Analysis of Nazi Propaganda

A Behavioral Study

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I. INTRODUCTION

As we examine the chronology of events leading up to the Holocaust, it becomes vital to understand the role of propaganda in perpetuating a crime of this proportion. To this end, this paper will analyze the fundamental tenets of Nazi propaganda, and the role that they played in not just the genocide of Jews, Romani peoples, homosexuals, and other *undesirables*, but also in helping turn Germany into an aggressor nation.

We will look at the calculated methodology adopted by the Nazi party under the guidance of both Adolf Hitler and Joseph Göbbels, and analyze the underlying techniques that were used. However, while the breadth and scope of Nazi propaganda were quite exhaustive, and included posters, movies, radio, and the press, this paper will focus on the primary method of rallying the German people – the creative use of posters to serve malignant ends. These posters will be analyzed through a behavioral lens to understand and identify key cognitive and psychological drivers that went into creating them, and the role that they played in instigating social and other cognitive biases in the German population. This analysis will primarily be visual in nature, and will look for behavioral cues that trigger bias responses.

Finally, this paper will provide an overview of the critical set of behavioral manipulations and provide a framework to help identify attempts at such propaganda wherever they may appear. Furthermore, this paper will also provide a list of elements for the "ideal" Nazi poster, with key elements borrowed from the various other posters.

II. USE OF KEY BEHAVIORAL PRINCIPLES

A. Introduction to Cognitive Biases

Cognitive Biases are situational instances of deviation in judgment, usually stemming from a stimulus. Typically cognitive biases are triggered for a variety of reasons, and their origins can be traced to evolved mental behavior to cope with new situations and make quick decisions. However, they can also be manipulated by providing an artificial stimulus seeking to induce certain responses in the target population. We will be analyzing Nazi propaganda with this lens, in order to better understand how they were able to manipulate an entire nation state.

B. Categories of Cognitive Biases

While there are several sources of cognitive biases, in this paper, we are interested in three broad categories of biases, namely [1] –

- Social & Attributional Biases: These are biases that affect our social perception and the means through which we determine who or what was responsible for a particular action or situation.

- Memory Biases: These are biases that can either enhance or impair the recollection of a memory, either near-term or long-term.

- Decision-Making Biases: These are biases that impair our ability to make rational decisions despite evidence to the contrary. This includes biases in probability and belief that impact decision-making.

We will see how stimuli corresponding to specific biases within each of these categories can be clearly seen in Nazi propaganda, and the specific role that these biases were meant to play. A detailed list of the biases referred to in the paper is also included in the Appendix.

III. HISTORY OF NAZI PROPAGANDA

The historical origins of Nazi propaganda can be traced back to Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, where he devoted two chapters analyzing the importance of propaganda and its practice. [2] While *Mein Kampf* itself was a work of propaganda, Hitler talked about the aims of a propagandist in indoctrinating a population and the importance of ensuring the continued propagation of the propaganda:

"The first duty of the propagandist is to win over people who can subsequently be taken into the organization. And the first duty of the organization is to select and train men who will be capable of carrying on the propaganda. The second duty of the organization is to disrupt the existing order of things and thus make room for the penetration of the new teaching which it represents, while the duty of the organizer must be to fight for the purpose of securing power, so that the doctrine may finally triumph."

Indeed, Hitler's choice of the Nazi party's flag used the red, white, and black theme of the flag of Imperial Germany.

While there are several instances that highlight the importance the Nazis placed on propaganda, none is more pertinent than the founding of *Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda* – or the Reich Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, known by its German initials as the RMVP. [3] Under the direction of the RMVP, the Nazi party found it effective to translate their ideological notions into narrative events which always depicted an oversimplified Good vs. Evil outlook parlayed over Us vs. Them scenarios, easily accessible and understood by mass audiences.

