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11/27/16  
HI 421

## Delusions & Grandeur: Nazi Propaganda During the Second World War

Since the fall of Nazi Germany, historians have tried to understand the rise and rule of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. How did the Nazi Party, with its racist and authoritarian rhetoric, captivate the minds of millions of German citizens, and lead the country into a second disastrous World War? Historians often lay the blame for the rise of the Third Reich on factors such as the Treaty of Versailles, the weakness of the Weimar Republic's democracy, and economic hardship in Germany, but it is crucial not to forget the unique successes of the Nazi Party as it evolved from a small fringe group to eventually become the only political party in Germany. While certain factors that helped the Nazi Party gain power and support seem like mere serendipity due to the myriad of factors outside of their control, one constant element that the Nazis used with frightening potency was harnessing public opinion through propaganda. The Nazis saw propaganda as an incredibly important tool, which only became more and more important to them during the Second World War. The degree to which the Nazis achieved their propaganda aims is a very tricky subject to evaluate for a number of reasons, as there are a number of different ways to gauge public mood, including SD reports, personal journals, and more. Furthermore, there is some disagreement as to how to historically analyze the effect of propaganda, and each different type of source is often subject to its own biases. One aspect of propaganda that I think is of particular importance is wartime propaganda, specifically the propaganda aimed at the German general public. Since the Nazis put so much emphasis on the importance of domestic propaganda in the

war effort, I think that analyzing domestic wartime propaganda will be especially valuable in not only judging the Nazi propaganda machine, but also gaining insight into the German public psyche during the war. I hope to tackle a few primary questions on the subject. First, how efficient and effective was the Nazi propaganda machine in executing its aims during wartime? How did Nazi propaganda respond to wartime events outside of their control, such as when the tide of the war turned against Germany? In particular, I hope to look at the topic of *Vergeltung* and use it as a stress test of sorts in order to evaluate how the Nazi propagandists performed under pressure. Lastly, what are the challenges associated with evaluating the impact of propaganda on German citizens, as well as the benefits and weaknesses of different types of sources? I believe that approaching the subject with these three primary questions in mind has led me to a reasonable conclusion on the subject of Nazi wartime propaganda. In short, while the Nazis could not win the war on propaganda alone, the Nazi party remained relatively skilled and effective in the art of propaganda even in the twilight hours of the Second World War.

While the Nazi propaganda machine reached its peak during the years of the Second World War, it is important to remember how the Nazi propaganda machine came to be within the context of the Nazi Party's rise and pre-war rule. Since the early days of the Nazi party, they viewed propaganda as absolutely essential to accomplishing their goals, and when Hitler was chosen as the chief propagandist of the party, his ideas on propaganda propelled the Nazi party to new heights.<sup>1</sup>

Through years of persistence, they learned how to politically maneuver themselves

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<sup>1</sup> Bytwerk, Randall L. *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2008. Page 1-4.

into positions that garnered them more publicity and respect amongst the German populace.<sup>2</sup> They turned political rallies and oratory into an art form and harnessed them as potent propaganda tools, while adjusting their rhetoric to match what their audience wanted to hear<sup>3</sup>. They even established a department specifically for propaganda, which grew into another one of the hulking administrative bureaucracies of the Third Reich.<sup>4</sup> Headed by Goebbels, Nazi propaganda efforts sought to dominate the German consciousness at all levels. This meant that not just political messages had to adhere to the party line, but so too did culture, including art, film, and music, as well as education, and the press.<sup>5</sup> However, throughout the regime, the Nazi leadership always favored its roots, which lay in the spoken word.<sup>6</sup> In Hitler's own words in *Mein Kampf*, the "magic power of the spoken word, and that alone," was the most powerful force for creating change, and this view was echoed in official Nazi doctrine.<sup>7</sup> Rhetoric, in Hitler's view, was most powerful when it simplified things.<sup>8</sup> He believed successful orators should be able to bring together disparate elements of their audience into one singular group, appeal to the lowest common denominator, motivate crowds, and present passionate rhetoric with little consideration for complexity or counter arguments, but instead win over supporters

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<sup>2</sup> Sax, Benjamin C., and Dieter Kuntz. *Inside Hitler's Germany: A Documentary History of Life in the Third Reich*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1992. Page 94.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Page 98.

