The Daily Mail and the First World War

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FIRST WORLD WAR

The *Daily Mail* has recently caused controversy with its views on patriotism. Adrian Bingham looks back at a time when the newspaper's belief in its national duty provoked intense debate and copies were burnt in the City of London.

French newsboy selling the Daily Mail to a Canadian soldier. Associated Newspapers

When Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914 the widespread feelings of fear, uncertainty and patriotic determination were matched at the offices of the Daily Mail by a sense of vindication. The newspaper had been warning about the German threat for years, perhaps most notoriously when it serialised in 1909 a series of inflammatory articles by the journalist Robert Blatchford, which, when reprinted as a penny pamphlet, sold some 1.6 million copies. The Mail had, moreover, consistently demanded that the Royal Navy be reinforced. It was soon styling itself 'the paper that foretold the war'. For its critics, the Mail's irresponsible stoking of anti-German sentiment, driven above all by the paper's owner, Lord Northcliffe, actually helped to create the conditions that enabled conflict to break out. 'Next to the Kaiser', wrote the esteemed editor and journalist A.G. Gardiner, 'Lord Northcliffe has done more than any other living man to bring about the war.' Northcliffe would not, however, moderate his intense patriotism

or be deflected from what he viewed as his duty to his country.

In many respects the First World War marked the height of Northcliffe's political influence; he used the Daily Mail to expose what he perceived as weaknesses in the prosecution of the war. He also played a significant role in the chain of events that led to the toppling of Herbert Asquith as prime minister and his replacement by David Lloyd George. The Mailentered the fray in 1914 with a combination of patriotic superiority and Christian faith in the valour of the British people. It was certain both of the rightness of the British cause and of the suitability of the 'official rhetoric' of the war: the language of honour, glory, heroism and sacrifice that expressed traditional martial and patriotic values. The day before war was finally announced the paper told its readers:

> Our duty is to go forward into this valley of the shadow of death with courage and faith – with courage to suffer, and faith in God and our country … We must stand together at this hour … On us of this generation has come the sharpest trial that has ever befallen our race. We have to uphold the honour of England by demeanour and deed … We are standing for justice, for law against arbitrary violence.

The Mail moved quickly to provide support for the troops in France, ensuring that 10,000 copies of the continental edition were delivered to the front lines each day. They introduced a 'Soldiers' Friend' column, which offered supportive information and consolation to the ordinary Tommy with a blend of messages, advice and features.

While highlighting the bravery and gallantry of the British soldiers, the paper missed few opportunities to emphasise the savagery and brutality of the German war machine. Only two days after war had been declared the Mail was claiming that German troops in Belgium had 'disgraced themselves by unpardonable atrocities'. The destruction caused as the Germans moved through Belgium and France was described in sensational detail, not least to encourage outraged British citizens to enlist. The destruction at Louvain was 'almost incredible in its wickedness':

> [men were] remorselessly shot down by the guards. They drove the women and children into the fields, perpetrating upon them atrocities which cannot be detailed in cold print. They then bombarded the city and destroyed the best part of it in a few hours … Germans have been systematically taught by their military to be ruthless to the weak. The Kaiser, a single word from whom would have stopped this riot of savagery, has, on the contrary, done his best to kindle the lowest passions of his men.

The bombardment of Rheims prompted the first ever full-page photograph in the Mail on September 22nd, 1914, with the paper portraying the town's cathedral in all its magnificence before its destruction.

It was not long, however, before Northcliffe became frustrated with the strict censorship imposed on the British press when reporting events in Europe. 'What the newspapers feel very strongly', wrote Northcliffe to Lord Murray of Elibank, 'is that, against their will, they are made to be part and parcel of a foolish conspiracy to hide bad news. English people do not mind bad news.' Such censorship was particularly worrying when it risked hiding failures in the prosecution and management of the war. Drawing both on the experiences of his visits to the front and on private sources of information from his many correspondents, Northcliffe became increasingly convinced that several men in leading positions were not up to the job, including the prime minister, Asquith, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, and the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener.

