

Gary Messinger

“Words Have Become Battles”

The Characteristics and Costs of Propaganda during the First World War

During the First World War, for the first time in history, governments made use of a powerful new weapon called propaganda, exploiting recent expansions in the reach of the newspaper press and the growing influence of film, poster art, and advertising. The British were the most effective practitioners of propaganda, due to their long tradition of public debate. Germany tended to be clumsy in its propaganda, resorting more to autocratic declaration than to subtle persuasion. In all of the belligerent nations, use of propaganda was often honorable, relying upon factual evidence and logical rigor. But, most of the time, wartime propaganda resorted to lying and demonization of the other side. For this reason, propaganda caused long-term harm. The hatred sown by wartime propaganda stimulated mistrust among nations during the 1920s and was one of the causes of the Second World War.

In the First World War (1914-1918), as all combatant nations struggled to gain advantage in a conflict that threatened to drag on forever, strategists resorted to use of frightening new weapons that might turn the tide, such as the machine gun, poison gas, the tank, the submarine, the airplane, and the dirigible. One of the new weapons was psychological: propaganda.

The interest of the warring nations in propaganda was traceable to many causes, including the continuing increase in sales of news publications in expanding urban centers that had started well before the war, and expansions in networks involving powerful tools of communication like the telegraph,

the telephone, and the motion picture camera. As the First World War progressed, officials in all the belligerent countries began to see that if all elements of mass persuasion were managed and coordinated, as only a government was large enough to do, then a new and powerful tool – *official propaganda* – might take its place as part of a nation's arsenal.

The term propaganda dated from the year 1622, when the Roman Catholic Church under Pope Gregory XV established a committee of cardinals known as *Congregatio de propaganda fide*, or College for the Propagation of the Faith, to engage in missionary activities against Protestants during the Counter Reformation. The word had primarily religious connotations until the First World War, but, from 1914 on, most observers came to view “propaganda” as the sinister manipulation of public opinion by official elites.

German Propaganda

The German army circulated propaganda among enemy troops and civilian populations. In Belgium, for example, the Germans air-dropped leaflets, directed at enemy troops and civilians, claiming that resistance was futile. Soon the Germans were also printing and circulating attractive, illustrated magazines directed at foreign audiences, like the *Gazette des Ardennes*, the *Antwerpsche Tydingen*, and the *Gazet van Brussell*, in Belgium and France and the *Glos Stolicy* in Warsaw. These publications reported on German victories and sought to sow dissent, for example by claiming that the English were not paying their allies a fair share of finances for the war.

The civilian government in Germany issued pamphlets, brochures, doctored news stories and other forms of propaganda that supplemented the military's efforts. The material circulated throughout Europe, as well as in the United States, Latin America, and elsewhere. German civilian propaganda was greatly aided by the willingness of large numbers of writers and academic figures to endorse armed conflict. For example, ninety-three prominent thinkers, ranging from the playwright Gerhart Hauptmann to scientists like Max Planck and Wilhelm Roentgen, issued a carefully-reasoned, conscientious manifesto during the earliest days of the war to support Germany's attack on Belgium, and the great novelist Thomas Mann wrote in support of his country's actions.

German efforts to manipulate opinion suffered from organizational confusion. The various offices responsible for propaganda production argued with each other about control, competed in the *Reichstag* for budgetary

appropriations, and frequently conveyed contradictory messages to the public regarding vital matters like how captured enemy soldiers would be treated, the extent of Germany’s territorial aims, and terms upon which peace might be possible. A large problem for the Germans was failure to understand foreign audiences: the consequence of growing up in an autocratic culture where the process of motivating audiences by persuasion rather than blunt assertion was not well understood.

