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**PROJECT RAND**  
**RESEARCH MEMORANDUM**

THE EXPLOITATION OF SUPERSTITIONS FOR  
PURPOSES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE (U)

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Summary

The scattered and fragmentary material available in unclassified sources indicates that a number of people in nearly all major societies are susceptible to superstitious appeals. There is a frequent assumption that receptivity to such appeals increases during wartime, but no conclusive evidence to prove this assumption has been found. (Indeed, the fact that certain types of neuroses were found to decrease in incidence and severity during the past war casts a measure of doubt on this assumption.) It is clear, however, that susceptibility to such non-rational appeals causes considerable trouble for the secret police and for other authorities in totalitarian states. This is shown with particular clarity by the preoccupation of the German secret police with chain letters during the war, and by periodic denunciations of non-rational behavior in the Soviet press and radio.

The most common types of non-rational appeals which have been noted in the unclassified literature are as follows:

1. Prophecies concerning future events, either optimistic or pessimistic.
2. Belief in protective devices and acts.
3. "Fringe" or "radical" religions, particularly those maintaining that the end of the world is at hand.
4. Belief in magical phenomena, miracles, etc.
5. Fatalistic attitudes towards one's chances of escaping harm.

All of these appeals, in varying degrees, may produce behavior which runs contrary to the needs of a society at war:

1. Indifference to rational activity, caused by the belief that non-rational factors are more important, that "fate" has already decided, etc.

2. Preoccupation with non-rational acts which are not conducive to the war effort. In some cases, these non-rational acts will be of such a nature as to overburden the postal system, transportation system (e.g. pilgrimages), or other instrumentality of government. In addition, the energies of internal security forces may be taken up with investigating and suppressing non-rational behavior.
3. Weakening of power of approved symbols to hold allegiance.

## I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a few examples of superstitions (observed both during World War II and, in the case of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries, in the postwar period), to show some of the techniques which have been used by wartime propagandists to exploit popular superstitions, and to suggest very briefly some of the factors which might be considered in any attempt to exploit superstitions for psychological warfare.

Although during the recent war sporadic attempts were made by propaganda specialists to make use of the enemy's non-rational beliefs, so far as we know no major or systematic attempt to exploit potentialities in this area was made.<sup>1</sup> The field is thus relatively unexplored, and scraps of material bearing on it must be gleaned from a mass of literature published during and after the war. No attempt has been made in this paper to examine all works of possible relevance. The observations presented here are based on a reading of the major works on psychological warfare and of a few of the many books which deal with wartime conditions in the principal countries involved in World War II. With the two exceptions of a file of captured Nazi Security Service documents and of the weekly FCC reports on Nazi propaganda for 1943 and early 1944, all material in this report is based on open, published sources.

<sup>1</sup> Several attempts were made by "black" propagandists on both sides to make use of non-rational appeals during the past war. Since the files of these "black" operators were not examined in the course of preparing this memorandum, the extent of their activities cannot be described here.

## II. Superstition in World War II

### A. GERMANY

Both the FCC summaries of domestic German radio broadcasts and the Nazi Security Service reports on German morale make reference to the prevalence of several types of superstitious beliefs and practices in war-time Germany. Anxiety about the future, coupled with ignorance about how the war was going, led to the patronage of soothsayers of all sorts who claimed to be able to guess the future -- astrologers, fortune-tellers, crystal-gazers, ouija board manipulators, tea leaf readers, numerologists, and the like. Early in the war several different types of chain letters began to circulate; some of these contained prophecies of an early armistice, while others purported to be good luck letters which if passed on would serve to placate unseen forces and preserve the welfare of the communicator. A description of several chain letters circulating in 1942 is contained in a Nazi Security Service report of May 21, 1942, a translation of which appears as an appendix to this paper. As the war progressed and its outcome grew more uncertain and foreboding, apocalyptic stories appeared. One such story recounted that in a certain observatory a new planet had been sighted which was moving rapidly towards collision with the earth.<sup>1</sup> Finally, in 1943, an increase in non-institutionalized forms of religion was reported. Apparently this took the form of brooding about death and of metaphysical speculations about the after life and had no connection with organized church groups or activities.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> FBIS, FCC, Central European Analysis, Jan. 7, 1944, A-4.

<sup>2</sup> FBIS, FCC, Central European Analysis, Sept. 24, 1943, A-6.



In Nazi Germany several of the top Nazi elite were no less subject to superstitious beliefs than were the common people.<sup>1</sup> It is widely known that Hitler was a very superstitious man. During the period of his preparation for power in the twenties, he is said to have frequented spiritualistic circles and taken part in seances, and he claimed to have heard voices commanding him to save Germany.<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Semmler reports in Goebbels -- The Man Next to Hitler<sup>3</sup> that Hitler consulted and was greatly moved by a fortune-teller who told him in 1923 that he would come to power in 1933 with Hindenburg. It has even been reported<sup>4</sup> -- although no verification has been found for this -- that since he regarded "seven" as his lucky number, Hitler liked to launch large-scale attacks on Sundays (e.g. Austria, Poland, the Low Countries, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Russia.).

<sup>1</sup> It should be pointed out that democratic as well as totalitarian elites may be susceptible to superstition. Various American generals and admirals are noted for their stock of superstitious notions. Admiral Halsey is a particularly striking example: he carries innumerable talismans and good-luck charms, avoids traveling in the same plane with Admiral Nimitz (whom he feels has bad luck in the air), and regards the number thirteen as his jinx. In his memoirs he describes an incident which illustrates this last phobia:

"When we received orders for our next operation, we were appalled to find that not only had we been designated Task Force 13, but our sortie had been set for February 13, a Friday! Miles Browning and my Intelligence Officer, Col. Julian P. Brown of the Marines, immediately went to CINCPAC's headquarters and asked his chief of staff, Capt. Charles H. McMorris, 'What goes on here? Have you got it in for us, or what?'

