

# Semantics and the Use of Language in the Holocaust

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In order to fully understand the development and actions taken during what we know as “The Holocaust”, it is crucial to look at the issue of semantics. Semantics, like linguistics, is the study of language and how it evolves and changes over time. Words can mean different things based on their context, such as the time period in which it was spoken or written, or the location and cultural context in which it was used. These factors can have a heavy impact on how words are interpreted. During their twelve year reign, the National Socialist Party (known as the Nazis) took advantage of these discrepancies and used them for their own purposes. Their overarching goal was to exterminate the entirety of the Jewish people, as well as political prisoners, partisans, homosexuals, and the physically and mentally disabled. At least ten million people were killed during the Holocaust, and six million of those were Jews alone. While brute strength was vital in the “success” of the Nazis goals, their use of language during the period was just as important. The main foci of this paper are the use of semantics by the Nazis to conceal their actions, the evolution and development of the German language during the Holocaust, and the propaganda used to blame the Jewish population and indoctrinate the German people.

### **Nazi Deutsch**

The first and most commonly found example is that of the Nazis using semantics and word variations in order to cover up and hide the true nature of their actions. They were able to do this in a variety of ways. One of which was the formation of “Nazi Deutsch”, a specific “language” characterized by the use of terms that were almost exclusively found in use during the Holocaust. German was already in a sense tailored to be used as the language of the Holocaust, especially regarding its numerous vocabularies of terms regarding destruction.<sup>1</sup> The Nazis augmented this expansive vocabulary by creating new terms that euphemistically represent

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<sup>1</sup> James Edward Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 4.

the actions the regime undertook against the Jewish population and other targeted groups. This practice became widespread during the time of Nazi *Sprachregelung*, or control over speech by the government.<sup>2</sup> One such word was *Schutzhaft*, which meant “taken into protective custody”.<sup>3</sup> The meaning behind *Schutzhaft* was broad and general, and granted the Nazis unparalleled control and power over their captives. Nazi officials and security forces used *Schutzhaft* as a cover for imprisonment, torture, and murder under the umbrella of legality and justice. As the Nazis became increasingly powerful, they took in political enemies, partisans, Jews, and the mentally ill under the cover of *Schutzhaft*.<sup>4</sup> They were essentially able to do whatever they wanted to them, including imprisoning them without proper cause, due process, or right to a trial. Many of these victims were sent off to labor camps or killed and never heard from again. Early on in the regime’s life, many Germans and other civilians were ignorant of the true meaning behind *Schutzhaft* and assumed that proper protocol was followed. The exact meaning of the word was purposefully kept vague and protected bureaucrats in particular. Accountability disappeared behind *Schutzhaft*, so those in charge were able to make any order they wanted without being questioned; only those within the government understood the full meaning behind it. In a sense it was a code word, such as those used in other internal documents. Another similar term, *Sonderbehandlung*, or “Special Treatment”, carries an intimidating feeling behind it in the present day, but during the Holocaust it was often marked as “S.B.” on files for those intended to be executed.<sup>5</sup> Anyone could be targeted for *Sonderbehandlung*, but very few people actually knew that the special treatment in store was execution or torture. The Nazi Party first employed these mutated words only within the government offices and under extreme secrecy. However, as

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Michael and Karin Doerr. *Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi-German: An English Lexicon of the Language of the Third Reich* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Michael and Doerr. *Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi-German*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Karin Doerr, “Words of Fear, Fear of Words” *Explorations in Anthropology* 9, no. 1 [February 2009]: 50.

their power and influence spread, they slowly introduced these words into everyday life without fear of repercussions. This resulted in the creation of the *Executionsvokabular*, whose English translation can be clearly seen. As summary executions expanded and became more commonplace, the Nazis found that they required more words in order to fully cover the variety of creative and cruel ways they used to kill. These words were created to purposely hide their motives from the public, and disguised their plans while they were put into action. An entire sub-category of *Nazi-Deutsch* was created by the Nazi government and military leaders for use in all of their written correspondence and reports. This protected them in case the letters were intercepted, as the reader would not be able to fully understand the unfamiliar words that had been newly-created.

As the Second World War and the genocide against the Jewish population progressed, so did the need for the German language to evolve alongside it. When the Nazis started forcing all Jews to relocate into ghettos, correspondence between the government and the administration in charge of the ghettos included many similar terms, such as *Sonderaktion*, *Sonderzulage*, and *Sonderkonto*. Like *Sonderbehandlung*, these words were more variations of “special treatment.” “Special Action,” “Special Rations,” and “Special Account,” were all used to flag individuals for forced labor, resettlement, or simply execution.<sup>6</sup> Any outsider who might have read these official orders would assume that the mentioned individuals were receiving medical treatment, extra food rations, or preferential treatment perhaps due to bribes or connections. In truth, these were almost all euphemisms for mass-killings of Jews within the ghettos and the killing sites across Eastern Europe. The pogroms, such as the infamous “Kristallnacht” in 1938 were most often referred to simply and euphemistically as *Aktionen*. When Nazis came into a town and

