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Nazi Propaganda and the Outbreak of World War II



US Holocaust Museum

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German troops parade in Warsaw to celebrate the defeat of Poland, October 5, 1939. — US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park

Eighty years ago, on September 1, 1939, Germans awoke to news informing them that Polish troops had attacked Germany. At 5:40 a.m., Adolf Hitler took to the airwaves to alert the German armed forces that “the Polish state has rejected his efforts for the peaceful regulation of neighborly relations” and, instead, had taken up arms. Germans in Poland, he proclaimed, are being persecuted with “bloody terror, driven from home and farm.” In order to put an end to Poland’s “unacceptable violations of Germany’s borders,” he had no choice but to resort to “force against force.”

Later that day, Hitler expanded upon these themes in his address to the *Reichstag*, his Nazi-only, rubber stamp parliament. He presented himself as a

longtime advocate of peace. Poland, instead of negotiating for a peaceful settlement of their differences, had repeatedly violated the German border, carried out economic warfare against the German city of Danzig, and treated the ethnic Germans in Poland, including women and children, in a “bestial and sadistic” way. While castigating Poland for its abuse of minorities, Hitler bluntly stated that minorities living in the German Reich were not persecuted. He then promised not to wage a fight against women and children but only against military targets, and he pledged to honor and guarantee the neutrality of other European states. Because of his love for peace, he announced that a non-aggression pact had been signed with the Soviet Union, stipulating that Russia and Germany would never again go to war.

In hindsight, his claims were clearly outlandish lies, geared to masking Nazi Germany’s pre-meditated invasion of Poland, its rapid rearmament, and brutalities against its own Jewish population. The German occupation of Poland that followed was one characterized by violence against the local population, including women and children. Nor was the signing of the non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union a serious effort to guarantee peace between the two ideologically different states; in Hitler’s mind, it was purely a temporary expedient to allow for the invasion of Poland without threat from the Soviet Union.

As the world commemorates the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, it is important to reflect on the role propaganda played in these events as well as some of the consequences. By manipulating the population’s emotions with fear-mongering and hate, the Nazis helped to facilitate war and ultimately genocide.

Spreading Fear and False Information

The Nazi messaging in the lead-up to war was a propaganda *tour de force* designed to deceive both domestic and foreign audiences. Even in late August 1939, politicians in England and France still believed that war could be averted because Germany seemed willing to negotiate. What people didn't realize is that Hitler, while publicly professing his interest in peace, was preparing to attack Poland. To facilitate the last objective, he had to come up with a plan that would justify military action without portraying Germany as the aggressor.

On August 22, 1939, Hitler informed his military leadership that he would provide a “propagandistic reason for starting the war, regardless of whether it is believable or not. The victor will not be asked afterwards, if he spoke the truth or not. “

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Joseph Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry and Otto Dietrich's Press Office instructed the German media to run headline stories that stoked fear of Poland's intentions. Chief among these were exaggerated claims of Polish atrocities against ethnic Germans living in western Poland. German newsreels carried emotionally charged images and interviews of ethnic German refugees who had fled across the border because of Polish violence. German journalists were given the following directives in those late August days: “Don't write about the flood of peace proposals and offers of negotiation, at least not all the details,” and “The language of the atrocity reports may not be relaxed in any way.” Newspaper headlines screamed that

“All Poland in War Fever” and that Polish anti-aircraft had fired at a German plane carrying a major German official. Because all of Germany’s newspapers, whether independent or controlled by the Nazi Party, were required to follow the instructions from the Press Office, Germans received only a distorted picture of the real political situation in the east.

At the same time as Germans were being fed a steady diet of disinformation, Hitler instructed his SS leaders, Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich, to engineer phony attacks on German border locations in order to precipitate war with Poland. Germany’s military intelligence office was to provide Polish uniforms, while the SS would supply the bodies for the uniforms. On the night of August 31, the SS commandos went into action, launching attacks on several German installations, including the Gleiwitz radio station. As part of the deception, the SS murdered concentration camp prisoners who had been dressed in Polish army uniforms and left their corpses in the vicinity of the staged attacks. A German known locally for his pro-Polish views was shot in the head and left at the radio station as proof of an insurrection by Poles. The world would not discover that these events were staged until nearly six years later — after the defeat of Nazi Germany and the trial of the major German defendants before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg.

Germany as Victim, Not Aggressor

Like all clever propagandists, Hitler sought to mask his true intentions by appealing to the moral high ground. He understood that many, if not most, Germans did not want to go to war again; World War I had cost the nation some 2 million dead. And indeed there was no uproar of enthusiasm when German troops invaded Poland. What made it palatable to the civilian population was to paint Germany as the victim of foreign machinations and violence. By staging the phony attacks on the German borders, the Nazis

provided “proof” of their victimhood and used it in tandem with the claim that Germany was encircled by enemies in the east and west. To further preserve Germany’s image as the victim, the Propaganda Ministry directed the German press not to refer to the invasion of Poland as war, but only as a military intervention. Only when Great Britain and France declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, were newspapers permitted to use the term because the onus of blame could be placed on the western allies and Poland.

