

EUR3. Dictatorship and Democracy | Sample answer

What contribution did Joseph Goebbels and/or Leni Riefenstahl make to Nazi propaganda? (2008)

The Nazi propaganda machine was made up of many parts that served to control all forms of media that the German population had access to. From radio broadcasts and film production to youth indoctrination and public rallies, the Nazis were aware of the importance of propaganda in communicating their anti-Semitic, nationalistic and ultimately war-mongering values. Books, newspapers, speeches, the arts, symbols, posters – among other aspects of media – were useful in brainwashing large swathes of Germans from 1933 onwards. Headed by Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda aimed to achieve the goal of propaganda, which was in Hitler's words "to serve our own right, always and unflinchingly." As the following essay will show, Goebbels had an enormous contribution to the malign influence that was Nazi propaganda on the people of Germany and beyond.

Goebbels can be seen as the mastermind behind much of the Nazi propaganda experiment. Film was one such cog in the wheel of Nazi deception that was engineered by Goebbels. A film that delivered the message of a global Jewish threat was *The Eternal Jew*. This film, presented as a documentary of sorts, was made on the insistence of Goebbels. It included vile depictions of Jews as sub-human or virus-like. The film stoked the flames of pre-existing anti-Semitism within the Third Reich and contributed to the idea that Jews were somehow inferior, dangerous, or parasitic. Another film that achieved the aims of influencing the German population and communicated Nazi ideology was *Triumph of the Will* directed by Leni Riefenstahl.

She is figure certainly worth describing in terms of her contribution to Nazi propaganda. Impressive in its overall production values, her magnum opus, *Triumph of the Will*, chronicles the Nuremberg Rally of 1934. It helped glorify the National Socialist movement and stirred up much patriotism among Germans at the time. Historian Richard Evans described it as "a propaganda film designed to convince Germany and the world of the power, strength and determination of the

German people under Hitler's leadership." A crew of 120 people worked on making the film and it was lauded upon its release in 1935 at home and abroad. Winning numerous awards such as the Gold Medal at the Venice Film Festival in 1935 and the German National Film Prize, Goebbels (presenting the award to Riefenstahl) said it was "a magnificent cinematic version of the Furher." Riefenstahl also made a film promoting the 1936 Berlin Olympics which aimed to show the Aryan race as powerful and dominant. Olympia, the sports documentary she made, was considered to be the best of its kind at the time.

In general, the Reich Film Chamber took control of the film industry. The Reich Cinema Law of 1934 imposed strict censorship which prevented any films opposing Nazi values to be made. Yet for all this to work, Goebbels knew non-political films were necessary too. By 1938 49% of films were made were comedy, only 10% political. Goebbels was a keen fan of cinema himself and knew that films were needed as important form of escapism. He was cautious of making too many propaganda productions. However, he was aware of the need for propaganda film during the war to boost national morale. The film Kolberg, in which Goebbels was involved in production, was a historical drama released in colour designed to increase the German people's determination to fight their enemies. Other aspects of cultural life were affected by propaganda also, such as museums. For example, The External Jew exhibition in Munich attracted 412,300 people from November 1937 to January 1938. It was of course Goebbels that officially opened the event on November 8th 1937 to an adoring crowd.

Goebbels insisted that strict control be exerted over the new medium of the time – radio. He saw it as an "instrument for influencing the masses" and encouraged collective listening on cheap devices called Volksempfänger. He shrewdly made the comment we "must not allow technology to run ahead of the Reich, but rather the Reich must keep pace with technology." He encouraged as many families as possible to own a radio; by 1939 70% of households had a set, which at the time was the highest percentage in the world. Radio wardens were hired to organise for Hitler speeches to be played on loudspeakers in schools, factories and offices, and then monitored the reactions of listeners. However, like with film production, Goebbels knew that not all radio programmes should be propagandised. Hence, his message to radio managers – "don't become boring". As a result, popular and classical music dominated the airwaves to the public's satisfaction.

Goebbels himself was a once aspiring author and playwright. He understood the value of the written word. But not all books were deemed compatible with Nazi rule. Mass book burnings took place, most infamously in Berlin in May 1933, which demonstrated that “un-German” publications were not permissible in this fascist State. At this event spoke of “the triumph of the German revolution has cleared a path for the German way”. But *Mein Kampf*, written by Hitler, was printed in millions (even in Braille) helped spread the Nazi message throughout the German population. As well as books, Goebbels insisted that the press was strictly controlled by the regime. Opposition newspapers were shut down and the Propaganda Ministry controlled news content through directives distributed by daily conferences in Berlin. Goebbels’ belief was that the public should think uniformly – and based on how he orchestrated the running of the press in Germany it is evident he did his best for this aim to be realised. The main Nazi newspaper was called the *People’s Observer* and was one of the first newspapers in the world to use colour – once more showing the trademarks of Goebbels’ thinking.

The Nuremberg Rallies were propaganda spectacles that helped communicate the Nazi message further. Goebbels was a regular contributor to these through his speeches. A skilled orator, he was determined to emphasise Nazi ideology to the masses at these events. He used inflammatory speeches as a method of propaganda in and of themselves. In fact, in the 1934 rally he said “the effective propagandist must be a master of the art of speech, of writing, of journalism, of the poster, and of the leaflet”. Goebbels believed that Nazi propaganda should appeal to the desire for order and a restoration of traditional German values. The rallies helped embody these notions. Also, the cornerstones of Nazi propaganda, which Goebbels promoted, were *Volksgemeinschaft* – Germany unity, “racial purity”, and that individuals be subordinate to the fascist State were communicated during the events. More broadly, the promotion of these ideals were an important contribution as it helped lay the groundwork for anti-Jewish legislation to be tolerated through the passing of the Nuremberg Laws. The propaganda used by the Nazis employed the fallacious idea of Social Darwinism which saw mankind as a racial hierarchy with the German/Aryan Race at its peak. It succeeded in convincing Germans that Jews were somehow “other”, sub-human or unequal. Though most Germans disapproved of violence against Jews, most also passively accepted the propaganda that ridiculed them. Furthermore, the concept of struggle was a central notion of Nazi propaganda, which successfully aimed to unite Germans together in the face of its many threats, such as the USSR to the east or the conspiracy of international Jewry.

Nazi propaganda, through its pervasive use of rallies, posters, public images, films, books, indoctrination and the press sought to elicit political loyalty and promote racial thinking among the masses. Joseph Goebbels was clearly the master puppeteer in how it all operated – and considering all his contributions described above, it is fair to say he was instrumental to the success of Nazi propaganda realising in its aims during his time in power.