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<sup>6</sup> Kurt Jonassohn and Karin Doerr, “The Persistence of Nazi German” *Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies*, [April 1999].

mentioned an “Aktion,” they were usually discussing the mass deployment of violence against Jews in that area.<sup>7</sup> Since such language was created to deceive and cover up these procedures, many civilians (both Germans and Jews) were unaware of the plans prior to their occurrence. The Nazis used the word “liquidated” (*Liquidiert*) to describe the mass murder of a community.<sup>8</sup> By using this language, they de-humanized the Jews from human beings to the equivalent of excess material and deceived many people regarding their true intentions. The Nuremburg War Crimes Trials demonstrated this rather clearly. The minutes of the agenda discussion regarding the mass killings were difficult to decipher, as all the terms and the language used within the conversation were specifically chosen to veil the actual meaning behind them.<sup>9</sup> If someone not “in-the-know” were to have overheard the conversation, they would have heard a seemingly innocuous conversation without any hint of the criminal plans behind them. However, as the war continued, more people began to understand and decipher the intentions behind these words. Jews became much more aware of the meaning behind *Aktion*, and understood the danger behind it when it came to roundups and forced migrations to ghettos and concentration camps.

### **Creation of New Terms**

Nazi Deutsch also led to the creation of many terms that previously had not existed before World War II. The term “*Deutscher Gruss*” was created to describe Hitler’s salute.<sup>10</sup> This salute was one of the most iconic symbols of the Third Reich and became a part of everyday life. Before it became required for daily use, the “Heil Hitler” could be used to assert which “side” someone was on. Those who said “Heil Hitler” were considered a comrade, or *Volksgenosse*,

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<sup>7</sup> Jonassohn and Doerr, “The Persistence of Nazi German.”

<sup>8</sup> Michael Berenbaum, “Sonderkommando: Testimony from Evidence,” in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed., Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 63.

<sup>9</sup> Jonassohn and Doerr, “Persistence of Nazi German.”

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

while those who might have chosen to simply say “Good afternoon” were looked upon with suspicion.<sup>11</sup> As the persecution of the Jews moved from spontaneous violence to governmental policies, the *Abstammunsnachweis*, an official certificate of origin, was required to prove citizenship status. These documents were frequently checked by police at checkpoints or simply on the street, and were used to track down and further terrorize and intimidate Jews and other foreigners. German citizens began meticulously tracking down their family trees in order to create their own *Ahnenpass*, a racial passport, to keep on hand to instantly prove their citizenship if they were questioned.<sup>12</sup> Once Hitler started preaching the importance of eugenics in developing the “Master Race”, the *Erbtauglichkeit* certificate became required in order to reproduce. If a German couple married and wanted to have children, they first had to get permission from a government organization in order to do so.<sup>13</sup> This ensured that only pure “Aryan” Germans would reproduce, and those with mental or physical disabilities, the poor, and those who did not fit the ideal standard would not be able to pass along their “defective” genes to the next generation.

The Nazi eugenics program serves as an intense example of how language developed during this time. The eugenics program focused on the sterilization of anyone considered unfit, either by race, disability, or even social class. Even the term for “eugenics” changed multiple times, from “hereditary hygiene” (*Erbhygiene*) to “reproductive hygiene” (*Fortpflanzungshygiene*), and the designation given to it by Aryan supremacists, “race hygiene” (*Rassenhygiene*).<sup>14</sup> The use of social class as a contributing factor was also seen rather frequently. Those living in the lower classes were often seen as degenerates (*entartet*), and many

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<sup>11</sup>Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 22.

<sup>12</sup>Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich*, 76.

<sup>13</sup>Jonassohn and Doerr, “Persistence of Nazi German.”

<sup>14</sup>Henry Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 11.

German Eugenic scientists were against social welfare that helped the poor. Just as intelligence and success was strived for in German society, the poor were often blamed for their situation. They believed that by coddling the degenerate lower classes, the German government was preventing natural selection and “survival of the fittest” from occurring.<sup>15</sup> This was considered a part of “Exclusion Genetics”, which was created to help improve the “racial stock” and gene pool of Germany.<sup>16</sup> Anyone who was not considered ideal stock was not authorized to reproduce. This “improvement through exclusion” (Aufartung durch Ausmerzung) was supported by the increased use of genealogies by the German people in order to prove their pure and Aryan ancestry.<sup>17</sup> The mixing of German blood with Jewish, Gypsy, or people of other races to create “hybrids” was considered a grievous offense.<sup>18</sup> The term for these hybrids, *Mischlinge*, is related to the word *Rassenmischung*, or “mingling of the races”.<sup>19</sup> Germans were encouraged to marry and reproduce only with other “pure” Germans. The “alien Jewish penetration” (Judische Uberfremdung) was especially singled out as the distinctive threat to German race purity.<sup>20</sup> Exclusion was not the only means used by the Nazis to improve German bloodstock. Sterilization measures were taken for all those who were considered “Inferiors”. These *Minderwertige* could be chosen for any number of reasons based on a variety of criteria.<sup>21</sup> One of the main foci for sterilization was that of hereditary diseases. Anyone who was found to carry an

