

## Chapter 21

# The First World War

The locomotive of historical change was set in full flight in 1914 for both warfare and propaganda. The war that began with dancing in the streets throughout Europe's capitals ended four years later with an armistice signed in the Compiègne Forest amid sorrow, tragedy, and recrimination. It was a war that began with traditional volunteer armies and ended with all the belligerents having introduced conscription. It saw the destruction of four European empires – the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman – and the creation of new, independent but insecure states – Rumania, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland – that were to sow the seeds of future conflict. Untold dead and maimed, poison gas, trench warfare, tanks, aeroplanes, blockades and starvation, mutinies, revolution – all seemed inconceivable in that innocent summer of 1914 when the Germans unleashed their Schlieffen Plan amidst a cultivated illusion that fostered the belief that it would all be over by Christmas.

The very fact, of course, that Germany had invaded Belgium and France in August 1914, and was to remain fighting on their soil for the rest of the war, forfeited the moral high ground the German government had hoped to secure by its pre-war propaganda. No matter how much propaganda material the Germans poured out in an attempt to justify their actions, 'Poor Little Belgium' remained a rallying cry for their enemies throughout the war. War could no longer be regarded as a sport fought between gentlemen playing the game by the correct rules. Instead, it became a bloody and relentless struggle in which sustaining morale became just as essential for both sides as sustaining the military effort. It was not just a battle between troops, guns, submarines, ships, and aeroplanes but a

battle between entire peoples. It was a battle that, despite better pre-war planning, the Germans were to lose, with dramatic effects for Europe and the world as a whole.

Within hours of the expiry of the British ultimatum to Germany, the British cable ship *Telconia* cut the direct subterranean cables linking Germany with the United States. Thanks to this prompt and premeditated action, the British were able to seize the initiative in what was perhaps the most vital of all the propaganda battles: the struggle for the sympathy of the American people. In 1914, Britain and Germany were each other's best trading partners. On the outbreak of war it became essential for both to compensate for their mutual loss by increasing their trade with the rapidly expanding markets of the United States or, better still, to entice the Americans into joining their cause. Britain, at the head of the Allied Powers, was of course better placed than Germany to direct this campaign against American neutrality by virtue of her common language and heritage. Even so, great caution was required; no nation likes to be told where its duties lie, least of all by foreigners with foreign accents. This was a mistake that was to be made by the German government, which promptly and blatantly poured propaganda material into neutral America, using the German-American societies or bunds as their distribution agents. All the evidence available to the British government suggested that this approach was counter-productive.

To wage this highly delicate campaign for securing American sympathies, the British government set up a secret war propaganda bureau at Wellington House under the direction of Charles Masterman. This department was the single most important branch of the British propaganda organization between 1914 and 1917 and its work was so secret that even most Members of Parliament were unaware of it. It was essential to disguise from the American people the fact that the massive bulk of paper material they were receiving from Britain about the war – pamphlets, leaflets, cartoons, and even the news itself – was emanating from Wellington House under Foreign Office guidance. Several other important – and ultimately successful – principles of operation were also established. For example, the British campaign adopted a low-key and highly selective approach based upon persuasion rather than exhortation. It was also decided that the best propagandists for the Allied cause were sympathetic Americans, particularly those in influential

positions in government, business, education, and the media. The principle here, as one document put it, was ‘that it is better to influence those who can influence others than attempt a direct appeal to the mass of the population’. Thanks to their control of the direct cable communications between Europe and North America, the British also monopolized the news, and news was to be the basis of the British propaganda campaign – all of it carefully censored and selected, of course. The factual approach had the advantage not only of credibility; it also left American editors with the freedom to present the news in their customary style so that their readers could make up their own minds about the issues reported. But it must always be remembered that the British controlled the source of that news; even the American correspondents working behind the German lines relied on the direct cables – the indirect cables running through neutral Scandinavia and Portugal were slower and more expensive, and the newspaper business, then as now, relied upon speed and economy. Indeed, censorship was the source of much friction between Britain and America between 1914 and 1917, but it was an essential element of the successful British propaganda campaign.

The British campaign was greatly aided by several spectacular German mistakes, the best known being the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915 and the Zimmermann Telegram in 1917. These incidents enabled the British to punctuate their softly-softly approach with the occasional rabbit punch. The evidence discovered by marine archaeologists and salvage experts in the mid-1980s suggests strongly that the passenger liner holed by a German U-boat in May 1915 was in fact carrying illegal armaments. However, to contemporaries, the act was presented as a blatant atrocity, another example of Prussian barbarism at the expense of innocent civilians. The Germans insisted that the sinking was a justifiable act of war but, combined with the publication of the *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* in Belgium, better known as the Bryce Report, within a few days of the *Lusitania* incident, it served to reinforce precisely the stereotype of the Hun that British propaganda had been trying to create. But the real German mistake came a year later when a bronze medal was struck by the German artist Goetz to commemorate the sinking of the liner. The Foreign Office managed to obtain one of the limited editions, photographed it, and sent it to the United States, where it was

published in *The New York Tribune* on the anniversary of the sinking. The photographs caused so much excitement that the British decided to exploit further the resulting anti-German feeling by producing virtually an exact replica in a presentation box, together with an 'explanatory' leaflet. The medal was reproduced in hundreds of thousands. What was originally an attempt by a private German artist working on his own initiative to justify the submarine campaign to his own people became a *cause célèbre* of Hunnish barbarism and one of the most dramatic British propaganda coups of the war.

