Cartoons of the

W.A. Coupe looks at ways in which the Nazis employed political cartoons in their armoury of propaganda techniques for imparting their message to the German people.

(Plate 1) Rembrandt’s engraving of Goethe’s ‘Faust’ is the inspiration behind this November 1933 cover for the traditionally right-wing journal Kladderadatsch, presenting Hitler as the shining force for Germany’s salvation.

From the mid-nineteenth century the German periodic press had embodied a rich tradition of graphic political satire. It was therefore natural that the National Socialists, with their keen sense of propaganda, should seize on the cartoon as a convenient vehicle for their message. Since its inception in 1924, Julius Streicher’s notorious publication, Der Stürmer (The Stormtrooper), employed ‘Fips’ (Philip Ruprecht) to produce the front-page cartoons that gave graphic illustration to the journal’s motto: ‘The Jews are our misfortune’. Similarly, Joseph Goebbels, Gauleiter of Berlin and Party Director of Propaganda, highly valued cartoons and used them from the late 1920s in his newspaper, Der Angriff (Attack). In an obvious attempt to go ‘up market’ in the 1930s, the Party published Die Brennnessel (The Stinging Nettle) as its own counterblast to sophisticated liberal publications such as Simplicissimus and Lustige Blätter (Merry Pages).

Such competition was, of course, destined to disappear in 1933. Hitler had never made a secret of his intention to destroy the ‘so-called freedom of the press’ once he achieved power, and after the Reichstag fire, many liberal and socialist newspapers and journals were unrestrainedly suppressed. Others were ‘co-ordinated’—initially by a process of wholesale intimidation, and latterly by the legal sanctions embodied in the ‘Reich Editorial Law’. This made editors responsible for ensuring that no ‘offensive’ or ‘subversive’ material appeared in their journals and put them under the ultimate supervision of Goebbels’ Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, which had rapidly established offices in all main centres. In keeping with Goebbels’ celebrated dictum that ‘the Government should be able to play on the press as though it were a piano’, official news conferences and written communications reinforced the ethos of the ‘New Germany’ and instructed editors on what was to be emphasised, played down or omitted, and even which words or expressions might be used and which were deemed ‘undesirable’. Illustrated material had to be approved by a censor before publication.

The new measures effectively meant that comment on home affairs was limited to cartoons of approbation, while satire was reserved for Germany’s real or imagined enemies. The cartoons of the period thus provide an accurate reflection of the shifts in Nazi policy and the accompanying cynical manipulation of public opinion. Particularly striking is the way in which, on the one hand, the German public was being reassured
of its leader’s pacific intentions while on the other it was being prepared for war. A mere four days after taking office, Hitler was secretly meeting senior army officers and outlining plans for the implementation of the programme already foreshadowed in Mein Kampf. Over the next few years further meetings reinforced these strategies, culminating in the Four Year Plan of 1936, whose premise was the perceived need to prepare a war of aggression.

But the main task of Nazi propaganda, both at home and abroad, was to reassure the general public, alarmed at the possibility that Hitler meant war. The ‘Peace Declaration’ in Hitler’s speech to the Reichstag on May 17th, 1933, was intended to do just this and thereafter the assertion of National Socialism’s peaceful intentions became the stock-in-trade of Nazi propagandists. In the run-up to the ‘election’ of November 1933, for instance, the traditionally right-wing Kladderadatsch contributed to the massive public brainwashing with a free adaptation of Rembrandt’s engraving of Faust’s vision of the sign of the macrocosm (plate 1). ‘Der deutsche Michel’ (the German equivalent of England’s John Bull or France’s Marianne) appears as Faust, who turns his back on the skeleton of the Versailles Treaty and faces the radiant swastika which floods his study with light and proclaims ‘With Hitler for honour and peace’. The text quotes verses from Goethe’s treatment of the same incident:

How different is the working of this sign,
For now I glow as if from newest wine.
Courage I feel in Mankind’s lot to share,
Both earthly joy and earthly pain to bear.

