

## **Mad men?**

*Marketing the Third Reich:  
Persuasion, Packaging and Propaganda*

Nicholas O'Shaughnessy  
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### **Colin Challen**

**T**he title of this book is both arresting, yet banal. And very chilling. To deal with the last point first: the twenty first century's highly developed concept and practice of marketing is that you identify your market, then you quantify it and then seek profitable ways of satisfying it (either financially or electorally). So it doesn't, initially, really seem appropriate to use the word 'marketing' in the context of 'selling' Nazism. It is difficult to imagine Hitler organising focus groups to see how he might adapt *Mein Kampf* to the mood of the day. In an age before the supposed innovative and pervasive use of opinion polling, focus groups and spin doctors, surely the Nazis would have used crude propagandising to promote their equally crude ideology?

*Marketing the Third Reich* strips away such illusions. It is not too hard to consider Josef Goebbels as a very modern marketing innovator whose services would be in high demand today. From deranged men to mad men? If there's a lesson from history about how to sell something, even something as odious as a nasty political creed, why not stoop to learn from it? That thought is arresting, since it's not commonly acknowledged outside the history of marketing. Today's political marketers would not wish to publicly acknowledge that many of the techniques which were used by their Nazi predecessors are still being employed today to package the product and persuade the public to consume it.

Superficially the idea that the Nazi propaganda machine was a huge, homogenous and blunt instrument fits with the evidence. Their propaganda material – the millions of leaflets, booklets, films, newsreels and radio broadcasts – had to subscribe to a centrally approved format. All content, even at a parochial level, had to be centrally approved. In today's parlance it to be 'on message'. But that discipline most definitely embraced another

'contemporary' innovation: segmentation. The Nazis well understood that, in some areas, anti-semitism meant little; that rural audiences were different to urban audiences; and that there were different class, age and gender interests to be addressed. They even devised communications specifically targeted at Marxists – not to condemn them but to seek their conversion to Nazism. Different techniques were employed to get the message across, including that old mainstay of recent years, direct mail, some of which was hand-written by local cadres. Had social media existed in the 1930s and 1940s the Nazis would have been the leading proponents of its use.

To what end was all this marketing put? While different segments of the population may have been addressed differently, in tone and sometimes content, the overarching desire of the Nazis was to bind the people into a homogenous consciousness, i.e. integral to the state. As O'Shaughnessy says, 'propaganda was no mere tool but an entire philosophy of governing.'<sup>1</sup>

It is a matter of debate whether this was successful. Did it, for example, generate enthusiasm for war? A. J. P. Taylor wrote:

'Germans and Italians applauded their leaders; but war was not popular among them, as it had been in 1914. Then cheering crowds everywhere greeted the outbreak of war. There was intense gloom in Germany during the Czech crisis of 1938; and only helpless resignation the following year when war broke out. The war of 1939, far from being welcome, was less wanted by nearly everybody than almost any war in history.'<sup>2</sup>

The question arises: how deep did the message sink in? Outside the circles of party zealots, did the population embrace the message or merely acquiesce in it? 'We were only following orders', so to speak. Unlike modern marketing, which is all carrot, Nazi marketing also wielded a big totalitarian stick. Also unlike modern marketing, it treated its target audience with didactic disdain, as Hitler made clear in *Mein Kampf*:

'We must avoid excessive intellectual demands on our public. The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of these facts all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> p. 41

<sup>2</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, (London: Folio Society, 2008), p. 116.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, (London: W.H. Freeman & Co, 1992), p. 250.

Hitler's analysis still stands as a lesson for today's marketers: brand building relies heavily on repetition. The makers of a certain washing powder used to irritate me enormously with their TV commercials – the same thing, over and over again. The Labour Party were guilty of this too, in the 1997 general election, when they introduced the 'pledge card' with five key pledges. John Prescott, for example, would whip this out at every opportunity – to the point it seemed of tedium. Or as Peter Mandelson put it more prosaically in relation to '22 Tory tax rises', the message had to be repeated until party staff vomited.<sup>4</sup>

But if the repetition of the message is delivered crudely, or is seen to be didactic, will it work? Politicians and parties which are understood to be 'on message' all the time can be met with ridicule. One example of this is the old joke about Peter Mandelson's alleged grip on Labour MPs: through their pagers he had even sent them a message telling them to 'breathe in, breathe out.' Another example is from the 2017 general election, with Theresa May's constant repetition of the phrase 'Strong and stable government'. What initially was seen as a strength soon became self-parody, not least because it rapidly became obvious that no-one believed it.