Germany’s lack of subtlety led to many errors. An example was the famous case of the English nurse Edith Cavell. In 1915 the German occupying army in Belgium executed her on charges of spying and aiding prisoners to escape. She may not have been directly engaged in espionage, but she did help some 250 men to make their way out of enemy territory. Nevertheless, Allied governments scored a propaganda victory by orchestrating a worldwide campaign of condemnation against her execution. A short time later the French executed two German nurses in very similar circumstances. But nothing was said about this act in German propaganda. An American reporter in Berlin asked the Prussian director of propaganda for the general staff why the Germans did not make propagandistic use of the event. The Prussian officer replied, “What? Protest? The French had a perfect right to shoot them.”¹ This may have been true, but revealed an inability to understand how civilian audiences in other countries might be influenced by use of such information.

In their post-war memoirs, the two greatest German generals, Ludendorff and Hindenburg, voiced regret that they had not paid more attention to propaganda. “Today words have become battles,” Ludendorff declared: “The right words, battles won; the wrong words, battles lost.” The generals ascribed almost magical power to propaganda. “We were hypnotized... as a rabbit by a snake,” Ludendorff stated.² Germany’s perplexity regarding the new weapon of propaganda had very negative consequences after the war, when right wing politicians, including Hitler, claimed that Germany had not been beaten in a fair fight and, in the next war, would need to outdo other nations in mendacity.

France, Belgium and Italy

French experience with wartime propaganda was in some ways similar to German. French officials squabbled among themselves as to who would control press relations. A central office to work with reporters, the *Maison*

de la Presse, was not established until early 1916. Nevertheless, the French were able to use media effectively because of centuries of experience coordinating the national bureaucracy, a patriotic willingness to cooperate for the protection of the nation they loved, and a cultural heritage that equipped them to understand diverse audiences and the art of motivating people by methods other than command.

A weakness in French propaganda was the relatively limited effort to develop mass persuasion for use against enemy troops. French generals viewed things like propaganda leaflets as of marginal value and preferred to husband limited resources and leave the task of enemy propaganda to others.

Belgium, almost completely overrun by the Germans in the first few days of the War, was a conquered nation that could not conduct propaganda from home except in a small part of its territory. Italy was another example of a peripheral participant, given the many factions jockeying for governmental power and the country's frequent switches in policy. It never crafted a coherent propaganda strategy.

British Propaganda

By far the most sophisticated users of mass persuasion during the Great War were the British. Non-governmental organs of communication quickly assumed much of the work of justifying the British cause, through newspaper editorials, magazine articles, books, pamphlets and other material issued by publishers voluntarily. Even comic publications, like *Punch*, the famous magazine of political humor, were part of the conversation. Given Britain's great literary tradition and its longtime familiarity with political debate, discourse in support of the war often rose to high levels of eloquence. For example, in a pamphlet published in 1914, H. G. Wells called for the "punishment" of Germany through military action, but also said that the great conflict now in progress had the potential to be "The War That Will End War." This became a widely repeated slogan. But newspapers and magazines also circulated hate speech and stories of atrocities committed by the enemy, for example describing German factories that turned human bodies into glue, whether these stories could be documented or not.³

Most leaders of public opinion in Britain were eager to support the cause. Authors who assisted the government included Arthur Conan Doyle, Arnold Bennett, J. M. Barrie, G. K. Chesterton, John Galsworthy, John Masefield, and Gilbert Murray. Owners of publications like *The Times*, the *Daily News*, the

Pall Mall Gazette and *the Spectator* were equally willing to help. As the War went on, an increasing number of prominent writers and press lords served as directors of offices related to governmental publicity. Arnold Bennett was in charge of British official propaganda in France; H.G. Wells directed civilian propaganda against Germany late in the war; the press barons Lord Northcliffe and Lord Beaverbrook were each for a time involved in overseeing large governmental offices of propaganda; and the head of official propaganda mid way through the War was the novelist John Buchan. The government co-opted the talents of these men, but also wisely gave them latitude in the way they directed official propaganda, and all were allowed to continue their private careers without being required to curtail activities or sign special secrecy agreements. There was a gentlemanly aspect to it all, a chivalric quality in press-government relations that was not to be seen in later wars.

