The JEWISH ENEMY

NAZI PROPAGANDA DURING WORLD WAR II AND THE HOLOCAUST

Jeffrey Herf

The Belknap Press of
Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
2006

In memory of
George L. Mosse (1918–1999)
and
for Walter Laqueur

Copyright © 2006 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Herf, Jeffrey, 1947–
The Jewish enemy : Nazi propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust / Jeffrey Herf.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-674-02175-4
1. World War, 1939–1945—Propaganda. 2. Nazi propaganda—Germany—History—20th century. 3. Antisemitism—Germany—History—20th century. 4. Holocaust, Jewish (1939–1945). 5. Germany—Politics and government—1933–1945. I. Title.
D810.P7G337 2006
940.53'181—dc22 2005056279

Contents

Preface

Why did European, especially German, anti-Semitism, which had never led to an effort to murder all of Europe's Jews before, do so between 1941 and 1945 in the midst of World War II? What changed to make anti-Semitism a rationale for mass murder rather than for a continuation of centuries-old patterns of persecution? The answer lies in what Hitler and his leading propagandists and ideologists had to say about the "Jewish question" in the midst of the war and the Holocaust and in their efforts to shape the narrative of events through propaganda in the controlled press. Rather surprisingly, in view of the vast literature on the subject, *The Jewish Enemy* is the first book to examine in depth the Nazis' paranoid anti-Semitic account of the world war. Their story of an innocent Germany besieged by international Jewry intent on its "extermination" served as both the public announcement of and the justification for the Final Solution.

In the jargon of historians, this is a work of modified intentionalism. That is, it examines the ideological intentions of key political actors in the historical conjuncture that was World War II. The Holocaust, however, was not the inevitable outcome of the continuities of German, or of European, history. The long tradition of elite and popular anti-Semitism

created a climate of indifference in which the murderers could operate but did not per se inspire a policy of mass murder. The historians' search for ideological origins has taken us toward but not to the Final Solution. For it was only in the historically specific circumstances of the war that the most radical and paranoid current of European and especially German anti-Semitism, which Hitler had adopted from the beginning of his political activities, became the key to the German dictatorship's explanation of ongoing events and thus a causal factor in the evolution of the Holocaust. Hitler and his associates had long believed that anti-Semitism offered *the* explanatory framework for world history. First in 1939, then still more in 1941, and on up through the last days of the Nazi regime, he and his leading propagandists argued that it was necessary to "exterminate" the Jews before they were able to exterminate Germany and the Germans.

Historians of a previous generation enlightened and inspired me and many others with their work and personal encouragement. Karl Bracher's analysis of the Nazi regime and of Europe's century of ideologies has been an exemplar of historical explanation and moral clarity. François Furet's examination of the intersection of ideas, events, and circumstances surrounding the Terror in the French Revolution served as a model for integrating radical ideological currents into the narrative of political history and as an antidote to historical determinism. Thomas Nipperdey examined anti-Semitism as one of the "multiple continuities" of German, and European, history. The deaths of Furet and Nipperdey leave an intellectual and personal void.

Bracher, Furet, and Nipperdey are part of a rich scholarly tradition of examining the intersection of ideas and politics. George Mosse and Walter Laqueur also worked in this tradition. Together they founded and edited the *Journal of Contemporary History*, in which much important work on Nazism and Fascism has been published. Laqueur made essential contributions to the history of the Holocaust, stimulated my interest in the mixture of secrecy and blunt talk in Nazi anti-Semitic

propaganda, and encouraged me over the years. Mosse led the historical search for the Holocaust's ideological origins and illuminated in many ways how various components of European culture contributed to a climate in which the Holocaust became possible. He was an inspiring teacher, example, and friend for three decades.

However much I resisted it, *the Jew* is in every respect the center of the language of the Third Reich, indeed of its whole view of the epoch.

—Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness, 1942–1945,* July 20, 1944, Dresden

What is characteristic of Nazi propaganda is less the lie than the imposition of a paranoiac pattern on world events.

