

MODERN HISTORY

Modern History HSC Assessment Task National Studies – Germany (1918 – 1939)

Assess the impact of Nazi propaganda, terror and repression on the German people from 1933 to 1939.

The period before the second World War, from 1933 to 1939, was characterised by manipulation, permeating anxiety, and forceful government control. The impact that propaganda, terror and repression had on German society was both large and negative; however, the manner in which this impact was delivered differed with each feature. Propaganda controlled thinking, terror controlled behaviour, repression controlled threats; and the totalitarian government controlled everyone.

All aspects of German society between 1933 and 1939 were embedded with propaganda, manipulating each level and faction of society into idealised Nazi followers. Propaganda had both a large and negative impact on pre-war Germany: it Nazified the population, misinformed on politics matters, and eroded the culture. However, it also possessed limited positive aspects, in that workers and their families, which basically equated to the entire population, were awarded holidays, placed periodically throughout the year.

In March, 1933, soon after Hitler came to power, the Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda was established. This body controlled the German (and foreign) press, radio and cinema. With the formation of the sub group, the Reich Chamber of Culture, in September later that year, more areas of the media came under control; the theatre, music, literature, art, architecture and sport. The final significant body was the Central Propaganda Office of the Nazi Party, which was directly and solely responsible for the promotion of the regime, achieved through elaborate displays, rallies and special ceremonies associated with the Nazi movement.

The minister for the Propaganda Ministry was Dr. Joseph Goebbels, who later became president of the Reich Chamber of Culture and director of the Central Propaganda of the Nazi Party. He was an important figure in the creation and distribution of propaganda, as he was well aware of its value and effectiveness, and how to achieve such standards. Goebbels believed that the role of propaganda was to “simplify complicated ways of thinking so that even the smallest man in the street may understand”, which differed greatly to German propaganda during World War One that targeted the elitists and the intellectuals.

The first, and possibly most important, impact that Nazi propaganda had on the people was that it eroded freedom of thought. The main purpose of the propaganda was to establish, and then maintain, support for the Nazi regime and their political ideologies. It did so through the constant assertion that the Nazi Party was superior to all others and its leader, Hitler, was a hero; a man so dedicated to his role as Chancellor that he would sacrifice any personal interest for the greater good. The _____ that this instilled in the people created the perfect platform for the state to then promote the policies of the party. This form of propaganda and its effects are illustrated through the newspaper articles and films of the time.

Strict control over the newspapers, which developed from the Editorial Law of 1933, allowed the government to dictate what they could and could not publish. The German News Bureau issued the stories that the newspapers could print, many of which were false, misleading or exaggerated. A popular form of propaganda in the print press were atrocity stories, invented to justify Nazi attack on whichever enemy the government wanted to crush at that particular time. Few people would have doubted the reliability of this form of media, as the fundamental role of newspapers is to report the truth. Those newspapers that the state disapproved of, including those who refused to follow the restrictive guidelines, were simply abolished to maintain what the public was made privy to and, in turn, how they thought.

While the film industry was not completely taken over by the government, the Propaganda Ministry did possess tight control of it. All German filmmakers were forced to join the Reich Chamber of Film, employees had to take an oath of loyalty to Hitler, and the Reich Motion Picture law meant that all films had to be approved before they were released to the public. Early propaganda films contained blatant propaganda, in which people who were a part of the movement (for example, members of the Hitler Youth and the SA) were glorified; however, as time progressed, they became far more subtle. Many explored Germany's heroic past with clear comparisons to current Germany, while others promoted Hitler, concentrating, as most propaganda does, on emotion, opposed to fact. There was also much anti-Semitic material, which presented the Jews as enemies to the state who were threatening the racial purity of the nation. Like the programs broadcast over the radio, this propaganda combined entertainment with education, firmly embedding its message – whether it concerned the strength of the Nazi Party or the discussion of the party's policies – in the viewer's minds.