(Plate 2) See no evil:
following Hitler’s occupation of the Rhineland, Kladderadatsch
made this strong statement in his favour, showing a wholesome Führer
as the good sower
spreading seeds of peace.

The cartoon which Kladderadatsch’s old liberal competitor Simplicissimus published almost simultaneously reveals how closely co-ordinated the press had become. Simplicissimus, which for so long had been a bitter opponent of Hitler and all he stood for, now showed Peace depositing her olive branch and twig of oak (Germany’s national symbol) in the urn which in German usage equates with the ballot box. Only Party-approved candidates were available for election, and in the accompanying plebiscite voters were invited to express their support for Government policy. In combination with the title ‘Your Vote for your Nation’, the cartoon rather obviously suggested that a vote for Hitler was a vote for peace. Lest anyone should miss the point, the words ‘For equal rights, honour and peace’ – the Party-approved slogan – appear below the picture.

In keeping with Hitler’s rejection of multifaceted propaganda and the insistence, expounded in detail in Mein Kampf, that the ‘sluggishness’ of the masses meant that only the ‘thousandfold repetition of simple concepts’ would be effective, the claim that Nazism meant peace was endlessly repeated right up to the outbreak of hostilities – often with startling effrontery. In 1936, for instance, when Hitler re-occupied the Rhineland, he sought to soften the Allies’ attitude by indicating a readiness to conclude non-aggression treaties with France and Belgium and return to the League of Nations. The offer was palpably specious, but enabled propagandists to gloss Hitler’s violation of a solemn treaty as a statesmanlike act conducive to peace: Kladderadatsch rushed out a cartoon showing Hitler as the good sower who scatters ‘The seed of peace, not dragon’s teeth’, while Peace in the background blows a trumpet fanfare (plate 2). Equally, in 1938, at the very moment Hitler was preparing the Anschluss and the destruction of Czechoslovakia, Die Brennessel prefaced its special number on ‘Traffic’ with a cartoon which showed a policeman holding up the traffic so that Peace could cross the road. Whether the traffic lights show
The propagandaists had not merely to reassure the public, however: they had also to prepare it for the war that was the natural goal of Hitler's policies. Accordingly, a relentless campaign was conducted to show how Germany was exposed to the malice and military might of its neighbours, in the light of whose bellicose attitudes rearmament was a sacred duty. As early as August 1933, Die Brennessel showed a German family faced with a world in flames, while a huge skull and cross bones made up of hostile aeroplanes threatens them from above (plate 3). In the same way, Simplicissimus could show the sky over a German town blackened with falling bombs and remark that if this should happen, there would be no fear of a German counter-attack. The failure of Germany's neighbours to respond in kind to the disarmament forced on Germany in the Treaty of Versailles provided a certain plausible justification for the introduction of German rearmament by the 'Law for the Reconstruction of the National Defence Forces' in March 1935. In a cartoon entitled 'In Reply to the Lie of Universal Disarmament - Universal Military Service' Simplicissimus neatly subsumed the argument by showing 'der deutsche Michel', who is protected only by a low garden fence and confronts a grotesquely over-equipped French soldier, wearing his gas mask and protected by myriad aircraft (plate 4). 'Or does Monsieur think that my night-cap (his traditional attribute) is adequate protection for me?' he asks.

In anticipation of Hitler's subsequent 'War Directive No. 1', the threat to peace was constantly declared to be the result of the intransigence and provocation of Germany's neighbours, no matter how grotesquely untrue or inherently improbable such a claim might be. Argument and evidence yielded to repeated assertion. A typical case was the response to the entirely valid strictures of the League of Nations that German rearmament was disturbingly inconsistent with the principle of respect for treaty obligations and threatened disarmament plans currently under international discussion. The members of the League were threatening Germany, it was claimed; they were not really in favour of peace and so were forcing Germany to rearm. Klauderadatsch encapsulated the official position by showing Peace, her arms and eyes raised to Heaven in an impassioned, despairing appeal, leaving the Palace of the League with the cry: 'Heaven, you are my witness that they did not bother to ask about me!' (plate 5).