Immediately after Hitler was appointed as the Chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, the Nazis kick-started the systematic destruction of free press, beginning with the expulsion of anyone who did not tout the party-line from journalistic activities. This was accomplished through a combination of force, political arrests, and exile. For the next few months, several newspapers were either consolidated or shut-down in the name of nationalism. On October 4, 1933, the Reich Press Chief Otto Dietrich helped formulate and pass the Editorial Control Law, which placed all remaining press under government control, and banned any "non-Aryan" undesirable from participating in journalistic activities. [3]

It is vital to understand the importance of Otto Dietrich's policies in facilitating the Nazi regime's genocidal and aggressor activities, an importance that was succinctly captured in Dietrich's court judgment during the Ministries Trial in Nuremberg in 1949, where he was convicted on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity:

"...The [propaganda] campaign's only rationale was to blunt the sensibilities of the people regarding the campaign of persecution and murder which was being carried out. These press and periodical directives were not mere political polemics, they were not aimless expression of anti-Semitism, and they were not designed only to united the German people in the war effort...

… [The directives'] clear and expressed purpose was to enrage Germans against the Jews, to justify the measures taken and to be taken against them, and to subdue any doubts which may arise as to the justice of measures of racial persecution to which Jews were being subjected." [4]

By exploiting existing stereotypes and the sentiments of the German people, Nazi propaganda sought to target those whom it considered either an enemy or unworthy of being a citizen – Jews, Gypsies (Roma and Sinti), homosexuals, communists and other political dissidents, and those Germans who were viewed as inferior and detrimental to creating a strong Germany (such as people with mental or physical disabilities). In addition, these themes were also used in the arguments for *Lebensraum*, or living space, for Germany's expansionist plans to help create a bigger, stronger Germany.

Given the political and economic climate in Germany at the time, combined with the humiliation and unfairness of the Treaty of Versailles, the German population was ripe for such propaganda. Therefore, the Nazi propaganda machine sought to fulfill the stated goals of the party [5], and focused on hyperboles of a few favorite themes: [6]

- Humiliation of Germany and the unfairness of the Versailles Treaty
- The weakness of Weimar parliamentary republic
- The evil of world Jewry, Bolshevism, and Capitalism contrasted against the patriotic Nazi German

While these were the dominant themes, the propaganda in itself had a 3-fold focus:

- Deification of Hitler (e.g. as a messianic figure to be followed)
- Defining the enemy and justifying their treatment (e.g. Jews and Bolsheviks)
- Rallying the masses (e.g. for war and eugenics)

In the following sections, we will examine propaganda materials from each of these in their historical context, and analyze them for behavioral cues.

IV. DEIFICATION OF HITLER

One of the earliest themes of the Nazi party was the deification of Hitler by portraying him a messianic figure. While perhaps the finest representation of this was Leni Riefenstahl's film, *"Triumph des Willens"* or *"Triumph of the Will"*, this theme was also quite prevalent in other media, including print and poster.

One of the most common posters that helped create the cult of personality around Adolf Hitler was the one shown below:

{Artifact 1}

In the above poster, one cannot help but notice the appearance of light around Hitler, almost giving him a halo. Furthermore, the presence of a winged bird lends angelic characteristics to the poster, and this is only enhanced by the presence of wreath-like flowers around the poster. These are designed to trigger a few key responses in the viewer, most notably the *Halo Effect*, a social bias where the perceived qualities of the portrayed individual spill over into other areas of their personality. In addition, the authoritative stance and the determined shepherd-like portrayal of someone leading the

people aim to trigger the *Authority Bias*, wherein there is a favorable response to authority on ambiguous stimulus. These exact biases are also sought in the following posters, with similar characteristics:

{Artifacts 2, 3, 4}

While the poster below in Artifact 5 does not necessarily contain a halo, the viewer's attention is first directed at the god-like patriarchal figure on top, and then one discovers a figure resembling Hitler on the bottom left. This triggers an association stimulus, where Hitler is associated with the god-like figure that first catches the user's attention, resulting in a *Halo Bias* trigger through *association*. The same is effect is achieved in the other two Artifacts 6 and 7, as well.