Because so much propaganda was being produced voluntarily, the government decided to limit its role in media manipulation. This strategy was partly the idealistic reflection of long-time British belief that government should exemplify civility. But the calculation also relieved political leaders of the need to decide how far to go in supplying certain kinds of opinion manipulation. The state did go far in censorship, particularly when it issued the Defence of the Realm Acts (1914 and later). DORA prohibited statements “by word of mouth or in writing or in any newspaper, periodical{...}or other printed publication” which were “intended or likely” to undermine loyalty to the King, troop recruitment, or confidence in the currency.⁴ Such sweeping language made it easy to imprison highly vocal pacifists and radicals. The government imprisoned the great philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell for voicing objections to the war, and the police cruelly harassed the novelist D. H. Lawrence because of his anti-war comments. And the government did have highly dishonorable lapses in rhetorical restraint. For example, early in the war, Prime Minister Asquith persuaded the distinguished jurist James Bryce to issue an internationally publicized report that greatly exaggerated the extent of atrocities committed by the Germans, suggesting they were barbarians, and diverted attention from cruelties practiced by the British in Ireland. Similarly, later in the War, the government paid large sums of money to reprint and disseminate vicious cartoons drawn by the famous Dutch artist Louis Raemakers that purported to be true records of German violence toward civilians and portrayed the Germans as barbarians.

Clever use by the British of the Zimmerman Telegram was a very important example of propaganda in the Great War. After German resumption of

unrestricted submarine attacks in February 1917, the United States broke off diplomatic relations between the two countries. Soon thereafter, British code breakers intercepted a telegram from the German Foreign Minister, Arthur Zimmerman, to the government of Mexico, urging Mexico to ally with Germany and offering the return of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona if America was defeated. The British unofficially leaked the text of the telegram to the Associated Press in the United States, resulting in a tidal wave of news reports and public outrage. In March 1917, the sinking of three American ships by German U-Boats further aroused public opinion, moving President Wilson to go to Congress for the declaration of war made on April 6. The telegraph, the printing press, and the reporting of sensational news were not by themselves the causes of the declaration of war, but they were extremely important links in the process that led to war.

Visual Propaganda

Throughout the First World War the printed word was the most important medium of communication, but the War also stimulated limited use of other media. For example, the Allies used hand-operated gramophones in battles against the Austro-Hungarian armies. The Allied armies loudly played recordings of the national anthems of the many discontented ethnic groups that were under the rule of the Habsburgs, frequently prompting soldiers from these nationalities to desert.⁵

By the time of the Great War, the rapid growth of the motion picture industry meant that all the powers experimented with use of films. On the Allied side, the first official production was *Britain Prepared* (1915), which showed soldiers in training and home front scenes emphasizing loyalty and spirit. Several scenes showed the Royal Navy. These unfailingly brought British audiences to their feet in wild cheering, making contemporaries very interested in the potential of imagery in motion to touch the deepest chords of a nation's sensibility. A later production, *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), featured actual footage of British fighting men in battle, although, unknown to the public at the time, some of the scenes were staged. *The Battle of the Somme* was the first instance of a war movie showing the dead. At a time when popular sensibilities were still largely Victorian, these scenes ignited a national debate on whether it was proper to film such things.

After viewing British productions, German generals vigorously supported the making of films, strongly believing in their value as tools to build morale

among fighting men. The Germans produced documentaries that made their case powerfully, foreshadowing that country’s post-war prominence in cinema. These included *Behind the Fighting Lines of the German Army* (1915), *Germany on the Firing Line* (1916), *Germany and its Armies of Today* (1917), and *On the Austro-German Battlefronts* (1917).

For reaching broad audiences, the most powerful visual medium, by far, was the poster. Even today, many decades later, the first thing that comes to the minds of many people upon mention of the First World War is the military recruiting poster that showed Kitchener (Uncle Sam in the United States), soberly staring at and pointing at the viewer, with the words below; “I want you.”

