

US prosecuted Nazi propagandists as war criminals

The Nuremberg tribunal and the role of the media

By David Walsh
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The ongoing US aggression in the Middle East raises the most serious questions about the role of the mass media in modern society. In the period leading up to the invasion, the American media uncritically advanced the Bush administration's arguments, rooted in lies, distortions and half-truths, for an attack on Iraq. It virtually excluded all critical viewpoints, to the point of blacking out news of mass antiwar demonstrations and any other facts that contradicted the propaganda from the White House and Pentagon.

The obvious aim was to misinform and manipulate public opinion, and convince the tens of millions within the US who were opposed to the administration's war policy that they constituted a small and helpless minority.

Now, as if on cue, the US media has obediently turned its attention to Syria, evidently the next target of the US military. If the focus of the White House and Pentagon should shift to North Korea or Iran, the appropriate items will begin to appear about the dire threat represented by those regimes to the security of the American people.

In the American media there is barely a trace of serious analysis concerning the political and social realities of the Middle East. It long ago abandoned any sense of responsibility for educating and informing the public or carrying out the critical democratic function traditionally assigned to the "Fourth Estate," i.e., serving as a watchdog and check on government abuses and falsifications. Instead it slavishly carries out the function assigned it by the ruling elite: to confuse, terrorize and intimidate the American public, rendering it less able to resist the reactionary program of the right-wing clique in Washington.

The television networks and leading newspapers are the prime source of news and information for tens of millions of people in the US. However, these public resources are in the hands of giant firms, controlled by fabulously wealthy individuals who will stop at nothing to defend their profits and property. The corpses of thousands, or, if necessary, millions of Iraqis, Syrians, Iranians and others are a small price to pay, as far as the media billionaires are concerned, for achieving American military and economic domination of the globe.

This makes the US media an accessory before and after the fact to crimes carried out in Iraq and future crimes against other peoples in the region and around the world. Sitting far from the ravaged Iraqi cities, in well-appointed boardrooms, the media moguls may believe they will never face such charges. There are, however, historical parallels and precedents to the contrary.

The role of propaganda and propagandists figured prominently at the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal, convened to render judgment on the Nazi leaders following World War II. The tribunal was an institution organized by the victorious Allied governments, serving in the final analysis the ruling classes of those countries.

Nonetheless, in their arguments US prosecutors set forth a democratic legal principle derived from the international experience of a half-century of carnage: that planning and launching an aggressive war constituted a criminal act and that those who helped prepare such a war through their propaganda efforts were as culpable as those who drew up the battle plans or manufactured the munitions.

The case made against Hans Fritzsche, one of the individuals chiefly responsible for Nazi newspaper and radio propaganda, is particularly significant. Fritzsche, born in Bochum, Westphalia in 1900, served in the German army in World War I and studied liberal arts at university, but left without a degree. He began a career as a journalist working for the Hugenberg Press, a newspaper chain that supported the right-wing "national" parties, including the Nazis.

Fritzsche began commenting on radio in September 1932, discussing political events on his own weekly program, "Hans Fritzsche Speaks." That same year the regime of Franz von Papen appointed him head of the Wireless [Radio] News Department, a government agency. Fritzsche was generally sympathetic to the Nazi cause, but not a member of the party.

Underlining the importance with which the Hitlerites viewed radio as an instrument of propaganda, on the evening that the Nazis came to power, January 30, 1933, two emissaries of Joseph Goebbels, soon to be minister of propaganda and enlightenment, paid Fritzsche a visit. The latter was allowed to stay on as head of the Wireless Radio Department despite his rejection of certain conditions set by Goebbels, including the immediate firing of all Jews and all those who refused to join the Nazi Party.

The Nuremberg prosecution case against Fritzsche notes: "Fritzsche continued to make radio broadcasts during this period in which he supported the National Socialist [Nazi] coalition government then still existing."

In April 1933, Goebbels paid Fritzsche a personal visit and informed him of the decision to place the Wireless News Service under the jurisdiction of the newly created Propaganda Ministry as of May 1, 1933. Apparently satisfied with the results of the first meeting, Goebbels arranged a second at which Fritzsche informed the propaganda minister of the steps he had taken to "reorganize and modernize" the agency, including ridding it of Jewish employees.

"Goebbels thereupon informed Fritzsche that he would like to have him reorganize and modernize the entire news services of Germany within the control of the Propaganda Ministry. ... He [Fritzsche] proceeded to conclude the Goebbels-inspired reorganization of the Wireless News Service and, on 1 May 1933, together with the remaining members of his staff, he joined the Propaganda Ministry. On this same day he joined the NSDAP [Nazi Party] and took the customary oath of unconditional loyalty to the Fuehrer."

