

Photography in Propaganda

By Kathleen Collins

Utopias, Dystopias, and Engineering “Progress”

#38—Karl Qualls

In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag claims, “Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder,” making a startling, yet valid accusation that a camera is a weapon, able to manipulate and take ownership of anything in its path. Throughout World War Two, photographs were used as a means of controlling both subjects and audiences. People have a natural tendency to believe whatever is evident in an image, which makes photography the perfect foundation for propaganda. *This paper argues that photographs give inaccurate representations of truth because of their ability to be manipulated; however, because photographs are commonly accepted as factual, they have been used as a means of control in democratic and authoritarian governments alike.*

Democratic and authoritarian governments have both used photography as a way to seize control over a people; while the final goals of these contrary governments were completely different, the means used to obtain their goals were alike. During the 1930s, several major events were going on throughout the world: in Germany, the Nazi Party was in power with Hitler promoting racial “purity”, and the Great Depression was causing crisis throughout the United States, with Franklin Roosevelt avidly promoting his New Deal programs. The Nazi Party issued anti-Semitic propaganda in order to unite the population against Jews, while in America, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) distributed thousands of pictures of poverty and devastation in rural America in order to gain support for Franklin Roosevelt’s economic recovery plan.

In Germany, photographic propaganda was often engineered to make Jews look scandalous and uncontrollable. In 1937, an exhibition began in Munich titled *The Eternal Jew*, containing 265 unappealing images of Jews, making it easier for society to dehumanize them. The Eternal Jew exhibition ran for about a year from 1937 to 1938 in Munich. In the brief amount of time that this exhibition was in place, about half a million people came to view it, with about 5,000 people visiting every day. Over this time, the Secret Police reported there to be a sharp rise in anti-Semitic feelings and in violence against Jews.¹

The goal of these photographs was to associate Jews with racial impurity and to expose a fictitious Jewish- Bolshevism conspiracy that Jews played a large role in the Communist movement. The exhibit claimed to show “Jews’ typical outward features” and to portray their allegedly Asiatic and Middle-Eastern characteristics.² Photographs in *The Eternal Jew* exhibition illustrated the Nazi attempt to associate Jews with the Soviet Union and with African Americans, who were considered racially impure (see figures one and two). In *The Third Reich: A New History*, Michael Burleigh maintains that, “propaganda encouraged and incited people to...entertain thoughts which under normal circumstances they might have remained blissfully ignorant of.”³ *The Eternal Jew* photographs gave people visual “evidence” of Jews’ wrongdoing and incited feelings of racial superiority that had not been present before. If people had not previously

¹ David Welch, “Nazi Propaganda,” *BBC*, February 17, 2011.

² *Ibid.*

³ Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000): 330.

associated Jews with communism, they might after seeing a photograph with a Jewish man next to a Soviet flag.

As Susan Sontag claimed, “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. To photograph someone is a subliminal murder.”⁴ In Nazi Germany propaganda, the photographers had an immeasurable amount of power over the Jews, because with their cameras, they possessed the ability to portray Jews however they wanted—they had complete control over who they were. They could “possess” them and, in a way, “murder” them by taking away who they are.

Many scholars, including Peter Fritzsche, author of *Life and Death in the Third Reich*, believe Nazi propaganda photographs to be staged, inaccurate representations of reality.⁵ Figures three, four, and five were published in a German propaganda magazine called *Illustrierter Beobachter*, in an article titled, “The New Game: The S.A. Cleans up the Liebknecht House.” These photos show children reenacting the Nazi suppression of communists in concentration camps through different games. They also show children pretending to capture and kill everyone in the Liebknecht House, the German Communist Party headquarters. These photographs advocated the inclusion of children into acts of violence against specific groups that the Nazis looked down upon. They also made the claim that this prejudice against communists was a basic, everyday aspect of life by showing children carelessly playing games that involve the murder of communists.

⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador USA: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 14-15.

⁵ Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 42-44.

Frtizsche argues that these images were staged, pointing out the misspelling of the word “Liebknecht” in figure three, where it is instead spelled “Libknecht.”⁶ However, whether or not they were staged, the images captured a small portion of German life and applied it to the whole—causing citizens to believe that their children should also be participating in this.

Photography is a powerful tool in any society—whether it is a corrupt dictatorship as in Germany, or a democracy as in America. The FSA photographs, although intended to improve the lives of rural Americans, were politically motivated and had the intention of controlling the public; therefore, they can be considered propaganda. While the FSA photographers were given instructions not to stage their subjects and not to manipulate their photographs in any way,⁷ the presence of the camera is, in itself, a manipulation; Subjects are inclined to change their behavior in the presence of a camera. Moreover, the subjects in the FSA photographs may have been particularly disposed to behaving a certain way in front of the camera, knowing that the photos could result in government aid. Another way the FSA photographer could have easily manipulated their photographs and viewers was simply by only photographing negative, unappealing scenes, leaving viewers only to guess what the rest of rural America looks like.

“Migrant Mother” by Dorothea Lange is perhaps the most famous FSA photograph, and one of the most famous photographs of all time. It portrays a mother and her two children looking exhausted and disheveled, and it encourages sympathy in the viewer (see figure 6). After taking this picture, Lange said, in an interview with

⁶ Ibid., 43.

⁷ Michael L. Carlebach, “Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration.” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 8 (Spring, 1988): 6–25.

