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ARTICLE

Sergei Chakhotin against the Swastika: Mass Psychology and Scientific Organization in the Iron Front's Three Arrows Campaign

Benjamin Diehl

City University of New York
Email: bdiehl@gradcenter.cuny.edu

Abstract

This article details the influence of Russian psychologist Sergei Chakhotin on the propaganda of the Iron Front, an antifascist organization that resisted the rise of the Nazis in the dying days of the Weimar Republic. Notably the creator of the Three Arrows symbol, Chakhotin espoused theories and methods that used Ivan Pavlov's notion of the conditioned reflex and Fredrick Taylor's theory of scientific management to transform socialist propaganda to better combat the rise of fascism. By scrutinizing Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) periodicals and Iron Front propaganda, I argue that Chakhotin's ideas played a crucial role in catalyzing changes in the form and content of street campaigning throughout 1932. Chakhotin provided a scientific lens through which his allies in the SPD could view and understand the mass appeal of the Nazis, as well as the necessary changes in party tactics that were required in the age of mass media, popular spectacle, and emotional struggle.

Keywords: Sergei Chakhotin; psychology; propaganda; social democracy; National Socialism; antifascism

Introduction

In the late spring of 1932, the Hessian city of Darmstadt was the site of a battleground. Two opposing forces competed in this city for control of public space, in uniformed masses, attempting to claim a decisive victory for their respective sides. The combatants were members of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), or Nazis, and members of the Iron Front, a composite organization made up primarily of activists in the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). These political movements, the two largest in Germany at this time, were not competing militarily—this was no civil war in the literal sense. They did not use military weapons, and the goal was not (yet) the physical elimination of their opponents. Instead, the two sides were competing for votes. Indeed, Darmstadt was the setting of an electoral campaign that was hotly contested between the forces of the radical right and the pro-republican left, not to mention the smaller radical left under the German Communist Party (KPD).[1]

Rather than being a real war, this conflict was instead a war of symbols (*Symbolkrieg*) and was designated as such by those who fought in it.[2] The Nazis' weapon of choice was, of

[1] Donna Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

[2] Richard Albrecht, "Symbolkampf in Deutschland 1932. S. Tschachotin und der 'Symbolkrieg' der Drei Pfeile Gegen den Nationalsozialismus als Episode im Abwehrkampf der Arbeiterbewegung Gegen den Faschismus in Deutschland," *Internationale Wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 22 (1986).

course, the swastika, while the Iron Front wielded a very new symbol, the Three Arrows. Just as the Nazis had done with their swastika since their political breakthrough in 1930 and even before, the Iron Front had the Three Arrows produced everywhere: it was printed on flags, graffitied onto walls, and worn as pins and on armbands by its members. In fact, the direct aim of this particular campaign was to meet the profusion of swastikas that was characteristic of Nazi street campaigns with an equal and perhaps greater outflow of Three Arrows. And the leaders of the Iron Front in Hesse did not stop there in mimicking the Nazis. Gaudy parades, raucous speeches, and uniformed masses accompanied the war of symbols on the side of the Iron Front as well as the Nazis. Members of the Iron Front could even be seen using their own salute and shout, a raised fist and the word "Freiheit!," to counter the Nazi salute and "Heil Hitler!."[3]

What was the genesis of such crude imitation? If one looks at images from these Iron Front rallies in Hesse and elsewhere in Germany (as in Figure 1) during the election campaigns of 1932, it seems as though the pro-republican Iron Front had become a spitting image of the very fascist movements they had been so adamant about resisting with pure defiance and resolve. Why would committed democrats adopt these forms of spectacular, militant propaganda?

To answer these questions, historians have described such measures as proof of a deviation against the norm within the SPD and larger German social democratic movement that was the result of either a generational conflict or a dangerous flirtation with the ideas and methods of the Nazis.[4] By contrast, I argue that the SPD's turn to these new methods of propaganda and the forms they took was the product of the profound influence of Russian psychologist and propagandist Sergei Chakhotin, inventor of the Three Arrows—the Iron Front's very own tool of psychological warfare.[5] Chakhotin's attention to "mass psychological elements" and the rational organization of political propaganda, which he took to be the cause of the Nazis' success, were informed by his own experiences in the Russian Revolution and his deep exposure to the psychological discoveries of Ivan Pavlov and Frederick Taylor's principles of scientific organization. The synthesis of these two thinkers, especially the introduction of Pavlovian notions of the conditioned reflex, represented a novel and incisive analysis of Nazi successes and SPD deficiencies. Key advocates within the SPD who sought to adopt new styles of political propaganda took much from Chakhotin's arguments, and one can trace these ideas in SPD periodicals and propaganda initiatives during various election campaigns throughout 1932. First taking hold in Hesse, where Chakhotin's influence in the SPD was strongest, the Three Arrows and its accompanying militant forms of propaganda spread throughout Germany as the Iron Front used these new methods to project a more dynamic, spectacular image. Chakhotin's role in designing and propagating this new style has not gone unnoticed by historians, but his innovative use of scientific theory to both explain its success and justify its use requires greater attention. Crucially, against predominant materialist and aesthetic perceptions, Chakhotin provided a scientific lens through which his allies in the SPD could view and understand the mass appeal of the Nazis as well as the changes in party tactics that the 1930s age of mass media, popular spectacle, and emotional struggle required.[6]

[3] Serge Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses: The Psychology of Totalitarian Political Propaganda*, reprint (New York: Routledge, 2017 [1939]).

[4] Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism*; Stefan Vogt, *Nationaler Sozialismus und Soziale Demokratie. Die Sozialdemokratische Junge Rechte 1918–1945* (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz, 2006).

[5] Due to the variety of national contexts in which Chakhotin's Russian name was transliterated, his surname appears in a number of variations. I will use the following spelling: Sergei Chakhotin. On the origins of the Three Arrows, see Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*.

[6] The small existing literature on Chakhotin, specifically, includes Richard Albrecht, "Sergej Tschachotin oder 'Dreipfeil Gegen Hakenkreuz.' Eine Biographisch-Historische Skizze," in *Exilforschung—Ein Internationales Jahrbuch Herausgegeben im Auftrag der Gesellschaft für Exilforschung*, vol. 4 (Munich, 1986), 208–28; Stephanie Averbeck-Lietz, "Die Polit-Kampagne 'Drei Pfeile Gegen Hakenkreuz' 1932 und Ihr Autor Serge Tchakhotine," in *Wer die*

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Figure 1. Demonstration of the Iron Front on the occasion of the Reichstag election in Berlin, 1932. (Archiv der deutschen Jugendbewegung, F1-535-034)

My claim is developed from two other major works on the SPD during the Weimar period that focus on elements of the party's right wing, namely those of Donna Harsch and Stefan Vogt, respectively. Harsch pinpointed the deployment of new political tactics such a symbolic propaganda and charismatic leadership in a subfaction of the SPD's right wing, which she called the "neorevisionists." This group consisted of younger members of the party, such as Carlo Mierendorff and Theo Haubach, who resisted what they saw as an ossified SPD leadership and organization and sought to revitalize the party with elements of the new propaganda.[7] Stefan Vogt, who wrote the most comprehensive history of the SPD's right wing during this period, argued that the turn towards a more irrational and emotional style was part of the neorevisionists' attraction to the Nazis' linking of nationalism to socialism, an affiliation that they felt would also serve the SPD.[8] Inserting a nationalist bent to the SPD's image was part of the same thinking that led the members of the "Mierendorff Circle" to adopt similar propaganda tactics. In the end, Vogt is clear in his assessment that this group developed a problematic association with Nazi ideas and fraught assumptions about the ability of the SPD to mirror their success in winning over the middle class through ideological and tactical changes.[9] Between the works of Vogt and Harsch, however, it is

Vergangenheit Kennt, Hat eine Zukunft. Festschrift für Jürgen Wilke, ed. Carsten Reinemann and Rudolf Stöber (Cologne: Herbert von Halem, 2010), 143–61; Margarete Vöhringer, "A Concept in Application: How the Scientific Reflex Came to Be Employed against Nazi Propaganda," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6, no. 2 (2011): 105–23; John Biggart, "Sergei Stepanovich Chakhotin: A Russian Taylorist in Berlin 1922–1926," in *Yearbook of the Alexander Solzhenitsyn Institute for the Study of Russian Culture Abroad*, ed. N. F. Gritsenko (Moscow: Alexander Solzhenitsyn House of Russia Abroad, 2012).

[7] Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism*.

