

**PROPAGANDA
DURING
THE
FIRST
WORLD
WAR**

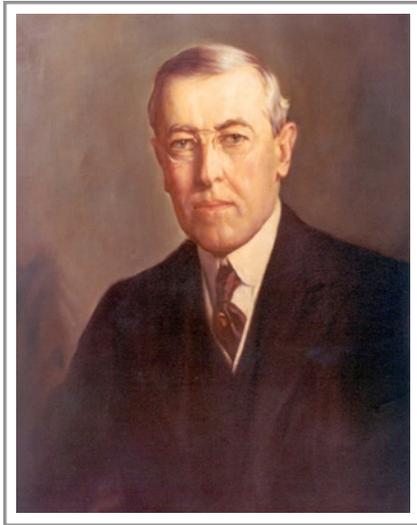


Of Fraud and Force Fast Woven: Domestic Propaganda During the First World War

by Aaron Delwiche

"Lead this people into war, and they'll forget there was ever such a thing as tolerance. To fight, you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fibre of national life, infecting the Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat, the man in the street."

It is one of history's great ironies that Woodrow Wilson, who was re-elected as a peace candidate in 1916, led America into the first world war. With the help of a propaganda apparatus that was unparalleled in world history, Wilson forged a nation of immigrants into a fighting whole. An examination of public opinion before the war, propaganda efforts during the war, and the endurance of propaganda in peacetime raises significant questions about the viability of democracy as a governing principle.



Woodrow Wilson

Like an undertow, America's drift toward war was subtle and forceful. According to the outspoken pacifist Randolph Bourne, war sentiment spread gradually among various intellectual groups. "With the aid of Roosevelt," wrote Bourne, "the murmurs became a monotonous chant, and finally a chorus so mighty that to be out of it was at first to be disreputable, and finally almost obscene."

Once the war was underway, dissent was practically impossible. "[I]f you believed our going into this war was a mistake," wrote *The Nation* in a post-war editorial, "if you held, as President Wilson did early in 1917, that the ideal outcome would be 'peace without victory,' you were a traitor." Forced to stand quietly on the sidelines while their neighbors stampeded towards war, many pacifists would have agreed with Bertrand Russell that "the greatest difficulty was the purely psychological one of resisting mass suggestion, of which the force becomes terrific when the whole nation is in a state of violent collective excitement."

This frenzied support for the war was particularly remarkable in light of the fact that Wilson's re-election had been widely interpreted as a vote for peace. After all, in

January of 1916, Wilson stated that "so far as I can remember, this is a government of the people, and this people is not going to choose war." In retrospect, it is apparent that the vote for Wilson cloaked profound cleavages in public opinion. At the time of his inauguration, immigrants constituted one third of the population. Allied and German propaganda revived old-world loyalties among "hyphenated" European-Americans, and opinions about US intervention were sharply polarized. More than eight million German-Americans lived in this country, and many were sympathetic to the cause of their homeland. Meanwhile, anti-German feeling was strong among the upper classes on the Atlantic coast, and was particularly intense among those with social and business connections to Britain or France. Most Americans, however, were not connected to the European conflict by blood or capital, and were not interested in waging war overseas.

The Committee on Public Information

The absence of public unity was a primary concern when America entered the war on April 6, 1917. In Washington, unwavering public support was considered to be crucial to the entire wartime effort. On April 13, 1917, Wilson created the Committee on Public Information (CPI) to promote the war domestically while publicizing American war aims abroad. Under the leadership of a muckraking journalist named George Creel, the CPI recruited heavily from business, media, academia, and the art world. The CPI blended advertising techniques with a sophisticated understanding of human psychology, and its efforts represent the first time that a modern government disseminated propaganda on such a large scale. It is fascinating that this phenomenon, often linked with totalitarian regimes, emerged in a democratic state.

Although George Creel was an outspoken critic of censorship at the hands of public servants,



George Creel, head of CPI

the CPI took immediate steps to limit damaging information. Invoking the threat of German propaganda, the CPI implemented "voluntary guidelines" for the news media and helped to pass the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918. The CPI did not have explicit enforcement power, but it nevertheless "enjoyed censorship power which was tantamount to direct legal force." Like modern reporters who participate in Pentagon press pools, journalists grudgingly complied with the official guidelines in order to stay connected to the information loop. Radical newspapers, such as the socialist Appeal to Reason, were almost completely extinguished by wartime limitations on dissent. The CPI was not a censor in the strictest sense, but "it came as close to performing that function as any government agency in the US has ever done."

Censorship was only one element of the CPI's efforts. With all the sophistication of a modern advertising agency, the CPI examined the different ways that information flowed to the population and flooded these channels with pro-war material. The CPI's domestic division was composed of 19 sub-divisions, and each focused on a particular type of propaganda.