New Rhetorics

In the realm of civilian propaganda, the Great War may have been the last in which Victorian-style rhetoric played a very large role. Many – perhaps most – of the highly articulate people involved in the war were the products of an educational system that emphasized grounding in literature and practice in platform oratory as the keys to effective communication. The growth of mass communication had begun to chip away at this tradition. For example, newspaper reporters were beginning to write in ways that catered to the more rapid pace of city life and the short attention spans of many readers; and non-verbal forms of discourse, like film and the poster, were undermining the primacy of the word. Nevertheless, strong emphasis upon chains of logic and citation of evidence and example was still widespread. Hence, the war stimulated an outpouring of hundreds of thousands of books, pamphlets, and articles in newspapers and magazines that almost seemed to be derived from a legalistic, declamatory template. Examples (in this case British pamphlets) included *What Europe Owes to Belgium* (1914), by the academic H. W. C. Davis, *The Truth about German Atrocities* (1915), issued by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee, and *The Purpose of War: An Address delivered for the Fight for Right Movement* (1916) by the novelist John Buchan. In 1914, in the same vein, all the combatants assembled hefty collections of official pre-war diplomatic communiqués and treaties, published under titles like the *German White Book*, the *Russian Orange Book*, and the *Belgian Grey Book*, to support each nation’s case for going to war.

Throughout the Great War, however, most of the large-scale initiatives in official propaganda, private-sector communication, and news reportage departed from nineteenth century styles radically. Mass persuasion now more aggressively focused upon, and almost isolated for attention, the *symbols* that united each nation, exploiting touchstones that propagandists knew were important. The United States emphasized the theme of American innocence: its finest young men made the journey “over there” to rescue a sinful Europe and defend the goddess who was enshrined in the nation’s most famous statue. The French emphasized protection of their superior civilization and *la belle France*. Germany portrayed itself as the victim of all the nations that were conspiring against it, the bringer of its superior *Kultur* – particularly its great science, literature, music and philosophy. Propagandists elaborated age-old, proven techniques of wartime inspiration, in which one keys of great national epics and sagas and justifies wartime conduct as the acting out of the latest chapter in an ancient, primal drama of survival and morality.

This approach is especially evident in posters from the war years. For example, a United States poster of 1917-1918 showed a beautiful young woman in medieval armor with a sword, and carried the words “Joan of Arc Saved France. Women of America Save Your Country. Buy War Savings Stamps.” Another American poster, issued in 1918, carried the caption “The Greatest Mother in the World.” Exploiting visual allusion to Mary the Mother of Jesus, it showed a woman in Biblical dress, with a cross on her headband, holding a wounded soldier in her arms. The poster called for donations in response to the “Red Cross Christmas Roll Call.” In contrast to these relatively high-minded appeals, many posters trafficked in hate and stereotypes. A relatively mild example was a German poster issued in 1915 that showed the goddess Germania carrying a triumphal banner with the words *Einigkeit Macht Stark* (Unity Brings Strength) and a placard *Gott mit Uns* (God with Us), as she stands on top of a vanquished Russian bear, a selfish British pig, and a crowing French cock. An example of explicit visual portrayal of the enemy as a barbarian was an American poster of 1918, issued to stimulate sale of war bonds, and carrying the heading “Remember Belgium” above a menacing silhouette of a pike-helmeted German soldier dragging a small girl away to an unspecified but easily imaginable fate. Another example of explicit portrayal of the enemy as a barbarian was a British poster issued in 1914 that carried the caption “Once a German always a German.” It showed a German soldier shooting a nurse and bayoneting a baby, and then the same soldier after the war, dressed in a business suit, cordially touring factories. It

warned against dealing with “This Man, who has shelled Churches, Hospitals and Open Boats at Sea{...}who after the War will want to sell you his German Goods.”

Tensions between truth and falsehood also challenged journalists. An example was the failure of British newspapers, in August 1914, to report the Battle of the Frontiers near Paris, where some 300,000 French troops died in a period of ten days; and the information remained unreported for the entire war. The press in Allied nations also failed to report the impressive success in 1914 of German troops at the Battle of Tannenberg, where the Russians suffered massive losses and the German generals, Ludendorff and Hindenburg, attained national fame.