Naturally, in the engineering of the Czech and Polish crises the German press was required to propagate appropriately similar views. Simplicissimus' comment on the Polish question in May 1939 will stand for a host of others (plate 6). Peace, naked and armed only with his traditional olive/palm branch, walks along a path in a narrow defile. Hidden by a bend in the path, three heavily armed Poles lie in ambush, ready to mow Peace down with their machine gun. The text quotes the proverbial line with which Schiller's Wilhelm Tell waits to kill his enemy: 'Through this sunken path he has to come'. The inappropriateness of the allegory might have disturbed more informed readers: Tell was waiting to kill a tyrant who had outraged humanity, not ambushing an innocent victim. But such considerations were of importance only for pedants and intellectuals; Hitler had written in Mein Kampf that propaganda was not intended for intellectuals, but for the broad masses, whose 'intellectual capacity is only
very limited, whose understanding is small, but whose forgetfulness by contrast is great'.

This contempt for the public is clearly evident in the way Nazi propaganda was capable of changing direction the moment the political plans of the Party required it. At the time of the Munich agreement and well into 1939, for instance, Chamberlain was fêted as a great statesman and a man of peace. Then suddenly, after the British guarantee to Poland, he was represented as a hypocritical warmonger whose aim was to 'encircle' Germany. Nowhere is this contempt for the memory and intelligence of the public more evident than in the attitude to the Soviet Union. The assertion that Bolshevism was 'World Enemy No. 1', a Jewish conspiracy which aimed at the subjugation of independent nations and the destruction of all civilised values was the great theme of Nazi propaganda. Especially after Stalin's show trials and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Nazi propagandists never tired of representing Stalin as a monster, a latterday Ghenghis Khan or Ivan the Terrible, who butchered his associates and starved millions to death at the behest of his Jewish masters. Plate 7 is a typical example from *Der Stürmer* of 1937. Stalin sits on his throne, his hammer and sickle dripping blood, while through the window the results of his activities are seen in the pile of corpses and the gallows from which his opponents hang. The text emphasises that he is a mere puppet, however:

A tool of Juda, in the hand of Jews.
He thinks he determines the fate of a whole world.

As late as April 27th, 1939, the SS journal, *Das schwarze Korps*, could comment on Anglo-Russian negotiations by showing Stalin offering a bloody hand to an equally bloody John Bull, fresh from atrocities in Palestine. With the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in August 1939, however, the same journal could celebrate Germany's alliance with her long-standing foe as a
master-stroke of the Führer that had thwarted Chamberlain’s attempts to repeat the 1914 ‘encirclement’ of Germany (plate 8). That this master-stroke had been achieved by an alliance with the blood-stained instrument of international Jewry was conveniently ignored.

With the coming of hostilities the echoing of official views was unmistakable. Building on folk memories of the ‘pervidy’ of Great Britain, the British were presented as the arch-villains responsible for the outbreak of war. The French, by contrast, were depicted as the stooges of British policy. Göring, in a speech of September 9th, 1939, had revived the hoary notion from 1914 that ‘Britain would fight to the last Frenchman’. On September 18th, in a speech in Danzig, Hitler similarly declared the French to be the dupes of pernicious Albion:

If it is declared in England that the War will last for three years, I can only say that I am sorry for the French poilu. He has no idea what he is fighting for. He simply knows he has been given the honour of fighting for at least three years.

Naturally such sentiments were widely reported and could readily be translated into visual terms.

Plate 9 is a lurid variant of what immediately became a stock theme. An ugly, buck-toothed Brit isher with his characteristic glengarry is harrassing a scantily clad Frenchwoman, while through the window French troops can be seen marching off to fight. The title indicates the ‘varying roles’ of the two allies and this is underlined in the text: ‘Frenchmen to the front! We Tommies will undertake the care of the Parisienne!’ Elsewhere, the Britisher is shown as the second man on the tandem who lets the poilu in front do all the pedalling, or as a bird-nester, who stays safely on the ground, while his French assistant hangs on by his fin gernails to the ledge onto which he has been encouraged to venture in an attempt to rob the German eagle’s eyrie. In another variant the Britisher is the death’s-headed new bell-ringer of Notre Dame wildly ringing the bell whose clapper is a French soldier.