One of the most important elements of the CPI was the Division of News, which distributed more than 6,000 press releases and acted as the primary conduit for war-related information. According to Creel, on any given week, more than 20,000 newspaper columns were filled with material gleaned from CPI handouts. Realizing that many Americans glided right past the front page and headed straight for the features section, the CPI also created the Division of Syndicated Features and recruited the help of leading novelists, short story writers, and essayists. These popular American writers presented the official line in an easily digestible form, and their work was said to have reached twelve million people every month.

The Division of Civic and Educational Cooperation relied heavily on scholars who churned out pam-



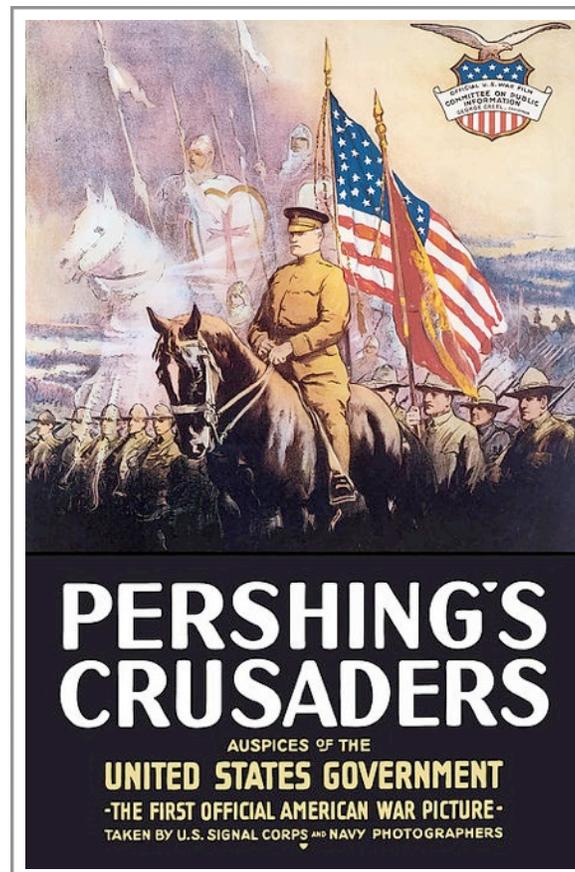
This headline from The New York Times shows the level of censorship in the U.S. during the war.

phlets with titles such as *The German Whisper*, *German War Practices*, and *Conquest and Kultur*. The academic rigor of many of these pieces was questionable, but more respectable thinkers, such as John Dewey and Walter Lippmann, also voiced their support for the war. Even in the face of this trend, however, a few scholars refused to fall in line. Randolph Bourne had been one John Dewey's star students, and he felt betrayed by his mentor's collaboration with the war effort. In one of several eloquent wartime essays,

Bourne savagely attacked his colleagues for self-consciously guiding the country into the conflict. "[T]he German intellectuals went to war to save their culture from barbarization," wrote Bourne. "And the French went to war to save their beautiful France!... Are not our intellectuals equally fatuous when they tell us that our war of all wars is stainless and thrillingly achieving for good?"

The CPI did not limit its promotional efforts to the written word. The Division of Pictorial Publicity "had at its disposal many of the most talented advertising illustrators and cartoonists of the time," and these artists worked closely with publicity experts in the Advertising Division. Newspapers and magazines eagerly donated advertising space, and it was almost impossible to pick up a periodical without encountering CPI material. Powerful posters, painted in patriotic colors, were plastered on billboards across the country. Even from the cynical vantage point of the mid 1990s, there is something compelling about these images that leaps across the decades and stirs a deep yearning to buy liberty bonds or enlist in the navy.

Moving images were even more popular than still ones, and the Division of Films ensured that the war was promoted in the cinema. The film industry suffered from a sleazy reputation, and producers sought respectability by lending wholehearted support to the war effort. Hollywood's mood was summed up in a 1917 editorial in



Movies like Pershing's Crusaders flooded theaters with propaganda supporting the war effort.

The Motion Picture News which proclaimed that "every individual at work in this industry wants to do his share" and promised that "through slides, film leaders and trailers, posters, and newspaper publicity they will spread that propaganda so necessary to the immediate mobilization of the country's great resources." Movies with titles like *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin*, *Wolves of Kultur*, and *Pershing's Crusaders* flooded American theaters. One picture, *To Hell With The Kaiser*, was so popular that Massachusetts riot police were summoned to deal with an angry mob that had been denied admission.

