Abstract/ Summary/ Overview of the argumentation in the final edition of Kurt Baschwitz’ study on ‘Mass delusion’ (Der Massenwahn).

Note about the changed subtitle. It changed from ‘Its workings and mastery’ (Seine Wirkung und seine Beherrsung, 1923) to ‘Causes and healing of the hatred of Germans’ (Ursache und Heilung des Deutschenhasses, 1932). The emphasis within the book itself shifted accordingly.

Both versions can well be considered rather one-sided, in the sense that they mobilized all possible arguments against the ‘official’ allied version of events (that largely remained dominant in history books ever since), but shunned possible arguments to support it – of which there were many as well.

(Despite his later life in The Netherlands, Baschwitz hardly ever mentioned this ‘youthful error of judgment’ or referred back to it in some detail in subsequent works. He probably felt slightly embarrassed by it, particularly after the Second World war had reinforced the allied perspective. He may have hoped it would be overlooked – which it largely was. Few later readers went far beyond the title, or dug deep into the text itself. As the first edition was printed in the old-fashioned ‘Frakturschrift’ which readers found increasingly burdensome to decipher; and fewer even knew there had also been a second version).

Background. After his Ph.D. in economics, young Kurt Baschwitz had begun to work as a journalist for a quality daily in Germany’s main seaport, the Hamburger Fremdenblatt. Like most middle-class liberal intellectuals, he was proud of the country’s resurgence and identified with it. At thirty, halfway the First World War, he was sent to become its correspondent in the key neutral Dutch seaport of Rotterdam. This enabled him to closely follow the international press, to try and sort fact from fiction.

To his great surprise many allied propaganda stories continued to thrive, long after having been debunked by German sources or by mere facts. Even though the Dutch (as well as the Swiss) governments tried to maintain neutrality, he felt, the population of these neighbouring non-combatant states turned increasingly anti-German. This even continued long after the war had been lost, and after the disastrous Versailles treaty had been imposed. He wondered why this was the case, and thus embarked on the book upon his return.

Central ideas. The Atlantic allies did of course have huge advantages in international propaganda, both material and immaterial, which the confined central European powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) had not. But the main reasons, he felt, were psychodynamic. The author of whom most studies were quoted by far, was Sigmund Freud. Even though Kurt Baschwitz did not follow a conventional psychoanalytical approach, his key notions in this book were all closely related to it.

The contrast between conscious and unconscious thoughts, the idea that we are often not aware of our own deepest drives, and deploy a wide variety of mental ‘defence mechanisms’ to overlook them. Another key process is similar to ‘cognitive dissonance reduction’, although that term was coined only much later. Since the Versailles treaty imposed an extraordinarily heavy punishment on the ordinary German adults, their children and even future generations, they must somehow be held extraordinarily guilty.

Editions. The first edition of the book was published during the first desperate economic crisis of 1923, and immediately sold two printings. It was followed by a
slow return to more-or-less normal, but then a fallback into a second desperate economic crisis five years later. It launched the Nazis on the road to power, with remilitarization and the first anti-Jewish measures – which ultimately cost Baschwitz his prestigious new job and forced him to flee. So it was with further anger and despair that he reworked the entire book for a more elaborate second edition published in 1932, and added a new subtitle on the unreasonable Germanophobia – particularly of ‘onlooker and bystander’ states. To the unprepared reader, however, both the title and the argument may easily convey a false impression about his true motives and preoccupations.

Slanted perception. We tend to see the First World War through the lens of the Second World War and conflate the two. The Germans were alone in causing the war, we are told, and committed unspeakable atrocities. The Allies had no ulterior motives: neither the Americans, nor the British, or even the French. Generations of new academic historical research, however, paint a rather different picture. The First World War arose out of an escalating struggle between half a dozen big powers, which had been going on for many years and had become increasingly hard to contain. It was the first war in history that was both massive and industrial. There were many horrors and atrocities during the First World War, but Germany was not alone in committing them – and many ‘accepted truths’ about them have since turned out to be plain wrong. This is not to plea for a ‘revisionist history’, but for an understanding of Baschwitz’ preoccupations in this place and time.