On a similar note, the Nazi Party was also careful to employ censorship, ensuring that only the politics that they wanted the public to view were brought to their attention. They removed, or concealed, all weaknesses and exaggerated all strengths. The state of the economy is the perfect example, in which the media published / broadcast articles on the high employment rates and financial security that was echoed across the country, but kept secret the issues that the government was facing, including the deficits and loans. The people were lured into a false sense of security and led to believe that the Nazis were achieving greatly. Thus, they developed faith in their leadership, so much so that one German woman was reported as saying, "He [Hitler] is my mother and my father. He keeps me safe from all harm."

Not only did the Nazis utilise mainstream media, like the newspapers and the cinema, but their propaganda extended to all corners of the cultural scene; in art galleries, book stores, and song lyrics; places where one may not expect to encounter propaganda. Goebbels recognised that it was vital to "bring the masses the new attitude in a way which is... interesting, instructive, but not schoolmasterish." The innovative and experimental culture that flourished under the Weimar government was nowhere to be seen. Instead, art, books and music were tightly controlled. Art had to be realistic and depict images of everyday Aryan life or German landscapes; literature had to be "German" and was burned if the state disapproved of its content or its author; and the Reich Chamber of Music returned the music scene to classical German composers, especially those who explored nationalist emotions or heroic themes. A traditional Germany was emphasised and the values of the Nazi Party, including the most pure race, were depicted as ideal. While the erosion of culture and the reduction of the people's freedom of expression impacted on the people as a whole, its ramifications would have been most strongly felt by the elite.

While the experiences of propaganda were mostly negative, some enjoyed the benefits, which were small in contrast, but nonetheless evident. The German calendar was reformed to include a number of annual celebratory events, specifically related to the Nazis. This meant that workers and their families (basically equating to the whole nation) were given periodic holidays throughout the year. "The National Day of the Party", for example, was basically an annual party rally that spanned over a three to five day period. It involved speeches by various leaders and special events for certain factions – notably, the German army, the SS, the Hitler Youth and the German Labour Front. Such events elicited positive responses from the holiday-loving public, but it is important to remember that the government possessed an ulterior motive, which was to promote its party and policies. This form of propaganda was subtle, but effective.

While the effects of propaganda appear minimal, the psychological impact imparted was great. It was propaganda that implicitly shaped the people's beliefs and values to mirror those of the Nazi Party; teaching them which factions of society were enemies of the state and persuading them that Hitler and the Nazi movement was something worth following. Without propaganda, the Nazi regime would not have been nearly as successful, as questions threatening to the regime would have evolved with dissent following close behind.

If propaganda failed and people continued to actively oppose the regime, the government adopted methods of terror, with impacts both large and negative. During the period between 1933 and 1936, Hitler effectively transformed Germany into a police state, in which terror was abundant from one corner of the nation to the other. Specifically, the terrorism was evident in the constant use of surveillance and the occasional violent and political-based event. It was this permeating fear and anxiety that was able, in effect, to control the behaviour of the people.

Throughout the 1930s, the Nazis developed a highly structured police body. Most notable were the Gestapo, secret state police, and the SS, the private army and security system of the Nazi Party.

The first method of terror was the use of surveillance. This eroded the people's trust, as they questioned the people around them, never quite sure who was listening or who they would impart their knowledge unto. The Gestapo was the main body who surveyed the people; however, the SS also played a role.

The Gestapo was established in November, 1933, to protect the internal security of the Reich, by both investigating and suppressing any person suspected of conducting anti-state activities. It was the investigation side of its role that was a significant cause of terror. The Gestapo used extensive and intrusive surveillance systems to identify the enemies of the state. Propaganda was also employed to establish the Gestapo as a large, omnipresent organisation, increasing the fear that an agent was always nearby and always listening. This was false. In fact, 60 to 90 per cent of its cases were actually from ordinary German citizens, who were encouraged to report. This reporting system, however, possibly increased the terror. What was usually considered to be private, such as "inter-racial" relationships (between Jews and Germans), homosexuality, or passing criticisms, could now be "heard" by the police; little remained secret. This resulted in a state of heightened anxiety, in which justified paranoia was rife. One person who experienced life in the police state remembers how "One closed the door carefully and conducted conversations in a whisper. One looked over one's shoulder in a public place before speaking. One did not trust the mails. One chose with great care the rendezvous where one met one's friends. No one who has not experienced it can imagine the frighteningly oppressive atmosphere of a totalitarian regime."

