

# Film/Cinema

By [Roger Smither](#)

## Summary

The First World War played a significant role in the evolution of film both as a medium for reporting war and as a tool for the propagandist manipulation of public opinion to support the war effort. It affected the perception of cinema as a socially acceptable medium, influenced the development of certain genres of film, and affected patterns of cinema attendance and film distribution around the world.

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## Introduction

Other articles in this encyclopaedia examine the topic of film and cinema in several of the countries participating in the First World War. This article examines the place of the war in the history of cinema generally. It looks at the part played by the war in changing social attitudes to the act of cinema-going, prompted by the perception that film offered an unequalled way for civilians on the home front to share in the experience of war. The possibility that this desire to share might expose the viewer to some of the horrors of war was one of the factors leading to the imposition of [censorship](#) of war films in most belligerent

countries, but film was also perceived as a valuable means to demonstrate commitment to the war and success in the field to allies and [neutrals](#). Problems relating to the realities of combat and the limitations of available technology led some filmmakers to include staged footage in their films, making the reality of the resulting records a continuing field for discussion. The war accelerated the development of what would come to be known as newsreels to cater for this thirst for information, although cinema was not a venue where news was “broken”; the same appetite also helped launch the genre of feature-length documentary. While many films had [propaganda](#) intent, delivering propaganda through the medium of cinema was never straightforward and audiences tended to prefer escapism to a strong message. Commercial film producers made films with both [pacifist](#) and patriotic messages, but many of the period’s most successful films ignored the war altogether. Other developments in cinema which the war helped to accelerate included the use of animation, and a reinforcement of the developing “star” system through the harnessing of big names to patriotic causes. The realities of wartime economics also led to permanent changes in patterns of film distribution and production.

## Film and Society: The Act of Cinema-Going before and during the War

On the eve of war, cinema was established as a major – in some countries, the major – medium for popular entertainment. Screenings, which had started in mixed venues such as music halls, and had then been taken out on the road at fairs and carnivals before colonising the high street in converted stores and nickelodeons, were increasingly taking place in purpose-built venues. These were becoming bigger and grander, as well as more numerous, year by year. The Mark Strand Theatre, which opened on Broadway in New York City in October 1914 with a seating capacity of almost 3,000, was just the newest and largest addition to a total of over 10,000 exhibition venues in the [United States](#) as a whole. [Great Britain](#) had some 5,000 permanent cinemas by 1914, offering a total seating capacity of over 4 million.<sup>1</sup> On the eve of war in [Russia](#), in spite of the tendency to portray the country as relatively backward compared to other nations, there were 200 movie theatres in the two major cities of St Petersburg and Moscow and a further 1,200 in the country beyond.<sup>2</sup>

As popular entertainment, however, film continued to carry with it the perceived taint of its fairground origins and its largely working class audiences, and was commonly held in contempt by the traditional arbiters of cultural taste. [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1868-1918\)](#), for example, is reported to have written in 1913 “I consider that the cinema is an empty, totally useless, and even harmful form of entertainment. Only an abnormal person could place this farcical business on a par with art.”<sup>3</sup> A similar level of disdain may be

detected in one response when [C.F.G. Masterman \(1873-1927\)](#), the man in charge of [Britain's propaganda](#) efforts at the start of the First World War, suggested that film should be among the media used for the purpose: the Secretary to the Board of Film Censors, [Joseph Brooke Wilkinson \(1870-1948\)](#), "greeted the suggestion...with the horrified enquiry 'What, has the country come to that?'"<sup>4</sup>

Cinema's efforts to improve its social status had begun before the war with the development of better performance venues and larger-scale and more cultural productions such as the Italian epics *Quo Vadis?* (1912) and *Cabiria* (1914). These trends continued after 1914. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), by [D.W. Griffith \(1875-1948\)](#), for example, was advertised on its 1916 release in Britain with text reading "HIGHLY IMPORTANT. 'The Birth of a Nation' will never be presented in any but the highest class Theatres and at prices charged for the best theatrical attractions." The film was indeed screened at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, with top ticket prices many times those normally charged for cinema admissions. This and other developments prompted *The Times* to publish an article stating that: "There is room for more and more recognition by people of intelligence and taste that the cinematograph, with its marvellous resources, its uncanny abilities, can provide an entertainment worth anyone's attention."<sup>5</sup> The image of cinema as a potential force for morality as well as for culture was further enhanced by Griffith's next film, *Intolerance* (1916). In parallel with these moves on the cultural front, the progress of the war itself was a powerful force in bringing into cinemas people who might previously have avoided them as the hope of better understanding what was going on worked to break down earlier prejudices. [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#) himself said of the film *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), "The public should see these pictures that they may have some idea of what the army is doing and what it means."<sup>6</sup>

