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## Nazi TV

Television and its influence on World War II



Revealing the new technology 1935. Photo Alamy Stock Photos (licensed image)

**I**n all fearlessness, the Nazis didn't invent TV. The British did. Or the Americans. Or the Russians depending on who you listen to. The fact is, a lot of countries were experimenting with the new medium in the 1920s and '30s but it was Nazi Germany that introduced the world's first regular television service and it was Nazi Germany that first used television to push a message.

Launched in March 1935 as Deutscher Fernseh Rundfunk, TV station Paul Nipkow Fernhsehsender started broadcasting 90 minutes of programming three times a week to a few select Berliners — the Nazi Party elite and some National Post Office employees. The line-up consisted of variety shows, concerts, and gymnastics promoting the state-organized leisure campaign Strength Through Joy. Simple fare but there was no mistaking its goal of "imprinting the image of the Führer on every German heart, never to be erased." So said Reich Program Director Eugen Hadamovsky when he formally opened the station that spring. No ambiguity there.

Yet, the endeavor was never formally called Nazi TV nor was it officially part of the Propaganda Ministry. (I'm calling it Nazi TV for simplicity's sake.) Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels wasn't that enthusiastic about television — he preferred radio to fire up the masses — so television became Nazi light, less inflammatory but politicized nevertheless. The venture was actually operated by the National Radio Company and the National Post Office which had overseen television's development.

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Early Nazi programming 1936. Photo The Times

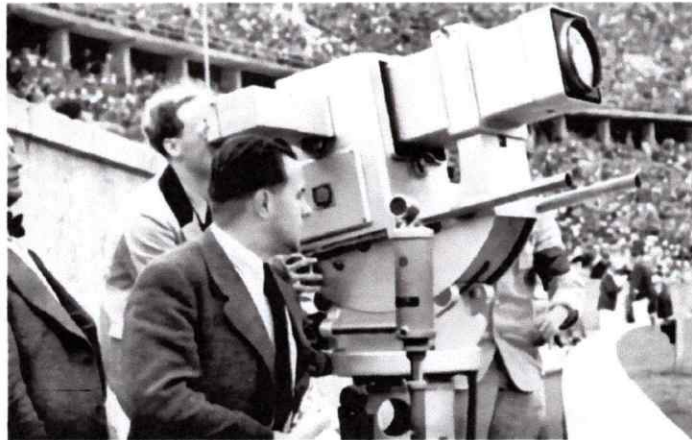
### Early programming

Entertainment was Nazi TV's heavy-handed stock in trade. Images recently retrieved from Berlin's Federal Film Archives confirm its purpose. 1936's *Roof Garden*, for instance, is a clumsy attempt to sell militarism masquerading as a variety show. Cue the singers and dancers.

"The brown marching columns are the SA, the black ones are the SS," sings the man on the mandolin. "The Führer calls, and they come without delay from the north, the south, the east, and the west."

It's laughable today, fodder for an *SNL* parody, but chilling when you consider what came three years later, mobilization and World War II.

While Germany was the first to establish regular programming (the BBC started its regular television service 20 months later in November 1936), distribution remained a problem. Only a few sets were in circulation and the public could only witness the new marvel in public television parlors, usually 20 people at a time. Nazi TV had not yet reached the masses.



Recording the 1936 Olympics. Photo Wikimedia Commons

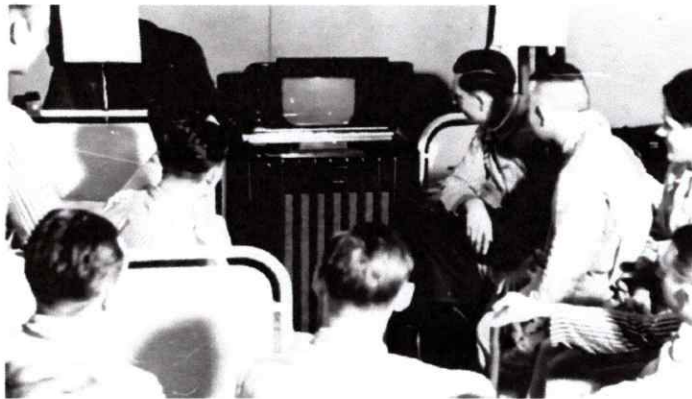
### Finding an audience

That all changed with the 1936 Olympics. Armed with three new electronic cameras, Nazi TV now fed live, real-time images to 28 new viewing parlors throughout Berlin. The station had also upped its technical game, switching from a mechanical transmission system (much like the rotating disc system the BBC initially used) to electronic transmission. That made the pictures

sharper. An estimated 160,000 Berliners attended the parlors, good numbers for the times. Nazi TV had found its audience.

After the Olympics, the station increased its programming and focused, as before, on health, order, and obedience. The 1938 program *Brides at Schwananwerder*, for instance, takes viewers behind the scenes at a Reich Brides' School where, as the narrator explains, young women are receiving instruction on "becoming wives and life companions for their husbands." Activities included housecleaning, flower arranging and changing diapers. The Reich was very big on traditional gender roles.

But it's the 1939 quasi-documentary, *German Students on Rural Assignment*, that's particularly disturbing. The camera captures several students applying a device to a young girl's head to measure the dimensions of her skull. "We're conducting anthropological experiments to determine the racial characteristics of this region, the white-coated "scientist" says. The intent and the foreshadowing are clear. The Nazis will be implementing their master race dogma in the occupied countries.



Hospitalized soldiers watching TV 1941. Photo Der Spiegel

### **Final messages and legacy**

When war was finally declared months later Nazi TV changed its message again. Wartime programming focused on propping up the home front resulting in a stream of programs on making preserves, growing your own vegetables, recycling clothing, and saving kitchen scraps to supply state-operated pig farms. A pre-war order of ten thousand home television sets never materialized and Nazi TV found itself transmitting to the wounded (at one point 11 Berlin hospitals were hooked up to transmissions), soldiers garrisoned in Paris, and the few private homes that still had receivers. Sports were popular. So were the variety shows. The productions became slicker and more sophisticated, a precursor to America's 1950's classic *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

"We wanted to distract people from the War," a former production manager said after 1945. A 1941 television report on a blossom festival in Werder, a small town near Berlin, illustrates TV's push to placate its viewers and pretend there's nothing to worry about.

"Why should we be sad, especially in wartime?" the town's mayor says confidently. "This is the time we need most of our inner cheer. And what could be better suited than the Cherry Blossom Festival in Werder where we hope to give the people of Berlin this inner gladness and make them strong again for their work."

Why be sad indeed? It was 1941; Germany had just invaded Russia and we know how that turned out.

In November 1943, Allied bombing destroyed Rundfunk's transmitter and by late 1944, Nazi TV ceased operations.

After the War, the occupying powers established their own television stations, reflecting their own particular biases. A truly German voice only re-emerged when the Allies left Berlin in 1955 and Germany was partitioned. East Germans were offered regular television programming, albeit Soviet-style, in March of 1956. West Germany also started regular programming in 1956, dubbing American programming into German and, in a nod to the future, adding commercials. Television, as we know it today, had arrived.



## HISTORY OF YESTERDAY