[8] Vogt, *Nationaler Sozialismus und Soziale Demokratie. Die Sozialdemokratische Junge Rechte 1918–1945*.

[9] Stefan Vogt, "Nationalist Socialism against National Socialism? Perceptions of Nazism and Anti-Nazi Strategies in the Circle of the Neue Blätter für den Sozialismus, 1930–1934," in *From Weimar to Hitler: Studies in the Dissolution of*

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difficult to determine the extent to which the neorevisionist group was in fact ideologically committed to a more nationalist socialism or if they were instead responding to the practical needs of the party in trying to stop the burgeoning success of the Nazi movement.

Alternatively, in this article I show that one can much more easily understand the Iron Front's militant appearances if one takes into consideration Chakhotin's unique role in bringing science to bear on propaganda and party tactics. Having spent the previous two decades in the laboratory developing his theories on Pavlovian psychology and Taylorist organization, Chakhotin possessed a level of scientific expertise that he deliberately sought to bring into the contentious politics of the early 1930s. Conceiving of society as a field for the experimentation and application of these theoretical propositions, he led a process by which these cutting-edge human sciences were employed as tools for realizing a propaganda that would have the same efficacy as Nazi methods, but would aim toward the defense of German democracy, the elevation of socialism, and the preservation of European peace. As both scientist and activist, Chakhotin sought to translate theory into action and might therefore be thought of as a "technician of general ideas," as anthropologist Paul Rabinow once formulated. He based his militant propaganda in the biological "instinct of struggle" as a way to capture the imaginations of a generation for whom total war and an emotionally engaged politics was fundamental to their understanding of the social world.[10] Chakhotin's significance lies not only in the fact that he pioneered a scientific propaganda that captures a particular interwar confidence in science's ability to regulate human social relations, but also that his particular emphases were uniquely fitted to the practical demands of the SPD's neorevisionists and the extra-parliamentary struggles and spectacular propaganda that characterized the late Weimar political atmosphere.[11]

A brief explication of Chakhotin's theory will serve to elucidate this before delving deeper further below. In contemporary articles and later in his most famous book, *The Rape of the Masses* (1939), Chakhotin argued that Nazi methods had unlocked the enormous potential of a propaganda that was based on the manipulation of human psychology.[12] He viewed this as the result of the Nazis' intuitive yet unintentional application of Pavlovian conditioning and Taylorist rational organization. In the former, the repetitive public appearance of symbols like the swastika and other important devices such as the uniforms, salutes, parades, and flags that characterized Nazi political strategies seized hold of Germans' psyches, conditioning them subconsciously to accept the inevitability of Hitler's victory. These methods importantly sought to play upon viewers' biological drive for survival, using martial undertones to intensify both the fear of and belief in the energy and strength of the Nazi movement. In the latter, Hitler's party had developed a highly organized, unified system of propaganda that could deliver a potent message across the entire country—a rationally organized machine that guaranteed their remarkable productivity. Such a centrally organized system, which facilitated the uniformity and simultaneity of their political communication, was a fundamental prerequisite for the repetition necessary for the reflex conditioning on which successful propaganda depended.

Chakhotin decried the dictatorial tendencies of these methods, but essentially argued that because they were so successful and biologically determinant, even peace-loving socialists had to adopt them to prevent the catastrophe that Nazi dictatorship would bring. And indeed, the neorevisionist wing of the SPD took these exigencies seriously. Using the scientific backing of their Pavlov-trained propaganda adviser, figures such as Carlo Mierendorff

the Weimar Republic and the Establishment of the Third Reich, 1932–1934, ed. Hermann Beck and Larry Eugene Jones (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 222–47.

[10] Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[11] Geoff Eley, "Nazism, Everydayness, and Spectacle: The Mass Form in Metropolitan Modernity," in *Visualizing Fascism: The Twentieth-Century Rise of the Global Right*, ed. Julia Adeney Thomas and Geoff Eley (Durnham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 70–93. For more on this, see the following.

[12] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*.

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and his fellow "young militants" sought to employ these new tactics in order to compete with the fascists on equal ground.[13] This was not a matter of breaking with socialist doctrine in favor of a more national socialist one, nor merely a case of generational conflict and the rejection of older styles. Instead, it was a tactical change based on the circumstances of the time. The SPD's neorevisionists sought to avoid a calamitous Nazi electoral victory at all costs, going so far as to advocate militant methods of propaganda if it meant preserving the integrity of the republic and peace in Europe. This strategy is best summed up in a phrase from Chakhotin himself, who wrote later on that this was a "violent propaganda of non-violence."[14] If adopting political symbols, uniforms, charismatic speakers, militant parades, and shouted slogans meant a demagogic manipulation of the masses in the short run, it was justified by the avoidance of real dictatorship and the preservation of peace and socialism in the long run.

In order to appreciate fully the peculiarity of this entanglement of science and politics, this article pushes beyond the work of scholars who have portrayed Chakhotin as more of a side character and places his unique role in converting scientific theory into political action at the center of the drama of the late Weimar SPD.[15] In what follows, I first provide the necessary context for understanding the difficult position of the SPD in the early 1930s and in particular how the younger members of the party sought to recast their political strategy. Following this, I introduce the figure of Chakhotin, delving briefly into his background and socio-scientific thought, and explicating the precise way in which he became involved with the SPD in 1931–1932. Exploring the ways in which theory was converted into practice, I then provide an in-depth analysis of several important SPD campaigns, with special attention to the so-called "Hessian Experiment," in which Chakhotin and his political allies put the new propaganda on full display, all while using Pavlovian and Taylorist principles to justify these changes in SPD periodicals. We follow the story through the summer of 1932, when the political drama between the Nazis and the Iron Front was at its highest. Ultimately, in highlighting these findings, this article concludes by arguing for the reevaluation of a historical figure who demonstrates clearly the hitherto underappreciated significance of a distinctly scientific approach to the field of political communication in the interwar era.

Before moving forward, it should be noted that this article relies mostly on published writings and photographs, without extensive use of archival materials. Further research in the archives may reveal more about the precise relationship between Chakhotin and his SPD allies. Nonetheless, the writings of Mierendorff and Haubach and the form of Iron Front propaganda as they appear in descriptions and photographs clearly show the influence of Chakhotin's theory. Though I am hesitant to describe him as the "Red Goebbels" (a moniker given to him years after the events described),[16] or assign to him the role of propaganda puppet master, I do consider the sources used as highly revealing of Chakhotin's theory and its influence, justifying a more in-depth treatment and contextualization.

Social Democracy in Crisis, 1930–1932

The onset of crisis for German social democracy came in 1930, when the SPD found itself out of government and facing increasing political pressure from both left and right. The downfall

[13] On the "neorevisionists" or "young militants" as a political group, see Dorothea Beck, "Theodor Haubach, Julius Leber, Carlo Mierendorff, Kurt Schumacher. Zum Selbsverständnis der 'Militanten Sozialisten' in der Weimarer Republik," *Archiv Für Sozialgeschichte* 26 (1986): 87–133; Woodruff Smith, "The Mierendorff Group and the Modernization of German Social Democratic Politics," *Politics and Society* 5, no. 1 (1975): 109–29.

[14] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*, 273.

[15] In addition to the works of Harsch and Vogt in German history, other major historical works that have placed Chakhotin in a marginal role include Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[16] This is noted in Vöhringer, "A Concept in Application."

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of the SPD-led coalition of chancellor Herman Mueller was precipitated by the disillusionment of President Paul von Hindenburg, who instead favored a government-by-decree through a new chancellor, Heinrich Bruning. A more authoritarian approach was needed in order to circumvent the social democrats, who, despite being the largest party and therefore the rightful candidates for leadership, would pose difficulties for the conservative president's goals of preserving military funding at the expense of unemployment compensation.[17] Such political maneuvering around the chancellorship was common in Weimar Germany, so the ouster of the social democrats from power in April 1930 was disappointing, but not catastrophic.