The publication in America of the *Lusitania* medal photographs came at an opportune moment for Britain. Following the abortive Easter Rising in Ireland and the subsequent execution of its leaders, pro-Irish sympathy in America was hampering the British cause and forcing British propagandists back onto the defensive. They responded by launching an attack on the moral reputation of the rebel leaders, particularly Sir Roger Casement, whose alleged diaries – in fact forgeries – contained lurid details of homosexual activities. What is most significant about the Irish question, together with other sources of Anglo-American friction such as the Blockade of the Central Powers and the censorship, is that the Germans singularly failed to exploit these issues in America. Combined with their own mistakes, these lost opportunities stand out in marked contrast to the successful British initiatives. Take for example the case of Nurse Edith Cavell. Her execution in 1915 appeared to confirm the brutality of the Germans so well 'documented' in the Bryce Report. The Germans may well indeed have been justified in this action as a legitimate punishment for someone aiding the escape of Allied soldiers, but the wave of world-wide indignation her execution caused was another serious blow for the German cause. It was not just that she was a woman that created the outcry; the execution on spying charges of Mata Hari by the French in 1917 caused no such wave of sympathy (partly because, again, the Germans failed to exploit her death). Cavell was presented as an 'angel of mercy' whose tragic murder was set against the background of Belgian violation. By rigidly adhering to military justice the Germans were merely conforming to the stereotype created for them by British propagandists of Teutonic brutality and ruthless inhumanity.

Atrocity stories were, of course, a time-honoured technique of

war propagandists. The First World War was no exception. Images of the bloated 'Prussian Ogre', proudly sporting his pickelhaube, the 'Beastly Hun' with his sabre-belt barely surrounding his enormous girth, busily crucifying soldiers, violating women, mutilating babies, desecrating and looting churches, are deeply implanted in the twentieth century's gallery of popular images. Evoked repeatedly by Allied propagandists during the Great War, the British stereotype of the Hun and the French image of the 'Boche' provided them with the essential focus they needed to launch their moral offensive against the enemy, at home and abroad. They personified and pictorialized a German society based upon militarist principles in order to bring home to soldiers and civilians alike the terrifying consequences of defeat. Neutral countries were also left in no doubt as to where their sympathies should rest. During the early stage of the war, it was important for the propagandists to cast blame on the enemy for starting the conflict and to prove that he had deliberately let loose the dogs of war upon peace-loving nations. The very fact that Germany admitted violating international law by attacking France and Belgium provided the British with the moral foundation they required to justify intervention to the ordinary men whom they now required to enlist 'For King and Country'. Atrocity stories, as ever, helped to sustain the moral condemnation of the enemy.

Perhaps the most infamous atrocity story of the Great War concerned the alleged German 'Corpse-Conversion Factory'. On 10 April 1917 – barely four days after the United States had entered the war on the Allied side – a German newspaper carried a story of a factory being used to convert corpses (*kadavers*) into war commodities. A week later, the British press – for which atrocity stories were frequently good copy – accused the German government of boiling down *human* corpses to make soap. An official investigation was launched to ascertain the origins of the story. A Berlin newspaper had indeed reported the discovery in Holland of a railway carriage loaded with dead German soldiers. The train had been destined for Liège but had been diverted to Holland by mistake. A Belgian newspaper had picked up the story, claiming that the bodies were destined for soap bars. No further substantiating evidence could be found, save the testimony of a British army officer who reported that he had seen the Germans removing their dead from Vimy Ridge where there was a noticeable absence of German war graves. That, however, was enough for the British

press who had a field-day with the story. Many members of the government who thought it was more likely that the word *kadaver* referred to horse flesh were none the less prepared to allow the publicity given to the story. The Foreign Secretary, Balfour, even went so far as to claim that, however flimsy the evidence, 'there does not, in view of the many atrocious actions of which the Germans have been guilty, appear to be any reason why it should not be true'! Had the British government swallowed its own propaganda? Perhaps it would be fairer to say that such was the success of the image of Hunnish brutality that 'facts' were frequently interpreted more in accordance with the stereotype than in light of the real evidence.

This was one reason why the greatest single propaganda coup of the war had to be treated with great caution and delicacy. The publication of the Zimmermann telegram was undoubtedly the crowning achievement of the British propaganda campaign in the United States and helped to bring the Americans firmly into the war on the Allied side. The story is also a classic example of the relationship between propaganda, censorship, and secret intelligence in the modern world.

