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Author(s): Alice Goldfarb Marquis

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Alice Goldfarb Marquis

Words as Weapons: Propaganda in Britain and Germany During the First World War

The thunder of the guns of the first world war was accompanied by another kind of barrage — the war of words between the belligerents. Within each embattled nation, words were seen as powerful movers of men and women; they became mobilizers of the national spirit, calls to courage, to sacrifice and, finally, to simple endurance.

Long after the killing stopped, men debated the meaning and importance of the verbal conflict. To some participants it had all been like a prep-school prank, an exciting happening, signifying little; others drew from it portentous meaning and a stern lesson. But almost every interested observer realized that something vital about mass communications had changed during the war and the debate centred around the nature of this change.

Some saw the journalist as ‘an engineer of souls’ playing on the ‘whole keyboard of human instincts . . . to incite to action’, and employing ‘a tremendous apparatus — the press.’¹ Others felt that ‘the most careful experiments and surveys have failed to substantiate the wide claims on behalf of mass media or the fears of critics of mass communication.’²

The first quotation, from Serge Chapotkin, a journalist victim of Nazism, indicates that words are the all-powerful fathers to the deed, and in itself, by its strong wording and condemnatory tone, arouses feelings of fear and anxiety. Interestingly enough, however, the second statement, by Denis McQuail, a professor of sociology, is also emotionally loaded. Its calm scholarly tone implies a scientific attitude, a quiet confidence, indeed, in the ability of rational analysis to measure the persuasive power of words. But the direct connection between word and deed remains elusive. Indeed, the word ‘propaganda’ itself rings pejoratively

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today, implying an intent to deceive, a straying from the path of objectivity, a tampering with the human will.

The first effective channels for mass propaganda developed during the nineteenth century, with the approach of mass literacy and the proliferation of the printed word. What came to be called the 'yellow press' developed rapidly during the 1880s and 1890s. In England, the growth of the popular press, as well as its concentration in a few ownerships, is epitomized by the spectacular careers of Alfred and Harold Harmsworth, the self-educated sons of a Dublin barrister. Between 1888 and 1890 they acquired control of newspapers with circulations totalling more readers than had ever been available before. Alfred, who became Lord Northcliffe in 1905, founded *Answers* in 1888, bought the London *Evening News* in 1894, founded the *Daily Mail* in 1896 and the *Daily Mirror* in 1903, and bought control of *The Times* in 1908. His younger brother Harold became Lord Rothermere and by the first world war was owner of the *Daily Mirror*, the *Sunday Pictorial*, the *Leeds Mercury*, the *Glasgow Daily Record*, and the *Glasgow Evening News*. Newspaper circulations in England (as well as in the United States) rose most sharply between 1890 and 1910 and tended to level off in the 1920s.³

Along with this growth of the popular press went the notion that the public's thinking could be moulded and channelled through the printed word. Dissemination of wire-service news from one centralized source to hundreds of newspapers in widely scattered places provided an irresistible temptation for centralized control of press information. Thus the era in which propaganda acquired its modern definition and its evil connotation clearly lies in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and more specifically in the accelerated manipulation of mass opinion by government and the press during the first world war.

The public's thirst for information about the war, the various governments' urgent need to mobilize the entire civilian population, the development of bureaucratic machinery for manipulating public opinion, and the technical means for accomplishing these goals all converged into one brilliant burst of rhetoric. The orgy of killing on the battlefield took place against the backdrop of an orgy of loaded words, and the silences were equally deadly, for they often masked the truth. Small wonder that Ludendorff wrote, during the war: 'Words today are battles: the right words, battles won; the wrong words, battles lost'.⁴ Truth or falsehood were beside the point: words were simply another weapon, as morally neutral as a cannon

or a bomb.

Whether propaganda actually changed the course of the war remains problematical. The fact is that it was widely *perceived* as having had a major effect on the war; during the post-war years, the discussion of the effects of wartime propaganda became as laden with strong feeling as its content. 'It became perfectly clear', Professor Harold Lasswell wrote in 1927, 'that the practice of propaganda and the practice of talking about propaganda were dominating characteristics of this period.'

The content, the organization, the methods and the effects of this powerful new weapon may be compared within two environments: the 'open' society of Britain and the 'closed' society of Germany. Just as in the war of weapons British tactics finally prevailed, so they did in the war of words. This verbal victory had a profound and totally unexpected effect in Germany, as will be seen later.

The German press unquestioningly supported the war from the day Austria opened hostilities against Serbia on 25 July 1914. British press opinion at that point was confused and largely opposed to entering a European land conflict. But before the British declaration of war on 4 August, the press turned full circle, first to pained recognition that intervention was necessary and finally, after the German invasion of Belgium, to stridently patriotic calls for victory.

On 29 July an editorial in the *Daily News* stated that 'the most effective work for peace that we can do is to make it clear that not a British life shall be sacrificed for the sake of Russian hegemony of the Slav world.' On the following day the same newspaper stated that 'the free peoples of France, England and Italy should refuse to be drawn into the circle of this dynastic struggle.' On 1 August it published a letter entitled 'Why we must not fight' over the well-known initials of A.G. Gardiner, a liberal journalist, who blamed 'the industrious propaganda of Lord Northcliffe' for Britain's 'anti-German frame of mind' and asked 'Where in the world do our interests clash with Germany?' answering 'Nowhere'.

On 3 August 1914, Sir George Riddell, publisher of the mass circulation sensational Sunday *News of the World* as well as the weekly *Church and Family Newspaper*, telegraphed to Lloyd George, then Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Asquith government: '[There is] a feeling of intense exasperation among leading liberals . . . at the prospect of the government embarking on war. No man who is

responsible can lead us again.'

Wickham Steed, the editor of *The Times*, recalled in his memoirs that during the crisis the newspaper's financial editor, Hugh Chisholm, was called in by the head of one of the largest banks in the city and flatly told that *The Times'* pro-war editorials must cease: the demand was refused.⁶ As late as 7 August leading British journalists were dubious about the wisdom of war. 'I am strongly of the opinion that the war ought not to have taken place', C.P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, wrote to W. Mellor of the Manchester and Salford Trades and Labour Council, 'but once in it, the whole future of our nation is at stake and we have no choice but to do the utmost we can to assure success.'⁷ Scott himself wrote no leader about the war until 12 December 1914, following the enlistment of the *Manchester Guardian*'s chief leader writer, who had written editorials condemning Germany. In a letter to his close confidant, L.T. Hobhouse, Scott wrote that 'at first it seemed impossible to write honestly at all without raising questions which we had decided to leave alone.'⁸

German press opinion, by contrast, was considerably more unified as the war broke out; the tradition of government management of news had been well-established under Bismarck and Wilhelm II.⁹ The 'shading' of news in German newspapers was apparent from the first day of hostilities. Typical was the slant of the wording in a report of Austria's declaration of war on Serbia, on 25 July 1914. The following day, the *Berliner Tageblatt* reported the stirring effects of 'the news that the outbreak of the Austrian-Serbian War had become unavoidable.' The same story contained an opinion-laden paragraph strongly indicating official inspiration: 'One assumes and hopes that quiet and sensible (*vernünftige*) elements in France and England will see to it that the Serbian-Austrian matter (*Angelegenheit*) will not develop into a world war.'

The pervasive hand of the official censor can already be detected on 1 August 1914 in a front-page editorial of *Vorwärts*, Germany's leading Social Democratic newspaper: 'The orders issued by [military] authorities force restrictions upon us and threaten the existence of our paper. Of course there will be no change in our fundamental convictions and our political attitude.'¹⁰

The previous day a State of Siege had been declared in Germany, which meant suspension of 'the right to express opinion freely by word, print or picture.' This rule had been intended only for areas directly endangered by the fighting, but it was quickly applied

throughout the country. On the same day a memo containing 26 prohibitions was issued to the press by Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, 'to prevent unreliable information from reaching public print'.¹¹

On 8 August 1914 General von Kessel, the Chief Commander in the Marks (the military district which included Berlin), reminded the press, 'once more and for the last time, that . . . the printing of news regarding military affairs is prohibited'. Addressing editors as though they were a gang of unruly schoolboys, he warned them that 'from now on, measures of force will be resorted to against the transgressors. Public warnings have not been lacking'. Emphasizing this, he announced on the same day that the *Tägliche Rundschau für Schlesien und Posen* was suppressed for publishing 'military news' in spite of 'repeated general warnings'.¹²

The effect of these measures was not lost on those who might have protested. But only their shadow can be traced, as in a pathetic editorial published in *Vorwärts* on 1 August 1914: 'We take for granted that the members of our Party, because of their training and their loyalty to their convictions, will understand the restraint forced upon us and will remain faithful to us in these trying days'.¹³ . . .

