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Propaganda and the Rise of Nazi Radio

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Introduction

Less than a year after the parliamentary elections of 1932 and the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, Joseph Goebbels stood in front of crowd of journalists and German radio officials in Berlin. As Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Goebbels opened the tenth annual German Radio Exhibition on August 18, 1933 with a speech that would form the basis of Third Reich-era propaganda until the end of Nazi rule in 1945. “The radio will be for the twentieth century,” he said, “what the press was for the nineteenth century.”¹ In a separate address in March 1933, Goebbels emphasized his point in even clearer language; he says, “I hold radio to be the most modern and the most important instrument of mass

influence that exists anywhere.”² For Goebbels, the future of communication and the key to unifying the German people resided in the developing potential of radio technology. In his mind, without the utilization of the radio, the Nazi Party would not gain total control over the German government and people.³

The radio was the most important medium through which the Third Reich spread its propaganda, as evidenced by the amount of resources the Nazis invested in the technology which excited officials with its versatility and ability to communicate with a wider audience and faster than ever before. At this time in Germany, the press already enjoyed widespread readership, which made it an effective platform to disseminate messages through. And yet Goebbels claimed that the radio would overtake the press in terms of importance. Why was he so

¹ Joseph Goebbels, “Radio as the Eighth Great Power,” August 18, 1933, German Propaganda Archive. Accessed November 14, 2017. <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb56.htm>.

² David Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 184.

³ Robert Edwin Herzstein, *The War That Hitler Won: Goebbels and the Nazi Media Campaign* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987), 176.

confident in saying this? Due to the Nazi Party's absolute control over the airwaves, the advances in broadcasting technology, and the personal endorsement of top Party leaders, the radio was primed to overtake the press and become the most effective and widespread propaganda tool of the Third Reich.

Radio in the Weimar Republic

During the years of the Weimar Republic—the pre-1933 democracy in Germany—radio was still a budding technology being explored in many capacities. The first ever national broadcast came on October 29, 1923 when the program “Sendstelle Berlin” reached 461 listeners over the airwaves.⁴ Hans Flesch, who was then responsible for developments in live reporting and the interactivity and participation of the audience, gave German radio its start.⁵ During this time, radio was used mostly to broadcast news to Germans living elsewhere in Central Europe.⁶ However, the Weimar government never recognized the value of the technology in the way that the Nazis did after 1933. As Joseph Goebbels said in his German Radio Exhibition speech, “At best, [the Weimar Republic] saw it as an easy way to distract the masses from the difficulties of our national and social life through games and entertainment.”⁷ While radio during the Nazi era also contained elements of entertainment, it was used primarily as a political tool, integrated as a means to reach the citizens of Germany quickly and effectively.

Consolidation of German Radio

In 1925, most sectors of the media, such as the press and the film industry, were owned by individuals and private companies.⁸ Radio, on the other hand, was different. The *Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft* (“Reich Broadcasting Corporation”) served as the governing body of all German radio, the main

task of which was regulating all radio broadcasts. *Reichspost* (“Reich Mail”), housed within the national government, owned 51 percent of the company, while the nine regional content stations collectively owned the other 49 percent.⁹ Although the Reich Broadcasting Corporation was legally a single entity, the Nazi government used three separate channels to assist in their spread of propaganda over-the-air. The first, the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda (RMVP), was led by Goebbels himself, created on March 12, 1933 by official order from Hitler.¹⁰ The other two were the Central Propaganda Office of the Party and the Reich Chamber of Culture, the latter of which featured seven sub-chambers, including one for radio.¹¹ After Hitler created the RMVP, Goebbels took the reins and vowed to make the radio an active influence over the listening public—something he accused the previous regime of failing to do.¹² In March 1933, Goebbels said, “Our radio propaganda is not produced in a vacuum, in radio stations, but in the atmosphere-laden halls of mass gatherings. In this way every listener has become a direct participant in these events.”¹³ As the boundaries of radio technology began to expand in the 1930s, Goebbels and the Party pushed the limits. The regime had lofty hopes of speaking to each German citizen directly, in their homes, through a personal radio set—a feat that had never before been accomplished.¹⁴ But before any of this could be achieved, the consolidation of power over German radio and the advancement in broadcasting technology had to occur.

