

The Bloodless Conquest in *All the Light We Cannot See*

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“What press has been in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, radio will be in the 20<sup>th</sup>” (Dean 4). This widespread fascination with the radio, shown in this statement given by Nazi Germany’s Propaganda Minister, is clearly displayed in Anthony Doerr’s novel *All the Light We Cannot See*. Just like newspapers in the nineteenth century, radios were sources of spreading news, discoveries, advertisements, and entertainment during the early to mid twentieth century. During World War II, however, both the allies and the axis powers used radio broadcasts carefully. For instance, the musical radio programs in England shied away from broadcasting German and Italian music, thus supporting the country’s political position (MacKay 516). For the Nazis, broadcasting government propaganda and restricting the use of nongovernment media were means to persuade both their German and foreign audiences to support the Third Reich. In Doerr’s novel, these manipulative radio broadcasts (transmitted by both Third-Reich supporters and enemies) suggest that physical invasion is not sufficient to completely conquer an enemy. Instead, both the legal and illegal radio broadcasts in *All the Light We Cannot See* show that physical surrender does not equate defeat, but rather defeat comes from psychological surrender of personal opinions and identity.

Historically, pro-Nazi radio propaganda efforts strengthened the self-image of the German people and their view of the new government, thus attempting to conquer the minds of the listeners. When the Third Reich was established in 1933, Hitler ordered that the Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda (ProMi) be created with Joseph Goebbels as the Propaganda Minister. While other countries also had government organizations regarding patriotic propaganda, this new German ministry had a unique focus termed “mind-bombing”

(Bergemeier 3). The goal of “mind-bombing” was to aim as many radio broadcasts as possible in favor of the Third Reich, while simultaneously making discrediting the other European nations (3). The purpose of these broadcasts was to boost the confidence of average German citizens in themselves and in their government’s ideals, and by so doing, the Third Reich would gain greater support.

In *All the Light We Cannot See*, Doerr displays this concept of “mind-bombing” through the radio broadcasts that the people of Zollverein enjoy listening to. One radio broadcast clearly shows this idea: “Over these three years, our leader has had the courage to face a Europe that was in danger of collapse. . . . He alone is to be thanked for the fact that, for German children, a German life has once again become worth living” (Doerr 43). Because the script has exaggerated the facts to make Hitler seem like a sort of savior, this and other broadcasts are trying to convince listeners that the Nazi party was the best for Germany considering the circumstances. Repeated pro-Nazi propaganda increases the productivity of the mines in Zollverein as workers trust their government’s interest in the people. As a result, the community becomes more prosperous, and even the orphans enjoy luxuries such as meat at Sunday supper and new clothes (39). The children are especially excited to help their country after repeatedly hearing patriotic chants: “We hope only to work, to work and work and work, to go to glorious work for the country” (39). Within the Children’s House, the teenagers Hans and Herribert fully embrace this youth-oriented patriotism by joining Hitler Youth and repeating patriotic greetings to passersby (42). By showing the positive responses of radio propaganda in Zollverein, Doerr accurately portrays that the Third Reich was seeking to conquer the minds of the German populace.

Along a similar vein, Doerr shows how the French surrender themselves emotionally as well as physically, because the Nazi forces have manipulated them through fear. While the ProMi

was broadcasting patriotic propaganda within Germany, it was also broadcasting internationally through a tactic called “black propaganda,” which consisted of pro-Nazi radio programs disguised as local amateur broadcasts (Bergmeier 195). Because France was an early target for such propaganda, the broadcasts aired for several years, providing critiques of French institutions and persuading listeners that the German counterparts were superior. In a meeting with Joseph Goebbels, Hitler explained the purpose of such broadcasts:

“Artillery preparation before an attack . . . will be replaced . . . by the psychological dislocation of the enemy through revolutionary propaganda. . . . Our strategy is to destroy the enemy from within, to conquer him through himself. Mental confusion, contradictory feelings, indecision, panic—these are our weapons”. (3)

During the invasion of France in 1940, these radio stations labored to fulfill their purpose with statements like, “Will Paris be another Warsaw with our women and children’s blood running in the gutters?” (202). Whether or not this statement and others like it were true, their sense of panic and anxiety contributed to France’s surrender. Although there is no evidence of any black propaganda in *All the Light We Cannot See*, fear and anxiety circulate in Paris through rumors with unknown sources, fulfilling Hitler’s goal cited above. Before leaving Paris, Marie-Laure hears rumors that the Nazi soldiers are extraordinarily strong, that their weaponry is highly advanced, and that they lock disabled persons in jail (Doerr 59). As the Germans invade, the fear increases as the Parisians assume their army is too weak to resist the Nazi forces: “Someone says, ‘The Second Army mauled, the Ninth cut off, France’s best fleets wasted.’ Someone says, ‘We will be overrun’” (78). Because the French are giving in to the fear and poor self-image circulating through the rumors, at this point in the novel the Nazis have begun conquering not only the lands of the French but also the minds of the French.

The effects of these broadcasts continue within the novel as Doerr emphasizes another of Nazi Germany's manipulative tactics—strict law and policy enforcement. In Germany, radio broadcasts became more and more heavily censored as time passed. These censorships were so strict that listeners complained that some broadcasts were unintelligible (Dean 8). Broadcasters not only had to avoid certain topics, but they also had to substitute certain words carefully; for example, “National Socialist Party” replaced “Nazi Party,” and words like “alleged” couldn't be used in reference to official statements (7). Eventually, German civilians were allowed to listen only to state-sponsored programs, which ensured that all legally broadcasted information supported the Third Reich. In the novel, radios and radio transmitters were confiscated from all civilians in France. Any violation of these policies resulted in serious punishment. The novel also displays this censorship and its enforcement when the vice minister takes away Werner's copy of *Principles of Mechanics* since it is written by a Jewish author (Doerr 58). Because he fears what would happen to his sister if an official visited again, Werner destroys his handmade radio when he discovers that Jutta has been listening to prohibited broadcasts (86). For this same reason, Etienne fears the consequences of joining the resistance effort when he is asked to turn on his radio transmitter, which the Nazis failed to confiscate. Thus, the fear and persuasions begun by the pro-Nazi broadcasts and rumors are perpetuated by the law enforcement regarding the use of radios in both Germany and France.

The characters within *All the Light We Cannot See* rebel once they realize that the Nazis are not only trying to physically take over the German government and the neighboring nations, but to psychologically conquer the minds of others. While the individual cases vary, I think the characters' ethical reasoning allows them to both recognize and stand up to the Nazis. Perhaps the most dramatic case of rebellion is that of Frederick. Frederick realizes much sooner than

Werner that the teachers at Schulpforta are not trying to educate the students so that the children will be able to think for themselves but rather so that the students will support the Third-Reich. When Werner and Frederick spend a few days together on break, Werner naively talks about their dreams of the future. Frederick, on the other hand, understands that he will never realize his hopes of becoming a bird watcher because it would not support the Third Reich's purpose. He replies, "Your problem, Werner, . . . is that you still believe you own your life" (Doerr 223). Here, Frederick understands that what they are learning at Schulpforta is hyper-focused on the political goals of the country regardless of the boys' desires and moral beliefs. Consequently, Frederick is beaten and bullied by his peers, while under teacher supervision, for being the weakest in the class. Eventually he rebels by refusing to pour his bucket of water over the prisoner—an act that ironically shows he is the morally strongest in the class. By so doing, he keeps his own values and opinions intact regardless of his teachers' and peers' opinions, although persecution increases so much that it damages Frederick permanently.

Similarly, the Old Ladies' Resistance Club of Saint-Malo is created when the French women realize the Nazis are trying to micromanage the lives and thoughts of civilians. Madame Manec points out that these ladies are "the ones who make [the Nazi's] world run" by providing services and food. However, the ladies realize the dangers of aggressive tactics, like Frederick's, so they resort to what Michel de Certeau calls "la perruque," meaning a small act of resistance of the weak members of an institution against the strong members (25). Certeau explains, "*La perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time' or as complex as a cabinetmaker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room" (25). It is through this and similar small acts of resistance that Certeau proposes how the weak can gain victory over the strong (xix). As a result of adopting such tactics, the women

begin taking advantage of the system imposed upon them by changing road signs, feeding the soldiers' dogs laxatives, and writing "Free France Now" on as many five-franc notes as possible (Doerr 252–53). Through Frederick's obvious resistance and the Old Ladies' Resistance Club's more subtle resistance, these characters show that they are not surrendering their minds and will, despite the Nazis' physical occupation in France.

By resisting the urge to emotionally surrender to the Nazi forces, the rebels prove to maintain their own identity and way of thinking. Historically, the journal *Les Annales* continued to publish articles during the German occupation while also seeking to keep a distinct French identity, despite the heavy censorship and the dismissal of Jewish staff members (Davis 354). Although the writers could not express ideas as freely as before, the employees were determined to keep circulating distinctly French ideas instead of succumbing to the pressure to become essentially a pro-Nazi journal written in French by the French (Davis 355). In *All the Light We Cannot See*, maintaining their own identity and opinions motivates some of the rebels to broadcast the illegal radio transmissions. For instance, as Werner continues to help hunt and kill illegal broadcasters, he notices that they pride themselves in their effort to contact fellow civilians: "Everybody, he is learning, likes to hear themselves talk" (Doerr 343). In other words, the broadcasters enjoy expressing what *they* feel is important, even if it be through codes.

Similarly, as Madame Manec tries to persuade Etienne to transmit codes on his radio transmitter, she knows that she is fighting an emotional war against an enemy she cannot win. However, she claims that resisting the micromanagement of the Nazis is better than allowing them to control the minds of the community. She tells Etienne, "Don't you want to be alive before you die?" (Doerr 270). Etienne does not fully understand her meaning of "alive" until he joins the resistance himself and feels the excitement of actively resisting the Nazis. Although he

admits he does not know the meaning of the codes he broadcasts, he still expresses his own form of resistance by also transmitting music by famous French composers such as Debussy, Ravel, Massenet and Charpentier (332). By doing so, Etienne seeks to stay “alive” by letting the listeners hear music from their own country, instead of that from Germany.

What is the definition of defeat? Doerr’s *All the Light We Cannot See* suggests that the most powerful invasions do not simply conquer lands and properties, but rather they conquer ways of thinking. Historically, Hitler and Goebbels successfully used propaganda to “mind-bomb” their German or French targets. In the novel, Werner contemplates the power of the radio as a weapon and points out: “This is cleaner, more mechanical, a war waged through the air, invisibly, and the front lines are anywhere” (Doerr 344). As the characters realize their values and identities are at risk, they resist the temptation to let the Nazis invade their minds through fear and persuasion. The rebellious characters, like Frederick, Etienne, and Madame Manec, seek psychological victory by maintaining their own ideas and self-images intact. Thus, these characters show that psychological invasion can be successfully thwarted by staying true to one’s ideals instead of accepting the enemy’s. In essence, the acts of rebellion in *All the Light We Cannot See* exemplifies Churchill’s exhortation to “defend our [country], whatever the cost may be . . . we shall never surrender.”

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