Later in August, *Vorwärts* reminded 'every intelligent reader that he cannot expect that the newspaper he reads will maintain in its news service, articles and editorials, the peculiar attitude which has characterized it in times of peace.' If the readers were 'puzzled' by their paper's attitude, they should remember that 'without giving up its fundamental standpoint', *Vorwärts* was 'much limited in its freedom of action. It is extremely difficult for the editors of a socialist labourpaper to combine the duty of protecting the interests of the laboring class with the task of conforming with the regulations of the military authorities'.¹⁴

All such protestations of virtue were, however, unavailing; on 27 September 1914 von Kessel issued an order suppressing *Vorwärts*. The order was withdrawn on 30 September with the stipulation that any reference to 'class hatred and class struggle' was to be avoided in future. Hugo Haase (an attorney) and Richard Fischer (the paper's business manager), both Reichstag deputies, had pleaded with von Kessel to rescind the order. But the general had the last humiliating word: 'I make the request that this communication be published on the front page of the next issue of the paper'.¹⁵!

The justification of tight German censorship was the fear that newspapers would publish sensitive military information. But such a fear had small foundation. The only wire service in Germany (until

1921) was the ‘semi-official’ Wolff Telegraph Bureau (WTB) established in 1871 with a government guarantee that all official news would move exclusively through it. In exchange, the WTB had agreed that all ‘politically sensitive material’ would be cleared with the Foreign Office. Thus, when war broke out, WTB became the German newspapers’ sole source of war news.¹⁶

The contrasting reactions by the British and German press indicate a profound contrast in the organization of the two societies. The unified support of the war in the British press was openly arrived at, the result of more or less public agonizing. Despite party differences and a tendency in some quarters to treat politicians like a private stable of race horses,¹⁷ the press leaders reached unanimity by individual routes.

In Germany, unity was imposed from above. Party differences were bitter; the military sensitivity to what was printed in *Vorwärts* was in a sense justified; the Social Democrats had for years averred that they would not fight workers of other lands. The early *Vorwärts* editorials indicate the party’s confusion and dismay when faced with the reality of war. Nationalism had overwhelmed the principle of international socialist unity; but beneath the surface, the wound bled. By stern repression, the German military censors hoped at least to staunch the blood or, if that proved impossible, to kill the patient.

When war broke out, it was the public’s clamour for news which drove governments both in England and Germany to construct bureaucratic channels for transmitting information. These soon diverged into a multitude of paths, as various government agencies tried to deal with the press via a web of competing, barely controlled hierarchies with feuding staffs and perpetual bitter rivalries.

In Britain, a Parliamentary War Aims Committee, representing all parties, improvised a press bureau in August 1914. From 15 September 1914, the government informed the opposition of war news by reading cables from the front to opposition Shadow Cabinet meetings at the House of Commons. Conservatives immediately suspected that the government was ‘cooking the news’ because the wording was paraphrased, but were assured that this was only to protect the cipher.¹⁸ In mid-September 1914, too, Major E. D. Swinton was sent to France to send back dispatches under the by-line ‘Eyewitness’; he stayed until mid-July 1915. Meanwhile, Sir George Riddell, deputy chairman of the Newspaper Proprietors Association

(NPA), served as an intermediary between the press and government departments. He made weekly rounds of the Press Bureau, Admiralty, War Office, Foreign Office and other departments and passed on his findings at a weekly news conference for editors as well as by frequent memos. Until March 1915 Riddell would call informally each week on Horatio Herbert Kitchener at the War Office and Winston Churchill at the Admiralty to give them 'a good grilling' as to what was new. Since, according to his diary, he almost daily saw them socially (along with Lloyd George, Lord Balfour, Lord Astor and many other important government figures), Riddell was a trustworthy transmitter of their information. After March 1915 Riddell was officially appointed press representative at the War Office and Admiralty to receive 'private information for circulation to editors.'¹⁹

In December 1916 a Department of Information headed by C.H. Montgomery of the Foreign Office supplanted Riddell's friendly chats with 'H.H.' and 'Winston'. Not until January 1917 was the department formally organized under Colonel John Buchan and coordinated by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Edward H. Carson. The names of those who served at various times on the department's 'advisory committee' read like a roster of British press lords:²⁰ Lord Northcliffe; Lord Burnham, managing proprietor of the *Daily Telegraph*; Robert Donald, editor of the *Daily Chronicle*; C.P. Scott; Lord Beaverbrook (Max Aitken), before his peerage a prominent Unionist MP, who in 1917 bought an interest in the *Daily Express*; and Riddell.

In February 1918 the Foreign Office gave control of various aspects of propaganda to some members of this advisory committee: Northcliffe became director of propaganda (and thereby gained infamy) in enemy countries; Donald directed propaganda in neutral countries; Buchan was director of intelligence; General A. MacRae was appointed director of administration. This arrangement lasted exactly one month.

In March 1918 the whole propaganda effort, including 'small' information bureaus set up ad hoc in various other departments from time to time,²¹ was centralized, as much to the chagrin of information *apparatchiks* in the War Office, the Admiralty and the Foreign Office as to the delight of their new chief, Lord Beaverbrook. 'What a hubbub! What a hullabaloo!' wrote Beaverbrook in his memoirs, 'these service departments and the Foreign Office sought to hold on to their authority. With what skill and letter-writing activities they

tried to defeat the prospects of the little Ministry struggling to draw the breath of life . . . The Foreign Office went so far as to make a successful raid upon the staff being built up by the new Ministry of Information.²² He promptly appointed his arch-rival-to-be, Lord Northcliffe, to take charge of propaganda in enemy territory, with the hearty approval of David Lloyd George, by now Prime Minister.²³

Beaverbrook's appointment (as well as Northcliffe's) roused a storm in Parliament, highlighting the equivocal position of the press throughout the war. Who was government, and who was press? In fact, they had merged to so striking a degree that official censorship and propaganda in England were largely a dead letter. The Beaverbrook appointment merely confirmed intimate relationships which had existed throughout the war. The implications of this incestuous union reverberated in subsequent events.

By contrast with the British model — and parallel with Germany's fortunes on the battlefield — the German propaganda apparatus began in orderly fashion, developed bureaucratic ramifications, and finally, despite repeated attempts to pull itself together, disintegrated during the final collapse. The process left a smouldering residue of recrimination and grievance.

From 3 August 1914 onward, an officer from the General Staff daily briefed reporters from Berlin and provincial newspapers. At the same time the Foreign Office expanded its section issuing reports (*Referate*) on the domestic and foreign political and economic situation to include enemy 'atrocities' and 'cultural and art' propaganda. On 7 September 1915 the *Kriegspresseamt* was formed, under the General Staff, to centralize censorship as well as information output. Its chief was Oberstleutnant A.D. Deutelmoser, later head of the propaganda bureau. It issued three periodical publications: *Deutsche Kriegsnachrichten*, *Nachrichten der Auslands presse*, and *Deutsche Kriegswochenschau*. By October 1916 the *Kriegspresseamt* had added an evening update to its regular 11 a.m. briefings; a summary of both was sent over the WTB wire.²⁴ In the effort to feed a news-hungry public (and clamouring reporters), a 'press conference' was organized to meet a committee of journalists two or three times weekly. The conference included representatives from the War Ministry, General Staff and authorities from the District Military and Navy Department, as well as from the Interior Department, Food Ministry, Colonial Office, Post Office, Treasury Department and Foreign Office. This system functioned quite efficiently until

1917 when governmental unity in the field of propaganda began to dissolve into acrimony between military and civilians, among the various political parties and also between government and press.