Far more ruinous for the SPD that year was the unexpected electoral breakthrough of the NSDAP in September. Despite some signs of Nazi surge in local elections, very few had predicted their enormous success in the national Reichstag elections.[18] Adding insult to injury, the KPD also increased their share at the expense of the SPD, who despite remaining the largest party, faced clear evidence of German voters' cooling affections. The elections of September 1930, then, threw the party into a state of deep demoralization and confusion, with one member recalling that the elections "struck like a bomb," creating "depression and helplessness" throughout the social democratic movement.[19]

The SPD therefore found itself in a difficult position, one that reflected the growing tensions of late Weimar politics. On the one hand, it faced the encroaching strength of the KPD, which though being a party of the left was far from an ally. Throughout the 1920s, the KPD had consistently denounced the SPD for its "bourgeois" tendencies as traitors of the Marxist cause, going so far as to label them "social fascists." In the context of the growing depression, the KPD took on a more militant tone, lambasting the social democrats for their weakness in demanding unemployment compensation and general strikes, while also pushing a more radically antifascist tone against the Nazis and other far-right political movements. On the other hand, the NSDAP threatened to replace it as the largest party in the country. This would be an obvious threat to the SPD because the elevation of this party to government would threaten the survival of the republic and signified the appeal of the far right to German voters.[20]

Within the SPD, various factions began to project their opinions concerning why the party was hemorrhaging voters to the KPD and how it could deal with the sudden popularity of the Nazis. The neorevisionists, a group of young militants on the right wing of the party, attributed both of these failures to the ossified, uninspiring leadership of the party, which had led the once dynamic social democratic movement into a state of doctrinaire rigidity and feeble indecisiveness. These members argued it was clear that working-class voters were dismayed by the party's lack of stalwartness in government and lack of militancy for the cause of the unemployed, and so switched to the more radical KPD. At the same time, the party's electoral campaigning had grown deplorably lackluster, complacent, and uninspiring.[21] This development made it impossible to compete with the Nazis, who, according

[17] On the political crises of late Weimar Germany, see Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018).

[18] Leading social democrats claimed to have been completely caught off guard by this. See Harsch, *German Social Democracy*, 80–84. Most politicians across the spectrum wrote the Nazis off as a fringe group: Larry Eugene Jones, *Hitler versus Hindenburg: The 1932 Presidential Election and the End of the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 53.

[19] Julius Leber, "Todesursachen," in *Julius Leber. Schriften, Reden, und Briefen*, ed. Dorothea Beck and Wilfried F. Schoeller (Munich, 1976).

[20] For conflicts between the SPD and KPD throughout Weimar and especially in the later period, and the way this was affected by the Nazi breakthrough, see Sara Ann Sewell, "Antifascism in the Neighborhood: Daily Life, Political Culture, and Gender Politics in the German Communist Antifascist Movement, 1930–1933," *Fascism* 9 (2020): 167–94; Marcel Bois, "'March Separately, But Strike Together!' The Communist Party's United-Front Policy in the Weimar Republic," *Historical Materialism* 28, no. 3 (2020): 138–65; Joachim C. Häberlen, "Scope for Agency and Political Options: The German Working-Class Movement and the Rise of Nazism," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 14, no. 3 (2013): 377–94.

[21] Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism.*

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to Carlo Mierendorff, a young SPD Reichstag representative and intellectual rising star of the larger social democratic movement, had drawn in German youths with their "spiritual habitus" and "pseudo-heroic appearance."[22] For Mierendorff, the SPD had completely forgotten all the important irrational qualities of political campaigning, especially the "ability to fascinate the masses," while the Nazi propaganda's emphasis on aesthetics and emotions had contributed to their explosive success among voters, young and old.[23]

Beyond interparty disputes, Mierendorff's critique signals a number of important aspects of German political culture that coalesced during these years involving the role of spectacle, mass media, and emotions in politics. Indeed, one of the longstanding arguments made about the failure of the Weimar Republic, most famously by Detlev Peukert, was that it lacked emotional or charismatic legitimacy among voters.[24] Opponents of parliamentary democracy, Nazis included, relied on political messages that focused on national renewal and moral rejuvenation, and parties such as the SPD had little by way of these emotional appeals. More recently, historians have argued that this was not for lack of trying and that the republic did possess a number of rituals, spectacles, and symbols that sought to fill this longing for aesthetics and emotions.[25] Nadine Rossol has described how parades, mass spectacles, and gymnastics were seen as crucial for Weimar's popular appeal and inclusivity, while Manuela Achilles has shown how the celebration of Constitution Day, orchestrated in part by the federal art expert Edwin Redslob, showed a clear emphasis on political aesthetics and performative displays.[26] These arguments, rooted in Walter Benjamin's famous assertions about the Nazis' novel aestheticization of politics, reveal a political atmosphere in Weimar Germany that was increasingly focused on mass acclamation.[27] Corey Ross has painted a similar picture, albeit from the angle of mass media. The symbolic and spectacular aspects of late Weimar politics, Ross argues, were part of a much broader expansion of the mediums of mass entertainment and public communications that made the manipulation of emotions through stereotypes and potent imagery the basis for winning support and ridiculing opponents.[28]

The Nazis, then, were not necessarily innovators in the types of emotional and spiritual appeals they made, over which the neorevisionists were so clearly concerned. Indeed, many of their tactics in propaganda and street politics were developed from previous models from the left, ironically, the SPD itself. But as Geoff Eley has recently argued, the NSDAP used Weimar Germans' proclivity toward mass spectacle and political aesthetics to their own advantage, with devastating effect.[29] Though historians have successfully mitigated the caricature of a Nazi Party that overwhelmed and hypnotized Germans with their spectacular propaganda, it remains true that this was a component that differentiated them from political opponents and ultimately contributed to their resounding success in free elections

[22] Carlo Mierendorff, "Gesicht und Charakter der Nationalsozialistischen Bewegung," *Die Gesellschaft* 7, no. 6 (1930): 439–504.

[23] Carlo Mierendorff, "Wahlreform oder Faschismus?," *Neue Blätter für den Sozialismus* 1, no. 10 (1930): 410–12.

[24] Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

[25] Kathleen Canning, "The Politics of Symbols, Semantics, and Sentiments in the Weimar Republic," *Central European History* 43, no. 4 (2010): 567–80.

[26] Nadine Rossol, "Performing the Nation: Sports, Spectacles, and Aesthetics in Germany, 1926–1936," *Central European History* 43, no. 4 (2010): 616–38; Manuela Achilles, "With a Passion for Reason: Celebrating the Constitution in Weimar Germany," *Central European History* 43, no. 4 (2010): 666–89.

[27] As appears in the epilogue to Benjamin's famous essay; see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, reprint (New York: Schocken Books, 1969 [1935]).

[28] Corey Ross, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany: Mass Communications, Society, and Politics from the Empire to the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[29] Eley, "Nazism, Everydayness, and Spectacle: The Mass Form in Metropolitan Modernity."

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throughout 1930–1931.[30] As David Welch has argued, Nazi propaganda was successful insofar as it produced mass consensus out of prevailing concerns and tensions that Germans would see resolved in the development of the *Volksgemeinschaft*; the Nazis' ability to develop an emotional or charismatic appeal through spectacles and aesthetics ought to be seen in this light, as a culmination of preceding trends in mass politics.[31]

In light of these debates, the criticisms of Mierendorff and others about the SPD's lack of mass political appeal take on more profound dimensions. Though the social democrats doubtless participated in the types of republican celebrations and spectacles mentioned previously, they lacked their own political aesthetics and street performativity, which young militants saw as crucial to their success as a movement. In response to their flagging electoral success in 1930 and even further in 1931, Mierendorff criticized the SPD leadership for its "undervaluation of the extra-parliamentary process," relying only on its institutional activity and forgoing the all-important fight for the streets.[32] He and Theo Haubach, a close friend and fellow neorevisionist, demanded that the SPD transform itself into a "militant party" that could compete with not only the Nazis, but the communists as well. Haubach thus wrote, revealingly, in 1931: "Our movement must learn to understand that ceremony, command, and firm leadership are by no means undemocratic and certainly not anti-socialist, and it will have to adopt many aspects of opponents in Rome and Moscow in order to be able to defeat them."[33] The ceremonial aspects of political symbols and uniformed masses needed to replace the "formlessness" of social democratic rallies. Only through a "spiritual" transformation of the party and its leadership could the SPD counter the rise of the Nazis and communists by staking their claim in the battle for the streets that characterized the extra-parliamentary sphere.[34] Haubach's emphasis on this new type of party, and the leadership it required, is best seen as a solution to the pervasive sense of party crisis developing since 1930.