PS. Style. A confusing habit of his is to use an entire paragraph for positing a way of thinking, and then abruptly follow it with Nein/ No: this is not how things really are, and then another paragraph to explain why. It regularly puts the reader on the wrong foot.
World War onwards, and particularly in his last, best-known and most-translated work on witch hunts.

I-1, p. 13. *Superstition does not explain mass delusion*. These phenomena are often linked to the ‘dark Middle Ages’, to religion and the clergy. Baschwitz emphasizes that they really intensified during the transition to the newer ages, with the spread of printing and also of secular ideas.

I-2, 24. *Information anxiety and guilt feelings*. Some people tried to stand up to the persecutions. But many others felt that if witches and heretics were punished so horribly, they must have committed terrible crimes. This points to a need of onlookers/bystanders to unburden their conscience. (Compare the later notion of ‘cognitive dissonance reduction’).

I-3, 29. *The need for an embodied evil*. When people suffer from uncertain forces (the weather, epidemics, famine, crises, etc.) they tend to look for individuals or groups to blame. They want to believe in a personal Evil, rather than an anonymous one.

I-4, 35. *The weapon of Heresy*. Once the charge of heresy exists, power holders and others abuse it against opponents, to tighten their grip and expand their possessions. Examples abound, from the history of countries like Great Britain, France and Germany.

I-5, 42. *The atrocity lie bout religious wars*. There were widespread atrocities during the various religious wars, but they were also further exaggerated by the other side. Similar ludicrous stories turn up time and again, also after the spread of printing.

I-6, 47. *Horror as a means of war in the new age*. Secular wars have become just as horrible as religious ones, particularly with the development of new technologies, and the failure of statesmen to reach accommodation.

II. THE HATE OF GERMANS AS A MASS DELUSION

II-1, 51. *The propaganda superstition*. Warring parties have powerful tools for making propaganda and influencing public opinion. But the problem is not so much that they can lie, but that people want to believe. A good example is the ‘corpse factory’ story. It was almost immediately demonstrated to result from a translation error, but continued to thrive thereafter.

II-2, 57. *The overestimation of opinion makers*. Allied propaganda stuck, and German attempts at clearing such things up remained ineffective. One reason was that various peoples, particularly the neutral onlookers/bystanders, wanted to unburden their conscience.

III-3. *The enigma of the horror thrill*. It is surprising that even the most outlandish stories are widely believed. Particularly if they contain immoral or even sexual elements. Shocking has entertainment value in newspapers. (There are even references to the use of the first audio records and moving pictures for propaganda purposes, although mostly in the immediate aftermath of the war).

III-4, 73. *Horror campaigns with or without after-effects*. Some horror stories re-emerge under entirely different circumstances. True reports that Belgians systematically cut off hands of transgressors in Congo probably helped inspire false reports that Germans systematically cut off children’s hands in Belgium.

III. THE SPLITTING OF CONSCIOUSNESS AS A SIGN OF MASS DELUSION.

III-1, 77. *Double standards*. The allied powers have sooner or later committed the very same transgressions they blamed on the Germans. Being the first to formally
declare war, to violate the neutrality of third countries, to prepare youngsters with ‘militaristic’ movements, etc. (Think of Baden Powell’s boy scout movement inspired by the British war against the Boers).

III-2, 88. Repression of one’s better judgment. Excesses of the Germans have been exaggerated: against women and children, churches and antiquities. The same holds for submarine warfare. The lie about the sinking of the Lusitania is a case in point. This in contrast to allied air attacks.

III-3, 101. Omissions in the war guilt story. Article 231 in the Versailles ‘Diktat’ makes Germany the sole initiator of the war. Yet newspapers had long reported that France and Russia were pushing for war. Even if the German government is held guilty, the enormous reparations make the civilian population and future generations pay.