In his German Radio Exhibition speech, Goebbels also declared, “We will bring to the microphone the best spiritual elements of the nation, making the radio into the most multifaceted, flexible means of expressing the wishes, needs, longings, and hopes of our age.”¹⁵ For him, the flexibility of the radio is part of what made the format so indispensable. Many Party members, speakers, and orators could

⁴ Horst J.P. Bergmeier and Rainer E. Lotz, *Hitler's Airwaves: The Inside Story of Nazi Radio Broadcasting and Propaganda Swing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 3.

⁵ Welch, *The Third Reich*, 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷ Joseph Goebbels, “Radio as the Eighth Great Power.”

⁸ Welch, *The Third Reich*, 38.

⁹ Keith Somerville, *Radio Propaganda and the Broadcasting of Hatred: Historical Development and Definitions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 111.

¹⁰ Welch, *The Third Reich*, 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁵ Joseph Goebbels, “Radio as the Eighth Great Power.”

use the nascent platform to spread their message to an unprecedented amount of people practically instantaneously through a multitude of mediums. However, as previously mentioned, the Reich Broadcasting Corporation was not completely state-run. Thus, upon coming to power, the Nazis first needed to restructure the balance of power.

What Goebbels sought was *Rundfunkinheit*, or complete unity and control over all facets of the radio.¹⁶ After Hitler's appointment as Chancellor on January 30, 1933, Goebbels insisted on allowing the RMVP full responsibility for all radio broadcasts. Hermann Göring, President of the Reichstag, mounted the largest defense to Goebbels' request. He believed that the regional radio branches and their authorities should remain in control at the local level.¹⁷ Göring's words fell on deaf ears, however, as Hitler—through a presidential declaration—gave Goebbels full control over all intellectual influences of the state on June 30, 1933.¹⁸ This, of course, mandated that all radio media responsibilities were shifted into the RMVP's jurisdiction.¹⁹ The deal was not quite complete without Hitler's approval for Goebbels to take charge of content, as well as distribution. This did happen, but not until April 1, 1934.²⁰ As a result, the nine regional stations had become, for all intents and purposes, nine branches of the state-owned Reich Broadcasting Corporation.²¹ Indeed, they were forced to cease all original programming by order of Goebbels and instead became conduits for the RMVP's content.²²

It is interesting to note that no formal piece of legislation ever gave the RMVP legal control over the nation's radio broadcasting. Hitler's decree was law, but it was never explicitly formalized, as was the case with many Nazi policies throughout the 1930s and 1940s. The working compromise that existed between the RMVP and German radio was, in this instance, enough to keep Goebbels and his ministry

in charge of content and distribution through to the end of World War II.

Reich Radio's Expanding Reach

Another factor that legitimized the radio as one of Germany's most powerful and effective propaganda tools was the development and success of foreign broadcasts. For instance, the Reich Broadcasting Company signed a contract with American broadcasting conglomerate NBC in the summer of 1929.²³ Although it took until April 2, 1933 for the first live German broadcast to reach the United States, the two companies had been exchanging pre-recorded programs with each other since 1929.²⁴ In 1933, Goebbels drew up a tentative five-year plan of growth for German radio. At the time, only two hours of content were being broadcast on just three different frequencies across the country.²⁵ By the invasion of Poland in September 1939, Goebbels oversaw 119 hours of programming across 18 separate stations. His plan, while indeed increasing content, also sparked a vigorous commitment to the creation of short and long-range towers across the country.²⁶ By 1934, shortwave transmissions were being sent regularly to Africa, Latin America, and East Asia.²⁷ The Nazi government received the perfect chance to showcase its innovations in radio when much of the world's attention was fixated on Berlin in 1936 for the eleventh Olympic Games. In a globalizing world, a total of eight broadcasters read Olympic news in five different languages for twenty-two hours of content each day.²⁸ Two years later, with the world on the precipice of war, the Reich Broadcasting Company was sending shortwave broadcasts every minute of every day in twelve different languages to countries as far away as Brazil.²⁹ Not only were German reports being broadcast internationally, but the Reich Broadcasting Company also began employing foreign correspondents. These

¹⁶ Welch, *The Third Reich*, 40.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁸ Somerville, *Radio Propaganda and the Broadcasting of Hatred*, 113.

¹⁹ Welch, *The Third Reich*, 39.

²⁰ Somerville, *Radio Propaganda and the Broadcasting of Hatred*, 113.

²¹ Welch, *The Third Reich*, 39.

²² Herzstein, *The War That Hitler Won*, 177.

