

HIST 312 – Take Home Final

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Topic: “It remains an orthodoxy that the First World War was a propaganda war, a war of lies, that served no purpose.”

Discuss in relation to at least three forms of propaganda created during the war by at least two countries. What purpose did propaganda play?

To say the First World War was a propaganda war is undoubtedly true in the sense that it was a prevalent part of wartime life. However, to argue that this propaganda was the product of needless lies to justify a needless war ignores the intended purposes of the propaganda and how it was disseminated. Propaganda realized its purpose as it was both a psychological weapon to be used on the battlefield and a tool to galvanize populations. These tools and weapons were effectively used by military and government institutions, further showing the war was not a purposeless war of lies. If there is any truth to the war of lies stereotype it lies in propaganda that had its origins in civilian folklore, a party that should not be taken to fully represent the warring nations and their intentions.

One important aspect of propaganda was its ability to affect the psyche of enemy population, both military and civilian. An interesting case study for this is that of American Heber Blankenhorn and the American Expeditionary Force documented by Clayton D. Laurie. Blankenhorn's efforts were inspired by his knowledge of the effect Austrian propaganda had on Italian soldiers during their defeat at Caporetto. One of his earliest works for the American military was the result of a rumour coming from behind enemy lines that the Americans did not take prisoners of war (POW). The military establishment feared this would deter Austro-Hungarian from surrendering in battle. Blankenhorn and his associates developed a leaflet to be dropped in enemy territory that detailed the good treatment a POW could expect if captured by the Americans, even going as far as to detail the rations they could expect to receive, with the hope that this knowledge could spur an enemy soldier to surrender with less resistance than they otherwise might.

Reports from behind enemy lines that civilians were picking up these leaflets and pocketing

them, supposedly for later reading, only encouraged this form of propaganda and the content evolved in a multitude of ways, most evinced by attempts to demoralize the enemy population that the war they were fighting was not a worthwhile war. Perhaps not surprisingly, these leaflets were also printed for and distributed to American soldiers as well so that they may see the progress they were making in order to encourage them in the fight, the inverse of what the leaflets were doing behind enemy lines.

While it may be difficult to fully assess the effectiveness of these leaflets in an impartial manner a quick overview would seem to indicate they were a resounding success, especially as the war dragged on. The German General Staff went as far to issue an order against reading propaganda that was dropped behind their lines and, eventually, in order to combat soldiers pocketing the leaflets for personal use and distribution among civilians began offering financial compensation for leaflets that were turned in to commanding officers. One officer even attributed calls for soldiers to desert that were contained in letters sent to the front to being an effect of the leaflets that were being circulated among the civilian population.

Here we can clearly see how the American army used the propaganda effectively as a weapon of psychological warfare. It is interesting to note that Blankenhorn and his associates had a particular emphasis on sharing only claims that could be verified, a means to ensure the propaganda had staying power and could not be easily dismissed. To say that this form of propaganda was the essence of the war is misleading, rather, the essence of the war was contained in the leaflets and became ingrained in the minds of those who received it, serving as an effective psychological weapon and furthering the aims of those who spread it.

But propaganda was not just for demoralizing the enemy, it also had it's uses for mobilizing the nation disseminating the works. One form this took on was through atrocity propaganda, a form which insight can be seen through the work of John Horne and Adrian Gregory. Certainly both sides perpetrated war crimes, perceived or real, as displayed by Horne. These war crimes, or atrocities, served as fodder for propaganda to be circled among civilians. This atrocity propaganda took on a life

of its own in allied nations, particularly Britain and France, especially in the aftermath of the fall of Belgium. This propaganda portrayed the Germans as barbaric with little regard for true culture and western civilization as a whole. The propaganda appealed to the Eurocentric definitions of culture that persisted, mobilizing a sense of outrage and duty to protect this culture. Appeals to moral values such as chivalry were also common as women and children were portrayed as vulnerable and in need of noble defenders, especially those who were in occupied territories and were witnessing the atrocities firsthand.

Judging by how far-reaching some of these atrocity stories spread among civilians, and the lives of their own that these stories took on, it is reasonable to assume that this type of resonated with the populations. As Joseph Carruth notes, this atrocity propaganda, in the form of Britain's Bryce Report, even resonated with Americans and moving them towards a more sympathetic position for the Allied war cause. However, the prevalence of this form does lend itself to a discussion on the veracity of the content being disseminated this form of propaganda.

Atrocity propaganda can seemingly be divided into two categories of its own, top-down propaganda and bottom-up propaganda. The top-down form of propaganda was that which originated from institutions such as government and news media whereas bottom-up propaganda originated in stories that were circulated among the common civilian. As Gregory argues, the top-down form seemed to take longer to report and permeate the civilian portion of society as the institutions of a nation tended to take longer to ensure the legitimacy of a report's content and sources. Meanwhile, the bottom-up form tended to circulate quicker among the civilians with which it had its roots and sources tended to be, with an almost dubious consistency, friends of friends who had witnessed the events or heard through another friend. This bottom-up propaganda even permeated the institutions that supposedly were best at checking their sources as the stories became the stuff of folk legend, building such deep roots that the stories could not be ignored.

Here, once again, we can see that this form of propaganda was effective and did galvanize

intense emotions from the civilian populace. The top-down propaganda was certainly useful in this regard and it could be argued that the bottom-up propaganda of the civilians was even more effective. The top-down propaganda also reinforces what was said earlier, that is, that the war was not a war of lies. The propaganda spread in this manner had its origins in reliable sources and merely served as an aside to the main objectives a nation had for a war, the propaganda was not the objective itself. The stereotype that the war was meaningless, entirely focused on propaganda and disseminating lies within the propaganda seems to have its origins in the bottom-up propaganda with its often less than reliable source material. This propaganda was, unfortunately, occasionally repeated in the press and in institutions such as government as the stories became part of the collective conscience, but to say this was fully representative of the true nature of the war is a stretch nonetheless. The civilians who spread these stories were certainly not wholly representative of the nations at war and their aims and would have had little, if any, ulterior motives for spreading blatant lies. If anything, the way these atrocity stories spread among the public only seems to display the power of story when it becomes part of the collective conscience when it is considered how the enemy could be viewed in lieu of these stories.

Overall, the First World War was not primarily about propaganda and the propaganda disseminated through official channels served the purpose of galvanizing the home front while demoralizing the enemy, both in through verifiable means that offered legitimacy to its purpose.

Bibliography

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