First, the left and centre parties accused the military of political interference after Ludendorff told the Berlin press during an interview that he anticipated a 'victorious peace of dictation'. Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg then aggravated the conflict by refusing to create a Ministry of Propaganda, and finally the military replied by establishing its own press service, the *Deutsche Kriegsnachrichtendienst*, under Ludendorff's personal direction.²⁵ Some members of the Reichstag understandably feared military control of propaganda. On 11 October 1917 Deputy Müller-Meiningen accused the *Kriegspresseamt* of growing from 'about 90 officers to several hundred' and of inspiring political articles, like 'Scheidemann's Following' which indicated that the future Chancellor could not count on more than 706,000 votes.²⁶ As late as 20 March 1918, as the British propaganda against Germany rose to a crescendo, Ludendorff vainly suggested establishment of an Imperial Ministry of Propaganda; in September a special information officer was attached to General Headquarters to furnish newspapers with authorized war stories.

The pattern that emerges from these two, in a sense, parallel propaganda systems roughly mirrors the battlefield picture — in Britain a growing sense of purpose articulated through increasing coordination; and in Germany growing discord and, finally, disintegration.

The mechanism by which the British government centralized propaganda, in both administration and tone, was simply bringing the press lords into the government, so regularizing a previously informal relationship. The decision was thereby subjected to searching parliamentary debate, perhaps an overscrupulous step since the two press lords could easily have been appointed to advisory posts with the same power, but without the need for parliamentary review. However, throughout the debate the dangers of unifying two such powerful forces as government and press were publicly scrutinized: the decision that the exigencies of war required it was an open one.

In Germany the Reichstag's growing impotence was indicated by the querulous tone of opposition deputies' remarks. Without any information-gathering or investigative facilities of their own, members had to rely on hearsay and whatever data they could personally glean. As the military tightened its control over every facet of life, political bias and interference became more possible and ever

easier to justify. By its control over the news reaching the press, the military also monopolized the channel for opinion reaching the public through the press. Since there was no recourse from the arbitrary decisions of the military censor, both as to what was printed and what was not, the newspapers were forced to choose between conformity and oblivion.

The wartime propaganda effort in both Britain and Germany diverged into two streams: censorship and news management. In both countries the dark depths of censorship eventually swallowed most 'bad news' — information considered to be damaging to home morale, encouraging to the enemy or detrimental to relationships with neutrals. On both sides interpretation was broad.

In Germany, suppression ranged from food shortages, casualty lists, notices of death, and mention of peace demonstrations, to advertisements for quack venereal disease cures (since they might prevent sufferers from consulting a qualified physician).²⁷ Real military news was well under control in Germany, anyway, through pre-censorship of all WTB dispatches and a requirement that any military news gathered by individual newspapers from correspondents, letters from the front or hearsay, had to be cleared with the local military command.

In Britain, the interpretation of what constituted sensitive military news and should therefore be suppressed was equally broad, but censorship was handled far less obtrusively. Essentially, the British system consisted of a close control of news at the source by military authorities, combined with a tight-knit group of 'press lords' who (over lunch or dinner with Lloyd George) decided what was 'good for the country to know'.

Censorship in Germany, in addition to controlling news at the source, also relied on a mass of regulations issued nationally by the General Staff and regionally by local military commanders. This system almost guaranteed that the other aspect of propaganda and its most decisive side — news management — was overwhelmed from the start. The military men in charge had no feeling for what would today be called public relations; and because newspapers were so closely censored they too lost touch with public opinion.

British censors clamped down on military news on 26 September 1914, forbidding speculation about troop movements within the previous four days or in the week ahead. This regulation followed

publication by *The Times* and *Daily Mail* of the names of French divisions moved to the left flank in Flanders.²⁸

In October 1915, over tea at the Home Office, Sir John Simon proposed a series of strict censorship regulations to Sir George Riddell. Simon suggested that newspapers disobeying a Press Bureau notice would ipso facto be considered as violating the Defence of the Realm Act, that a committee composed of representatives of various government departments should be formed to manage the bureau and that the government should be able to suspend newspapers which disobeyed the rules. 'He seemed to think that these regulations would meet with the approval of a large section of the press', Riddell noted in his diary, 'I assured him he was mistaken'. Sir George immediately raised the alarm among the most prominent members of the NPA and the proposed rules were dropped. In November 1915 the War Office tried once again to propose a set of regulations for handling news, including a ban on 'matters of controversial or political interest, praise or censure' of military operations and mention of any military formation or individuals by name. These proposed regulations were almost immediately repudiated by the War Office and withdrawn.²⁹

But while official censorship floundered, the press willingly censored itself. For example, no casualty lists were issued at all before 19 May 1915. After that date, Riddell regularly circulated the official lists 'for private information of editors' and reported that, throughout the war, 'the secrecy imposed upon the press was in no case violated.'

C.P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, in a letter to Hobhouse on 12 October 1915, describes receiving a letter from an 'educated' corporal wounded at Loos, which was 'too damaging for publication — from which it appears that in that engagement we again shelled our own men and that we lost hill 70 after winning it in that way. Otherwise we might have got through to Lens . . . P.S. Just heard from Lloyd George. Shall be lunching with him tomorrow.' Scott, in fact, periodically infuriated his own staff when rival newspapers outstripped the *Manchester Guardian* with information its editor-in-chief had picked up several days earlier on his political rounds.³⁰

Important losses or battles often went completely unmentioned. When the battleship 'Audacious' was sunk by a mine on 27 October 1914 off the Irish coast, the loss was simply never announced. When the Battle of Jutland was under way, not one civilian knew about it

except the Prime Minister and Sir Edward Grey ‘who happened to call.’ The Admiralty published no statements because, as Lord Balfour explained to Sir George Riddell, it ‘would have occasioned unnecessary anxiety.’ After the battle, the Admiralty persuaded Winston Churchill, who was then sulking in ‘retirement’, painting, to write a ‘semi-official precis . . . based on official documents.’ Even the architects of news management, the politicians, were worried about how little the public was told. On 19 September 1916 Lloyd George remarked to Riddell: ‘The public knows only half the story. They read of the victories; the cost is concealed.’³¹

Why did British journalists cooperate so willingly in suppressing important news? The obvious answer is that they all belonged to the same club, whose membership also included the most powerful politicians. Publishing a casualty list (or a letter from a wounded corporal about military bungling) would have meant expulsion from the club; social ostracism apparently meant more to the newsmen than their professional duty to inform the public.

The government also possessed positive incentives. In addition to breakfast, lunch, tea, dinner and golf weekends in the company of the powerful, knighthoods and lordships were generously distributed among the press and, finally, prestigious posts in government itself. However, the ties between politicians and the press were so multifarious and so intimate that it is difficult to sort out who influenced (or corrupted) whom. Riddell, for example, not only saw Lloyd George almost daily, but actually rented a country house at Walton Heath which he then turned over to Lloyd George as a weekend retreat. In the summer of 1918 Riddell rented another house — Danny, in Sussex — which he shared with Lloyd George.

Northcliffe was similarly close to the Prime Minister, though steadfastly maintaining his newspaper’s independence from government policy. ‘L.G. never tells me about his meetings with Northcliffe’, Riddell noted in his diary on 27 May 1916, ‘but I am sure they are in daily contact.’ Max Aitken noted in his diary for 2 December 1916 that he was ‘fully aware of the great influence Lord Northcliffe’s attitude had on the development of events. Northcliffe had been foremost in denouncing the inefficiency of the Asquith government and in interpreting and focusing the popular judgement in this matter.’³²

On 5 December 1916 the Asquith government fell, to be replaced by a War Cabinet formed by Lloyd George. Four days later the new Prime Minister wrote in his own hand to Aitken offering him a

peerage as consolation for being left out of the War Cabinet. After consulting his Parliamentary mentor, Bonar Law, Aitken refused. A few days later Law changed his mind as he saw the chance to offer a vacant seat in Parliament to someone else; Max Aitken became Lord Beaverbrook.³³

Beginning in 1916, a veritable shower of honours descended on the press. On 21 December Donald of the *Daily Chronicle* was offered a knighthood, and later a baronetcy, both of which he refused. The same day a knighthood was reportedly offered to Spender of the *Westminster Chronicle*.³⁴ After that the King reluctantly approved a spate of honours for pressmen proposed by politicians.

