V for Victory and Viral

July 19, 2009, from the blog “Release” by Jason Karpef

July 20 marks the 68th anniversary of World War II’s “V for Victory” campaign. A New York Times article of the day describes it as a “nerve war” against the Nazis in occupied Europe. Launched by the BBC, championed by Winston Churchill, and executed by countless brave people in conquered countries, V for Victory was quintessential propaganda. It was also viral marketing in an era when the only computers were a handful of top-secret, room-sized machines (also part of the fight against the Nazis, used to break their coded messages).

The concept began in early 1941 with a BBC radio broadcast by Belgian refugee Victory DeLavelaye. He urged those under occupation to use “V” as a rallying symbol, the first letter in the French “Victoire,” the Flemish “Vrijheid,” and the English “Victory.” BBC editors embraced the concept, and the service beamed the official campaign to occupied Europe beginning July 20.

Per the NYT account, a BBC announcer with the nom-de-guerre “Colonel V. Britton” read a statement from Prime Minister Churchill:

The V sign is the symbol of the unconquerable will of the occupied territories and a portent of the fate awaiting Nazi tyranny. So long as the peoples continue to refuse all collaboration with the invader it is sure that his cause will perish and that Europe will be liberated.

Col. Britton urged listeners to create “V” graffiti, to chalk or paint the letter on walls and pavement. The “V” theme continued as it was construed as the Roman symbol for the number “5.” Listeners were instructed to read Daniel 5, beginning with the fifth verse—the “writing on the wall” foretelling the downfall of the Babylonian empire that had enslaved the Jews. Additionally, Col. Britton told the audience to tap out Morse code for the letter “V,” three dots and a dash for the benefit of friend and invader alike. That rhythm mimicked the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth (again, V as 5), a motif likened to “fate knocking at the door,” an extra affront to the Germans that co-opted the greatest work of one of their greatest composers. The first notes of Beethoven’s Fifth became the BBC’s call sign for its broadcasts to continental Europe throughout the war.

V for Victory spread across Europe, as one defiantly drawn or tapped “V” sparked another and another. Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels quickly countered, claiming the campaign was a Third Reich invention signifying the German “Viktoria.” The Nazis posted their “V” on banners and newspaper front pages and used Beethoven’s Fifth in their radio broadcasts. It is true brilliance when you can get the competition (enemy) to carry your message.

V for Victory was viral marketing. A major media platform, the BBC, created the spark and the people did the rest. The great communicator of the age, Winston Churchill, continually flashed the V sign for photographers, maintaining his role in the movement. Nearly seven decades before Twitter let Iranians strike a blow against their dictatorship, V for Victory gave voice to Hitler’s involuntary—and temporary—subjects.