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# Propaganda and the 21st Century Student

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**Abstract**

This short piece provides a way of thinking about the Enlightenment's legacy and the strength of modern propaganda in order to enable world history teachers to use these themes in their classes, both for teaching history and for helping students to reflect on their own lives. The authors provide background on the ideas of 1930s critical theorists and their impact on the interwar period, then suggest practical ways that world history instructors (in high schools and universities) can use these insights in developing lectures, lesson plans, and assignments for their classrooms.

**Key Words**

propaganda, Enlightenment, Frankfurt School, cultural studies, media, interwar Germany

**Propaganda and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Student**  
**By Miguel Martinez-Saenz and Tammy M. Proctor**

In a recent special issue of the *American Historical Review* (December 2010), several authors look anew at the role of the Enlightenment in fostering contemporary debate among scholars and in history classrooms. As Karen O'Brien argues in her commentary on the issue, "the twenty-first century finds the Enlightenment in robust health . . . despite a phase of devastating postwar and postmodern critique."<sup>1</sup> O'Brien's point, namely that the Enlightenment is still with us, as both ideal and reality, echoes the central question of this article: how might we approach the legacy of the Enlightenment in a world history classroom, when it seems that the contemporary world is more a product of propaganda than rationality?

Our readers might recall that in 2004 American funny man Jon Stewart's appearance on CNN's now defunct "debate show" *CrossFire* illustrated poignantly the implications of making television programming exclusively a profit-driven enterprise that abandons almost completely the need to enable viewers to develop their dispositions in such a way that they might value rigorous assessment and reassessment of belief over and above simplistic entertainment especially when it comes to considering world events. Hosted by James Carville and Paul Begala "for the left" and Tucker Carlson and Robert Novak "for the right," *CrossFire* was billed as a current events debate

show that would challenge the views of liberals and conservatives alike. In place of his regular waggish shtick, Stewart posed a serious challenge to Begala and Carlson, claiming that their primetime theatrics had nothing to do with debate and were in fact detrimental to American political life. The segment's outcome was a no holds barred assault, with Stewart labeling both hosts as "partisan hacks" who earned their pay as mere lackeys of the dominant political parties. Stewart's central claim that "knee jerk, reactionary talk" should be distinguished from argumentative conversation recalls other comedic routines such as Monty Python's "The Argument Clinic." This skit makes plain a lesson that contemporary political commentators would do well to learn, namely, that argument is not simply the "automatic gainsaying of any statement the other person makes." Similarly, Stewart's criticism can be construed as a reminder that taking a contrary position, namely, reflexively opposing what your interlocutor says, is neither "honest debate" nor a useful model for responsible political exchange.

But, not incidentally, a de facto shift of position is not sufficient to demonstrate the sort of openness to learning we are promoting. For even the acquiescent first-year college student who is willing to adopt without much consideration the beliefs of his current professors is demonstrating a willingness to shift positions. In other words, if students are unable to understand the issue fully and have not developed both the ability and the disposition to question their beliefs and the background that holds their beliefs together, it is unlikely that they can make an "informed" decision regarding whether they ought to adopt a proposed belief. Such capricious ignorance is no more desirable from the perspective of conversation than Rush Limbaugh's obdurate insistence that he is always right. What is common to both Limbaugh and the naïve college student is that neither engages fully in the task of assessing whether there is good reason to adopt alternative views.

Keep in mind, what passes as argument on news media outlets hardly resembles the sort of dialogue that might help to increase awareness of our myriad contemporary challenges and their possible solutions. More often than not the growing fusion of politics and entertainment appears calculated to promote mindless affirmation of personal ideology at the expense of mutually beneficial conversation. So, Sean Hannity or Keith Olbermann, for example, are not in the business of cultivating the dispositions that will make them or their viewers more willing and more likely to engage others in constructive debate, debate that might result in someone believing that they have got “it” wrong. The result for the featured pundits and a growing segment of the American population, then, is a stubborn narrow-mindedness that obscures the fallibility of our beliefs and downplays the potential intellectual contributions of those with whom we interact.

