



Written by [JKelly](#) on June 4, 2018

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Propaganda: Fight for the Minds of Children

From the print edition of *The New American*

“In the presence of this blood banner, which represents our Führer, I swear to devote all my energies and my strength to the savior of our country, Adolf Hitler. I am willing and ready to give up my life for him, so help me God.”

— Oath taken by new members of the *Jungvolk*, the junior division of the Hitler Youth



Through 1939, the Hitler Youth counted among its membership as much as 63 percent of all 10- to 18-year-old children in Germany. After membership became compulsory in 1939, membership reached approximately 90 percent of those that age. Structuring the daily lives — and taking advantage — of the nation’s children through the Hitler Youth organization was no accidental development, but was, in fact, a key strategy of the regime.

The Hitler government understood that capturing and using the youth of the nation was central to its goal of a total state, and ultimately, to a thousand-year Reich. Properly indoctrinated, rather than provided with a classical education, the German youth would be prepared to be obedient subjects, rather than independent citizens, in the future dystopia. Secondly, a fawning cadre of children, easily manipulated into worshipping the state and its leader, was a potent source of propaganda that could be used to mold and manipulate public opinion at home and abroad. Who could fear and oppose Hitler as a tyrant if millions of innocent children loved him as a father? Who could oppose the state, when the nation’s children had evidently spurned their parents to embrace the party and state as the new family?

“In their desire to establish a total state,” wrote Pennsylvania State University historian Jackson Spielvogel in *Hitler and Nazi Germany: A History*, “the Nazis understood the importance of winning over the youth to their ideology. The future was theirs if they succeeded.”

In a great many areas, the Nazis, i.e., National Socialists, were pioneers in the systematization and industrialization of evil, elevating to a demonic “art” the total state’s engines of destruction. The scholar Anthony Rhodes, a veteran of the British Expeditionary Force who was at Dunkirk for the evacuation and went on after the war to a career as a teacher, novelist, and foreign correspondent for the British press, began his 1987 study of wartime propaganda by noting the pioneering role of the Nazi state.

“When on February 28, 1933, the Reichstag building in Berlin was set on fire, Chancellor Adolf Hitler obtained an emergency decree from President Paul von Hindenburg placing restrictions on personal liberty, including freedom of the press,” Rhodes noted in *Propaganda, The Art of Persuasion: World War II*. “Thirteen days later, on March 13, the Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda was founded under the direction of Dr. Josef Goebbels, to control the press as well as all other means of expression — radio, film, art, and literature. It is most appropriate that propaganda in Nazi Germany should have been considered worthy of an entire government department. No ‘Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda’ had ever existed before, in Germany or in any other country.”



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To many, Rhodes included, it seems reasonable to view the Nazis as innovators in the use of new forms of propaganda. This, however, is not entirely true. The Nazis did, in fact, employ prop-aganda on an “industrial scale” not previously seen elsewhere, something that foreshadowed our own present age of “post-truth” and “fake news.” But in this, they merely refined and extended prop-aganda tactics that had been developed years earlier, including both the use of children in propaganda and the targeting of children with propaganda. And much of this was developed in the Western liberal “democracies,” including the United States, years before the Nazi takeover of Germany.

Nazi “Strength” and “Protection”

The growth of the Nazi state was built on the notion, firmly believed by Hitler, that the “masses” desired strength and protection. The demon meditated upon this in the pages of *Mein Kampf* and later expanded upon the theme in comments to Herman Rauschnigg, according to Rhodes. “Haven’t you ever seen a crowd collecting to watch a street brawl?” Rhodes quotes Hitler as having told Rauschnigg. “Brutality and physical strength is what they respect. The man in the street respects nothing more than strength and ruthlessness — women too, for that matter.”