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<sup>15</sup> Weiss, “Race Hygiene Movement,” p. 201; Bergmann, Czarnowski, and Ehmann, “Objekte humangenetischer Forschung,” p. 122. Cited within Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> Bergmann, Czarnowski, and Ehmann, “Objekte humangenetischer Forschung,” p. 132; Muller-Hill, “Selektion,” p. 144; On Nazi language, see Klemperer, *LTI: Aus dem Notizbuch eines Philologen*. Cited within Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Bergmann, Czarnowski, and Ehmann, “Objekte humangenetischer Forschung,” p. 130. Cited within Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Muller-Hill, “Selektion,” p. 141. Cited within Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 30.

undesirable disease was referred to as an *Erbkrank*, and submitted for sterilization procedures.<sup>22</sup> These standards were eventually raised to “include anyone whose behavior was ‘alien to the community’ (gemainshaftfremd).”<sup>23</sup> These persons were known as “Asozials”, a word whose English relation can be clearly seen.

### **Evolution of the German Language**

Nazi Deutsch, in addition to adding new words to the language, also changed the meaning of many German words and ideas. For example, the Nazis pushed the concept of extreme German nationalism, above all others. One way they did this was by morphing words such as “Blood” (*Blut*) and “Race” (*Rasse*) into compound terms which classified something as either “Pro-German”, or “anti-German”.<sup>24</sup> Anyone who had mixed blood, or “tainted blood” was considered non-German and therefore dangerous and untrustworthy. These people were classified as a “counter race”, or *Gegenrasse*, and were pushed out from German society. However, even the Nazis were forced to realize that the differences between Jews and non-Jews were frequently impossible to distinguish. One of the reasons that the Nazis required the Jews to wear the armband with the Jewish Star was for identification purposes, because many were physically indistinguishable from run-of-the-mill Germans. They did not want to risk letting a Jew escape them and go unnoticed. They considered a Jew who did not “look Jewish” to be “practicing mimicry” (*üben Nachahmung*).<sup>25</sup> Rather than just realizing that Jewish people do not all look similar, they believed that the Jews were purposely deceitful and were using their cunning to hide in plain sight. Many of these terms and ideas were inspired from Hitler’s

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<sup>22</sup> Reichsgesetzblatt 1933, 1:529, English translation in Control Commission for Germany (British Element), “Nazi Health Laws,” p. 1-5. Cited within Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Michael and Doerr. *Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi-German*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 151.

autobiography, “Mein Kampf”, and put into use within the government.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the Nazis compounded many terms together to represent the ideologies of the Regime.<sup>27</sup> This subject frequently comes up when discussing propaganda used by the Nazis.

One of the best examples of the evolution of Nazi Deutsch is the “Final Solution of the Jewish Race”. When the term “Final Solution” (*Endlösung*) was first put into use, it had nothing to do with the actual extermination of the Jewish race.<sup>28</sup> The first plan was *Umseidlung*, or “resettlement” of the Jewish race, by forcibly deporting the Jews out of Germany. However as the war continued and the Nazi policies became increasingly hostile, the term *Umseidlung* was changed to *Evakuierung* (evacuation).<sup>29</sup> While the difference may not seem that drastic, it exemplified the change of the mindset within the government. While “resettlement” was simply the movement of people from one area to another, “evacuation” hints that the German race was in danger from the Jews. This subtle change further expanded the conflict between the German civilians and Jews. Still, at this point the idea of the complete extermination of the Jewish race had not been considered. However, the evolution of *Endlösung* could easily be traced throughout the war. In 1935, *Endlösung* referred to the forced deportation of the Jews out of Germany. In 1939, *Endlösung* evolved to a more territorial policy, which involved forcing the Jews out of the surrounding countries in Europe as well.<sup>30</sup> Just two years later, genocide was included in the “Final Solution”. The first method of genocide used in the Final Solution was firing squads and mass executions. It was through this method that entire towns across Eastern Europe and Occupied Russia were “cleansed” of their Jewish populations, with a couple thousand men,

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<sup>26</sup> Jonassohn and Doerr, “Persistence of Nazi German.”

<sup>27</sup> Jonassohn and Doerr, “Persistence of Nazi German.”

<sup>28</sup> Rudolph Aschenauer, editor. *Ich, Adolf Eichmann: Ein historischer Zeugenbericht* (Augsburg, Germany: Druffel-Verlag, 1980).

<sup>29</sup> Doerr, “Words of Fear, Fear of Words,” 50.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew E. Mathis “General Semantics and Holocaust Denial.” *Et Cetera* 63, no. 1 [January 2006]: 58.

women, and children killed within a day or two. By 1942, however, killing methods of the *Endlösung* changed to using gas chambers as a more efficient means of extermination.<sup>31</sup> This method was also largely considered less “traumatizing” for the German perpetrators.

