Führer cult' had become synonymous with the NSDAP and it is significant that the Party referred to itself even on the ballot papers as the 'Hitler movement'. From 1930 onward the panache of its propaganda in staging political rallies, where Hitler could project his leadership and the faithful could give the impression of being a dynamic movement, far exceeded these of other parties. The carefully constructed mass rallies with their marches, banners and Hags, when combined with Hitler's speeches provided Goebbels with the opportunity to synthesise the twin concepts of Volksgemeinschaft and the 'Führer cult' in one political experience. The mass political rally would continue to play a dominant role in the politics of the Third Reich where it was seen to be the physical manifestation of a nation's 'triumph of the will'. This also explains why the Nazis repeatedly staged 'national moments' (*Stunden der Nation*), when Hitler's speeches would be broadcast throughout the Reich. On such occasions life would come to a standstill, demonstrating the sense of national solidarity. The individual participant in the ritual, moved by Hitler's rhetoric and swayed by the crowd, underwent a metamorphosis, in Goebbels' famous phrase, 'from a little worm into part of a large dragon'.

Further Reading

- D. Welch, *The Third Reich, Politics and Propaganda*, Routledge 1993
- R. Hamilton, *Who Voted for Hitler?*, Princeton 1982
- I. Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, London 1993
- M. Broszat, *Hitler and the Collapse of Weimar Germany*, Leamington Spa 1987

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