<sup>4</sup> Sax and Kuntz. *Inside Hitler's Germany*. Page 98.

<sup>5</sup> Sington, Derrick, and Arthur Weidenfeld. *The Goebbels Experiment; a Study of the Nazi Propaganda Machine*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943. Page 30-32.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Page 33.

<sup>7</sup> Bytwerk, Randall L. *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*. Page 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Page 2.

through repetition of effective slogans.<sup>9</sup> By their own admission, the Nazis could neither have secured power, nor maintained their grip on Germany afterwards without effective oration.<sup>10</sup>

Before analyzing Nazi wartime propaganda, it is worthwhile to examine the Nazi propaganda machine in terms of its administrative structure, as well as some of the chronic challenges that existed independently of wartime events. In evaluating the performance of the ministry of propaganda, one problem that often arises in literature on the subject is the characterization of the ministry as totalitarian. In one essay by Carlton J.H. Hayes, he argues that the fascist states of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Nazi Germany included, truly are totalitarian organizations which “monopolize all powers and direct all activities of individuals and groups,” leaving no room for free will or dissent under the guiding force of one governing entity.<sup>11</sup> David Welch points out the problems with the totalitarian interpretation, particularly in regards to what German historians criticize as an isolation of individual Germans within the interpretation, which oversimplifies the debate regarding individual responsibility within the regime.<sup>12</sup> While I would agree that the Nazi state and its component ministries certainly aspired to be totalitarian in their level of control over Germany, the reality seems to be quite different. In Jay Baird’s book, his description of Goebbels’ first months as minister sounds like the *Gleichschaltung* of culture under the ministry was easy, simply saying that “within a matter of several months...”

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<sup>9</sup> Bytwerk, Randall L. *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*. Page 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Page 4.

<sup>11</sup> Gregor, Neil, ed. *Nazism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Page 130.

<sup>12</sup> Welch, David. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. London: Routledge, 1993. Page 3-4.

“...the entire apparatus of public communications had come under his control. Radio, journalism, and the film art fell root and branch into the hands of the Nazis, as did all opportunities for convincing the crowd through demonstrations and mass meetings”.<sup>13</sup> Baird also seems to hold a high opinion of Goebbels’ abilities, claiming that Germany had “in Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels two of the most gifted demagogues in the history of the West”.<sup>14</sup> He even goes as far as to say that “Goebbels was probably the most effective funeral orator since Pericles”.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps he is trying to play up the importance of the subject he is writing about, but nevertheless, this characterization seems to be overly flattering and dramatic. According to other accounts, Goebbels’ first few months were not quite as easy as Baird suggests. Notably among these accounts is that of Goebbels himself, who in his own published diary admits there were “some difficulties” at first, due to constructing the parameters and roles taken on by his ministry.<sup>16</sup> Not only that, but the Nazi’s quest for *Gleichschaltung* was still not fully realized in their minds. For example, the press still remained a difficult form of media to unify under the Nazi *Gleichschaltung*, with 4,703 different newspapers operating in Germany when Hitler was appointed Chancellor.<sup>17</sup> In order to achieve unity, Goebbels did not immediately enforce conformity and suppression, but rather chose to enact a “slow erosion” of the press through banning Communist and SD papers at first, while also choking

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<sup>13</sup> Baird, Jay W. *The Mythical World of Nazi War Propaganda, 1939-1945*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974. Page 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Page 12.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Page 13.

<sup>16</sup> Bramsted, Ernest Kohn. *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda, 1925-1945*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1965. Page 51.

