

THE PLEA

Vol. 35 No. 2

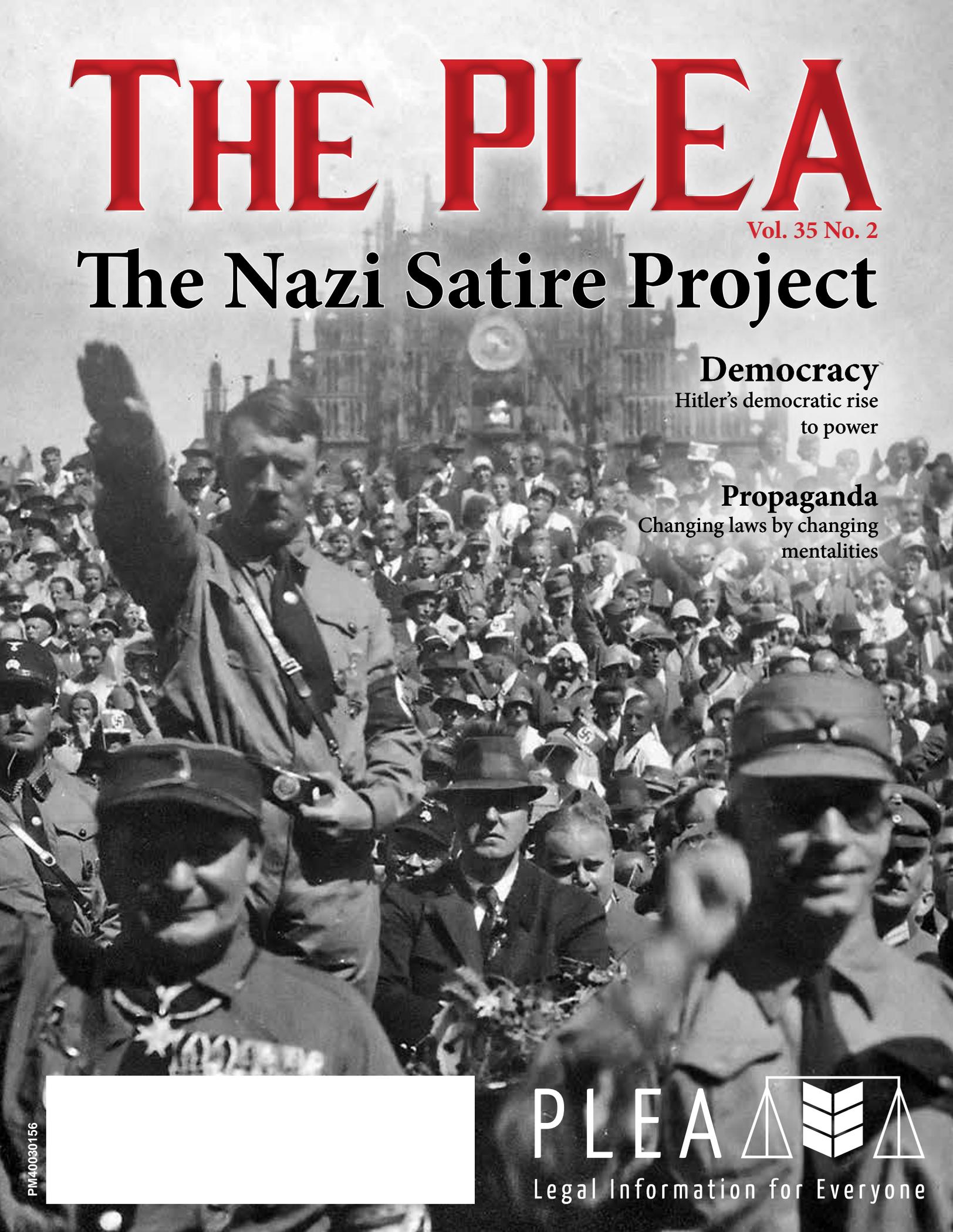
The Nazi Satire Project

Democracy

Hitler's democratic rise
to power

Propaganda

Changing laws by changing
mentalities



PM40030156

PLEA 
Legal Information for Everyone

CONTENTS

3 Democracy and the Rise of Nazism

How could it be that Hitler was elected to power?

6 Satire and the Manipulation of Public Opinion

How did Joseph Goebbels use satire as a tool of propaganda?

8 The Satire of *Die Brennessel*

What was the Nazi government telling Germans?

10 The Failure of State Satire

Was the German public in on the joke?

12 Further Resources

Don't stop learning now!

Elites fear satire. And understandably so. As satire theorist Robert C. Elliott said, it “eats its way in implication through the most powerful structures.”¹ But what happens when this premise is flipped on its head, and elites take control of satire?

This issue of *The PLEA* considers this by examining state-created satire in Nazi Germany. Primarily focussed on Nazi Germany’s official state satire magazine *Die Brennessel*, it considers:

- the rise of the Nazi regime,
- the propaganda ministry’s creation of official state satire, and
- the German public’s reaction to it.

