

---

# British propaganda during World War I

---

In **World War I**, **British propaganda** took various forms, including pictures, literature and film. Britain also placed significant emphasis on atrocity propaganda as a way of mobilizing hatred against Germany.

Britain had no propaganda agencies at the war's outbreak, but an organisation was soon established at Wellington House under Charles Masterman in response to propaganda activities in Germany. During most of the war, responsibility for propaganda was divided between various agencies, resulting in a lack of coordination. It was not until 1918 that activities were centralised under the Ministry of Information.

When the war finished, almost all of the propaganda machinery was dismantled. There were various interwar debates regarding British use of propaganda, particularly atrocity propaganda. Commentators such as Arthur Ponsonby exposed many of the alleged atrocities as either lies or exaggeration, leading to a suspicion surrounding atrocity stories which meant a reluctance to believe the realities of Nazi persecution in the Second World War.

In Germany, military officials such as Ludendorff suggested that British propaganda had been instrumental in their defeat. Adolf Hitler echoed this view, and the Nazis later used many British propaganda techniques during their time in power.

## Organization

Britain had no propaganda agencies in place at the war's outbreak. This led to what Sanders and Taylor have termed "an impressive exercise in improvisation".<sup>[1]</sup> Various organisations were established during the war, and several attempts at centralisation and greater coordination between these agencies occurred. By 1918, these attempts at centralisation were mostly fulfilled in the Ministry of Information.

### Early agencies (1914-1915)

The initial establishment of a propaganda agency was a response to the extensive propaganda activities of Germany. Charles Masterman was chosen to head the new organisation, which was to be based at Wellington House, the London headquarters of the National Insurance Commission. After two conferences in September, the war propaganda agency began its work, which was largely conducted in secret, unknown by parliament.<sup>[2]</sup>

Until 1916, Wellington House was the main British propaganda organisation, with work focused on propaganda to the United States, although divisions also existed for other countries. Wellington House had expanded significantly by the time of its second report in February 1916, with new departments and an increase in staff.<sup>[3]</sup>

Alongside Wellington House, two other organisations were established by the government to deal with propaganda. The first was the Neutral Press Committee, which was given the task of supplying the press of neutral countries with information relating to the war and was headed by G. H. Mair, former assistant editor of the *Daily Chronicle*. The second was the Foreign Office New Department, which served as the source for the foreign press of all official statements concerning British foreign policy. During the early phase of the war, many voluntary amateur organisations and individuals also engaged in their own propaganda efforts, which occasionally resulted in tensions with Wellington House.<sup>[4]</sup>

---

## Foreign Office centralisation (1916)

A lack of coordination between these various organisations led to propaganda activities being centralised under the Foreign Office following a conference in 1916. The Neutral Press Committee was absorbed into the News Department, and Wellington House was placed under the control of the Foreign Office.

Only Masterman was resistant to this reorganisation, fearing the loss of independence that it implied.<sup>[5]</sup> However, later criticism of the Foreign Office's control of propaganda emerged during the year, particularly from the War Office. After David Lloyd George, who had been instrumental in the establishment of Wellington House, became prime minister, the propaganda machinery was once more reorganised.

## Propaganda under Lloyd George (1917)

In January 1917, Lloyd George asked Robert Donald, editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, to produce a report on current propaganda arrangements. Donald's report was critical regarding the continued lack of coordination, asserting that "the condition into which publicity and propaganda work has drifted at the present time is due to the casual way in which it originated and to the promiscuous way it has expanded."<sup>[6]</sup> Nevertheless, Wellington House's activities in America were praised.<sup>[7]</sup>

Immediately after the production of this report, the cabinet decided to implement its plan to establish a separate Department of State to be responsible for propaganda. Although not Donald's first choice, John Buchan was appointed head of this new organisation in February 1917.<sup>[8]</sup> The department was housed at the Foreign Office, with the title of the Department of Information. However, this organisation was also criticised, and Robert Donald argued for further reorganisation, an idea supported by other members of the advisory committee, such as Lords Northcliffe and Burnham. Buchan was temporarily placed under the command of Sir Edward Carson, until another report was produced by Robert Donald later that year.

This second report again highlighted a persistent lack of unity and coordination, although this time even Wellington House was rebuked for its inefficiency and haphazard nature of distribution.<sup>[9]</sup> Both Masterman and Buchan answered the criticisms in this report by suggesting the investigation behind it was limited in scope.<sup>[9]</sup> Nevertheless, criticisms against the current propaganda system increased and, following the resignation of Carson from the War Cabinet in 1918, it was decided that a new ministry should be created.