III-4, 109. Did the world press really fail? Analyses of the pre-war press further show that many other elements that contributed to the outbreak of the war were out there in the open. For instance that the assassination of the Austrian crown prince in Bosnia was committed by terrorist networks with close links to the Serbian state, and to the pan-Slav movement promoted by Russia.

III-5, 114. Where was the war guilt propaganda? Initial press reports, also in Britain, had said that it was Russian mobilization that triggered the war. It was only later that the sole blame was put on Germany. That is also when the atrocity propaganda took off.

III-6, 120. The resistance against information. Attempts by neutral researchers (in Norway, the U.K. and the U.S.) to lay the facts on the table were ignored. Even neutral peoples did not want to know things that went against the dominant tide.

IV. THE ‘NEED FOR UNBURDENING’ AS THE CAUSE OF MASS DELUSION

IV-1, 127. Do newspaper readers accept lies? Newspaper editors cannot simply do as they please. If they get away with tendentious reporting, this is because the newspaper readers prove receptive to it. Because they share the same ‘altered state of mind’, the same double standards and mass delusions. Not only citizens of enemy states, but also of neutral states – the latter sometimes even more.

IV-2, 141. Forgotten outbreaks of hate between peoples. Baschwitz extensively quotes the works of Prussian king Frederick the Great (also on Macchiavelli), who reflected on these issues during the seven year war. Both agreed that public opinion and history always side with the victors.

IV-3, 153. Guilt feelings about official neutrality. Countries often claim neutrality, but overlook shipments of weapons and ammunition to one side. This further reinforces the need of those onlookers/ bystanders to unburden themselves, by choosing to believe in the evil nature of the other side.

IV-4, 159. The moral self-preservation drive. Masses and groups do not have a soul or mind, only individuals do. Although they may indeed reinforce each others’ wishful thinking through ‘proof in numbers’, for instance about the nature of friends and foes. They identify with their own group or category, and try to hold it in esteem. Freud has shown that this may result in a split consciousness, and the mobilization of a variety of defence mechanisms.

IV-5, 176. Communities of responsibility. A major object of identification of citizens is formed by their nation or state and its authorities, also in their interaction with other nations and states. They thus tend to identify with their own people and
country, in conflicts and wars. They tend to take moral responsibility for them. This translates into their beliefs.

IV-6, 190. *The mass psychological need for unburdening.* People feel they ought to speak out and stand up for weaker states bullied by more powerful ones. That is what many did when the Boer settlers in South Africa were attacked by the British. But if they cannot or will not act in this way, if they choose neutrality, they need to unburden their conscience by blaming the victims.

V. REVERSE AND MIRROR IMAGES AS EXPRESSIONS OF MASS DELUSION

V-1, 205. *Scholars in delusion.* Before the war broke out, Germany had widely been considered as one of the cradles of modern European civilization, with peak contributions ranging from literature and music, to science and medicine. Its educated liberal middle classes were shocked to suddenly find their people depicted as Militaristic and Barbaric.

This resulted in the 14 Oct. 1918 Appeal of 93 of the most renowned Nobel Prize winners and university professors against the claims of allied propaganda. It consisted of half a dozen paragraphs, each beginning with the formula ‘Es ist nicht war’ (It is not true, that …). It was later followed by a second similar appeal, with even more signatories. But there also was a response from overseas colleagues, examples of a boycott and discrimination.

V-2, 216. *The child murder tale as a reverse image of the famine war.* As soon as the war broke out, Britain had deployed its almighty fleet to block a relatively narrow stretch off Denmark, to entirely cut off access to Germany’s three main seaports – all in the North-west. In fact Germany’s launching of submarine warfare was largely a response to that blockade, and a vain attempt to impose one on Britain as well. But the Entente powers also pressured neutral buffer states such as Switzerland and The Netherlands to stop deliveries of food and other necessities over land.

This led to shortages and malnourishment in Germany, which at first they tried to deny and hide. But toward the end of the war it led to the outbreak of a real large-scale famine. The blockade was maintained until half a year after the armistice, and allegedly caused a million civilians to die prematurely – including many children. The Versailles reparations, furthermore, at that point imposed the cession not only of many means of transport (ships, planes, railway carriages and cars) but also ten percent of cattle including much-needed milk cows. Baschwitz linked this to the allied propaganda claims that the Germans themselves had proven to be ‘baby killers’ – in Belgium and on the Lusitania.