<sup>17</sup> Zeman, Zbyněk A. *Nazi Propaganda*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965. Page 43.

non-conforming press from receiving information, as well as encouraging Nazi ideology in the sphere of editing.<sup>18</sup> Only once this course of action had time to take effect did the Nazis pursue more direct legislation.<sup>19</sup> Further difficulties with realizing totalitarian ambitions came about in the propaganda ministry's dealings with other government organizations. In the realm of Nazi relations abroad, for example, Goebbels and other top officials were convinced that propaganda was preferable over diplomacy, and wanted to influence the Foreign Ministry as such.<sup>20</sup> However, the Nazi efforts to infiltrate the Ministry were painstakingly slow, so much so that Adolf Müller, serving as minister to Berne, retained his position for six months after Hitler rose to power, even though he was a Social Democrat.<sup>21</sup> While some high-level Nazis became impatient at the slow pace, Hitler's slow approach won the support of existing German diplomats, which the Nazis would need to maintain a favorable image.<sup>22</sup> This was not the only time the Nazis toned down the pace of the *Gleichschaltung* to save face, and sometimes, such as in the case of removing racist propaganda during the Berlin Olympics or in their halting of the euthanasia program, backpedaled on official policy to preserve their image. It also seems as if the propaganda ministry fell victim to another common chronic problem of Nazi administrations, namely the quagmires of bloated bureaucratic hierarchies and constant infighting between spheres of influence within the government. One essay by Robert Koehl even described the Nazi system as "feudal" in nature, with

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<sup>18</sup> Zeman, Zbyněk A. *Nazi Propaganda*. Page 43-45.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Page 45-46.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Page 55-56.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Page 56.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Page 56-57.

competing “vassals” seeking to enlarge their “fiefdoms” by battling their rivals, which by design ensured the status of the Führer at the top, at the cost of creating weaker, less efficient bureaucratic administrations that were ultimately dependent on the Führer.<sup>23</sup> One incident in particular demonstrates that Goebbels and his ministry were no exception. Goebbels and Foreign Minister Neurath were often jostling for influence over responsibilities abroad, and things ironically got worse when a Nazi official took over the Foreign Ministry in the form of Ribbentrop.<sup>24</sup> Ribbentrop restored his ministry’s press division, again showing the inefficient redundancies created by rivalries between Nazi administrations, and the bickering between Ribbentrop and Goebbels was so bad that Hitler himself ordered them to come to a compromise.<sup>25</sup> One particularly interesting account of this comes from Otto Dietrich, who served as the Reich’s Press Chief from 1933 onwards, and it highlights the downright comical nature of these types of conflicts. According to Dietrich, Ribbentrop convinced Hitler to decree that foreign propaganda would be the domain of the Foreign Ministry.<sup>26</sup> Ribbentrop proceeded to hire movers to loot Goebbels’ offices of foreign propaganda-related equipment, leading to Goebbels’ employees sealing themselves inside and a bewildered Goebbels calling for help from Hitler.<sup>27</sup> Hitler then forced Goebbels and Ribbentrop to sit down together in a train compartment until they could work out a compromise, and three hours later they were still at an impasse, leading Hitler to angrily dictate a solution that “largely

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<sup>23</sup> Gregor, Neil, ed. *Nazism*. Page 183-186.

<sup>24</sup> Zeman, Zbyněk A. *Nazi Propaganda*. Page 58-59.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Page 59.

<sup>26</sup> Sax and Kuntz. *Inside Hitler's Germany*. Page 168.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

revoked his previous written order".<sup>28</sup> However, this still did not prevent Ribbentrop and Goebbels from attempting to step on each other's toes in the following months.<sup>29</sup> Within the propaganda ministry itself, Goebbels seems to have taken care to make his ministry fairly simple and streamlined. As the head of both the Central Propaganda Office of the Party, the President of the Ministry of People's Enlightenment and Propaganda, and the President of the Reich Chamber of Culture, Goebbels was easily able to firmly consolidate his already powerful position within the Reich.<sup>30</sup> Structurally speaking, he carefully crafted a well defined hierarchy within his domain, which was meant to facilitate giving orders and directives from the top down, while allowing information to travel up the hierarchy from the bottom, including reports evaluating the feelings of the public, which Goebbels stressed as an absolute necessity for his Ministry to fulfill its duty.<sup>31</sup> He was correct in this assessment, and their ability to accurately diagnose and respond to public opinion during the war was crucial in maintaining their propaganda operations, especially when the tide of the war turned against Germany.