The episode that crystallised this concern, over which Northcliffe put both his and theMail's reputation on the line, was the Shell Crisis of May 1915. Northcliffe had received letters from the front claiming that British military operations were being undermined by the lack of the right kind of shell and, after the Allies failed to capitalise on an initial breakthrough at Neuve Chapelle due to a lack of munitions, these criticisms began to be publicly aired. On May 15th, 1915 The Times (also owned by Northcliffe at the time) published a telegram from its respected military correspondent, Lieutenant-Colonel Repington, highlighting the problem and Northcliffe decided to go on the

offensive. After some critical editorials, on May 21st the Mail published an incendiary piece written by Northcliffe himself and headlined 'The Tragedy of the Shells: Lord Kitchener's Grave Error'. Northcliffe pinned the blame for the shells scandal directly on Kitchener:

> Lord Kitchener has starved the army in France of high-explosive shells. The admitted fact is that Lord Kitchener ordered the wrong kind of shell … He persisted in sending shrapnel – a useless weapon in trench warfare … The kind of shell our poor soldiers have had has caused the death of thousands of them.

This direct public attack on such an esteemed figure at a time of national crisis was shocking and generated fury among many of Northcliffe's critics. Members of the London Stock Exchange burned copies of both The Times and the Mail and anxious advertisers cancelled contracts. Thousands of readers stopped buying the papers. Northcliffe, though, was undaunted: at this point he was concerned not with circulation but with what he perceived as his national duty. 'I mean to tell the people the truth and I don't care what it costs', he told his chauffeur. It was clear even to Northcliffe's opponents, moreover, that there were indeed problems with Britain's munitions supply. Northcliffe was soon vindicated. Although Kitchener survived in the short term, the Liberal government fell at the end of May 1915, to be replaced by a coalition administration: Asquith remained as prime minister, but Lloyd George was appointed as minister of munitions to address the supply problems.

These changes were not enough to stem the criticism from the Mail. When Northcliffe read a devastating report by the Australian journalist Keith Murdoch (father of Rupert) on the failures of the Dardanelles operation, the Mail went on the offensive once again. The paper accused the government of using censorship to hide mistakes:

> Unless the British public takes the matter into its own hands and insists upon the dismissal of inefficient bunglers among the politicians and at the War Office, we shall lose the support of our Allies, the enthusiasm of the

> Dominions; we shall waste the magnificent efforts of our soldiers and sailors; and, eventually, we shall lose the war.

The Mail repeatedly contrasted its fearless truth-telling with the 'Hide-the-Truth' newspapers that 'have chloroformed the masses into the belief that everything is going well with us'. And while Asquith and Kitchener remained in power, the attacks continued. The Mail argued, for example, that the existing cabinet of 23 was unwieldy and inefficient: a more focused 'war cabinet' would be more decisive. It repeatedly pushed the government to end the 'recruiting muddle' and introduce conscription to ensure that Britain had the necessary manpower to take on the German military. It also showed its support for the 'magnificent men' at the front by demanding that they be properly equipped; during 1915 and 1916 there were numerous calls for more machine guns and shrapnel helmets. Convinced that the nation's leaders were dangerously lethargic, the Mail passionately believed in its duty to awaken the public to the need for a more strategic and interventionist government.

Over the course of 1916 the tide seemed to turn in the Mail's direction. The Military Service Act of January 1916 introduced conscription for unmarried men aged 19 to 40 and this scheme was gradually extended. The paper's chief enemies were also dispatched. Kitchener's death at sea in June 1916 was greeted by Northcliffe with barely concealed relief, while by the end of the year Asquith was losing his authority. Once again the Mailpressed its point, attacking the 'limpets' that were clinging onto power:

> A moment in our struggle for existence has now been reached when Government by some 23 men who can never make up their minds has become a danger to the Empire. The burden of administration in war makes demands on the body and mind which cannot possibly be supported by idle septuagenarians like Mr Balfour and Lord Lansdowne or by such a semi-invalid as Lord Grey of Fallodon … The notorious characteristic of our 'Government' of 23 is indecision … It just waits till the Press and the Germans have done something which forces it to decide in a hurry – and too late.