From lecture hall podiums and movie screens to the pages of popular fiction and the inside of payroll envelopes, the cause of the Allies was creatively publicized in almost every available communication channel. But this is only part of the story. The propaganda techniques employed by the CPI are also fascinating, and, from the standpoint of democratic government, much more significant.

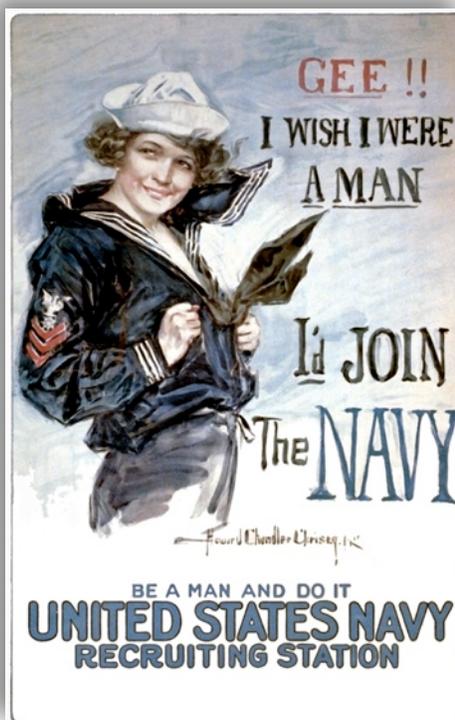
Appeals of Propaganda

CPI propaganda typically appealed to the heart, not to the mind. Emotional agitation is a favorite technique of the propagandist, because "any emotion may be 'drained off' into any activity by skillful manipulation." An article which appeared in *Scientific Monthly* shortly after the war argued that "the detailed suffering of a little girl and her kitten can motivate our hatred against the Germans, arouse our sympathy for Armenians, make us enthusiastic

for the Red Cross, or lead us to give money for a home for cats." Wartime slogans such as "Bleeding Belgium," "The Criminal Kaiser," and "Make the World Safe For Democracy," suggest that the CPI was no stranger to this idea. Evidence of this technique can be seen in a typical propaganda poster that portrayed an aggressive, bayonet-wielding German soldier above the caption "Beat Back The Hun With Liberty Bonds." In this example, the emotions of hate and fear were redirected toward giving money to the war effort. It is an interesting side-note that many analysts attribute the failure of German propaganda in America to the fact that it emphasized logic over passion. According to Count von Bernstorff, a German diplomat, "the outstanding characteristic of the average American is rather a great, though superficial, sentimentality," and German press telegrams completely failed to grasp this fact.

Demonization

A second propaganda technique used by the CPI was demonization of the enemy. "So great are the psychological resistances to war in modern nations," wrote Lasswell "that every war must appear to be a war of defense against a menacing, murderous aggressor. There must be no ambiguity about who the public is to hate." American propaganda was not the only source of anti-German feeling, but most historians agree that the CPI pamphlets went too far in portraying Germans as depraved, brutal aggressors. For example, in one CPI publication, Professor Vernon Kellogg asked "will it be any wonder if, after the war, the people of the world, when they recognize any human being as a German, will shrink aside so that they may not touch him as he passes, or stoop for stones to drive him from their path?"



Silent film star, Fatty Arbuckle, is pictured in this publicity photo (left) pasting propaganda posters on a wall in New York City. Notice this poster (right) is on the wall in the photo.

A particularly effective strategy for demonizing Germans was the use of atrocity stories. "A handy rule for arousing hate," said Lasswell "is, if at first they do not enrage, use an atrocity. It has been employed with unvarying success in every conflict known to man." Unlike the pacifist, who argues that all wars are brutal, the atrocity story implies that war is only brutal when practiced by the enemy. Certain members of the CPI were relatively cautious about repeating unsubstantiated allegations, but the committee's publications often relied on dubious material. After the war, Edward Bernays, who directed CPI propaganda efforts in Latin America, openly admitted that his colleagues used alleged atrocities to provoke a public outcry against Germany. Some of the atrocity stories which were circulated during the war, such as the one about a tub full of eyeballs or the story of the seven-year old boy who confronted German soldiers with a wooden gun, were actually recycled from previous conflicts. In his seminal work on wartime propaganda, Lasswell speculated that atrocity stories will always be popular because the audience is able to feel self-righteous indignation toward the enemy, and, at some level, identify with the perpetrators of the crimes. "A young woman, ravished by the enemy," he wrote "yields secret satisfaction to a host of vicarious ravishers on the other side of the border."