"'Sock' Morris agreed that no sane sailorman would dare buck such a combination of ill auspices, and changed our designation to TF 16 and our sortie to the fourteenth." (Halsey, William F. and Bryan J., Admiral Halsey's Story, p. 97.)

<sup>2</sup> Bychowski, Gustav, Dictators and Disciples, pp. 152-154.

<sup>3</sup> Semmler, Rudolf, Goebbels -- The Man Next to Hitler, pp. 166-168.

<sup>4</sup> "Soldiers' Superstitions," New York Times Magazine, April 2, 1944.

Goebbels too was superstitious. Semmler recounts an incident which<sup>1</sup>  
illustrates the Propaganda Minister's non-rational fears:

"Goebbels is very superstitious. The more obscure the situation and the gloomier the future, the more this is noticeable ....  
"At the usual time to-day I went into his room to show him some press telegrams. Among them was an American radio announcement that Hitler was ill beyond recovery and that the General Staff had decided to force him to retire. Goebbels passed me the sheet of paper with a remark, and as I stretched out my hand to take it I brushed my sleeve against the silver-framed picture of Hitler which stood on the desk. It swayed, slipped and fell to the floor, the glass flying in all directions. For an instant there was a painful silence. Goebbels' face had gone pale. I was horrified. Then with a furious expression he shouted: 'No bad omens from you, please.' .... The whole evening Goebbels remained upset by this occurrence and looked thoroughly nervous."

British doctors reported Rudolf Hess' interest in the occult and his great confidence in horoscopes; Hess himself said that one factor in his decision to fly to England was that his old friend and professor Haushofer had seen him in three dreams piloting an airplane across the ocean.<sup>2</sup>

There is no way of measuring accurately how widely held superstitious beliefs were in wartime Germany nor to what extent they served to depress morale, produce defeatism, impair working efficiency, or otherwise lessen the war effort. But as the attached report on chain letters by the Security Service indicates, (See Appendix A) Nazi authorities regarded chain letters as a nuisance problem, were aware that they might weaken morale, and were sufficiently concerned to take steps to combat them. Similarly, they took measures against fortune-tellers. Count Ciano reports in his diary that

<sup>1</sup> Semmler, op. cit., pp. 166-168.

<sup>2</sup> The Case of Rudolf Hess, edited by John R. Rees, p. 13.

"since the Hess affair, all fortune-tellers and astrologers in Germany have been arrested."<sup>1</sup> Penalties for fortune-telling first involved payment of a fine, and when this proved an unsuccessful deterrent, fortune-tellers were imprisoned. Press and radio publicity of such punishment was given as a warning to others. Provincial and later national press articles and domestic radio broadcasts sought to dispel superstitious notions either through ridicule or rational arguments. One such article appeared in the October 25, 1943 issue of Der Mittag:<sup>2</sup>

"German victory must come before German peace. This is our unshakeable determination. But the day of victory can not be discovered from tea leaves, stars, through horoscopes, slide rules, or tricks with numbers. Yet, there are people who have been doing so recently. They juggle the chronology of the Middle Ages or take at random various dates regarding the ages of army leaders, politicians of past centuries, and our Fuehrer's age. The main thing for them is that the result points to peace in the near or distant future. Another sort of clairvoyant deals with nature. Some municipal zoo has a female elephant which gave birth to a baby in 1871 and again in 1918, it is therefore called the 'Peace Elephant.' It is quite natural that this elephant will soon have a baby again. To complete the story it is said that this elephant basks in the sun under a 'peace palm tree' which always blooms in the year before a peace. Others spread copies of some documents which have even 'been released by the Fuehrer' and were written in the 17th century by monk who predicted the great struggle between East and West...He said that the decision of the war would fall between four towns or four ruins; the victor would kneel between two limetrees, announcing the victory to his people. This and similar stuff, if it is copied seven times and sent out to others who do the same thing, is supposed to bring luck to the writer."

#### B. OTHER COUNTRIES

Similar examples of superstition have been reported in other countries at war, both democratic and totalitarian.

<sup>1</sup> The Ciano Diaries, edited by Hugh Gibson, p. 370.

<sup>2</sup> FBIS, FCC, Central European Analysis, November 5, 1943, B-10-11.

In London, although newspapers were sharply reduced in size, the number of astrological advertisements increased.<sup>1</sup> It was reported that fortune-telling and astrology enjoyed new popularity in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Foreign correspondents stationed in the Soviet Union report occasional instances of superstition among peasants and the more ignorant groups in the Russian population. Robert Magidoff, for example, describes a conversation he had with an uneducated cook whom he had promised to employ when the war was over. She came to him in September, 1944 to ask him to hire her because, she said, the war was almost over. When Magidoff asked her what made her think so, she pointed out that there were no mushrooms that year and that almost all the newborn babies were girls.<sup>3</sup> In Moscow, in the summer of 1941, an acquaintance of Alexander Werth told him that the peasants were predicting that Hitler would die on August 5 and that the war would end August 12.<sup>4</sup>

It has been widely observed that in combat soldiers tend to adopt superstitious practices and fetishes which they believe will protect them from harm. Japanese troops, for example, wore good-luck sennin-bari, or belts-with-a-thousand-stitches; these were belts which Japanese women had passed from hand to hand, each woman in turn adding a stitch.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kris, Ernst and Speier, Hans, German Radio Propaganda, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> Zolotow, Maurice, "The Soothsayer Comes Back," Saturday Evening Post, April 17, 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Magidoff, Robert, In Anger and Pity, pp. 114-115.