Shortly after the outbreak of war, the British enjoyed three remarkable strokes of luck that gave them all three of the major German naval codes. The first, the HVB code used by the German Admiralty and warships to communicate with merchant vessels and each other, was seized by the Royal Australian Navy off Melbourne from a German steamship whose captain was still unaware that war had been declared. The second, the SKM code, which, once cracked, eventually yielded high grade German naval signals, was found by a Russian vessel on the body of a dead German sailor from the *Magdeburg*, sunk in the Baltic. The third remaining code, the VB code, was found in a chest by a British fishing vessel in November 1914. Courage, and luck again, was at work in securing the diplomatic codes used by the Germans. The courage belonged to a British-born Austrian wireless engineer, Alexander Szek, who worked on repairing the Brussels wireless station now in German hands. Szek managed to copy down much of the German diplomatic ciphers and handed them over to the British in the late summer of 1915. For his efforts, he was shot shortly afterwards – probably not by the Germans but by the British, who were afraid that he might inform the enemy of what

he had done, thereby jeopardizing the code breaking operation. Good fortune, also in the summer of 1915, revealed the whereabouts of a complete German diplomatic codebook – in the basement of the India Office where it had been left as part of the abandoned luggage of a German vice consul who had been forced to flee Persia! As a result the British were able to monitor the cable traffic in and out of Germany; by the end of 1915 they could also decipher most of it.

All this was carried out in Room 40 at the Admiralty. When, therefore, in the early hours of the morning of 16 January 1917, the night duty officers in Room 40 intercepted a telegram from the German foreign minister, Zimmermann, to the German ambassador in Washington, Count Bernstorff, proposing to introduce unrestricted submarine warfare from 1 February and suggesting an alliance with Mexico in the event of American intervention, they knew immediately that they had a propaganda bombshell on their hands. Most of the message was deciphered immediately; enough at least to grasp its meaning and significance. But two major problems remained: first, how to convince the Americans that it was authentic, especially since American code-breakers could not crack the ciphers and thereby verify the telegram; and, second, whether to risk publicizing it and thereby inform the enemy that their codes had been broken. Moreover, the telegram had been sent via the American cables, which the British were reluctant to admit they had also been tapping for fear of antagonizing Washington. While Room 40 and its flamboyant chief 'Blinker' Hall pondered the problems, the Germans, right on schedule, launched their unrestricted U-boat campaign to starve Britain into submission. A copy of the telegram was obtained from the Mexican end and duly deciphered using the India Office fluke; this eased the worry about revealing to the Americans the degree to which Britain's code-breaking activities extended to neutrals. On 23 February, Balfour handed the telegram over to the American ambassador in London, Walter Page, and it was published in the United States on 1 March. Not unnaturally, it caused a sensation. The Germans were actually threatening to bring the Old World's war into America's back garden; Mexico had been offered their lost territories of Texas and Arizona in return for offering a springboard to invasion. Remember the Alamo!

In fact, President Wilson, who barely six months earlier had

fought and won a presidential election on a 'Keep America out of the War' ticket, had already made up his mind to intervene on the Allied side before he heard of the Zimmermann telegram from Walter Page. The growing economic dependence of the Allies upon American money, the unrestricted U-boat campaign itself, the memories of the *Lusitania*, the numerous other passenger liners sunk by the Germans, the Bryce report, all combined with the quietly persistent and skilfully handled secret British propaganda campaign to help Americans 'take the right view' of the issues, and the USA duly declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917. But the Zimmermann telegram undoubtedly helped to smooth Wilson's path with the powerful anti-interventionist lobby. And any lingering doubts as to the authenticity of the Zimmermann telegram were, in an astonishing fit of stupidity, dispelled by the German foreign minister himself on 3 March when he admitted that he had sent it. Room 40 had also been able to disguise the fact that their code had been broken from the Germans, who assumed that a decoded copy of the telegram had been stolen in Mexico. Even better was the fact the American codebreakers, who had been given nothing of worth but enough to convince them that the telegram was genuine, got most of the credit for deciphering it.

Once the Americans had entered the war, there was obviously less need for the British to concentrate so much of their propaganda in their direction and Wellington House declined in importance. A week after declaring war, the Americans set up their own propaganda organization, the Committee on Public Information (CPI), under the direction of George Creel, a journalist and supporter of the president. This body was responsible for censorship and propaganda, although Creel was more interested in 'expression rather than suppression'. He later described its work as 'a plain publicity proposition, a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world's greatest adventure in advertising'. The Creel Committee was divided into two sections, the Domestic, which attempted to mobilize America for war, and the Foreign, subdivided into the Foreign Press Bureau, the Wireless and Cables Service, and the Foreign Film Service. The Foreign section supervised offices in more than thirty overseas countries. More than twenty further subdivisions handled the specialized aspects of the work. Like Wellington House before it, this body was staffed with writers and journalists but, unlike the British body, it operated in full view of the public. These men



poured out millions of pamphlets, often dealing with issues of personal concern to their liberal, reform-minded intellectual authors who often seemed more determined to reaffirm the ideals of the American republic than to combat Prussian militarism. In other words, many of the CPI's staff saw their appointment as an ideal opportunity to promote an ideology of American democracy at a time when America itself was undergoing significant social transformations, such as the growth of cities and the closing of the frontier (which in turn affected immigration). Such an ideology could therefore provide a unifying cohesion for a country as diverse as America at a time of war and social change.