Early Nazi propaganda posters played off this theme of the German people — women and children in particular — needing a strong leader to save them from the threats surrounding them. One such poster shows a German mother, fist clutched to her lips in distress, her eyes downcast with fear, while a frightened child — a girl — clutches at her breast, gazing at her in a desperate plea for help. Meanwhile, a boy, younger, holds tight to her leg, head turned away and down, fearful to look up. “Deutscher Frauen,” proclaims the poster in bold Teutonic text, “Denkt an Eure Kinder; wählt HITLER” (“German women, think of your children, vote Hitler”).

The idea that Hitler was the great champion who would save the people was carefully cultivated by Goebbels in his prop-aganda efforts. “The simplest people,” Goebbels wrote of Hitler in his newspaper, *Der Angriff*, “approach him with confidence, because they feel he is their friend and protector.”

This theme was carried through most Nazi propaganda, whether it employed children as a motif or not. Another Nazi poster supporting the 1932 election depicted a mass of workmen, sketched in ink to gritty effect, their eyes hooded and brows wrinkled. The overall impression of the workmen in the piece is despondency and despair. “Unsere letzte Hoffnung: Hitler” the text of the poster proclaims. “Our last hope, Hitler.” Only the National Socialist strongman could save the women, the children, and the workers, at least according to party propaganda.

It is easy to scoff at this propaganda from the perspective of the present. The manipulation is so transparently ridiculous that it is difficult to imagine anyone giving it credence. Yet it was incredibly successful. “When every contemporary book people read, every newspaper, every film they see, every broadcast they hear for years on end is permeated with the same spirit, the same propaganda, they are no longer able to relate what they see and hear to alternative reports,” Rhodes noted in describing the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda. In fact, the impact of the Nazi propaganda effort was underscored by even William Shirer, the American foreign correspondent who covered Germany in the 1930s for the Hearst newspapers and for CBS. In his *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, Shirer recounted how the incessant propaganda even disturbed his own thinking.

“I myself was to experience how easily one is taken in by a lying and censored press,” Shirer recalled.



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“Though unlike most Germans I had daily access to foreign newspapers, especially those of London, Paris and Zurich ... and though I listened regularly to the BBC and other foreign broadcasts, my job necessitated the spending of many hours a day in combing the German press, checking the German radio, conferring with Nazi officials and going to party meetings. It was surprising and sometimes consternating to find that notwithstanding the opportunities I had to learn the facts and despite one’s inherent distrust of what one learned from Nazi sources, a steady diet over the years of falsifications and distortions made a certain impression on one’s mind and often mislead it. No one who has not lived for years in a totalitarian land can possibly conceive how difficult it is to escape the dread consequences of a regime’s calculated and incessant propaganda.”

Propaganda in the Free World

An American reading about propaganda in Nazi Germany will be predisposed to a certain intellectual reaction, or intellectual orientation, to such information. Such a generalized American, or even a citizen of other Westernized nations with “liberal” styles of government, will consider Nazi Germany an “alien” state — marked by an inherent “otherness” — that separates it substantively from the civilized nations of the “free world.” Propaganda, however, is, and has been, no less pervasive in America and other Western nations than in the great collectivist tyrannies of recent memory.

Jacques Ellul, the mid-20th-century French philosopher, sociologist, lay theologian, and scholar of propaganda, noted as much in his important 1965 treatise on the subject. “Nowadays,” Ellul wrote in his *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, “propaganda pervades all aspects of public life. We know that the psychological factor, which includes encirclement, integration into a group, and participation in action, in addition to personal conviction, is decisive. To draw up plans for an organization, a system of work, political methods, and institutions is not enough; the individual must participate in all this from the bottom of his heart, with pleasure and deep satisfaction.”

The pioneering American propagandist Edward Bernays, having served with the U.S. Committee on Public Information (CPI), the American propaganda agency that, unbeknownst to Anthony Rhodes, predated the Nazi propaganda ministry by more than a dozen years, called for more thorough and “modern” political propaganda of the type later described by Ellul as early as 1928. “It is not necessary for the politician to be the slave of the public’s group prejudices, if he can learn how to mold the mind of the voters in conformity with his own ideas of public welfare and public service,” Bernays wrote in his book *Propaganda*. “The important thing for the statesmen of our age is not so much to know how to please the public, but to know how to sway the public.”