²³ Bergmeier and Lotz, *Hitler's Airwaves*, 35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ John Carver Edwards, *Berlin Calling: American Broadcasters in Service to the Third Reich* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Bergmeier and Lotz, *Hitler's Airwaves*, 36.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁹ Edwards, *Berlin Calling*, 5.

individuals could give live reports from various locations all over the world, making Germany the first country to utilize the technology in such a way.³⁰ Even in the middle of World War II in 1943, German radio was producing nine distinct news programs every day.³¹

According to Bergmeier and Lotz, Germany's European Foreign-Language Services were created, "to promote a new European order and combat the inflammatory lies of her enemies and seek recognition and support for Germany's political, military, economic and cultural goals and achievements..."³² The broadcasts that were sent abroad became just as crucial to the Nazi Party's propaganda efforts as national broadcasts. In an interview about his book, *Marketing the Third Reich: Persuasion, Packaging and Propaganda*, Nicholas O'Shaughnessy highlights a strength of the Nazi regime as having stations and content that addressed all types of people, both at home and overseas.³³ During the war, the British Broadcasting Company played its own radio programs, but they were often filled with sleepy organ music and viewed as quite boring, even by British citizens. The Nazis seized the opportunity and set up secret radio stations that could be accessed in England. At their peak, these Nazi stations were attracting a majority of English radio listeners, even up to 70 percent, on any given weekend.³⁴ While it is difficult to accurately speculate on the effectiveness of these foreign messages and broadcasts, it was certainly an integral part of the Third Reich's radio propaganda agenda. However, a more important goal of such an agenda was reaching German listeners, both before and during the war. The Nazis were largely successful in their endeavors, with some help from one crucial invention.

The "People's Receiver"

"The German radio under National Socialist auspices must become the clearest and most direct instrument for education and restructuring the German nation."³⁵ These are the words of Goebbels'

Program Director and Transmitter Leader, Eugen Hadamovsky. To make the radio the powerful educational tool that they knew it could be, Goebbels and the Nazi Party needed a means by which the maximum number of citizens could have access to broadcasts. In 1933, Goebbels and his team created a solution: the *Volksempfänger*, or "people's receiver," named as such for its affordability and the accessibility to the radio that it could give millions of Germans.³⁶ To make it a reality, the government convinced manufacturers to produce some of the smallest and cheapest radio sets that existed in Europe and heavily subsidized production in order to drive prices down.³⁷ Two models were produced in the early years of the Third Reich, one for 75 Reichsmarks and another for just 35 Reichsmarks, which was even payable in installments for members of the working class.³⁸



Volksempfänger (Peoples Receiver) from 1933
Source: Wikimedia

The creation was a near-instantaneous success. In 1933 and 1934 one million radio sets were sold, raising the total number of radios in the country

³⁰ Ibid., 7.

³¹ Bergmeier and Lotz, *Hitler's Airwaves*, 43.

³² Ibid., 84.

³³ Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, interviewed by Mark Klobas, *New Books Network*, November 6, 2017.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Bergmeier and Lotz, *Hitler's Airwaves*, 6.

³⁶ Welch, *The Third Reich*, 41.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

to six million units.³⁹ By the end of 1939, as the Second World War began, more than 70 percent of homes in Germany had access to wireless radio, giving the German populace the highest percentage of radio ownership worldwide.⁴⁰ These devices became so popular that sales from the “people’s receivers” alone covered over 80 percent of the RMVP’s expenses during its existence.⁴¹

Even when people were away from their homes during the workday, the RMVP devised a system that made it nearly impossible to miss an important radio broadcast. Local radio officials, or *Funkwarte*, were charged with setting up loudspeakers in practically all public places, including town centers, factories, offices, schools, even coffeehouses and restaurants.⁴² At the blaring of the sirens, life across the country would briefly stop. Community listening events would commence, which included speeches or other special announcements meant for all German ears.⁴³ The people were trained to anticipate who was about to speak, as each prominent radio voice was always preceded by a particular song. Once that song began to play, each individual was expected to remain attentive for the duration of the broadcast.⁴⁴ Those that did not comply with these rules were often reported by the *Funkwarte* to their superiors and punished in various capacities.⁴⁵

