

# Comparative Study on the Self-identity Construction of Ordinary Soldiers in Nazi German and America Impacted by the War-time Propaganda

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## Abstract

The relationship between the propaganda and war-time psychology, and its impact on the war has always been an important topic in conducting the historical researches. But few studies focused on the geographical dimension of soldiers in different nations. This paper did a comparative study on the psychological state for the ordinary war-time soldiers in US and Nazi in the second world war, focusing on how they are influenced by the war-time propaganda. Through the study a certain conclusion can be made that an obvious resemblance shared by soldiers from Nazi German and America on its self-identity construction. They both influenced by the propaganda and has the collectivism and patriotism, which can be explained by the similar external environment to which they were exposed.

## Keywords

War-time propaganda, self-identity construction, Nazi German, America.

## 1. Introduction

Every individual is related to collective, and the nature of that relationship is central to the identity construction. This is especially significant in wartime when modern warfare requires individuals to abandon their individuality in the name of collective sacrifice—and perhaps demands individuals to give up their very lives in service of the collective. Few studies focused on how these propaganda and psychological state differ in different armies and how much does national culture matter in this issue. By doing a comparative study of soldiers in the armies of Nazi Germany (supposedly collectivist) and the United States (supposedly individualist), this essay will attempt to answer the question “Do German soldiers more impacted by the war-time propaganda?” and “What is the possible objective reason that leads to this result?”

## 2. On the Nature of the Propaganda

Propaganda, in its most vital core, is the information used mainly to influence its targets in order to reach a specific aim. In achieving its goal, it may not be objective or reasonable, and it may be displaying the fact partially and mendaciously. Propaganda is largely used by governments for their political purpose. It is especially inevitable in war-time. By dehumanizing and creating hatred towards a supposed enemy, propaganda is used by governments to make influences on citizens and soldiers, which is a powerful weapon in war. The collectivity, with its realization of nationality, is highly emphasized and praised. “The major goal of war propaganda,” according to the historian Maureen Honery, “was to discourage individualistic, self-interested attitudes in order to produce a collective spirit of self-sacrifice on the home front.” [1] (Honery, 6) As we will see, the same is true with propaganda to the soldiers: its purpose is to raise the collectivity of the soldiers in order to fight and sacrifice for the country.

### 3. Soldiers of Nazi Germany

Propaganda, with its forms of public speech and advertisement, was ubiquitous in Nazi Germany. It also made an evident impact on the society and even the social convention. On the contrary to our usual perception, although under this ubiquitous and influential propaganda, the individuality of the soldiers was still retained.

The war-time propaganda in Nazi Germany, with its agitative content, powerful emotion, and crafty diction, is rather persuasive in itself. E.K. Bramsted concluded that propaganda for the Nazis "had not a specific, but a total validity." [2] (Bramsted, 454) Take the public speech of Joseph Goebbels on February 18, 1943, towards the citizens of Berlin as an example, in which Goebbels wanted his speech to build national fanaticism towards the war after their failure in the Battle of the Stalingrad, and also to gain greater power in charging the economy during the wartime.

Through a close reading of Goebbels's speech, we can see what effects the Nazis hoped their propaganda would have. We can distinguish three major aims.

#### (1) Emphasizing the German nationality

"The future of Europe hangs on our success in the East. We are ready to defend it. The German people are shedding their most valuable national blood in this battle." [3] (Bytwerk, 20)

As one of the founding theories of the Nazism, social Darwinism provides a scientific-like theory in explaining the superiority of the German nation. In constructing the collectivity, the superiority of German's nationality is emphasized in the speech. It also attaches German's resisting against the Soviet Union to the future of Europe, which proves the superiority of the German nation. By emphasizing the nationality, it persuaded people in believing the rationality and validity of this war, by which the collectivity is constructed.

#### (2) Imbuing the hatred towards the target enemy.

"The goal of Bolshevism is Jewish world revolution. They want to bring chaos to the Reich and Europe, using the resulting hopelessness and desperation to establish their international, Bolshevist-concealed capitalist tyranny." [3] (Bytwerk, 10)

By defaming the enemy of the war and terrifying description of the goal of Soviet Union, it stirred the fury of the public by twisting the truth and making the people portraying a negative image of its enemy. Moreover, by relating the Soviet Union with Jewish people, it combines this speech with the propaganda towards the Jews in the massacre. By portraying a mutual enemy hated by all the citizens and the soldiers, the collectivity is constructed.

#### (3) Construct the personality cult of Hitler

"Is your confidence in the Führer greater, more faithful and more unshakable than ever before? Are you absolutely and completely ready to follow him wherever he goes and do all that is necessary to bring the war to a victorious end? (The crowd rises as one man. It displays unprecedented enthusiasm. Thousands of voices join in shouting: 'Führer command, we follow!' A wave of shouts of Heil flows through the hall. As if by command, the flags and standards are raised as the highest expression of the sacred moment in which the crowd honours the Führer.)" [3] (Bytwerk, 41)

By constructing the personality cult of Hitler, he was justifying and sanctifying all the deeds and decisions of the government, including the war. With the collective frenzied emotion, it deprived people's individuality of freedom to speak and the capability of critical thinking. With a mutual model, the collectivity is constructed and strengthened.