V-3, 229. *Guilt feelings and the urge of the weak to worship (the strong).* Small states have become accustomed to the fact that they cannot really inflect the larger course of events. When the big powers do things that are unjust, therefore, they have only two options. One is to oppose them, which often proves futile. The other is to believe that the stronger alliance is per definition right, and that the weaker alliance has brought its fate upon itself.

The small buffer states thus try to unburden their conscience by adhering to the idea that the weaker alliance is guilty: of having single-handedly started the war, violated the neutrality of a small neutral neighbour, and embarked on an uninterrupted campaign of atrocities. In fact, Baschwitz argues, the excesses in Belgium were no worse than in any other situation where an occupier faced armed resistance from a civilian population. Such as when Britain later tried to squash Irish independence (or
all allied powers thereafter tried to squash the independence of their colonies, with only very few exceptions).

V-4, 249. **The meaning of mirror thoughts.** Baschwitz’ ‘Mirror thoughts’ are comparable to Freud’s defence mechanism of ‘Projection’. They do not so much apply to neutral as to warring peoples. They deny and repress their own darkest thoughts and leanings, and ascribe them to the opponent instead. They are a further manifestation of the splitting of consciousness, and to judging by double standards.

VI, 254. **RULES OF HATE BETWEEN PEOPLES – Intermediary summary**

Two-thirds into the book, Baschwitz takes a pause to sum up the regularities and rules he has identified so far. They are mostly clusters of apodictic claims. They are somewhat repetitive, and add few new elements here. Neither do they form a theoretical framework developed in successive steps, although one might consider translating these eight pages in their entirety – along with some later similar overview fragments.

[Note that his framework can also be understood as an earlier version of later social categorization and attribution theory. We categorize ourselves, and are categorized by others, as belonging to certain groups – for instance nations. We tend to identify with them, and tend to be identified with them. This has profound consequences for the ways we organize and reorganize our mental frameworks all the time.

When we, or our own group, do something good or well, we tend automatically to attribute this to our common goodness or competence. When we, or that same group, do something bad or badly, by contrast, we tend just as automatically to attribute this to an unhappy concurrence of circumstances. For our enemies and opponents, the exact reverse happens. So our mind is a rapid-fire sorting machine of people, actions and events. Protecting a self-image of moral rectitude is the key. JvG].

VII. **THE CHANGEABILITY OF HATE BETWEEN PEOPLES**

VII-1, 262. **The secret of the control of moods by the French.** During the war itself, the U.K. and later also the U.S., proved largely able to steer international public opinion. In Versailles, it were the French who imposed the disastrous terms of the treaty, even on their own allies. But the others had gone along that far, and could not easily back out again. Soon, however, even Lloyd George and Wilson publicly expressed doubts and regrets, whereas the American senate refused to become party to the treaty and have it signed. While the Anglo-Americans demobilized, France instead stepped up its military deployment. It also came to dominate international public opinion for a while, and revived the old atrocity stories.

VII-2, 269. **Mood making through military violence.** It was not only France’s occupation of the mining-and-industry Rhine and later the Ruhr area in the German West that created new facts on the ground, but also its role in the allied military commands in the German East. The most eloquent example was the fate of mining-and-industry Upper Silesia, where election results were dismissed at first.

VII-3, 274. **Changing affinities in the life of peoples.** At various points in the recent past, the politicians, the press and the public of France, Britain and the U.S. had suddenly expressed a great like or dislike of each other (depending on sudden wars overseas and other conflicts of interest). But it is true that larger language communities (English, German) do more easily draw together, and sources of misunderstandings between those countries are fewer.
England and France as ‘hate profiteers’. During the early war, Britain was the major power and the major propagandist. After the war and the Versailles treaty, France took over this role. It even tried to manipulate the League of Nations and the Red Cross to this effect.