Thus, the neorevisionists, in this case Mierendorff and Haubach in particular, saw an opportunity to advocate for major changes in the party that could help the social democrats compete with their more radical, anti-parliamentary adversaries, while also acting upon the changes in German political culture they observed regarding emotions, spectacle, and mass media. The references to the need to develop the "ability to fascinate the masses" and the "militant party" reveal this most clearly.[35] To their excitement, the opportunity to act on these new impulses came in December 1931 with the creation of the Iron Front. Following significant pressures from within the party to take more immediate action, SPD chairman Otto Wels at last convened a meeting with the leaders of German social democracy to develop an official policy on extra-parliamentary activities. In effect, the Iron Front brought together the SPD, the General German Trade Union Federation, the Workers' Sport Federation, and the *Reichsbanner Rot-Schwarz-Gold*, the pro-republican paramilitary, under a single banner in defense of the German republic. It was designed as a way to reinvigorate social democracy in anticipation of the crucial presidential elections set for March and April of the next year.[36]

[30] Ian Kershaw, "How Effective Was Nazi Propaganda?," in *Nazi Propaganda: The Power and the Limitations*, ed. David Welch (London: Routledge, 1993), 180–225.

[31] David Welch, "Manufacturing a Consensus: Nazi Propaganda and the Building of 'National Community' (Volksgemeinschaft)," *Contemporary European History* 2, no. 1 (March 1993): 1–15; Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, *Selling Hitler: Propaganda & the Nazi Brand* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016).

[32] Carlo Mierendorff, "Die Lehren der Niederlage," *Neue Blätter für den Sozialismus* 1, no. 11 (1930): 481–84. The damaging retreat of the SPD and other European socialist parties from the extra-parliamentary sphere in the 1920s and 1930s is also a theme in Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[33] Theo Haubach, "Die Militante Partei," *Neue Blätter für den Sozialismus* 2, no. 5 (1931): 208–13.

[34] Haubach, "Die Militante Partei."

[35] Mierendorff, "Wahlreform oder Faschismus?."

[36] Häberlen, "Scope for Agency and Political Options: The German Working-Class Movement and the Rise of Nazism."

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As the new year approached, the task of reorganizing the SPD's propaganda lay ahead of leaders such as Mierendorff and Haubach. Though they had a clear image, seeing the Nazis as a model (if a dubious one at that), it remained to be seen how exactly they would do this. Most importantly, some key aspects of their propaganda needed to be sorted out, not least what symbol the party would use to combat the swastika and how far they should go in mimicking their fascist opponents. Furthermore, though Wels and other SPD top officials had consented to the formation of the Iron Front, it remained clear within the first few months of 1932 that the party leadership would not move forward with a fully fledged transformation of the movement. In short, the Iron Front, though holding much promise for the desired changes of the party's tactics, still had much to consider regarding the form of and rationale for their movement toward these modern methods. That both of these would come from an émigré Russian scientist is more than just a historical curiosity.

Specialist and Symbol: Sergei Chakhotin and the Three Arrows

What Sergei Stepanovich Chakhotin was supposed to be doing in Germany at this time was anything but engaging with politics. Since 1930, the Russian had been conducting cancer research at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Heidelberg, a position he had filled after being awarded a grant from an American research foundation, in part thanks to a reference letter from none other than Albert Einstein.[37] Chakhotin had connected with the renowned physicist years prior during his doctoral studies in Germany. At Heidelberg University, he completed a dissertation that focused on the development of electro-sensory reactions in microorganisms. In short, he examined the learned response of certain protozoa to exterior stimuli, a thesis that earned the attention of Ivan Pavlov, who eventually hired the young scientist as a research assistant. He continued this work in Pavlov's St. Petersburg laboratory, helping to expand data on the conditioned reflex to the micro-level.[38]

Chakhotin, though a brilliant scientist, had one fateful characteristic: an irresistible inclination toward politics.[39] In particular, he was highly attracted to street campaigns and protests. Even in his university days, he flung himself into countless student demonstrations—one of which earned him a form of exile from Russia by the czarist regime.[40] More consequentially, when revolution began to break out in his homeland in 1917, Chakhotin chose politics over science when his boss, Pavlov, demanded he stop printing propaganda materials in his laboratory.[41] It would be the first of many political leaves of absence from his scientific research. While Chakhotin's involvement in the Russian Revolution cannot be described in full here as a committed anti-Bolshevik and anti-monarchist, he found himself temporarily on the winning side but ultimately had to flee the victorious Reds. Under the provisional government, Chakhotin worked and wrote on propaganda (within an organization he led, the "Committee for Socio-Political Enlightenment") and was later employed as the chief propagandist for the Whites as the head of the Information and Agitation Division (OSVAG) of Anton Denikin's military government.[42]

After fleeing Russia in the wake of the Soviet victory, Chakhotin spent the 1920s working intermittently for émigré organizations and as a scientific researcher. Yet once again, in the context of a Germany rife with political conflict and the troubling rise of a new type of

[37] Yuriy Posudin, *Sergei Chakhotin—His Contributions to Social Psychology and Biophysics*, trans. Stanley J. Kays and Pierre Tchakhotine (Kiev: Artemedia Print, 2015).

[38] Sergej Tschachotin, "Die Statocyste Der Heterepoden" (Heidelberg, University of Heidelberg, 1908); Vöhringer, "A Concept in Application." On the his work under Pavlov, see Vöhringer.

[39] In a documentary on Chakhotin, family members express their frustration over his inability to refrain from engaging with politics, a trait that often disrupted their lives. Boris Hars-Tschachotin, *Sergej in der Urne* (Filmkinotext, 2014).

[40] Posudin, *Sergei Chakhotin—His Contributions to Social Psychology and Biophysics*.

[41] Albrecht, "Sergej Tschachotin oder 'Dreipfeil Gegen Hakenkreuz.' Eine Biographisch-Historische Skizze."

[42] Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution*, 223–24.

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right-wing authoritarian political movement, he proved unable to resist the urge to get involved with politics. He had reputably been in contact with SPD confidants over the course of 1931, with whom he often discussed the troubling prospect of a Nazi or fascist takeover. These confidants presumably included figures such as Mierendorff and Haubach, though hard evidence is hard to come by. Yet it is tempting to view much of their writing during this period, especially Haubach's concept of the "militant party," as coming from conversations shared with the Russian. The evidence of Chakhotin's direct involvement with the social democrats points to him engaging with the movement around the end of November 1931.[43] The occasion of his return to politics is worth recounting in detail, for it provides illuminating details about the origins of his most important creation.

According to Chakhotin, he often walked the streets of Heidelberg after a day of research. He was disturbed by the sheer ubiquity of the Nazi swastika, which seemed to be placed on nearly every wall.[44] Chakhotin knew that he was not alone in this feeling. In fact, he understood this as a form of conditioning, an interpretation rooted in his deep knowledge of Pavlovian psychology. According to his understanding, the Nazi symbol had, through the "force of suggestion," caused him and other Germans to feel a sense of "menace" when confronted by the symbol: here was constant proof that the supporters of Hitler's coming Germany were everywhere, that resistance was futile, and the dictatorship seemingly inevitable. Alternatively, for supporters of the Nazi movement, the swastika energized them constantly and confirmed for its footsoldiers the popularity of their movement and its unstoppable force in taking over town after town.[45] Though the symbol was in fact nothing more than a printed form, it had a certain sensory function that could invoke strong emotions—both positive and negative.[46] Like Pavlov's bell, the swastika brought about the *feeling* of the threat of force or the presence of comrades without actually presenting anything as such. A conditioned reflex had been established whereby the appearance of the swastika produced a learned, automatic response of either fear or enthusiasm, depending on one's position on the political spectrum.

Looking back later on his Heidelberg walks, Chakhotin recalled that in the early days of the Iron Front, he had noticed something that might serve as an antidote to the paralysis the Nazis' immersive propaganda had inflicted. One swastika was crossed out with white chalk, an act Chakhotin presumed to have been done by someone antagonistic to the Nazis, perhaps even a fellow socialist.[47] From this, he envisioned a psychologically based counter measure that could decondition Germans from the learned response created by Nazi propaganda, a process that Pavlovians such as Chakhotin knew as "inhibition."[48] The scientific theory behind this concept was first developed, like so many of Chakhotin's fundamental assumptions, in Pavlov's laboratory. In effect, Pavlov and his assistants discovered that if the sound of the bell coincided with an additional stimulant, such as a flashing light, it would inhibit the conditioned reflex of salivation, in effect neutralizing the psychological training. Taking these lessons to the streets of Heidelberg, Chakhotin concluded that the appearance of a counteracting stimulus, a symbol that after similar repetition would in some sense negate the swastika, could break the conditioned reflex of menace that the Nazis had been able to establish in their opponents.[49]

[43] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*. These details are observed in a chapter of the book that serves as a memoir for these years.

[44] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*.

[45] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*, 164–65.

[46] A much larger argument on the role of political symbols in mass movements is made in George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1975).

[47] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*, 103.

[48] Roger Smith, *Inhibition: History and Meaning in the Sciences of Mind and Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992): 190–204.