A major concern of the Creel Committee was how to bring home to ordinary Americans why they were now involved in a war being fought over 4000 miles away. Despite the U-boats, and given that the first trans-Atlantic flight did not take place until 1919, the American homeland was not itself directly threatened. Making it appear so was done in a variety of ways. Firstly, official speeches suggested that America was fighting a war for peace, freedom, and justice for *all* peoples. Even ordinary Germans deserved the benefits of democracy rather than the oppression of autocrats and ruthless military regimes. As President Wilson stated in 1917: 'We have no quarrel with the German people. We have no feeling towards them but one of sympathy and friendship. It is not upon their impulse that their government acted in entering this war.' This kind of tone was to set an example to the other Allies, whose major propaganda theme against the enemy for the rest of the war was to divide the German people from their leaders. But it also served to warn Americans that their enemy was a regime, not a people, an ideology rather than an army, and that if such an autocratic regime triumphed, democracy everywhere would be endangered.

The CPI had an established source of anti-German propaganda in the atrocity stories already circulating in Allied countries. These were duly drawn upon to demonstrate the nature of the Kaiser's regime and its incompatibility with democratic ideals. The Kaiser was portrayed as a devil in a spiked helmet, German soldiers as violators of innocent women (nurses and nuns being favourite targets of their lust) and child murderers. Germany's record in Belgium, Mexico, and in the Atlantic was also exploited as an illustration of German *kultur*. British propagandists were only too happy to help in supplying material, such as the cartoons of Louis

Raemakers, which by October 1917 had been reproduced in more than 2000 American newspapers with a combined circulation of just under 250 million readers. A captured German U-boat was even sent to America on loan for public display. But the British had to be particularly careful not to antagonize American opinion and were now happy to let the Americans themselves take the lead. The CPI attempted to promote an internationalist mentality to justify intervention as an American mission to bring democracy to the Old World. The message was taken into the schools, for instance through the CPI's publication *The National School Service*, into the factories, and indeed into all public places including the motion picture theatres which now became centres for overt jingoism.

With radio still largely at the stage of morse-code transmissions, a network of speakers was formed known as the Four Minute Men who gave a million four-minute speeches to perhaps 400 million people. They were highly successful in stirring up emotions, increasing the level of popular involvement in the war, promoting the sale of war bonds, and aiding recruitment. America was also bombarded with posters, photographs, and exhibitions, while American advertising companies, which had done so much pre-war to pioneer modern sales techniques, were also employed to bring their professional expertise to the campaign. The American motion picture industry was rapidly emerging as the most powerful in the world as a result of the effects of the war on European film production. Having moved in large part from New York to Hollywood, it was only too happy to help the government through the War Cooperation Committee of the Motion Picture Industry whose chairman was D. W. Griffith, the renowned director of *Birth of a Nation* (1915), a film which symbolized the transformation of the cinema into a serious art form and an instrument of mass persuasion. Stars like Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and William Hart appeared in such films as *The Great Liberty Bond Hold-up* (1917), a short trailer which exploited the screen images of its stars for war bond ('liberty bonds') sales, and the feature *The Little American* (1917), directed by Cecil B. De Mille, about a young girl (Mary Pickford) who travels to France to visit her sick aunt. *En route* her ship is torpedoed (no prizes for guessing by whom). Arriving in France she witnesses German atrocities, supplies information to the French about German positions, is arrested by the Germans but is rescued just before she is due to be

executed by firing squad. At home, spy films brought the German threat to American soil itself, whilst films such as *The Hun Within* (1918), *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin* (1918) and *The Claws of the Hun* (1918) also helped to maintain the overall climate of anti-German sentiment.

With such a willing partner, the American government might be forgiven for leaving film propaganda solely to Hollywood, but the CPI was not always happy with the dream factory's more zealous wartime products. After a slow start, the CPI's Films Division itself produced over sixty official films, ranging from feature films like *Pershing's Crusaders* to a weekly newsreel, *The Official War Review*. The US Army Signal Corps was designated as an official film unit in July 1917, and although it was perhaps to achieve greater fame in the Second World War, when top Hollywood professionals were recruited to serve in it, the initially inexperienced army cameramen of 1917-18 were able to produce some impressive combat footage that was included in many CPI compilation films such as *America's Answer* (1918) and *Our Colored Fighters* (1918). The official films were less overtly propagandistic than the commercial industry's productions. They were designed to serve military needs (recruitment and morale), to inform and educate, and to serve as historical 'records'. In other words, they represented part of the CPI's philosophy that it was its duty to engage in patriotic education for a modern democracy.

With an average weekly audience of 80 million, together with a growing appreciation of the role of the cinema's power to persuade and inform, the CPI could ill afford to ignore the movies as an instrument of propaganda. And just in case the Hollywood products were not serving national interests in the movie theatres, Four Minute Men would turn up to deliver their oration between reel changes. All means of communication were therefore used to enhance the sense of American nationalism, but the CPI was felt by some to be a threat to the very democracy in whose name America was fighting. By arguing that the needs of the government outweighed the needs of the individual, the CPI was felt to be flying in the face of an American philosophical institution. In fact, Creel and his colleagues felt that the war had brought out certain issues concerning the role of the State and its relationship with its people in the modern world that America needed to confront. But all that would be irrelevant unless Germany could be defeated.