Another way the Nazis used semantics was through word substitution. This was frequently seen in relation to the persecution of the Jews. The Nazis would use mild, ambiguous terms such as “resettlement” to describe the mass forced migration of the Jews into ghettos or out of cities.<sup>32</sup> These were considered *Tarnwörter*, or code words, and were created by changing the situational meaning of a normal everyday word in order to conceal the actions they now stood for. “Resettlement” was vague and indistinct, and did not accurately describe the situation that was awaiting the Jews just outside the cities: extermination. *Umseidlung*, the German word for resettlement, was used to order the removal of the Jewish population out of Germany. However, as the Jews were banished from the surrounding countries as well, *Umseidlung* became synonymous with sending them to be killed. However, the Nazis were careful to keep the support of the German people, and often disguised their intentions. They used different words and phrases, such as “preventative detention” (*Sicherungsverwahrung*), “Assign to work” (*Zugeordnet zu arbeiten*), and “security services” (*Sicherheitsdienste*), which had the outward appearance of being normal military orders, but had separate meanings that only those within the government would understand.<sup>33</sup> During the ghettoization of the Jewish populations, the German authorities made the Jews pay for the building and maintenance of the ghettos. The Jewish police, the enforcers in the ghettos, were required to collect “contributions” (*Beitrag*) from the

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<sup>31</sup> Mathis, “General Semantics and Holocaust Denial,” 56.

<sup>32</sup> Doerr, “Words of Fear, Fear of Words,” 48.

<sup>33</sup> Michael and Doerr. *Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi-German*, 16.

Jews.<sup>34</sup> Despite the voluntary connotation behind the word “contribution,” these payments were mandatory and those who did not pay were consequently arrested and detained. The Nazis had some trouble deciding what to call some of the ghettos because while most were set up to house and detain the Jewish, a few short-term ghettos were created only as killing centers.<sup>35</sup> The Nazis ended up simply calling them “destruction ghettos” (*Vernichtungs Ghetto*) (or in private, “Nazi Death Traps”) in order to distinguish them from the normal ghettos in official orders or discussions.<sup>36</sup> However, their true meaning remained hidden from the public, who could only allude to what exactly was targeted for destruction.

The terms “labor camps” and “work camps” (*Arbeitslager*) were used to deceive both the Jewish and the German populations by hiding the fact that some of the camps were set up as death camps. Many of the Jews believed the work camps would at least provide them with a bed and food, which was more than many of them had been receiving while living in the ghettos or on the run. The Germans, too, were able to turn a blind eye to where the Jews were being sent; as many of them honestly believed that they were just being sent out to work on farms out in the country or chose to convince themselves of this. Neither party knew immediately that some of the labor camps were instead death camps that had been set up for mass extermination. By the time many of them realized the true fate waiting at these “work camps”, it was too late. The Nazis were able to hide the true nature of many of the camps, simply because they were able to

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<sup>34</sup> Christopher R. Browning, ““Alleviation” and “Compliance”: The Survival Strategies of the Jewish Leadership in the Wierzbnik Ghetto and Starachowice Factory Slave Labor Camps” in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed., Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 29.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Dean, “Life and Death in the “Gray Zone” of Jewish Ghettos in Nazi-Occupied Europe: The Unknown, the Ambiguous, and the Disappeared” in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed., Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 210.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Dean, “Life and Death in the “Gray Zone” of Jewish Ghettos in Nazi-Occupied Europe: The Unknown, the Ambiguous, and the Disappeared” in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed., Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 210. From Roman Mogilanski, ed., *The Ghetto Anthology: A Comprehensive Chronicle of the Extermination of Jewry in Nazi Death Camps and Ghettos in Poland* (Los Angeles: American Congress of Jews from Poland and Survivors of Concentration Camps, 1985).

exploit some “loopholes” when it came to title and classification of the camp. For example, Belzec, in Poland, was not technically considered a “camp”, because it did not have the facilities to house and feed its prisoners. Instead they were killed immediately after arriving.<sup>37</sup> Tartak, located in Starachowice, Poland, was another exception as well. It had no fences and no guards, so it did not fit the criteria of a “concentration camp”. Several hundred Jews were sent to work at the sawmill there and build shipping crates. Despite the lack of guards and fences, almost nobody tried to escape because the surrounding area was far more dangerous for Jews than the actual site.<sup>38</sup> If these camps were found and investigated, the Nazis could claim that they were not a *Konzentrationslager* due to a technicality. Auschwitz was primarily built around the Buna factory for the purpose of producing synthetic rubber. Prisoners were sent there for four years to toil in the factory, and yet not a single pound of synthetic rubber ever came out of the camp.<sup>39</sup>

In terms of the concentration camps, the word *Selektion* was the barrier between life and death. When the Jews and other “unwanted” arrived at camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, they were immediately taken off the cattle cars and chosen to either be sent to the labor camp to work, or be sent to the gas chambers to be killed. Children were immediately chosen for death and usually their parents were taken with them to be killed as well. The old, the infirm, the crippled, and even the weak looking were usually sent to their deaths immediately.<sup>40</sup> The young and fit were sent to the camps to work like slaves until the next cattle car came in, after which there would be another *Selektion* that would have the new “recruits” replace those who were weak

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<sup>37</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 256.