In the early years of the Second World War, Nazi Germany enjoyed a good deal of military success, and this in turn made the task of the Nazi propagandists much easier. At first, the "distinct lack of enthusiasm" amongst the population at the start of the war put considerable demands on Goebbels and the Nazi propaganda machine in terms of their ability to reassure the population and maintain faith in

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<sup>28</sup> Sax and Kuntz. *Inside Hitler's Germany*. Page 168.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Bramsted. *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda, 1925-1945*. Page 53.

<sup>31</sup> Bramsted. *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda, 1925-1945*. Page 53.  
Zeman, Zbyněk A. *Nazi Propaganda*. Page 39.



Nazi leadership.<sup>32</sup> While they could not mobilize the population to joyfully disregard the dreadful memories of the First World War, they did excel in undermining opposition to the war by portraying such sentiments as “unpatriotic and defeatist”.<sup>33</sup> The public mood then underwent a shift when Germany began winning quick, decisive victories, all while sustaining relatively minimal losses, which by many accounts relieved the dread and anxiety present at the beginning of the war.<sup>34</sup> While the Nazi propagandists could not direct the pace of the war, they certainly did all they could to capitalize on the propaganda opportunities presented by Germany’s early victories, with a special focus on Hitler’s supposed military genius and the effectiveness of the Blitzkrieg.<sup>35</sup> While this was certainly effective in mobilizing support for the war effort during the early victories, the reliance of Nazi propaganda on positive developments in the war would become a liability once news of victory stopped coming.

After a streak of good fortune for Germany’s military in the first years of the war, the beginning of the Russian campaign marked the start of a turning point in the war.<sup>36</sup> Unlike earlier on in the war, there was little propaganda effort to prepare the German population for war with Russia.<sup>37</sup> Despite making great progress in the first few months of the campaign, the failure to reach Moscow and the subsequent high toll of the Russian winter on the German army had dire consequences for Nazi

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<sup>32</sup> Welch, David. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Page 90.

<sup>33</sup> Kershaw, Ian. *The "Hitler Myth": image and reality in the Third Reich*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. Page 143.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Page 145.

<sup>35</sup> Welch, David. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Page 91-98.

Kershaw, Ian. *The "Hitler Myth"*. Page 152.

<sup>36</sup> Kershaw, Ian. *The "Hitler Myth"*. Page 169.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* Page 173.

propaganda, which had approached the Russian campaign as a struggle against a nation both ideologically and racially inferior to Western Europe.<sup>38</sup> The stalling advance in Russia, along with the declaration of war by Hitler against the United States in December 1941 also diminished German hopes that the war would end soon, further eroding the belief that Hitler truly wanted peace, a belief that played an important role in Hitler's cult of personality earlier on in the war.<sup>39</sup> The events following the start of the Russian campaign led to doubts about Hitler's military genius, and led to further strains on Nazi propaganda, and Germany's reversals of fortune soon came to a head with the disastrous outcome in the Battle of Stalingrad.<sup>40</sup> This was partially made worse by actions outside of Goebbels' control. In the fall of 1942, Hitler declared that it was certain that Stalingrad would be captured once and for all, but Goebbels took issue with what he saw as overconfidence which was "out of touch" with the more bleak view of the war felt by many Germans.<sup>41</sup> When news finally came that the 6<sup>th</sup> army had surrendered, official propaganda reported that they had not surrendered but instead fought to the death.<sup>42</sup> The subsequent negative impact on German civil morale was only exacerbated by the dissonance between the reality of the outcome and the outright dishonesty of Nazi propaganda and the assurances of victory, and led to an unprecedented "crisis of confidence in the regime amongst broad sections of the

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<sup>38</sup> Kershaw, Ian. *The "Hitler Myth"*. Page 169.

Welch, David. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Page 98-100.

<sup>39</sup> Kershaw, Ian. *The "Hitler Myth"*. Page 144, 169.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Page 189.