That said what we experience in our classrooms tends to mirror the extreme polarization of the political realm in the twenty-first century United States where students often struggle to move beyond emotion to a rational analysis of history. Beginning their papers with “I feel,” for example, university students in their first-year history surveys often betray their inability to sort argument from opinion challenging instructors at a fundamental level. With the onslaught of data through the web sources that are instantly available and the “truthiness” of much media coverage, students and teachers alike struggle to make meaning and to use history as a lens for understanding the modern world.

Despite what sometimes appears to be the failure of Enlightenment rationality, we want to use the example of 1930s Germany to offer ideas about how to conceptualize the teaching of world history. Our ideas are tentative ones, developed as a result of a team-taught course and several team-teaching projects in each of our fields: philosophy and history. What we are suggesting is that world history teachers can use both the historical study of the Enlightenment and a theme of propaganda to help stimulate critical thinking among students in survey courses. One of world

history teachers' main goals is to challenge students to hear and recognize alternative voices and narratives in history and to embrace the multiplicities of human experience. World history texts and classrooms, furthermore, are ideal spaces for grappling with the complexity of the world around us. What we propose is a way of thinking about the Enlightenment's legacy and the strength of modern propaganda that enables world history teachers to use these themes in their classes, both for teaching history and for enabling students to reflect on their own lives. In the next few pages, we provide background on the ideas of 1930s critical theorists and their impact on the interwar period, then suggest practical ways that world history instructors (in high schools and universities) can use these insights in developing lectures, lesson plans, and assignments for their classrooms.

German critical theorists who lived in the early part of the twentieth century experienced historical conditions that shaped both their philosophical attitudes and their interests. In 1923, the same year that the Institute for Social Research emerged in Frankfurt as a new model for cultural critique and critical theory, the Weimar Republic was struggling to overcome a hyperinflation, renegotiating its war debt, and jailing a group of upstarts who staged a putsch in a Munich Beer Hall. Only four years earlier, Germany had emerged from a world war and proletarian revolution much reduced in political power. Just as Germany had been scarred and inspired by the experiences of war and revolution, a young generation of intellectuals had emerged from the same crucible. This mostly male, Jewish, bourgeois group was composed of young (between 20 and 30 years of age) war veterans.<sup>2</sup> As Marxists, this group felt stranded between the increasingly hard-line Bolshevik model and the moderate socialism of Weimar.<sup>3</sup> While their project matured, the Weimar state imploded before their eyes in 1933 with Hitler's rise to power. By the 1940s, the Institute in exile at Columbia University in New York had identified the need to combat not only the constraining elements they saw as inherent in capitalist culture and in the project of the Enlightenment, but more importantly

perhaps, they found it necessary to demonstrate why capitalist culture led inevitably to a Totalitarian State.<sup>4</sup>

A result of these historical changes is the development of the aims, goals, and central project of the early critical theorists of the Frankfurt School.<sup>5</sup> The Frankfurt School philosophers were not the first to use cultural criticism as a way of examining the ills of capitalist industrial society. Armed with the Marxist categories of class, exploitation, surplus value and profit, cultural critics of the twentieth century have waged campaigns against politicians and demagogues who have purported to create structures and institutions that promote the general good. These Marxist elements regarding ideology critique and emancipation provided the basis for the philosophy of the most influential thinkers of the Frankfurt School: Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. As Albert Wellmer points out, “Both Marx and Critical Theory tried to analyze modern societies in the light of a normatively grounded idea of emancipated society.”<sup>6</sup> Like the Annales school emerging in France during the same period, Frankfurt School thinkers addressed a synthesis between social theory and social philosophy. To critique the dominant ideology of a totalizing society in the wake of the centralization of World War I, they believed one must embrace a “total” critique of a culture.