[49] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*, 5–6.

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The antidote would be a new, opposing symbol—one that could be used to directly cross out the Nazi symbol, just as the anonymous rebel had on the streets of Heidelberg. Thus, the Three Arrows (*Dreipfeile*, shown in its various forms and applications in Figure 2) was created. Instead of just one line of chalk, this symbol would fully obscure the swastika, with its three lines piercing through. In other variations, as shown previously, the arrows could also be used to look as though they are chasing away the swastika or confronting it head on. In any of these cases, the intention was clear: the Three Arrows would begin the process of Pavlovian inhibition on a mass scale. Crucially, at the same time, the new symbol would condition a new reflex that would reinvigorate socialists and other antifascists with a sense of resistance and hope. Even from this early conception, Chakhotin envisioned something that would bring an element of struggle to what had, up to that point, been an attitude of complacency and indifference.[50]

Aside from its martial symbolism, the Three Arrows had another distinct advantage, according to Chakhotin, namely its ease of reproduction.[51] Anyone with a piece of chalk could quite easily deface a swastika. And so, Chakhotin began to test his theory around the time that the Iron Front was forming. Shortly after his discovery of the crossed-out swastika in Heidelberg in December 1931, he began to recruit fellow socialists in Heidelberg to take on the ubiquitous Nazi symbols, cutting through each swastika with the newly created Three Arrows symbol.[52] The result, as Chakhotin would put it, was the first of many "symbol wars" that the Iron Front waged against the Nazis in the streets of German cities.[53] Taking up this act with enthusiasm, more and more socialists became engaged in the effort to replace the swastika with the Three Arrows, which through repetition became a symbol of antifascist resistance for the public. The Pavlovian theory Chakhotin espoused dictated that the stimulant had to be repeated in multiples of hundreds or even thousands in order to establish the conditioned reflex.[54] The Iron Front had to abandon the politically defensive position it had occupied since 1930 and go on the offense against the swastika, which they had allowed to dominate Germany's streets and the minds of the masses.

Crucially, owing to his close association with various SPD leaders in these regions of western Germany, Chakhotin's Three Arrows spread fast. Within months, in early February 1932, a local newspaper in Bochum, roughly 200 miles north of Heidelberg, reported a massive SPD demonstration in which the Three Arrows appeared on activists' flags and badges.[55] Not long after, in March, Chakhotin was published for the first time in SPD periodicals, where he articulated the notion of the "activation of the working-class," in which the propaganda activities of the Iron Front were meant as a way to reignite the historically vibrant, combative political ethos of the German social democratic movement.[56] The rapid expansion of the use of the Three Arrows was proof to him that working-class and other left-minded Germans were awaiting the signal for the militant defense of the republic. The opportunity to reactivate the enthusiasm and action of the working class using his propaganda methods, to put these theories more fully into practice, would be afforded in Hesse, the state in which the opening scenes of the article occurred.

[50] Averbeck-Lietz, "Die Polit-Kampagne 'Drei Pfeile Gegen Hakenkreuz' 1932 und Ihr Autor Serge Tchakhotine."

[51] The ease of reproduction in political symbols is an important aspect of Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

[52] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*, 104.

[53] As described in Albrecht, "Symbolkampf in Deutschland 1932."

[54] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*, 4. The process of applying this repetition is known as the subject's "apprenticeship."

[55] "Große Linkskundgebung in Bochum," *General-Anzeiger für Dortmund und das Gesamte Rheinisch-Westfälische Industriegebiet*, February 13, 1932.

[56] Sergej Tschachotin, "Aktivierung Der Arbeiterschaft," *Neue Blätter Für Den Sozialismus* 3, no. 3 (1932): 149–51.

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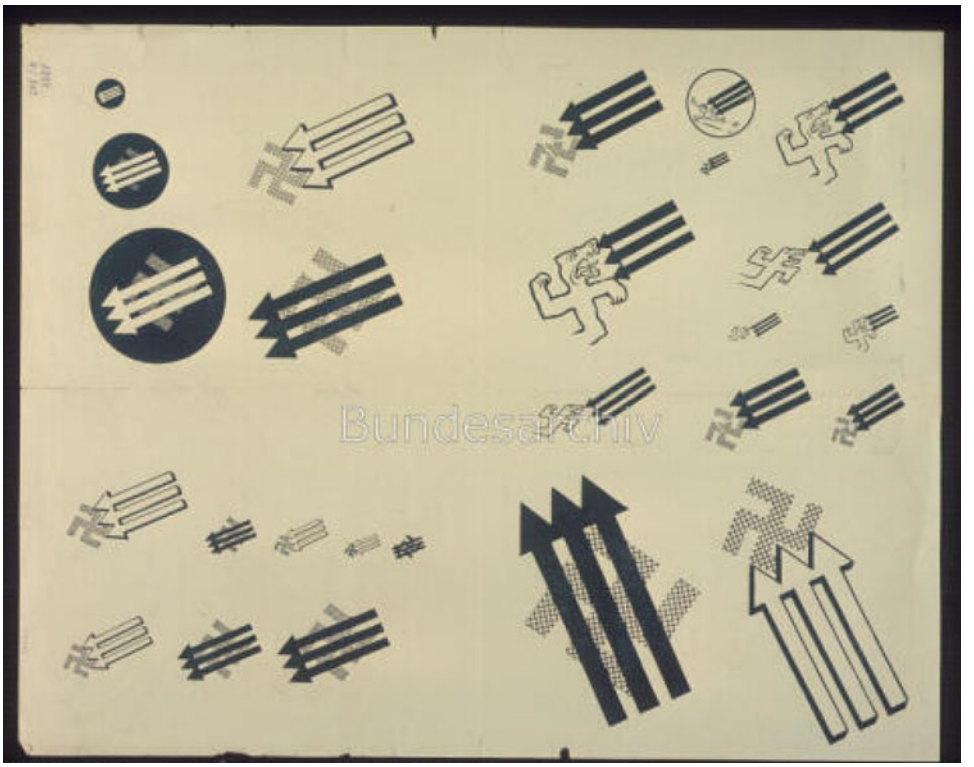

Figure 2. The Three Arrows and its various applications to the swastika. (Bundesarchiv, Plak 002-021-012 / Grafiker (in): o.Ang.)

More Evidence Required: SPD Hesitancy and the "Hessian Experiment"

Chakhotin was first able to present his new symbol and his perspectives on propaganda to the SPD leadership, alongside Mierendorff, in April.[57] That month saw the reelection of Hindenburg to the presidency, who, although being the SPD's candidate of choice, was hardly a socialist or democratic candidate, and in any case had a much more difficult time defeating Hitler, his opponent in this fateful competition.[58] Chakhotin and Mierendorff provided one potential path forward for the SPD's political hopes, which needed more than a little encouragement with critical Prussian state elections coming that same month. But the old social democrats proved to be quite reluctant to adopt the new methods, fearing they would be mocked by friend and foe alike as parroting the ridiculous tactics of the Nazis. This hesitancy to commit to the new style would be, for Chakhotin, a grave mistake, one confirmed for him and his political allies by the disastrous state-election results toward the end of that unhappy month.[59] Hesitancy and a conservative outlook had once again held back the Iron Front's efforts to rejuvenate German social democracy, and the Nazis continued their relentless march toward political victory.

Given the abysmal results in April, it is perhaps no surprise that May saw a flurry of articles by Chakhotin and his allies that were highly critical of party tactics and sought to push the new propaganda more aggressively. The year's campaigning was far from over, with national Reichstag elections due in July, as well as various local and state elections.

[57] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*, 202.
[58] Jones, *Hitler versus Hindenburg*.
[59] Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism*, 180–82.

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Frustrated by the party leadership, Mierendorff made less-than-veiled references to the "average party official of the old school" who was no longer capable of handling the current political situation. The new conditions required that the party oppose "mass domination through demagogy with mass reclamation through the socialist ideal."[60] Theo Haubach, publishing under his pseudonym, raised the importance of symbols in the political struggles of that year, praising the "struggle of the three arrows against the swastika" as a critical development, one that gave the party a weapon with which to fight their enemies while also granting a memorable and dynamic symbol to the Iron Front's campaigning.[61] In light of recent failures, these "young militants" demanded a spiritual transformation of social democracy, in which the new symbol and organized public gatherings would allow them to compete more capably with the Nazis' mass appeal.