While suitable for most any reader, *The Nazi Satire Project* has been written to help English Language Arts 30 teachers use satire to meet Comprehend and Respond Outcome B 30.4 (indicator d), “Demonstrate critical reading behaviours to analyze meanings, ideas, language, and literary quality in a range of contemporary and historical texts.” It has also been written as a Content support for teachers of History 20, linking to “The Rise of Totalitarianism and the Impact on the Individual” in Unit Two: The Totalitarian State.

¹ Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 264.

Democracy and the Rise of Nazism



Hitler cast votes in Königsberg, East Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russian Federation) during the March 1933 election.*

Adolph Hitler's Nazi Germany was likely the greatest social and political setback of the 20th century. What makes Hitler's rise to power even more troublesome is the fact the Nazis were elected into power.

There are many theories about how the Nazis came to rule Germany. Some historians point to the Treaty of Versailles, Germany's peace agreement with the Allies following World War I. The treaty's excessive compromises

weakened the German economy and battered national morale. Others point to Black Friday, the 1929 stock market crash that triggered the Great Depression. Germany was hit particularly hard due to its economic ties with the United States. And others point out that Germany never came to a consensus on political fundamentals or human rights following World War I. The country's post-war constitution was largely believed to be imposed upon Germany by the Allies.

These morale, unity, and economic problems following the first World War spawned radical criticism from fringe political groups. Like most liberal democracies—such as Canada or the United States today—Germany's post-war constitution allowed radical criticism to take place in the public sphere. In Germany, the leading criticism on the far right came from Nazis.

Who were the Nazis?

The Nazis were a political party formally called the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*. In English, this means the National Socialist German Workers' Party. It formed in 1920. Even though they called themselves socialist, there was very little that was socialist about the party. Hitler appropriated the word socialist as "a matter of fashion"² to take advantage of the ideology's popularity at the time.³ The term Nazi was used by opponents of the party, due to the word's informal link to foolishness and clumsiness.

The Nazis promised to restore Germany to its former greatness. Underpinning this promise was a racist and anti-democratic worldview. According to historian Jeremy Noakes, Nazis believed Germany's problems were:

fostered and exploited by the Jews through the doctrines of Liberalism with its emphasis on the priority of the individual over the community, [and the result of] democracy with its subordination of the 'creative' and 'heroic' individual to the mass, and of Marxism with its advocacy of class war.⁴

This critique first appeared destined for failure. The Nazis captured only 3% of the vote in Germany's



Nazi Brownshirts, 1932. Some German political parties created paramilitaries who engaged in widespread street fighting. The disorder contributed to German frustration with democracy.‡

1928 federal election. However, as German instability grew—especially economically with the onset of the Great Depression—so too did the Nazi vote. A series of four elections between September 1930 and March 1933 saw Nazi support grow to 43% of the vote and 45% of the seats of the proportionally-representative Reichstag, or German Parliament.

Nazis take control

Within two months of the March 1933 election, the Nazi Party took absolute control of Germany. They did this by threatening and exploiting a fractured opposition, manipulating a perceived communist threat, and partnering with other far-right parties. Once they and their partners were able to control a majority of the seats in the Reichstag, liberalism in Germany was thrown aside in favour of a worldview that held that:

Every actual democracy rests on the principle that not only are equals equal but unequals will not be treated equally. Democracy requires therefore first homogeneity and second—if the need arises—elimination or eradication of heterogeneity.⁵

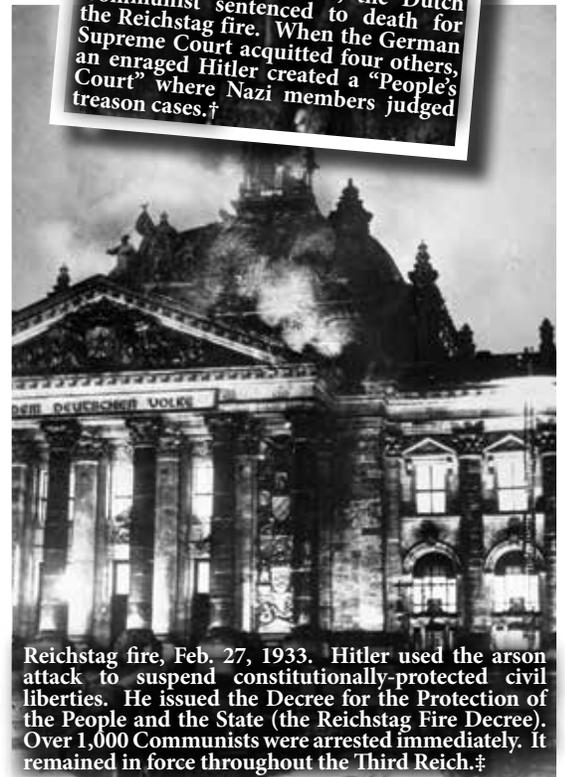
In other words, far-right thinkers in Germany believed democracy would only work if everyone was the same. Because everybody was not the same, diversity had to be destroyed. In the place of a diverse society, the Nazis idealised a singular, racially-unified German society called the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Such a society excluded "others."