<sup>38</sup> Christopher R. Browning, ““Alleviation” and “Compliance”: The Survival Strategies of the Jewish Leadership in the Wierzbnik Ghetto and Starachowice Factory Slave Labor Camps” in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed., Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 30.

<sup>39</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 73.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

from starvation and cold. While the word *Selektion* is rather self-explanatory, the dictionary definition of it cannot state the fear and powerlessness that it came to stand for.<sup>41</sup>

### **Long Term Effects of Nazi Deutsch**

The use of Nazi Deutsch has forever marred the face of the German language, sometimes in ways that frequently aren't noticed or considered. One of the most common ways this is seen is with the use of proverbs and common phrases. "*Arbeit Macht Frei*", was the motto displayed on the front gates of Auschwitz and other concentration camps. While that phrase is not commonly used in every day German anymore, many phrases that are similar bring back painful memories. Other common quotes such as "Live and Let Live" (*Leben und leben lassen*) as well as "To each his own" (*Jedem das Seine*) were used by the Nazis during the Holocaust for their own purposes and to justify their actions.<sup>42</sup> These spoken and written phrases still carry the tragic connotation with them, even when spoken innocently. Another way that the Holocaust has permanently affected the German language is, for example, the word *Umschlagplatz*. It means "Railway shipping yard", and while it is not malicious or threatening in its nature, the word is now marred with the memory of the collection point for Jews. These railway shipping yards were frequently used as a holding yard for the Jews before they were sent to the camps, or deported. They would be fenced in the *Umschlagplatz* sometimes for days at a time with very little food or water. This collecting point characterized the desperation and hopelessness of the Jews in this situation.<sup>43</sup> While the word is still in use in modern Germany, there are those who hear it even in a relevant conversation and still think of the horrible detainment of the Jews before their deaths.

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<sup>41</sup> Doerr, "Words of Fear, Fear of Words," 49.

<sup>42</sup> Karin Doerr, "'To Each Their Own' (Jedem das Seine): The (Mis-)Use of German Proverbs in Concentration Camps and Beyond," in *Proverbium* 17 (2000): 71-90; and Wolfgang Brückner, "*Arbeit Macht Frei*": *Herkunft und Hintergrund der KZ-Devise* (Opladen, Germany: Leske and Budrich, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> Doerr, "Words of Fear, Fear of Words," 48.

Some words which were corrupted by the Nazis are no longer in use today. As with the *Umschlagplatz*, they frequently still represent the symbolic meaning rather than the literal meaning. Words like “resettlement” still may have that depraved double meaning behind them. Many of the terms that were used by the Nazis to cover up their actions are now considered off-limits. *Endlosung*, “The Final Solution” and the rallying point behind the Holocaust, is understandably absent in modern-day German.<sup>44</sup> However, not all the words have been taken out of use. Obviously that would not be conceivable, due simply to the mass amount of words and phrases that were used by the Nazis. As time has passed, many have come back into use. The German phrase, “Until you are blue in the face” is still allowed in general conversation, as it was created before Hitler’s reign and still has colloquial meaning behind it.<sup>45</sup> Despite the horrible memory of the gas chambers and the millions of people who were murdered by suffocation, the phrase was able to revert back to its original (innocent) meaning. Even *Aktion* and *Sonderaktion* have been recycled into modern German language. Words which once represented violence and oppression are now used in the business world and frequently in advertising to promote a special offer or sale.<sup>46</sup>

### **Propaganda use by the Nazis**

Another way semantics were manipulated by the Nazis was in propaganda used to convince the German people that their actions were justified. One way this was accomplished was by taking out any foreign-based words, or *Fremdworter*, and replacing them with “pure” German words. This method of “Germanization” helped push the idea that the German race was better than all others.<sup>47</sup> It was not always a smooth translation however. The German government

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<sup>44</sup> Doerr, “Words of Fear, Fear of Words,” 54.

<sup>45</sup> Jonassohn and Doerr, “Persistence of Nazi German.”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Michael and Doerr, *Nazi Deutsch/Nazi German*, 28.

decided to get rid of the *artfremd*, or foreign word “Mikroskop”, and instead replaced it with a word that literally translated into “Fine-seeing tube”.<sup>48</sup> Despite the fact that “Fine-seeing tube” was a much more confusing explanation for what is commonly known as the microscope, the Nazis still considered it a superior term due to its German origins. The same situation occurred with the word “Maschine”, which instead was to be known as *Gangwerk*, which means “motion work”.<sup>49</sup> Despite Nazi insistence that these “pure” (*Reine*) and “clean” (*Sauber*) words replace the foreign-based ones, these words never became fully integrated into every day speech. Most people continued using the words in their original form. Still, dictionaries created during this period of time contained many of the Nazi Deutsch words.<sup>50</sup> These have proved to be a great reference in Holocaust historiography as they include many of the words and phrases that were taken out of use after the fall of Nazism. Germanization even affected the type of font and lettering allowed in public documents. The Nazi regime did away with the plain roman type, regarding it as too “foreign” and feminine. Instead, all materials printed by the government used a heavy black font. Its gothic design was thought to be more commanding and intimidating – more “German” so to speak.<sup>51</sup> It was in this manner in which the iconic SS logo was created. The bold, black pair of “SS’s” in the distinct lightning-bolt shape came to represent the control and power of the Nazis.