<sup>4</sup> Werth, Alexander, Moscow War Diary, p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> "Good Luck Belts," New York Times Magazine, January 11, 1942.

A foreign correspondent describes superstitions among Russian troops:<sup>1</sup>

"In some (troops), war strengthened their belief in the Church. Others acquired curious fetishes and superstitions. They believed they would not die -- if such-and-such did not happen. They would be safe if they did not look backward in battle. They would be safe if they did not think of death. They would be safe if their wives or sweethearts did not lose faith in them. This last belief was widespread in the Red Army. In letter after letter Red Army boys wrote back to their sweethearts and wives: 'So long as you are faithful to me, I will not be killed.'"

U.S. air combat crews considered it unlucky to make their beds before going on a mission but lucky to shave.<sup>2</sup> Among the top brass, General Eisenhower carried a 5-guinea gold piece for good luck, and General Kenney carried a pair of dice which had been blessed by a priest in World War I;<sup>3</sup> Admiral Halsey's superstitions have been noted above. The American Soldier<sup>4</sup> observes that many U.S. soldiers carried protective amulets or cherished articles of clothing which they had worn in previous dangerous battles, or made pre-battle preparations in a ritualistic fashion. Others fatalistically assumed that they would not be killed until their number was up or that they would only be killed when a shell had their number on it. There is no statistical evidence to show how many soldiers accepted magical and fatalistic practices, but there are indications that even those men who did not really think that these superstitious practices had any efficacy adopted them and felt that they derived some measure of confidence from them.

<sup>1</sup> Salisbury, Harrison, Russia On the Way, p. 286.

<sup>2</sup> "Soldiers' Superstitions," New York Times Magazines, April 2, 1944.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The American Soldier, edited by Samuel A. Stouffer et al, Vol. II, pp. 188-191.

Magic and fatalism apparently fulfilled much the same function as prayer and to some extent represented alternative techniques for dealing with the problem of anxiety. Sometimes, however, soldiers adopted all three techniques concurrently on the theory that it did no harm to try anything.

### III. Postwar reports of superstition in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe

From occasional references in the Soviet press and in the comments of foreign visitors recently returned from the Soviet Union it is apparent that thirty years' struggle against the "vestiges of decadent bourgeois culture" has not been entirely successful in stamping out "reactionary" superstitions, especially among peasants and unskilled laborers. One correspondent reports that when he threw a bread crust in the wastebasket, his maid reproved him, saying that not only was it sinful but that it would bring down dark spirits upon him.<sup>1</sup> Another recent visitor reports that among the few topics which it is still "safe" for foreigners to discuss with Russians are fortune-telling and superstitions, and she reports:<sup>2</sup>

"(In Moscow) you can get your fortune told by cards, by tea leaves, by water reflection, by black rats, by birds, by psychic manifestations. Within two kilometers of Moscow there is a woman who guarantees to influence your lover -- by means of his photograph -- so that he will never look at another woman but you...

"People understand that if you drop a fork a woman is coming to call, but if you drop a knife it will be a man. You have only to tell a sympathetic listener what you dreamed last night to have the dream interpreted for good or ill. If you break a mirror -- well, you know what. Russians love ghost stories and grisly supernatural tales and have a good store of them which they will relate with relish and enthusiasm."

<sup>1</sup> Moorad, George, Behind the Iron Curtain, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> Atkinson, Oriana, Over At Uncle Joe's, p. 310.

Superstitious practices are widely enough accepted and indulged in to call forth an occasional article of reproof in the Soviet press. Early in 1945, for example, Komsomolskaya Pravda, a newspaper for Soviet young people, published an article entitled "The Strange Case of Motia-Madeleine" which satirized a Soviet girl for aping Western ways in her dress and conduct. Among the foolish attitudes for which she was ridiculed were her acceptance of Western superstitions -- in particular, the belief that she could talk to the dead.<sup>1</sup> Late in 1949 another Soviet periodical remarked:<sup>2</sup>

"It is still possible, sometimes, to find children in Soviet schools who suppose that the way to pass an exam is not by diligence and systematic work, or conscientious and profound knowledge of a subject, but by all sorts of magic actions like putting on 'a lucky suit,' tying knots in one's handkerchief, and other similar acts..."

Despite official discouragement of "fringe" religious groups, the disruptive behavior of one such sect was serious enough to provoke a recent article in Literaturnaya Gazeta.<sup>3</sup> According to this account, a religious fanatic in a rural district persuaded a group of collective farmers that on a certain day they would be able to leave the earth and ascend to heaven. At the appointed hour the farmers and their families left their work and gathered together to await the ascension, but the ascension did not materialize although the group waited patiently for two weeks. Meanwhile the crops were not sowed and the children did not attend school. The article concludes by berating local agitators and propagandists for not countering "this raving propaganda" with "educational scientific-political propaganda."

<sup>1</sup> Moorad, George, op. cit., pp. 54-58.

<sup>2</sup> Oleshchuk, F. "Religion -- A Reactionary Ideology," Uchitelskaya Gazeta, November 26, 1949, in Current Digest of the Soviet Press, December 27, 1949.

<sup>3</sup> Yegorov, Ivan, "Kitayevskoye Fakirs," Literaturnaya Gazeta, September 3, 1949, in Current Digest of the Soviet Press, November 8, 1949.

Similarly, there are occasional references to superstition in the Peoples' Democracies. About a year ago a curious rumor was reported from Rumania.<sup>1</sup> A woman was reported to have said to a mysterious old man, "Don't be an ass." He replied, "Who says so, is" and vanished. Since then, the story runs, the woman has had a donkey's head.