<sup>41</sup> Welch, David. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Page 104.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Page 105.

population".<sup>43</sup> Following these setbacks, Goebbels increasingly pushed for Germany to adopt a policy of total war, and could begin to frame total war as the only means for Germany's salvation against the growing threat of annihilation.<sup>44</sup> While Goebbels' drastic measures secured some impressive propaganda successes in terms of galvanizing a significant portion of the population against the threat of Bolshevism and raising morale in the short term, the realities of war soon came to Germany's doorstep, and Goebbels and Nazi propaganda as a whole were once again forced to shift gears, this time to address the growing threat of Allied bombing raids against Germany.<sup>45</sup>

A particularly interesting subject regarding Nazi wartime propaganda is the topic of *Vergeltung*. Not only was it an important theme for Nazi propaganda in the post-Stalingrad years, but it also serves as a very insightful look into how Nazi propagandists responded to bad news, dealt with other parts of the Nazi government, and managed public opinion. As the subject of a thorough article by Gerald Kirwin and a topic of importance in many other works on Nazi propaganda, it may also serve as a means to analyze the historiography of Nazi propaganda. The concept of *Vergeltung*, meaning "hour of revenge", was, simply put, the "promise of retaliation" against Britain due to the increased Allied bombing of Germany following the reversals of German military efforts at Stalingrad and elsewhere, and it remained a recurring, if sometimes inconsistent theme of German domestic

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<sup>43</sup> Welch, David. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Page 106  
Kershaw, Ian. *The "Hitler Myth"*. Page 189.

<sup>44</sup> Welch, David. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Page 106-110.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* Page 110-113.

propaganda throughout the second half of the war.<sup>46</sup> Beginning in 1942, the increase in Allied bombing on Germany exposed many Germans to the terrible realities of warfare – realities which had a profound impact on civilian morale, and which German propagandists could no longer hide.<sup>47</sup> Relieving the bombings by countering with German planes would be impossible, since the tide of the air war had turned against Germany long ago, and most of the air force was busy fighting in the East.<sup>48</sup> Unable to deny the damage of the raids or promise a meaningful military response for the time being, the Nazi leaders initially operated under the same principle that had guided them when the bombings were not so severe, which meant being quite candid about the impacts of the bombing, and harnessing them as a propaganda tool to whip up hatred against the allies, reinforcing ideals of German stoicism, and promising to produce more planes.<sup>49</sup> However, this doctrine had unintended consequences as the bombings intensified, and began to ravage more major German cities. Due to the increased rate of bombings with no corresponding change in how the regime responded, Germans began to give less credence to Nazi propaganda as an indication on the course of the war, and began to judge more based on how bad the bombings were.<sup>50</sup> What Kirwin neglects to adequately explain as Kallis does in his book is the impact of region-specific bombing on German morale and

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<sup>46</sup> Kallis, Aristotle A. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Page 163.

Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation - A Study in Nazi Propaganda Behaviour and German Civilian Morale." *Journal of Contemporary History* 16, no. 3 (July 1981): 565-83. Accessed November 28, 2016. JSTOR. Page 565.

<sup>47</sup> Kallis, Aristotle A. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. Page 160.

<sup>48</sup> Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation - A Study in Nazi Propaganda Behaviour and German Civilian Morale." Page 565.

<sup>49</sup> Kallis, Aristotle A. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. Page 160.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* Page 161-162.

subsequent propaganda efforts. Due to the Allied bombings focusing on specific areas, notably near Cologne and Hamburg, the war experiences of different portions of the population became very different from one another.<sup>51</sup> This was a problem for propagandists, who in turn had to respond to this loss of “uniformity” with a “diversification of its own discourse, depending on the audience”.<sup>52</sup> Kallis also explains that the differences in bombing based on region created resentment and bitterness amongst the populations hit hardest by the bombings, both against the populations which had not suffered as much, like Berlin, and against Nazi leadership for not doing enough to protect them from Allied bombings.<sup>53</sup> Kallis even claims that there was a certain kind of “perverse relief” felt in the RVMP when the allies bombed Berlin hard in November 1943 because it meant that now the experiences of the Berlin population was unified with that of other Germans.<sup>54</sup> Realizing that their approach to the allied air raids was not working, the Nazi propagandists began promising that all the suffering inflicted by Allied bombings would one day be answered by “eye-for-an-eye retaliation” that would take place during the “hour of revenge” – *Vergeltung* – at some point.<sup>55</sup> Previous mentions of the concept of retaliation against Allied bombing were usually interpreted by the population as a promise for renewed German raids similar to the earlier blitz.<sup>56</sup> However, by the spring of 1943, *Vergeltung* was something “vague and indeterminate, but

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<sup>51</sup> Kallis, Aristotle A. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. Page 162.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Page 162-163.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Page 163.