After entering the Propaganda Ministry, Fritzsche went to work for its

“German Press Division.” From 1933 to 1942 Fritzsche held various positions in that department, heading it for the four years during which the Nazi regime launched its invasions of neighboring countries. The Nuremberg prosecution argued: “By virtue of its functions, the German Press Division became an important and unique instrument of the Nazi conspirators, not only in dominating the minds and psychology of Germans, but also as an instrument of foreign policy and psychological warfare against other nations.”

According to Fritzsche’s own affidavit: “During the whole period from 1933 to 1945 it was the task of the German Press Division to supervise the entire domestic press and to provide it with directives by which this division became an efficient instrument in the hands of the German State leadership. More than 2,300 German daily newspapers were subject to this control. ... The head of the German Press Division held daily press conferences in the Ministry for the representatives of all German newspapers. Hereby all instructions were given to the representatives of the press.”

The prosecution case, argued by Drexel Sprecher, an American, placed considerable stress on the role of media propaganda in enabling the Hitler regime to prepare and carry out aggressive wars. “The use made by the Nazi conspirators of psychological warfare is well known. Before each major aggression, with some few exceptions based on expediency, they initiated a press campaign calculated to weaken their victims and to prepare the German people psychologically for the attack. They used the press, after their earlier conquests, as a means for further influencing foreign politics and in maneuvering for the following aggression.”

Fritzsche was named head of the German Press Division in 1938 after the “primitive military-like” methods of his predecessor, Alfred Ingemar Berndt, created “a noticeable crisis in confidence of the German people in the trustworthiness of its press,” in Fritzsche’s words.

The Nuremberg prosecutor detailed the propaganda campaigns taken up by the German media, under Fritzsche’s immediate supervision, in relation to various acts of foreign aggression, including the incorporation of Bohemia and Moravia (1939) and the invasions of Poland (1939) and Yugoslavia and the USSR (1941).

The Nazi press propaganda campaign preceding the invasion of Poland involved manufacturing or manipulating complaints of the German minority in that country. Fritzsche explains: “Concerning this the leading German newspapers, upon the basis of directions given out in the so-called ‘daily parole,’ brought out the following publicity with great emphasis: (1) cruelty and terror against Germans and the extermination of Germans in Poland; (2) forced labor of thousands of German men and women in Poland; (3) Poland, land of servitude and disorder; the desertion of Polish soldiers; the increased inflation in Poland; (4) provocation of frontier clashes upon direction of the Polish Government; the Polish lust to conquer; (5) persecution of Czechs and Ukrainians by Poland.”

In regard to the Nazi propaganda surrounding the Yugoslav events, the prosecutor noted the “customary definitions, lies, incitement and threats, and the usual attempt to divide and weaken the victim.”

Fritzsche describes how he received instructions on the eve of the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941: “[Foreign Minister Joachim von] Ribbentrop informed us that the war against the Soviet Union would start that same day and asked the German press to present the war against the Soviet Union as a preventative war for the defense of the Fatherland, as a war which was forced upon us through the immediate danger of an attack of the Soviet Union against Germany. The claim that this was a preventative war was later repeated by the newspapers which received their instructions from me during the usual daily parole of the Reich Press Chief. I, myself, have also given this presentation of the cause of the war in my regular broadcasts.”

Thus, the presentation of an illegal invasion of a foreign country as a

“preventative” or pre-emptive war did not originate with Bush, Cheney or Rumsfeld.

The prosecution in the Fritzsche case raised an issue that is of the greatest relevance today: the role of Nazi media propaganda in inuring the German population to the sufferings of other peoples and, indeed, urging Germans to commit war crimes. It argued: “Fritzsche incited atrocities and encouraged a ruthless occupation policy. The results of propaganda as a weapon of the Nazi conspirators reaches into every aspect of this conspiracy, including the atrocities and ruthless exploitation in occupied countries. It is likely that many ordinary Germans would never have participated in or tolerated the atrocities committed throughout Europe, had they not been conditioned and goaded by the constant Nazi propaganda. The callousness and zeal of the people who actually committed the atrocities was in large part due to the constant and corrosive propaganda of Fritzsche and his official associates.”

The American media today reports poll results indicating that 60 or 70 percent of the population supports the war against Iraq. Such polls are not conducted by disinterested bodies for the purpose of advancing sociological knowledge. The manner in which the interviewees are selected and the questions formulated has a considerable impact on the results obtained. The powers that be in America have every interest in maintaining the fiction of a nation united behind its president and armed forces. In reality, there is widespread hostility and opposition to the war and to the Bush administration, which finds no expression in the media, the Democratic Party or any other official American institution.