A few days ago, according to a New Yorker item:<sup>2</sup>

"the government of Czechoslovakia decreed, the Associated Press says, that all palmists, fortune-tellers, and 'other specialists in the occult' must suspend operations in that country at once, on the ground that they are 'medieval remains of the capitalist era.'"

Recently a series of religious "miracles" has been reported from Czechoslovakian villages.<sup>3</sup> In one instance the cross on the alter of a parish church was reported to have bowed right and left and finally, symbolically, to the West; the "miracle" so impressed the Czechs that pilgrims began to converge on the village from miles around until Communist officials closed the church and turned the pilgrims away from approaching roads. In another instance, the Virgin Mary was said to have appeared in a vision and to have struck unconscious a local Communist. Finally, a report from Western Bohemia even stated that the Virgin Mary had been seen waving an American flag and followed by American tanks and troops.

The number of broadcasts from Moscow and Czech radios which have appeared since the reported "miracles" would indicate that the Communists

<sup>1</sup> Washington News, January 24, 1949.

<sup>2</sup> "Talk of the Town," The New Yorker, February 4, 1950.

<sup>3</sup> New York Times, February 9, 1950.



were considerably amoyed at the interest they provoked. According to the Foreign Broadcast Information Service's daily reports of Soviet and Eastern European radio broadcasts, there were nine broadcasts concerning the "miracles" between February 28 and March 19, seven from Czech transmitters and two from Moscow (including a review of a New Times article on the subject). The "miracle of the cross" has been denounced as "an outrageous swindle" engineered by the parish priest "with the aid of a steel wire, a coil spring, and rubber bands"; the "fraud" was inspired by the Vatican as part of its plot to undermine the new regime. It was explained to newspapermen at a press conference, and on March 10 all Czech motion picture houses were instructed to show a newsreel of it. A Prague Sunday newspaper featured a story with pictures to show how the trick was performed.

As for the report of the Virgin Mary's appearance waving the American flag, a Prague broadcast to Europe says:

1  
"It is obvious at first sight that this apparition bears the mark 'made in the United States.' These despicable machinations only help to unmask the high clergy as executors of the plans of the imperialist warmongers communicated to them by the Vatican through its agents."

IV. Deliberate manipulation of superstitious attitudes for purposes of psychological warfare

From the days of Xerxes, who told the Greeks that when the Persians shot off their arrows they shut out the light of the sun,<sup>2</sup> military strategists and propagandists have tried to capitalize on the superstitious foibles of the enemy. In an ancient Chinese military campaign one

1 FBIS, March 14, 1950, GG9.

2 Margolin, Leo J., Paper Bullets, p. 20.

commander tried to destroy his opponent's forces with an army that included large detachments of sorcerers.<sup>1</sup> In more recent times the British, by exploiting local superstitions, achieved some military successes during the 1920's: when British plane-mounted loud speakers told tribesmen along the Northwest Frontier that God was angry with them for breaking the peace, the tribes scattered; the Russians who were attacking religion in their propaganda were reportedly considerably irritated at what struck them as an improper form of warfare.<sup>2</sup>

During World War II both sides made occasional attempts to exploit the natural wartime interest in the supernatural. In the course of the 1940 campaign on the Western front, the Germans sent persons who masqueraded as astrologers into France ahead of the advancing armies with instructions to try to depress French morale by spreading dire predictions among French women about the fate of their husbands.<sup>3</sup> They also used magic lanterns to project images on the face of drifting clouds.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, the FBI was said to have kept a file of wartime astrologers and fortune-tellers suspected of being Axis agents, and a few fifth columnists of this nature were arrested.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Linebarger, Paul M.A., Psychological Warfare, pp. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Braden, Charles S., "Why Are the Cults Growing," Christian Century, January 12, 1944.

<sup>4</sup> German Psychological Warfare, edited by Ladislav Farago, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Zolotow, Maurice, op. cit.

As the following 1942 entries in his diary indicate, Goebbels was well aware that there were propaganda potentialities inherent in the popular wartime interest in astrology and fortune-telling:<sup>1</sup>

"March 16: The enemy is now making use of horoscopes in the form of handbills dropped from planes, in which a terrible future is prophesied for the German people. But we know something about this ourselves! I am having counter-horoscopes worked up which we are going to distribute, especially in the occupied areas."

"April 28: In the United States astrologists are at work to prophesy an early end for the Fuehrer. We know that type of work as we have often done it ourselves. We shall take up our astrological propaganda again as soon as possible. I expect quite a little of it, especially in the United States and England."

"May 19: Berndt handed in a plan for occultist propaganda to be carried on by us. We are really getting somewhere. The Americans and English fall easily for that type of propaganda. We are therefore pressing into our service all star witnesses for occult prophecy. Nestradamus must once again submit to being quoted."

But Goebbels' astrological propaganda was not designed exclusively for the enemy; he also saw the possibilities of spreading occult prophecies domestically to bolster the morale of the German people. Semmler describes a device used by Goebbels in the spring of 1944:<sup>2</sup>

"A new propaganda trick has been thought of by Goebbels. He has noticed that in times of danger and distress people become much more prone to superstition or occult practices -- he is so himself -- and will seek the advice of card-readers or other fortune-tellers."

"A month ago there appeared in a Norwegian paper, at Goebbels' instigation: 'The Revelations of the Swedish fortune-teller, Gruenberg.' These give a forecast of the future course of the war. They are fantastic and crazy but he foretells, after a

<sup>1</sup> The Goebbels Diaries, 1942-1943, edited by Louis P. Lochner, pp. 126, 193, 220.

