

# BEDTIME IN THE THIRD REICH: HOW CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS INDOCTRINATED A GENERATION

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## INTRODUCTION

The youth of the Third Reich were hateful, loyal, and war-ready, but no child is born with these qualities. Instead, they are systematically ingrained through the mobilisation and coordination of a state's apparatuses.<sup>1</sup> While propaganda often entails reinforcement strategies to manipulate, this essay illuminates how the picture books of the Third Reich laid foundational assumptions - views which were later developed into the vitriolic hatred of a Nazified youth.

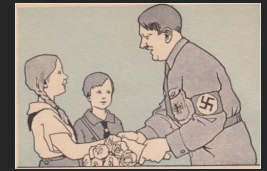


Figure 1

## DEPARTING FROM THE EXISTING SCHOLARSHIP

### Existing View:

- Historian David Welch has noted how Nazi propaganda primarily worked through the reiteration of "existing trends and beliefs"<sup>2</sup>

### Limitations of this view when applied to children:

- Children do not begin life with the same sets of ideas and assumptions that adults do, thus they must have been created

### Corrective pivot in this essay:

- Analysing how foundational assumptions were formed in the youth, which were later developed into the central tenets of Nazism

## METHODOLOGY: THE TWO COMPONENTS OF PICTURE BOOKS

### Textual:

- Uses of rhetorical devices – metaphors/similes/collective language
- Story frames – Villain archetypes/Heroin archetypes/Settings

### Visual:

- Features – exaggerations/iconographic motifs/body language

### Fusing the two:

- Each component of a picture book reinforces the other. Consequently, you have to assess how picture and word worked together to create beliefs – what was reinforcing what

## ANTISEMITISM

### Beginning with Fear:

- Jews fill the roles of villains
- Accompanying images are intimidating
- In stories, Jews are threats
- The protagonists at risk are children like the reader

### Unifying the Group – Making all the same:

- Images depict Jews with shared features: portly frames, hunched backs, and a large, '6' shaped nose
- Language used enforces the notion of *the Jew* rather than *a Jew* – identity defined by belonging to the collective

## TENETS FOSTERED AND HOW

## LOYALTY

### To Hitler:

- Laid an emotional foundation by fostering love before loyalty
- Paternalised the Führer by drawing equivalences to parents
- Use of language like 'our' as he speaks to draw the reader into a shared partnership

### To the German People:

- Create a defined in-group and out-group
- Make belonging to the in-group desirable, using images, such as *Fig. 2*, to enforce notions of 'Aryan' superiority

## MILITARISM

### Making war fun:

- Sanatise war – accompanying images and story beats do not acknowledge trauma
- The protagonist or narrator shows active disappointment at inaction

### Attracting boys to youth groups

- Stories created the impression of a community among the troops
- Child protagonists consistently display a desire to participate
- Books portray camp life as fun, as a place of play instead of pain



Figure 2

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## REFLECTIONS & TODAY'S CONTINUITY

In the Third Reich, children received a coordination of all elements of life toward their indoctrination. Picture books played a central role in instilling many of the foundational beliefs that would later develop into the tenets of Nazism.

Today's children, whilst in a very different world, navigate structurally similar mechanisms of persuasion:

- Algorithms result in filter bubbles, holding us in echo chambers of single views, just as Nazi picture books forwarded a monolithic viewpoint
- Disinformation and misinformation remain weapons used in political spheres
- Media remains politicised, designed to persuade audiences

## REFERENCES

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- Figure 2: Elvira Bauer, 'Image 2 in *Trust No Fox on His Green Heath And No Jew on His Oath*', *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University Archive, 1 August 2023, <<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fuchs.htm>> [accessed 20 June 2025].