<sup>56</sup> Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 566.

nevertheless terrible and decisive in its effect”.<sup>57</sup> Amidst these unclear understandings of retaliation, the German public’s imaginations ran wild with fantastical visions of the possibilities, so much so that *Vergeltung* was “regarded as the very guarantee of final victory”.<sup>58</sup> As Allied bombings continued to intensify, so too did the urgency with which the German public regarded retaliation, forcing the Nazi propagandists to make use of the theme time and time again, as it seemed to them that it was all they had left to soothe the German people.<sup>59</sup> Another added benefit of *Vergeltung* propaganda was that it initially was an easy tool for propagandists, considering that it promised something in the future, and therefore “did not require any immediate basis of fact”.<sup>60</sup> Rumors about super-weapons swirled, including fantastical tales of massive bombers, advanced rockets, and even city-destroying atomic bombs.<sup>61</sup> These high hopes regarding what was such an urgent issue for so many Germans soon gave way to anxiety, desperation, and disappointment when the promise of retaliation did not materialize in a timely manner.<sup>62</sup> So profound were these feelings amongst Germans that the Nazis feared a “boomerang effect” would occur if the message remained the same, and multiple reports from party members and SD officials caution that it would result in a disastrous loss of credibility.<sup>63</sup> This evidently concerned the propagandists, who in July 1943 banned the press from mentioning *Vergeltung* unless it appeared in a

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<sup>57</sup> Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 566.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Baird, Jay W. *The Mythical World of Nazi War Propaganda, 1939-1945*. Page 220.

<sup>62</sup> Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 568.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

speech given by a party minister.<sup>64</sup> When pressed on the topic, they urged patience, saying that a truly decisive retaliation would take time, while playing up German air raids against British targets, even though it was nothing compared to Allied air raids, causing further frustration.<sup>65</sup> Hope for retaliation, and consequently German civil morale in general, suffered during the Summer of 1943, but when Hitler gave a radio address in September, which according to Kirwin made a profound contribution to boosting the civilian mood, but he is careful to point out that “new trust in *Vergeltung* cannot be seen apart from the overall more positive view of developments that accompanied news of successful German counter-measures in Italy”.<sup>66</sup> This is something that I unfortunately did not find in other sources regarding *Vergeltung*, and adds another layer to the complex back-and-forth nature of *Vergeltung* discourse. As summer gave way to autumn, *Vergeltung* increasingly grew in importance in the minds of both German civilians, who Kirwin claims “swayed to and fro between outright pessimism and over-enthusiastic optimism,” adding that the emotionally-charged subject had become almost like a “drug” for concerned German citizens.<sup>67</sup> Other historians writing about this particular period simply indicate only an overall downward trend in feelings regarding *Vergeltung*, but Kirwin’s article seems to add a slightly more nuanced view of civilian morale that makes sense in the context of Hitler’s addresses during the autumn of 1943, which still held significant influence amongst the population, as well as Goebbels’

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<sup>64</sup> Kirwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 569.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. Page 570.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. Page 571.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. Page 572.

“30 War Articles for the German Nation” address.<sup>68</sup> As Kirwin puts it, Hitler’s addresses showed that the population had a “*willingness to believe*” but that “the higher hopes were raised, the greater the disappointment and deep feeling of depression that follow on realizing that *Vergeltung* was not imminent”.<sup>69</sup> *Vergeltung* increasingly became tied to *Wunderwaffen*, or “miracle weapons”, and many SD reports indicated the belief that a “miracle” retaliation would be the only thing that could save Germany.<sup>70</sup> Once again, Kirwin adds a layer of detail to the issue that some other historians left out, saying that as the end of 1943 approached, promises of *Vergeltung* returned to the forefront of propaganda, but he also neglects to fully explain that, once again the subsequent disappointment led to them once again suppressing the topic in the media the following month of January 1944.<sup>71</sup> The Nazi leadership recognized they were approaching a crisis point, and they responded by piecing together what planes they could into an air force to attack Britain in a “baby blitz”.<sup>72</sup> While the propagandists enthusiastically exaggerated the impact of the air raids against Britain, they did not want to give off the impression that it was a substitute for *Vergeltung*, but merely a “scene setting” transition into the retaliation to come.<sup>73</sup> While this did work to an extent, it had a number of negative

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<sup>68</sup> Welch, David. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Page 116.