<sup>2</sup> Semmler, Rudolf, op. cit., pp. 123-124.

period of much bitterness and disappointment, a victory for Germany. After many defeats, 1948 will be Hitler's greatest year. All this is embroidered with details, as these things always are. The final conclusion is that Germany and the Western Powers will fight together against Bolshevism, with Hitler hailed as the saviour of Europe.

"Soon after the Norwegian paper had published these sensational forecasts, a typewritten leaflet began to turn up in a number of German cities, giving extracts from the article. It was passed from hand to hand and one can imagine even sober, serious men, talking worriedly about the war, pulling out of their breast-pockets the comforting prophecies of Gruenberg, showing it to one another, and persuading one another once again that everything will turn out all right."

The Allies too put out propaganda designed to produce defeatism among superstitious peoples. According to the passages from Goebbels' diaries quoted above, they dropped leaflet horoscopes in occupied countries predicting a German defeat. In the Far East a black radio program, known as Operation Hermit and beamed by OSS to Nanking, used astrology, phrenology, fortune-telling, etc. to analyze puppet rulers in East Asia to predict their downfall and the collapse of the Japanese Co-Prosperity Sphere. With what looked like real clairvoyance, the program even predicted a great disaster<sup>1</sup> for the first week in August, 1945. During the Italian campaign British Army magicians used their talents to conjure up devices to scare Italian peasants; one such device is described by Captain Maskelyne in Magic Top Secret:<sup>2</sup>

"Our men...were able to use illusions of an amusing nature in the Italian mountains, especially when operating in small groups as advance patrols scouting out the way for our general moves forward. In one area, in particular, they used a device which was little more than a gigantic scarecrow, about twelve feet high, and able to stagger forward under its own power and emit frightful flashes and bangs. This thing scared several Italian Sicilian villages appearing in the dawn thumping its deafening

<sup>1</sup> MacDonald, Elizabeth, Undercover Girl, pp. 200-201.

<sup>2</sup> Maskelyne, Jasper, Magic Top Secret, p. 129.

way down their streets with great electric blue sparks jumping from it; and the inhabitants, who were mostly illiterate peasants, simply took to their heels for the next village, swearing that the Devil was marching ahead of the invading English.

"Like all tales spread among uneducated folk (and helped, no doubt, by our agents), this story assumed almost unmanageable proportions. Villages on the route of our advance began to refuse sullenly to help the retreating Germans, and to take sabotage against them; and then, instead of waiting for our troops to arrive with food and congratulations of their help, the poor people fled, thus congesting the roads along which German motorized transport was struggling to retire. The German tankmen sometimes cut through the refugees and this inflamed feeling still more, and what began almost as a joke was soon a sharp weapon in our hands which punished the Germans severely, if indirectly, for several critical weeks."

V. A few factors to be considered in exploiting superstitions

On the basis of war and postwar evidence it seems evident that in both the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Democracies superstitions exist which could be exploited in the event of a possible future conflict with these countries. How widespread these tendencies are is unknown and is a moot question; it would undoubtedly be possible to find some evidences of superstition in any country in the world, and the mere fact that there are occasional references to this type of behavior in the books of Western observers of the Soviet scene should not be taken to mean that superstition is necessarily widespread. But the fact that the Soviet press, one of whose principal functions is to point out the shortcomings of Soviet society, has commented in national newspapers and periodicals on the phenomenon can be taken to mean that Soviet leaders are aware that the problem does exist.

Since it is doubtful that the "Soviet man" is motivated by psychological mechanisms that are fundamentally different from those which animate his Western counterpart, it can be reasoned -- although conclusive evidence to

support this point has not been found in the material examined -- that wartime will aggravate superstitious tendencies. It seems likely that superstitions flourish in an atmosphere of tension and insecurity and that when daily experiences fail to provide sufficient reassurance and freedom from anxiety, when in fact factors making for anxiety and insecurity are multiplied, as they are in time of war, an atmosphere exists which is conducive to the acceptance of superstitions.

In wartime, the average person feels himself at the mercy of fate; whether he and those he loves are killed or wounded seems a matter of chance. Yet perhaps these forces are not entirely blind or beyond control; perhaps they can be placated if only he carries a good-luck charm or makes six copies of a chain letter and passes it on. At any rate it can do no harm to try.

Furthermore, in wartime the individual's insecurity is increased because, since military security imposes at least a partial blackout of news, he feels he does not know what is going on at a time when what happens outside his immediate locality is of vital importance to him. This is probably especially true in a totalitarian country where individuals have long been accustomed to a government-controlled press and radio which give out only as much information as they choose and which choose to leave out a great deal and to treat the news which is presented with something less than complete frankness and objectivity. Most of all, the individual -- whether he lives in a democratic or in a totalitarian state -- wants to know not only what is happening today but what will happen tomorrow. So he turns to the crystal-gazers and the fortune-tellers and the astrologers

who claim they can lift the veil from the future.

Finally, many a superstitious belief is the product of wishful thinking and is accepted because it represents something the individual would like to believe. Since most people hate war and long not only for victory but for peace, prophecies of an early armistice or of new measures to end the war speedily, even if based on nothing but rumor and superstition, find a receptive audience. On the other hand, the anxious individual is not necessarily receptive only to those prophecies which are in accord with his wishes; he may also accept those which confirm his worst fears. Thus dire prophecies of serious reverses or of cataclysmic destruction of the world also are accepted, often by the same individual who accepts optimistic prophecies.