The SS followed the policies of the Nazi Party, including Hitler's racial policies, and reflected these policies as it conducted its police functions, including the handling of all internal enemies. According to Werner Best, Chief of the SD (the intelligence agency of the SS), the SS had the responsibility to "discover the enemies of the State, to watch them and surrender them harmless" and the right to "be free to use every means suited to achieve the required ends". It was its means of "discovery" and "watching" that caused fear in the people, as well as the knowledge of what the SS would do once it had found the enemies. The most common punishments were death or referral to concentration camps. The public didn't know which was worse.

Secondly, the government also allowed, and sometimes even encouraged or initiated, violent and political-based events in which their opponents were openly targeted by the general public. The "Night of Broken Glass", in 1938, illustrates this point. With the increasing anti-Semitism, Goebbels instigated a "free-for-all" against the Jews. As a result, nearly one thousand synagogues were set alight or destroyed, over 7,000 properties were looted, approximately one hundred Jews were murdered, and another 30,000 were arrested and sent to concentration camps. They were then forced to pay for the damages. It was the fact that these events took place without warning and with little acknowledgement to the targets that the fear evolved; not to mention the fact that an entire population was being set upon a small minority, who were basically defenceless to their size and intent.

Terror was abundant in the years leading to the war. It evolved from the general public who witnessed the brutal acts of the SA, SS and Gestapo in clear daylight, but also from the constant circulation of rumours. Most people obeyed and publically approved the system out of fear, rather

than actual agreement with it. By far the worst part, however, was that the people couldn't turn to the law for protection. These bodies were the law, or rather they controlled it. The population had to follow the rules or risk the consequences – whatever they were.

Alongside terror, and often interrelated, the Nazis resorted to the forceful repression of all opposition, thereby controlling any threats. Repression had a largely negative affect on the people. Repression was evident through the law and judiciary, the occasional event to silence the dissenters, the utilisation of concentration camps, and the removal of those people who possessed what were deemed as undesirable traits. The political, racial and moral enemies of the state were mostly targeted; however, repression would indiscriminately extend to all who disobeyed or voiced their disagreement with the government.

There was one main law that was passed to repress all German people, as well as the implementation of several others specific to certain groups, that, in effect, reduced and restricted civil liberties. The court system further enforced the views of the state.

Firstly, the Decree for the Protection of People and State, legislation issued in 1933, gave the Nazis power to deal with any situation that they deemed to be an emergency, basically suspending the Weimar Constitution and restricting civil liberties. The Emergency Decree stated: "Restrictions on personal liberty, on the right of free expression of opinion, including freedom of the press; on the rights of assembly and association; and violations of the privacy of postal, telegraphic and telephonic communications and warrants for house searches, orders for confiscations as well as restrictions on property, are also permissible beyond the legal limits otherwise prescribed." The decree granted power to the Gestapo to arbitrarily arrest all suspects at any time. While at the police headquarters, they were often mistreated and could be held almost indefinitely, separating the opposition from the general public.

While the people increasingly lost rights and free will, the minority groups were suffering disproportionately. The Jews, the most known enemy of the Germans, are a poignant example. Civil laws that were passed from April to October of 1933 prevented Jews from gaining employment in certain areas, including teaching positions, legal and medical professions and the civil service; while, the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 removed further civil rights, separating the Jews (and other "inferior" races) from the Germans legally, socially and politically. They were considered an entirely different race – "racially distinctive" minorities with "alien blood" – and were unable to become involved, sexually or through marriage, with a German. More than 120 laws, decrees, and ordinances were enacted between 1935 and 1939, further eroding the rights of German Jews.