—E. H. Gombrich, *Myth and Reality in German Wartime Broadcasts,* London, 1969

1 The Jews, the War, and the Holocaust

The texts and images of wartime ideology and propaganda of Nazism are a rich and revelatory means of understanding why European, and in particular German, anti-Semitism, the source of centuries of persecution, led between 1941 and 1945 to the Holocaust. From 1919 to January 30, 1939, Hitler hurled terrible abuse and threats of violence at the Jews. In a speech to the Reichstag when he was making plans to begin a second European war, he publicly threatened to "exterminate" all the Jews of Europe if they provoked such a war.[1] In their public statements, the Nazis repeatedly asserted that the connection between World War II and the Jews was causal and necessary and thus by implication not an accident of timing and geography. Though Hitler had long planned to launch the war at a time and place of his choosing, he and his propagandists insisted that the "extermination" of the Jews was a justified response to a war launched against Germany by "international Jewry." A blend of hatred, self-righteous indignation, and paranoia was at the core of the Nazi justification of genocide. Nazi propaganda presented Germany's war against the Allies and its intention to "exterminate" the Jews of Europe as part of one overarching war of retaliation and defense. This escalation of Nazi policy from persecution to extermination was accompanied and prefigured by a radicalization of Nazi Germany's public language about the Jews.

There was, of course, an abyss between Nazi propaganda that presented the Third Reich as the innocent victim of others' malice and the reality of Hitler's long-planned policy of expansion and aggression. This gap tempted contemporaries to assume that the propaganda was merely a manipulative means used by cynics who were fully aware that it reversed the chronology of events that their own aggressive plans had set in motion. Yet some contemporary observers concluded that the Nazis believed their own paranoid logic. The literary scholar and diarist Viktor Klemperer wrote in his diary in 1944, soon after D-day: "However much I resisted it, *the Jew* is in every respect the center of the language of the Third Reich, indeed *of its whole view of the epoch*."[2] Klemperer recognized that anti-Semitism was not only a set of prejudices and hatreds but also an explanatory framework for historical events. The young E. H. Gombrich, who subsequently gained fame as an art historian, worked at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) translating and analyzing German wartime propaganda. A quarter century later, Gombrich wrote that Nazi propaganda had created a mythic world by "transforming the political universe into a conflict of persons and personifications" in which a virtuous young Germany fought manfully against evil schemers, above all the Jews. The Jews were the cement for this myth, first in the political battles within Germany and then on the international plane. It was "this gigantic persecution mania, this paranoiac myth that [held] the various strands of German propaganda together." Gombrich concluded that what characterized Nazi propaganda was "less the lie than the imposition of a paranoiac pattern on world events."[3] During World War II, the propaganda of the Nazi regime repeatedly asserted that an actual political subject, an actor called Jewry or international Jewry, was "guilty" of starting and prolonging the war and that a Jewish international conspiracy was intent on exterminating Germany and the Germans. These statements rested on a paranoia inherent in the Nazis' radical anti-Semitism. In the context of World War II, these beliefs transformed the centuries-old European anti-Semitism from a justification for traditional forms of persecution into what the historian Norman Cohn called a "warrant for genocide."[4]

Faced with expressions of such views by Nazi Germany's national political leaders, most contemporary Marxists, liberals, and conservatives of the time, as well as a good number of postwar scholars, were skeptical that the Nazis truly believed their own propaganda. And yet an examination of modern political culture draws attention to the causal significance of many irrational and illusory ideological perspectives. In the case of Nazi Germany, historians have amply documented what Saul Friedlander has called Hitler's early "redemptive anti-Semitism," which combined paranoid fantasy about an all-powerful international Jewry with promises of redeeming and saving Germany from that pernicious influence.[5] Ian Kershaw notes "the all-devouring manic obsession with the Jews" that Hitler displayed in his beer hall tirades in Munich just after World War I.[6] This obsession is evident in a speech to a Nazi party meeting of April 6, 1920, when Hitler said, "We don't want to be emotional anti-Semites who seek to create a mood for pogroms. Rather, we are driven by a pitiless and fierce determination to attack the evil at its roots and to exterminate it root and branch. Every means is justified to reach our goal, even if it means we must make a pact with the devil."[7]