Critical theorists also recognized the importance of understanding history from the purview of human activity and as a product of the human agent. One of the governing assumptions of the critical theorists is that individual freedom implies political self-determination. In other words, from the claim that human beings are free it follows that they should have the right to direct the course of their lives. There is a need, as a consequence, to provide a critique that unmask the underlying structures and institutions that are hindering the emancipation of human beings. For social critics, then, dismantling the ideology embedded in “existing culture” was necessary if human beings were truly to be emancipated. Horkheimer explains,

If...the theoretician and his specific object are seen as forming a dynamic unity with the oppressed class, so that his presentation of societal contradictions is not merely an

expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change, then his real function emerges.<sup>7</sup>

What the critical theorists were trying desperately to promote was a critical self-awareness that enabled people to recognize those antagonistic elements in the social, political, and cultural institutions and the rationalization processes that give them pseudo-normative force.

Horkheimer and Adorno's insistence on the necessity of critical self-awareness reflects a profound disappointment with the failure of Enlightenment promises of progress in the face of National Socialist ideology. In an odd juxtaposition, the Frankfurt theorists diagnose a sick and somnolent society in need of awakening, just as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels are promoting the same notion, but to different ends. Horkheimer and Adorno identified a "culture industry" that robs citizens of imagination, will and freedom, reducing humans to consumption-craving automatons. The culprits in creating this situation were the unholy trinity of scientists, capitalists and liberals, all of whom failed humanity with their limited imagination and lack of reflection. Yet for Hitler, the "culture industry" represents an opportunity for the clever politician. The endless repetition and mechanical reproduction of mass culture that Horkheimer and Adorno decry as soul-stealing provides the answer for Hitler to the decadence and weakness of the liberal Weimer state. Hitler laid bare this promise in *Mein Kampf*:

Like the woman whose psychic state is determined less by grounds of abstract reason than by an indefinable emotional longing for a force that will complement her nature . . . the masses love a commander more than a petitioner and feel inwardly more satisfied by a doctrine, tolerating no other beside itself, than by the granting of liberalistic freedom with which, as a rule, they can do little, and are prone to feel that they have been abandoned. They are equally unaware of their shameless spiritual terrorization and the hideous abuse of their human freedom, for they absolutely fail to suspect the inner insanity of the whole doctrine."<sup>8</sup>

In the name of freedom, then, Hitler began establishing constraints by the 1930s, namely rules and the reinforcement of norms that were conducive to the impoverishment of the masses.

Detlev Peukert pointed out that Hitler's extraordinary appointment as Chancellor on January

30, 1933, came without an electoral majority or a clear political platform. Peukert also found Hitler's rise to power impossible without the support of "old power elites in business, public administration and the military" who saw the Nazi party as a "respectable alliance partner" who could be easily manipulated and controlled.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, perhaps, Peukert's insight was that the new Nazi state incorporated both the old power elites (especially in the army) and the new Nazi techniques of political mobilization. The scientific *Gleichschaltung*, or coordination of all aspects of German society and state, that solidified by the end of 1934 sealed the deal. Opposition political parties were eliminated, the state bureaucracy was centralized, industry and army were brought under Nazi control, and a massive network of state-sponsored propaganda and cultural events was created.

Historian Modris Eksteins comments on the success of this project:

Without the emphasis on technique, Hitler's rise to power is inconceivable. The devotion to enhancing the appeal of ritual, the obsession with propaganda, and the interest in technology and in the applications, as opposed to the substance, of science, all fitted under this rubric of technicism . . . Propaganda was to Hitler not just a necessary evil, a question of justifiable lies, of warranted exaggeration. Propaganda was to him an art.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly, Klaus Mann's description of the horrifying success of the strategy in his 1936 novel *Mephisto* bears recalling:

The whole country was transformed into an armed camp; the armaments industry flourished; there was a permanent state of mobilization, and the foreigner gazed spellbound at this imposing, terrifying spectacle, like a rabbit at the snake that is just about to swallow it. Life was fun under the dictatorship . . . but nothing could be heard above the din blasting forth from megaphones and microphones.<sup>11</sup>

Just five years later this integrated Nazi nation was at war with Europe, and dissent seemed to be strangely absent. How had it happened?

Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin and other Frankfurt thinkers made it their mission to identify the "false consciousness" that had invaded contemporary culture. Horkheimer, in what is one of his more biting and insightful criticism regarding justifications based on interests and the relegation of reason to instrumental reason, writes,

Having given up autonomy, reason has become an instrument...Its operational value, its role in the domination of men and nature, has been made the sole criterion...Meaning is supplanted by function or effect in the world of things and events...The more the concept of reason becomes emasculated, the more easily it lends itself to ideological manipulation and to propagation of even the most blatant lies...Subjective reason conforms to anything...Deprived of its rational foundation, the democratic principle becomes exclusively dependent upon the so-called interests of the people, and these are functions of blind or all too conscious economic forces...Once the philosophic foundation of democracy has collapsed, the statement that dictatorship is bad is rationally valid only for those who are not its beneficiaries, and there is no theoretical obstacle to the transformation of this statement into its opposite.<sup>12</sup>

As Horkheimer notes, if the ruling class benefits from a dictatorship then it follows that they will rationalize the need for a dictator. For example, when Hitler issued his Decree for the Protection of People and State in February 1933 following the Reichstag fire, he was able to persuade the old political elites to accept the restrictions in the name of “national security.” Article 2 of the decree spells out the executive’s rights, “If in a state the measures necessary for the restoration of public security and order are not taken, the Reich Government may temporarily take over the powers of the highest state authority.”<sup>13</sup> This expansion of state authority was supported by a massive propaganda effort, which made even the persecution of dissidents a reason for a national political rally. As Hitler proclaimed in *Mein Kampf*,

The content of propaganda is not science any more than the object represented in a poster is art. The art of the poster lies in the designer’s ability to attract the attention of the crowd . . . The function of propaganda does not lie in the scientific training of the individual, but in calling the masses attention to certain facts, processes, necessities, etc., whose significance is thus for the first time placed within their field of vision. *The whole art consists in doing this so skillfully that everyone will be convinced that the fact is real, the process necessary, the necessity correct, etc.* (Emphasis added.)<sup>14</sup>

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, importantly, Hannah Arendt recognized that the propaganda Hitler described was accompanied by no noticeable opposition, writing that Eichmann felt himself supported in his actions to exterminate Jews by the silence from eighty million Germans living under Hitler’s dictatorship:

German society . . . had been shielded against reality and factuality by exactly the same

means, the same self-deception, lies, and stupidity that had now become ingrained in Eichmann's mentality. These lies changed from year to year, and they frequently contradicted each other; moreover, they were not necessarily the same for the various branches of the Party hierarchy or the people at large.<sup>15</sup>

One of the fundamental facts of propaganda is that it is not necessary to tell people the same things all the time or even to bother with the truth. What propagandists promote are calculatedly vague nationalist or patriotic calls to arms that are disguised as clear common interests that citizens share.

The Enlightenment, keep in mind, established the notion of common interest as a unifying theme in a nation, with *philosophes* such as Rousseau and Diderot claiming the importance of the general will. Diderot claimed that the general will enlightened "you on the nature of your thoughts and your desires."<sup>16</sup> And, as early as 1920 the National Socialist party program had emphasized the Enlightenment idea of the general good, instructing members that "It must be the first duty of each citizen of the state to work with his mind or with his body. The activities of the individual may not clash with the interests of the whole, but must proceed within the frame of the community and be for the general good."<sup>17</sup> Who determines the general good in a society, however? As Horkheimer pointed out, the general will as a "pure act of understanding" masks the fact that it is not all citizens' interests being promoted.<sup>18</sup> In fact, rather than liberating humanity, reason has been increasingly used to serve only the interests of political elites.<sup>19</sup> Few could have imagined the price to be paid for adopting the values of the Enlightenment tradition.

The Frankfurt School hoped to combat the move toward a meaningless and powerless mass culture by promoting critical rationality and a rejection of instrumental rationality, but can this be successfully implemented?<sup>20</sup> If enlightened revolutionary struggle is the only way to provide a critique of society and the prevailing social conditions that leads to the transformation of society, then why did it fail when espoused by the proponents of liberalism? The idea that knowledge through reason would be able to free or emancipate the individual was at the cornerstone of the Enlightenment notions of human progress. As Marianna Papastephanou points out "the myth of

progress, social order and relevant ideologies are the solace through which, by means of the culture industry, the slumber of the masses is prolonged.”<sup>21</sup> As a consequence, Adorno and Horkheimer are trying desperately to rekindle a tradition that cherishes doubt and criticism by questioning a conception of reason that is being characterized only as instrumental reason. For many people today the freedom to consume equals emancipation. Therefore, when faced with a “paranoid society” and a persuasive national myth, what impact does abstract rational reflection have on the development of morality and conscience?

