

Film and Photography in the Third Reich

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The background

WHenever we see a film or photograph made in Germany between 1933 and 1945, we need to remember the aims of Nazi propaganda. These were to mobilise Germans behind the creation of both a new Greater German Reich and 'living space' in the East, and a 'master race' from which 'inferior' elements had been eliminated. Individualistic, humanitarian and Christian values were to be replaced by totalitarian collectivism and racism. Co-ordinating this strategy of indoctrination was the Ministry of Propaganda and Popular Enlightenment headed by Joseph Goebbels: an extremely important figure, despite rivalry from other parts of the Nazi State, and the person who masterminded the regime's biggest propaganda success, the creation of a widely-accepted 'Hitler myth'.

Germany in 1933 had a wide range of media for propagandists to use, including a sophisticated press and an established state radio network. (Television, though the Nazis accelerated its development, remained marginal.) A third major resource was the world's most important film industry after Hollywood. Realistically, Goebbels worked within its existing private-enterprise framework for as long as possible - there was no state takeover until 1942 - while using financial and other pressures to get the films he wanted. (In the 1930s big firms like UFA and Tobis became increasingly dominant; this made supervision easier, but would probably have happened anyway because of the Depression and the cost of conversion to sound.) Key control mechanisms were a tough 1934 censorship law and State powers to exclude anyone deemed politically or racially 'unsuitable' from any branch of the industry. And, especially during the war, Goebbels and his officials often intervened to 'tune' the political content of major productions. Finally, film audiences were greatly enlarged, for example, by increasing youth screenings and deploying mobile cinemas in remote areas. (The armed forces, the education authorities and the Hitler Youth also made and showed films for their own purposes.)

Nazi cinema

Ironically, one of the few Nazi films easily available today, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), is far from typical of the Third Reich's output. A cinematic record of the Nuremberg Party Rally of September 1934, it was directly commissioned by Hitler and made, more or less independently of both the industry and Goebbels, by one of the world's few female directors. It contains many technical innovations - cameras mounted on lifts, shots from planes and balloons - and pounds viewers relentlessly with propaganda, including a marching sequence lasting 18 minutes. Riefenstahl not only conveys a stirring



Dr Goebbels winning young hearts in 1934

impression of what the rally must have been like but creates memorable visual symbols: Hitler's plane descending through the clouds (nature mastered by technology); shots of old Nuremberg (German cultural traditions); a forest of moving flags (Nazism as a force of nature); and endless ranks and columns of men (Nazi unity and discipline contrasting with Weimar chaos). But *Triumph of the Will* is also overshadowed by the Röhm Purge launched on 30 June/1 July 1934, i.e. only two months before the rally. Although the liquidation of SA leader Ernst Röhm and other top Brownshirts is only obliquely referred to - Riefenstahl's brief could have been 'Don't mention the Purge!' - it seems ever-present. And the film projects three crucial messages relating to it: chaotic radicalism would be crushed; Party unity (despite everything) was rock solid; and, above all, Hitler had not sold out to Germany's conservative elites. Riefenstahl claimed later that she knew little about either the Purge or politics generally, but had just tried to film the rally 'as it was'. However, the speech extracts that we hear - chosen from many hours of footage! - underline these messages so clearly that Riefenstahl was either lying or had strong political guidance during the editing. Comparing *Triumph of the Will* with her memoirs and other documents on 1934 is a fascinating exercise.

Mainstream film production between 1933 and 1945 was heavily dominated by entertainment: love stories, comedies and musicals, and special-effects adventure fantasies like *Münchhausen* (1942/3). In fact, about 85 per cent of all 'Nazi' feature (fictional) films seemed harmless enough, after the war, to be reissued with minor cuts.



The image as propaganda. Aryan types at Nuremberg

(Many contain submerged political messages; but how far these were 'read' by Third Reich audiences is uncertain.) This strategy reflected Goebbels' fear that too much hard-core indoctrination would repel audiences, and that light relief was essential. It also met film companies' desire for profits, especially from exports. And it matched longer-term Nazi dreams of a German-dominated European industry capable of challenging Hollywood.

But the minority of blatant propaganda films received a disproportionate share of resources (money, stars, sometimes colour film stock), as well as prizes and publicity designed to boost their appeal. Taken together, they cover all the key Nazi concerns: euthanasia (*I Accuse*, 1941); anti-Semitism (the costume drama *Jew Süß* and the 'documentary' *The Eternal Jew*, both 1940: two of the most vicious pieces of hate-propaganda ever created); hatred of Britain (among many others *Uncle Krüger*, 1941, about the Boer War, and the spectacular *Titanic*, 1943, parts of which were reused in the 1958 Hollywood film *A Night to Remember*); and hostility to Poles, Communists, democrats and so on. A series of Frederick the Great epics, starring Otto Gebühr, continued a genre already popular before 1933, but with increasing doses of Nazi rhetoric. The last and most elaborate, *The Great King*, was premièred in Berlin on 3 March 1942, and on 19 April, the eve of Hitler's birthday, praised by Goebbels in a big speech about leadership, destiny and sacrifice. The Napoleonic blockbuster *Kolberg* (1945), shot in Agfacolor, exhorted ordinary people to fight on for survival despite the defeatism of the generals. Although such films evidently failed to achieve their purpose - most Germans were probably ready to surrender by the time *Kolberg* appeared - the huge

resources devoted to them, including thousands of military extras, underline Goebbels' belief in the importance of film propaganda.