Chakhotin himself published no fewer than three articles that month. One, which appeared in *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, a periodical published nationwide, would become one of his best-known and most frequently cited pieces.[62] In it, he made a second important claim about the organization of propaganda, to add to the psychological aspect. Essentially, Chakhotin posited that, although the party had begun to adopt such mass psychological dimensions as the new Three Arrows symbol, this facet remained only partial, as it lacked that other side of extra-parliamentary politics that the Nazis had been so successful at developing, namely: centralized and rationalized organization. A longtime advocate of Taylorist ideas of scientific management, he fused these organizational concepts to Pavlovian physiology and introduced this synthesis into politics.[63] Like other German psychotechnicians during this period, many of whom were, by contrast, pro-Nazi, Chakhotin sought to extrapolate Taylorist rationalization of the workplace to the greater social world.[64] The following passage, quoted at length, vividly depicts his two-pronged theory:

> All these theoretical-practical conclusions and demands arise so necessarily from the two factors designated here as decisive for political propaganda: 1. the principle of totality or integration and differentiation of human drives as a basis for propagandistic actions, 2. the rationalization of the monitoring of activities and their management, expressed especially in the form of political weather maps, tables, schemas and so on. The demand for such a reconfiguration of our whole propaganda and organization system, coupled with a mobilization of all our party labor, appears to us to be the most important outcome of the political development of the last weeks.[65]

The concept of totality, vital to Chakhotin's rendering of Pavlov's biological discoveries, will be discussed further in what follows. Presently, it's worth noting that references to "weather maps" and other forms of statistical and schematic information were outgrowths of Chakhotin's earlier work, both as head of propaganda for the White army in the Russian Civil War and his directorship of the Soviet Trade Mission's organization department throughout the 1920s, two positions in which he previously implemented Taylorist thought.[66]

[60] Carlo Mierendorff, "Die Volle Wahrheit," *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 38, no. 5 (1932): 396–404.

[61] Walter Glenlow, "Geist und Technik des Preussenwahlkampfes," *Neue Blätter für den Sozialismus* 3, no. 5 (n.d.): 232–39.

[62] Sergej Tschachotin, "Der Technik der Politischen Propaganda," *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 38, no. 5 (1932): 425–31.

[63] John Biggart has provided the most in-depth analysis of Chakhotin's relationship to Taylorism. See Biggart, "Sergei Stepanovich Chakhotin."

[64] See for example, the case of Fritz Giese in Andreas Killen, "Weimar Psychotechnics between Americanism and Fascism," *Osiris* 22 (2007): 48–71.

[65] Tschachotin, "Der Technik Der Politischen Propaganda," 430.

[66] As described in Chakhotin's Russian-language, full-length book on the principles and applications of Taylorist organization. Serge Chakhotin, *Organisatsiya: Printsipy, Metody v Proizvodstve, Torgovle, Administratsii i Politike* (Berlin: Opyt, 1923).

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By bringing together Pavlov and Taylor, Chakhotin sought to inject another field of thought into the political debates within the SPD, namely, psychotechnics.[67] For him, the conditioned reflex was at the heart of efforts on behalf of psychotechnics to make Taylorist organization more humane, influencing behavior in "consideration of the human factor."[68] Although this had been practiced in Germany and elsewhere in industry, commerce, and administration, it had not made its way deliberately into politics and propaganda. In another article from May 1932, he wrote that "if we return to politics, we must state that the consideration of such 'psychic' factors seems to be of extraordinary importance for the assessment of events in this field as well."[69] As evidence that "psychic factors" needed to be considered more urgently, he cited several political and social projects from the previous two decades that had manipulated mass opinion through centrally organized propaganda initiatives based around emerging psychological principles. This included World War I, the Russian Revolution, Western advertising, and the Soviet five-year plan. What connected these major historical developments was their coordinated use of new forms of media that could be mass produced and disseminated widely, which Chakhotin claimed had been, albeit unintentionally, representative of the types of social conditioning that disciples of Pavlov felt possible once applied outside of the lab. The Nazis, of course, were yet another organization seeking this type of comprehensive psychological control. Both the possibility and reality of a politics grounded in scientific manipulation necessitated that committed social democrats also develop systems of centrally organized, mass psychological propaganda, lest they fail to compete with those movements more willing to do so.[70]

Such dire analyses and bold solutions did not remain the subject of journalism alone. Indeed, while writing about the new propaganda, Chakhotin and his allies were also busy putting theory into action. Elections were set to be held for the Hessian diet in early June, so the Iron Front campaigned throughout May in such cities as Darmstadt, Mainz, Offenbach, and Worms. Crucially, these districts were ones in which Mierendorff, Haubach, and other younger socialists had a much more decisive control of the party bureaucracy and close connections to local working-class organizations. In recent years, Hesse had seen the weakening of the SPD, who lost votes to both the Nazis and the communists.[71] And so, to turn around these electoral misfortunes by deploying Chakhotin's propaganda methods, Hesse was chosen as the place where the entire gamut of the prescribed changes would be applied. As Chakhotin would himself describe later, "The fight in Hesse was thus to be a struggle to the death with moral weapons."[72]

The weapons the Iron Front wielded in Hesse included not only the Three Arrows, but countless other devices that could produce the expected results. Using immersive, militant propaganda, the socialists would definitively end the psychological grip of the Nazi menace and reinvigorate the extra-parliamentary energies of German social democracy. The forms this effort took are revealing. For example, a typical Iron Front-led parade in Hessian cities during this vital campaign ran as follows. SPD activists marched in a long column; at the head, three columns of men carried an enormous wrought-iron arrow each. Behind them, a couple of activists carried a large flag that displayed the swastika being chased away by the Three Arrows. Next came a group carrying iron brooms, shouting such phrases as

[67] Chakhotin's reference to this field can only be understood as an outgrowth of his exposure to it during his work in 1920s Berlin. For the 1920s as the "era of psychotechnics," see Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992): 278–80. For psychotechnics' particular influence in Berlin, see Andreas Killen, *Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves, and German Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006): 194–204.

[68] Sergej Tschachotin, "Die Positive Seite Unserer Niederlage," *Deutsche Republik* 6, no. 35 (1932): 1093–97.

[69] Tschachotin, "Die Positive Seite Unserer Niederlage."

[70] Tschachotin, "Die Positive Seite Unserer Niederlage."

[71] Beck, "Theodor Haubach, Julius Leber, Carlo Mierendorff, Kurt Schumacher. Zum Selbsverständnis der 'Militanten Sozialisten' in der Weimarer Republik," 117.

[72] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*, 206.

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"Sweep Hesse Clean!," gesturing toward any Nazis they passed by. In consecutive order would subsequently stride a group of SPD youth members, farmers and workers, a group of musicians playing Iron Front music, and uniformed men of the paramilitary group, the *Reichsbanner*, in an open-top motor vehicle. As a triumphant finale, a woman dressed as the goddess of liberty would drive by followed by a group of young women dressed up in Iron Front uniforms, carrying Three Arrow flags. In a comedic afternote, the parade was trailed by a horse-drawn wagon, embroidered with swastikas, from which hung a puppet of Hitler—nearby socialist marchers would wink and shout, sarcastically, "Goodbye, Adolf! Parting ways hurts!"[73]

Such a layered spectacle aptly portrayed what Chakhotin had referred to in writing as "totality," a formulation that is critical to his rendering of Pavlovian physiology.[74] To enhance the conditioning underway since the adoption of the Three Arrows, the expanded propaganda effort sought to deepen the psychological training. The militant overtones were deliberately nurtured, not because Chakhotin wanted the socialists to try and reproduce the Nazi image, but rather because he insisted that the "instinct of struggle" was one of the main biological drives, of which there were four: survival (or struggle), nutrition, sex, and maternity. In this sense, the emphasis on struggle was based on the innate "fight or flight" reflex possessed by all biological life, rather than the romantic, metaphysical concept of struggle employed in Nazi parlance.[75] Insisting that politics was, like all human action, a biologically determined experience, he encouraged the use of propaganda that would impress upon one of the audience's primary instincts. The most successful political displays would in fact exhibit all four to create a totalizing experience that would psychologically enrapture the viewer.[76] In this example of the Iron Front's parade, we can very clearly see the ways in which the aggressive, militant aspects attempted to play upon the survival instinct of both the active and passive portions of the voting population. But beyond this, the presence of young women, the Goddess of Liberty, and the youth organizations sought to activate the sexual and maternal instincts.[77] Nutrition, or alimentary needs, were implicit in the very message of socialist economics.