These insights about the limits of Enlightenment rationality and the uses of propaganda lead us back to the world history classroom. The Frankfurt theorists’ project, namely to cultivate the questioning mind and to stimulate a view of societies and cultures based not merely on instrumental rationality nor on the emotional tugs of modern propaganda, provides a framework for those teaching the modern world. In looking at the Enlightenment’s impact on world history and the various ideologies that it spawned, teachers might want to consider discussing the nature of propaganda and rationality as these notions emerged in the period beginning with the revolutions of the eighteenth century. With this information as a base for further discussion, students may be challenged to trace the ways in which rational bases for action helped establish the modern power dynamics that mark the development of the globe into the twentieth century.

We can see clearly the power of myth and tradition in human lives by the extraordinary success of national myths since the French Revolution. Lynn Hunt’s work demonstrates that when the king was killed in 1793, the sacred center of the nation disappeared. A “new symbolic language fashioned for the newly mobilized masses” had to be constructed, or in other words a revised “master fiction” had to be supplied.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Benedict Anderson sees a celebration of rationality as the symbolic replacement for lost myths, a concept “born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm.”<sup>23</sup>

Reason, then, appears to be just another competing myth. His “imagined communities” of nations have extraordinary power precisely because they perpetuate a mythic faith in unseen connections between people unknown to each other. National myths have power not because they appeal to rational foundations, but precisely because they do not. The Frankfurt thinkers realized this, yet still found themselves impotent in the face of the political revolution of National Socialism.

Enlightenment rationality provides a basis from which to stand and evaluate the world, but a sophisticated understanding of the power of propaganda (and the use of myths) is also essential for understanding global processes. What follows is a short discussion of texts, assignments, and questions that might shape such an approach to the world history classroom.

### **Teaching Propaganda**

In teaching world history from the 1700s to the present, the narrative of the nation-state and its myths takes a central role. Students have ample opportunity in all the major textbooks to consider the origins of nationalism and the ways in which imperialism, industrialization, and national liberation struggles shaped understandings of nationalism. However, these themes are often viewed by students as “givens” because they fit well into the students’ worldview. Industrialization and technology create progress in students’ minds, and their understandings of under-developed regions of the world are coded accordingly. Students view the world in simple terms, and world history often undermines their mental maps of the globe. A basic question of geography – “What is a continent?” often stymies students. When they define a continent as a landmass surrounded by water, the problem of our continental naming becomes immediately apparent. As Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen note, however, this is not just a mere matter of semantics, but we tend “to let a continental framework structure our perceptions of the human community . . . [e]ach continent is accorded its own history, and we locate its essential nature in opposition to that of the other continents.”<sup>24</sup> World history courses often challenge such conceptions, and the thematic approach

we propose here, to make propaganda a central theme of the course, takes the notion of undermining students' solid conceptions of the world to its extreme. We think that historical propaganda can be an exceptional teaching tool in global history courses because students find it interesting and because it does shake the foundation of their certainties.

One of the more useful string of assignments that has worked in our global history courses is one that focuses around propaganda. Essential here is an integration of the arts and visual sources into the classroom. With the availability of YouTube videos, with art databases on all major library websites, and with increasing numbers of full-text works of poetry and prose literature, the internet can be an important tool for teachers who want to bring the arts into their classrooms. Historically, humans turned to the arts for a framework for making decisions and evaluating the impact of their actions. One needs only think of the trench poetry of the First World War to see an example of humans coming to terms with the tragedy in which they are trapped. Most famously, Wilfred Owen reflected on the emptiness of patriotism in the lines:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs . . .  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory  
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.*<sup>25</sup>

Yet art's importance as knowledge is continuously dismissed as relative and non-objective in a world of scientific supremacy. It is relegated to the realm of the passions or the emotions; art can move us, some maintain, but it can never provide us with concrete answers to questions such as "how ought I live?" Using visual sources to engage students and help those with difficulty reading historical documents find another point of connection with the past can prove invaluable.