{Artifact 5, 6, 7}

In addition to these biases, several posters also sought to trigger another bias, namely *Bandwagon Effect*, where people tend to do or believe things that many other people do, as well. In showing Hitler as an authoritarian leader with the German people behind him, the following posters sought to trigger both *Authority Bias* and *Bandwagon Effect*, as evidenced in the posters below:

{Artifacts 7, 8}

While there were several other posters that sought to convey a variety of other ideas, the vast majority of the them featuring Hitler sought to elicit one or more of these three biases – *Halo Effect*, *Authority Bias*, and *Bandwagon Effect / Herd Instinct*.

V.   DEFINING THE ENEMY

If the messianic portrayal of Hitler was an attempt at oversimplification to manipulate how the German masses perceived him, the Nazi propaganda against Jews (as well as the Bolsheviks and other *undesirables*) was considerably more explicit.

There were two primary types of portrayal of the Jews that were oddly at contrast, but aimed at achieving the same objective. Jews were either portrayed as seedy, degenerate, ugly, masses associated with vermin, or they were portrayed as greedy, fat, and unpleasant elements who sided with the enemy.

{Artifact 9, 10, 11}

There is a reason why the Nazis chose such a portrayal, and why this even worked in the first place. By picking only relatively unpleasant looking Jewish attributes, and by choosing to portray Jews in only an unpleasant manner, the Nazis applied *Selection Bias* to elicit several other cascading biases. By taking advantage of the *Negativity Bias* inherent human nature, wherein we pay more attention to negative images, the Nazis succeeded in associating Jews with those unpleasant mental images. This created a *Clustering Illusion*, where people were conditioned to see unpleasantness in the Jewish population when there was none present. Doing so, particularly in combination with the Nazi portrayal of the non-Jewish, "Aryan" German as a superior individual helped perpetuate just that – a *Superiority Bias*. This, in turn, created an environment of *Self-Serving Bias* of behavioral confirmation, where all responsibility for the success of Nazi Germany was claimed by the Germans, and the blame for all failures were laid on the Jewish population. [7]

As this continued, it created an environment which rejected any evidence contrary to the established paradigm – i.e. the superiority of "Aryans" and their corresponding success, and the contrasting inferiority of Jewish population and its burden for all its failures. Once again, this succeeded in creating yet another decision-making bias in the population, the *Semmelweis Reflex*, where Nazi propaganda of Jewish

inferiority and blame was accepted without question even in cases when contradictory evidence was present.

As we saw in the Deification of Hitler in Section IV, we can see elements of stimuli to elicit the *Bandwagon Effect* in an "Us vs. Them" portrayal of an unpleasant looking Jewish caricature, sometimes associated with Bolsheviks and/or the US/UK as seen in Artifacts 12-14. This also succeeded in eliciting *Trait Ascription Biases*, which propagated oversimplified stereotypes.

{Artifact 12}

{Artifact 13 - A Consolidated Theme}

{Artifact 14}

The "Us vs. Them" theme became particularly explicit as Germany began its war on aggression, and showed a picture-perfect German mother and child, contrasted with an abject poverty-stricken Bolshevik family, with a man who resembles the Nazi Jewish caricatures (Artifact 15).

{Artifact 15}

This contrast was also used in passing laws that forbade inter-mingling of the Jewish and other "non-Aryan" population with the "Aryan" German people. Since the Nazis had already created the biases corresponding to an "Us vs. Them" mentality, portraying and forbidding interracial relationships was relatively easy from a propaganda perspective:

{Artifact 16}

When the Nazi party came out with the anti-semitic propaganda film that posed as a documentary, *The Eternal Jew*, they also began using Jewish elements – such as the Star of David and fonts that resembled Hebrew (Artifact 17) – to portray the Jews as a single, culturally distinct population separate from the Germans. This practice can be seen elsewhere, as well, and continued to be used to distinguish the Jewish cultural identity as being separate from the German national identity, as seen in Artifacts 17, 18, 19.