The so-called "Hessian Experiment" was for Chakhotin the scientist the ultimate expression of experimentation and results.[78] It was in this political laboratory that the Russian psychologist was able to practice his techniques without the typical hindrances imposed by the old leadership. And for him, this was why the campaign was successful. Success here was not

[73] Sergej Tschachotin and Carlo Mierendorff, *Grundlagen und Formen Politischer Propaganda* (Magdeburg: Bundesvorstand des Reichsbanners Schwarz-Rot-Gold, 1932).

[74] This notion of a public exhibition that aims for a sort of "totality" that would captivate all of the viewer's senses bares stark similarity to the various forms of spectacles discussed by Guy Debord. See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, reprint (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 1995 [1967]). In the German context, the phrase, and its focus on capturing all human drives in a single cohesive form, bears notable similarities to the holistic sciences and their application to social and political activities. See Anne Harrington, *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture from Wilhelm II to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), and Michael Hau, "Sports in the Human Economy: 'Leibesübungen,' Medicine, and Performance Enhancement during the Wemair Republic," *Central European History* 41, no. 3 (September 2008): 381–412.

[75] The biological science behind these instincts is emphasized and elaborated upon even further in the second, extended edition of *The Rape of the Masses*. See Serge Tchakhotine, *Le Viol des Foules par la Propagande Politique: Nouvelle Edition* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952).

[76] In his assertion that psychology possessed nearly infinite real-world applications, Chakhotin reflects similar tendencies to psychologists from previous decades such as Gustav Le Bon and Hugo Münsterberg, both of whom he cites frequently. See Stefanos Geroulanos, "The Plastic Self and the Prescription of Psychology: Ethnopsychology, Crowd Psychology, and Psychotechnics, 1890–1920," *Republic of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 3, no. 2 (2014).

[77] Interestingly, these depictions of women within Chakhotin's propaganda rely on clearly feminine gender norms, making him no exception to the "eternally feminine" image of women in the propaganda of the era. See Julia Sneeringer, *Winning Women's Votes: Propaganda and Politics in Weimar Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003): 282. See also Sewell, "Antifascism in the Neighborhood."

[78] Sergej Tschachotin, "Das Hessische Experiment," 6, no. 43 (1932): 1155–58.

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to be measured in terms of votes; the Nazis had still won the most votes, though the SPD did improve their share at the expense of the communists. The real significance of the Hessian elections was its psychological effect. By displaying publicly that the socialists would fight back with a renewed counteroffensive using militant propaganda, the elections had acted as "psychological mass revivals" (*psychologisches Massenaufrichten*), reversing the "ominous, paralyzing effect" induced by Hitler's movement.[79] As a veteran experimenter, Chakhotin even included a "control" region—one electoral district in which he and his comrades did *not* employ the new propaganda—where the SPD neither bolstered their share of votes nor saw the same excitement among supporters and, in fact, lost further ground. Of course, there could have been a variety of factors that shaped these voting outcomes that do not necessarily confirm the scientific efficacy of the modernized methods.[80] But for Chakhotin, this bit of data would provide an essential justification for his prescribed changes—both in the immediate sense and in posterity.[81]

Chakhotin's Theory Deployed, Summer 1932

In order to capitalize on their symbolic success, Chakhotin and his closest colleague, Mierendorff, set out to capture the application of the new propaganda for the Iron Front's efforts more systematically.[82] The result was a fascinating brochure, *Die Grundlagen und Formen der neuen Propaganda*, which among other things was essentially an instructional manual that depicted all of the various techniques and materials being used in the Hessian campaigns.[83] This publication's dissemination was helped along by the belated approval of the party council, who, after meeting with Chakhotin and Mierendorff again on June 14, finally decided to approve their methods for nationwide deployment. This decision resulted not only from the party's mounting success in places like Hesse, but also the recent change in government. In light of Heinrich Brüning's attempts to play to the interests of the political center and left, Hindenburg had him replaced as chancellor with Franz von Papen in an effort to consolidate the government under a figure who would be more resolute in unifying and empowering the political right. In the eyes of the SPD, this reactionary development made toleration unacceptable, and the party now took on a new radicalism given their role as the unmitigated opposition.[84]

The Chakhotin-Mierendorff pamphlet substantiated the party's new combative self-image in both theoretical and practical ways. To ground their partnership in SPD history, the pair made a reference to Ferdinand Lassalle's speech "Science and the Worker," aligning the application of mass psychology and scientific organization to the historic alliance between science and socialism.[85] They then outlined the theory and circumstances that they felt justified the change in style, notably focusing on the "dominance of the emotional" in contemporary German politics and the necessity of intimidation and derision in popular propaganda. In addition, Chakhotin and Mierendorff explained the importance of the militant party—that activist portion of the population that engaged in street campaigns like those in Hesse. They argued that in any given city or locale, only about 10 percent of the population was likely to participate in rallies and hang up posters; the remaining 90 percent

[79] Tschachotin, "Das Hessische Experiment."

[80] One of his preeminent reviewers, Jacques Ellul, felt this was too strong of an assumption. Jacques Ellul, "Tchakhotine (Serge)—Le Viol des Foules par la Propagande Politique: Nlle Édition Revue et Augmentée," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 3, no. 2 (1953): 416–18.

[81] In his major work, *The Rape of the Masses* (1939), Chakhotin used the Hessian elections as the case and point for how successful the application of his theories could be.

[82] Carlo Mierendorff, "Die Freiheitspfeile Siegen in Hessen," *Neue Blätter für den Sozialismus* 3, no. 6 (1932): 386–89.

[83] Tschachotin and Mierendorff, *Grundlagen und Formen Politischer Propaganda*.

[84] Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism*, 186–90.

[85] Tschachotin and Mierendorff, *Grundlagen und Formen Politischer Propaganda*, 4.

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were mere spectators of the political drama.[86] Of that small percentage of politically *active* Germans, even fewer belonged to the SPD or the larger socialist movement. The intense organization of this small group was necessary mainly because it was their job to convince the much larger *passive* population of the strength and passion of the movement. As a sort of political vanguard, then, SPD activists performed street propaganda in an effort to enact the same sort of psychological conditioning done by symbols such as the Three Arrows.[87] This helps clarify why Chakhotin viewed the Hessian campaigns as successful in their symbolic and affective achievement: they displayed to the politically ambiguous, passive mass of German voters the new energetic and combative image of the SPD.

Regarding practical considerations, Chakhotin and Mierendorff also elaborated on the various forms of propaganda and its subsequent organization. For the former, one finds clear instructions for how activists can draw the Three Arrows and use it to vandalize Nazi swastikas, as well as diagrams that depict the proper dimensions and layout for flags, pins, paper lamps, banners, and posters.[88] In addition to recommending materials, the pamphlet also featured instructions for replicating bodily comportment, with illustrations of the correct way to do the "freedom salute" (a raised fist), and schematics for the appropriate arrangement of public rallies, with human columns, rows of speakers, and other musical and aesthetic groupings. Such exactness and thoroughness in describing the new methods was no mistake. Before relaying these practical recommendations, Chakhotin's aforementioned concern with rational organization becomes clear once again, insofar as he stressed "uniformity" and "simultaneity" as key elements of any successful propaganda.[89] Considering that the lack of such homogeneity in the party's political communications was, according to Chakhotin and his political allies, a major cause of the failures so far that year, it seems clear that this pamphlet aimed at correcting it. With its standardized forms, Chakhotin and Mierendoff's brochure could allow the party leadership to check the uniform implementation and consistent success of a propaganda that conditioned German voters on a mass scale using sharp, succinct forms that were "hammered" (*eingehämmert*) hundreds or thousands of times into their psyches.[90]

The publication and dissemination of *Die Grundlagen und Formen der neuen Propaganda* throughout Germany in June and July of 1932 was accompanied by the adoption of its recommendations by the highest party organs. By this time, the Three Arrows had become a staple of SPD propaganda posters printed by the publishing house *Vorwärts* in Berlin, the chief periodical of the SPD, and would have appeared across the country in the run-up to the Reichstag elections on July 31. To help disseminate the new techniques, Chakhotin held multiple training sessions in Berlin in which he instructed SPD and Reichsbanner leaders from local organizations from all corners of the Reich.[91] These instructions were applied in mass rallies held across the country. For example, on July 9, at an event in Dortmund called the "Freedom Day of the Iron Front," Karl Höltermann, leader of the Reichsbanner, led a procession (what Chakhotin called "symbol promenades") through various neighboring cities, complete with all the spectacular visuals that had now become typical. Upon arriving in Dortmund, they had assembled such a large crowd that a larger venue was needed, so the Iron Front held its main event at a local stadium. Various speakers, including both Höltermann and Mierendorff, electrified an audience who shouted "Freiheit!" with

[86] Tschachotin and Mierendorff, *Grundlagen und Formen Politischer Propaganda*.

[87] This logic echoes the scholarly literature surrounding the concept of the vanguardism in totalitarian political movements. See most recently, Phillip W. Gray, *Vanguardism: Ideology and Organization in Totalitarian Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[88] Tschachotin and Mierendorff, *Grundlagen und Formen Politischer Propaganda*, 12–25.

[89] Tschachotin and Mierendorff, *Grundlagen und Formen Politischer Propaganda*, 10.

[90] Tschachotin and Mierendorff, *Grundlagen und Formen Politischer Propaganda*.

[91] "Vorträge, Vereine und Versammlungen," *Vorwärts*, July 17, 1932. The advertisement notes that several of these sessions had been held in weeks prior.

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Figure 3. General Chrispian spricht zu den Massen hinter dem Schloss. (Archiv der deutschen Jugendbewegung, F1-535-034)

military-style music accompanying.[92] A photo of a rally that took place in Berlin (Figure 3) emphatically captures the spectacular nature of such mass gathering. At the center of the city's *Lustgarten*, supporters of the Iron Front gathered to listen to a speech from SPD leader Arthur Crispien, with raised fists, banners, and symbols.

Such a militant exposition was exactly the kind of activity Chakhotin had been pushing for since the start of that year. And, indeed, similar posters and rallies were observable across Germany during these intense months of campaigning. In spite of this, however, the SPD's political situation did not improve. Indeed, just as the party initiated its counter-offensive, they were stuck again by two blows—one from the government, the other from the Nazis—and both significantly undermined the new fighting spirit. On July 20, 1932, in an effort to rid the SPD of their most significant political bastion, Chancellor von Papen orchestrated the overthrow of the SPD-led Prussian state government, which was justified on the duplicitous pretexts that the SPD was failing to keep order and conspiring with the communists.[93] This shock coup d'état left the party in a state of hopeless despair. Less than two weeks later, the Reichstag elections returned results that were hardly promising, with the communists gaining at the expense of the SPD and the Nazis increasing their hold on middle-class voters.[94]

Looking back on these events, Chakhotin had plenty to say about why the SPD met with this catastrophic political failure in the fateful month. While no doubt self-serving, he nonetheless convincingly pointed out the SPD leadership's failure to resist the July 20 coup as neutralizing the militant image that the Iron Front had worked hard to develop since its foundation. For Chakhotin, this should have been the moment when the socialist movement armed itself for civil war, and the party should have at the very least initiated a general

[92] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*, 108.
[93] Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism*, 193–200.
[94] Harsch, *German Social Democracy and the Rise of Nazism*, 215–18.

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strike or some more passive mass demonstration of force.[95] He felt they had missed their chance to capitalize on the party's shift toward the dynamic militancy needed to gain the approval of the masses, a sentiment he evidently shared with Joseph Goebbels, who recorded in his diary that day that "The Reds have missed their great hour. It will never come again."[96] Having displayed such passivity, he observed, it is no wonder they were unable to acquire the needed votes from those Germans seeking a party that possessed true revolutionary spirit.

Conclusion

The militant resistance to Hitler's ascension that Chakhotin and Mierendorff had longed for did not come in July, nor did the party leadership try to summon it forth even during the seizure of power. The Iron Front continued to hold rallies and display their militancy, but these endeavors dwindled as the republic's survival looked bleak.[97] Differences between the neorevisionist wing and the party leadership persisted even beyond Hitler's takeover: While Wels and others fled the country, Mierendroff, Haubach, and the other young militants remained, seeking to continue the fight. Eventually, they were interned at the nascent concentration camps, and Chakhotin himself was forced to flee to Denmark, where he wrote his first account of their propaganda campaign, *Dreipfeil Gegen Hakenkreuz* (1933).[98]

The continued gap between the SPD leaders and the neorevisionists is reminiscent of the generational strife to which Donna Harsch attributes their turn toward militant propaganda. We therefore should acknowledge that there were the makings of a revolution "from below" within the party, and doubtless Mierendorff, Haubach, and Kurt Schumacher, who are often associated with this younger group of SPD right-wingers, saw themselves as the new face of the party. Likewise, their decision to remain in Germany may indicate a more nationalist inclination, as Stefan Vogt has argued, though their continued resistance to the Nazis betrays an openness to a more nationalist socialism. Nationalism was hardly of interest to Chakhotin, who continued his vagabond political activism in France years later, taking up the banner of a decidedly internationalist antifascism.[99]

Yet, as I have contended in this article, nothing about the published writings of Chakhotin and his neorevisionist allies suggests that their ideological or generational positions were the decisive factor in their attraction to these new methods. Instead, a certain necessity and practicality runs through their writing on the methods and forms of Iron Front propaganda. Especially in the coauthored pamphlet *Grundlagen und Formen*, there is a sense that Chakhotin and Mierendorff were giving instructions based on the prospects for success; having proven the efficacy of the new style in Hesse, they sought their application on a national level, seeing the functional necessity of such changes.

This is perhaps the clearest way we might see the influence of Chakhotin's scientific approach. The confidence he had in the validity of Pavlovian psychology and applied Taylorism made such recommendations more than a matter of generational preference or ideological opinion. Instead, they were matters of biological fact, which had to be taken seriously by SPD leaders if they wanted to attain mass appeal. Moving from theory to action, he argued for the application of these sciences to social democracy's extra-parliamentary counteroffensive against political opponents to the left and right, seeing an opportunity to place a scientific approach to propaganda at the service of socialism, democracy, and peace rather

[95] Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses*, 225–29.

[96] Joseph Goebbels, *Tagebücher 1924–1945*, ed. Ralf Georg Reuth, vol. 2, 5 vols. (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1999): 676.

[97] For example, a large demonstration was held in Lübeck in the middle of February, led by Julius Leber, a close ally of Mierendorff. See *Lübecker Volksbote*, February 17, 1932.

[98] Sergei Tschachotin, *Dreipfeil Gegen Hakenkreuz* (Copenhagen: Verlag Aktiver Sozialismus, 1933).

[99] First as a propaganda adviser to the French Popular Front and then as an international peace activist after World War II. See Daniel Guérin, *Front Populaire: révolution manquée* (Paris: René Julliard, 1963): 107, and Tchakhotine, *Le Viol des Foules par la Propagande Politique*.

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than dictatorship and war. In some sense, he also justified these recommendations on the basis of the movement's history. His reference to Lasalle's "alliance between Science and the workers," which appears in the Chakhotin-Mierendorff pamphlet and later as an epigraph to his book *The Rape of the Masses*, was meant to justify this fusion of scientific theory and socialist politics, while his emphasis on the SPD's history of struggle and resistance sought to encourage a return to their militant roots.

The larger context is also crucial to understanding the gravity of these recommendations, as is Chakhotin's unique understanding of them. Throughout the Weimar period and into the Third Reich, sensory propaganda, political aesthetics, and public spectacles became part of the visual landscape of German politics and society. The developing strength and diversity of mass media produced a context in which political movements and even the republican state itself began to employ these techniques of mass politics to varying ends. The NSDAP's mastery of these practices, epitomized in the swastika and the enormous, theatrical rallies at Nuremberg, was in this sense a culmination of these developments, rather than genuine innovation. Viewed from this angle, we ought to consider the changes sought by Mierendorff and the other neorevisionists as an effort to bring the SPD's public image more in line with the demands of the time. Adding greater militancy to their party through the Iron Front and its controversial style, they aimed to produce a similar spectacular, aesthetic appeal to that of the Nazis and communists and to capture the emotions and spirit of struggle that attracted Germans.

Chakhotin's scientific approach to this effort enriches our understanding of the symbols and rallies that were characteristic of Nazi and Iron Front propaganda, which have mostly been characterized by references to the artistic, romantic quality of public spectacles and political aesthetics. The introduction of Pavlov and Taylor to this mix tied the irrational qualities of sensory propaganda and mass demonstrations to applied psychology. In this vision, a novel link forms between psychotechnics and political aesthetics that historians have not yet fully appreciated. That they coalesced around a contemporary, Chakhotin, who at the same time applied these ideas to produce real changes to the visual landscape of late Weimar Germany and beyond, is all the more reason for studying his work.

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Benjamin Diehl is a PhD candidate in history at the City University of New York, Graduate Center. He is currently completing his dissertation, "Fascinating the Masses: Sergei Chakhotin and the Psychotechnics of Political Propaganda."

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