In the early years, Hitler denounced the Jews as an element alien to the German nation, and the cause of Germany's problems, from military defeat to the Depression. Not until January 30, 1939, however, did he publicly threaten to exterminate the Jews. Between 1920 and 1939, often in the most vicious terms, he called for the "removal of the Jews from the midst of our people."[8] Toward the end of *Mein Kampf,* he wrote, "If at the beginning of the war and during the war twelve or fifteen thousand of these Hebrew corrupters of the people had been held under poison gas, as happened to hundreds of thousands of our very best German soldiers in the field, the sacrifice of millions would not have been in vain."[9] Yet however vicious his language or profound his hatred, between April 1920 and January 1939 he did not repeat the threat to kill all the Jews in Germany or in the rest of Europe. Rather, he spoke of "world" or "international Jewry" as an actually existing political subject with vast power that was hostile to Germany.[10] This subject had played a role in Germany's defeat in World War I, he claimed,

and had helped bring about the Bolshevik Revolution, Germany's postwar inflation, and the economic crisis of 1929. Between 1933 and 1939, international Jewry had been responsible for the criticism leveled by the European powers and the United States at Nazi Germany's domestic policies, including but not limited to its anti-Semitism. Before 1939 Hitler made no secret of his violent hatred of the Jews and of his determination to drive them out of public life, the professions, and the economy, deprive them of German citizenship, and then, by force if need be, drive them out of Germany. Indeed, during the era of anti-Jewish persecution between 1933 and 1939, the Nazi regime through its Transfer (Haavarah) Agreement with some Jewish organizations, encouraged and allowed the movement of sixty thousand German Jews and about a hundred million marks from Germany to Palestine.[11] Hitler justified every escalation of persecution against the Jews as a response to what he alleged was a prior act of aggression by international Jewry. Yet from January 1933 to January 1939, through six years of escalating anti-Semitic persecution, boycotts, arbitrary arrests, theft, purges, and the pogrom of November 1938, Hitler, without declaring war against the Jews, repeated his assertion about the threat international Jewry posed to Germany.[12] In January 1939, however, he struck a distinctly more radical and murderous tone.

While proclaiming Jewry's threat to Nazi Germany, Hitler prepared to launch a war for Lebensraum in the East. Such a military action would provide Germany with raw materials and food supplies safe from an Anglo-American blockade and would lay the groundwork for a subsequent bid for world domination and an attack on the United States.[13] Hitler presented himself publicly as a man of peace and as a provincial, albeit radical, German nationalist who sought merely to apply to the German-speaking peoples of Central Europe the League of Nations principle of the right of national self-determination.[14] In fact, his strategy for victory entailed preparation for a series of short wars against isolated enemies, in which victory would offer resources that would facilitate further expansion, on the path to world domination. Waging war sooner

rather than later would exploit Nazi Germany's head start in armaments. Delay would undermine its initial advantage.[15]

