

A Reich of Lies

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In order to gain power, Hitler lied about the past. This was not difficult, because he only had to build on the falsifications that already existed and turn them into propaganda weapons of mass destruction.

'The broad masses of a nation are not made up of professors and diplomats. [...] Whoever wishes to win over the masses must know the key that will open the door to their hearts',¹ noted Adolf Hitler in 1924, when spending time behind bars in Landsberg Prison. 'In its message as well as in its forms of expression the propaganda must be kept on a level with the intelligence of the masses, and its value must be measured only by the actual success it achieves. At a public meeting where the great masses are gathered together the best speaker is not he whose way of approaching a subject is most akin to the spirit of those intellectuals who may happen to be present, but the speaker who knows how to win the hearts of the masses',² wrote the leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei – NSDAP). After his release, he published his thoughts in the form of a book titled *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*). He then proceeded to put them into practice.

A recipe for catchy fake news

In order to win the democratic elections, Adolf Hitler made sure that Nazi propaganda showed the NSDAP as the only force capable of saving the Germans from internal and external enemies. That was done by drawing on the myths present in German thinking about the state and the nation. **Neither Hitler nor his trusted propaganda specialist Joseph Goebbels needed to create his own legends. It turned out to be more effective to search for those already existing on the fringes of the public**

¹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. James Murphy, London 1939, p. 281.

² *Ibid.*, p. 285.

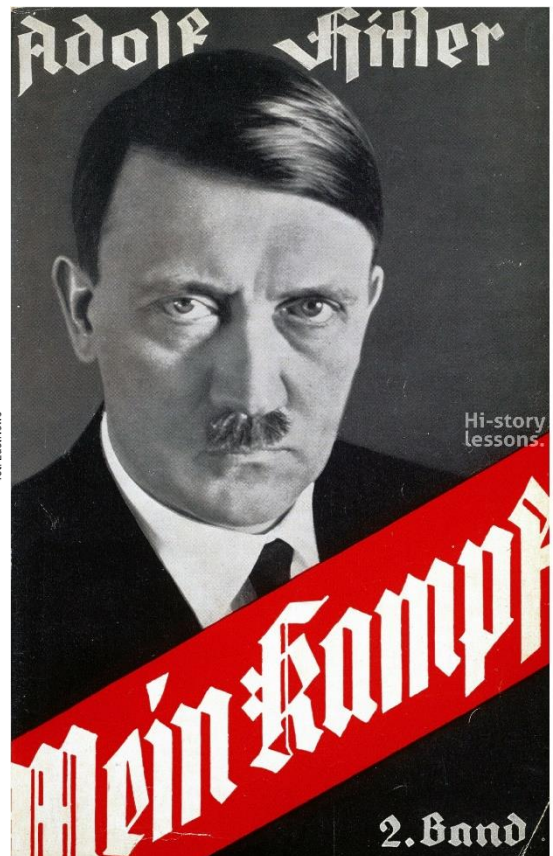
arena. Sometimes they were modified a little to convince more Germans that such stories were true.

Myths about the recent past proved to be the most effective propaganda as they simply explained to ordinary people the terrible reality of Germany shaken by crises.

The historical falsifications had one thing in common: they cast the Jews, social democrats and communists in the worst possible light, supporting Hitler's opinion that they were the most dangerous enemies of the German people.



↑ Youths looking at Adolf Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* in Klaipėda. This photo was used for propaganda purposes supporting Germany's intention to incorporate the city of Klaipėda into the Third Reich, Lithuania, 1939.