Failures of this kind were due in part to censorship policies. In Germany and Russia, there was almost no freedom of the press. But even in Allied countries, all news stories from the Front had to be cleared by a tiny board of censors. Only five English and two American reporters, acting on behalf of one or more newspapers and the wire services, had clearance to go to the Front. The most able journalists managed to write excellent reports. For example, the Australian reporter Keith Murdoch wrote a detailed and eloquent expose of British bungling during the Gallipoli campaign against the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Newspapers and the government at first suppressed the account but the editors of *The Times* eventually decided to run it and it helped to precipitate a Parliamentary investigation.

After the War

After the war, in memoirs and retroactively published collections of their writings, many of the producers of wartime propaganda admitted that they had failed in many ways to uphold their responsibilities for adequate candor. Their confessions were one cause of a form of shock that occurred during the 1920s, when the people learned many more details about the conflict and realized that they had not been told the full truth.

A striking example of the confessions published and widely read after the war was the memoir *Disenchantment* (1922), by the British journalist Charles Montague. A highly respected editor before the war for the *Manchester Guardian*, Montague became the Army officer who, during the conflict, oversaw the five English and two American correspondents allowed to cover activities at the Western Front. His experience as censor left him with deep misgivings. He admitted the need for information control and propaganda in

modern warfare. But he wondered whether, now that nations had unleashed their powers of lying, they could ever get back to habits of peace. The potential of opinion manipulation had scarcely begun to be realized during the war, Montague asserted, and he asked: "What would be left by a war in which Propaganda had come of age and the state had used the press, as camouflaging material, for all it was worth?"

Montague challenged readers to recall ancient Athens in the time of the Peloponnesian War and the accompanying plague as described by Thucydides, when (quoting Thucydides), "the meaning of words had no longer the same relation to things, but was changed by men as they thought proper." Montague was frightened by the thought that war had worked that way on the soul of ancient Greece, when armed conflict was tamer than in the twentieth century. Moral recuperation would take time, he said, like building up devastated French towns brick by brick.

Conclusion

The legacy of propaganda in the First World War was two-sided. On the one hand, the methods of mass persuasion show a large degree of restraint and moderation in comparison to the Second World War and the later Cold War, when propaganda became much more extensive and vicious. If war, a deeply irrational act, is going to occur, it is encouraging to learn that moderation can still be present, as in the First World War writings of great thinkers like H. G. Wells, Max Weber, and Thomas Mann; and in the sincere attempts by all the belligerent countries to offer evidence-based justifications of the legality of their actions. On the other hand, the legacy of First World War propaganda is very disturbing. The combatant nations in the war all yielded to the temptations to tell very large lies and present their opponents as devils. Every country made a short-term calculation that demonization of the enemy would provide a tactical advantage. And that may in fact have been the case occasionally. But the long-term cost was huge. Although the Great War ended officially in 1918, the hatred sown by propaganda lived on, making it much more difficult for nations to trust each other. In addition, the lies told during the war made audiences skeptical after the war when wartime secrets began to be revealed. The largest consequence of such skepticism came in the 1930s, when people assumed that reports about Germans establishing concentration camps were nothing more than examples of the kinds of wild claims that had been common during the years 1914-1918. There is an old

saying: “In the long run, telling the truth is the most effective propaganda. We can all profit by remembering that advice today.”⁶

Notes

1. Quoted in Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in World War I* (1927; reprinted 1971), 32.
2. Ludendorff quotations from Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (1999), 212-213.
3. The circulation of hate speech and stories of atrocities in Britain during the war is discussed in M. L. Sanders and Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War, 1914-1918* (1918), *passim*, and Cate Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning* (1977), *passim*.
4. Defence of the Realm Acts quoted in Ferguson, *Pity of War*, 219.
5. For the use of gramophones as well as other aspects of the war in Central Europe, see Hugh Seton-Watson and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe: R. W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria Hungary* (1981).
6. This article is based on the author's books *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War* (1992) and *The Battle for the Mind: War and Peace in the Era of Mass Communication* (2010).