

Nazi propaganda from 1927–1945 reveals the role of dehumanization of Jews in the Holocaust

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The authors found that Jews were progressively denied the capacity for fundamentally human mental experiences leading up to the Holocaust. Credit: BScar23625, Flickr, CC0 (<https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>)

A linguistic analysis of Nazi propaganda suggests that dehumanization of Jews shifted over time, with propaganda after the onset of the Holocaust portraying Jews as having a greater capacity for agency, relative to earlier propaganda focused on disengaging moral concern. Alexander Landry of the Stanford Graduate School of Business, California, and colleagues present these findings in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* on November 9, 2022.

Widespread views hold that [dehumanization](#) is a precursor to mass violence. Many believe that dehumanization promotes violence by removing moral inhibitions against harming fellow humans. However, few studies have actually examined [empirical evidence](#) for this idea.

To better understand the role of dehumanization in mass violence, Landry and colleagues conducted a linguistic analysis of Nazi [propaganda](#)—including hundreds of posters, pamphlets, newspapers, and political speech transcripts—from before and during the Holocaust. The researchers assessed the prevalence of certain terms related to [mental state](#), distinguishing between those associated with capacity for agency, such as "plan" or "think," and those associated with experience, such as "hurt" or "enjoy."

The findings suggest that propaganda leading up to the Holocaust progressively denied Jews' capacity for experiencing fundamental human emotions and sensations—in line with the idea that dehumanization leads to disengagement of moral restraints.

However, propaganda during the Holocaust increasingly used language related to intentionality and malevolence, suggesting that Jews were now demonized and portrayed as possessing a greater capacity for agency. The researchers offer speculation as to why this shift took place; perhaps it served efforts to portray Jews as a masterminding threat, while also providing rationalization to soothe Nazi executors who were traumatized by their experience of killing Jews.

Overall, these findings suggest that the dynamics of dehumanization associated with mass violence may be nuanced and shift over time.

The authors note that their analysis included limited data for some time periods, especially in the months preceding the onset of the Holocaust in July 1941, and that only one researcher was involved in drafting data collection guidelines. Future research could address these limitations and further examine the dynamics of dehumanization for both the Holocaust and other genocidal contexts.

The authors add, "To eliminate violence, we must understand the motives that drive it. To do so, we examined the portrayal of Jews in Nazi propaganda. We found that Jews were progressively denied the capacity for fundamentally human mental experiences leading up to the Holocaust, suggesting that dehumanization can motivate [violence](#) by reducing moral concern for victim groups."

More information: Alexander P. Landry et al, Dehumanization and mass violence: A study of mental state language in Nazi propaganda (1927-1945), *PLoS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0274957](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0274957)

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