As Bernays intimated, the public needed to be swayed away from its native individualism and “nudged” toward valuing service to the state. The people must no longer be independent, but must be controlled. “Ours must be a leadership democracy administered by the intelligent minority who know how to regiment and guide the masses,” Bernays declared.

For the state to form up such a class of willing subjects, impulses toward individualism must be overcome and substituted with impulses toward service, starting at a very young age. Propaganda aimed at this end began to appear in earnest with the coming of American intervention in the First World War.

In an article for the peer-reviewed journal *Journalism History* in 2012, Ross Collins of North Dakota



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State University examined propaganda aimed at children in the pages of three popular youth magazines during the period of American involvement in the First World War. Collectively, the three magazines had circulation approaching the half-million mark, and so reached a large percentage of American youth of the period.

These magazines, *American Boy*, *St. Nicholas Illustrated Magazine for Boys and Girls*, and *The Rally* (later renamed *American Girl*), were nominally privately published affairs. Their editors, however, like the editors of every publication at the time, were almost certainly heavily influenced by the government propaganda department, the Committee on Public Information.

This department exercised vast influence over the American media during the war. Historians James R. Mock and Cedric Larson investigated the CPI for their 1939 book, *Words That Won the War*. "The committee was so widespread in its ramifications," they wrote describing the vast collection of CPI archives that they had examined, "that the collection touches nearly all phases of American and world affairs for the years 1917 to 1919." Moreover, they continued, "The committee ... touched the private life of virtually every man, woman and child; it reflected the thoughts of the American people under the leadership of Woodrow Wilson; and it popularized what was for us a new idea of the individual's relation to the state."

Photo: AP Images

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Collins noted that the CPI's influence, in keeping with its extensive mandate and reach, extended to the children's publications. "To be sure, the editors of children's publications were among the recipients of CPI material," Collins noted, "and their approach toward children often matched the CPI's ideals." Those ideals included service to, and sacrifice for, the state, and emphasized obedience and physical and mental preparedness.

American Boy, Collins noted, urged children to keep fit so they would be physically prepared when called upon. "One thing each of you must do," *American Boy* told children in 1918, "is to keep physically fit.... Make ready for the day when your country may need you on the firing line."

St. Nicholas, in 1917, told children that they would not be at liberty to choose their own future, but to be ready when the government would tell them their future place in society. "There lies a duty upon every group of citizens, be they young or old, to organize themselves for service, in order that, when the government has need of them, they may be quickly and conveniently allotted their proper places," said an editorial in the magazine.

American Boy thought that children shouldn't just prepare to be called up by government in the future, but should serve immediately, by calling for a program of national service for youth. "The problem of boy mobilization," Collins noted of the magazine's position on the matter, could be resolved by forming "a quasi-military reserve for the under-aged."

"The United States Department of Labor has formed the 'Boy's Working Reserve, United States of America,' and is now enrolling the names of lads who are willing and able to serve their country along the lines worked out for them by the Department," *American Boy* reported.

As if indoctrinating children to prepare them for a life of regimentation and servitude was not enough, the propaganda aimed at them could be perversely joyless and mean-spirited as well, with *St. Nicholas*



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telling its youthful readers to prepare to give up their pets. “Suddenly he remembered what Father had said that stay-at-home folk could do for their country,” *St. Nicholas* imagined a fictional boy thinking during the war. “He looked at the flag — and then at his dog. ‘Yes,’ he said, with a brave little smile, ‘Boko may go.’” Apparently, the unfortunate “Boko” would be used as a mascot during troop training. At least that’s what *St. Nicholas* wanted its young subscribers to believe, according to Collins.

This was the education that the “greatest generation” received in its youth. These, “the children of World War I, nourished by the propaganda about war, became the adults who were to become leaders in the next world war,” Collins pointed out.