The most effective way in which propaganda was used by the Nazis was by the constant bombardment of the German people. A government office was created solely for the creation and spreading of propaganda. They created and published a “daily word”, or *Tagesparole*, which was

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Jonassohn and Doerr, “Persistence of Nazi German.”

<sup>51</sup> Renate Birkenauer and Karl-Heinz Brackmann, *NS-DEUTSCH: “Selbstverständliche” Begriffe und Schlagwörter aus der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus* (Straelen/Niederrhein, Germany: Straelener Manuskripte Verlage, 1988), 50.

to be put into use by the citizens.<sup>52</sup> As the government's reign over the people became stronger, they set into motions plans in which to further influence German citizens to become part of the cause. With the passing of the Nuremberg laws, the government passed an entire set of words and phrases regarding the Jews. Jewish citizens were required to wear the *Judenstern*, the "Jewish star", either on an armband or affixed visibly to their clothing. The government referred to them as *Sterntrager*, "those who bear the Jewish star".<sup>53</sup> In tandem with the Jewish star, the government marked specific buildings within the city as a "*Judenhaus*", a building in which Jews were allowed to enter.<sup>54</sup> The signs designating these buildings were yellow, just like the stars themselves, and were written in a Hebrew script which aimed to openly taunt the Jews.<sup>55</sup>

The Nazi government proved incredibly efficient in using propaganda and influential materials. Anything Hitler declared or wanted to put into circulation would be passed down through the chain of command and could be in use by the next day. This, paired with their influence on almost every part of daily life in Germany, allowed them to efficiently spread their anti-Semitic message. Hitler and the Nazis had already capitalized on their new, "improved" meanings of Blood (*Blut*), Race (*Rasse*), and People (*Volk*), and from there developed their "Race Theory". They constantly exposed the German people to the message of the "*Herrenvolk*" (or "Master Race"), and "*Lebensraum*", convincing the German people that their race was in fact superior and deserved to have all the land they required. This race theory identified the Jewish population as *Untermenschen*, or "sub-humans", and widened the gap even further between the Jewish population and the Germans. The term *Volksschädlinge* was created to describe

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<sup>52</sup> Michael and Doerr, *Nazi Deutsch/Nazi German*, 28.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Doerr, "Words of Fear, Fear of Words," 53.

something (in this case, Jews) as harmful and damaging to the people of Germany.<sup>56</sup> Hitler preached the need to remove the Jews from their land and make Germany and the surrounding lands clean from Jews, “*Judenrein*” once more. Joseph Goebbels, the head of Propaganda in the Third Reich, equated the “removal” of the Jews to that of killing a bacterial infection. It “was not terror, but ‘social hygiene.’”<sup>57</sup> As they pushed the concept of the “Master Race”, the ideas for handling the “Jewish Question” became more extreme. It was not long until the Wannsee Conference opened the door to mass murder of the Jewish population, supported by doctors, scientists and geneticists under the concept of “Bettering the Human Race”.<sup>58</sup>

### **The T-4 Euthanasia Program**

While enforcing euthanasia and sterilization stopped the “problem” at its source, it did not account for all the *Minderwertige* who already existed and were taking up valuable resources. This became a main argument in a book co-written by Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche titled “Die Freigabe der Vernichtung Lebensunwerten Lebens”, or “Authorization for the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life.” Binding was a widely published legal scholar, and Hoche, a psychiatrist and neuropathology specialist, lent credibility to Binding’s argument. Binding stated, “it is [a] distressing idea that entire generations of nurses shall vegetate next to such empty human shells [leeren Menschenhulsen], many of whom will live to be seventy years or even older.”<sup>59</sup> The phrase “Life unworthy of Life” became a rally cry behind the euthanasia

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<sup>56</sup> Michael and Doerr, *Nazi Deutsch/Nazi German*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 38, from Joseph Goebbels, “Der Jude,” *Der Angriff* (January 21, 1928), 323-324.

<sup>58</sup> Gideon Greif, “Between Sanity and Insanity: Spheres of Everyday Life in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando” in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed., Jonathon Petropoulos and John. K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 40. See Eugen Kogon, Hermann Langbein, and Adelbert Ruckerl, eds., *Nazi Mass Murder: A Documentary History of the Use of Poison Gas*, trans. Mary Scott and Caroline Lloyd-Morris (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>59</sup> Binding and Hoche, *Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens*, p. 54-55. Cited within Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 15.

program enacted by Hitler. The program, “Operation T-4”, was named after the address of the central euthanasia office, located on Number 4, Tiergarten Strasse.<sup>60</sup>