Beaverbook's peerage was approved early in 1917 after, as he wrote, 'a tremendous storm.' Northcliffe, who had been ennobled in 1905, was promoted to viscount in 1917. Lord Rothermere had climbed the ladder of nobility in spectacular fashion — baronet, 1910; baron, 1914; privy councillor, 1917; and viscount, 'with much reluctance' (on the King's part) in 1919. In the same year six more journalistic figures were 'reluctantly' honoured, and in 1920, two more. Sir Henry Dalziel of *Reynold's News* received a peerage, as did Riddell, notwithstanding the fact that he had recently been the guilty party in a divorce case.³⁵

Despite the proliferation of titles, the press sometimes proved ungrateful. In August 1917, for example, the *Daily Express* carried an editorial disapproving of Lloyd George's election platform and the Prime Minister wrote angrily to Bonar Law: 'Have you seen the leader in today's *Daily Express*? That is Max. Having regard to the risks I ran for him and the way I stood up for him when he was attacked by his own party, I regard this as a mean piece of treachery'.³⁶ On 12 December 1916 Lloyd George wrote to C.P. Scott, objecting to a leader in the *Manchester Guardian* asserting that the government's 'predominant flavour' was Unionist: 'I do wish you would put that right, because I know how anxious you are, apart from your old friendship to me, to see that I, in common with the rest of God's creatures, shall at least get fair treatment. When are you coming up to town? I want to see you.'³⁷

When friendly notes and social intimacy or peerages failed to tame the press, Lloyd George took another tack. In June 1917, for example, he appointed Northcliffe to a special mission in the United States. In a letter to Scott he explained: 'It was essential to get rid of him. He had become so "jumpy" as to be really a public danger and it was necessary to "harness" him in order to find occupation for his

superfluous energies. I had to do this . . . if I was to avoid a public quarrel with him.³⁸

On 23 January 1918 Lloyd George's Chief Whip, Frederick Guest, wrote to the Prime Minister: 'I do hope you will consider Max for Controller of Propaganda . . . He is bitten with it, knows it, and I want him anchored.' The appointment (along with the Duchy of Lancaster) came through on 10 February. Beaverbrook explained the storm that followed as caused by some newspapers 'disliking the competition of the *Daily Express* . . .'³⁹ On 22 February 1918 Austen Chamberlain attacked the appointment in Parliament, saying: 'As long as you have the owner of a newspaper as a member of your administration, you will be held responsible for what he writes in the newspaper.' At the same time, by accepting 'ministerial obligations', Chamberlain said, 'the press loses its freedom, and with its freedom, loses its authority.'⁴⁰ The same day the Unionist (Conservative) War Committee passed a resolution: '. . . no member of the government . . . should be allowed to act as the correspondent of a newspaper . . . and that no one who controls a newspaper should be allowed to be a member of the government . . .'.⁴¹

All was in vain. C.P. Scott reports how Lloyd George, over lunch in Downing Street on 4 March 1918, rationalized the appointment: 'Beaverbrook was extremely clever and though he was described as a "shady financier" he [Lloyd George] was not aware of any real foundation for the charge. As for Northcliffe he was safe as long as he was occupied and *The Times* had been quite reasonable during the time he was in America . . . Neither [Northcliffe] nor Beaverbrook would allow their propaganda work to be determined by their personal political views — indeed he doubted if they had any considered views.'⁴²

Thus, by judicious application of political power and peerages, Britain's wartime leaders coaxed cooperation from the press.

In Germany, by contrast, coercion was a reality. In addition to detailed regulations as to pre-censorship of all military news by local commanders, the German War Ministry issued a mass of rules and guidelines as to what else could and could not be discussed as well as the 'tone' and format to be used in such discussions. Repeatedly, individual newspapers were officially warned to tone down and occasionally a paper was suppressed as an example. The tenor of government dealings with the press generally was that of a long-suffering and kindly — but stern — parent dealing with a wilful, malicious, unruly — and potentially murderous — child. Thus, for example, in

early 1915 the Imperial Ministry of War, 'convinced that the patriotic attitude of the press hitherto is evidence that the press will also endeavour in future to prevent unintentional injuries to our great cause', issued these 'recommendations':

1. A questioning of the national sentiment and determination of any German, any one party or newspaper, is highly detrimental, because it impairs the impression of German unity and energy.
2. German victory means liberation for many foreign peoples from Russian despotism and English world-hegemony, and does not signify oppression. It would be injurious to our cause if German papers should express a contrary view.
3. The language used against the enemy countries may be harsh. However, an insulting and belittling tone is no sign of power. The purity and greatness of the movement which has gripped our nation demands a dignified language.
4. The foreign policy of the Chancellor, conducted upon instructions from His Majesty the Kaiser, must in this critical moment not be interfered with or hindered by covert or overt criticism. To doubt its firmness injures the prestige of the Fatherland. Confidence in it must be strengthened, and like the confidence in the military leaders, it too must not be shaken.
5. Demands for a barbaric conduct of war and the annihilation of foreign peoples are repulsive. The army knows where severity and leniency have to prevail. Our shield must remain clear. Similar clamours on the part of the inciting press of the enemy are no excuse for a similar attitude on our part.

A secret memorandum to the press (no date, but probably early in 1915) urged newspapers to 'give thanks to the War Command when the latter informs it as to what publications would be injurious to the Fatherland.' It then threatened 'legal action' against violators and warned of the 'strictest enforcement . . . demanded by interests of state.' The fact of censorship itself was to be suppressed. In an order dated 28 August 1915 newspapers were told 'not to refer to censorship . . . When a paper has been ordered to stop publication it must advise its readers of that fact in an inoffensive manner and the causes leading to the suppression must not be stated.'⁴³

As in England, casualty lists were sensitive material. After the first weeks of war increasing regulations were imposed. Only deaths of 'local or general interest' were to be mentioned; that is, the deaths of those who would be important enough to be mentioned in peacetime. Naming the wounded or missing was forbidden. Totals also were not allowed, and particularly cumulative totals. 'Tablets of Honour' were permitted, so long as the names were not consecutively numbered.⁴⁴

German war aims were another subject on which detailed regulations were issued. On 19 August 1915, after a speech on Poland by

the Chancellor had led some newspapers to speculate on that nation's future, an order was issued prohibiting any public discussion of war aims. On 25 November 1915 the press was warned to watch the effect of news reports on the enemy and neutrals, to 'stress the defensive nature of the war' and to play down prospects of territorial gains. As late as 15 May 1917, in answer to a Reichstag question, the Chancellor insisted that a discussion of war aims would not serve the interests of the country.⁴⁵

On 14 May 1915 the press — and individuals — were forbidden to discuss possible gains or losses of colonies: 'Lectures discussing this subject in public are not desirable. Such lectures must not be reported, nor should the papers express their own attitudes.' In October 1915 Baron von Gayl, general in command at Münster, ordered direct censorship by local police of the Dortmund *Arbeiterzeitung*. 'You are prohibited from publishing a text different from the censored one, or from making known, in any form whatsoever, any suppressed passages or changes of text', his order ran. 'It is left to you to publish this ordinance verbatim without any additions. Every different kind of publication and every kind of comment on the ordinance and on the underlying facts is prohibited.'

On 29 November 1915 the orders issued to the press by the Hamburg Military Command were typical both in tone and content of others issued throughout Germany:

Referring to the statement of the Ministry of the Interior regarding the food situation and the rise of prices I wish to express on my own behalf to the entire press of my district my earnest expectation that, in future, all possible moderation will be used when measures of the Government are criticized. . . I, therefore, shall not tolerate under any conditions that a considerable part of the press of my district shall continue its attitude toward the questions referred to above . . . If this order is not strictly observed I shall take severe measures.

On the same day the Hamburg command issued another typical order to the press — that newspapers were not to use any means (stars or blank spaces, for example) to indicate to their readers that particular news items had been censored. In another part of the directive, the Hamburg command urged the press not to criticize agriculture and commerce 'without good reason, . . . even if food prices should rise to such a level that the poorer classes would need the aid of the state in procuring the necessities of life.' The press was to 'scrutinize' all complaints to see whether public criticism was 'warranted' or if there were not 'some other way to obtain redress . . .