American propaganda aimed at children during the Second World War would find new and powerful modes of visual communication with children via the growth of popular comic books and heroes. Historian Cord Scott, an expert on the portrayal of war in comics, noted the importance of the genre in furthering the war effort during World War II. “Comic books were used to enlist everyone into the total war effort,” Scott noted. “One suggested that children could assist by buying war bonds and stamps (the latter were available in denominations as little as a dime). It provided a list of what the bond might pay for: \$150 buys a submachine gun for the marines, \$1.00 buys an entrenching shovel, and \$65 buys a .45 pistol, with five rounds for ten cents!”

As with the earlier world war, Second World War comics propaganda sought to romanticize wartime service for children, and to foster the idea that they should and could do their part to fight the enemy. Many comic superheroes who remain household names today in the age of Marvel’s Avenger blockbusters had significant appearances in World War II-era comics fighting the Nazis and the “Japs.” But one title, in particular, put boys as child soldiers into the fight.

This was *Boy Commandos*, produced by legendary comics artists Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. As a team, they had a knack for coming up with compelling characters, with one of them, Captain America, remaining among the most popular superheroes still today. Though much less remembered now, the pair’s *Boy Commandos* series was a commercial hit in 1942, selling in the millions. It featured an international group of boys, led by the hero Captain Rip Carter, fighting Nazis and “Japs.” An early issue, originally appearing in *Detective Comics* #66 in August 1942, has Rip Carter and his team of boys fighting the Nazis in Egypt. The boys heroically wreck a radio station after which they face “shots, rifle-fire, and chattering machine guns,” only to attack an enemy tank unit where “overcoming the tank crews, the commandos take over the iron monsters! Heading through a storm of flying steel, the commando-controlled tanks crash their way to the open desert.” The *Boy Commandos*, of course, win the day.

What red-blooded American boy wouldn’t want to head to the front after reading about such stirring heroics? It goes without saying that the reality of the war, with its dismemberment, disembowelings, and assorted mass death and destruction, was far different from the brightly colored romanticized notions of the comics.

Using Children Against Adults

Children are not only important to state propagandists as targets to be “formed” by prop-aganda efforts, but as tools in propaganda campaigns aimed at modifying adult behavior.

Biologically, adults are naturally predisposed to certain responses to facial features, especially those of children. The response to depictions of faces appears to be a constant of human behavior, with



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representations of facial features, and especially eyes, being regular features of prehistoric rock and cave art. Archaeologist Ben Watson, an expert in paleoart, noted this in the journal *Antiquity* in 2011, concluding that “faces with prominent eyes are forms of imagery that have the ability to evoke strong neurophysiological responses. This includes the activation of distinct neural structures, and inherent responses in emotional centers and reward networks in the brain.”

The pioneering researcher in this field was, interestingly, a one-time Nazi scientist, the Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz. In an article on the development of depictions of Mickey Mouse that increasingly emphasized wider eyes for the iconic character for the journal *Natural History*, well-known biologist Stephen J. Gould summarized Lorenz’s work on the subject. “In one of his most famous articles,” Gould noted, Lorenz “argues that humans use characteristic differences in form between babies and adults as important behavioral cues. He believes that features of juvenility trigger ‘innate releasing mechanisms’ for affection and nurturing in adult humans. When we see a living creature with babyish features, we feel an automatic surge of disarming tenderness.”

Whether this hypothesized effect is real or not was tested by Melanie Blocker of the Department of Behavioral Biology and the University of Muenster and her co-investigators, with results reported in the journal *Ethology* in 2009. The researchers investigated if Lorenz’s *Kindchenschema* (baby schema) really did elicit “caretaking behavior” by adults. According to Blocker, that baby schema includes “infantile physical features such as the large head, high and protruding forehead, large eyes, chubby cheeks.” The findings of her study confirmed the impact of such visual cues on adults. “Our results provide the first experimental proof that baby schema in infant faces is perceived as cute and induces motivation for caretaking in adults,” Blocker and her coauthors concluded.