Originally, “Life unworthy of Life” referred to the handicapped, the original targets of the euthanasia program. Hitler often described the euthanasia as a mercy to those people “so incapacitated that they could not keep themselves clean and ‘took their own excrement as food’”.<sup>61</sup> Despite the fact that this “worst case scenario” most likely encompassed only a minute fraction of most cases, it became the leading example in justifying these murders.<sup>62</sup> The use of “mercy deaths,” while originally instated for the handicapped, soon spread to anyone considered unworthy. This term was widely used as justification for murder on a racial and eugenic basis.<sup>63</sup> Binding believed the *lebensunwert* encompassed both the severely handicapped who lived in pain as well as those people who were so inferior that they were undeserving of life. Those “inferiors” could be completely healthy physically, but if they were considered “degenerate” they were considered “unworthy life”.<sup>64</sup> Henry Friedlander, author of *Origins of Nazi Genocide* described Binding’s criteria:

Binding’s definition of unworthy life was not very precise, but he did make it clear that he referred to inferiors who should be killed even if they could live painlessly for many years. He added a new criteria when he asserted that whether a life was worth living was determined not only by its worth to the individual but also by its worth to society.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 68.

<sup>61</sup> U.S. Military Tribunal, Transcript of the Proceedings in Case 1, p 7299-300 (testimony Hermann Pfannmuller); Platen-Hallermund, *Die Totung Geisteskranker*, p. 25-26 cited within Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, p 68.

<sup>62</sup> Page 63, footnote 8

<sup>63</sup> Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, xxi.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>65</sup> Binding and Hoche, *Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens*, p. 6-16. Cited within Friedland, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 15.

“Worth to society” became a focal point for euthanasia programs. The German government under Hitler and the Nazis was nothing if not efficient. Every citizen was expected to give back to their country, and those who were physically or mentally unable to perform a beneficial function to society were considered “burdensome lives” (Ballastexistenzen) and “useless eaters” (unnutze Esser).<sup>66</sup>

The Nazis used heredity, intelligence, and social class to decide whether someone was unworthy and should be euthanized. Many of these conditions were often connected, not just in the minds of the Nazis but in the minds of prominent social scientists of the time. Stanford Psychologist Lewis M. Terman was quoted as saying, “Not all criminals are feeble-minded, but all feeble-minded persons are at least potential criminals. That every feeble-minded woman is a potential prostitute would hardly be disputed by anyone.”<sup>67</sup> Scientific “findings” like these were often used as justification of their actions by the Nazis. As far-fetched as they seem in modern times, Nazi policies were considered legitimately scientifically based. This “science” gave them all the information and power they needed to perform these murders under the guise of improving and purifying Germany. This justification was broadcasted to convince the German population that these actions were for the benefit of the country and the greater good.

### **Indoctrination of the German Public**

Hitler was very careful not to lose the support of the Germans if at all possible, so they were forced to start slow and build up hatred against Jews. The Nazis continually put the blame of the current war and Germany’s defeat in World War I onto the Jewish population. Goebbels frequently compared the German fight against Jews as David against Goliath.<sup>68</sup> The propaganda

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<sup>66</sup> Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 81.

<sup>67</sup> Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, p. 234-239. Cited within Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 43.

posters painted all Jews as evil, despicable, and cunning, and claimed that they were trying to instigate the war in order to serve their own purposes. Once the Nazis were able to convince the German people that Jews were dangerous, they had their support in taking more extreme actions. When talking about the strategies that the government was using, public officials were told not to use the word “*krieg*”, or war, which would put negative attention on both sides. Instead, they were to explain the situation by stating that Germany was “responding to the threat.”<sup>69</sup> The public statements that were used were censored and edited to ensure that the response from the German people would be as positive as possible. Hitler insisted that the Third Reich was only trying to “right past wrongs” rather than start a war.<sup>70</sup> This approach, added to the extreme nationalism that was encouraged, incited the Germans to “defend themselves” against the Jewish enemy. Any hesitation was considered “sentimentality” for the Jews.<sup>71</sup> Anyone who spoke out against the violence and discrimination of Jews was accused of letting their “sentimentality” and emotions come before the protection of their nation. This helped develop the “us versus them” mentality that was crucial for the success of Hitler’s extermination plan. This was seen frequently during radio programming, which became popular after the introduction of the *Volksempfänger*, or “people’s radio.”<sup>72</sup> The Nazi radio program repeatedly used the phrase “unter uns” (just us) in a conversational manner when broadcasting to the German people.<sup>73</sup> Like Roosevelt’s “fireside chats,” the goal was to bring together the nation’s people in a relaxed, informal manner that would build trust. “Now that it is just us” was used to introduce a speech or radio broadcast that was clearly meant only for the German people. This subtly introduced

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<sup>69</sup> Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 57.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>72</sup> Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich*, 67.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

support for the “relocation” of the Jewish people by hinting that the Germans would only be able to speak freely once all Jews were gone from the country.