## The Ministry of Information (1918)

In February 1918, Lloyd George entrusted Lord Beaverbrook with the responsibility of establishing the new Ministry of Information. From March 4, 1918, this ministry took over control of all propaganda activities, being split into three departments to oversee domestic, foreign and military propaganda. The foreign propaganda division was under the headship of John Buchan and consisted of four branches; propaganda in military zones was the responsibility of the Foreign Office department MI7; domestic propaganda was controlled by the National War Aims Committee. A further organisation was set up under Lord Northcliffe to deal with propaganda to enemy countries, and was responsible to the War Cabinet rather than the Minister of Information.<sup>[10]</sup>

This ministry was a fulfilment of the recommendations regarding centralisation laid out in the second report of Donald, acting as an independent body outside of the remit of the Foreign Office.

Nevertheless, there were still problems and criticisms related to the new ministry. Tensions existed between the new Ministry of Information and older ministries such as the Foreign Office and the War Office, and many in government were concerned about the growing power of the press as symbolised by the journalistic control of the new propaganda ministry.<sup>[11]</sup>

In October, Lord Beaverbrook became seriously ill and his deputy, Arnold Bennett, assumed his position for the final weeks of the war. After peace was declared, the propaganda machinery was essentially dissolved and control of propaganda returned to the Foreign Office.

## Methods

Various methods of propaganda were used by British propagandists during the war, with emphasis on the need for credibility.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Literature

Various written forms of propaganda were distributed by British agencies during the war. These could be books, pamphlets, official publications, ministerial speeches or royal messages. They were targeted at influential individuals, such as journalists and politicians, rather than a mass audience.

Pamphlets were the main form of propaganda in the first years of the war, and were distributed to various foreign countries. These pamphlets were academic in tone and factual in nature, distributed through unofficial channels. By June 1915, 2.5 million copies of propagandistic documents had been circulated by Wellington House in various languages; eight months later, the figure was 7 million.<sup>[13]</sup>

Pamphlet production was greatly reduced under the Ministry of Information, to approximately a tenth of previous production.<sup>[14]</sup> This was both a result in changing ideas of the most efficient methods of propaganda and a response to paper shortage.

## Press

British propagandists also sought to influence the foreign press, by providing it with information through the Neutral Press Committee and the Foreign Office. Special telegraph agencies were established in various European cities, including Bucharest, Bilbao and Amsterdam, in order to facilitate the spread of information.

To supplement this activity, Wellington House produced illustrated newspapers, similar to the *Illustrated London News*, and influenced by the German use of pictorial propaganda. Various language editions were distributed, including *America Latina* in Spanish, *O Espelho* in Portuguese, *Hesperia* in Greek and *Cheng Pao* in Chinese.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Film

British propagandists were slow in exploiting cinema as a form of propaganda. Wellington House had suggested its use soon after the war's outbreak, but the suggestion was overruled by the War Office.<sup>[16]</sup> It was only in 1915 that Wellington House was permitted to implement its plans for film propaganda. A Cinema Committee was formed, producing and distributing films to allied and neutral countries.

The first notable film was *Britain Prepared* (December 1915), which was distributed worldwide. The film used military footage to promote ideas of British strength and determination in the war effort.

In August 1916, Wellington House produced the film *Battle of the Somme*, which was met favourably.

## Recruitment posters

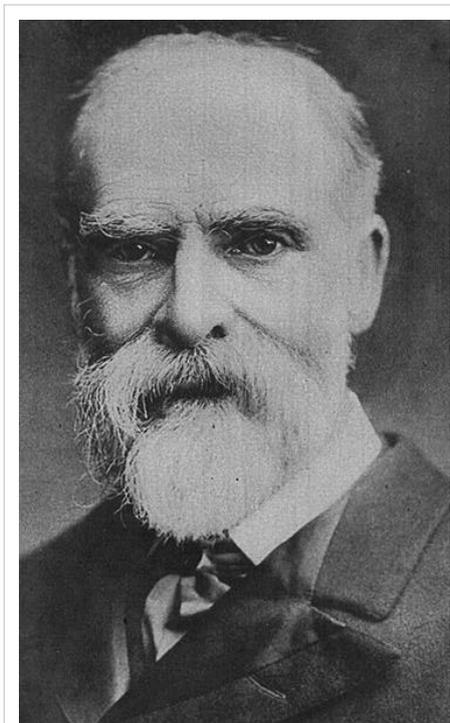
Recruitment was a central theme of domestic propaganda until the introduction of conscription in January 1916. The most common theme for recruitment posters was patriotism, which evolved into appeals for people to do their 'fair share'.

Among the most famous of the posters used in the British Army recruitment campaign of World War I were the "Lord Kitchener Wants You" posters, which depicted Secretary of State for War Lord Kitchener above the words "WANTS YOU".

