



**David Welch.** *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda.* London and New York: Routledge, 2002. xii + 246 pp. \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-27508-8; \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-27507-1.



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## How Popular Were the Nazis?

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One of the fundamental debates that has emerged in much of the recent historiography of Nazi Germany concerns the degree to which the German population willingly supported the Nazi regime, and especially its racist policies, as opposed to the degree to which that support was the result of coercion and intimidation. Recent works by, among others, Robert Gellately, Christopher Browning, Omer Bartov, and, most famously (or infamously), Daniel Goldhagen have addressed this question.[1] Initially published in 1993, and now out in a second edition with a revised introduction and postscript, David Welch's *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda* also seeks answers in this regard by analyzing the role of Nazi propaganda in shaping public opinion and thus garnering public support for the regime.

Welch's slim book (171 substantive pages) is at its strongest in describing the mechanisms of Nazi propaganda. He gives a detailed account of the creation of the Nazi newspaper empire, centered around the *Voelkischer Beobachter*. He also provides good insight into the origin and functioning of the Ministry for Popular Enlighten-

ment and Propaganda, headed by Josef Goebbels, which had a powerful hand in the content of German media and art. In the process, Welch outlines the mechanisms of Nazi control of radio and film, in addition to the press.

Much of the remainder of the book deals with the content of Nazi propaganda, which Welch divides thematically between peace and war-time. In the "peace time" section, he addresses the heavily promoted concept of *Volksgemeinschaft*, which was intended to subsume class differences into a racial utopia. He argues that the regime largely won over the working class through such programs as "Strength through Joy," which provided entertainment and travel opportunities, as well as promising a motor vehicle for the masses: the Volkswagen. He also notes that German boys, across socio-economic categories were, for the most part, enchanted with the Hitler Youth. Welch reaches the reasonable conclusion that propaganda in these spheres was largely successful—at least to the extent that it tended to diffuse both class conflict and opposition to the regime.

In regard to the Nazi euthanasia campaign, Welch argues that despite opposition from church leaders partic-

ularly, as well as others, propaganda in this sphere was also quite successful. Over 18 million Germans, for example, viewed the film *I Accuse*, a pro-euthanasia work. With regard to anti-Semitic propaganda, Welch argues that it created not so much hate as apathy and indifference. He also supports Ian Kershaw's thesis that a powerful "Hitler Myth" permeated German society, though Welch explains that this required great propaganda efforts.[2] In the section concerning the content of war-related propaganda, Welch shows a profound thematic shift occurring after the German defeat at Stalingrad in 1943: brash expressions of German invincibility increasingly became calls for great sacrifice in the face of a barbaric onslaught from the East.

The book is at its weakest in the new postscript. In this section, Welch reviews two of the major historiographical debates not addressed in the first edition of his book: the *Historikerstreit* (the controversy over some German historians' attempts to relativize the Holocaust in relation to other atrocities); and the furor surrounding Daniel Goldhagen's controversial thesis that an "eliminationist antisemitism" permeated German society prior to 1945. Conceivably, Welch could have addressed the *Historikerstreit*, which began in 1986, in his first edition of 1993. One can understand why he did not do so as the relativization of the Holocaust in the 1980s has little to do with the substance of his work, which treats the effect of Nazi propaganda on Germans between 1933 and 1945. Welch's discussion of that controversy simply seems out of place. The Goldhagen controversy, on the other hand, ostensibly fits within the purview of Welch's

work, dealing, as it does, with the question of how Germans felt about Jews and why. Here, however, Welch simply jumps on the anti-Goldhagen bandwagon and reiterates arguments that have been made repeatedly elsewhere.

In all, however, the book provides a valuable discussion of both the mechanisms and substance of Nazi propaganda. It also contains a useful appendix with ten documents relating to the content of the book, from a 1933 Goebbels speech on the tasks of the Ministry of Propaganda to a 1943 SD report on the deteriorating morale of the German people. A thematically organized bibliography (e.g. "Art and Culture," "Women") is also helpful.

Welch's work ultimately supports what seems to be an emerging consensus among historians of the Third Reich, that widespread German acceptance of the Nazi regime was based on both coercion and attraction, with, at least in Welch's work, an emphasis on the latter.

#### Notes

[1]. Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford and New York, 2001); Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992); Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford and New York, 1992); and Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York, 1997).

[2]. Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth"* (Oxford, 1987).

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