In an introductory world history course, the propaganda theme begins with the empires of the seventeenth century. Students examine a series of written sources from emperors of the period, but they also "read" portraits of these emperors to see what image they sought to project to their

subjects. Particularly useful for this assignment are the excellent (and quite different) portraits of leaders such as Kangxi (Qing China), Louis XIV (Bourbon France), Tokugawa Ieyasu (Tokugawa Japan) and Peter the Great (Romanov Russia).<sup>26</sup>



Louis XIV<sup>27</sup> (painted 1701) and Kangxi (painted circa 1720)<sup>28</sup>

These portraits provide a starting point for talking about the nature of power and how it is maintained, the problems of imperial rule, and the changes that are coming with the rise of Enlightenment ideas and modern capitalism. A useful text in this regard is Jonathan Spence's *Emperor of China: Self-Portrait of K'ang-Hsi*, which provides an accessible look at the problems of imperial rule and the intellectual ferment of the Qing court.<sup>29</sup>

Once students have looked at some of the political propaganda of empires and have considered the nature of imperial power, it is a natural step to ask them to examine propaganda in the revolutions of the late eighteenth century. For framing this discussion, one piece that works well is a chapter in Merry Wiesner et al., eds., *Discovering the Global Past*, which features portraits of

revolutionary heroes and eulogies about these leaders (George Washington, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Paul Marat, Simon Bolivar).<sup>30</sup>

The class reads and analyzes the documents in the chapter, then as a class, we discuss the portraits and their meaning. Students are reticent about “reading” art in class at first, but they gradually warm up to the idea and enjoy picking out important themes in the art and the speeches. The students make explicit connections to the past by comparing Washington with Louis XIV, for example. We also discuss the need for propaganda when the body-politic is no longer centered around the real body of a ruler.

While examining these Enlightenment revolutionary figures, students make the leap (often unprompted) to the ways in which our leaders present themselves today. We talk about the symbols of the nation, the good and bad propaganda, and the myths that define us. With this basis for thinking about the founding myths of nations, students then proceed to study of the nineteenth-century with an eye for nationalist propaganda in all its forms. The class discusses how manifestoes work in the context of revolutions and liberation struggles, examine the ways riots might affect political decision-making, and look at how imperialists sought to couch their civilizing mission in the language of national progress. In *Discovering the Global Past*, Chapter 9 examines competing notions of progress, and students are able to see the ways in which authors try to sway their audiences through appeals both to emotion and reason.<sup>31</sup> By the time the class has arrived at the twentieth-century, it is a fairly easy step to an assignment on reading modern propaganda.

Students are asked to find and evaluate war posters from both world wars, with an eye to variety of audience, nation, and participant. They write about a series of posters, but each is responsible for presenting one poster to the class for broader comment. This allows for an excellent discussion about why certain posters were chosen, what the posters demonstrate, and how effective each artist's approach might be. Students with foreign language background often bring in posters

from the countries that interest them, then translate the posters for their classmates (from Chinese, Russian, Japanese, German, Spanish or French – the most common foreign languages at my institution). A particularly lively discussion always ensues when more than one student “chose” the same poster to present; we discuss what makes this particular image or message so appealing.



United States' war posters from World War II and I.<sup>32</sup>

This assignment always generates great discussions, especially when paired with a short clip from a Bill Moyers' PBS documentary. In interviews more than three decades after the end of World War II, two leading propagandists discussed for cameras the secrets of their success. For Nazi filmmaker, Fritz Hippler, propaganda had an easy formula: “simplify and repeat.” For his U.S. counterpart, Frank Capra, it was a matter of showing the American public an enemy and highlighting the values of “us” (the ordinary American) versus “them” (the evil elsewhere).<sup>33</sup> After watching this, students often demand to know how the “Nazi” and the American propaganda chiefs can be saying similar things, and they go on to question how propaganda and advertising differ. Once students read a New York Times article from 2002, the debate becomes more intense. The Op-Ed piece by historian Victoria de Grazia examines the Bush administration's hiring of a former J. Walter Thompson advertising agency chairwoman to conduct market research in order to develop