During the war, community listening was also encouraged and became prevalent amongst soldiers on the frontlines. In what is likely Goebbels’ most famous speech, the Berlin *Sportpalast* Speech in 1943, he played to the emotions of the gathered crowd, saying, “They radioed to us that they had heard the Führer’s proclamation, and perhaps for the last time in their lives joined us in raising their hands to sing the national anthems.”⁴⁶ Regardless of whether this story—shared with a hand-picked audience—was exaggerated to elicit an emotional response, Hitler, Goebbels, and others were heard regularly by soldiers hundreds of miles away from

home. In one of his articles published in March of 1942, Goebbels describes the difficulty that the RMVP faces in catering to the diverse programming preferences of the German people.⁴⁷ He explains that while every effort is made to address reasonable requests, the German soldiers should receive precedent as the most important listeners of national radio.⁴⁸ This emphasizes precisely how central the radio was to the Nazi propaganda effort to boost troop morale and enforce National Socialist ideology in the armed forces in ways that were not possible in previous conflicts.



German family listening to the *Volksempfänger*
Source: German Federal Archive (through Wikimedia)

One of the better examples of the power of German radio propaganda is the reincorporation of the Saarland in 1935. An area on the southwestern border of Germany, the Saar had been occupied by the League of Nations, in accordance with the Treaty of Versailles, at the end of the First World War, and had remained occupied into the 1930s.⁴⁹ After fifteen years of such occupation, a plebiscite was set for January 1935, in order to determine whether the people of the Saarland wished to be reincorporated into Germany.⁵⁰ The RMVP played a crucial role in Nazi efforts to win a successful vote, and created the *Westdeutsche Gemeinschaftsdienst* (“West German Community Service”), an office specifically designed to handle the broadcasting of information in

³⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

⁴² Welch, *The Third Reich*, 42.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Joseph Goebbels, “Nation, Rise Up, and Let the Storm Break Loose,” February 18, 1943, German Propaganda Archive.

Accessed November 14, 2017. <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb36.htm>.

⁴⁷ Joseph Goebbels, “The Good Companion,” *German Propaganda Archive*. Accessed November 14, 2017. <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb12.htm>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Welch, *The Third Reich*, 41.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

that area.⁵¹ A full year before the plebiscite was scheduled, the RMVP began employing identical techniques in the Saar to the ones used in regions throughout the country. Local officials set up speakers across the Saar, additional “people’s receivers” were sold, and group listening with friends and neighbors was heavily encouraged. Combined with a more informal *Flüsterpropaganda* (“underground propaganda”) campaign, in which the Nazis spread rumors about knowing how individuals voted, the RMVP organized an all-out propaganda assault on the Saarland.⁵² In the end, 91 percent of those voting in the plebiscite voted to have the Saar rejoin Germany.⁵³

Combining the propagation of the “people’s receiver” with a local bureaucracy that ensured a large and attentive audience became a primary method in the Third Reich to quickly inform the public of any pressing information. In addition, the flexibility of the RMVP to alter or update the content of a message throughout the course of a day placed the radio head and shoulders above the abilities of the newspaper. With print media, new stories could only be printed and circulated twice per day at maximum efficiency, but with a radio newscast, the information could be publicized with ease at any time of day or night.⁵⁴ Hadamovsky beamed about the innovation of the new invention, saying, “For the first time in history, radio gives us the chance to reach millions of people with daily and hourly influences. The old and young, workers, farmers, soldiers, and officers, men and women, sit before the apparatus, listening...”⁵⁵ This was the most important goal for Goebbels and the RMVP. Radio messages were crafted to guide people to think and act as one nation with uniform values.⁵⁶ The Nazi Party believed that this new technology would create a “uniformity” and camaraderie amongst the German people that could transcend the class politics that had dominated the Weimar Republic.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Somerville, *Radio Propaganda and the Broadcasting of Hatred*, 112.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Joseph Goebbels, “Radio as the Eighth Great Power.”

⁵⁷ Welch, *The Third Reich*, 39.

Joseph Goebbels and the RMVP’s Revolving Door

There is no doubt that radio technology made an impression on the German public throughout the National Socialist period. But it may never have seen the usage it did without the influence and endorsement of elite Nazi figures, most importantly Hitler and Goebbels. Hitler realized the power of journalism and the media’s ability to portray information in persuasive ways early in his political career. In his 1925 work *Mein Kampf*, he wrote, “The journalists were real virtuosos in the art of twisting facts and presenting them in a deceptive form. [...] The newspaper propaganda was intended for the masses.”⁵⁸ With Joseph Goebbels at his side, however, he also began to appreciate the effectiveness of the radio as a platform for Nazi propaganda. When he toured the country in 1933, Hitler began to only visit cities that had active radio stations.⁵⁹ Although his oratory skills were well regarded and he thrived in front of a live audience, Hitler realized the importance of spreading his message to as great a number of people as possible. In 1933 alone, a year in which radio was still coming into its own, it is estimated that Hitler made 50 speeches that were broadcast over the air.⁶⁰ The medium of radio was unique in that it often captivated the general essence of a printed message, but added the personality and inflexion of the human voice.⁶¹ This added an extra layer to the oration that Hitler would use and, ultimately, master throughout his career.