Popular Photography that “[the mother] seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me.”⁸ Lange explicitly points out that the presence of the camera changed the behavior of the woman. She even admitted in an interview that her photographs incorporate her own emotions and contain bias; “[A documentary photograph] is not a factual photograph per se. [It] carries with it another thing, a quality in the subject that the artist responds to.”⁹ Photographer’s bias is unavoidable; therefore no photograph can be completely factual. In fact, the woman in this photograph, Florence Owens Thompson resented the photo that Lange took of her. Years later, Thompson’s daughter said, “She was a very strong woman. She was a leader. I think that’s one of the reasons she resented the photo—because it didn’t show her in that light.”¹⁰ This prominent photograph, which so many people reacted to, in fact portrays a woman that never existed. Instead, it depicts a woman that Lange constructed with her camera.

As the 1930s went on, Roy Stryker, the head of the FSA’s information division, changed the guidelines for what the FSA photographers were to capture with their cameras. He told them to “emphasize the idea of abundance – the ‘horn of plenty’ and pour maple syrup over it,” to reflect some of the improvements in rural America.¹¹ However, by controlling what photographers should include and omit and by giving guidelines as to how America should be represented lessened the reality of these so-called “factual” pictures.

⁸ *Popular Photography*, Feb, 1960

⁹ Dorothea Lange, *Mary Ellen Mark: 25 Years by Marianne Fulton*, Page: 26-27.

¹⁰ Library of Congress. “Migrant Mother: Print and Photographs Division.”

http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?awh:6:./temp/~ammem_d3PO...

¹¹ Michael L. Carlebach, “Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration,” 19.

Leonard Doob, a psychology professor at Yale University, once said, “The lens of the camera is no more objective than the lens of the human eye; the rays of light passing through it are regulated by the attitudes of the photographer.”¹² Every photographer who has ever taken a picture has done so with a certain intention. This intention itself is enough to place bias in the photo. Most people do not recognize this bias, however. There are three common misconceptions about photographs: this actually happened, the photographer played no role in the creation of this, and this scene is representative.¹³ These misconceptions are exactly why Nazi photographs were so effective—people considered them to be evidence of Jews’ wrongdoing; they believed these images to be reality, not considering the photographer’s ability to manufacture a fake, alternate reality and not considering the bias that the photographer certainly had against Jews. Furthermore, these misconceptions are also what allowed the FSA photographs to be so influential; viewers did not consider the subjective eye of the photographer.

The United States and Germany had two seemingly completely different governments during the 1930s—the U.S. with a democracy and Germany with a dictatorship. Nevertheless, both countries seized control over their people using photography as a method of manipulation. While the photographs in one government aimed to dehumanize and degrade a people, the photos in another aim to expose the horror faced by a group of people. The purposes of the two groups of photographs are noticeably different, with one intending to help and one intending to harm. However,

¹² Leonard Doob, *Public Opinion and Propaganda 2* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1966), 446.

¹³ Chris Meyer. “The FSA Photographs: Information or Propaganda?” *WR: Journal of the Arts & Sciences* 1, no. 1. <http://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-1/the-fsa-photographs-information-or-propaganda/>

both were politically motivated and aimed to sway the public in a certain direction. Both authoritarian Germany and democratic America used corrupt means in order to achieve their end goals.



Figure 1. Caption: “The Jew in his element: With Blacks in a Parisian night club.

Der Ewige Jude, Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP., Franz Eher, Nachf., 1937.



Figure 3. Caption: “The Liebnecht House’s last defenders”

"Das neue Spiel: S.A. räumt Liebnechtshaus," *Illustrierter Beobachter*, 15 April 1933.



Figure 4. Caption: “The Liebnecht House is captured.”

"Das neue Spiel: S.A. räumt Liebnechtshaus," *Illustrierter Beobachter*, 15 April 1933.



Figure 2. This image portrays a warning of eastern European “subhumans”

Der Ewige Jude, Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP., Franz Eher, Nachf., 1937.



Figure 5. Caption: “One is weary after hard political labors.”

"Das neue Spiel: S.A. räumt Liebnechtshaus," *Illustrierter Beobachter*, 15 April 1933.

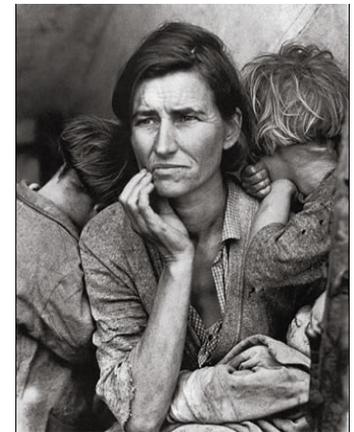


Figure 6. Caption: "Destitute peapickers in California; a 32 year old mother of seven children. February 1936."

Dorothea Lange, "Migrant Mother," *Library of Congress*.

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This article gave me a lot of information on the intent of the FSA photographs and helped me come to the conclusion that these photographs are, in fact, propaganda. It also directed me to Roy Stryker, the head of the FSA information division and how he directed the photographers, asking them to evoke certain emotions or ideas with their images. The FSA images were intended to be documentary, factual images of the west, but, as all photographs do, they turned out to be the photographer's interpretation of the scene.

Fulton, Marianne. *Mary Ellen Mark: 25 Years*. Boston: Little Brown, 1991, 26-27.

Library of Congress. "Migrant Mother: Print and Photographs Division."
http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?awh:6:/temp/~ammem_d3PO...

Doob, Leonard. *Public Opinion and Propaganda 2*. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1966), 446.

Burleigh, Michael. *The Third Reich: A New History*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2000.

Der Ewige Jude, Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP., Franz Eher, Nachf., 1937.

This book (translated: "The Eternal Jew") gave me some very important photographs that show the staged/ engineered aspect of photography and how it can be used in a negative, dehumanizing way. This primary source was important because I could find more information on what effect these photos had on society and how people reacted to them. It was also important to have a primary source showing exactly how cameras can be used to objectify humans.