It is no surprise, then, that propagandists would seek to use this stimuli-response mechanism to influence adult beliefs and behaviors in order to build the power and authority of the state and generate support for its actions. American propaganda posters during World War I often used images of children to drum up support for various aspects of the war.

One such poster, exhorting Americans to finance the war effort by investing in Liberty Bonds, depicts a desperate mother holding an infant, while another grasps up at her skirt. The text of the post asks viewers to consider: “Must children die and mothers plead in vain?”

Another image capitalized on the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Produced by artist Fred Spear, it depicted a mother, a passenger from the stricken ship, submerged in water, her long hair flowing in waves above as she sinks to the dark depths. Cradled in her arms is an infant. There is only one word written on the poster: “ENLIST.” This poster has long been noted for its emotional power, being called “perhaps the most powerful of all war posters” by author Maurice Rickards in his study of World War I propaganda posters.

World War II saw American propaganda posters continue to use the same approach. This was particularly the case when it came to war bonds. According to the National Archives and Records Administration, the U.S. government was well aware of the power of images of women and children in propaganda campaigns. “A study of commercial posters undertaken by the U.S. government found that images of women and children in danger were effective emotional devices,” NARA reports in an online exhibit of World War II propaganda posters. The government study included a Canadian poster by G.K. Odell that urged the purchase of victory bonds by depicting, once again, a mother and infant in danger



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from the black, grasping paws of Axis powers Japan and Germany. A U.S. poster urging Americans to buy war bonds was similar, showing three innocent American children playing outside on an otherwise idyllic summer day, while looming near them is the shadow of a giant, black swastika. The message: “Don’t let that shadow touch them.”

Dictators, Fake News, and Post-truth

The early and mid-20th century paved the way for future propaganda efforts capitalizing on images of children and mothers and families. Such images became beloved of dictators hoping to convince their captive audiences that they weren’t really as brutal as they seemed. Sure, they could kill millions, but they loved children the entire time.

Mussolini, mild by comparison to contemporary and later dictators, was depicted holding a happy child who was saluting him. The image was accompanied with this message: “Benito Mussolini loves children very much. The children of Italy love the Duce very much. Long live the Duce....”

And so it went with the Soviet butcher, Stalin. The illustration of Mussolini with a child almost seems to be the prototype for the roughly contemporaneous photo of Stalin with the young girl Gelia Markizova in photographer V. Matvievskii’s *Young Girl and the Leader*. The photo shows a smiling Gelia presenting the dictator with a bouquet of flowers, and the image went on to appear on the front page of *Pravda* and was later turned into a sculpture by the artist Georgi Lavrov. One year later, Gelia’s father was arrested and accused of being a Trotskyite. He was executed, confirming that Stalin was, indeed, no friend of children and families. No matter, in Soviet propaganda, children were happy, not because of their parents and family life, but because of the father of the nation, Stalin. This was the point of artist Victor Govorkov’s propaganda poster *Thank You Beloved Stalin for Our Happy Childhood*, which depicts a group of smiling youths gazing up in adulation at the proud visage of father Stalin.

Following in the footsteps of all “great” communist dictators, present-day communist despot Kim Jong-un occasionally plays at being like Stalin in pictures with children. The North Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) distributed a photo of a grinning Kim visiting an orphanage in 2015, surrounded by ecstatic youngsters. An article by KCNA describing Kim’s visit noted that the “beloved children offered new year greetings to him, presenting bouquets to him.” For his part, Kim expressed the desire that the children should grow up with “good moral traits, creativity and independence so that service personnel of the People’s Army, doctors and heroes may be produced from among them.”

That statement still reads like something that could have been produced by the CPI 100 years ago in World War I.