Hitler was the central, decisive historical actor driving events toward the war and the Holocaust. Yet the propaganda of the Nazi party and Nazi regime presented Hitler and Germany as merely responding to the initiatives, injustices, and threats of others. It was a propaganda that trumpeted innocence and self-righteous indignation and turned the power relations between Germany and the Jews upside down: Germany was the innocent victim; Jewry was all powerful. From 1933 to 1939, the translation of anti-Semitic ideology into a policy of persecution was presented as a justified response to what the Jews had done to Germany and the Germans. On January 30, 1939, a distinct shift occurred, as Hitler depicted the war that he was preparing to launch as the last in a long series of acts of aggression by international Jewry against Germany. According to Hitler's paranoid logic, the Jews had launched the war so that the Nazis would be compelled to wage a war of retaliation against the Jews of Europe. In his speech to the Reichstag on January 30, Hitler made his first unequivocal public threat to exterminate (that is, murder)—not merely to remove, deport, or defeat—"the Jewish race in Europe" in the event that "international finance Jewry inside and outside Europe" brought about a new world war. He publicly repeated the genocidal prophecy on at least six subsequent occasions between January 30, 1939, and February 24, 1943.[16] In contrast to his public practice between 1919 and 1939, in the ensuing years Hitler spoke and wrote with unprecedented clarity, bluntness, and frequency about acting on his threats to exterminate the Jews of Europe. He cast himself in the role of the prophet: the outbreak of World War II was further proof that international Jewry had indeed been out to destroy Germany and the Germans.

Hitler and his leading propagandists were able to entertain completely contradictory versions of events simultaneously, one rooted in the grandiose idea of a master race and world domination, the other in the self-pitying paranoia of the innocent, beleaguered victim.[17] Grandiosity

and paranoia were two poles of one fanatical ideology.[18] The Nazis projected their own aggressive and murderous intentions and policies onto their victims, the Jews most of all. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno captured this aspect of Nazism when they wrote in 1944 that the "blind murderer has always seen his victim as a persecutor against whom he must defend himself."[19] From beginning to end, the narrative of paranoia displayed in the propaganda accompanied and justified the Nazi regime's grandiose war of aggression and its genocidal policies.

The radical anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany's wartime propaganda also constituted an interpretive prism through which Nazi leaders viewed and misconstrued events as they unfolded. Indeed, the misperceptions of reality deriving from the anti-Semitic agenda contributed to major blunders and eventually to the Allies' ability to defeat the Nazis, albeit at horrendous cost. In *The Jewish Enemy,* I examine the process of translating anti-Semitic ideology into a narrative and tailoring the weekly and daily news to fit that narrative.[20] Like other practitioners of paranoid politics before and after, the Nazis believed they had uncovered deep secrets of modern history and politics, secrets that the great mass of humanity, mired in events, failed to grasp. At the same time that they entered an utterly mythic world, they convinced themselves and millions of others that their Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda (Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda) was educating the masses about the people behind the scenes and the realities that were the driving force behind events.[21] Within the "delirious discourse" of radical anti-Semitism, all riddles were solved, all historical contingency was eliminated, and everything became explicable.[22]

■

Historians of anti-Semitism and the origins of the Holocaust have fully documented its extent and depth in European, and especially German and Austrian, society and culture. With particular insight, they have explained the roots of "the era of persecution."[23] This impressive body of scholarship explains the path to an anti-Semitic "consensus," which

led by the mid- and late 1930s to the Nuremberg race laws, denial of citizenship, economic impoverishment, and imprisonment of Jews.[24] George Mosse, the pioneering historian of fascism and racism, boldly claimed that the racism of bodily stereotypes and countertypes "was the catalyst which pushed German nationalism over the edge, from discrimination to mass extermination."[25] Yet however despicable this consensus was or however odious the familiar caricatures of supposed Aryan and Jewish bodies, neither had led to a policy of mass murder. Reference to the long-term history of anti-Semitism leaves unanswered the question of why mass murder took place between 1941 and 1945 and not earlier.[26] The answer to this question lies in the efforts by the radical anti-Semites at the head of the Nazi regime to make sense and nonsense of the role of international Jewry in the outbreak and unfolding of World War II. The Nazi leaders believed that the unfolding events of the war confirmed the truth of their radical anti-Semitic ideology and reinforced the need to eliminate Jews from the face of the earth.