Anti-German propaganda fueled support for the war, but it also contributed to intolerance on the home front. Dachshunds were renamed liberty dogs, German measles were renamed liberty measles, and the City University of New York reduced by one credit every course in German. Fourteen states banned the speaking of German in public schools. The military adversary was thousands of miles away, but German-Americans provided convenient local scapegoats. In Van Houten, New Mexico, an angry mob accused an immigrant miner of supporting Germany and forced him to kneel before them, kiss the flag, and shout "To hell with the Kaiser." In Illinois, a group of zealous patriots accused Robert Prager, a German coal miner, of hoarding explosives. Though Prager asserted his loyalty to the very end, he was lynched by the angry mob. Explosives were never found.



Ads like this were placed in newspapers and magazines demonizing the enemy through stories of atrocities.

The War to End All Wars

Emotional appeals and simplistic caricatures of the enemy influenced many Americans, but the CPI recognized that certain social groups had more complex propaganda needs. In order to reach intellectuals and pacifists, the CPI claimed that military intervention would bring about a democratic League of Nations and end warfare forever. With other social groups, the CPI modified its arguments, and interpreted the war as "a conflict to destroy the threat of German industrial competition (business group), to protect the American standard of living (labor), to remove certain baneful German influences in our education (teachers), to destroy German music - itself a subtle propaganda (musicians), to preserve civilization, 'we' and 'civilization' being synonymous (nationalists), to make the world safe for democracy, crush militarism, [and] establish the rights of small nations et al. (religious and idealistic groups)." It is impossible to make rigorous statements about which one of these appeals was most effective, but this is the advantage that the propagandist has over the communications scholar. The propagandist is primarily concerned with effectiveness and can afford to ignore the methodological demands of social science.

Dishonesty

Finally, like most propagandists, the CPI was frequently dishonest. Despite George Creel's claim that the CPI strived for unflinching accuracy, many of his employees later admitted that they were quite willing to lie. Will Irwin, an ex-CPI member who published several confessional pieces after the war, felt that the CPI was more honest than other propaganda ministries, but made it clear that "we never told the whole truth - not by any manner of means." Citing an intelligence officer who bluntly said "you can't tell them the truth," G.S Viereck argued that, as on all fronts, victories were routinely manufactured by American military authorities. The professional propagandist realizes that, when a single lie is exposed, the entire campaign is jeopardized. Dishonesty is discouraged, but on strategic, not moral, grounds.

Post-War Propaganda

In the final months of 1918, as the war drew to a close, the CPI fell under increasing scrutiny from a war-weary American public and from the Republican majority that had gained control of Congress. On November 12, 1918, George Creel halted the domestic activities of the CPI. The activities of the foreign division were ended, amidst great controversy, a few months later. One might assume that the wartime propagandists then put down their pens and paintbrushes and returned to ordinary life. This was not the case.

According to Lasswell, many former agents of the CPI stayed in Washington and New York and took advantage of their skill and contacts. Two years later, the Director of the CPI's Foreign Division argued that "the history of propaganda in the war would scarcely be worthy of consideration here, but for one fact - it did not stop with the armistice. No indeed! The methods invented and tried out in the war were too valuable for the uses of governments, factions, and special interests." Sigmund Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, took the techniques he learned in the CPI directly to Madison Avenue and became an outspoken proponent of propaganda as a tool for democratic government. "It was, of course, the astounding success of propaganda during the war that opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind," wrote Bernays in his 1928 bombshell *Propaganda*. "It was only natural, after the war ended, that intelligent persons should ask themselves whether it was not possible to apply a similar technique to the problems of peace."

This peacetime application of what was, after all, a tool of war, began to trouble Americans who suspected



After the war, former members of the CPI, such as Edward Bernays, took the skills they had learned and turned them to a new pursuit, public relations.

that they had been misled. In *The New Republic*, John Dewey questioned the paternalistic assumptions of those who disguised propaganda as news. "There is uneasiness and solicitude about what men hear and learn," wrote Dewey, and the "paternalistic care for the source of men's beliefs, once generated by war, carries over to the troubles of peace." Dewey argued that the manipulation of information was particularly evident in coverage of post-Revolutionary Russia. *The Nation* agreed in 1919, arguing that "what has happened in regard to Russia is the most striking case in point as showing what may be accomplished by Government propaganda... Bartholomew nights that never take place, together with the wildest rumors of communism in women, and of murder and bloodshed, taken from obscure

Scandinavian newspapers, are hastily relayed to the US, while everything favorable to the Soviets, every bit of constructive accomplishment, is suppressed."

When one considers the horrible legacy of the war, it is tempting to pin complete responsibility for American involvement on hate-mongering militarists in the CPI. Such retroactive condemnation is no more complex than a wartime slogan. Ultimately, their guilt is less important than the questions their activities raised about the role of propaganda in a democratic society.

From "Propaganda" by Professor Aaron Delwiche. See more at <http://www.propagandacritic.com/articles/index.html>