

Joseph Goebbels on the Concept of Propaganda (1936)

Abstract

Propaganda and its effective application formed an important part of the Nazis' long-term aims of cultivating a National Socialist spirit amongst the population. For some, its utility lay in more than simply its function as a political tool: Joseph Goebbels believed that propaganda was an art form and that it possessed "a political power of the highest magnitude." In the following document—a commentary included within a "cigarette album" of photos of Hitler—Goebbels contextualizes his conceptualization of this power, as well as his pride in what he identifies as the accomplishments of German propagandistic efforts. Propaganda was not merely concerned with spreading a particular idea, he argued. The point of propaganda came from what it contributed to the world of experience. At its best, propaganda "spoke for itself"—and its value should be self-evident to observers. The National Socialist movement was one of emotion and action, not of reason. Propaganda, Goebbels argued, must also reflect that spirit.

It should be noted that before this period, the term "propaganda" lacked the negative connotations associated with it in the latter half of the twentieth century, and yet the open manner in which Goebbels goes out of his way to explain to readers and audiences the practical implementation of effective propaganda remains striking in its openness.

Source

All over the world, and still today also in Germany, there is a vast number of misconceptions about the concept of propaganda, and because they are so ingrained and based largely on prejudices, they can be cleared up only with difficulty. And this even though the German people, in particular, since the end of the war has enjoyed an object lesson in this regard that could not be any better or more vivid. In what is, from a historical perspective, such a short span of time, propaganda in Germany has proved a political force of the highest order; for it needs no further proof today that Imperial Germany collapsed under the onslaught of Marxist propaganda, and that the Marxist-democratic regime could be eliminated only because not only the National Socialist idea, but also National Socialist propaganda countered it with a superior new order and ability.

Propaganda requires skill. It is useless to assign a few clever people to it as needed. Like all great art, it has people who are especially gifted, who in most cases establish a school and in so doing also set a precedent. One also needs to clear up the widespread misconception that there is something inherently dishonorable or inferior about it. What matters for it, as it also does for everything else in life, is *what* it is used for and what it practically brings into the world of appearances. In this sense it has nothing to do with advertising. It's best off when it lets things and people speak for themselves, and it makes sure that if they are valuable, they will also be depicted and explained in their full value.

For good things and great men exert their own effect. That is also why you need to let them speak for themselves and without restrictions. And here it is the most important hallmark of a particularly successful propaganda that it leaves nothing out, but also adds nothing that does not belong to the nature of the object in question. The characteristic features of conditions or personalities should be brought out of the confusing surroundings clearly, vividly, and so simply and unpretentiously that they become understandable and recognizable for the broad mass of those who are supposed to be warmed and attracted by them.

National Socialism and its chief proponents not only came with a natural talent for this art, but have also

learned and applied it with steady work, in tireless and intimate contact with the people, and with a progressive refinement of the highest order. Along the way the Führer himself was their great teacher. It is little known that for a long time, in the early days of the Party, he held no office other than that of its chief of propaganda, and that in the brilliant mastery and exercise of this office he impressed upon the party its real spiritual, organizational, and political stamp. Because he understood – from his nature and his character – how to talk to his people, whose child he has always been and will always be, and to do his deeds for them from the heart. That is why from early on, all the love and the immense reserve of trust of his followers and later the entire German people have been focused on his person. And this even though the broad masses initially saw him from a distance only as politician and statesman. His purely human appearance often remained merely in the background. Today, the world knows him as the creator of the National Socialist doctrine and as the shaper of the National Socialist state, as the pioneer of a new European order and the guide to the peace and prosperity of the nations. But among untold millions of people in the world, behind this realization stands in many cases still a vague sense of the mesmerizing and fascinating presence of the person Adolf Hitler. The great simplicity and the simple greatness that he radiates have a potent and persuasive effect not only on every German, but also on every foreigner of sure instinct. Throughout the world, he is surely the person who can be addressed as the person who is most deeply and clearly rooted in our modern age in his feelings and thoughts, and therefore also bears within himself like no one else the ability to give this time a new form. To fully understand him in this breadth, one must know him not only as a politician and statesman, but also as a human being. And this book is intended to show a path to that end. It is a testimony to his personality itself, compiled with love and devotion by his closest collaborators and oldest comrades-in-arms. They speak up here and convey to the public the sort of picture of this great man that has not existed previously with such immediacy. They have all known the Führer very closely for many years, and they have learned in the process to admire him anew every day. It is this that constitutes the real value of this book. In it, the Führer appears as a person in his direct relationship to all the questions that pervade our time. The German people will be happy to take this opportunity to see the Führer close up and thus also get to know him more intimately as a person. And the fact that an opportunity is also being offered to acquire this book in a simple and inexpensive way is especially gratifying and will help to open up for it broad access to the masses of German readers. May it thus embark on a happy and successful road to the German people!

Source: Joseph Goebbels, “Der Propaganda-Begriff” (1936), in *Adolf Hitler: Bilder aus dem Leben des Führers*, herausgegeben vom Cigaretten-Bilderdienst. Altona-Bahrenfeld: Cigaretten-Bilderdienst, c. 1936, p. 7 f; reprinted in Bernd Sösemann (in collaboration with Marius Lange), *Propaganda: Medien und Öffentlichkeit in der NS-Diktatur: eine Dokumentation und Edition von Gesetzen, Führerbefehlen und sonstigen Anordnungen sowie propagandistischen Bild- und Textüberlieferungen im kommunikationshistorischen Kontext und in der Wahrnehmung des Publikums*. Volume 2. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011, pp. 761–62.

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