Other concepts used on recruitment posters included the fear of invasion, and atrocity stories. The "Remember Scarborough" campaign, recalling the 1914 attack on Scarborough, is an example of a recruitment poster combining these ideas.

## Atrocity propaganda

Atrocity propaganda, which aimed to mobilise hatred of the German enemy by spreading details of their atrocities, real or alleged, was used extensively by Britain in the First World War. It reached its peak in 1915, with much of the atrocities related to Germany's invasion of Belgium.<sup>[17]</sup> Newspaper accounts of "Terrible Vengeance" first used the word "Hun" to describe the Germans in view of atrocities in Belgium.<sup>[18]</sup> A continuous stream of stories ensued, painting the Germans as destructive barbarians, and many of the atrocities being reported were entirely fictitious.<sup>[19]</sup>



Lord Bryce

## Bryce Report

One of the most widely disseminated documents of atrocity propaganda during the war was the *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages*, or *Bryce Report*, of May 1915. This report, based on 1,200 witness depositions, depicted the systematic murder and violation of Belgians by German soldiers during their invasion of Belgium, including details of rape and the slaughter of children. Published by a committee of lawyers and historians, headed by the respected former ambassador Lord Bryce, the Report had a significant impact both in Britain and in America, making front-page headlines in major newspapers. It was also translated into 30 languages for distribution into allied and neutral countries.<sup>[20]</sup> Its impact in America was heightened by the fact that it was published soon after the sinking of the *Lusitania*. In response to the Bryce Report, Germany published its own atrocity counterpropaganda, in the form of the 'White Book' (*Die völkerrechtswidrige Führung des belgischen Volkskriegs*) which detailed atrocities committed by Belgian civilians against German soldiers. However, its impact was limited outside of a few German-language publications; indeed, some interpreted it as an admission of guilt.<sup>[21]</sup>

Other publications referring to the violation of Belgian neutrality were subsequently distributed in neutral countries. For example, Wellington House disseminated a pamphlet entitled *Belgium and Germany: Texts and Documents* in 1915, which was written by the Belgian Foreign Minister Davignon and featured details of alleged atrocities.<sup>[22]</sup>

### **Edith Cavell**

Edith Cavell was a nurse in Brussels who was involved in a network helping allied prisoners to escape. This was in violation of German military law, and as a result she was court-martialled for treason, and having been found guilty was executed in 1915. The story was reported, however, in a way that presented the event as the murder of an innocent houser of refugees.<sup>[23]</sup>

Following her death, the story was reproduced by Wellington House for many propaganda campaigns, both domestically and to the United States. Pamphlets and images depicted her execution as an act of German barbarity.

Soon after this incident, the French shot two German nurses who aided German prisoners of war to escape. German propagandists chose not to use this as propaganda.

### **The Lusitania medal**

British propagandists were able to use the sinking of the *Lusitania* as atrocity propaganda, as a result of a commemorative medal privately struck by German artist Karl Goetz a year later. The British Foreign Office obtained a copy of the medal and sent photographs of it to America. Later, to build on this anti-German sentiment, a boxed replica was produced by Wellington House, accompanied by a leaflet explaining the barbarism of Germany. Hundreds of thousands of these replicas were produced in total.<sup>[24]</sup>

### **The Corpse Conversion Factory**

On April 17, 1917, a report appeared in the British press, allegedly sourced in Belgium, concerning a "Corpse Exploitation Establishment" (*Kadaververwertungsanstalt*) near Coblenz, at which the bodies of German soldiers were allegedly converted into various products, such as lubricating oils and pig food.<sup>[25]</sup> . One source was the Belgian newspaper published in London, l'Indépendance belge, which attributed the story to an undated, unverifiable newspaper, La Belgique, supposedly published in Leiden, Holland. (There was a newspaper of that name published in Brussels, but it carried no such report.) The story is a vivid eyewitness description of German corpses being boiled down in a secret factory, with no explanation as to how the eyewitness gained entry. It gained credibility in the Northcliffe Press (notably the Times and the Daily Mail, April 17, 1917) by their juxtaposing to the Belgian account an excerpt from the official German newspaper, the Lokal-Anzeiger, in which a reporter, Karl Rosner reported experiencing the dull smell of boiling glue on his travels near the front. This was a Kadaververwertungsanstalt, he explains, where carcasses (dead horses were in abundance) were boiled down. The German word for glue (Leim) was mistranslated as "lime," leading readers to think of quicklime used to disinfect corpses. The idea that this and the other mistranslation of "Kadaver" as "corpse" instead of "carcass" were innocent mistakes is hardly credible given that the Daily Mail correspondent who acknowledged making the translation along with a colleague in The Times, were both seasoned correspondents from Germany and would have known the language well. Though this bit of propaganda gained credibility through the Northcliffe Press, the critical role of that press in disseminating the story in a credible way appears to have escaped proper historical appreciation. (See: [http://www.gmj.uottawa.ca/1002/v3i2\\_neander%20and%20marlin\\_e.html](http://www.gmj.uottawa.ca/1002/v3i2_neander%20and%20marlin_e.html)) The story was used as propaganda in neutral and allied countries, and the Department of Information published a four-page pamphlet about the incident, entitled *The 'Corpse Conversion' Factory: A peep behind the German lines.*<sup>[26]</sup>