The Creel Committee's major preoccupation was with the domestic front, but the Americans could only join in the work already begun by their allies in the campaign against enemy morale. Here again, the leading practitioners were the British. The French did have a substantial propaganda organization, the *Maison de la Presse*, but it was the constant subject of political suspicion and infighting. Its most useful work was done in the German occupied areas of France where it attempted to keep its citizens in touch with Paris's conduct of the war. But the French modelled their propaganda organization on the British and, by 1918, the British organization was at its most complex. Wellington House had gone into decline, its task done. A Ministry of Information was created under Lord Beaverbrook to deal with all propaganda in allied and neutral countries while the Department of Enemy Propaganda was formed at Crewe House under Lord Northcliffe. This was the work of Lloyd George, Prime Minister since 1916, who was passionately interested in propaganda and who disliked the career diplomats who had been doing such sterling work in America. Lloyd George wanted to see the target audience of Britain's propaganda widened beyond opinion-making élites. For this, he wanted to recruit the services of Fleet Street (Northcliffe owned many newspapers, including *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*; Beaverbrook owned the *Daily Express*). Besides, by harnessing the energies of the newspaper barons into the service of government, it might also disincite them to criticize his government. But there was a danger in the eyes of many critics that this type of propaganda machinery might be used for political purposes at home by helping to sustain an unscrupulous government in power.

It is too often thought that British propaganda directed against the enemy began with the creation of Crewe House. In fact, the campaign predated Northcliffe. One veteran German soldier recalled:

In the year 1915, the enemy started his propaganda among our soldiers. From 1916 it steadily became more intensive and at the beginning of 1918, it had swollen into a storm cloud. One could now see the effects of this gradual seduction. Our soldiers learned to think the way the enemy wanted them to think.

The man who wrote this was none other than Adolf Hitler. In *Mein Kampf*, the future German leader devoted two chapters to the

subject of propaganda that reflect his admiration for the British campaign as well as his appreciation of its finer points, such as the importance of timing, cumulative effects, and repetition. They were lessons he himself was to put to formidable use later.

More senior German figures, such as General Ludendorff, were also impressed with the work of 'The Ministry for the Destruction of the German Confidence'. He said that 'we were hypnotized by the enemy propaganda as a rabbit is by a snake'. All this enemy testimony to the effectiveness of the Allied campaign has to be treated carefully: would, for example, they have been so complimentary if the Germans had won the war? In other words, many figures in defeated Germany used propaganda as an excuse for defeat. But there was an ominous conclusion to the explanation. The argument ran as follows: the German armies were not defeated on the field of battle; Germany had not been invaded; indeed Germany had been victorious in the East with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918). How then did Germany lose the war? Because she was betrayed from within; Allied propaganda had caused a collapse of morale at home; the German armies had therefore been 'stabbed in the back'. This thesis was, of course, used by right-wing elements in the Weimar Germany of the 1920s to 'prove' a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy that was to help Hitler to power in 1933.

But how valid was the thesis? It was certainly true that the British began practising psychological warfare early in 1915. At first the military authorities were reluctant; as General Wilson stated, propaganda was 'a minor matter – the thing was to kill Germans'. But after the Germans began dropping leaflets over Allied lines around Nancy during the battle of Grande-Couronne in September 1914, even producing the *Gazette des Ardennes* for the benefit of French troops, the British decided to respond through the Director of Special Intelligence and the department known as MI7. By March 1915, a full scale 'paper war' had developed between the German airforce and the Royal Flying Corps. Six months later, the French established their own Service de la Propagande Aérienne, dropping *La Voix du Pays* over the occupied areas. But these types of operations were obviously directed at the troops; German civilians were a long way out of range of Allied aircraft. The leaflets would contain news denied the other side, maps showing the way home, descriptions of how well prisoners were being treated, and so on. As the Allied blockade of Germany began to bite, menus

from London restaurants were reproduced to illustrate the futility of the German submarine campaign to starve Britain into submission. Other methods used included loudspeakers placed along the trenches which would announce the futility of the enemy's plight. In Basle in neutral Switzerland, the British Consul even had as one of his tasks the placing of propaganda messages in bottles which he then floated down the Rhine into Germany. It is hardly credible that such methods fuelled the German revolution and brought about the abdication of the Kaiser in 1918.

Moreover, for most of 1918, the principal method of distributing enemy propaganda was by balloon, not aeroplane. This was because, at the end of 1917, four captured British airmen were tried by a German court martial 'for having distributed pamphlets containing insults against the German army and Government among German troops in the Western Theatre of War'. Although two of the accused were acquitted due to lack of evidence, and although the court itself questioned the ruling about whether this act was a violation of international law, two officers were sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. When news of this punishment reached the War Office in January 1918, all leaflet dropping by aeroplane was suspended. Reprisals were threatened resulting in the pardoning of the two officers, who were returned to their camps and treated as normal prisoners of war. But the Air Ministry remained reluctant to commit its men and machines to leaflet raids and the suspension order remained in force until October 1918, barely a month before the end of the war. Instead the British relied on distribution by balloon over the Western Front, but given that the absolute maximum range of most balloons was about fifty miles, only occasional freak conditions allowed German civilians to be reached until the crucial days of early November 1918 when aircraft resumed distribution. But given the cumulative nature of propaganda – and the treatment meted out to the two British officers in late 1917 would suggest a long-standing fear of Allied propaganda on the part of the German High Command – explanation for the 'stab-in-the-back' thesis must lie elsewhere.

In fact, Crewe House had initially chosen to target Germany's ally Austria-Hungary. Following the Bolshevik revolution and the subsequent Russian withdrawal from the war, the situation in Germany appeared to offer less prospect of a propaganda success than conditions in the Hapsburg empire, where crippling mass

strikes broke out in January 1918. The multi-national nature of Austria-Hungary provided scope for separatist propaganda. President Wilson led the way on 8 January 1918 with perhaps the most significant propaganda speech of the war when he proclaimed his Fourteen Points calling, amongst other things, for a readjustment of Italy's frontiers along lines of nationality, autonomy for the peoples of Austria-Hungary, including the establishment of self-governing states for the Yugoslavs, Poles, Rumanians, and Serbians. This declaration of policy – the most substantial of the war to date – provided Crewe House with the green light to foster the disintegration of the Dual Monarchy through the promotion of internal disaffection and even insurrection amongst the 'oppressed nationalities' which, in turn, would weaken Germany's capacity to sustain the fight. An additional bonus was the fact that, unlike the Germans, the Austrians had made no threats concerning captured pilots distributing propaganda by aeroplane.

Between May and October 1918, some 60 million copies of 643 different leaflets in eight languages, together with 10 million copies of 112 different newspapers in four languages, were distributed by the Allies in Austria-Hungary. By the end of the period, desertions were taking place on a massive scale. One source claims that hundreds of thousands of Slavs surrendered without a fight, and many were found to be carrying Allied propaganda material – despite the penalty of death if they had been caught doing so by the Austro-Hungarian authorities. Eight hundred leaflets were found on 350 prisoners of war on a single day. When on 16 October, the Emperor Charles, in anticipation of certain defeat, conceded to the nationalities the right to form their own separate states, thus taking Austria-Hungary out of the war as an effective ally, Germany could have made some claim to have been stabbed in the back – but by her own ally.

Part of Germany's problem was the inadequacy of her own propaganda machinery. From the outset, despite being prepared in advance, Germany's war propaganda was poorly organized and co-ordinated. The Kriegspresseamt, the German Press Bureau, had the dual function of supplying war news to the German press and co-ordinating the maintenance of morale at home and among the troops. Unlike the British, who had separate departments for these specialized areas, the German body was thus overburdened and its work diluted. It chose to concentrate on war news rather than on

morale, with the result that, when Allied propaganda began to escalate in 1917 and 1918, morale was revealed to have been seriously neglected. German attempts at counter-propaganda therefore came too late. The Army High Command began a programme of patriotic instruction among the troops using films, army newspapers, and lectures; but, as previously, this work was conducted by the military authorities whose first priority – not unnaturally – was waging war. They appreciated too late that modern warfare required as much attention to the munitions of the mind as to the planning of battles. Even the German army's own news-sheet, *Nachrichtenblatt der 18 Armee*, admitted on the eve of defeat:

In the sphere of leaflet propaganda the enemy has defeated us. Shooting poison darts from a secure hiding place was never a German art. We realized, however, that this struggle is a life-and death matter, and that one has to fight the enemy with his own weapons. Yet the spirit of the enemy leaflets skulks around and refuses to be killed.

Despite rewards for handing in enemy leaflets, and severe punishments for not, the German military authorities were simply unable to provide the victories necessary to dislodge the seeds of discontent sown by earlier Allied propaganda and exploited with ruthless efficiency by Crewe House both in and behind the German lines.

Propaganda, by itself, could not of course have defeated the Germans. After four years of stalemate and the failure of the last great German offensive in July, the preconditions of Germany's internal collapse were rapidly becoming evident. Despite the momentary triumph over Russia, the unrestricted U-boat campaign that had done so much to provoke America's entry into the war ultimately failed to force the Allies into submission. Food shortages caused by the Allied blockade, socialist-pacifist propaganda inspired by Bolshevik Russia, and the arrival of the American troops on the Western Front all seriously affected the German will to fight, let alone win. The collapse of Austria-Hungary was a further blow. Thus when Crewe House began to concentrate its attention on German morale in the summer of 1918, having already contributed materially to the Hapsburg collapse, the internal cohesion of the German Empire was already beginning to disintegrate. But the question remains: how far did Allied propaganda actually contribute to the final collapse of German morale, and was it civilian or military morale that collapsed, or both?



In 1918, the War Office began to compile information as to whether interrogated German prisoners claimed that they had been influenced by propaganda. These were rudimentary investigations and they are far from conclusive. Even so, many prisoners were found to possess propaganda material when they were captured. Of the 48 reports compiled between 13 May and 17 October on the effectiveness of balloon propaganda, only one contained an adverse comment by a German prisoner of war. Deserters in particular spoke of the propaganda leaflets with great enthusiasm, stating that at times they had even been exchanged for money and had indeed contributed towards their eventual decision to surrender. One American source claims that 80 per cent of captured prisoners were found to be carrying leaflets. Of course, statements made by captured prisoners are often suspect; often they would say merely what they thought their interrogators wanted to hear. But the millions of leaflets dropped over German lines in the final months of war were clearly getting through and were being read. Whether or not they actually produced a general collapse of morale among the German troops is, however, unlikely. There was certainly no large-scale military uprising on a par with the experience of troops in Russia. Yet where British propaganda may have had a significant effect was in those rest areas and readjustment camps just behind the lines where soldiers tried to relax after the exhilaration of battle and where they had time to read the leaflets, as well as letters from home that talked of the deprivations and hardships of German family life under the Blockade. It was here, and on leave, that most soldier-civilian interaction was most likely to occur, and it was here that British propagandists were at their most effective.

The German Army argued consistently that insufficient attention had been paid to civilian morale by the German propaganda organization. In Britain, this was not quite the case. There were no post-war debates about whether British morale had cracked and thereby affected the final outcome. However, patriotism was not by itself enough. Certainly, during the first eighteen months of the war, the British government had tended to rely on this factor alone. On the outbreak of war, the British Regular Army totalled 160,000 men – large enough, as Bismarck had once quipped, for the German police force to arrest. Although it was far from being the ‘contemptible little army’ many Germans believed it to be, this highly professional volunteer force was clearly not large enough to make any decisive

impact on the course of this new struggle. Accordingly, Lord Kitchener, who was rare among soldiers and politicians at that time in believing that the war would not be a short one, launched on 8 August 1914 his appeal for men to take up the sword of justice and fight for King and Country. At first, there was no shortage of volunteers; within a month, the figures had reached 30,000 a day. Recruitment stands set up by the War Office throughout the nation found it difficult to cope with the sheer weight of volunteers who rushed forward to sign up in response to Kitchener's outstretched index finger inviting them to enlist simply because 'Your King and Country Needs You'. The initial flood, however, soon dwindled into a stream and then into a trickle as enthusiasm began to fade. Because of the horrendous casualties on the Western Front, the shortage of volunteers was so alarming that conscription became inevitable. In the meantime, however, the early attempt by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee (PRC) to raise a volunteer force marked the first modern systematic official propaganda campaign in Britain directed at the mass of the civilian population. Recruitment was to remain the dominant theme of domestic propaganda until the introduction of conscription in January 1916 and was to serve as the principal focal point of the individual citizen's commitment to the national war effort.

The methods employed at the start of the war were largely variations on the famous Kitchener appeal. They were generally straightforward in their imagery and messages, depicting a Union Jack or a popular military hero calling for volunteers. Amateur and unofficial propagandists were in abundance, and there was also the enormously jingoistic influence of the press. Once recruitment began to dwindle, the campaign adopted a more threatening tone by depicting those who were already fighting and thus, by implication, suggesting that there were those who were not doing their fair share. Hence the message: 'Who's absent – is it You?' with John Bull pointing an accusing finger. Pressure was thereby exerted not just directly on potential recruits who had not yet joined up, but also indirectly on their families, who were also expected to make the sacrifice. Hence 'Women of Britain Say Go' and 'What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?' Posters, cigarette cards, lectures, films, and recruitment rallies all made the same point: it was more patriotic and socially acceptable to go rather than stay.

This pressure became more difficult to exert as casualty figures

from France continued to rise. In January 1916 compulsion rather than patriotism became the key element in recruitment. But pacifism was also on the increase, especially after the battles of Verdun, the Somme, and Ancre. Clearly, more concerted efforts to sustain the will to fight among the civilian population were required and in 1917 the National War Aims Committee (NWAC) was set up to concentrate upon domestic propaganda. The NWAC continued many of the methods used by the PRC to maintain the level of popular commitment to the war. Films, in particular, were effective among the working classes who were becoming increasingly attracted to the pacifist Labour Party. Films such as the highly popular *Britain Prepared* (1915), *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), and *Battle of the Ancre and the advance of the Tanks* (1917) capitalized on the growing popularity of the cinema as a mass form of entertainment by injecting patriotic themes that were all the more effective for being transmitted in the context of entertainment. The British government even commissioned D. W. Griffith to make *Hearts of the World* (1918), a propaganda film about a small French village under German occupation, which was portrayed with great brutality. Another aggressively anti-German film was *The Leopard's Spots* (1918), barely 2½ minutes long, which was actually discussed in Parliament under the erroneous title *Once a Hun, Always a Hun*. This film depicted two German soldiers in a ruined French town who attack a woman and her baby; the same two characters then appear as commercial travellers in an English village after the war trying to sell their wares. An English shopkeeper is impressed by a pan they show him until his wife appears and finds the words 'Made in Germany' on the underside. They are promptly thrown out of the shop and a caption appears (films still being silent) declaring: 'There must be no trading with these people after the war'.