Behind the scenes Northcliffe and Lord Beaverbrook, the new owner of the Daily Express, assisted the manoeuvres of those conspiring against Asquith. He eventually stepped down as prime minister and was replaced in December 1916 by the far more dynamic Lloyd George. These dramatic events did much to enhance the myths of the press barons wielding political power: many now saw Northcliffe as the force behind the throne.

A German medallion c. 1917 attacking Lord Northcliffe, who is sharpening his forked quill ready to dip into 'Propaganda Ink'. Associated Newspapers

The appointment of Lloyd George marked a turning point in the Mail's coverage of the war in several respects. Having got the decisive leadership that it desired, the paper threw itself more fully behind the war effort. Northcliffe himself was soon occupied on government business: first as head of the war mission to the United States, then as head of propaganda in enemy countries. The appointment of other press barons to official positions (Northcliffe's brother Lord Rothermere became air minister and Beaverbrook was appointed minister of information), led to the prime minister being accused in the House of Commons of creating an 'atmosphere of suspicion and distrust' by allowing his government 'to become so intimately associated' with 'great newspaper proprietors'. Never before had the popular newspapers seemed to wield so much power.

Despite the attacks on those overseeing the war effort, the soldiers on the front lines were almost always portrayed in heroic terms. Critical or pessimistic reporting of their efforts, if not censored, was usually felt to be inappropriate. Beach Thomas, the Daily Mail's main correspondent in France, rarely gave any indication of the grimness of the trenches or the horrors of the front lines. His report on the first day of the battle of the Somme in July 1916 – the single worst day in the history of the British army, when almost 60,000 casualties were

sustained – was typical of the determined optimism of his journalism:

> A great battle has been fought … we are laying siege not to a place but to the German Army … In the first battle, we have beaten the Germans by greater dash in the infantry and vastly superior weight in munitions … The 'Up-and-at-'em' spirit was strong in our Army this summer morning … A most English regiment was on the march at midnight down a country road in the hope of 'bumping the Boche'. A merry heart goes all the way. Finer spirits never deserved a heartier God-speed or merited more of their country.

Many troops came to resent such reporting, believing that it glorified the conflict or, at best, prevented civilians from understanding the realities of the war. Several soldier-poets famously directed anger at newspaper editors. Journalists such as Thomas had few options, however. They knew that excessive or gruesome detail in their dispatches would be removed and they felt an obligation to sustain morale at home. The silences continued, even though most readers knew that they weren't being given the whole story.

The Mail greeted the end of the war with joy and exhausted relief, as well as a passionate desire to see a punitive peace imposed on the Germans. During the election campaign, launched shortly after the signing of the armistice in November 1918, the Mail pressed candidates to pledge that the Kaiser be tried, that the nation receive 'full indemnity from Germany' and that the authorities secure the 'expulsion of Huns' from Britain. The Mail's determination on these points seems to have hardened Lloyd George's own stance on peace-making and after a decisive victory for his coalition government the prime minister went to Paris the following year conscious that wide sections of the public wanted to see Germany made to pay for the unprecedented bloodshed of the Great War. But Lloyd George rejected any suggestions that Northcliffe play an official role in the peace-making process and in April 1919 decisively turned against him for presuming to interfere in the diplomatic negotiations and 'sowing dissension between great Allies'. With his reputation damaged by his close relations with newspaper proprietors, the prime minister now cast them

adrift.

But Northcliffe was glad that the Mail could start to turn to other things. Little more than six months after the end of the war he was reminding his staff that the public were sated with comment about the peacemaking process: ‘What the public wanted this morning was more of the horses. They are not talking about St Germain, but about Epsom.’

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