

The National Archives
Education Service

Britain 1906-1918

Background and Big
Question – Gallery Six



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Gallery Background

Propaganda 1914-18

A great debate for historians of the Great War is whether or not propaganda in Britain was effective. There is no doubt that much effort went into it and that it was highly efficient.

When war broke out in 1914, the British showed they understood the power of thought and communication. The British ship *Telconia* cut the cable links between Germany and the USA. This allowed Britain a free hand in the early days of the war in gaining US support.

In 1914 the British government set up its propaganda bureau in Wellington House under Charles Masterman. It was so secret that most MPs did not know it existed. It worked behind the offices of the National Insurance Department, which was used as a front.

The main aim of the bureau in the early stages was to control information. This meant censorship and it was strictly enforced. At the same time, the government carefully chose the facts that it gave to the newspapers. The end result was that government propaganda was all facts, it was just that the facts were very carefully chosen - especially the facts that were left out! Good examples of this were the way the propaganda section made use of the German invasion of Belgium and the German sinking of the passenger liner, the *Lusitania*. They also used stories of alleged German atrocities in Belgium to good effect.

Another key element of British propaganda in the early stages of the war was to get men to volunteer to join up. At first the volunteers flooded in, and the famous poster of Lord Kitchener saying 'Your Country Needs You' was seen as a masterly piece of propaganda. However, voluntary recruiting fell below the levels required in 1915 and the government eventually had to introduce conscription.

It may be that other propaganda appeals to get men and women to work in the factories and mines were more successful. However, it may just be that British people were patriotically committed to winning the war and the propaganda had little effect.

As the war went on, the strain on the British people increased considerably. Government was constantly concerned by the possibility that the British people would become war-weary and stop supporting the war.

In 1917 the propaganda bureau in Wellington House was replaced by a new Department of Information. In theory it was headed by the government minister, Sir Edward Carson. In practice it was run by the novelist, John Buchan. In 1918 this Department became part of a larger Ministry of Information headed by Lord Beaverbrook, the newspaper owner.

Also in 1917, the National War Aims Committee was set up to focus on propaganda at home. This Committee worked closely with the Department of Information and with voluntary organisations like the Topical Committee for War Films. This group, and other voluntary organisations like the British Empire Union, the Fight For Right Movement and countless others, held rallies and parades or produced pamphlets or made films.

Film emerged as a new and powerful medium during the war and many government documents show what an impact it had on the propaganda makers. Films like 'For the Empire' and 'The Battle of the

Somme' were huge box office successes. Millions of people went to see them. However, as with all the other forms of propaganda, the fact that people went to see the films does not necessarily mean that the message behind them got through, or even that it was needed.

Gallery six: The Big Question

THE BIG QUESTION IN THIS GALLERY IS

HOW EFFECTIVE WAS PROPAGANDA IN BRITAIN IN THE 1914-18 WAR?

Can you save the Public Record Office's reputation?!

The problem

The Public Record Office has a new Head of Exhibitions. This job includes organising outside speakers coming in to give talks.

The leading WWI historian, Hilary Lee, is coming to give a talk, but something has gone wrong. Dr Lee's briefcase has been stolen! She has the plan for her talk in her pocket, but she had a collection of slides in her briefcase. She cannot illustrate her talk.

The Head of Exhibitions has come to you in desperation. He has given you the outline of what Dr Lee will be saying in her talk.

There is some good news. Dr Lee is not going to read out a script. She has some detailed planning points to help her stay on track. You can give her a new outline with some suggested sources to go in her slide show.

The bad news is she is due to talk in less than one hour! Good luck!

What you have to do:

Your job is to search through the sources in this Gallery and:

Select some sources that will support the points Dr Lee will make

Note the sources in the outline of Dr Lee's talk

Write clear captions for each source explaining what it is, where it came from and when it was produced

Dr Lee will not get a chance to look at these sources before the talk, so it would also be useful if you add a few notes on the reliability of the source (e.g. if its purpose was to get men to join up by saying that millions already had, then the figures may be a little exaggerated)

Remember – You will not be able to find sources to support every point Dr Lee will make. Your job is to choose a selection of sources that will support some of her points and will interest the audience.