To build this *Volksgemeinschaft* and rede-

fine democracy, Nazi thinkers set about creating a mythic and cultic rather than a rational public sphere where a grand narrative trumped facts and hatred trumped human decency. Adolph Hitler was to be this cult's leader. Hitler put a primary emphasis on changing citizen mentalities so that the *Volksgemeinschaft* would be supportive of his sweeping changes to Germany's laws and social systems. As well, he worked on psychologically preparing the German population for war. ¶¶



Marinus van der Lubbe, the Dutch Communist sentenced to death for the Reichstag fire. When the German Supreme Court acquitted four others, an enraged Hitler created a "People's Court" where Nazi members judged treason cases.‡



Reichstag fire, Feb. 27, 1933. Hitler used the arson attack to suspend constitutionally-protected civil liberties. He issued the Decree for the Protection of the People and the State (the Reichstag Fire Decree). Over 1,000 Communists were arrested immediately. It remained in force throughout the Third Reich.‡

2 Tim Stanley, "Hitler wasn't a socialist. Stop saying he was," *The Telegraph*, February 26 2014. <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/timstanley/100261121/hitler-wasnt-a-socialist-stop-saying-he-was/>

3 Jewish Virtual Library. The Nazi Party: Background & Overview. www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/nsdap.html

4 Jeremy Noakes, "Introduction: Government, Party and People in Nazi Germany," in *Government Party and People in Nazi Germany*, ed. Jeremy Noakes (Great Britain: University of Exeter, 1980), 2.

5 Carl Schmitt, "On the Contradiction between Parliamentarism and Democracy," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, & Edward Dimendberg (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 335.

ELECTIONS IN A DICTATORSHIP

March 5th, 1933 was the last multi-party German election. However, this election was not free.

Hitler was already Chancellor by January 1933, heading up a minority coalition with other conservative parties. The Nazis used the power of office in the hopes of electing a majority government. In preparation for the March 1933 election, the Brownshirts—the Nazi paramilitary wing—infiltrated the police, broke up other political party meetings, seized assets of opposition parties, and threatened or beat opponents. Meanwhile, businesspeople threw their support behind the Nazis due in part to a fear of rising Communist support.

Despite all this, Hitler only achieved a minority 43% of the vote in March. Not having the majority he desired, Hitler instead passed the *Enabling Act*. This law gave him dictatorial powers. It was passed with support from right-leaning parties, and by physically forcing Social Democrat and Communist members from the Reichstag.

Once passed, the Reichstag was powerless. It only met 19 times and adopted seven laws. The Nazis' 986 other laws were all simply proclaimed by the government. This included a law that banned all other political parties.

Nevertheless, Hitler still held elections in 1933, 1936, and 1938. However, the only choice on the ballot was the Nazis. Voters could either vote for or against them. In each election, Nazis received over 90% approval. While many Germans supported the one-party state because they had grown frustrated with the instability of liberal democracy, many others cast approving ballots out of fear.



Paul von Hindenburg, German president and constitutional head, 1925-1934. He signed into law Hitler's Reichstag Fire Decree and his Enabling Act. When Hindenburg died, Hitler made himself president thus ending any constitutional checks on his power. †

THINK

1. To build their path to power, Nazis were particularly effective in motivating non-politically conscious citizens to vote for them. What does the election of the Nazis tell us about the importance of being well-informed before casting a ballot?
2. Nazi election platforms often anchored their discriminatory worldview to the economy. For example, Nazis incorrectly blamed the Jews for difficulties facing workers in Germany.
 - a) Do you see any similar scapegoating in political discourse today, where discrimination of minorities is linked to economic issues?
 - b) What problems arise when we only look at issues through an economic lense?
3. The Nazis have often been described as a “catch-all” party, with supporters from across classes and professions. Party membership included farmers, lawyers, teachers, civil servants, students, and labour. Each pushed their interests upon the party, and all were held together by the notion of power and a conviction to re-establish Germany's greatness.
 - a) Do you think people sometimes put certain principles aside in exchange for power?
 - b) After the March 1933 election, the Nazi party was flooded with applications for membership. What does this tell us about the nature of ambition and power?
4. Look back at the Nazi conception of democracy:

Every actual democracy rests on the principle that not only are equals equal but unequals will not be treated equally. Democracy requires therefore first homogeneity and second—if the need arises—elimination or eradication of heterogeneity.

- a) Are unequals not treated equally in a democracy? Explain.
- b) Society is heterogeneous (diverse in character or content). In Canada, this is reflected through many laws, including the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*. How do we and how can we embrace that diversity to ensure that democracy works?

Satire and the Manipulation of Public Opinion

The Nazi government wanted public support for its draconian laws. Satire was one way of building this support.

To create a homogenous Third Reich where all Germans shared the same values, Hitler and the Nazis needed to change German mentalities. One of their methods was propaganda. Propaganda is material that contains ideas or information meant to influence attitudes. Though usually biased or misleading, propaganda can also be based in some truth or perceived truth.