The past in the service of the Nazis

'What about the victories at Sadowa and Sedan, or the billion-worth war ransom [war reparations from France defeated in 1871 – author's note], what about our struggle for culture – is all this supposed to assert the power of the Jews?' asked the columnist Konstantin Frantz shortly after the world plunged into the greatest economic crisis of the 19th century. This was triggered by the crash of the Berlin and Vienna stock markets in the spring of 1873 when the investment banks known as the Founders underwent a series of bankruptcies. Over the following years, as millions of people in the German Empire lost their savings and jobs, they looked for someone to blame for the catastrophe, and Frantz pointed at them. In 1875 another journalist, Ferdinand Perrot, published a series of articles in *Kreuzzeitung* on the Jews controlling German banks. Although the Jews living in Germany had assimilated completely, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck received a petition signed by 200,000 citizens calling for the strict control of their number. Eventually anti-Semitic publications multiplied. This legacy became the main inspiration for Nazi propaganda after 1920. **It refreshed the old conspiracy theories proving that the Jews controlled the economy and the financial world**, presenting lampoons from 50 years earlier as reliable sources. To this were added *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* prepared by the Russian tsar's secret police (*Okhrana*) in the late 19th century. The publication was used to convince voters that Jews had been conspiring for centuries to rule the world. There was also another work, written by Alfred Roth, leader of the German Nationalist Protection and Defiance Federation (Deutschvölkischer Schutz- und Trutzbund – DVSTB), in 1919. Under the pseudonym Otto Arnim, he published *Die Juden im Heere* ('The Jews in the Army') claiming that during the First World War, German Jews were mainly engaged in financial speculation or spying for the benefit of the hostile powers, evading serving on the front, while officers of Jewish origin spread defeatism among their subordinates. Roth referred to military census data, which he falsified. This fact did not bother Hitler or Goebbels and the much-discussed book allowed them to use anti-Semitic falsifications to undermine the foundations of the Weimar Republic.

Traitors everywhere

'The National Socialist Revolution had but one goal: to restore order within one's own nation', the new chancellor announced in a radio speech on 14 October 1933. For half a year, Adolf Hitler had been consolidating his power gained through electoral success. **To a large extent, he achieved it by creating a modern propaganda machine, based on the street marches of the Nazi Party's *Sturmabteilung (SA)* militia, mass-produced newspapers and leaflets and, above all, public speeches.**

Josef Berchtold, *Hitler über Deutschland* ('Hitler over Germany'), 1932 [accessed: 17 March 2021]. Available at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Randall Bytwer: www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-kits/traveling-exhibitions/state-of-deception/josef-berchtold-hitler-ueber-deutschland-hitler-over-germany



The cover of a propaganda brochure *Hitler über Deutschland* ('Hitler over Germany'). Thanks to the use of an aeroplane in the 1932 electoral campaign and *Deutschlandflüge* ('Flight over Germany'), Hitler was able to deliver up to five speeches a day.

In order to capture the crowds, Goebbels came up with the *Deutschlandflüge* ('Flight over Germany') programme. Hitler flew to subsequent cities by plane and the landing would take place in front of huge crowds of people. Immediately after leaving the plane, the leader gave a perfectly written speech, rehearsed down to a single gesture, and then flew away to another town. This is how the mass audience was conquered and seduced by consistently repeated half-truths and lies, confirming Goebbels' observation that: 'a lie repeated a thousand times becomes the truth.'

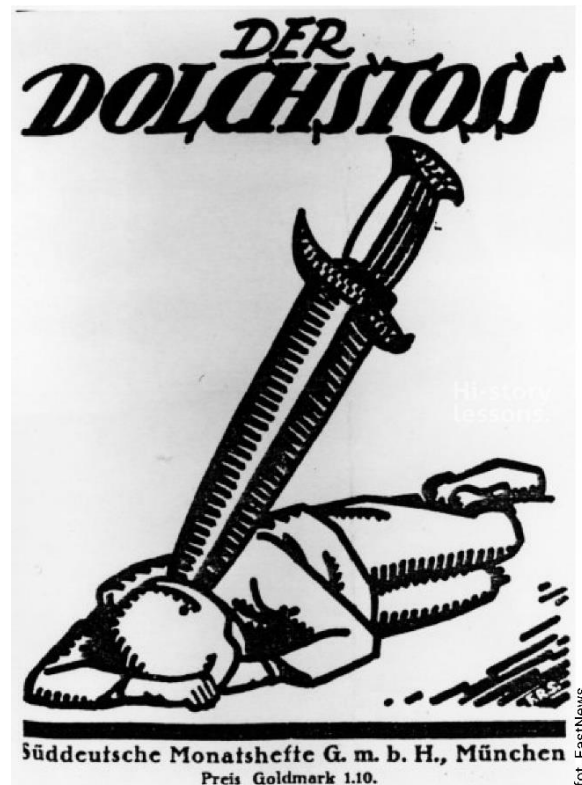
In addition to fallacies concerning the Jews, Hitler was most likely to use ones relating to the war and the Treaty of Versailles which formally ended it.