A curious side effect of this reluctant acceptance of film as a source of information and understanding was that films were often specifically marketed as being "official" precisely in order to enhance their standing. This was in marked contrast to the efforts made to conceal the true origins of much propaganda in other media, particularly in Britain, on the ground that their arguments would carry greater conviction if they seemed to be the product of independent thought. Films from the front, on the other hand, were released from the start as *Official Pictures of the British Army in France* and the newsreel *Topical Budget*, after it had been effectively nationalised in 1917, was rebranded first as *War Office Official Topical Budget* and then in early 1918 as *Pictorial News (Official)*. Similarly, in Germany and the USA, posters identified films as, respectively, "*militärisch-amtlicher Film*" (Military official film) and "Official United States War Films".

## Censorship and Information Management

From its very beginnings, film had appealed to its audiences by showing them portrayals of real events as well as imagined stories: [Auguste Lumière \(1862-1954\)](#) and [Louis Jean Lumière \(1864-1948\)](#) first public screening on 28 December 1895 had included both *L'Arroseur Arrosé*, an acted comedy sketch in which a boy causes a gardener to water himself, and *Sortie des Usines Lumière à Lyon*, a factual record of workers leaving their factory. "Actualities" had been a popular part of film programmes ever since, offering film coverage of important current events on the national and international scale (including the wars of the period) as well as opportunities for members of the audience to recognise themselves, their friends and their relations in films of more local interest. Factual film of the First World War would continue both traditions, showing the unfolding of events on the war's various fronts and offering viewers the opportunity, or at least the hope, of recognising loved ones among the faces of the soldiers filmed.

Films from the front were thus popular with audiences at home, who – as King George had invited them to do – welcomed the opportunity to share the experiences of the fighting soldier through films that were hailed as "the real thing at last". A first obstacle to this "sharing" was, however, the suspicion of that soldier's commanding officer about the very idea of filming on the front line. All the belligerent nations enacted legislation at the start of the war placing restrictions on press freedom, concerned about the risk that unrestricted reporting might provide intelligence that could be valuable to an enemy or images damaging to recruitment or morale at home. In the case of film these concerns mixed with the contempt which was, as we have seen, common in the officer class. Such reasoning led, for example, to an early decision by [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850-1916\)](#), Britain's Secretary of State for War, to place a complete ban on [photography](#) and film at the front which lasted for almost a year. It was only a perception that Britain was losing the propaganda campaign for sympathy among neutral countries as well as failing to cater adequately to interest at home that led to the relaxation of Kitchener's ban and the appointment of the first two "Official Kinematographers" in the autumn of 1915. Within a year, the official cameramen produced *The Battle of the Somme*, which attracted huge audiences and generated enormous popular enthusiasm, though it also reactivated concern about the possible impact on [morale at home](#).

*The Battle of the Somme* was also used extensively in British propaganda aimed at neutral and allied opinion. Together with *Britain Prepared* (1915), the film played a major part in efforts to influence opinion in the United States, then, of course still neutral.<sup>7</sup> It was also one of the films taken on tour in Russia by a British mission sent to persuade the Tsar's armies

that their allies in the west were doing their part to defeat the Kaiser.<sup>8</sup>