This does not mean that it will be necessary, or even desirable to suppress public discussion of the economic situation', the directive concluded mysteriously. 'On the contrary, the press must maintain the right of free expression . . .'⁴⁶

As the war dragged on, the conflict between the civilian government and the military sharpened. There were indications that the military censors had a distinct bias. On 16 January 1916, for example, Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg asked Hindenburg to suppress the *Pommersche Tagespost* and *Goslarsche Zeitung* for discussing a dispute between the Kaiser and Hindenburg on the one hand and Bethmann-Hollweg and Scheidemann on the other. Hindenburg promptly refused, saying that he would not use his censorship power 'for purely political speculations.' When the shoe was on the other foot, however, the military censors acted quickly and drastically. On 24 June 1917, for example, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* began a series of articles, 'Parliamentarism: Past and Future', by Max Weber criticizing the power of bureaucrats to manage information as well as the spinelessness of politicians (and the weakness of the Constitution) in not demanding public access to government information. The local military commander immediately ordered that henceforth the *Frankfurter Zeitung* should be subject to complete pre-censorship.

From 26 January 1916 all conversations with generals, as well as their speeches, letters, telegrams and orders, had to be cleared 'for authenticity' with the *Kriegspresseamt*, even when their content did not conflict with the regulations. After 25 February 1916 all discussions of relations with America had to be pre-censored, and from 21 November 1916 all references to or pictures of the Kaiser (even official speeches and telegrams) had to go through the censor.

If any unwanted material slipped through this screen, its reprinting was quickly throttled. On 19 May 1916, for example, an order went out prohibiting any reprint of a review of the book *Battle of the Marne*, which had appeared in the *Süddeutsche Konservative Korrespondenz* (Karlsruhe). Similarly, an article in the *Kreuzzeitung*, 'America and Ourselves', was not to be 're-printed or discussed'.

The effect of such regulations was to intimidate editors into compliance. Often the delay occasioned by squeezing material through the censorship pipeline made its content valueless. The effort was so time-consuming and irritating that editors simply gave up, dutifully publishing the official material distributed through WTB and nothing more.

Local censors, it appears, were sometimes capricious. On 24 May

1916 Deputy Dr Pfleger asked in the Reichstag that suppression of newspapers should go through the Chancellor, rather than local military commanders. Newspapers were often suspended without recourse, he said, because of affronts to local or provincial officials.⁴⁷

How did the German press respond to this kind of tutelage? A few feeble and isolated protests are documented, and these deal mostly with technical problems. In February 1915, for example, members of the German Publishers' Association unsuccessfully asked the General Staff to distribute war communiqués directly rather than through WTB. The objectors were told to address their complaints to WTB.⁴⁸ The most overt protest took place on 21 March 1917, when Berlin's five leading newspapers refused to print a speech by Dr Helfferich, the Minister of the Interior, giving as their excuse a paper shortage.

In fact, it is likely that Germany's complex system of paper allocations actually provoked more anger among publishers than the censorship. There are some indications that political considerations did enter into the newsprint rationing. Such was the perversity of the rules that newspapers which demonstrated a need for more paper received less and vice-versa. The formula was that periodicals which had shrunk in size (measured in square metres) between 1913 and 1915 received extra paper, while those which had grown received less. A political reason underlay this seemingly outlandish system. The government hoped to strengthen the provincial press whose support was more assured while weakening the more unruly and more critical mass publications based in Berlin. By 1916, the big-city (mostly Berlin) newspapers' average size was down 50 percent. Meanwhile, newspaper circulations were increasing. The *Berliner Tageblatt*, for example, grew from 220,000 in 1913 to 300,000 in 1919. This meant, in practice, that more and more readers received less and less newspaper.⁴⁹ On 3 June 1916 the Army High Command blamed the paper shortage for its ban on extra editions: in actual fact, the generals shrank from inflaming public hopes or fears. On 29 May 1917 another order prohibited free sample copies, posting of newspapers in windows and on kiosks or distribution to restaurants and cafés, as well as the giving away of such items as maps or timetables to new subscribers. In a 1917 memo to the *Kriegspresseamt* the German Publishers' Association complained that too many German editors and reporters had been drafted into the army and pointed out how cleverly British newspapers had handled 'damaging news',

specifically a German air raid on London. The English press had run short bulletins of what had occurred, followed by a 'complete, colourful account appealing to Britons' sporting interest and to their courage under attack as well as on the offensive.' The stories were so dramatically written, the German publishers said, that readers almost overlooked the report of damage and deaths.⁵⁰

Only near the end of the war, and then in a roundabout way, did some newspapers in general become aware of the true meaning of censorship. In January 1918 *Vorwärts* was banned for three days as a punishment for demanding a general strike. This prompted the unionized employees (composing room, press room, delivery staff) of most other Berlin newspapers to strike. Until 2 February 1918 some Berlin papers failed to appear at all, while others appeared sporadically.⁵¹

In practice, once again, British and German propaganda efforts during the first world war offer a study in contrasts: in Britain, for good reasons, the government trusted the press; in Germany, and also for good reasons, it did not.

The British government could trust the press because of the tight web of personal, political, social and professional relationships that bound newspaper owners, editors and politicians into one ruling elite. Through long parliamentary experience, Britons had learned the importance of self-restraint and the meaning of loyal opposition. Press and politicians (as well as major newspaper advertisers) were members of the same clubs, guests at the same dinner parties and active members of the same narrow spectrum of political parties. Press restraint somehow became identified with gentlemanliness, and doing the right thing became a matter of fulfilling obligations to fellow-members of the club, rather than meeting a professional responsibility for informing readers. Another interesting facet of British press-government relationships which may be noted here is the fact that most of the press lords were men of modest origins who had clawed their way to financial success, political power and social acceptability. Northcliffe and Rothermere, as mentioned, were two of the fourteen children of a Dublin barrister. George Riddell began his career as an office boy to a solicitor. Lord Beaverbrook was a self-made Canadian businessman who emigrated to Britain in 1910.

No comparable web of obligation existed in Germany to bind press and government in the warm mantle of social acceptability. The German military thought that devising rules and enforcing them strictly could replace the generals' lack of experience in journalism

— or even in dealing with journalists. The strict controls imposed on the press had unanticipated results. On the one hand, it became increasingly difficult to stifle growing weariness and disillusionment. On the other hand, since all public expressions of opinion were bottled up, there was no way to gauge what people were really thinking. Tighter secrecy and harsher censorship could eventually no longer hide the reality of defeat, a defeat made more bitter by the public's unpreparedness.

The methods and content of overt propaganda (as opposed to censorship) were also a direct function of the relationship between the press and government. In England each editor saw himself as a willing — indeed enthusiastic — partner in the government's effort to win the war. Editors and publishers had generous opportunities to help make policy, not only as it related to the press, but as to the conduct of the war itself. In Germany, by contrast, they were treated as vicious children; they had little autonomy and were even publicly reprimanded. The course of the propaganda effort within the two countries as the war progressed directly reflected these two contrasting styles.

The British skilfully used all eight basic categories of propaganda methods: (1) stereotypes (bull-necked Prussian officers), (2) pejorative names (Huns, Boches), (3) selection and omission of facts (evacuations called 'rectifications of the line' and retreats unmentioned), (4) atrocity stories (Belgian nuns raped, hands of babies severed), (5) slogans ('war to end wars'), (6) one-sided assertions (small victories inflated, large defeats censored), (7) pinpointing the enemy ('German militarists'), and (8) the 'bandwagon effect' ('all patriotic people join the Army').⁵²

A collection of newspaper quotations from early in the war (November 1914) gathered by Cecil Ponsonby, a pacifist MP, illustrates the mechanism of some atrocity propaganda:

When the fall of Antwerp got known, the church bells were rung (meaning in Germany) (*Kölnische Zeitung*).

According to the *Kölnische Zeitung*, the clergy of Antwerp were compelled to ring the church bells when the fortress was taken (*Le Matin*).

According to what *Le Matin* has heard from Cologne, the Belgian priests who refused to ring the church bells when Antwerp was taken have been driven away from their places (*The Times*).