Nonetheless, there is a constituency for war among the more backward layers of the population. Aside from the relatively small number of right-wing fanatics, who would be in favor of war against almost anyone, including a good section of their fellow Americans, those in favor of the assault on Iraq believe a) that the Saddam Hussein regime had a hand in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on New York City and Washington; b) that the Iraqis possessed “weapons of mass destruction,” which they intended to use against their neighbors or the US at some future point; and/or c) that the Iraqi population desired “liberation” at the hands of the US military.

While it is outside the scope of this article to expound on this, all three claims have been proven to be lies by the events of the war itself and will be further exposed by future developments. If many Americans, however, believe these arguments, with all the tragic consequences for the Iraqi and other peoples, how is that to be accounted for? Clearly, by “the constant and corrosive propaganda” of the US media over the course of months and even years, dating back to the first Gulf war. The media’s very success in manipulating public opinion is one of the strongest proofs of its culpability in the commission of war crimes.

It is worth quoting extensively from the Fritzsche prosecutor’s conclusion, for it sheds considerable light on the role of the media in the modern age, as well as the democratic sensibilities of those pursuing the Nazi war criminals, sensibilities that no longer carry any weight within US ruling circles.

“Fritzsche was not the type of conspirator who signed decrees, or who sat in the inner councils planning the overall grand strategy. The function of propaganda is, for the most part, apart from the field of such planning. The function of a propaganda agency is somewhat more analogous to an advertising agency or public relations department, the job of which is to sell the product and to win the market for the enterprise in question. Here the enterprise was the Nazi conspiracy. In a conspiracy which depends upon fraud as a means, the salesmen of the conspiratorial group are quite as essential and culpable as the master planners, even though they may not have contributed substantially to the formulation of all the basic strategy, but rather concentrated on making the execution of this strategy possible. In this case, propaganda was a weapon of tremendous importance to this conspiracy. Furthermore, the leading propagandists

were major accomplices in this conspiracy, and Fritzsche was one of them...

“Fritzsche learned a lesson from his predecessor, Berndt, who fell from the leadership of the German Press Division partly because he over-played his hand by blunt and excessive manipulation of the Sudetenland propaganda. Fritzsche stepped into the gap caused by the loss of confidence of both the editors and the German people, and did his job with more skill and subtlety. His shrewdness and ability to be more assuring and ‘to find,’ as Goebbels said, ‘willing ears of the whole nation,’—these things made him the more useful accomplice of the conspirators...

“Fritzsche is not in the dock as a free journalist but as a propagandist who helped substantially to tighten the Nazi stranglehold over the German people, who made the excesses of the conspirators palatable to the German people, who goaded the German nation to fury and crime against people they were told by him were subhuman.

“Without the propaganda apparatus of the Nazi State, the world would not have suffered the catastrophe of these years, and it is because of Fritzsche’s role in behalf of the Nazi conspirators, and their deceitful and barbarous practices, that he is called to account before the International Military Tribunal.”

The tribunal found Fritzsche not guilty on the dubious grounds that he had not had sufficient stature to formulate or originate the propaganda campaigns undertaken by the Nazi regime. It also asserted that the prosecution had not proven that Fritzsche was aware of the extermination of the Jews or had spread news he knew to be false. (Fritzsche was immediately rearrested and charged by German courts with various crimes. He was sentenced to nine years at hard labor, left prison in 1950 and died of cancer three years later.)

The prosecution, in its reply to the “Unfounded Acquittal of Defendant Fritzsche,” returned insistently and pointedly to its arguments. It noted that the verdict failed to take into account that Fritzsche was until 1942 “the Director de facto of the Reich Press and that, according to himself, subsequent to 1942, he became the ‘Commander-in-Chief of the German radio.’”

The prosecution went on: “For the correct definition of the role of defendant Hans Fritzsche it is necessary, firstly, to keep clearly in mind the importance attached by Hitler and his closest associates (as Goering, for example) to propaganda in general and to radio propaganda in particular. This was considered one of the most important and essential factors in the success of conducting an aggressive war.”

In Hitler’s Germany, the reply to the verdict continues, “propaganda was invariably a factor in preparing and conducting acts of aggression and in training the German populace to accept obediently the criminal enterprises of German fascism. ...

“The basic method of the Nazi propagandistic activity lay in the false presentation of facts. ... The dissemination of provocative lies and the systematic deception of public opinion were as necessary to the Hitlerites for the realization of their plans as were the production of armaments and the drafting of military plans. Without propaganda, founded on the total eclipse of the freedom of press and of speech, it would not have been possible for German Fascism to realize its aggressive intentions, to lay the groundwork and then to put to practice the war crimes and the crimes against humanity. In the propaganda system of the Hitler State it was the daily press and the radio that were the most important weapons.”

There is little to be added to this condemnation. While all historical analogies have their limits, the indictment of the German media chief for war crimes speaks with great force to the role of the US media barons in contemporary world affairs.

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