Propaganda and the Holocaust

Purpose:
Students will investigate the role of propaganda and the media in shaping attitudes of the public in fostering anti-semitism.

Background Information

Propaganda and the Visual Arts in the Third Reich

Propaganda is information designed to promote and shape the opinions and behavior of mass audiences. Nazi propaganda is often associated with Hitler's speeches and with well-known Nazi films such as Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will (1934). However, propaganda can take many forms. Nazi officials used art, sculpture and visual mass media to sell ideas, control information, and shape public opinion.

Images carry enormous impact and are particularly effective tools of propaganda because they

- *stand out from the printed page and attract attention;*
- *communicate information quickly;*
- *are memorable;*
- *appeal to our emotions;*
- *can be reproduced easily and circulated widely in mass media.*

Hitler understood the power and appeal of art as a kind of propagandistic "short-cut." In Mein Kampf, he declared: "Propaganda is a truly terrible weapon in the hands of an expert... All propaganda must be popular and its intellectual level must be adjusted to the most limited intelligence among those it is addressed to." Like the cartoon by Garvens, images can synthesize complex, highly abstract ideas and make them more specific and concrete.

[Philipp Rupprecht – alias "Fips "- in Julius Streicher's Der Stürmer, December 1929.]

Cartoons were an important vehicle for Nazi propaganda. Portraying the world as divided between pure and impure, the perfect and the degraded, they circulated symbols and stereotypes of difference. Garvens' cartoon juxtaposes the impure, distorted Jewish body of the modern, "degenerate" artist with the pure, healthy Aryan physique of Hitler's sculpture which exemplifies the Nazi concept of the "New Man." Deployed *extensively, Nazi visual propaganda played a key role in shaping the mindset which made the* Holocaust possible: promoting national pride and solidarity but also playing on and fostering *deep feelings of anti-semitism.*

[Germany, Side-by-side Profiles of a Stereotyped Jew and an Aryan Woman (YVA, 1652/15).]

Nazi policy makers perceived art to be one of the most important elements in building the Third Reich. The government placed high social value on the visual arts in all their forms: they were promoted by the state and disseminated widely in leaflets and books, through postcards and stamps. They held a prominent place in public ceremony. As Hitler declared at the opening of the House of German Art in the summer of 1937: "we were the ones who created this state and have since then provided vast sums for the encouragement of art. We have given art great new tasks." Nazi ideology made the aesthetic enterprise the heart of the dream of creating a more beautiful, purified, hygienic world.

Control of the arts was central to Nazi totalitarian rule. In 1933, as soon as the Nazis came to power, Hitler established a ministry of propaganda under the direction of Joseph Goebbels. As Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, Goebbels began the "synchronization" (Gleichschaltung) of culture, bringing all the arts in line with Nazi goals. Under his control, the Reich Chamber of Culture monitored all aspects of German culture - the press, education, music, film, theater and the visual arts. To ensure racial homogeneity and ideological conformity, membership was required of all professionals in the arts. The Nazis did not allow any independent organizations.

[Munich, Germany, A crowd at the entrance to an exhibit entitled, Degenerate Art, 1937. Yad Vashem Photo Archive.]

The National Socialists rejected and attacked just about everything that had existed on the art scene before 1933 (as a means of discrediting the culture of the Weimar Republic). Identified with internationalism and progressive politics, the Nazi regime criticized modern art as intellectual and elitist, foreign and Jewish, and symbolic of the forces which had humiliated Germany. Jewish, foreign and modern artists were labelled "degenerates." The government put them on black lists and branded them enemies of the state; they were considered a threat to the health of the German nation. The government began systematic and institutionalized attacks on modern art. Within the first year, the government banned a large number of artists from working; *they dismissed professors from their University posts; they censored or fired art critics; Party members replaced museum directors and curators. The Nazi government closed the modern wing of the National Gallery in Berlin and the Bauhaus. On May 10, 1933, members of the National Socialist German Students' Association organized nationwide book burning ceremonies in which they burned the works of "un-German" and Jewish writers. Artists suffered persecution, exile, incarceration and even death because of the content or style of their work, their political beliefs or religious affiliation.*

[The House of German Art. Munich, Germany. Yad Vashem, Photo Archive]

In the summer of 1937, Goebbels issued a decree that allowed the government to confiscate over 16,000 works of art from over 32 German museums and public collections. Six hundred and fifty of these (by 112 artists) were earmarked for a special state-sponsored, "educational" exhibition entitled Entartete Kunst. Opening in the Hofgarten arcades of Munich's Residenz on July 18, 1937, the exhibition traveled to eleven sites throughout Germany and Austria over a four year period and was seen by a record-breaking 3 million viewers. The goal of the blockbuster exhibition was to increase public revulsion for modern art and to enlist the public in the campaign to purify German culture from contaminating influences.