According to what (*The Times*) has heard from Cologne via Paris, the unfortunate

Belgian priests who refused to ring the church bells when Antwerp was taken have been sentenced to hard labour (*Corriere della Sera*).

According to information to the *Corriere della Sera* from Cologne via London, it is confirmed that the barbaric conquerors of Antwerp punished the unfortunate Belgian priests for their heroic refusal to ring the church bells by hanging them as living clappers to the bells with their heads down (*Le Matin*).⁵³

The reason these tales of German barbarity never lost their credibility is psychological. ‘A young woman ravished by the enemy’, writes Dr Harold Lasswell, ‘yields secret satisfaction to a host of vicarious ravishers on the other side.’⁵⁴ Furthermore, the British public, unprepared as it was for war with Germany, needed to believe that Germans were capable of the grossest behaviour imaginable. Few would question, for example, an announcement by the British Press Bureau of 29 August 1914 that ‘the intellectual metropolis of the Low Countries since the fifteenth century [Louvain] is no more than a heap of ashes’, or *The Times*’ report on the same day that ‘Louvain has ceased to exist.’ No British eyewitnesses were present, in fact, during the German capture of Louvain, and after the war it was discovered that only about one-eighth of the town suffered.⁵⁵

Photographs amplified the words. One picture of a Russian pogrom against Jews in 1905 was widely reprinted in Britain as being a fresh German atrocity in Belgium. Another picture, published in the *Daily Mirror* of 20 August 1915, was captioned: ‘Three German cavalrymen, loaded with gold and silver loot’ taken in Poland. The original of this picture had appeared in the Berlin *Lokalanzeiger* on 9 June 1914. The officers were the winners of a cavalry competition in the Grunewald and they were holding their trophies.⁵⁶

One of the most ghastly tales was in the *Sunday Chronicle* of 2 May 1915:

Some days ago a charitable great lady was visiting a building in Paris where have been housed for several months a number of Belgian refugees. During her visit she noticed a child, a girl of ten, who, though the room was hot rather than otherwise, kept her hands in a pitiful little worn muff. Suddenly the child said to the mother: ‘Mamma, please blow my nose for me’. ‘Shocking’, said the charitable lady, half-laughing, half-severe, ‘a big girl like you, who can’t use her own handkerchief’. The child said nothing, and the mother spoke in a dull, matter-of-fact tone, ‘She has[n]ot any hands now, ma’am,’ she said.

The grand dame looked, shuddered, understood. ‘Can it be’, she said, ‘that the Germans . . . ?’ The mother burst into tears. That was her answer.⁵⁷

Psychologically, atrocity stories in wartime fill basic needs:

1. To overcome people's natural repugnance to killing, even in war.
2. To fill gaps of fact as to how Britain got into the war.
3. Since war is a regression to primitive human behaviour, civilians, even more than soldiers, use atrocity stories as an outlet for primitive feelings.

To overcome people's natural resistance, according to Harold Lasswell, 'every war must appear to be a war of defense against a menacing, murderous aggressor . . . All guilt must be on the other side of the frontier.'⁵⁸

The Lansdowne Peace Plan was 'widely circulated in the early days of 1917', according to Beaverbrook, 'and fully discussed' after being submitted to the Asquith Government in 1916. Not a word of it was published, however, until November 1917.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, a renewed wave of propaganda describing the barbarity of unlimited U-boat warfare effectively immunized the public against pacifism: how could Britons accept any but the severest peace terms against such an unscrupulous enemy?⁶⁰ Even Lloyd George had to steel himself against the desire for peace. On 28 December 1917 he told C. P. Scott: 'I am in a very pacifist temper. I listened last night, at a dinner given to Philip Gibbs on his return from the front, to the most impressive and moving description of what the war in the West really means . . . Even an audience of hardened politicians and journalists was strongly affected. The thing is horrible and beyond human nature to bear . . . I fear I can't go on with this bloody business: I would rather resign.'⁶¹

Probably the greatest propaganda coup of the war, because it combined a sense of moral righteousness for his own side while sowing dissension among the enemy, was a short speech on 8 January 1918 by President Wilson, at the request, it is said, of Edgar Sisson, the American Commissioner of the Committee on Public Information in Petrograd. Sisson urged the President to make a statement on war aims in a thousand words or less and 'in short, placard-like paragraphs and short sentences.' The result was the famous Fourteen Points.⁶²

In the face of such clever verbal assaults, the Germans continually appeared feeble, defensive and naïve. Just as they vainly claimed to be fighting a defensive war when they marched into Belgium, they tried to refute the atrocity stories. Among the early publications of the *Zentralstelle für Auslandsdienst* were a White Book about Belgian atrocities, papers answering 'French lies' about German

plundering and violation of the rules of war, and another paper contradicting 'Russian lies' about German atrocities in the East. The cardinal rule of propaganda — never answer enemy charges; this only spreads the original lie — was broken. However, defensiveness verging on self-pity was to be the dominant tone in Germany's propaganda effort. The underlying reason was embedded in the way it was organized and controlled. The military men in charge had little contact or experience in dealing with ordinary people, while those who had such experience — the publishers and journalists — were systematically excluded from information policy-making. An example of the lofty ineptness of Germany's efforts was the manifesto *An die Kulturwelt* published early in 1915 and signed by 93 professors and intellectuals, including Gerhardt Hauptmann, Max Planck, Engelbert Humperdinck, Max Reinhardt, Wilhelm Roentgen, Gustav von Schmoller, Siegfried Wagner, Wilhelm Wundt and Paul Ehrlich. They protested 'to the civilized world against the lies and calumnies with which our enemies are endeavouring to stain the honour of Germany in her hard struggle for existence . . .' The manifesto then denied that Germany had caused the war, that Germany had 'trespassed' in Belgium, or that any Belgians had been needlessly injured: German correctness in burning Louvain was righteously maintained. 'Furious inhabitants having treacherously fallen upon them in their quarters, our troops, with aching hearts, were obliged to fire a part of the town as a punishment [though] in our love of art we cannot be surpassed by any other nation . . . we must decidedly refuse to buy a German defeat at the cost of saving a work of art.' The intellectuals then denounced alleged Russian atrocities in the East and the use of dum-dum bullets in the West and finally affirmed that 'those who have allied themselves with Russians and Serbians, and present such a shameful scene to the world as that of inciting Mongolians and Negroes against the white race, have no right whatever to call themselves upholders of civilization.' The manifesto concluded: 'Have faith in us! Believe that we shall carry on this war to the end as a civilized nation, to whom the legacy of a Goethe, a Beethoven and a Kant is just as sacred as its own hearths and homes. For this we pledge you our names and our honour.'

The dominant themes of German home propaganda carried through this fatal negative righteousness — the encircling policy of the Entente, the necessity to hold fast (*Durchhalten*), violations of the laws of land and naval warfare by the enemy, the historic mission

and high culture of Germans (*Deutschtum*), the need for national expansion and the 'proclamation that a German victory would be good for the world.'⁶³

The obverse of the lofty ideals propounded by elevated men was the gutter-appeal of pure hate for England. Again the tone was negative, as in the slogan '*Gott Strafe England*', which became an automatic greeting, answered by '*Er strafe es*', and was printed on postcards, cigarette cases, pipes, pocketbooks, mugs, walking sticks, pocket knives, brooches, rings, cuff-links, handkerchiefs and even garters and braces. A children's song, popularized in 1914, went: 'Fly Zeppelin. Fly to England. England shall be destroyed with fire!'⁶⁴ A new 'Hymn of Hate' (for which the author Ernst Lissauer received the Iron Cross) for a time supplanted the national anthem. Its first verse was:

French and Russians they matter not.
A blow for a blow and a shot for a shot;
We love them not, we hate them not,
We hold the Vistula and the Vosges-gate,
We have but one and only hate,
We love as one, we hate as one,
We have one foe and one alone —
England!⁶⁵

A poem by an unidentified *Hofrat* published on 20 November 1914 in *Welt am Montag* elaborated the theme of hate:

*O du Deutschland, jetzt hasse mit eisigen Blut,
Hinschlachte Millionen der teuflischen Brut.
Und türmten sich berghoch in Wolken hinein
Das rauchende Fleisch und das Menschengebein!*

*O du Deutschland, jetzt hasse geharnischt in Erz:
Jedem Feind einen Bajonettstich ins Herz!
Nimm keinen gefangen! Mach jeden gleich stumm,
Schaff zur Wüste den Gürtel der Länder ringsum.*⁶⁶

England continued to be singled out as the particular foe as late as 1916, when pastors of Evangelical churches were directed to preach sermons, not against France or Russia, but only against England.