Radical anti-Semitism rested on the belief that the Jews were a cohesive, politically active subject—that is, a group united on a global scale by racial bonds that transcended any allegiance to nation-states. In the Nazi view, this powerful and autonomous entity, international Jewry, controlled assorted stooges and accomplices who served its evil interests. One way in which this view of a Jewish global conspiracy was distinct from less radical, and nongenocidal, forms of Jew hatred was the relative lack of importance it attached to Jews' presumed physical appearance. Indeed, the Nazis claimed that the Jews were experts at camouflage and that as a result a massive effort at "public enlightenment" was needed to expose them and their aim of world domination. If not identified and destroyed, the Nazi propagandists feared, Jewry would annihilate the German people. As a result, Hitler and his associates publicly declared on numerous occasions that they would "exterminate" Jews before the Jews could exterminate the Germans. The idea of a Jewish a conspiracy was popularized by the mass publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in the decades preceding the Nazis' arrival

in power. The accomplishment of the Nazi propagandists was to bring the idea of this conspiracy up to date and to flesh it out with the names and faces of recognizable prominent figures in mid-twentieth-century Europe and the United States. The theory of an international Jewish conspiracy supplied answers to such seemingly difficult questions as, Why did Britain fight on in 1940 rather than negotiate? Why was it likely that the Soviet regime would collapse like a house of cards following the German invasion of June 1941? Why did Franklin Roosevelt oppose Hitler? Why did the anti-Hitler coalition remain intact as the Red Army continued to push toward Central Europe after spring 1943? In the idea of a vastly powerful international Jewish conspiracy operating behind the scenes Nazi leaders believed they had found the answer to these and many other riddles of modern history.

Though there exists an excellent group of works on Nazi propaganda, none has focused on the translation of radical anti-Semitism into the texts and visual images of wartime propaganda.[27] *The Jewish Enemy* draws on numerous sources to trace that translation process: relevant speeches by Adolf Hitler; speeches, essays, and the multivolume diary of Joseph Goebbels, head of the Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda; selections from the thousands of daily and weekly press directives that Reich press chief Otto Dietrich and his staff gave to newspaper and periodical editors at press conferences in Berlin; front-page articles and headlines in government-controlled newspapers; and the relevant anti-Semitic wall newspapers and posters, black and white or in color, which intruded on the everyday visual experience of millions of Germans during the Third Reich. Some of these texts and images are well known. Others were familiar at the time but have been given short shrift even in the scholarship on Nazi propaganda. The vitally important press directives, *Word of the Day (Die Parole des Tages),* came to light in Otto Dietrich's postwar trial in Nuremberg but have been oddly underutilized. The brightly colored anti-Semitic political wall newspapers have also attracted little scrutiny.[28] Drawing on this wealth of material, I will argue that Nazi Germany's radical anti-Semitic

propaganda during World War II was integral to Nazi motivation and to the launching of the war and perpetration of the Final Solution.

What does "the war against the Jews" mean? For Lucy Dawidowicz, who made the phrase famous in her pioneering work, it meant the Holocaust, the Final Solution of the Jewish question in Europe.[29] With the ensuing explosion of scholarship about the Holocaust, two scholarly communities emerged. One, composed of military historians, continued to focus on the conventional battlefield narratives of World War II, while the second examined the history of the Holocaust in more detail. While the military historians wrote about Stalingrad and D-day, the others examined the Wannsee Conference and Auschwitz-Birkenau and other extermination camps. Although this dichotomy gave way to an attempt to connect World War II and the Holocaust in time, space, and ideological inspiration, Dawidowicz's phrase "the war against the Jews" still evokes in our minds specifically the mass murder of European Jewry.[30] The time has come to reach a more inclusive understanding of "the war against the Jews," one in which World War II plays a critical role.