Even before the Nazi Party was the German government, they were creating propaganda to influence attitudes. In 1929, the party established a central propaganda mechanism that existed above local political control. It was headed by Joseph Goebbels. This party mechanism became a government ministry once the Nazis took power. The Ministry for People's Enlightenment and Propaganda, as it was called, set about building a new society. As German propaganda expert Randall Bytwerk said, the Nazis wanted Germans to:

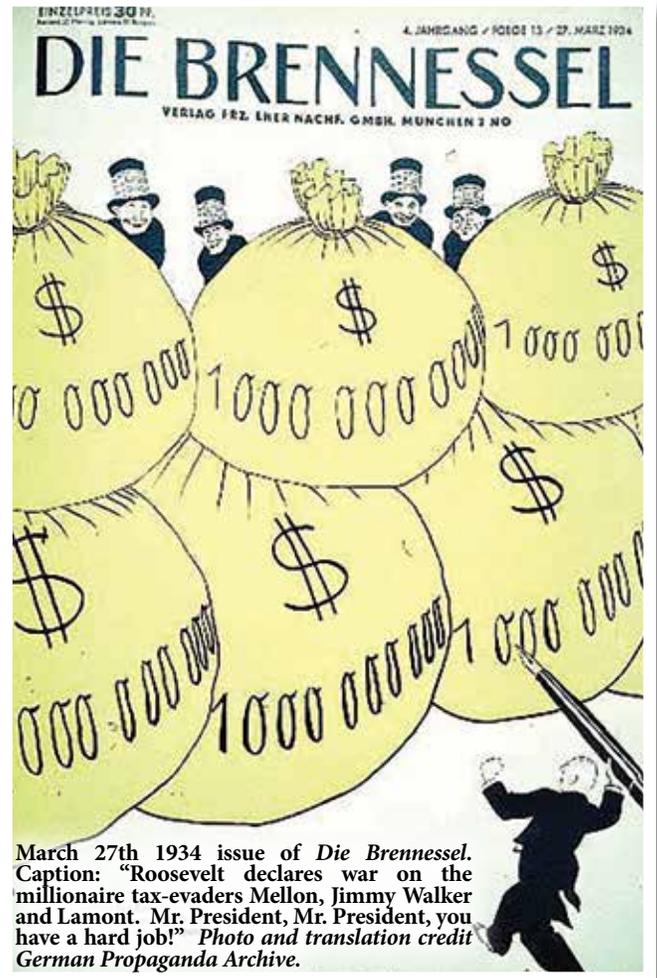
share almost unanimously a common worldview of religious proportions, what some today call hegemonic metanarrative, with little room for opposing versions of truth.⁶

Without doubt the ministry had its propagandistic successes, perhaps best exemplified by Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 masterwork film *Triumph of the Will*, a profile of the Nazi party's 1934 congress. The Nazis even commissioned their own blockbuster version of *Titanic*, which pegged the blame for the disaster on unrestrained British greed. Questionable, however, was the success of the ministry's satire.

Satire Kills

Germany had several dedicated satire magazines in circulation before and during the Nazi Party's rise. This included the more liberal *Simplicissimus*, which dated back to 1896; the Social Democrat Party's *Der wahre Jakob*, which dated back to 1879, and the conservative-leaning *Kladderadatsch*, which dated back to 1848. Recognizing satire's popularity, the Nazis added *Die Brennessel* to the mix in 1931.

On the surface, there is not much that is funny about Nazi ideology. This is especially true given that in their quest to create a mythic and cultic rather



than a rational public sphere, Nazis recognized a trait of satire that ancient societies recognized: its ability to kill.

In its earliest Arabic and Irish forms, satire acted as a fatal curse against enemies. This belief meant that the poets of these societies had a specific role in war: they would compose satire that harnessed mythical and deadly forces, and unleash these forces upon their enemies.⁷ Satirists were viewed much like warriors, because these societies believed that satire—quite literally—could kill.

The Nazis largely held the same view. Their satire primarily targeted enemies and critics: the people they began killing and banishing from the country

⁶ Randall Bytwerk, *Bending Spines: The Propagandas of Nazi Germany and the German Democratic Republic*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 2.

⁷ Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*, 264.

once they took power. As a Nazi critic wrote in 1932, satire was to be praised because “laughter kills.”⁸ Given the power of satire, it is little wonder that satire was the only form of humour that the Nazi propaganda machine had developed when the party took power.

Satire and the State

Once the Nazis had absolute control of the state, governmental work began in earnest to re-engineer the public sphere from the top-down. Their goal was a uniform society where the *Volksgemeinschaft* subscribed to Nazi ideals.

Every public statement from Goebbels’ press organs at the Ministry of People’s Enlightenment and Propaganda was viewed as the “direct will of the National Socialist state.” This included *Die Brennessel*. As an official party and state publication, it reflected the government line and was considered “the leading light” of Nazi Germany’s satire.¹⁰

Other satire magazines in Germany soon fell into line or vanished. *Simplicissimus* was colonised by Nazi supporters and changed its overall direction. *Kladderadatsch* tilted further right. *Der wahre Jakob*, the social democratic satire magazine, was banned outright.