"This type of propaganda was widely consumed by soldiers at the front. The study made by Benjamin Barber IV and Charles Miller can be served as the illustration, in which they studied the impact of the radio broadcast on the front and the soldiers' performance. The fact that the radio was acting as the primary medium in broadcasting and communicating the public

speeches by Hitler and other officers towards the front is reflected in the paper. The interviewer Goebbels made a description on the scene of soldiers listening to the radio as “hundreds of thousands will decide to follow Hitler, and fight in his spirit for the revival of the nation.” [4] (Barber&Miller, 485)

Though under the extremely strong influence of the propaganda emphasizing the collectivity for the soldiers in Nazi German, it is never our traditional perception that soldiers are entirely manipulated by the propaganda that their individuality is obliterated. On the country, it can be illustrated by the personal diaries and letters that the individuality for the German soldier s still retains and plays a significant part in the construction of the self-identity, with its realization of criticizing the rationality of the war and the mass killing.

Consider this letter from Major General Hellmuth Stieff to his wife. provides evidence of the soldier’s rethinking the act of war.

“It is a city and a population that is doomed. The situation is so horrific that one cannot enjoy SO much as a moment of life spent in this city where one does not move with a sense of victory but rather with the burden of guilt! And I'm not the only one who feels this way- -the men forced to live there feel the same...You can no longer speak in terms of ‘righteous indignation over crimes against ethnic Germans.’ This extirpation of entire lineages [Geschlechter], including women and children, can be committed only by a subhuman breed of humans that is not worthy of being called ‘German.’ I am ashamed to be a German!” [5] (Rabinbach, Anson, & Gilman, 57)

Since this is a letter he wrote to his wife, it is highly possible that it is a true reflection of his emotion and thought of the war. In this letter, it is clear that his individuality is apparent, with the realization of criticizing the act of war and killing. He felt guilty of destroying the city and killed the citizens there. Moreover, the German nationality, what a person who is under the dominance of the enthusiastic collectivity would be proud of, disgusts him. The war environment is deconstructing the value system influenced by the propaganda. It can illustrate the fact that the individuality is still retained for the soldiers.

A similar circumstance can be detected by the soldiers who are in charge of the massacre. According to *Ordinary Men* by Christopher R. Browning, the reaction of the Nazi policeman Trapp (pseudonym) after the mass killing was documented as follows:

Indeed, Trapp's distress was a secret to no one. At the marketplace, one policeman remembered hearing Trapp say: ‘Oh, God, why did I have to be given these orders,’ as he put his hand on his heart....He said something like, ‘Man, . . . such jobs don't suit me. But orders are orders...He then began turn around again and wept like a child.’ [6] (Browning, 32)

Instead of being an emotionless killing machine, Trapp felt sorrow and pain. While criticizing the justices of the massacre, he still followed the order. Trapp’s reaction after executing the Jewish people for a day can be a vivid example of the struggle of the collectivity, inspired by the propaganda and the prerequisite of his career, and the individuality, inspired by nature and the anti-humanitarian condition. From this example, it is clearly illustrated that the individuality still retained for the ordinary soldiers in Nazi German.

#### 4. American Soldiers

It is our universal perception that America, with its pedagogic tradition, ideological cultivation, and cultural tradition based on the Enlightenment, did not have the ubiquitous and influential propaganda as German, and its soldiers are not as impacted and influenced by propaganda as its German counterpart. However, collectivity and patriotism influenced by the propaganda played a significant part in the perception of the self-identity for soldiers in America.

According to *War Without Mercy*, written by John Dower, the poster propaganda was actually quite similar in Japan and the United States. American posters, as in this example, frequently portrayed the Japanese as subhuman barbarians.



**Figure 1.** An American war-time poster [7]

The United States, too, had a propaganda office known as the Office of War Information, and historians argue that it was quite similar to its counterparts in Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany. [8] From the appreciation made in *War Without Mercy*, the poster in America is even more biased and mendacious. Consider the illustration of the poster above, which was released in America in the war-time. [9] The strategy of dehumanizing and creating negative images for the target enemy can be detected in the poster. By publishing this poster, the government encouraged people to practice thrift, which raises the collectivity by advocating the collective obligation for the American citizens as a nation. It shares great similarity to Nazi propaganda.

It is thus obvious that different from the traditional perception that Allies countries like American did not have the propaganda as effective as its German counterparts, propaganda in American is also ubiquitous and influential. If we look at a soldier's diary from the American side, we can see a desire to sacrifice the individual in the name of the collectivity. Bruce Bliven, Jr. published an excerpt from his diary in *The New Republic* in 1944, and in it, he is explicit about this:

"So instead of 'automatically,' I'd use 'deliberately'; and in place of "our boys" put 'our armies.' The real object for astonished surprise is that in a remarkably short time we have turned out armies good enough to win, armies made up of well-trained soldiers, led by capable officers, furnished with superior equipment and supported by an air force of overwhelming power. And this is far more remarkable, if less romantic, than the idea that American boys have a trace of Paul Bunyan's blood in their veins." [10] (Bliven)

This diary written by an ordinary American soldier can illustrate the fact that the patriotism and the collectivism as a nation plays an important part in the mentality. The collectivity also exists in soldiers in America.

## 5. Conclusion

It is the traditional perspective that it is hardly possible for soldiers in Nazi German to retain their free will due to the ubiquitous propaganda, whereas soldiers in American were under a limited influence from it, for the individuality is highly emphasized by the pedagogic inclination, ideological cultivation, and the cultural tradition based on the Enlightenment. However, It is

clearly reflected and concluded from the comparative study above that there is an obvious resemblance shared by soldiers from Nazi German and America on its self-identity construction. They both influenced by the propaganda and has the collectivism and patriotism. Consider the objective circumstance of the impact of the most extreme environment of the war, it is natural for soldiers tending to act and think under the dominance of individuality and nature. The extreme environment of war is the reason why the resemblance exists in these two different countries.

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