{Artifacts 17, 18, 19}

We had previously discussed how the Nazis used association quite frequently. This is particularly evident when it came to portraying *other* enemies of the German state in an unpleasant light. As seen in Artifacts 20, 21 below, the Nazis combined the portrayal of the Bolsheviks and the Jews in a single image, creating an impression that the Jews were responsible for communism.

{Artifacts 20, 21}

Even when other enemies, such as the United States of America or England were depicted, it is hard to miss the caricature of a Jewish-like person being portrayed as being responsible (Artifacts 22, 23), or the presence of Jewish cultural elements such as the Star of David (Artifacts 24, 25). This was used to elicit a decision-making bias stemming from *Framing*, where *how* something is presented affects the perception and rationale of a decision.

{Artifacts 22, 23}

{Artifacts 24, 25}

Such portrayal was also used in both German-occupied countries as well as countries that were at war with Germany (Artifact 26) to show the Jews as being responsible for World War II (Artifact 27).

{Artifacts 26, 27}

It was also used to discourage popular phenomenon of the time, such as Jazz music (Artifact 28). In addition to the clear racial overtones associated with Jazz, the player is also wearing a Star of David, while the poster reads *"Degenerate Music"*, in reference to how anything associated with Jews was considered *degenerate* by the Nazis.
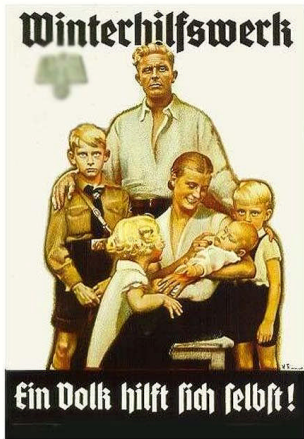

{Artifacts 28}

Therefore, in our analysis of how the Nazis used propaganda to Define the Enemy, we find that they sought to elicit one or more of these biases – *Clustering Illusion, Trait Ascription Bias, Superiority Bias, Self-Service Behavioral Confirmation Bias, Semmelweis Reflex,* and *Bandwagon Effect / Herd Instinct* – all aimed at separating the German people from "others", who were portrayed as the inferior enemy, or agents thereof.

VI.   RALLYING THE MASSES

As Hitler himself had stated in *Mein Kampf*, the Nazis felt strongly that true power could only be acquired through the triumph of the doctrine, which requires rallying the masses in support of said doctrine [2].

As the enemy was being successfully *framed* and *defined*, it became easier for the Nazis to rally the masses. Given the unfairness of the treaty of Versailles and the tumultuous economic times, the Nazis used their propaganda machine to rally the "Aryan" German family in supporting the Nazi cause:

{Artifacts 29. 30}

The primary objective of such a portrayal was to show the hardworking German family, which was being unfairly punished by the cost of reparations from World War I. In doing so, the Nazis succeeded in propagating what is now known as *Ingroup Bias*, which is the tendency for people to give preferential treatment to other people that they perceive as being members of their own group. This, in combination with the anti-Jewish propaganda, succeeded in distancing the majority of the German population from the rest of the undesirables.

Given the presence and notoriety of the SS, one of the outcomes of the *Ingroup Bias* was the creation of a *Herd Instinct* or *Bandwagon Effect*. This meant that those who felt differently about Hitler's policies stayed silent and adopted the behaviors of the majority to avoid conflict for their safety, as seen in Artifact 31, which states, *"Deutscher - Sei Stolz Und Schweige"*, or *"German - Be Proud and Silent"*, encouraging people to avoid dissension and accede to Nazi policies.

This, in turn, created a *Projection Bias*, where people subconsciously assumed that all others shared similar values and positions as themselves (or rather, values similar to how others viewed them).   This further reinforced the herd mentality, and reduced the opposition to the Nazi cause.