Presumably the better-educated and more intelligent groups in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe will be less susceptible to superstition than the more ignorant groups. Undoubtedly there is some correlation between the type and amount of education a man has received and his readiness to accept such a non-rational idea as that passing on a chain letter can save him from harm, but the correlation may not be as close as is popularly assumed. The fact that superstition was as prevalent as it was in World War II in the supposedly more enlightened and scientific era of the twentieth century is evidence that the rejection of superstition does not necessarily follow enlightenment. Even men who under normal circumstances would scoff at the idea that there was any magical potency in a chain letter may in wartime rationalize to the extent of saying: "I don't really believe in this, but at least it does no harm to try it."

On the other hand, the more intelligent and better educated groups in the population will probably be less likely to fall prey to the more obvious and blatant forms of superstition. Given the same degree of insecurity, the better-educated man may be more likely to seek relief from his anxieties in other ways. Or he may be willing to accept a harmless superstition like carrying a gold coin for good luck while he draws the line at going so far as to consult and accept the prophecies of a ouija board manipulator. In view of the emphasis which Soviet leaders have placed on materialistic explanations of the laws of the universe, it is unlikely that the Soviet elite are as addicted to superstition as the Nazi elite were, but the sub-elites may not have been equally successful in ridding themselves of such bourgeois notions. Attempts to manipulate popular beliefs in superstition will probably be most successful, however, if directed against peasants, old people, and the more ignorant workers in Russia and her satellites.

There would seem to be two major directions which attempts to exploit popular superstitious ideas might take. The first would involve using fortune-telling, astrology, and any of the occult techniques for guessing the future to predict dire events likely to befall the enemy. It should be relatively easy to devise general prophecies of eventual disaster, but although vague prophecies might produce a general state of depression among those who accepted them, more decisive results might be obtained by somewhat more specific predictions coupled with instructions of what to do to avoid the predicted disaster.

The second common type of superstition which might be exploited is the popular acceptance of devices and practices calculated to ward off harm.



Chain letters instructing the recipient to make several copies of the letter and pass them on to friends would fall into this category. Such letters may pose nuisance problems for the enemy governments in that they consume time that could more profitably be spent on war tasks. If widely disseminated, they may overburden the postal system. Instructions on what to do to appease fortune should be devised with emphasis on acts which will cause greatest annoyance to the enemy government.

If an attempt is made to exploit superstitions for purposes of psychological warfare, it will be necessary to explore a number of problems not investigated in this paper. The questions listed below are merely suggestive of the various types of problems which should be considered. Answers to some of them may be found in the literature regarding World War II "black" propaganda operations.

1. What types of superstitious appeals will be best adapted to the various audiences to be propagandized? What superstitions are peculiar to Eastern Europeans, to Russians, to the various nationalities of the Soviet Union? What superstitions are most prevalent among peasants, among combat troops or airmen, among civilians? What evidence is there that given members of the enemy elite are addicted to certain types of superstitions? In addition to biographical and other material regarding groups and individuals in the enemy country, a study of local superstitions as reflected in popular folk lore might be profitable in providing answers to these questions.

2. What timing factors should be considered in attempts to exploit superstitions? Will superstitions find greater acceptance after the enemy

has suffered reverses or deprivations -- e.g. after an air raid or after a reduction in rations or an increase in the length of the prescribed working week? What types of superstition are likely to be acceptable in the early part of a war as contrasted to later years? As war progresses, is there an increase in fatalistic attitudes and a corresponding decrease in the belief in the efficacy of magical devices? What evidence is there that some types of superstitions lose their credibility after enjoying a brief vogue?

3. What results have previous psychological warfare operations in this field obtained, and what specific effects should this type of non-rational appeal attempt to achieve? What types of nuisance behavior would be most annoying to the enemy government or most likely to impair the war effort? What types of nuisance behavior are possible for the individual in a totalitarian country in wartime?

4. What are the best methods for communicating non-rational appeals to the intended audience? What audiences can be reached by leaflets or radio broadcasts? What are the relative advantages of disseminating this type of appeal through word-of-mouth rumors introduced by agents? What are the potentialities for word-of-mouth communication within the enemy country?

5. What special limitations are attempts to exploit superstition subject to? To what extent can enemy counter-propaganda offset the effect of our propaganda, e.g. by offering the domestic population reassuring prophecies to combat the effect of dire predictions? What may be the boomerang effects

of attempts to exploit popular folk lore?<sup>1</sup> Finally, to what extent will the police controls in a totalitarian country make it difficult or impossible for the individual to engage in the nuisance behavior suggested by our propaganda even if he should wish to do so?

<sup>1</sup> One illustration of the fact that such attempts can boomerang is afforded in the recent exchange of Russian folk tales by Messrs. McNeil and Vyshinsky. At a UN meeting, McNeil recounted a Russian folk tale about a serpent to whom he compared Vyshinsky. Vyshinsky neatly parried with another tale entitled "The Serpent and the Slanderer." According to this story, when the slanderer and the serpent were vying for first place as the most loathsome creature in Hell, top honors went to the slanderer.



## APPENDIX A

## CHAIN LETTERS IN WARTIME GERMANY

Under the Nazi regime in Germany, Section III of the Office of the Chief of the Security Police and the Security Service issued periodic reports describing for the benefit of higher authorities what the German people were thinking and doing in the course of their daily life. These documents deal, for example, with the reaction of the population to various radio broadcasts and articles in the press, with rumors, with difficulties which the man in the street had in dealing with his food ration office, and with the prevalence of various types of crimes and misdemeanors. Entitled "Meldungen aus dem Reich" (the title was later changed to "Berichte zu Inlandsfragen"), the reports were classified "Secret". How the material was gathered is not specified in the issues which have been examined, but it is clear that lower echelons of the police and security service had informants sprinkled throughout the population and in addition made use of various types of police files. Periodic summaries from these lower echelons were sent to Berlin and an over-all report was prepared there in the Prinz Albrecht Strasse police headquarters.