Interestingly though, as Nazi Germany began to pass laws that discriminated against Jews, the antisemitism in *Die Brennessel* slightly mellowed. Randall Bytwerk accounted for this as a strategic move meant to minimize sympathy for Jews. However, vitriolic antisemitism still appeared in magazines not published by the state. Most notorious was the anti-semitic weekly *Der Stürmer* run by Hitler’s friend Julius Streicher. 🚫

THINK

1. The Nazis outlawed all political parties but their own, with the goal of making a singular-thinking nation.
 - a) Does outlawing an idea—such as a political ideology—make the idea go away? What will happen to the idea if it is outlawed.
 - b) If an idea truly is bad, and if you cannot completely make an idea go away through law, then why is it important to engage in rational discussion about the merits and drawbacks of the idea?
 - c) What kinds of limits are put on free speech in Canada today?
2. Robert C. Elliott believed in the revolutionary potential of satire. For example, he said if a corrupt judge is satirized, that judge comes to stand for the legal system itself. Thus, satire has the effect of undermining not just its individual targets, but entire institutions. What do you think? Does satire have revolutionary potential?

8 Patrick Merziger, “Humour in Nazi Germany: Resistance and Propaganda? The Popular Desire for an All-Embracing Laughter,” *International Review of Social History* 52 (2007): 288.

9 Merziger, “Humour in Nazi Germany: Resistance and Propaganda?” 288.

10 Merziger, “Humour in Nazi Germany: Resistance and Propaganda?” 286.

11 Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*, 111.

WHAT IS SATIRE?

Satire theorists share one near-universal agreement about defining satire: it is incredibly difficult to define. Satire theorist Robert C. Elliott perhaps said it best when he described satire as “notoriously a slippery term.”

Even though he believed it was difficult to define satire, Elliott did ascribe an “avowed purpose” to satirists. He said they:

expose some aspect of human behavior which seems to him foolish or vicious, demonstrate clinically that the behavior in question is ridiculous or wicked or repulsive, and try to stimulate in his reader (or in Roman times, his listener) the appropriate negative response which prepares the way to positive action.¹¹

To accomplish this critique, satirists usually use humour or invective. However, not all humour or invective is satire. Instead, satire can be broken down into three main types: Horatian, Juvenalian, and Menippean.

Horatian satire is rooted in the writing of Horace (65 - 8 BC). For him, satire was mild mockery and playful wit delivered in plain language. Horace did not want to cause pain, but did want to resolve serious issues in society. Juvenal (c. 1st century - 2nd century) felt differently. He was enraged by viciousness and corruption in Rome, so Juvenalian satire was meant to bring terror and destruction to its targets. A third less discussed form is Menippean. Based in the philosophy of 3rd century cynic Menippus, it was a humorous attack on mental attitudes more so than institutions. Menippean satire presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent.

FROM THE PAGES

The Nazis spent considerable efforts psychologically preparing citizens for war. The Ministry for People's Enlightenment constantly told citizens that Germany was under threat from liberalism, communism, socialism, Jews, and foreign nations. These satirical cartoons from *Die Brennessel*—courtesy Randall Bytwerk's German Propaganda Archive—capture just a few of these portrayals.



“If you give people enough time, they get the idea.” A Jew, a communist and a socialist are talking, “It’s been a year and they still have not let us back in. It is beginning to look like they don’t want us...” (30 January 1934)



The Nazis institutionalized their racist beliefs in 1935 through the Nuremberg Laws. One law stripped Jews of their citizenship; the other law prohibited marriage or sexual relations between Germans and Jews. The laws were soon expanded to include Roma and black people, and helped pave the way for the Nazis killing an estimated eleven million people, including six million Jews. While the Nazis were undeniably the worst offenders, Germany was not the only country rife with antisemitism at the time. Much of the world closed their doors to Jewish refugees from Germany. For example, Canada only let in 5,000 Jewish refugees between 1933 and 1945.

- How could this cartoon apply to Canada of the time?
- What can we learn from this historical experience that applies to refugees today?



“Those who can’t see will feel it...” In the top frame, two men are complaining that nothing is happening in Germany. The two workers are annoyed, so one “accidentally” directs his shovel handle to the jaw of a complainer. In the bottom, one worker says to another: “Something happened after all...” This was part of a general Nazi campaign against complainers. (23 October 1934)



It is believed there was much discontent with the Nazi government amongst Germans in 1934. It was largely because people in the peasant and working classes were disappointed with the early progress of Nazi economic policies.

- This cartoon juxtaposes the idle rich with the working class. Given that the Nazis received much support from the working and peasant class, how does this cartoon help the Nazis consolidate their political base?
- Does this cartoon promote violence against enemies of the state?