When German troops occupied Poland, they carried out brutal reprisals against Poles for allegedly killing ethnic Germans following the invasion. While acts of violence against ethnic Germans did occur, Nazi propagandists grossly exaggerated the numbers to justify murder as well as the marking of Polish forced laborers later brought to Germany.

In their campaign against Europe’s Jews, the Nazis used with equal skill the propaganda techniques deployed in the lead-up to war. Months before the invasion of Poland, Hitler gave his so-called “prophecy speech” on the sixth anniversary of his appointment as German chancellor (January 30, 1939). In it, he warned the world, “If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!”

Hitler continually referred back to his “prophecy” during the war, purposely changing its original date to September 1, 1939, to coincide with the invasion of Poland.

The Nazis depicted the Jews as the true instigators of war, who pulled the strings of Allied statesmen, and thus an existential threat to European civilization, and to Germany in particular. Even as Berlin collapsed around

him and some 6 million Jewish men, women, and children already had been killed in the Holocaust, Hitler kept lashing out against this imaginary Jewish conspiracy.

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Published in Memory & Action

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What are your thoughts?



Ree Jackson
Aug 31, 2019



Thank you for reminding us of all the details such as skillful propaganda that brought about the Holocaust. May we never forget.



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John McMahon
Sep 2, 2019



By September 1939 I believe that Nazi propaganda was being produced primarily for international consumption rather than internal manipulation of the German public, since by that time the German citizenry were *all in* on anything Hitler wanted to do... [more](#)



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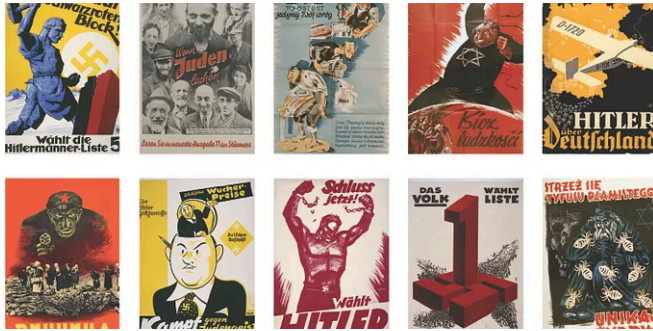


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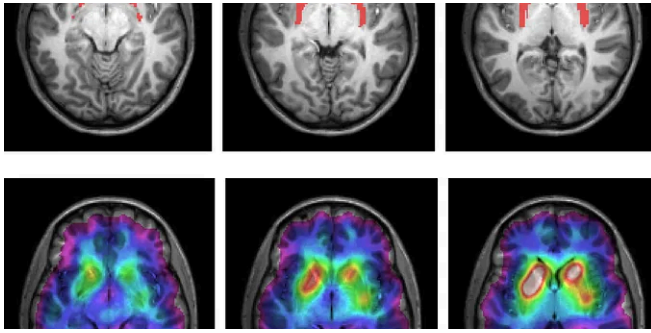
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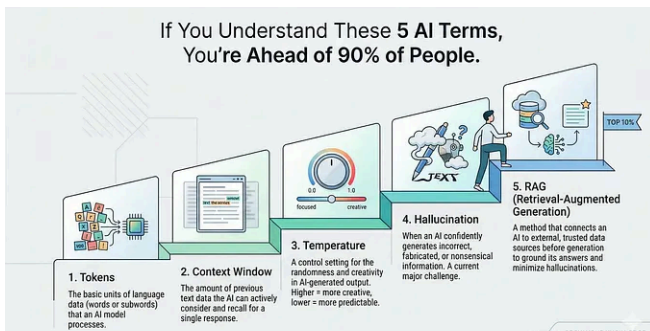



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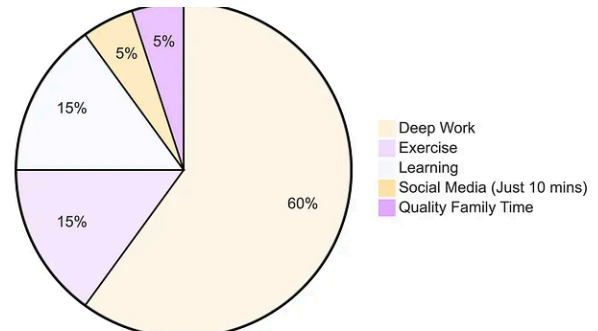


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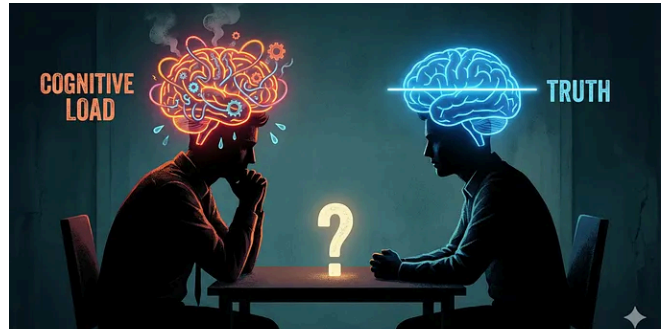


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