Another dictator fond of using children for propaganda purposes was former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Most famously, after his forces invaded Kuwait, they took as hostages a number of men and families that had been working in the Kuwaiti oil fields. Among those taken was Stuart Lockwood, then five years of age, and his mother and father. The unfortunate captives were to be used as human shields and for propaganda stunts. Infamously, Saddam appeared on TV with his hostages, young Stuart among them, who later recalled the event for *The Guardian*: “I was scared,” Stuart said of the experience. “Then he tried to sit me on his lap. I crossed my arms and shied away.” A screen capture of the TV image from the episode shows a stoic Mr. Lockwood standing stiffly, while the dictator smiles and puts his arm around the little boy. It’s a mortifying scene, made worse by knowing that, out of the picture, Stuart Lockwood’s captive parents had to watch, powerless to protect their son.



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Such scenes aren't just for rogue states and dictators. As statism continues its pervasive march through the heart of the Western nations, such propaganda displays grow ever more common. Especially on issues related to gun control, American propaganda aimed at overturning the Second Amendment has increasingly focused on using children. Following Adam Lanza's murderous attack in Newtown, Connecticut, President Barack Obama attempted to capitalize on the tragedy by posing with the families of the victims and calling for tighter gun controls. Writing for ABC OTUS News in 2013, Mary Bruce reported on Obama's calls for gun control in the wake of the shootings. "Speaking before families of the victims of the Sandy Hook massacre," Bruce noted at the time, "President Obama made an impassioned and urgent plea for stricter gun laws, as he accused Republicans of threatening to use 'political stunts,' to block reforms." In response to that type of propaganda stunt, Senator Rand Paul, not long after, remarked: "In some cases, I think the president has used them [the victims and their families] as props."

And so it continues to go today. We live in an era even more suffused with propaganda than that experienced by William Shirer in Nazi Germany. It has been said that we are in the "post-truth" era, a time period of "fake news" where facts are easily ignored as long as the preferred narrative is advanced. The best example of that has come in the wake of yet another tragic school shooting, this time in Parkland, Florida. Here, in the wake of another horrific school massacre, kids themselves became not just the symbolic content of the propaganda, but simultaneously were offered up as their very own propagandists, in a sort of "propaganda selfie."

The central symbol of this propaganda effort, and also the person positioned as its author, is young David Hogg. And as part of any analysis of this current round of propaganda, one must admit its genius. As a child, Hogg benefits from Konrad Lorenz's concept of *Kindchenschema*, and along with the other kids, victims and propagandists alike, successfully engenders in adults strong feelings of sympathy, remorse, and, simultaneously, protectiveness. Moreover, because Hogg is his own propagandist, he is simultaneously protected by his *Kindchenschema* — he cannot be contradicted easily or effectively by adults as that would be tantamount to an attack, something that is anathema to the adult protective instinct. Anyone critical of youthful gun controllers such as Hogg engages in that criticism at their own peril, as Laura Ingraham found out when she noted that Hogg whined about not being accepted to four colleges.

Power and Propaganda

At its base, propaganda is aimed solely at manipulation — efforts to make individuals act, even willingly, against their own best interests. Succeeding in this, for the propagandist and his statist employers, is an exercise in the expression of power. Put another way, the more pervasive prop-aganda becomes, the more freedom is diminished.

When fully realized, the total state and total propaganda are one and the same, inseparable. Where you see the implementation of total propaganda, then you may reliably infer from that the existence of a totalitarian state, even though the reality of that state is obscured by the propagandists' fog. Such propaganda may be recognized by its tactics, especially the degree to which it both targets and uses children, and by its relative success in obscuring or replacing the truth.

With regard to the latter, says Jacques Ellul, "Nowadays facts do not assume reality in the people's eyes unless they are established by propaganda. Propaganda, in fact, creates truth in the sense that it



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creates in men subject to propaganda all the signs and indications of true believers.”

The most insidious tool and tactic of propaganda in service to the total state is the targeting and use of children. Recognizing this and countering it, preventing children from becoming pawns of the state in both body and mind, difficult though it may be, is the essential first step in thwarting the total state.

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