Hitler delegated most of the control in the realm of broadcasting to Goebbels, who, with about 1,000 staff in the RMVP,⁶² also attempted to install some leadership underneath him. Eugen Hadamovsky, who held previous employment as a motor mechanic, was appointed Director of Broadcasting in 1933. He earned much of his clout for founding the National Socialist Radio Chamber, which would become the Reich Radio Chamber—one of the “Reich Chambers of Culture”—six months later.⁶³ Also

⁵⁸ Somerville, *Radio Propaganda and the Broadcasting of Hatred*, 88.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 106.

⁶⁰ Welch, *The Third Reich*, 42.

⁶¹ Somerville, *Radio Propaganda and the Broadcasting of Hatred*, 111.

⁶² Welch, *The Third Reich*, 31.

⁶³ Ibid., 40.

Reich Transmitter Leader, Hadamovsky approved all important broadcasts before they could be transmitted over the airwaves. But, as dedicated as Hadamovsky was to the Party and its goals, Goebbels viewed him largely as incompetent.⁶⁴ To offset this, Goebbels hired Dr. Heinrich Glasmaier as Reich Superintendent of the German Radio Network.⁶⁵ Yet, after a year in his position, Glasmaier also failed to impress Goebbels, and was transferred to the Central Propaganda Office in 1942 to reduce his responsibilities.⁶⁶ Ultimately, Hans Fritzsche emerged as the most competent and, according to Herzstein, most important German radio broadcaster in the Third Reich.⁶⁷ His intelligence, sarcasm, and wit made him a popular voice during the early-war years of German victory. Later in the war, though, his personal style and resistance to complying with the RMVP's standards had made him a nuisance to both Goebbels and the radio-listening public.⁶⁸

This revolving door of directors and superintendents solidified Goebbels' distrust of civil servants. He once wrote in his diary, "Just as you cannot expect a cow to lay eggs, you cannot expect a bureaucrat to look after the interests of the state properly."⁶⁹ The civil service did, however, add to Goebbels' power over an increasingly unified German radio industry. Already Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda since 1933, he was later appointed as President of the Press Association. In this role, Goebbels had the ability to bar any journalist from engaging in their work.⁷⁰ His authority was even backed by an official court system that fined, expelled, or otherwise punished those that violated the laws.⁷¹ By 1939, Goebbels was in a position to force all commentators, announcers, and press editors to

attend his own "ministerial conferences."⁷² There, he instructed members of the press on what was appropriate to publish and how radio broadcasters could or could not alter official messages for air.⁷³ Succinctly summarizing Goebbels' power over the radio, O'Shaughnessy says, "Goebbels actually had a switch in his office to switch it on and interfere in the radio programming everywhere with his stentorian voice, saying some important item of news or something like that. Control was centralized."⁷⁴

Conclusion

With the growth and improvement of broadcasting stations, the Nazis expanded their influence at home and across the world. With the introduction of small, reasonably priced radio sets, citizens of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds were within reach of the Nazi Party's messages. The "people's receiver" created what was nearly a direct line from the lips of Joseph Goebbels and RMVP functionaries to the people's ears. In the 1930s, such public access to the private sphere of the home was unprecedented. And while the Nazis continued to take advantage of their control over more traditional forms of media, radio had become the prized propaganda medium for the Third Reich. As Goebbels professed in his German Radio Exhibition speech in 1933, "The radio is the most influential and important intermediary between a spiritual movement and the nation, between the idea and the people."⁷⁵ While it is impossible to determine precisely how effective the radio was in influencing the German people, there is no denying its central importance to the dissemination of Nazi propaganda.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Herzstein, *The War That Hitler Won*, 182.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Welch, *The Third Reich*, 31.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Herzstein, *The War That Hitler Won*, 179.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, interviewed by Mark Klobas, *New Books Network*, November 6, 2017.

⁷⁵ Joseph Goebbels, "Radio as the Eighth Great Power."