[Hitler visiting at the exhibition of German art, 16/7/1939. Yad Vashem, Photo Archive]

Strategically, the Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung (The Great German Art Exhibition) opened the day before and across the street from the Degenerate Art Exhibition and functioned as its counter-image. Mounted in the recently completed Haus der deutschen Kunst (House of German Art), it was the first of eight annual exhibitions which showcased what the Third Reich regarded as Germany's finest art. A monumental, colonnaded, neo-classical building, the House of German Art was the first significant building commissioned by the new Nazi regime. At the groundbreaking ceremony in October 1933, Hitler declared it a "temple [to] house a new German art." For three days preceding the opening of the annual exhibition of the Great German Art Exhibition, Munich, draped in banners and flags, celebrated German Art Day with extravagant choreographed pageantry. The state spared no expense for these spectacular ceremonies. Consisting of monumental, gilded paper-mache heads of *classical statuary, costumed Rhine maidens and warriors of the Teutoburg forest, the parade--which culminated in a finale of thousands of marching soldiers—proclaimed "Two Thousand Years of German Culture."*

From: Propaganda and the Visual Arts in the Third Reich, Yad Vashem

Resources:
Propaganda and the Visual Arts in the Third Reich, Yad Vashem
Excerpts of German Youth Interviews in the 1930's(Facing History)
Confessions of a Hitler Youth(abbreviated version)
Teaching the Holocaust Using Photographs
German Propaganda Archive(Calvin College)
Nazi Propaganda: Stanford History Education Group
Google Slide Show Propaganda
History Unfolded

Classroom Setup: Student journals, chromebooks or laptops, access to internet, poster paper for brainstorming.

Part I
Have students in groups define propaganda and give examples. Include why images are such an important part of propaganda. Then have groups share with the class. Have the class come to some consensus on the definition.

Activity
Part I
Students in groups will choose **two images** from the *German Propaganda Archive* (there are numerous images here-you may want to narrow some of these by category). In addition, each group will choose one of the examples from the *Google Slideshow* about Anti-semitic propaganda in Germany and in the US.

Students will analyze each of their images for characteristics of propaganda. Does this piece of art have the ability to:
- shape public opinion
- stand out from the printed page and attract attention;
- communicate information quickly;
- be memorable;
- appeal to our emotions;
- be reproduced easily and circulated widely in mass media.

Share images and conclusions with the class.

Part II
Students will chart their observations and conclusions about the use of propaganda in Germany in fostering anti-semitism by gathering information from three sources:

- view about 10 minutes of the four hour documentary Confessions of a Hitler Youth.
- read the excerpts from the Facing History article: German Youth Interviews.
- View the short video from Yad Vashem about using photography to learn about the Holocaust.

Characteristics of this form of propaganda?	How does this shape opinion?	Is this effective? Why or why not?
"Hitler Youth" video		
German Youth Interviews		
Photography		

- How does propaganda work to both build and undermine our understanding of our common humanity?

- Are youth more susceptible to propaganda than adults?

- How can propaganda both humanize and dehumanize?

Assessment:

- Hitler wrote, "If you tell a lie big enough and long enough, people will believe you." How did he apply that principle to the propaganda viewed in this lesson?
- What examples are there today about the use of propaganda to undermine human rights?

Civic Engagement

- What are the stories of the Holocaust that have not been told? Are there more stories to tell? More information to share with the public? Could these stories challenge our assumptions about what America knew about the Holocaust? Could these stories help us to affirm the humanity of others? How did your hometown cover these events?

Students will become citizen journalists and participate in *History Unfolded: US Newspapers and the Holocaust.* Students will research local newspapers for coverage of the Holocaust and then archive this research at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. This lesson takes 2-3 class periods.

Students must first create an account and then the class can work as a group or students can work individually to research events in the 30's and 40's relating to the Holocaust. Lesson plans, student packets and an overview of the press coverage in the US during WWII can be found here.

Additional civic engagement opportunities:

- Students hold a forum of local journalists (print, TV or online) to discuss the following:
    - How do you tell a story that gets people to care about an issue?
    - How can words and images be used to inspire people to take action to help others?
    - How can news media be used as a tool for civic participation and social action?
    - What are the challenges of using images and film in advocacy?
    - Why is it important to have a variety of sources to tell a story?
    - How can citizens get involved in telling and remembering stories?
    - Do you think readers and viewers prefer stories that reinforce people's humanity or stories that tell the story of inhumanity to others?