## Notes

- [1] Sanders 1982, p. 1
- [2] Sanders 1975, p. 119
- [3] Sanders 1975, p. 121
- [4] Sanders 1975, pp. 120–121
- [5] Sanders 1975, p. 122
- [6] Cited in Sanders 1975, p. 123.
- [7] Sander 1975, p. 123
- [8] Sanders 1975, pp. 123–124
- [9] Sanders 1975, p. 126
- [10] Sanders 1975, pp. 127–128
- [11] Sanders 1975, pp. 128–129
- [12] Sanders 1982, p. 143
- [13] Sanders 1975, pp. 129–130
- [14] Sanders 1975, p. 142
- [15] Sanders 1975, pp. 134–135
- [16] Sanders 1975, p. 136
- [17] Wilson 1979, p. 369
- [18] Laurence V. Moyer, *Victory Must Be Ours: Germany in the Great War 1914-1918*, p 96 ISBN 0-7818-0370-5
- [19] Laurence V. Moyer, *Victory Must Be Ours: Germany in the Great War 1914-1918*, p 97 ISBN 0-7818-0370-5
- [20] Haste 1977, pp. 93–95; Knightley 1995, p. 86; Sanders 1982, p. 143
- [21] Haste 1977, p. 95; Horne 2001, pp. 238–241; Messinger 1992, p. 75; Sanders 1982, pp. 144
- [22] Sanders 1982, p. 142
- [23] Haste 1977, pp. 89–90
- [24] Welch 2003, pp. 123–124
- [25] Ponsonby 1928
- [26] Haste 1977, pp. 90–91; Sanders 1982, p. 147

## References

- Haste, Cate (1977), *Keep the Home Fires Burning: Propaganda in the First World War*, London
- Horne, John; Kramer, Alan (2001), *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial*, London
- Knightley, Phillip (2002), *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo*, Johns Hopkins University Press, ISBN 9780801869518
- Messinger, Gary S. (1992), *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War*, New York
- Ponsonby, Arthur (1928), *Falsehood in War-Time: Propaganda Lies of the First World War* (<http://www.vlib.us/wwi/resources/archives/texts/t050824i/ponsonby.html>), London: George Allen and Unwin
- Sanders, M. L. (1975), "Wellington House and British propaganda during the First World War" (<http://www.jstor.org/pss/2638471>), *The Historical Journal* (Cambridge University Press) **18** (1): 119–146, doi:10.1017/S0018246X00008700
- Sanders, M. L.; Taylor, Philip M. (1982), *British Propaganda During the First World War, 1914-18*, London
- Welch, David (2003), "Fakes" (<http://books.google.com/?id=Byzv7rf6gL8C&printsec=frontcover>), in Nicholas J. Cull, David H. Culbert and David Welch, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*, ABC-CLIO, pp. 123–124, ISBN 9781576078204
- Wilson, Trevor (1979), "Lord Bryce's investigation into alleged German atrocities in Belgium, 1914-15" (<http://www.jstor.org/pss/260012>), *Journal of Contemporary History* (Sage Publications, Ltd.) **14** (3): 369–383, doi:10.1177/002200947901400301

# Article Sources and Contributors

**British propaganda during World War I** *Source:* <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?oldid=433117925> *Contributors:* Asav, Bodnotbod, Chuunen Baka, CommonsDelinker, Fastily, Goldfriitha, Good Olfactory, GraemeLeggett, Hmains, Hugo999, Iridescent, Jarry1250, Manxruler, Master Deusoma, Mike Rosoft, Mr pand, Muhandes, Nsaa, TheGrappler, ThinkingTwice, 15 anonymous edits

# Image Sources, Licenses and Contributors

**Image:Kitchener-Britons.jpg** *Source:* <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Kitchener-Britons.jpg> *License:* Public Domain *Contributors:* Infrogmation, Jza84, Kintetsubuffalo, Klare Kante, Lokal Profil, Quibik, Rebutcher, Sandpiper, TT1, TeleComNasSprVen

**Image:Bryce.jpg** *Source:* <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Bryce.jpg> *License:* Public Domain *Contributors:* New York Times Company.

# License

---

Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

---