Kallis, Aristotle A. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. Page 165-166.

Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 572.

<sup>69</sup> Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 572.

<sup>70</sup> Kallis, Aristotle A. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. Page 167.

Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 572.

<sup>71</sup> Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 574.

Kallis, Aristotle A. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. Page 166.

<sup>72</sup> Welch, David. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Page 117.

<sup>73</sup> Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 576-577.

Kallis, Aristotle A. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. Page 166.



consequences. Many who had experienced Allied air raids before feared that they would get worse in response to German air raids.<sup>74</sup> SD reports at the time also indicated that many Germans saw through the propaganda that exaggerated the impact of the German air raids and downplaying that of Allied air raids, further eroding civilian trust of the news.<sup>75</sup> As the first few months of 1944 dragged on, reports reflect an increasingly dire picture for the propagandists, and in April one SD claimed that most of the population no longer believed in *Vergeltung*.<sup>76</sup> This reached an extreme in the final days before the V-1 missiles were finally launched, and on D-Day, one SD explicitly indicates an inevitable "crisis of confidence among a broad section of the population".<sup>77</sup> The V-1 missiles, however, turned out to be remarkably underwhelming compared to what many expected from the long-awaited *Vergeltung*, and Goebbels and the propagandists had anticipated this.<sup>78</sup> Initial excitement soon gave way to this terrible realization, the impact of which was only exacerbated when Germans realized that Allied air efforts actually increased following the V-1 attacks.<sup>79</sup> There was simply no way for them to live up to the expectations that for so long had grown beyond the realm of possibility, and *Vergeltung* had been the only effective tool at the propagandists' disposal in an otherwise dark time for Germany's military endeavors, and a crucial "substitute for military success which in better days had been regarded as the fundamental

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Welch, David. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Page 117.

<sup>74</sup> Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 577.

<sup>75</sup> Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 578.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. Page 579.

<sup>78</sup> Kallis, Aristotle A. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. Page 167.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

guarantee of future victory".<sup>80</sup> However, these promises could only work in the long term if they were fulfilled in reality.<sup>81</sup> With all hopes now resting on the V-2 weapons, the ministry could do nothing but allow this, as it was such a potent theme, and reports from summer and autumn of 1944 consistently agreed that it was absolutely critical in maintaining public mood.<sup>82</sup> While the launch of the V-2 weapons in September of 1944 caused a more dramatic and longer lasting elevation in morale, another bout of disappointment gripped Germany once again, and before long, the entire *Vergeltung* theme faded out as Germany prepared for the final phase of the war.<sup>83</sup> Ultimately, *Vergeltung* serves as a key example of how the propaganda ministry was able to direct the German population's attentions, even in light of dire developments that had profound effects on domestic life. However, it also shows that Goebbels and his ministry were far from omniscient in assessing the impact of their propaganda on the public, and sometimes suffered unforeseen long-term consequences in pursuit of short-term solutions.

Perhaps the most important and most difficult aspect of analyzing Nazi domestic propaganda is evaluating its impact on German citizens. First hand accounts, such as that of Max Seydewitz's book, are helpful to understanding the mindset of German citizens, but primary sources in the form of personal accounts from the time are also prone to certain problems. For instance, Syedewitz consistently emphasizes German opposition to the Nazi regime and its policies, perhaps because he intended to play a role in post-war German politics and

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<sup>80</sup> Kerwin, Gerald. "Waiting for Retaliation." Page 579.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Kallis, Aristotle A. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. Page 167.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. Page 167-168.