'The German People fought so heroically only because they were completely convinced that they had been wrongfully attacked,' he explained to radio listeners

on 14 October 1933. The intention was to make the Germans believe that in 1914 the armed conflict had been triggered by Great Britain, France and Russia, despite Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles making it clear that the Wilhelmine Reich (Germany) and Austria-Hungary were to blame for starting the war. In order to deny this, Hitler did not have to personally produce fallacies, but instead made creative use of the work done for him by the Weimar Republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It created a special unit to falsify the past. The historians it employed destroyed documents that could indicate the guilt of the Wilhelmine Reich. The unit also supervised social organizations, publishing two journals, *Der Weg zur Freiheit* and *Die Kriegsschuldfrage*. They promoted the German version of events with regard to the controversial issues of the past. Many eminent historians published articles in both journals and Hitler appreciated that effort. In his speeches, he constantly repeated facts and notions manipulated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' unit, making it easy for him to destroy the Weimar Republic.



A drawing of 1924 illustrating the myth about the 'stab in the back' dealt to the German army by socialists, democrats and Jews.



Incidentally, both journals proved useful to the Nazis and were published until the end of Hitler's rule. Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg also helped the führer

to overthrow the Weimar Republic. In the autumn of 1919, he testified before the Reichstag Commission investigating the causes of the defeat of the German Empire in the war. The former chief of General Staff denied that in the autumn of 1918 the German army was losing on the entire western front. According to his assessment, things would have remained under control had it not been for the traitors' stab in the back (*Dolchstoß*). That *Dolchstoß* was carried out by the social democrats and the communists stirring up a revolution in the country.

The 'stab-in-the-back' myth was picked up by the German right, and it became one of Hitler's favourite propaganda tools. Thanks to it, in his rallying speeches he seamlessly combined treason, social democrats, communists and Jews. It allowed him to strike at the foundations of the Weimar Republic, which was considered to be the work of the German social democrats. It was, after all, they who took over the government in November 1918, and they were the ones who were the victims of the severe sanctions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. The hatred that the Germans had for that document, the sense of injustice and the need to find those responsible for it made falsifying history simple.

Hitler flawlessly captured the lies that people wanted to believe in.

He then offered them, without any limitation, in exchange for their votes and their consent to the 'Nazi revolution'. When he won the election and started to plan his dream of conquest, he began to correct the history of other countries too. Scientific and research institutions, forming a network of *Ostforschung* (Eastern research) institutes proved to be a useful tool. They employed, among others, historians, sociologists, lawyers, economists, geographers, linguists and religious experts, specializing in issues related to Eastern Europe. Their knowledge and skills were used to justify, scientifically, the centuries-old links between those areas and the German Reich – especially the disputed lands, which after the First World War became part of Poland and Czechoslovakia. References to research by *Ostforschung* scientists proved to be a convenient propaganda tool to justify the territorial claims that Hitler began to make against Germany's eastern neighbours. This made it easier to convince citizens that the war he had started in September 1939 was serving to restore justice.

And while it continued, the führer kept reiterating the role of history. On 12 August 1940, on his orders, the head of the High Command of the *Wehrmacht*, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, issued a directive ordering his subordinate units to destroy monuments in occupied Belgium and France. All memorials depicting Germans as aggressors during the First World War were to be destroyed. Hitler began by changing the past as he prepared for the time when he would rule the whole of Europe.

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