Given that Britain's belated acceptance of the idea of battlefield filming had been brought about by the perception that [Germany](#) was winning the propaganda war for neutral opinion, there is some irony in the fact that the huge success of *Battle of the Somme* nationally and internationally prompted fears that the advantage was going the other way, leading to the establishment in January 1917 of a new propaganda organisation – the Photographic and Film Office (*Bild- und Filmamt*), or Bufo, whose role was to co-ordinate the wartime activities of the German film industry. Some months after the creation of Bufo, the [Imperial government](#) secretly established the *Universum-Film-Aktiengesellschaft* (Ufa) in December 1917 with the intention of producing and distributing patriotic feature films in the same way that Bufo supervised newsreels and war documentaries. Although Ufa was the realisation of a centralised and carefully co-ordinated German film industry, it was, in fact, established too late to make a major contribution to the war effort.<sup>9</sup> Bufo, on the other hand, would produce many propaganda films, including *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme* (With Our Heroes on the Somme – 1917), Germany's specific answer to the British Somme film.

## “Truth” and Staging

A problem facing cameramen who did attempt to film on the battlefield was the impossibility of recording images that captured the actuality of combat in ways that would engage the audience. Using the available technology of cameras, lenses and film stock, the empty battlefield of [modern warfare](#) and the tactical preference for attacks at dawn or dusk yielded few pictures to match the way civilians imagined the fighting. This was the problem that D.W. Griffith was trying to convey when he said, commenting on his experiences filming *Hearts of the World*,

viewed as drama, the war is in some ways disappointing, everyone is hidden away in ditches. As you look out over No Man's Land there is literally nothing that meets the eye but an aching desolation of nothingness. ... It is too colossal to be dramatic!<sup>10</sup>

Reacting to this disappointment, Griffith and others would retreat to the studio or more cooperative locations to film their battle scenes – “as experience has shown, filming under fire does not create as powerful an impact as good staging” observed the Russian cinematographer P. K. Novitskii.<sup>11</sup> *The Battle of the Somme* famously includes a staged “over the top” sequence inserted to compensate for the visual disappointment of the actual film of the British attack.

In fact, the amount of outright “faking” which filmmakers attempted to pass off as genuine

combat footage remained rare in films that claimed to show actuality, not least because it was realised that the use of fake sequences, should it be detected, could undermine the validity and thus the usefulness of a whole film, or a whole propaganda campaign. Other responses to the difficulties of filming genuine battle footage included the use of film of troops on exercise or in training, and extensive use of scenes shot “behind the front” showing soldiers on the march or in camp, or focusing on those aspects of the fighting – the build-up of supplies, the work of [artillery](#), the operations of an airfield, or [medical services](#) – that were some distance behind the front line trenches. During filming, cameramen would frequently encourage those they were filming to act up for the camera, prompting scenes that would provide a little light relief for the audience at home; soldiers would in any case often need no such prompting, and would respond enthusiastically to the presence of the camera. The resulting scenes obviously represent something other than pure, objective “truth” and still provide interesting insights into the reality of “news”.

## News on Screen

In addition to the one-off actuality film on a single topic, factual film increasingly reached its audiences through a type of filmmaking which had originated in the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War but reached new heights under the impetus of that conflict. The year 1908 had seen the first editions of the format that would come to be known as newsreels – regularly released compilations of several short actuality stories, offered as parts of the regular programme of attractions. Pathé Frères established the model with *Pathé-Journal* in [France](#), and then went on to develop newsreels in most of the countries where they operated, including those that would be major participants in the war. By the time the war started, most of those nations also supported competitor newsreels. In France, *Pathé-Journal* was joined within two years by *Gaumont-Actualités*, *Éclair-Journal* and *Éclipse-Journal*, while in the United Kingdom *Pathé's Animated Gazette*, issued from 1910, was joined in the same year by *Warwick Bioscope Chronicle* and *Gaumont Graphic* and, a year later, by *Topical Budget*. Similarly, in the USA Pathé started production of a newsreel in 1911, to be joined by Universal in 1912 and Hearst in 1914.