Early in August 1917 the *Kriegspresseamt* sponsored a week-long conference on the propaganda effort. The ideas and methods discussed again revealed feebleness of concept, incomprehension of

what moves public feeling, querulous defensiveness and the naive paternalism of those in charge. 'Slogans are one means by which the Entente works so extraordinarily successfully', Major Stotten of the *Kriegspresseamt* told the conference. 'We have not succeeded at all. The only useful slogan we have is "Freedom of the Seas!"' He then suggested a contest with prizes for 'really appropriate slogans'. Professor Doctor Reinke thought that 'public notices' would be effective. He suggested using 'short but strong words which go straight to the heart of the people and steel their desire for victory . . . everything depends upon the vividness of the wording.' He also recommended 'frequently hoisting the flag . . . the nation is thrilled by the sight of flags . . .'

Colonel Kittel explained how the *Kriegspresseamt* had been studying British recruiting posters and French war posters and how 'both we and the artists we called in for advice were really astonished to see how much our enemies have achieved in the use of the poster.' General Superintendent Moeller said there was a need to know more accurately what the public was thinking. He suggested sampling public opinion by handing out questionnaires to audiences at concerts, cinemas or meetings. 'We should let each person decide', he added, 'whether he wishes to sign his name or indicate his occupation.' Professor Stephinger proposed that wall posters be hung every two to four weeks to summarize the results of various offensives. He also suggested distributing leaflets to audiences leaving theatres and concerts 'telling them what great men have said about the Fatherland, or any other worthwhile subject.'

Major Stotten urged those present to enlist artists in their own districts to illustrate propaganda material, but revealed his own experience when he attempted this: 'We found that a great number of artists belong to that group of people who survey the war only critically.'

Professor Abderhalden described his three-day courses on the food situation for preachers, teachers and other presumed leaders of opinion: 'The interest was very great and those men spread the information gained among the masses.'⁶⁷

The chief problem revealed by these discussions was the leadership's lack of contact with the public — and for this press management was largely to blame. All honest expressions of opinion having been stifled by censorship, any 'feel' for public opinion had been lost.

German war communiqués themselves betrayed this insensitive-

ness. The official reports tried to cover every front briefly, more with an eye to scattering publicity evenly among the various military commanders rather than to stirring emotions with deeds of individual heroism and glory. A typical communiqué appeared in the *Berliner Tageblatt* of 31 October 1917: 'Sharp machine gun fire on the Flanders front was followed by a strong English attack on Passchendaele. The town was lost. Strong counterattacks then drove the enemy out. *Im Osten, nichts wichtiges. In Italien geht es vorwärts.*' To the end, the defensive tone was never lost. During the second battle of Verdun, for example, the communiqué for 18 September 1918, after describing the successes of the German air forces, concluded: 'to the premature triumphal shouts (*Triumphgeschrei*) of the enemy press, our flyers gave a truly German reply.'⁶⁸

In management of news, once again, the British system of voluntary press-government cooperation was far more successful than the German system of earnest denials, uncoordinated piecemeal effort and basic mistrust of the press. Factually, of course, the Germans were at a disadvantage for, while the Belgian atrocities may have been fabrications, the unprovoked German invasion was not. Similarly, towards the end of the war, the British were able to report genuine battlefield success while the Germans had somehow to put a brave face on defeat.

Such considerations aside, however, the German military's disregard for, and even contempt of ordinary people became increasingly evident. They were not to be trusted even with all the facts of victories. The generals were more interested in even-handed publicity for each of their colleagues on the various fronts than in presenting the public with detailed information about its heroes in the ranks.

After the war great debates raged in both countries as to the effectiveness of propaganda. A spate of books appeared 'unmasking' verbal warfare, denouncing the lies, the omissions and the distortions wrought by propagandists. '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.'⁶⁹

Some Britons claimed that propaganda had lengthened the war by preventing, through repetition of atrocity stories, the success of peace efforts such as the Lansdowne Plan. Others, like Lord

Northcliffe's *The Times*, believed that 'good propaganda had probably saved a year of war, and this meant the saving of thousands of millions of money and probably at least a million lives.'⁷⁰

Some of the other effects of wartime propaganda were less grandiose, but nevertheless interesting. For example, it was press propaganda that raised Lord Kitchener's military stature so high that 'the general public banked upon Kitchener long after the better informed were aware of the shortcomings of "Lord K of Chaos"'.⁷¹ When the *Daily Mail* attacked the war hero in May 1915 for allegedly failing to supply enough shells to France, copies of the paper were indignantly burned in the London Stock Exchange and other public places. Meanwhile Riddell and Scott agonized for months along with political leaders over how to rid the country of Kitchener without a public furore. Fortunately, the dilemma was solved on 6 June 1916 by the Field-Marshal's being drowned.

It was in Germany that the wartime propaganda of both Britain and Germany had its most profound — and most bizarre — effect. Ludendorff and Hindenburg openly blamed Germany's defeat on British propaganda. 'This propaganda greatly intensified the demoralization of the German Forces', wrote Hindenburg in his autobiography.⁷² Ludendorff's tribute in his *Kriegserinnerungen* was even more glowing: 'We were hypnotized . . . as a rabbit by a snake. [British propaganda] was exceptionally clever, and conceived on a great scale . . . In the neutral countries we were subject to a sort of moral blockade . . .', the German commander was gleefully quoted by Beaverbrook in his own memoirs.⁷³ It might be said that Germany's moral initiative was lost immediately through deeds — the invasion of Belgium, the sinking of the 'Lusitania', the execution of Nurse Edith Cavell — and further demolished by their use of poison gas and unrestricted submarine warfare.

The Nazis were among the loudest post-war critics of Germany's lamentable wartime propaganda. 'We have learned enormously from the tactics of our enemies', Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*. He considered the atrocity propaganda as well as Lord Northcliffe's anti-German campaign as 'an inspired work of genius'.⁷⁴ Eugen Hadamovsky, deputy to Joseph Goebbels, devoted a goodly portion of his major work *Propaganda and National Power*, published in 1933, to an exposition of what Germans must learn from the British. 'The German people were not beaten on the battlefield, but were defeated in the war of words', he insisted, complaining that the Germans 'were sent into this mighty battle with not so much as a

single slogan, while the enemy nations took up arms “against the Hun” “for world peace” and “for the League of Nations”. In politics’, he concludes, ‘those who are fertile and creative will always win over those who are sterile, bureaucratic or who are mere diplomats.’⁷⁵

Comparing details of war communiq  s, Hadamovsky observed that the Germans tried to report evenly on events along a 2,400-kilometre front, while the British had only to cover a 135-kilometre front. The German presentation was ‘marked by its coldness, sobriety and so-called “objectivity” becoming colourless, spineless and utterly unmilitary.’ He analyzed the British dispatches and found they ‘related in great detail the fight over a single farm, a stretch of forest or a hill, giving lengthy descriptions of the heroic deeds of individual groups, officers and soldiers.’

It was not ‘objectivity’ which was needed, Hadamovsky diagnosed, but ‘passion’. Furthermore, the Germans made a fatal mistake in allowing enemy dispatches to be published in German newspapers. Readers thus were able to compare the ‘uneventful, dispassionate and boring situation on our side and to contrast it with the enemy’s burning and enthusiastic display of interest and with the fierce passion of his combat soldiers.’⁷⁶ The lesson Hadamovsky drew from the British was that the propagandist must have ‘unswerving faith in [his] . . . cause, not to shrink from even the most powerful emotions and, finally, to keep pounding the same thought into the brains of the masses.’⁷⁷

Hadamovsky was elaborating on the shrewd assessment of war propaganda by Hitler, who claimed to have spent four and a half years turning ‘the storm-flood of enemy propaganda over in his brain’. He devoted a whole chapter of *Mein Kampf* to praising British war propaganda while denouncing the ineptness of the German effort. ‘What we failed to do, the enemy did, with amazing skill and really brilliant calculation. I myself learned enormously from this enemy war propaganda’. He isolated the qualities that made British propaganda so successful: ‘Basically subjective and one-sided attitude . . . toward every question . . .’, appeal to ‘primitive sentiments of the broad masses . . . ’ and endless repetition of a few points. ‘At first the claims of the propaganda were so impudent that people thought it insane; later it got on people’s nerves; and in the end, it was believed.’