In addition, special courts were set up by the Nazis to punish political dissent, thereby repressing any view that did not comply with the view of the one party state.

In response to political opposition, the government, through one of its policing bodies, simply removed it in well-organised and somewhat complex operations. One such event was the Night of the Long Knives, which was held in 1934, to restrain the growing defiant and unstable SA. Led by the SS, Operation Hummingbird, as it was known, involved the arrest of hundreds of political leaders and the murder of hundreds more. It was a simple, yet powerful, statement on behalf of the government, and as historian Kewshaw says, it clearly warned that opposition would not be tolerated and would be dealt with effectively immediately.

For the general public, on the other hand, the more favoured response was the utilisation of concentration camps. Like the use of arbitrary arrest, these camps allowed those who opposed the system to be prevented from influencing others by physically removing them. They would be punished for their disobedience, ensuring that they would not spread their message further. The first concentration camps, at Dachau and Oranienburg, were established only weeks after Hitler came to power and were administered by the Gestapo and the Order of the Death's Head (a body of the SS). Gestapo records dating back to the war show that people were arrested for summary offences,

such as “loafing on the job”, to more indictable offences like “working against the Reich” and “spreading religious propaganda.” Within a year, concentration camps had spread across the country. Between 1934 and 1939, over 200,000 people were sent to these camps.

The conditions within the concentration camps were incredibly harsh, moreso for some. All factions were required to wear a coloured triangle to reflect their status. The homosexuals, for example, wore pink, and because they were able to be recognised, they were often targeted by guards and inmates alike. Additionally, capital punishment was accepted for some offences. At the Dachau Concentration Camp, for example, a list of offences that warranted the death penalty was included within the regulations issued by the commandant; the offences ranging from discussing politics to forming cliques to collecting true or false information about the concentration camp. This clearly suggests that anyone who threatened the regime by supplying a viewpoint that differed from that of the one party state, or even attempted to, were dealt with harshly. The Nazi Party would not have survived had this discontent spread and the people were made privy to options other than the one that they were given.

Not only were political enemies repressed, but so were those people that posed a threat to the purity of the Aryan race. Those people that possessed undesirable traits, physical or mental, were removed from society, ensuring that they could not be bred further. What was considered “undesirable” was defined by the state, and included mental or physical illness, black skin, and so on. Early Nazi policy meant that these people were sterilised; however, as time progressed, the Nazis took a more drastic approach, with Hitler introducing the Euthanasia program in 1939, restricting it only to those with disabilities. This was a form of repression. It repressed the inherent right of self; of freedom and of life.

There was one group of people, however, who were free from the confinements of repression. Nazi Party members, especially those considered invaluable or inexhaustible, were generally allowed to perform the same acts that were forbidden by the general public. History cites examples where high-ranking party members, working closely with Hitler, were allowed to be involved in homosexual relationships or marry a member of the racial enemies, without the imposition of the usual punishment. This merely shows that not all factions of society were affected by the government’s implementation of repression.

To maintain the totalitarian state, repression was rife. All threats, either real or imagined, were controlled or crushed, and this extended from politics to race to social standards. Repression in Germany was a physical act. The people’s civil liberties, their basic human rights, were eroded, and many were physically abused in concentration camps, through government-initiated events, and by the process of sterilisation. Opposition and criticism were not tolerated – and the Nazis ensured that everybody knew.

There is no doubt that the government’s use of propaganda, terror and repression pervaded each corner of Germany in the period between 1933 and 1936. Their impact was both large and negative, indiscriminately extending to most factions of society. The result was a nation that was brainwashed to mimic the ideologies of the Nazi party; a nation that experienced a strong sense of fear as they undertook their daily lives; a nation that was silenced into submission if they dared to express a thought or a characteristic that threatened the one party state.