The issue of Meldungen aus dem Reich for May 21, 1942, contains a rather full treatment of the problem of chain letters which, since information on this subject is comparatively scarce, has been translated in full below.

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Resurgence of the Chain Letter Problem

A few months after the start of the war, strange letters appeared in various parts of the Reich proper. These had a partially religious, partially religious-political content and were widely distributed -- especially in the country districts -- because of their prophecies about the progress and outcome of the war or because they were regarded as good-luck letters which would preserve the safety of their possessors.

These letters soon came to the attention of thousands of persons, both because of the prescribed method of transmission (each recipient was told to make three to four copies), and because people were told that anyone who breaks this "lucky chain" will be pursued by misfortune and will not find "salvation."

In the months from April to June, 1940, the transmission of these messages reached such an extent that the press, film, and radio had to expressly point out the foolishness of the chain letter nuisance. As a result, the number of such letters visibly decreased, and almost disappeared in the year 1941. In February of this year (1942), however, a new wave of

chain letters began, which - as can be ascertained from the available reports - threatens to assume far larger proportions in all parts of the Reich, and in fact has already surpassed the levels of the previous years. (Ed. note: there follows a list of 22 cities from which reports were received by police headquarters.)

In the most cases these letters consist of the so-called "Greeting from Lourdes", which has achieved the greatest circulation not only because of its brevity, but also because of the "plea for an armistice" which it contains.

This letter, which allegedly started its rounds on November 1, 1942, in Lourdes, begins with the words: "A mother passes it on, so that an armistice will come". Then the usual demand follows that the letter be copied and sent on to four persons "to whom one wishes good luck." The letter ends with the words: "But you may not stop the letter, for if you do you will have no more happiness. These words will be fulfilled. Pray three Ave Marias, and within 177 hours you will experience unexpected good fortune."

A similar chain letter, perhaps started as the "Greeting from Lourdes" and was altered as a joke, is circulated especially by young women and girls, because it allegedly originated with young soldiers! An extract from it is as follows:

Somebody sent it to me and I am sending it to you. Copy it three times and send the text to four people to whom you wish good fortune. The lucky chain began with two young soldiers. The lucky chain must make its way around the world. Persons who break the chain will never be happy.... The lucky chain began on November 3, 1939. A group of young soldiers, who deserve good fortune! You keep nothing!

Again and again the so-called "Testament of a fleeing monk from the 17th Century" appears, and in spite of its long-winded expressions is frequently copied off, probably because of the prophecies in the text about the progress and outcome of the war. Its circulation continues, in spite of the fact that the Archive of the City of Wismar, which according to the "Testament" possesses the original document, has attempted to point out the false statements in the letter. Because of the numerous questions which it has received, Wismar has already made arrangements to provide the requested information on printed postcards, which read as follows:

The so-called testament of a fleeing clergyman is in all respects a complete invention. A document with such contents has neither been found here nor is it preserved in the City Hall. We request you to assist us in suppressing this falsehood.

The same motives may have contributed toward assisting in the distribution of another forgery for the superstitious, the alleged "Vision of the Countess Pillante, Princess of Savoy". This one ends with the words:

But the peoples who have raised themselves against Christ will perish in flames. Starvation will destroy those who remain, so that Europe will become empty. Then the sons of the holy Francis and Dominick will go through the world and lead those who remain to Christ. But the bent cross will be branded on the foreheads of the criminals.

A "Letter from Heaven" is also very widely distributed, and has achieved as great circulation among the Volk Germans and the transferred German populations as in the Old Reich. It owes its popularity primarily to its use as a "lucky piece". After being told to cease working on Sunday and to go regularly to church, the recipient is also threatened - as in all other cases - with eternal damnation:

Whosoever does not believe this letter shall not achieve eternal salvation. But whosoever carries it with him and gives it to others to read or to copy, his sins shall be forgiven even though they are as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the sands of the sea. But he who does not heed this letter and does not pass it on to be read or copied, he shall be damned.

The letter promises further all kinds of miraculous effects. Whoever carries it with him will "suffer no harm from a gun loaded by anyone", and will be protected from all other bodily harm. As proof it is stated that a "Count Felix of Flanders, who wanted to behead a knight for his misdeeds was able neither to wound nor to behead the knight". It developed that the latter carried with him the Letter from Heaven with the mysterious characters, and the Count then immediately copied it for himself. The letter is supposed to have been found in Jesus' grave and was also at one time in the possession of the Kaiser Karl. The latter had the letters emblazoned on his shield in gold.

Another "protective letter", which a housewife in Hamburg circulated and also gave to an Italian citizen when he left the country, differs very little from the so-called Letter from Heaven. It begins with the following words:

Holy Protective Letter.

In the Name of God the Father and of the Son...Just as Christ stood still in the garden, so all guns shall be silent. Whoever carries this with him will not be harmed. The guns, swords and pistols of the enemy shall not strike him...This letter was sent from heaven and was found in 1724 in Holstein. It was written with golden letters and hovered over the holy baptismal font."...

The letter ends with a row of capital letters in an arbitrary arrangement.

Another "protective letter", which is sent especially frequently to the front, begins in the following manner:

The words in this verse will bring help when it is asked for:  
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.  
Heavenly Father, I always carry Thee with me,  
According to Thy will, which is bound to my heart.  
Thou wilt also bring my enemies  
To me here in quietness!  
Protect and preserve me from all harm,  
With Thy mighty mercy..."