As for the German propaganda effort, Hitler cut to the heart of its failure when he wrote that ‘the form was inadequate, the substance

was psychologically wrong.' He blamed the Germans for not understanding the value of propaganda as a 'frightful' psychological weapon. By contrast, he admired the Allied portrayal of Germans as 'barbarians and Huns' because this 'prepared the individual soldier for the terrors of war.'

During the 1920s and 1930s Hitler was to apply brilliantly the lessons he drew from Britain's propaganda during the first world war. The word-storm loosed so lightheartedly by Beaverbrook, Northcliffe, Riddell and others would return to batter, and nearly destroy, Britain. In his examination of British propaganda, however, Hitler failed to look more deeply into basic institutions. British propaganda was so flexible because it was the product of an open society; its content (however false, vicious and distorted) was the product of a basic agreement within society (or at least among the elite) that the use of this weapon could be sanctioned in wartime. Once the emergency was over, Britons naïvely believed, the genie of propaganda could be safely stuffed back into his bottle.

In a different way the Nazis were also naïve. By examining only the content of British propaganda they developed certain simple rules for highly effective mass persuasion. But they failed (or refused) to see that some kind of truth must underlie effective propaganda; Germany, after all, did fire the first shots in the first world war, did attack neutral Belgium, did occupy substantial parts of France, and did (for whatever defensive reasons) carry on unrestricted submarine warfare. There was substantial truth in the British assertion that militarists ruled Germany; the tight military control of the German propaganda machine was only one illustration of this fact.

In the same way, Nazi propaganda based on the British example was most successful so long as it was rooted in some corner of reality. Grievances against Versailles, charges of economic injustice and anger at the ineptness of the Weimar democracy all had some such foundation. But no amount of clever wording could long conceal Germany's utter failure on the battlefield after 1942, nor could any kind of propaganda (except hermetic secrecy) justify the Nazis' systematic extermination of Jews, Gypsies, Poles and Russians.

As in so many other areas, in the field of propaganda the first world war marked a watershed. The new mass media opened new avenues for reaching vast new populations. For writers and readers alike, the war of words permanently debased the coinage of public dialogue. But disillusionment also laid the foundation for a new

scepticism and a reading public whose sophistication demands propaganda so subtle that it avoids even the word propaganda.

NOTES

1. Serge Chakhotin, *The Rape of the Masses: The Psychology of Totalitarian Political Propaganda* (New York 1940), 125.
2. Denis McQuail, *Towards a Sociology of Mass Communications* (London 1969), 45.
3. Melvin L. de Fleur, *Theories of Mass Communication* (New York 1966), 16.
4. 'Worte sind heute Schlachten: Richtige Worte, gewonnene Schlachten: falsche Worte, verlorene Schlachten' quoted in George G. Brantz, *Allied Propaganda and the Collapse of the German Empire in 1918* (Stanford 1938), 3.
5. *Ibid.*, vii.
6. Harold D. Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (New York 1972), 48-50.
7. *The Political Diaries of C.P. Scott 1911-1928* (London 1970), 99-100.
8. *Ibid.*, 116.
9. Kurt Koszyk, *Deutsche Pressepolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Düsseldorf 1968), 12.
10. Ralph Haswell Lutz, ed., *Fall of the German Empire 1914-1918*, 2 vols. (New York 1969), II, 4-5.
11. Koszyk, op. cit., 28.
12. Lutz, op. cit., I, 169.
13. *Ibid.*, II, 5.
14. *Ibid.*, I, 170.
15. *Ibid.*, II, 12.
16. Koszyk, op. cit., 220-21; see also Eugen Hadamovsky, *Propaganda and National Power* (New York 1972), 145-46.
17. David Lloyd George, for example was Sir George Riddell's and C.P. Scott's man, while Bonar Law 'belonged' to Lord Beaverbrook. Lord Northcliffe was the only press lord who 'prided himself on having no social relations with Ministers . . . He influenced politics . . . always from the outside', a failing noted critically by Lord Beaverbrook in *Men and Power 1917-18* (New York 1956), xxi.
18. Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and War*, 2 vols. (London 1928), I, 51.
19. George A. Riddell, *War Diary 1914-1918* (London 1933), 17-20, 118.
20. Brantz, op. cit., 22-23.
21. In 1915, for example, the Ministry of Munitions used a £50,000 Treasury grant to set up a Publicity Department to place articles urging that munitions workers be exempt from conscription. Riddell furiously wrote in his diary that 'newspapers resent the department's action in flooding the press with propaganda articles.' Riddell, op. cit., 219; also Brantz, op. cit., 24.
22. Beaverbrook, *Men and Power 1917-18*, 289.
23. For Lloyd George's comments, see *ibid.*, 277.

24. Koszyk, op. cit., 29, 68; see also Lutz, op. cit., I, 185.
25. Lasswell, op. cit., 23.
26. Lutz, op. cit., I, 199.
27. Koszyk, op. cit., 79.
28. Scott, op. cit., 109.
29. Riddell, op. cit., 23, 131-32.
30. Scott, op. cit., 142, 160.
31. Riddell, op. cit., 187, 210.
32. Beaverbrook, *Politicians and War*, II, 201.
33. Ibid., 328-30.
34. Riddell, op. cit., 233.
35. See Beaverbrook, *Men and Power 1917-18*, 244-46.
36. Ibid., 300.
37. Scott, op. cit., 252.
38. Ibid., 296.
39. Beaverbrook, *Men and Power 1917-18*, 266-77.
40. Lasswell, op. cit., 336.
41. Beaverbrook, *Men and Power 1917-18*, 279.
42. Scott, op. cit., 336.
43. Lutz, op. cit., I, 177-83.
44. Koszyk, op. cit., 78.
45. Bruntz, op. cit., 94-95; Koszyk, op. cit., 194-96.
46. The documents cited appear in Lutz, op. cit., I, 168-92.
47. Ibid., 190-97.
48. Koszyk, op. cit., 224-25.
49. Ibid., 253-54.
50. Ibid., 234.
51. Ibid., 42-44.
52. A.C. Brown, *Techniques of Persuasion: From Propaganda to Brainwashing* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1963), 94.
53. Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in Wartime* (London 1928), 10.
54. Lasswell, op. cit., 82.
55. Ponsonby, op. cit., 21.
56. Lasswell, op. cit., 206.
57. Ponsonby, op. cit., 80.
58. Lasswell, op. cit., 47.
59. Beaverbrook, *Men and Power 1917-18*, xxxvii.
60. James Morgan, *Atrocity Propaganda* (New Haven, Conn. 1941), 11.
61. Scott, op. cit., 324.
62. Bruntz, op. cit., 100.
63. Lutz, op. cit., I, 72-75.
64. Williams, op. cit., 94.
65. Ibid., 32.
66. Koszyk, op. cit., 121.
67. Lutz, op. cit., I, 125-31.
68. *Berliner Tageblatt*, 18 September 1918, 1.
69. Ponsonby, op. cit., 18.
70. Bruntz, op. cit., 220.
71. Lasswell, op. cit., 39-40.

72. Chakhotin, op. cit., 183.
73. Beaverbrook, *Men and Power 1917-18*, 303.
74. Chakhotin, op. cit., 183.
75. Hadamovsky, op. cit., 8-9.
76. Ibid., 152-53.
77. Ibid., 15.

Alice Goldfarb Marquis

has recently received her PhD from the University of California at San Diego for a thesis entitled *Marcel Duchamp: Eros, C'est la Vie*. She is presently engaged in a study of who makes taste in twentieth century art and on what basis; the relationship between ideas and aesthetic values in the context of the art market.