

DECEPTION & BLUFF: TASK INSTRUCTIONS

The key question: Did the British really employ magicians and practical jokers?

Your task

Imagine that you have met someone who simply does not believe that the British used deception and bluff tactics in WW2. Your task is to choose two examples that you think will convince this person and then present them with the evidence.

You could do this as a presentation or a written report. Use the report sheet to help.

Did the British really employ magicians and practical jokers?

The simple answer to this question is yes! The most famous example is a man called Jasper Maskelyne. Maskelyne was a stage magician who used his talents to fool the Germans. He was involved in the North African theatre of the war as part of a team that disguised tanks and even concealed the Suez Canal! Maskelyne wrote a book after the war describing his achievements, which some historians dispute. Many other imaginative characters worked for the British armed forces and British intelligence in the field of deception.

These images show stamps that were used in Germany in 1943. You probably recognise Hitler in the two stamps on the right. What you might not know is that Hitler's face was the only one allowed on German stamps. So why is Heinrich Himmler, commander of the SS and one of the most senior Nazis, shown on the stamp on the left?

Stamps used in Germany, 1943

Catalogue ref: HS 6/641



WESTERN EUROPE 1939–1945: DECEPTION & BLUFF**What is this source?**

This is a collection of stamps used in Germany in the later stages of the war. The stamp on the left is a fake stamp that was produced in Britain.

The actual image shown here is taken from an envelope that was posted in Germany and arrived in Switzerland late in 1943.

What's the background to this source?

By late 1943 the tide of war was beginning to turn against Germany. There was some evidence that German morale was poor. The British intelligence agencies were keen to take any opportunity that they could to try and stir up trouble in Germany. They came up with this idea of creating a stamp bearing the head of Heinrich Himmler. They hoped this would make Germans think that Himmler was trying to overthrow Hitler.

Heinrich Himmler was one of the most powerful Nazis. He controlled the SS. This huge organisation was almost a state inside the German state. It had its own armed forces and factories. It controlled the police and the Gestapo (secret police) and the concentration camps for Jews and other enemies of the Nazis. The SS certainly could have arranged to have stamps printed if Himmler had been plotting to overthrow Hitler. The British were hoping to cause doubt and suspicion between the leading Nazis.

It's worth knowing that...

Despite all this power, Himmler was not one of Hitler's closest companions. In fact, in 1945, he tried to start negotiations with the British and American leaders to get them to join Germany against the USSR. Hitler had him arrested.

Hitler actually made a lot of money out the use of his portrait on stamps. He charged the German post office a royalty for using his image, even though they had to! As a result another head appearing on stamps would have caused a lot of talk.

How does this source help us to understand the importance of deception tactics during the war?

1. What kind of images do you see on stamps in Britain today, and in other countries?
2. Imagine the Queen's head was replaced on stamps by another image (e.g. the Prime Minister). Do you think this would cause controversy in Britain today?