The paralysis of England, and the mirror images of France. Britain had become enmeshed in the Versailles treaty conditions, could not extricate itself from them to prevent the French ‘resumption of the war’ through its Ruhr invasion. All successive French governments had consistently been looking for ‘revenge’ for the 1870 war [and finally succeeded through their alliance with Russia].

Paris now exulted in its victory and succeeded in forcing the acceptance of its extremely harsh conditions by its more reasonable allies in 1919. It also told itself that the Versailles conditions and subsequent events might impose an impossibly heavy burden on Germany, but that they would surely have done the same if it had been the other way around. (The war reparations imposed by Germany on France in 1871, and by Germany on Russia in 1918, had also been considerable).

The uniqueness of the Versailles proceedings. It was not Germany and Austria that had started the war, but France and Russia – with England and later the United States going along. The disastrous current situation was not the consequence of the war, but of the peace, and the conditions attached to it. Both Lloyd George and Wilson had earlier stated publicly, that there should be no revenge, no annexations, no reparations. It was the French who imposed these. Lloyd George and Wilson later regretted this.

Mass psychologists Taine and Le Bon had already noted that during the French Revolution, the ‘hypnotic suggestion’ exerted by the most radical (Robespierre and company) did often prevail. Poincaré and Clémenceau played a similar role in this war and peace. The others are often paralysed, and later blame the pressure of the group as a whole for the derailments. (An argument further developed in his later book ‘Rational man and the crowd”).

European mores in treating the defeated. Earlier victorious statesmen such as German chancellor Bismarck had treated their defeated opponents in a much more chivalrous way than French Marshall Foch and prime minister Clémenceau did – in both war and peace. President Wilson even told his famous advisor Colonel House so.

The essence of war crimes. Italian mass psychologist Sighele had noted that even smart, just and good people might get involved in crimes under the influence of a crowd. Many leading allied politicians had publicly denounced the harsh conditions imposed by victors on the defeated as counter-productive and a cause of further conflict. Yet this is exactly what happened in Versailles.

The pangs of conscience, in statesmen guilty of peace. People closely involved in the process, such as the American Secretary of State Lansing and Italian prime minister Nitti, later revealed the contradictory feelings and regrets of some of the main protagonists.

The man of fate. Baschwitz is particularly harsh on American president Wilson. He says he was not the unworldly intellectual and dreamer caught in events that he was later made out to be. He had originally been sympathetic to Germany, but as soon as the war broke out he and a large part of the policy elite were set on supporting Britain. Yet he, too, resented and regretted the French forcing his
hand in Versailles and thereafter, and said they had ‘torn up’ the peace. [Note that key
details about Wilson’s personality and illnesses were not known at the time; an entire
literature about this subject has since arisen].

PROSPECT (Ausblick)
365. The paralysis of European statesmen, and overcoming it. Personalities
played a major role. In England, for instance, foreign minister Edward Grey and navy
minister Churchill overrode the reservations of some colleagues. All railed against
‘secret diplomacy’, but many of the harshest Versailles conditions had already been
convened in secret bilateral contacts between the European powers before or during
the war (the U.S. only became aware of this long after).

But some major driving forces of the war were psychological, Baschwitz
concluded: reverse and mirror images, the inclination to blame the victim, etc. (see
under ‘Notions’ below. [Such ideas were later elaborated by theories of social
categorization, attribution and of the logic of enemy images]. However, powerholders
cannot flee their responsibility by blaming the masses of the peoples. [An argument
further developed in ‘Rational man and the crowd’).

Last sentence: ‘The elimination of the mass delusion [among allies and
 neutrals] can only happen through the elimination of the need to unburden oneself,
that is to say by the restoration of justice’ [with regard to Germany]. PM. A final
irony is that by the time this revised second edition of the book was published in
1932, events in Germany had already become irreversible: the rise of Hitler, Nazism
and anti-Semitism. Only a few months later, Baschwitz was fired from his influential
position as a Jew, and fled to The Netherlands).

380-5. SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY