

# The Battle for the Mind: German and British Propaganda in the First World War

By Joshua D. Johnson



In the First World War humanity was horrified at the advent of trench warfare, u-boats, tanks, and casualties on an unprecedented scale as nations rapidly discovered new and more brutally effective ways to slaughter one another's citizens. However, war-fueled innovation extended beyond the bomb-blasted battlefields of the Eastern and Western fronts; it began in the home front, as the concept and practice of war propaganda flourished.

Governments engaged in the Great War learned very quickly that modern warfare would require the effective use of propaganda to sway public opinion. It was no longer sufficient for a nation's military to be the only force in conflict now the entire populace – both civilian and soldier – would combine into a national fighting force. “Of the numerous lessons to be drawn from the First World War, one of the most significant was that public opinion could no longer be ignored as a determining factor in the formulation of public policies” (Sanders & Taylor 1). National morale would depend on how swiftly recruits signed up and how much comfort and peace of mind citizens would be willing to sacrifice.

Each of these nations was required to increase its propaganda effort in order to continue fighting in a war that became increasingly detrimental to public morale. Examining the propaganda techniques of both countries will reveal a great deal about their respective cultures: how much they differed and how much they shared in common.

Even before their declaration of war on August 1, 1914, the Germans had already begun work on their own semi-official propaganda machinery, which was loosely spread throughout the various branches of German government. Early in the war German journalist Matthias Erzberger established the *Zentralstelle für Auslandsdienst* (Central Office for Foreign Services), which concerned itself with distributing propaganda to neutral nations (especially after the invasion of Belgium). The German government also heavily employed the Wolff Telegraph Bureau as a means of international propaganda. After the British cut Germany's undersea telegraph cables, the Germans relied upon their wireless Nauen station (the most powerful transmitting station in the world) to continue a constant feed of pro-German news reports to the world.

An interesting German propaganda technique was the use of mobile cinemas. These transportable film machines would be sent to the German front line to provide entertainment to the weary German troops. Scattered throughout the featured films, German propagandists had inserted short newsreels that would depict recent events in a decidedly pro-German light.

Posters and postcards also played an important role throughout the war. A comparison of German and British posters clearly reveals the differences between German and British culture. While British posters relied heavily on artistic flourishes and effective slogans, German posters were much more matter-of-fact. Indeed, German war posters were often nothing more than large, illustrated graphs which detailed the resources of Germany in comparison to other nations. One such poster that contrasted Germany's combined national income with Great Britain's features a smiling, well-fed German citizen holding a much larger wallet than the sour-faced, emaciated Briton that he is compared to.



German visual media excelled in adapting national mythology to the war. This was a decided advantage in propaganda over the British. Although Great Britain was a nation with a strong literary tradition, it lacked an epic cultural mythology like Germany's. German mythology in the Nordic tradition was perfectly suited for militaristic aims. It should come as no surprise, then, that many German war posters contained images of dragons, Valkyries, and sword-wielding, Siegfried-like heroes. Portions of the Hindenburg Line were even given such names as Siegfried and Wotan (the father of the gods in German mythology).

Germany placed far less emphasis upon recruiting in its propaganda than did the allies. The German military was fairly large at the beginning of the war, and since the German government had effectively portrayed their struggle as defensive, the German populace was swept up in a nationalistic fervor. Indeed, the primary manifestation of German home-front propaganda lay more in what was censored than what was said. German media was closely scrutinized by the government so that most of what the civilian population imbibed was positive. Defeats and setbacks were rarely revealed.

British propaganda has been described as "an impressive exercise in improvisation" (Sanders & Taylor, 1). The origins of Great Britain's propaganda machine are little known, but an almost

unanimous consensus exists among historians that, prior to the war, the British had no official strategy for propaganda. However, as the war progressed, German propaganda was eventually surpassed by the effort of the British. The Germans excelled in quantity (they were notorious for inundating neutral nations with their propaganda), but the British excelled in quality. The British government learned, and learned quickly, the best way to sway public opinion, at home and abroad, eventually organizing an official war propaganda office titled M17.

Perhaps the strong British literary tradition contributed to the quality of British propaganda. A large part of what makes great literature great is the ability to use the right words to convey a precise, effective meaning. British propaganda excelled at this. Even the simple poster which pictures two small children asking their befuddled father, "Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?" made a powerful impact on the British social conscience. British newspapers, cartoons, and visual media were very successful in producing their desired effect.



And what was this effect? One word: recruitment. Upon entering the war, Britain's volunteer army was woefully small compared to the immense German war machine. This required a massive number of recruits on a short notice. Initially, recruitment did not pose a problem for the British. Recruitment centers were literally overrun with volunteers. However, as the war (which had been predicted to be a short conflict) progressed and casualties mounted, recruitment slowed to a trickle. This is when propaganda began to play its crucial role.

Much of British propaganda appealed to a sense of national honor. Posters and pamphlets aimed to produce guilt among the men who had not volunteered for service. From the start, however, Great Britain was forced to use its most powerful and persuasive propaganda weapon: the demonization of the enemy. Germany also employed these tactics, but they were nothing in



comparison to the flood of atrocity stories and cultural animosity that Great Britain (and later the USA) would produce.

Early in the twentieth century the political scientist, Howard Lasswell, stated, “So great are the psychological resistances to war in most nations that every war must appear to be a war of defense against a menacing, murderous aggressor. There must be no ambiguity about whom the public is to hate” (47). The anti-German propaganda produced by Great Britain focused the anger and anxiety of the populace into a hatred of the savage and barbaric “Huns.” Much of this was accomplished through atrocity stories. As Aaron Delwiche has observed, “The atrocity story implies that war is only brutal when practiced by the enemy.” It is easier to kill a monster than a man.

By far, the most powerful assortment of atrocity stories produced during the war was *The Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, better known as “The Bryce Report” (named after James Bryce, the head of the committee). Contained within the pages of this officially sanctioned report were records of nearly every atrocity that it was possible for a German soldier to commit against the populace of Belgium. The most shocking accounts were those that described the killing or torture of women and children. While it is certain that such atrocities occurred during the war, the tendency of the report to dwell on the more sensational eyewitness accounts led to its eventually being discredited. Translated into 30 languages by 1915, the Bryce Report stoked the righteous indignation of the allied populace and dramatically increased recruitment for the cause of defeating Germany.

Eventually, as the war neared its conclusion, British and German propaganda was overshadowed by the enormous amount generated by the United States. Yet, the damage had been done. The emergence of propaganda in World War One set the standard for wars to follow, and sanctioned the deception of civilians and the demonization of the enemy. In the end, the point is not really the differences between German and British propaganda, but in their similarities. Both nations were driven by a philosophy that marked an important moment in cultural history: the opening of a vast gap between the “official truth” and the undisclosed reality of war.

---

### Sources Cited

Delwiche, Aaron. “Of Fraud and Force Fast Woven: Domestic Propaganda during the First World War”, taken from < <http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/propaganda.htm>>; on March 3, 2007.

Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York: Oxford, 1975.

Lasswell, Harold. *Propaganda Techniques in World War I*. London: M.I.T. Press, 1927.

M. L. Sanders and Philip M. Taylor. *British Propaganda during the First World War*. London: Macmillan, 1982.

Welch, David. *Germany, Propaganda, and Total War*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

## Propaganda Leaflets of World War I

---

Following are examples of leaflets dropped over enemy lines from planes and balloons:

- I. Fliegerabwurf-Schriften
  - II. Leaflet Air Post No. 12
  - III. Secret Summary of Intelligence, A.E.F.
  - IV. Fliegerabwurf-Schriften.
- 

I.

French Propaganda Leaflet -- said to have come from German soldiers in French prison camps:

---

Pass this along!

German War Comrades!

Think about this:

1. Only greedy rulers want war. The people want peace, and work, and bread.
2. Only the German Kaiser with his militarists, Junkers, and arms manufacturers wanted war, prepared for it and brought it on. No one wanted to fight Germany, no one opposed her desires for a "place in the sun."
3. If a murderer shoots a revolver on the street, it is the duty of every peace-loving, dutiful citizen to hurry to the aid of the fallen. For that reason Italy, Rumania, and the United States went to war against Germany; to free Belgium, Serbia, and France from the clutches of the murderer....
10. Stop fighting! Turn your cannons around! Come over to us. Shoot anyone who wants to hinder you from coming.

YOUR DEMOCRATIC COMRADES  
IN FRENCH PRISONS

---

II.

British leaflet dropped into German trenches by balloon:

---

FOR WHAT ARE YOU FIGHTING, MICHEL?

They tell you that you are fighting for the Fatherland. Have you ever thought why you are fighting?

You are fighting to glorify Hindenburg, to enrich Krupp. You are struggling for the Kaiser, the Junkers, and the militarists....

They promise you victory and peace. You poor fools! It was promised your comrades for more than three years. They have indeed found peace, deep in the grave, but victory did not come! . . .

It is for the Fatherland.... But what is your Fatherland? Is it the Crown Prince who offered up 600,000 men at Verdun? Is it Hindenburg, who with Ludendorff is many kilometers behind the front lines making more plans to give the English more cannon fodder? Is it Krupp for whom each year of war means millions of marks? Is it the Prussian Junkers who still cry over your dead bodies for more annexations?

No, none of these is the Fatherland. You are the Fatherland.... The whole power of the Western world stands behind England and France and America! An army of ten million is being prepared; soon it will come into the battle. Have you thought of that, Michel?

---

III.

Russian Proclamation to the German Soldiers:

---

The Provisional Government has fallen. The power is now in the hands of the Russian people, and the new government considers the immediate conclusion of peace as its foremost duty....

We charge you soldiers to stand by us in the fight for peace and socialism, for socialism alone can give the proletariat a lasting peace....

Brothers, if you support us, the cause of freedom is assured success....

Our soldiers have laid down their arms. It is now for you to follow this standard of peace.

May peace triumph! May the Socialistic and International Revolution live!

For the Council of People's Commissars.

*Signed* LENIN, TROTSKY  
December 5, 1917

---

IV.

American Leaflet from the Friends of German Democracy:

---

BROTHERS!

The world is in great need. You and you alone can end this need rapidly. We are American citizens of German descent. We know you and trust you. We beg you to trust us.

The great German nation is the barbarian and the breaker of trust in the eyes of the world. You can recover your good reputation only if you overthrow this government, which has made German intelligence and German industry a danger to the world. Take the determination of your destiny into your own hands....

If you will do this the world war will end. In the name of America we give you our word, that the new Germany will be taken up as an honorable member of the society of nations. Your intelligence and industry will once again be a blessing to humanity, instead of a curse.... Arise for a struggle for a free Germany!

In the name of Americans of German descent.

UNION OF FRIENDS OF  
GERMAN DEMOCRACY  
New York, March, 1918