therefore wanted to paint a sympathetic and forgiving picture of the German population he hoped to be popular with.<sup>84</sup> Other first hand accounts released after the war may fall victim to selective release of information or a downplaying of the impact of propaganda on the psyche, due to the shame associated with the Nazi past and the desire to distance oneself from the regime. Many works such as Kerwin's article on *Vergeltung* and Ian Kershaw's book *The 'Hitler Myth'*, among others, make frequent use of SD reports on civilian morale. Reports on public mood, which Goebbels treasured as essential to his work, are essential in constructing an understanding of the nature of German public opinion. However, while SD reports and other sources of information regarding public mood are often detailed and insightful, they have problems of their own. During the Nazi regime, terror served in parallel to propaganda in controlling the masses, and was used to prohibit discussing certain subjects.<sup>85</sup> This would only hurt the accuracy of SD reports, because if German citizens were too afraid to express their true feelings on a given topic, the reports would not reflect the entire reality of civilian concerns. SD reports also tend to focus on problems in public attitudes that required adjusting rather than what was going well for the public, and therefore do not adequately reflect the positive aspects of public mood. In addition to SD reports, directives issues from within the propaganda ministry as well as Goebbels' own personal correspondences and musings are very insightful, and when paired alongside corresponding SD reports, they add a valuable layer of intricacy to the analysis of Nazi propaganda.

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<sup>84</sup> Seydewitz, Max. *Civil Life in Wartime Germany: The Story of the Home Front*. New York, NY: Viking Press, 1945. Page v, 46-48, 318.

<sup>85</sup> Zeman, Zbyněk A. *Nazi Propaganda*. Page 6.

Baird, Jay W. *The Mythical World of Nazi War Propaganda, 1939-1945*. Page 222.

Works by Zeman, Kallis, and Welch are just a few that are especially valuable in this regard. Additionally, works with a particular thematic focus also serve as a means of complementing the broader understanding of Nazi propaganda. For example, Ian Kershaw's *The 'Hitler Myth'*, which focuses on Hitler's cult of personality and the evolution of his popularity over the course of the Third Reich, adds an insightful look into the role of Hitler in determining public mood. The question of German acceptance of Nazi propaganda has no single answer, as public attitudes changed drastically over the course of the regime. The impact of propaganda on Germans is also inextricably linked to the questions surrounding the degree to which *Gleichschaltung* and the Nazi ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft* were realized, both of which are still the subjects of intense debate, which is in large part due to their implications regarding the degree of responsibility that the German public had in the regime.<sup>86</sup> Ultimately, while there are certainly plenty of challenges inherent to evaluating the impact of propaganda, the SD reports in addition to first hand accounts are without a doubt two of the most important resources for understanding the effect of propaganda on the German people.

In conclusion, it is clear that the study of Nazi propaganda is heavily involved in broader historiographical debates surrounding Nazi history in general.

Administratively, Goebbels took care to simplify and streamline the most important fundamental functions of his ministry. However, he still fell victim to the absurd amount of infighting and inefficient redundancies that plagued Nazi bureaucracies in general. During the war, Goebbels and his propagandists thoroughly exploited

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<sup>86</sup> Welch, David. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Page 2-4.

their opportunities to capitalize on military victories. However, when the tides of war turned against Germany, they fought hard to maintain good public order, and their use of *Vergeltung* provides an insightful look into how the propaganda machine performed under pressure. While evaluating the impact of propaganda on the German public is the subject of significant debate, the notable changes in public opinion over the course of the war are useful in judging how well the Nazi propaganda machine performed during the Second World War. One thought-provoking characterization of Nazi wartime propaganda comes from Edward Herzstein, who described it as “the war that Hitler won”.<sup>87</sup> It is important to remember that the propaganda war did not take place in a vacuum, and the saga of Nazi propaganda ultimately had to work within the context of the real-time events of the Second World War. Perhaps a more accurate, although less catchy description would be that propaganda was “the war that Hitler lost the slowest”. Ultimately, while Joseph Goebbels and the Nazi propaganda machine were by no means omniscient and had their own unique problems, Nazi propaganda remained an important tool of the Nazi regime that was key to holding together public morale during the war, even as Germany’s military situation became hopelessly dire.

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<sup>87</sup> Kallis, Aristotle A. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. Page 6.

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