OF DIE BRENNESSEL

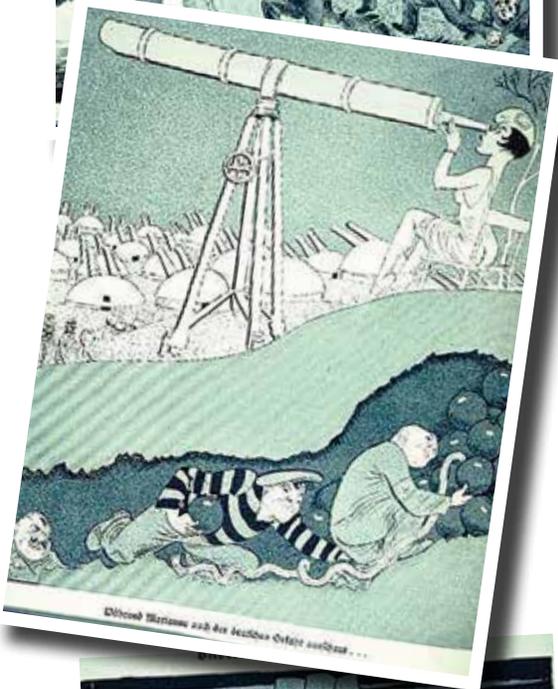


"A Scene from the 'Good Old Days.' - MARXISTS" The claim is that Marxism was leading German workers to their destruction before Hitler's takeover. (23 January 1934)



Marxism is a worldview developed by Karl Marx. He believed that workers will struggle under a dictatorship of the ownership until a classless society is developed. The German Communist Party subscribed to this ideology and the Nazi party did not. Once the Nazis were in power, they created the *Law Against the Founding of New Parties* of July 14, 1933. It banned all political parties but the Nazis.

- If Marxism was outlawed in 1933, why would the Nazis publish this cartoon in 1934? What does this tell us about the weaknesses of outlawing ideas?
- In Canada, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association. Why is it vital to enshrine this right in the Charter?

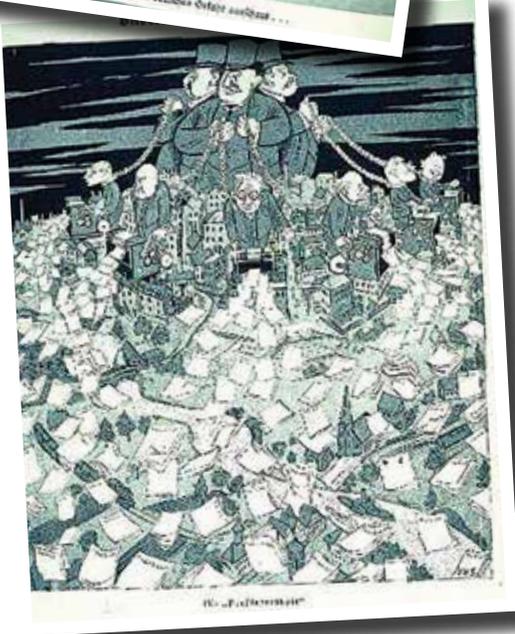


"While France Looks to Danger from Germany..." Marianne, the symbol for France, has all her guns pointing toward Germany while communists are tunnelling in from underneath. (17 April 1934)



France built up the Maginot Line in the 1930s, fortification of their border in case of a German invasion. Also during this time, the Communist Party was experiencing an upswing in support in France.

- Does this visual suggest that France is being undermined by forces even worse than the French themselves? How would it inflate the perceived danger that France posed to Germany?
- How is this cartoon an example of Hitler's conditioning of Germans to be psychologically prepared for war?
- Hermann Göring, the Commander of the German Luftwaffe, said that "the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country."¹² Have you seen similar discourse taking place today?



"A Scene from the 'Good Old Days.'" The theme is freedom of the press. This supposedly depicts the situation before 1933, when the Nazis claimed the Jews controlled the German press. (2 January 1934)



The Editor Law of October 4, 1933 prohibited non-Aryans from being newspaper editors. As well, it prohibited the publication of anything that "tends to weaken the strength of the German Reich, outwardly or inwardly, the common will of the German people, the German defense ability, culture or economy, or offends the religious sentiments of others."

- What dangers exist for a society that does not self-critique?
- Given Nazi control over the press, how is their publication of this cartoon ironic?

The Failure of State Satire

Official state satire from the Nazis failed by 1938. While the Nazis had their own explanation, so do propaganda experts.

There is no question that Nazi state satire was unsuccessful. *Die Brennessel*, the official Nazi satire magazine, ceased publication in 1938.

Meanwhile, the independent (but Nazi-supporting) satire magazines *Kladderatsch* and *Simplicissimus* carried on, though with waning circulation. While it is difficult to peg an exact reason of why state-created satire failed in Nazi Germany, there are several possibilities.

Die Brennessel claimed that it failed because it had accomplished its goals. The magazine wrote its own obituary in its penultimate issue:

It was our *Brennessel* that tens of thousands of National Socialist readers enjoyed during the period of struggle as it gave the sharp and hated blows that gradually wore down the old system.

It was *Brennessel* that after the seizure of power took sure aim at external enemies and the moaners and complainers at home.

It was *Brennessel* whose scorn inflicted deep wounds on the enemy, that made them the laughing stock of the world, that made them look ridiculous.

THE GERMAN PUBLIC FELT THAT THEIR STANDING WITHIN THE NAZI STATE WAS BEING JEOPARDIZED BY THE SATIRE.

We thank our readers for their loyalty. They know how much Brennessel (a piece of history of our party) served the idea through sharp attack and resolute defense until its greater goal was realized, the goal of its entire struggle: the creation of the Greater German Reich!¹³

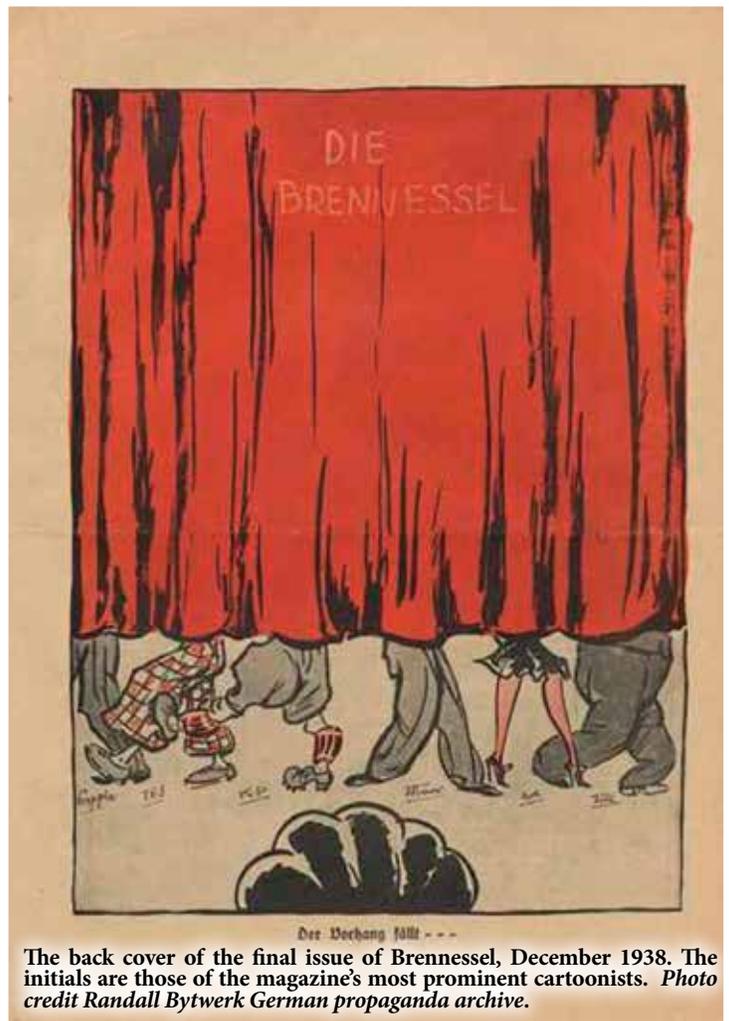
It is true that the magazine folded when the Nazis were at the height of their domestic popularity. However, like most any official Nazi statement, *Brennessel's* words need to be taken with a grain of salt.

Other Explanations

German communications history professor Patrick Merziger, along with Randall Bytwerk, believed that *Die Brennessel* failed largely because it was limited in what it could criticize. Even with the power of the state behind it, the magazine had surprising confines on what it could say.

For example, Merziger found that whenever the *Volksgemeinschaft*—the racially unified German community idealized by the Nazis—were satirically criticised in *Die Brennessel*, *Die Brennessel* received many letters objecting to the portrayal. Merziger said the letters were rooted in a belief that “a laugh that attempted to exclude could not be tolerated because to be shut out of the *Volksgemeinschaft* meant total exclusion.”¹⁴ In other words, the German public felt that their standing within the Nazi state was being jeopardized by the satire.

Nazi satirists first responded by telling people to get a better sense of humour. However, they soon caved, and satirical portrayals of the *Volksgemeinschaft* ceased. Because the Nazi state



¹³ Bytwerk, *Bending Spines*, 126.

¹⁴ Merziger, “Humour in Nazi Germany: Resistance and Propaganda?” 289.

¹⁵ Bytwerk, *Bending Spines*, 127.

was unwilling to engage in societal self-criticism by satirizing the *Volksge-meinschaft*, the only thing left for them to satirize was foreign nations and the people at home who complained about the Nazis.

What little *Die Brennessel* had left to satirize was still heavily censored. For example, Randall Bytwerk found instances of mild Italian jokes being pulled from the magazine by Nazi censors, due to the fact Italy was a German ally. Bytwerk believed that all these constraints left the magazine “with precious little room to criticize.” He said:

Humor is often a way of dealing with the stresses of everyday life, rendering them more endurable through laughter, but *Brennessel* permitted no such release. The complainers, the moaners, the dissatisfied, they were the magazine’s enemies, its frequent targets. It suggested that to criticize life’s difficulties was to be a traitor.¹⁵

In the end, an all-controlling state such as Nazi Germany—with its blindered quest to create a single-thinking nation with little room for critical thought—ultimately could not engage in self-reflection through satirical criticism.

Given the Nazi drive to create a single-thinking society, it comes as little surprise that in satire’s place came uncritical comedy and farce. The share of comedy in Nazi Germany’s theatre programmes rose from 26 percent in 1933 to 38 percent in 1935 to 68 percent in 1941, a growth “representative of the trend in all other forms of media.”¹⁶ The replacement of satire with uncritical humour would be just what a monotonizing, top-down state like Nazi Germany would want: entertainment that functioned as a distraction from political reality. 🚫

THINK

1. Robert C. Elliott pointed out that originally, satirists “were honoured and loved in their positive roles, but hated and feared because of their oppressiveness and their power to do harm.”¹⁷ Do you think the Nazis stopped satirizing the *Volksge-meinschaft* and simply focussed on its enemies to appease the German public? Or did they stop satirizing the *Volksge-meinschaft* to avoid exposing the double-edged nature of the people’s relationship with the Nazi state?
2. What does the Nazi control of arts and literature tell us about the importance of having a healthy and independent space for arts and literature?
3. Does entertainment today function as a distraction from political reality? Has political reality itself today become a distraction from actual issues of democratic importance?

16 Merziger, “Humour in Nazi Germany: Resistance and Propaganda?” 281.

17 Elliott, *The Power of Satire*.

18, 19 *The Bombing of Germany*, produced by Mark Samels (2010; Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation).

MEASURING THE POPULARITY OF THE NAZIS

Historian Ian Kershaw has pointed out that the Nazis reached the peak of their domestic popularity in 1938. This was the result of a series of foreign policy successes for Hitler and a general rebuilding of the German economy. However, it is difficult to gauge the level of genuine German buy-in to the Nazi regime.

It is safe to assume that the over 90% support that the Nazis received in their three elections cannot be considered accurate. But the absence of independent public opinion surveys—alongside the lack of a public political alternative—makes gauging the actual level of Nazi popularity difficult.

Further complicating understanding people’s beliefs in Nazi Germany is the reality of a state like Nazi Germany. Historian Donald L. Miller has pointed out that “in a police state, withdrawing support for the government means death.”¹⁸ And historian Jörg Friedrich has pointed out that “civilian populations have a special war aim, which is completely different from their leaders’ war aims. It is a very simple one. The war aim of the civilian population is to survive.”¹⁹ Such factors would make people more inclined to pretend they supported the government.

While there is no question that there were Germans who supported the Nazi regime, understanding the exact level of support may ultimately be an impossible task.

Further Resources

The Second World War is a broad and intense field of study. Below are just a few of the resources that helped inform this issue of *The PLEA*.

Bending Spines: The Propagandas of Nazi Germany and the German Democratic Republic

Randall Bytwerk's examination of German propaganda offers insights into Germany's message control before and after the Second World War.

Find it at your public library.

German Propaganda Archive

Randall Bytwerk maintains the largest English-translated archive of German propaganda on the internet. It is well-worth checking out.

<http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/brenn1.htm>

The Führer Myth: How Hitler Won Over the German People.

Historian Ian Kershaw offers a thoughtful explanation on Hitler's popularity for Spiegel Online.

www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-fuehrer-myth-how-hitler-won-over-the-german-people-a-531909.html

Humour in Nazi Germany: Resistance and Propaganda? The Popular Desire for an All-Embracing Laughter.

Patrick Merziger offers one of the broadest English-language analyses available of humour in Nazi Germany.

Find it in *International Review of Social History*, 52, pages 275-290.

The Goebbels Experiment

Thorston Pollfuss's 2005 documentary reveals many key passages in the diary of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi master of propaganda.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=BabyfW6nRWA

The Struggle over Mein Kampf

With the copyright recently expired on Hitler's autobiography and manifesto *Mein Kampf*, Sean Prpick explores issues surrounding the book for CBC Radio One's *Ideas*.

www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-struggle-over-mein-kampf-1.2913958

The Bombing of Germany

Mark Samels' 2010 documentary explores how war planners chose to bomb civilian populations in World War II.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=28HhSdn_Nso

An Enduring Battle about an Old War

Michael Getler, ombudsman of PBS, offers insights into the controversial nature of interpreting history in the context of The Bombing of Germany.

www.pbs.org/ombudsman/2010/04/an_enduring_battle_about_an_old_war.html

Shameless Propaganda

Germany was not the only nation influencing citizens through propaganda. This National Film Board of Canada's feature documentary explores NFB films intended to shape Canadian society during World War II.

www.nfb.ca/film/shameless_propaganda

* *Yad Vashem Photo Archive*

† *Wikimedia Commons/National Archive of the Netherlands*

‡ *Photo credit Wikimedia Commons/German Federal Archive*

All Die Brennessel reproductions and translations - Dr. Randall Bytwerk, German Propaganda Archive