The treatment of the Russian campaign, equally, illustrates how press comment was a mere echo of official attitudes, down to the imagery used. In the proclamation intended to mark the tenth anniversary of the Nazi assumption of power, Hitler declared on January 30th, 1943, that ‘Today our soldiers are fighting in the infinite spaces of the East to save Europe from destruction’. (The armies encircled at Stalingrad were in the process of capitulation on that very day.) On February 5th, Rosenberg wrote in the Party’s Volks ischer Beobachter: ‘In the plains of the savage and ravaged East, Augustus and Pericles are being defended no less than Goethe and Beethoven’. Subsequently both Göring and Goebbels enlarged on the theme that Germany was a barrier defending European civilisation from the barbaric hordes of the Asiatic steppes. The cartoonists’ response was immediate. Under the title ‘Europe’s Protective Wall’, Der Stürmer showed troops in snow fatigues making a human bulwark against the assault of the steppes.

Simplicissimus illustrated ‘The Watch in the East’ with a lonely German infantryman at the window of a ruined farmhouse above the caption ‘I am standing here for Europe’ (plate 10). Conversely, of course, the readiness of the Allies to act on the principle that the enemy of their enemy must be a friend could be represented as a ‘Crime against Europe’. To the evident approval of a Jew and his decadent mistress, Churchill and Eden, supported by Roosevelt and his wife, are shown releasing the ogre of Asiatic Bolshevism from the cage in which he had hitherto been imprisoned. Elsewhere Churchill’s love of painting is exploited in an allegory in which he paints the whole of the European map red with colour supplied by Molotov, while Anthony Eden’s name provided a convenient pun to reflect on the new Garden of Eden with its Cossacks and concentration camps that he was ready to concede to the Soviets in Eastern Europe.

But perhaps the most remarkable
aspect of German propaganda of this period was the way in which it could 'turn traitor'. The treatment of Stalingrad is a good example. On February 10th, 1943, the title-page of Simplicissimus carried a drawing of a giant Frederick the Great by Gulbransson. Recalling Frederick's dogged refusal to accept defeat in the darkest days of the Seven Years' War, the caption quoted his famous words: 'If I had more than my life, I would sacrifice it for my country.' Two further cartoons reflected directly on the German defeat. Erich Schilling evoked the 'Spirit of Stalingrad', a gigantic, battle-worn, but defiant German infantryman, reduced to holding his rifle like a club, who looks down on a smaller, very Asiatic Stalin and says, 'You think you have defeated me, Stalin, and yet you will be defeated by me.' A further cartoon showed two German infantrymen 'dug in' in a bleak, snow-covered landscape (plate 11). The text modifies lines from the Edda:

Possessions pass and races die,
And you will die like them.
But one thing I know that never dies:
The fame of the illustrious dead.

Goebbels saw in the defeat - the worst ever experienced by any German army - an 'image of grandeur truly worthy of classical antiquity' that could be used to galvanise the nation to shed its 'half-heartedness' and emulate the British 'Dunkirk Spirit', and the cartoonists' intention was clearly to echo this view. But Goebbels misjudged things. In spite of the success of his subsequent call for 'total war' in his address to the Party faithful in the Berlin Sportpalast, the triumphalism of yesteryear had disappeared. No longer is Churchill seen as a snowman who may survive the winter, but would melt in the spring; nor is Stalin, now shown as a parody of Augustus asking the executioner to 'give him back his generals' nor does Tommy Atkins complain further to Churchill that he has no prospect of using the Siegfried Line to hang out his underwear, sadly soiled after recent experiences. The possibility of defeat, vaguely sensed since mid-1942, had become a frighteningly real threat, in the face of which assur-

