Nazi Propaganda – Rise of the Radio

“I consider radio to be the most crucial instrument that exists for influencing the masses.” This statement made by Joseph Goebbels the Reich Minister of propaganda in his address to the Officials and Directors of the Radio Corporation, Berlin, House of Broadcasting on March 25, 1933 is the one that best outlines the importance of radio to the German propaganda machine leading up to and during the Second World War. It was this statement made shortly after the Nazi Party had gained power that would initiate the rise of radio as a propaganda tool such as television and websites are today. This change revolutionised the use of propaganda during the 20th century and served to inspire the world-renowned novel, 1984 written in 1949 by George Orwell to warn the world of the consequences of extensive use of propaganda.

The radio had been around some time before the Nazis had come to power, with the first audio broadcast sent in 1915. Before this, radio was simply a wireless telegraph that could only send the common dots and dashes of Morse code. Despite this development in radio occurring during World War I, the radio hadn’t been used for propaganda at this time. Therefore the Germans really pioneered this use of the technology, paving the way for other countries to use radio later in the century. A prime example of this would be the utility radio, created by the British as a response to the German Volksempfänger – the peoples Receiver. However this utility radio was only released in 1944, with much of the war already finished, so its effect was limited.

The people’s receiver was a German initiative headed by Goebbels himself, with Otto Griessing being the chief engineer behind the program. The receiver came in two models – The VE301, which was a very affordable 76 Reichsmark (2 weeks wages), and a cheaper model known as the DKE38 that was sold for just 35 Reichsmark. It was this principle of affordability that was the main goal of Goebbels. The radios were installed in factories, cafes and bars, as the target audience of Goebbels were the workers and soldiers of Germany, the lower and middle classes. Loud speakers were also installed on street corners that blared important Nazi messages to passers by. The result of these cheap radios was that by 1939, 70% of German homes had a radio. But, more importantly, these people would be excited to hear a broadcast, as the novelty of having a radio was still very fresh.

The very fact that the broadcasting was live is something that other types of propaganda, such as print or film could not replicate. These forms of propaganda were obviously pre-produced before distribution, so they could often be out-dated by the time they reached the masses due to the nature of the war. These propagandist messages were interwoven between carefully selected nationalistic music, which served to boost moral, much like modern advertising played on radios today is interwoven between pop music. Obviously, the ‘news’ they received during these gaps in music was not the whole truth – only positive news was reported, and straight out lies especially towards the end of the war. It is said that Germany reported they were winning the war, right up until they lost.

Yet another ‘feature’ of the radios is that they were specifically designed only to pick up stations being transmitted within Germany. Their antennas were purposely made small in order to prevent the German people reaching foreign stations who might have been transmitting either the truth about the war, or their own propaganda. This could be bypassed by use of a cheap external antenna, however once the war started listening to foreign stations became illegal. Over the course of the war, punishments for breaking this law ranged from fines, confiscation and even being sent to concentration camps or death towards the end of the war. Furthermore, there was some attempt at crude radio jamming in order to further prevent listening. This manipulation of the media

Germany also took advantage of long-range broadcasting. When they occupied foreign territory they would overrun local stations and report their own news, both in German and whatever language said territory spoke. They employed British nationals at a station based in Hamburg that aimed to broadcast over the channel into Britain via medium wave radio to demoralized allied troops. This program began on the 18th of September 1939 and continued until 30th April 1945.

These broadcasters obtained the name Lord Haw-Haw due to the upper class pronunciation of the programs name, “Germany calling” (pronounced Jairmany Cawling). Their station featured a mixture of propaganda expressed through catchy jazz tunes (A type of music despised by the Germans but loved by the British) and false or exaggerated reports of allied casualties. The Jazz music was particularly effective, as I found when listening to an example on YouTube, it was rather easy to get the messages stuck in my head. Not only this, but at the time radio technology was very new, and the speakers were low quality by today’s standards. This often led to confusion in the British Isles, as it was hard to distinguish between their own stations and the stations spreading German propaganda due to low audio quality. Compared with the other belligerents in the war, Germany was the nation that by far took the most advantage of this downside in broadcasting audio.

To summarise the effectiveness of the Nazis development of propaganda, and in particular the radios they built, I will end with this statement by Albert Speers. Speers was Reichsminister for armaments and war production and said this at the Nuremburg trials after the war: “Hitler's dictatorship differed in one fundamental point from all its predecessors in history. His was the first dictatorship [...] which made the complete use of all technical means for domination of its own country. Through technical devices like the radio and loudspeaker, 80 million people were deprived of independent thought. It was thereby possible to subject them to the will of one man.” It is this deprivation of independent thought that Orwell’s 1984 serves to warn us of to prevent another dictatorship as ruthlessly efficient as Nazi Germany from occurring ever again.

By Matt McConway