Furthermore, the Nazis also helped strengthen the *Ingroup Bias* by targeting children, youth, and students in their propaganda, as seen in Artifacts 32-35. This created a strong sense of communal organization, as was seen in the Hitler Youth programs.
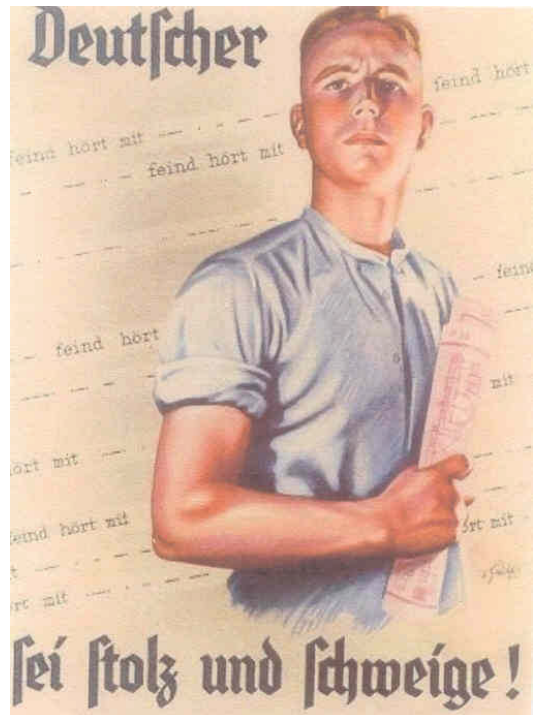
{Artifact 31}

{Clockwise from top left: Artifacts 32. 33, 34, 35}

The war-crimes trial judgment against Otto Dietrich, the Reich Press Chief, stated that he was responsible for helping "blunt the sensibilities" of the German people to the atrocities committed. To this end, one of the earliest Nazi propaganda posters shows the cost of healthcare for the sick and the disabled. Given the tumultuous economic times, this was used as an excuse to begin "mercy-killing" such people in the interest of the greater good. The posters below (Artifacts 36, 37) show clear examples of posters designed to elicit *Hyperbolic Discounting*, encouraging people to have a stronger preference for more immediate payoffs relative to later payoffs.

{Artifact 36}

{Artifact 37}

While this paper does not focus on any visual media, it is worthwhile to note the role played by movies such as *"Ich Klage An" – "I Accuse You"* – in desensitizing the population to killing the weak, and the suffering.

{Artifact 38}

However, while these were great for internal programs, Nazi Germany also needed to include propaganda that encouraged people to join the military for its expansionist plans. Such propaganda was deceptively simple, asking the German people to join the military service to help serve the nation, and fight the enemies of the German state that kept it from expanding forth.

To this end, once again the Nazis used the familiar theme of "Us vs. Them" to elicit a *Self-Serving Bias* citing *Lebensraum*, or living space, as the reason. [7] In the poster below, we can see this theme played out in the poster which reads, "*Hate and Destruction for Our Enemies. Freedom, Justice, and Bread for Our Nation."*

{Artifact 39}

Several of the other Nazi propaganda posters also parroted this theme of *Freedom*, which played on similar sentiments (Artifact 40, 41).

{Artifacts 40, 41}

Another common theme was that of patriotism and service, which also helped accentuate the *Self-Serving Bias* by using the *Superiority Bias* for Germany victory (Artifacts 42-45). Going back to the *Bandwagon Effect*, as more and more people joined the German military, it had a reinforcing mechanism of furthering this cause.

{Clockwise from top left: Artifacts 42. 43, 44, 45}

Therefore, in our analysis of the role of Nazi propaganda in rallying the masses, we find that they aimed at eliciting the following key biases – *Ingroup Bias, Projection Bias, Hyperbolic Discounting, Self-Serving Bias,* and *Bandwagon Effect / Herd Instinct* – all aimed at creating a genocidal, aggressor state.

VII. CONCLUSION

A. Analyzing the Results

While we have successfully analyzed the key tenets of Nazi propaganda to look for behavioral themes, we will still need to understand what they really *mean* in a behavioral context.