The Russian campaign, captured by Simplicissimus (in plates 10 and 11), replaces caricature with a more realistic style of drawing in its efforts to highlight the heroic qualities of the 'ordinary' German soldier prepared to sacrifice himself for the noble cause of the Fatherland.

ances of final victory rang hollow. The 'Spirit of Stalingrad' had presided over the utter destruction of an army of almost a quarter of a million men. The most effective propagandists had nothing to offer for their readers' comfort, except unrelieved Wagnerian gloom and the promise of immortality through death. However appealing in opera or poetry, such a prospect was scarcely calculated to raise morale among the population at large.

The impending destruction of the British Empire was another officially propagated theme that had equally negative implications. Late in 1942 Goebbels had mused in Das Reich that:

When examining the history of the gradual disintegration of the Roman Empire, one finds a striking resem-
The inevitable collapse of the British Empire became a regular theme in German propaganda as the country's own defeat appeared imminent (plates 12 and 13) — as if this presented a thread of consolation to a Germany racked with its own misfortune.

Thereafter this 'undelivered verdict' was never long absent from German propaganda. Initially the US was seen as the beneficiary of Churchill's warmongering. Kladderadatsch mocks American readiness to support Britain's war by showing Uncle Sam as 'A good Samaritan' who holds up a battered and war-worn John Bull and incidentally steals his wallet. In much the same spirit Das schwarze Korps commented on the perceived absurdity of Churchill's declaration that 'It is my intention to preserve the complete integrity of the British Empire' by showing him as a manikin postulating from his position in a giant Roosevelt's pocket (plate 12). Roosevelt, also appears as an outsized 'Uncle from America' who refusces the stool offered to him by Churchill and sits down heavily on the diminutive George VI, on the chair of the British Empire. Simplicissimus similarly produced a drawing of Roosevelt on a ladder, busily plucking the apple harvest of the British Empire, while suggesting to the nonplussed Churchill that he should keep a lookout.

As the war progressed, however, cartoonists began to envisage a world in which the British Empire would be divided between Russia and the US. Kladderadatsch responded to the news that the US had declared its intention to build a 'new democracy' in association with the USSR by showing Roosevelt and Stalin sitting in comfortable arrogance at their table, while Churchill appears as a busy and disgruntled waiter. Roosevelt addresses him: 'You can fetch us two more whiskies, John, and then you can leave us alone'. After the Teheran Conference, where Churchill seemed to be thrust into a minor role, Simplicissimus showed Churchill as a tubby, self-satisfied, little white hunter setting off on a hunt accompanied by Stalin and Roosevelt, who appear as two large cannibals (plate 13). In the background a grinning Mrs Roosevelt stirs a prominent cooking pot. 'If the hunt is not a success', says one cannibal to the other, 'We have always got Fatty here'. Less humorously, Das schwarze Korps shows Churchill in a cemetery, digging a grave, while Roosevelt and Stalin look on, wreathed in smiles. The text explains that 'The old grave-digger' has become suspicious. 'What are these two so pleased about? Do they perhaps think that this hole is for me?' he asks with understandable concern.

The validity of the prognosis is remarkable, but one did not need to be one of Hitler's hated intellectuals to realise that such visions of a dismembered British Empire could only become reality once Nazi Germany was defeated. As in the closing stages of the First World War, it is as though German propagandists, aware that their chances of winning were diminishing, wished to assure themselves and their readers that if Germany was destroyed, at least Britain would be ruined with it. In the midst of such officially sanctioned 'defeatist' thinking, assertions that Germany would triumph in the end assumed involuntarily pathetic overtones. Even in a totalitarian and co-ordinated society, the political cartoon could still make significant statements about the real state of the nation. That these statements were formulated at the behest of men for whom truth was an alien concept simply heightens their significance.

FOR FURTHER READING:

W.A. Coupe is emeritus professor of German at Reading University and is the author of German Political Satires from the Reformation to the Second World War (6 Vols. Kraus, New York, 1985-93).