The effect of this kind of hate-inspired war propaganda was to be felt on the return of peace when calls to 'Hang the Kaiser' and 'Make Germany Pay' were heard during the immediate post-war general election. If the First World War was really to be the 'War to end all Wars', then wartime recriminations would need to be quickly forgotten – not least so that Britain and Germany could resume their formerly lucrative trade links – essential if Germany was to pay her reparations and Britain her war-debts. The 'same old Hun' was, however, a resilient popular theme, the legacy of which was not even removed by the appeasement of the 1930s.

The wartime propaganda experience had four further consequences that were to prove just as damaging to future peace. The first has already been discussed – namely, the use to which the likes of Adolf Hitler manipulated the alleged role of propaganda in wartime to serve their own political purposes. Less well appreciated is the role played by propaganda in the creation of those new states in central and eastern Europe. When President Wilson announced his Fourteen Points in January 1918 he was making the most detailed statement of war aims of any Allied leader to that date. But they nonetheless remained somewhat generalized and when the subject nationalities of central and eastern Europe pressed for more details, they were not exactly forthcoming. However, even general promises about national self-determination provided Allied propagandists with their best opportunity yet to offer real incentives to the ‘oppressed nationalities’ and the newly created Crewe House seized upon them with great vigour. The problem was that, in the process, they often made promises about the post-war settlement that were yet to be agreed by the Allied governments. This broke one of the fundamental tenets of effective war propaganda: that policy and propaganda should be conducted hand-in-hand. Lord Northcliffe was quite willing to force the British government’s hand by propaganda promises about policies that had yet to be decided in anything other than in terms of general principle. These particular chickens came home to roost in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, when the Poles, Slavs, Czechs, Rumanians, and so on all turned up expecting those promises to be fulfilled. The result was the creation of a series of independent central and eastern European states created in accordance with the principle of self-determination on ethnographic, rather than strategic or economic, lines. The Italians in particular were furious. They had entered the war on the Allied side in 1915 under the secret Treaty of London in return for post-war territorial gains in south-eastern Europe that were now being denied them by the principle of self-determination. They left Paris disappointed and disillusioned, seized Fiume (Trieste) in a clash with newly-created Yugoslavia and, in a wave of nationalist euphoria, began the swing to the right that saw Mussolini appointed Prime Minister in 1922. Wartime propaganda had played a significant part in Mussolini’s rise and he himself was to convert the lessons of the wartime experience into peacetime use.

There was a third legacy of the wartime propaganda experiment

that was to have serious peacetime consequences, this time concerning the United States. Following the decision of the American Senate in late 1919 not to ratify the Versailles Treaty with Germany, a series of investigations was launched into the reasons for American entry into the war. During the course of these enquiries, many of the details concerning the nature and scope of Britain's propaganda campaign in America between 1914 and 1917 came to light. The conclusion was that the United States had indeed been duped into becoming involved on the Allied side, particularly by secret British propaganda emanating from Wellington House. A series of historical investigations by learned scholars reinforced what was fast becoming a legendary belief in the power of propaganda. The debate was, however, seized upon by isolationist elements in American politics who now argued for non-involvement in European affairs and for Americans to be on their guard against devious foreign propaganda. Indeed, such was the degree of American sensitivity to foreign propaganda that in 1938 the Foreign Agents Registration Act was passed by Senate requiring the registration with the US government of all foreign propagandists operating on American soil. The act remains in force to this day. During the 1930s, when American support might have strengthened the hand of the European democracies in their dealings with the dictatorships, the use of propaganda as a means of gaining that support was largely denied the very countries who had pioneered its wartime use.

As it turned out, the British chose to dismantle their wartime propaganda machinery on the return of peace. It had never been an activity with which the British had felt comfortable. True, it had played an invaluable role in wartime, both in helping to bring America into the war and in contributing to the defeat of the enemy. But there was felt to be no function for it in peacetime. The whole business left a bad taste in the mouths of the English gentlemen who presided over a British Empire that appeared to be at the height of its power and prestige. Never before had so many parts of the map been shaded red; the wartime achievement of the British was plain for all to see. Where was the need for further propaganda? Lord Ponsonby reflected the mood of many when he wrote in 1926 that 'the injection of the poison of hatred into men's minds by means of falsehood is a greater evil in wartime than the actual loss of life. The defilement of the human soul is worse than

the destruction of the human body.’ That an activity which attempted to persuade a soldier to lay down his arms and stop fighting was somehow morally worse than actually killing him might seem peculiar today. But it was quite common in Britain after the First World War and reflected how much the meaning of the word ‘propaganda’ had changed since 1911 when the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had described it as an activity relating largely to religious persuasion. But the popularity and virulence of wartime atrocity propaganda in particular led to a different meaning being assigned to the term and to the British abandoning their initiatives in this field. The British had demonstrated to the world the enormous power of propaganda in war but had abandoned it in peacetime; Soviet Russia and, later, Nazi Germany now took up where the British had left off.

But there was a fourth, and perhaps even more tragic, consequence. Lord Ponsonby had written his opinion following a post-war investigation into the accuracy of wartime atrocity stories. This and other enquiries could find little or no evidence that any of them had been true. The effect of this atrocity propaganda, however, led to a general disinclination on the part of the public in the 1930s and 1940s to believe real atrocity stories that began to come out of Nazi Germany. In this respect, the distortions of the First World War merely served to obscure the realities of the Second.