State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda

Hitler's Terrible Weapon: Publicity

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After touring the newly liberated Nazi concentration camp at Ohdruf, Germany, in 1945, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower said that he made his very public visit "to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to 'propaganda.'"

Those words are chiseled on the wall of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which has just opened a major new exhibition devoted to propaganda. Eisenhower's intuition that propaganda, which made the Holocaust possible, might also be used to deny its existence remains prescient. Just last week, German Chancellor Angela Merkel blasted the Catholic Church for rehabilitating the disgraced bishop, Richard Williamson, who has publicly questioned essential and accepted facts about the Nazi genocide.

In many ways, "State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda" feels like an introduction to Holocaust Museum 2.0. The $3.2 million exhibition is one of the largest and most ambitious in years, and certainly the most technologically slick in recent memory. By taking on the subject of propaganda, the museum is taking on the whole of the Nazi project, retelling the story of Hitler's rise to prominence, his consolidation of power, his ideology and his wars, and the aftermath, including a substantial look at how propaganda and genocide remain linked in places such as Rwanda.

One item on display, a large painting of the young Hitler speaking to a small, rapt audience, is titled "In the Beginning Was the Word." That biblical reference would make a good subtitle to "State of Deception," which covers much of the same ground as the museum's permanent collection, while more explicitly emphasizing the degree to which propaganda was the very fiber of the whole Nazi project.

It's also a subject of ongoing debate in our own political culture, where politicians routinely resort to the same techniques -- simplification, vilification, message branding -- that the Nazis relied on seven decades ago.

In her preface to the exhibition catalogue, museum Director Sara J. Bloomfield is particularly concerned about how new media might revive ideas and tactics that should have been thoroughly discredited in the rubble of concentration camps. As she puts it, "Once Again, the Nazis have new tools in this age of the Internet, and at the same time consumers..."
information seem less equipped to handle the massive amount of unmediated information confronting them daily," she writes.

The exhibition acknowledges and includes substantial amounts of the dark phantasmagoria of propaganda we know so well: Hitler and Goebbels hectored huge crowds, swastika banners hanging from stark, neoclassical buildings and crude anti-Semitic posters, movies and books. But curator Steven Luckert pulls back from the high-water mark of Nazi power in the early years of World War II to look instead at origins of its imagery in World War I, when the United States and its allies trafficked in jarring, anti-German propaganda. He traces propaganda through the bitter end of the Third Reich and its aftermath, when the victorious allies dismantled the old propaganda regime while using some of its methods to de-Nazify conquered Germany.

Lessons emerge. In many ways, Nazi propaganda was a perverse dialogue with Nazi opponents (at home and abroad) and with the German people. It could be as subtle as it was crass, and there were feedback mechanisms to ensure that failed messages or techniques were examined and improved. Nazis used sophisticated niche messaging, especially during their rise to power in the early 1930s, tailoring ideology to different interest groups. They were keenly aware of their competitors in other parties during the same period, and often out-maneuvered them. And they understood the many facets of propaganda, from its positive powers -- to instill a sense of unity and purpose in a beleaguered population -- to its slow, corrosive power to foster indifference and, finally, hatred.

One of the most jarring images of the exhibition is an elegant and austere 1932 poster showing Hitler's face hovering like a disembodied mask against a dark background, with a single word -- "Hitler" -- written underneath in sans-serif type. Luckert says the poster was withheld until the final weeks of the 1932 elections so that its stark simplicity would contrast with the colorful and cluttered campaign posters of competing parties.

It is a reminder that Hitler was the monstrous child of democracy. Although he never won a majority of votes in Germany, his power grew through the effective manipulation of the democratic process.

"Hitler über Deutschland," a brilliant propaganda stunt advertised in a 1932 pamphlet, anticipated the final days of American political contests. Using planes rented from Lufthansa, Hitler crisscrossed the country, speaking to nearly a million people. The poster promotes the campaign, showing a three-engine plane spewing little swastikas over the country. The imagery and the tour itself emphasized something essential to Hitler's appeal: Despite his ideology's hatred, he knew that he must present himself as a politician who transcended the usual petty divisions of a fractured society. He was a pan-German candidate.

That didn't last. Within days of being named chancellor in late January 1933, Hitler began placing constraints on his opponents and the press. The swiftness with which he consolidated the powers of communication was breathtaking, as are the depth and penetration of his messaging techniques. The exhibition includes toy soldiers in brown shirts and Nazi armbands; games such as "Jews Out!," played on a board ringed with an old, medieval city wall, and "Radio Send Spiel," which encouraged players to avoid enemy or foreign radio stations; and children's books such as "The Poisonous Mushroom," which showed a Jewish caricature rendered as blue-headed toadstool.

It covers the pseudo-science of race as it was taught in public schools and the recasting of German history as a series of grand accomplishments and horrific betrayals (by Jews, capitalists, communists and outsiders of all stripes). It demonstrates how hatred was deployed like a fusillade to soften the populace before the country goose-stepped over yet another line of civilized behavior. A map shows the march of the Wehrmacht on its Eastern Front, it also had to harden its own soldiers in preparation for the...
atrocities they would commit -- and so the tone of anti-Semitism grew more virulent and hateful in posters and other media.

The exhibition continues through Nuremberg, where Nazi propagandists were tried as war criminals and a critical distinction between hate speech and direct incitement of genocide was established. A postlude, which examines how that distinction played out in international trials after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, suggests the degree to which propaganda is still an unsettled subject.

A final picture of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose calls for the elimination of Israel may violate the United Nations convention on genocide, raises the question of whether we can draw lines between hate speech and incitement before people start dying. This is a more directly topical and controversial note than is usually struck in a temporary exhibition at the Holocaust Museum.

But it is not as risky a gesture as the open display of much of this still powerful material, which might not have been possible just a few years ago when more survivors were alive. The red, white and black swastika flag (which is seen in the permanent collection behind a grate) has an almost promiscuous power in its presentation here. A mini-cinema includes film footage newly edited into a tape-loop that is disturbingly more effective than the original material, at least for today’s audiences. Oil paintings of Hitler as an orator and war leader threaten to overwhelm their museum context, and work simply as effective imagery.

The Holocaust Museum has never been behind the times when it comes to its museum technology. But more than any other museum in town, it has been rigorous about putting content and ideas first. This exhibition doesn't opt for superficiality over technology -- the depth of information available is still remarkable -- but it does stray into the usual danger area of glitzy, interactive museum design. Which is noise and confusion.

And so as survivor Gerda Hass talks to the viewer on a small video screen, remembering how no matter which station you picked on the radio “there was always Hitler's voice,” you can hear “Deutschland über alles” filtering in from the mini-theater. A fascinating letter from 1946, detailing charges against the notorious anti-Semitic publisher Julius Streicher, is difficult to read because of the intrusion of a newsreel nearby. These are easy mistakes to make, but one hopes they don’t presage a move toward the current groupthink of exhibition design, which assumes that young people will respond only to a wild polyphony of media and stimulation.

Even today, the most jarring materials from the Holocaust are the items that, like Eisenhower’s visit to Ohdruf, prove on some basic, incontrovertible level that the seemingly unbelievable did indeed happen. Near the 1932 poster of Hitler’s face, which is so clean and elegant in its design, is a black-and-white photograph of young Nazi men hanging the same image on a wooden wall. As one man rises up to secure its top edge, you can see the hole in his sock as his heel rises out of a ratty old shoe. The poster, and the photograph of the poster in action, and the raw visual evidence of the economic, social and moral poverty within which Nazism took root, is more powerful than any touch screen or video terminal. But you need a bit of time, a little quiet and a lot of focus to see it.