Yet feature films took much too long to make - from six months to two years - to be used as planned accompaniments for political events, which moved increasingly fast after the 1938 Munich Crisis. During the war, Goebbels rarely had the kinds of films he needed and, as conditions deteriorated, it was necessary to tinker continually with projects like *The Great King* and *Kolberg*. Much more flexible, however, were the 40-minute newsreels that eventually became a compulsory part of cinema programmes. In November 1940 the four private newsreel firms were replaced by the state-controlled German Newsreel Company. Well-equipped Propaganda Companies, on all the fronts, shot dramatic (silent) footage which was then edited, dubbed, and vetted by Goebbels in Berlin. Newsreels' prime purpose was not to inform but to stir emotion: euphoria, patriotism and, ultimately, fear. In the summer of 1942, shots of the super-guns Thor and Dora bombarding Sevastopol to the dubbed accompaniment of Liszt's *Preludes* created an awe-inspiring impression of destructive power, yet exaggerated these weapons' military significance. Later, deception became increasingly the norm. In June 1944, for example, newsreel on the Allied invasion of Normandy combined old footage and dishonestly-presented new material to 'show' that the landings had been a disaster. In general, distortion was probably easier and more common than outright faking. Until almost the end, German soldiers were usually winning somewhere, giving picture opportunities for cameramen. But skilful editing and upbeat commentary and music blurred the relationship between these micro-events and the bigger picture.

Effects

Propaganda's purpose is to change people's attitudes and behaviour. Given the spectacular quality of many Nazi films, it is easy to assume that Germans must have been bowled over by them. But, as already suggested, we should be careful. Modern communications theorists are sceptical about the possibility of influencing adults whose beliefs and attitudes are already formed. (Young people, the target of much Nazi propaganda, may be more vulnerable.) The evidence is also limited. Clearly Goebbels could hardly have expected frank responses to the kinds of audience surveys carried out in wartime Britain, or by market-researchers today. However, the thousands of informers working for the SD (internal Security Service) reported comments overheard from all kinds of people. They suggest that, where film propaganda matched existing attitudes, such as anti-Communism, hostility to Poland or France, or desire for national unity and a strong state, it went down well. But messages - for example, in favour of euthanasia or total war - that went against Christian beliefs or consumerist aspirations, met much more resistance. Only the myth of Hitler as inspired leader and man of destiny seems, according to historians like Ian Kershaw, to have kept its appeal until late in the war. Still, long before that, thousands of Germans were probably finding death and destruction on the cinema screen increasingly unwatchable.



Hitler depicted as the child-loving man of the people

Photography

Pre-1933 Germany had a large illustrated press and a modern advertising industry, both of which made extensive use of photography. After 1933 many top fashion photographers and photo-journalists (including Stefan Lorant from Munich who went to London and eventually founded *Picture Post*) emigrated; the rest, like film-industry workers, had to join Nazi-controlled professional organisations.

Soon, therefore, the pictures Germans saw in newspapers and magazines were taken only by officially-approved photographers. During the war, photographers worked alongside newsreel cameramen in the Propaganda Companies. Lothar-Günther Buchheim who, much later, reworked his experiences in the best-selling novel *The Boat*, recorded life in operational U-boats. Another kind of career was that of Heinrich Hoffmann, a Munich photo-journalist and early NSDAP member who eventually

became Hitler's personal photographer. As 'the man who sees the Führer for us', he not only earned a fortune but helped Goebbels to project the dual image of Hitler as both all-powerful leader and simple, nature- and child-loving man of the people. As with newsreels, of course, we should be critical of these images. 'Private' photographs of Hitler relaxing at his mountain retreat near Berchtesgaden, for example, conceal the fact that he was surrounded there increasingly by a vast complex of barracks and other facilities, and security precautions ranging from armed servants to mobile flak batteries.

Some of these pictures were probably taken by Hoffmann's former assistant, Hitler's mistress Eva Braun. She was one of countless amateur photographers and cinematographers who depicted life in the Third Reich until its very end, equipped by firms like Agfa, Gossen, Francke & Heidecke (Rollei), Leitz (Leica) and Zeiss Ikon (Contax), and encouraged by the regime. A photographic section was created in the Propaganda Ministry, photo-shows and competitions were sponsored, and Germany's network of amateur clubs was formally subordinated to the Party. Amateurs could anyway be counted on to deliver images that matched the official vision of a harmonious, forward-looking society: well-fed, cheerful babies, German technology, German landscapes and the German body beautiful. Together with other evidence, such as statistics of car-ownership, photos and cine-films of holiday cruises and suburban homes indicate a level of middle-class affluence far higher by 1939 than a decade earlier. But problems arose when Leicas and Contaxes began to record much nastier realities. Already, in the First World War, illicit photos of mud and corpses had caused problems for propagandists. In the Second World War, amateurs depicted deportations of Jews, and soldiers snapped death-camps from passing troop-trains; executions and ghetto-'liquidations' were photographed by the killers themselves; despite strict bans, cine-enthusiasts shot colour footage of air-raid victims laid out in the streets. Much of this uncensored private material survives today in archives and more is coming to light. Its history, compared with that of the cinema and other officially controlled media, still largely remains to be written.

FURTHER READING: David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933-1945*, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1985; David Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*, Routledge, 1993; Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth*, Oxford University Press, 1987; E. Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Aftermath*, Harvard University Press, 1996; Leni Riefenstahl, *The Sieve of Time: The Memoirs of Leni Riefenstahl*, Quartet Books, 1992; K. Honnef (ed.), *German Photography 1870-1979: Part of a Medium*, Dumont Colonge, 1997.

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