a public relations and branding campaign to manage the U.S.'s reputation in the Middle East. By comparing this contemporary effort with propaganda campaigns in World War I and II, the article asks students to think about who controls the message delivered to “the people” in their own country and abroad.<sup>34</sup> This debate rarely ends with this class session, and especially once the class examines Cold War propaganda and texts from contemporary religious fundamentalists (Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Hindu), the central questions of propaganda and truth become defining themes of the course.<sup>35</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In interviews for the documentary, *Weapons of the Spirit*, we see an example of how visual sources might create debate about the nature of historical action. French villagers in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon looked puzzled when asked for the reason why they risked their lives to save five thousand Jews they didn't even know. As rescuer Marguerite Roussel said, “We never analyzed what we were doing. It happened by itself.” Another, Georgette Barraud, simply stated that “it happened so naturally, we can't understand the fuss.” One official summed up the town's actions by saying, “It was the human thing to do.”<sup>36</sup> For these rescuers, reason offered them little in the way of justification for action, but neither did they rely on any nationalist propaganda. In fact, if anything, Christian faith and communal ties were more decisive factors, suggesting that appeals to rationality are not necessarily “better” motivators than appeals to myths.

The 1930s and 1940s demonstrated that it was all too easy for a political movement to silence oppositional voices, identify and eliminate an internal enemy, and to build a near-totalitarian state. This era also showed the inadequacy of the “enlightened” intelligentsia's response to the crisis, highlighting the problem of audience. Where Hitler made his pleas to mass audiences in a highly-orchestrated theatrical spectacle, the opposition watched their newspapers and journals being smashed. Even the exiles who made it a life's work to oppose the intolerance and injustice of the

Nazi program, failed to adopt effective means of disseminating their message and to attract popular support. After all, how many people today would or could read the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*?

Bertolt Brecht reminded us in 1934, “propaganda that stimulates thinking, no matter what field, is useful to the cause of the oppressed. Such propaganda is very much needed. Under governments which serve to promote exploitation, thought is considered base.”<sup>37</sup> For Brecht, the courage to tell the truth is only part of the answer; people must discover the cunning to spread the truth effectively among the many. World history courses can equip students with the tools to recognize propaganda and its power, thereby better understanding the history of the modern world and negotiating the contemporary society in which they live.

#### ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Karen O'Brien, “The Return of the Enlightenment,” *American Historical Review* 115: 5 (December 2010), 1426.
- <sup>2</sup> Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of Modern Age* (New York: Anchor, 1989), argues that World War I created the modern world, and of the war generation, he writes, “As the war called into question the rational connections of the prewar world – the nexus, that is, of cause and effect – the meaning of civilization as tangible achievement was assaulted, as was the nineteenth-century view that all history represented progress” (p. 211).
- <sup>3</sup> See Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: The History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston: Little & Brown, 1973), 3-30.
- <sup>4</sup> See Franz Neumann *Behemoth* (New York: Oxford UP, 1942) and Friedrich Polloc. "State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations" in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Eds. Andrew Aruto & Eike Gebhardt. (New York: Continuum, 1990).
- <sup>5</sup> Although there are noticeable differences in both the ideas and methodologies employed by those active in critical theory and the Frankfurt school more specifically, for our purposes we will focus almost exclusively on the aspirations that unite them.
- <sup>6</sup> Albrecht Wellmer, “Reason, Utopia and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” in Richard Bernstein, ed., *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 50.
- <sup>7</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell et al. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 215.
- <sup>8</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 42.
- <sup>9</sup> Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life*, trans. Richard Deveson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 27.
- <sup>10</sup> Eksteins, 321.
- <sup>11</sup> Klaus Mann, *Mephisto* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 249.
- <sup>12</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Means and Ends,” in Ingram and Simon-Ingram, 41-44.
- <sup>13</sup> Compare to this to the United States’ Patriot Act. As Robert F. Worth writes, the government has assumed powers that “were removed by Congress or the Supreme Court as a direct result of the injustices of the McCarthy era.” “A Nation Defines Itself by its Evil Enemies,” *New York Times* (24 February 2002).
- <sup>14</sup> Hitler, 179-180.
- <sup>15</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Eichmann in Jerusalem,” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 326-327.
- <sup>16</sup> Lynn Hunt, ed. and trans. *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston: Bedford, 1996), 35.