The Nazis' use of propaganda sought to avoid these pitfalls by conveying their message in a variety of guises, which would restate key themes: strength, harmony, victory. These themes would emerge in portrayals of ordinary life, or the exemplary life of the nation as one family – a unified family with one father, the Führer. Sometimes Nazi propaganda avoided any explicit use of Nazi symbolism, but sought to appear as just another, ordinary facet of public life in the hope that their message would resonate in the public sphere. 'We know this as the social consensus heuristic – if everyone else agrees, so should I.'<sup>5</sup> This method was also developed through 'whisper' campaigns, where the hand of the party was intentionally kept invisible.

'He [Goebbels] organised a countrywide network through which Promi [the propaganda ministry] could spread information – or disinformation – that was considered unsuitable to be mentioned publicly, or when the government did not wish to appear as the originator. This network was, of course, separate from the party organisation that extended control over all citizens. Revelations coming from the secretary of a church group would be more readily believed, for example, than from a party

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<sup>4</sup> My recollection of Labour Party staff training sessions circa 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Pratkanis and Aronson, (see note 3) p. 252

official.<sup>6</sup>

It is 'nudge' theory, of course, that is the modern political equivalent of the 'whisper' campaigns. Party political broadcasts (which are now designed to be repeated on social media) are almost a secondary thought in comparison. The alleged Russian-initiated social media campaigns, designed to sway public opinion in Western democracies' elections, are another indication of new techniques. It should be noted that, although those 'Russian campaigns' are still unproven, Western governments are already preparing to respond in kind. The important thing about all these efforts, regardless of the standpoint from which they are delivered, is that they should be believable.nn

O'Shaugnessy's detailed, deeply researched and exhaustive account of Nazi marketing ends with inevitable questions: was Hitler ahead of his time? What comparisons can be made with today's methods of marketing political brands? What of the similarities between Nazi marketing techniques and the rise of, say, Donald Trump?

The core element of political marketing is to recognise the simple truth that manipulating perception matters more than possessing an intellectual understanding of the complexities of the real world. When confronted with a simple binary question, there is no space or time for lengthy expositions of all the pros and cons, only slogans and simplistic appeals to optimism. The election of Trump and the Brexit referendum are often represented as symptoms of a recrudescence of a baseness in political culture which harks back to the methods of Goebbels and thus threatens a rise in populist, right-wing extremism. But the methods of Goebbels never really went out of fashion and have been used equally on all sides. Obama's rather meaningless 'Yes we can' slogan, coupled with the use of Che Guevara-esque poster images is straight out of the Nazi design playbook. This of course doesn't make Obama a fascist. As O'Shaugnessy remarks, nor does Trump's colourful use of language – in all its platforms: the rallies, tweets, etc. – make him one. However, in spite of that, we can generally accept that he has authoritarian tendencies and is a demagogue. Comparisons falter, too, when one considers the total grip that Hitler and Goebbels exercised on all the media available to them. Only

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Newcourt-Nowodworski, *Black Propaganda in the Second World War*, (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2005) p. 30

Similar tactics were used by British black propagandists against the Germans. Allied black propaganda leaflets . . . .

'While appealing to his individual interest and self-preservation instinct, they play at the same time on his herd instinct by suggesting that "all those in the know" are doing a certain thing, e.g. hoarding grain against higher prices next year.'

From official document CAB 21 1071, quoted in Newcourt-Nowodworski, p. 70

North Korea today could match this domination. We are a long way short of that nightmare and hopefully close examinations of the Nazi marketing philosophy, such as O'Shaughnessy has delivered, will help to keep that monster at bay.

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