When the Nazi leaders, in private conversations, office memos, or public statements, drew a connection between the Jews and World War II, they were referring to World War II and the Holocaust taken together as one apocalyptic battle. They did not limit the meaning of their war against what they called international Jewry to the Final Solution. Instead, they viewed the Final Solution, the details of which they never discussed in public, as a necessary campaign of retaliation in the context of a broader war of defense waged by Nazi Germany against international Jewry, world Jewry, and less frequently "the Jews." In the minds and public assertions of the Nazi leaders, they were fighting a single war that pitted Germany and its allies against a colossal international conspiracy of nonequals driven by Jewish figures working behind the scenes, while their non-Jewish accomplices, primarily the Allies, were the enemy's public facade. The Nazi narrative attributed enormous autonomy and power to the Jews, while denying those attributes to the

nominal leaders of the most powerful nations in the world, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin, whom it identified as the Jews' puppets, accomplices, stooges, and servants.

Nazi Germany saw its enemy as a conspiracy of nonequals. International Jewry stood at its center, pulling the wires that controlled their stooges, the leaders of the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the United States. From the months preceding the beginning of the war in September 1939 up until Hitler's last days in the bunker in Berlin, the Nazi narrative presented World War II and the intent to exterminate European Jewry as components of a war of defense against an act of aggression launched, escalated, and then carried to a victorious conclusion by an immensely powerful international Jewish conspiracy. The radicalism and extremism of Nazi anti-Semitism did not lie only in the familiar and disgusting racist caricatures of the Jews' physical appearance or of their alleged sexual proclivities. These prejudices and phobias had been commonplaces of European anti-Semitism long before the Third Reich. Indeed, it was because Nazi leaders were so worried about what they regarded as the ability of Jews to camouflage themselves as non-Jews that they restored the medieval custom of forcing Jews into the open through the compulsory wearing of the identifying yellow Star of David. It was the conspiratorial aspects of modern anti-Semitism that were most important in fostering its radical, genocidal implications. The desire for a Final Solution to the Jewish question was inseparable from the Nazis' view of the Jews as an internationally organized political power that was playing a decisive role in the events of World War II.

With too few exceptions, Hitler's bitterest opponents found it difficult to believe that he actually meant what he said concerning the extermination and annihilation of the Jews. Here I shall stress the similarity between publicly declared intentions and actual policy.[31] We need to revise conventional wisdom regarding the role of euphemism and clarity in the public language of the Nazi regime. In fact, when its leaders spoke publicly after 1938 about what they intended to do to Europe's

Jews, they were remarkably blunt and unambiguous about their intention to exterminate or annihilate—that is, to murder—all the Jews of Europe. George Orwell famously wrote that the language and propaganda of totalitarian dictatorship is that of "euphemism, question begging and sheer cloudy vagueness." In efforts to "defend the indefensible," he argued that totalitarian regimes substitute clinical abstractions for straightforward proper nouns and visceral verbs that refer directly to the violent and criminal acts committed.[32] Orwell's argument applies well to the internal office memos of the Reich Security Main Office, the agency of the Nazi regime that carried out the genocide of European Jewry, to its famous name for the Holocaust itself, the Final Solution, and of course to the vicious deceptions that the officials engaged in the mass murder used to obscure from their intended victims their awful fate.[33] Yet public language in Nazi Germany was not limited to these now infamous euphemisms. As Hannah Arendt noted in her classic work *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* "in order not to overestimate the importance of the propaganda lies one should recall the much more numerous instances in which Hitler was completely sincere and brutally unequivocal in the definition of the movement's true aims, but they were simply not acknowledged by a public unprepared for such consistency."[34] In fact, the public language of the Nazi regime combined complete suppression of any facts about the Final Solution with a brutal, sometimes crude declaration of murderous intent. Two key verbs and nouns in the German language were at the core of this language of mass murder: *vernichten* and *ausrotten*. These translate as "annihilate," "exterminate," "totally destroy," and "kill," and the nouns *Vernichtung* and *Ausrottung* as "annihilation," "extermination," "total destruction," and "killing."[35] Whether taken on their own from the dictionary meaning or placed in the context of the speeches, paragraphs, and sentences in which they were uttered, their meaning was clear. When Hitler and other Nazi leaders and propagandists uttered them to describe what they intended to do to the Jews, they almost always did so after claiming that it was the Jews who were intending to exterminate