To do so, we will need to categorize our list of observed biases against the major categories of cognitive biases:

	Deification of Hitler	Defining the Enemy	Rallying the Masses
Social and Attributional Biases	• Halo Effect • Herd Instinct	• Trait Ascription Bias • Herd Instinct • Superiority Bias • Self-Service Bias	• Ingroup Bias • Herd Instinct • Projection Bias • Self-Serving Bias
Memory Biases			
Decision-Making Biases	• Authority Bias • Bandwagon Effect	• Clustering Illusion • Semmelweis Reflex • Bandwagon Effect	• Hyperbolic Discounting • Bandwagon Effect

As we look at the above set of biases, a few things of interest are worth noting. For one, there are no memory biases that were leveraged by the Nazis in their propaganda. For another, the Nazis relied heavily on triggering social biases that affected decision making capabilities, to carry out their manifesto. Finally, one cannot help but notice that *Herd Instinct* and *Bandwagon Effect* were leveraged across the board by the Nazis in coercing the German people. All these elements can therefore be considered key to creating the *ideal* Nazi propaganda poster.

B. Fighting Propaganda

In order to effectively fight propaganda, we need to educate people to identify and recognize propaganda when they see it. To this end, the above table could be used to create a convenient checklist to evaluate whether a state is pushing forth propaganda.

In its generalized form, as shown below, it can also be used to (at the very least) identify propaganda of the type practiced by the Nazis:

	Deification of Ruler/Ruling Body	Defining the Enemy	Rallying the Masses
Social and Attributional Biases	☐Halo Effect? ☐Herd Instinct?	☐Trait Ascription Bias? ☐Herd Instinct? ☐Superiority Bias? ☐Self-Service Bias?	☐Ingroup Bias? ☐Herd Instinct? ☐Projection Bias? ☐Self-Serving Bias?
Memory Biases			
Decision-Making Biases	☐Authority Bias? ☐Bandwagon Effect?	☐Clustering Illusion? ☐Semmelweis Reflex? ☐Bandwagon Effect?	☐Hyperbolic Discounting ☐Bandwagon Effect

VIII. APPENDIX: LIST OF REFERRED BIASES

The following list of biases are sourced and listed as-is from *"A Visual Study Guide to Cognitive Biases"* authored and available in the public domain by Eric Fernandez and Martin Poulter.

A. Social & Attributional Biases

- Halo Effect: The tendency for a person's positive or negative traits to "spill over" from one area of their personality to another in others' perceptions of them.

- Herd Instinct: Common tendency to adopt the opinions and follow the behaviors of the majority to feel safer and to avoid conflict. Also see: Bandwagon Effect below.

- Trait Ascription Bias: The tendency for people to view themselves as relatively variable in terms of personality, behavior and mood while viewing others as much more predictable.

- Dunning-Kruger / Superiority Bias: Overestimating one's desirable qualities, and underestimating undesirable qualities, relative to other people.

- Self-Service Behavioral Confirmation Bias: The tendency to claim more responsibility for successes than failures. It also manifests itself as a tendency for people to evaluate ambiguous information in a way beneficial to their interests.

- Ingroup Bias: The tendency for people to give preferential treatment to others they perceive to be members of their own groups.

- Projection Bias: The tendency to unconsciously assume that others share the same or similar thoughts, beliefs, values, or positions.

B. Decision-Making Biases

- Authority Bias: The tendency to value an ambiguous stimulus according to the opinion of someone who is seen as an authority on the topic.

- Bandwagon Effect: The tendency to do (or believe) things because many other people do (or believe) the same. Related to groupthink and herd behavior.

- Clustering Illusion: The tendency to see patterns where actually none exist.

- Semmelweis Reflex: The tendency to reject new evidence that contradicts an established paradigm.

- Hyperbolic Discounting: The tendency for people to have a stronger preference for more immediate payoffs relative to later payoffs, where the tendency increases the closer to the present both payoffs are.

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