Many people today question how the Nazi regime was able to orchestrate this mass killing without protest from the German citizens. The policies were at first comparatively mild, as they banned Jews from holding certain government offices or working in certain positions in the media such as newspapers. After Jews were successfully pushed out of those roles, it opened the door for the regime to flood society with anti-Jewish propaganda. While many Germans at first did not believe the horrible things the government was saying about their Jewish neighbors, they were constantly presented with these statements in the newspapers, by government officials, in the radio, and at official functions. The regime successfully employed the Nazi *Weltanschauung*, the Nazi German worldview, into their daily lives. The most effective method they used was implementing the “Word of the Week” newspaper. This bulletin-style poster was pasted on every surface within the cities. Thousands upon thousands of copies were distributed every week, sometimes reaching into the hundreds of thousands if the week was particularly eventful.<sup>74</sup> The sheer number of copies made it impossible to avoid. A memo from the office of propaganda stated that

Factories will also receive posters for poster boards, cafeterias, corridors, and other waiting rooms. Likewise, posters will be made available to all public service offices of the state, cities, the party, banks, payroll offices, welfare offices, post offices, and other offices of public service as well.<sup>75</sup>

Any citizen who went out in public at any point was instantly barraged by these messages. Every form of public transportation was required to have these posters in their offices, on the buses, and on the ticket stands. Most of the messages had to do with German pride and Nationalism, defending against the enemies, and Lebensraum. However, the anti-Semitic messages became

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<sup>74</sup> Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 14.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

more common, and by 1943 more than a quarter of the posters were attacks on Jews. These ideologies were put into German dictionaries, simple literature, and even the textbooks of children.<sup>76</sup> The language in the children's books was different from that of the violent, destructive language of the Nazi Deutsch. The Nazis did not want to scare Aryan children, but instead introduce the desired mindset at a young age. The language they used was much more simplistic and at first glance seemed innocent.<sup>77</sup> Once the children accepted those concepts as truth, they were slowly exposed to the more grim and stern language. This allowed them to be indoctrinated at a young age with the ideals of the Nazis, so that they grew up believing they were the "Master Race" and that Jews were dangerous and subhuman. Since they never heard differently from their peers, parents, and teachers, many of them joined the cause once they were old enough for political action.

### **Nazi Control and the Media**

The Nazis were also very careful when it came to outside sources learning about the regime's plans for the extermination of the Jews. The Nazis, having taken all Jews out of professions in the media, exerted almost total control over what was said in newspapers. However, from an outsider's (or at least, a non-German) perspective, the journalism industry still maintained the image of freedom of the press. Despite the sheer number of people who were involved including officials, soldiers, victims, and witnesses, not a word about the concentration camps, pogroms, or mass killings were ever mentioned in a German newspaper.<sup>78</sup> While the propaganda, especially the "Word of the Week" certainly suggested that every Jew deserved to die, Goebbels was very careful that no specific statement of the extermination plan was ever

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<sup>76</sup> Michael and Doerr, *Nazi Deutsch/Nazi German*, 28.

<sup>77</sup> Jonassohn and Doerr, "Persistence of Nazi German."

<sup>78</sup> Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 138.

mentioned in public media.<sup>79</sup> This is partially why much of the information during this time period was missing. Most of the information that was available about the mass shootings and concentration camps came from first-hand accounts of both the victims and the perpetrators. The media was an almost useless source when it came to trying to understand what really happened. The Nazis had total control over the newspapers and information, and were able to censor and twist it to fit the regime's agenda. The high government officials considered their tight control over information regarding the Final Solution as one of their highest "accomplishments".<sup>80</sup> This served a multitude of purposes. This censorship allowed those who were not directly involved to claim "plausible deniability". For many, they could claim no knowledge of the mass murders and attacks because these actions were not once mentioned in the newspapers. It also protected the Nazis from the anger and interference of outside countries. The German government knew that if it was widely published that Jews were being exterminated in mass numbers, other governments and countries might attempt to intervene. The global outrage that might have occurred could have potentially ruined their campaign. In the case of this propaganda, it was the absence of words and language that was used.

## **Conclusion**

Language and semantics are frequently overlooked when it comes to understanding the Holocaust. When compared to the death camps and mass murder of millions of people, "minor" issues like language are usually not the focus. However, without Nazi Deutsch, the propaganda, or the Jewish experiences, the Holocaust perhaps would have turned out very differently. What is commonly considered the worst genocide in the history of the modern world would not have been possible without the measures enacted by the Nazis regarding semantics. The issue of

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<sup>79</sup> Herf, *The Jewish Enemy*, 146.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

semantics in the Holocaust has had long term ramifications on the way history perceives the actions taken by the Third Reich in World War II. Although it may seem like a rather small issue, it can have serious implications. In the case of the Holocaust, the Third Reich was able to deceive the German people as well as the governments of other countries by changing some words around, adding a few others, and sliding through the cracks. They were able to continue in illegal and murderous plans while using words as a cover for legality. Society cannot function without laws, and laws cannot function without enforcement. Enforcement, however, is made much more difficult when people can change or break the law and get away with it by playing word games. A few million people were killed under the radar, with a vast amount of people unaware of it. An entire people was oppressed and mistreated, with very little opposition. This was able to continue on for years before the full scale of the action was finally realized. This was not done by criminals, convicts, or serial killers. The crimes committed during the Holocaust were the work of legitimate government officials at the head of a nation whose arsenal contained words and posters as well as guns and gas chambers.

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