- <sup>17</sup> Benjamin C. Sax and Dieter Kuntz, eds. *Inside Hitler's Germany: A Documentary History of Life in the Third Reich* (Toronto: D. C. Heath and Company, 1992), 73.
- <sup>18</sup> Diderot, in his definition of natural law for the *Encyclopédie*, notes that “Everything that you conceive, everything that you meditate upon will be good, grand, elevated, sublime, if it is in the general and common interest . . . [and] that in every individual the general will is a pure act of understanding . . .” Hunt *The French Revolution and Human Rights*, 35.
- <sup>19</sup> Historian Arno Mayer has demonstrated that despite the nineteenth century expansion of the franchise in many European nations, the aristocratic political elites continued to manipulate the system to their political advantage and to initiate bourgeois newcomers into the club rather than ceding any real power to them. See Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (London: Croom Helm, 1981).
- <sup>20</sup> Keep in mind that what ought to be clear is that for us social criticism ought to provide not only theoretical understanding, but it should also generate practical results. One might suggest, however, with Axel Honneth that the purpose of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* specifically was to disclose the pathologies present in the early twentieth century. See Honneth, “The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society: The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Light of Current Debates in Social Criticism.” *Constellations* vol. 7, no. 1, (2000) 116-127.
- <sup>21</sup> Marianna Papastephanou, “Ulysses’ Reason, Nobody’s Fault: Reason, Subjectivity, and the Critique of Enlightenment,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* vol. 26 no. 6, (2000): 47-59.
- <sup>22</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 88, 99.
- <sup>23</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London/New York: Verso, 1991), 7.
- <sup>24</sup> Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The History of the Twentieth Century: Volume 1, 1900-1933* (New York: William Morrow, 1997), 466. The Latin is usually translated as “It is a sweet and becoming thing to die for one’s country.”
- <sup>26</sup> The assignment also looks at Aurangzeb (Mughal India) and Osei Tutu (Asante Empire in West Africa).
- <sup>27</sup> Portrait of Louis XIV was painted by Hyacinthe Rigaud in 1701 and hangs in the Louvre. Public Domain – many accessible reproductions on the web.
- <sup>28</sup> Anonymous court artist, *Portrait of the Kangxi Emperor in Court Dress*, late Kangxi period (1662-1722). Public Domain – many accessible reproductions on the web.
- <sup>29</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *Emperor of China: Self-Portrait of K’ang-Hsi* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).
- <sup>30</sup> Merry Wiesner, William Bruce Wheeler, Franklin M. Doeringer, and Kenneth R. Curtis, eds., *Discovering the Global Past: A Look at the Evidence, Volume II: Since 1400*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 158-191.
- <sup>31</sup> Wiesner et al., eds., *Discovering the Global Past*, 268-305.
- <sup>32</sup> “When You Ride Alone You Ride With Hitler!” by Weimer Pursell, 1943; “USA Bonds,” by Joseph Christian Leyendecker, 1918; National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.
- <sup>33</sup> Interviews conducted for the video, *World War II: The Propaganda Battle*, c1982, [produced by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting].
- <sup>34</sup> Victoria de Grazia, “The Selling of America, Bush-Style,” *New York Times* (25 August 2002). See also, Robert F. Worth, “A Nation Defines Itself by its Enemies,” *New York Times* (24 February 2002).
- <sup>35</sup> For the Cold War Propaganda, the class watches *Atomic Café*, c1982, and for the religious fundamentalism section, we use Wiesner et al., eds., *Discovering the Global Past*, 460-486.
- <sup>36</sup> *Weapons of the Spirit*, c1989.
- <sup>37</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties,” Appendix A to *Galileo* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 146. This English edition was translated by Charles Laughton and edited by Eric Bentley.