The strikingly large circulation of the chain letters, according to the reports, can be ascribed to several motives. First, the centuries-old, deep-rooted superstition that special devices can be used to influence ones own fate or the fate of relatives at the front, again and again leads the population to the use of these chain letters. At least it cannot do any harm to obey the admonition of the chain letters that they should be sent on. In by far the majority of the cases the letters were sent on by the recipients with a certain anxiety and fear that if they destroyed the document the misfortune threatened in the letter would strike them or their families. In many cases, however, the unquestioned reliability and power of these protective letters was believed in just as firmly as the power of certain holy objects, rosaries, medallions, crosses, etc., are believed in by Catholic circles. One report states:

Since allegedly so many of the statements in these letters have been fulfilled, believing citizens are influenced by them to such a degree that, for example, the date predicted for the end of the war in these letters (three years and five months) has already achieved the status of a fixed idea. (Bayreuth)

Also in Protestant circles people have become thoroughly convinced of the effectiveness of these protective letters and they are often sent to the soldiers at the front as a talisman. One report states:

According to the belief of the woman who was questioned - a member of the Evangelical Church - the letter must at all times be carried by the soldier in his breast pocket, and above all, the soldier must believe in it. Then this letter would bring the help that was asked for, or would keep the soldier from harm. A soldier on leave, who carried the letter, confirmed this report, and alleged that without the letter he never would have come safely out of battle. A comrade, who also carried the letter but apparently didn't believe in it, had fallen. (Chemnitz)



As typical of the point of view of the rural population toward the chain letters, a report states:

Questioning of a whole series of chain letter writers - only females from peasant circles were concerned - showed that the population was seized as if by a psychosis. One woman brought the chain letter to the others with the urgent admonition that they should copy it three or four times as soon as possible and send it on to acquaintances. Even children are sent from farm to farm in order to deliver these letters. The women all maintained that they had not dared to destroy the chain letter or to refrain from passing it on, since they feared that otherwise they would be visited by a major tragedy. It appears that this undesirable behavior cannot be checked without strong threats of punishment. (Innsbruck)

It is clear that worry about relatives at the front plays a large role in the present wide circulation of these letters:

One can conclude from the available reports that the chain letter writers are motivated primarily by fear of further bloody battles. People want to do everything they can for the soldiers. For this reason, even chain letters are written for them, with belief in their miraculous quality. The letters certainly do not contribute to improving war morale. It is, after all, the purpose of the "Greeting from Lourdes" to seek an early armistice. (Bayreuth)

The letters are written almost exclusively by women and they are sent on largely to women who have relatives in the army or at the front. In order to obtain these protective letters and to send them on to soldiers at the front, service wives are often even sought out in their homes and requested to provide the desired document. (Graz, Oppeln, etc.)

The clergy do not play a prominent part in spreading chain letters, but they indulgently overlook this "pious and harmless superstition". It rarely happens that the clergy, to whom the chain letter nuisance cannot be unknown, take a stand themselves against this pernicious behavior. For instance, the following information comes from Linz:

In the course of the month of April, 1942, a single office was able to seize from 20 to 30 chain letters almost daily. Since it was necessary to assume that the number of letters in circulation must have been several times this number, the appropriate church authorities were asked to take measures against the circulation of chain letters. Only after this demand, the Bishop's office in Linz sent the following instruction to the lower clergy of the diocese:

"The chain letter nuisance has assumed such proportions during the past weeks that there is cause to make a general appeal to counteract it. In cases where the Pastor has not already done so on his own responsibility in the recent past, the next opportunity should be taken in a sermon or in an announcement from the pulpit to state expressly that these chain letters represent gross superstition, which no real Catholic can take part in or promote. The Faithful are to be exhorted to destroy such chain letters in the event that they come into their hands, and in any case not to circulate them further. For your information it is added that the secret police have brought this nuisance to our attention and have asked that we take measures from this quarter to help suppress it.

Not only in the Alp and Danube districts, but also in all parts of the Reich, even in the territories which have been newly won or retaken, there are complaints about a steadily increasing flood of chain letters.

The chain letter "Greeting from Lourdes" is circulating to a continually increasing extent. In Hausach/Kinzigtal alone 20 copies of it could be seized in a single day. The letters are circulated by the entire Catholic population. Through letters which were apprehended in the Lörrach Kreis it was possible to ascertain that the Catholic priest in Haslach/Kinzigtal had also circulated the letters. In spite of all measures the constantly increasing flood of the chain letters cannot be stopped. (e.g. Karlsruhe)

In Oberkrain the letter from Lourdes is circulating not only in German, but also in Slovene.

In the past two months the circulation of this chain letter (Greeting from Lourdes) has grown to a veritable flood in the whole district. In nearly all towns, but especially in the country, this document - in which as is well known the wish for an early armistice is expressed - is continually being copied and sent on. The Reichspost has constantly seized and turned over to the police whole sheafs of letters which from their outer appearance alone can be identified as chain letters. It should be noted in this connection that only a very small percentage of the letters ever come to the attention of the authorities at all. (Innsbruck)

From Vienna, Dortmund and Düsseldorf it is reported almost uniformly:

Various observations lead one to the conclusion that the chain letters are being circulated by the same people who recently circulated the Galen sermon and the other pastoral letters. The purpose may be on the one hand to preserve the belief of the people in their church through this superstitious nonsense, and on the other to encourage the desire for peace in order that the morale of these unreflective and primitive sectors of the population may be weakened.

Local attempts to suppress the chain letter nuisance have been unavailing up to the present time. For example, it has been reported from Graz:

The well-known chain letters continue to be circulated, in spite of the fact that the local press has already denounced this malpractice which overburdens the post office in an irresponsible manner.

Party circles have therefore proposed that, just as in 1940, the press, radio and film be employed again to check this constantly increasing nuisance by pointing out the nonsensical nature of such activity.

WPD/sj

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