During the war, disruption of conventional patterns of production or distribution and impulses of patriotism, control and propaganda commonly combined to promote the development of local newsreels. On the outbreak of the war in [Russia](#), for example, exclusive rights to film on the front line were given by the Tsar not to Pathé-Russe but to the Skobolev Committee for the Wounded. At much the same time *Kriegs-Journal*, produced by the Wiener Kunstfilm-Industrie from September 1914, and *Messter-Woche*, launched in October 1914, initiated national newsreels in [Austria](#) and [Germany](#) respectively. In [France](#) in 1917 the Service cinématographique des armées participated directly in the creation of a new newsreel called

*Les Annales de la Guerre*, and, as noted above, the same year in Britain saw the effective nationalisation of *Topical Budget* as a vehicle for official film. A newsreel series called *Yser Journal* was also created in 1918 by the Service Cinématographique de l'Armée belge.

Even in private hands, newsreels tended to avoid being controversial – producers knew that their films were screened as parts of an evening's entertainment and cinema proprietors did not wish to risk antagonising or dividing their patrons. In the more democratic combatant countries as much as in the more authoritarian ones, coverage of the war was universally patriotic and generally optimistic, becoming still more so in official newsreels. Dissent typically found no voice at all, or was portrayed at best in a negative way, as when news of a 1917 anti-war meeting was covered in Britain's *War Office Official Topical Budget* as a story with the title "PACIFISTS ROUTED AT BROTHERHOOD CHURCH. A pacifist meeting held at Kingsland was broken up by the forces of loyalty and patriotism." With most combatants (including Britain after March 1916) relying on conscription to fill the ranks of their armed services, newsreels were not needed to encourage recruitment, although for morale-boosting purposes they portrayed the enthusiasm with which men rallied to the colours. Newsreels could, however, be used to introduce other practical messages, either by the inclusion of practical stories in the newsreels themselves or by the addition of short "tags" – information films promoting economy in food and other consumption, encouraging the growing of vegetables and the purchase of war savings, or warning against "careless talk".

## Feature-Length Documentary

In addition to the single-topic actuality short film and the newsreel, the war also brought to cinema screens the new genre of the feature-length documentary. Such films in the UK as *Britain Prepared* and *The Battle of the Somme* created enough of a sensation to prompt similar attempts in other combatant countries. The perceived success of *Battle of the Somme* was, as we have seen, one of the reasons behind the establishment in Germany of Bufa and the inclusion among its first releases of several feature-length films. Beyond such British and German examples, forty-five-minute or longer factual films produced elsewhere include a number of French titles such as *La revanche des Français devant Verdun (Octobre - Décembre 1916)* [The Revenge of the French at Verdun (October-December 1916)] (1916), the sequence of battle documentaries made by the Italian Army from *Battaglia da Plava al mare* [Battle from Plava to the Sea] (1917) to *Battaglia dall'Astico al Piave* [Battle from the Astico to the Piave] (1918) and several US productions such as *Pershing's Crusaders* (1918) and *America's Answer to the Hun* (1918). Audiences' appetite for lengthy documentaries was not guaranteed: the success of *Somme* was emulated by two further long-format films in Britain – *The King Visits his Armies in the Great Advance* (1916) and *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* (1917) – but a fourth film, *The Retreat of the Germans and the*

*Battle of Arras* (1917), yielded more disappointing returns, leading the British to return to shorter formats for coverage of the fighting. Nonetheless, feature length documentaries continued to be produced to the end of the war, including coverage of civilian topics, notably the [role of women](#) in the new age of [total war](#), from *Mrs John Bull Prepared* (1918) in the UK to *La Femme française pendant la guerre* [French Woman during the War] (1917) and *L'altro esercito* (*La mobilitazione industriale italiana*) [The Other Army (Industrial Mobilisation in Italy)] (1918).

## News and Propaganda

Whether in newsreel or single-topic actuality film, the cinema showed news to its public, but did not “break” the news to them. The primary source for current affairs remained the daily [newspaper](#), which, at least in major cities with several competing morning and evening titles, often with multiple daily editions, had reliable channels for bringing a story to readers’ attention within hours of its happening. Film of the same event would usually take days or weeks to arrive. Audience members would in all probability know the facts of what they were about to see, to which film added the sense that they were sharing the experience with those who were actually involved. To be sure, the “experience” they were sharing was a sanitised one. As soldiers who could compare the true horrors of the front line trench with its cinematic representation pointed out, the film spared its audiences the smells and sounds of war, as well as providing them a view which typically omitted much detail about [casualties](#). Delicacy in production or even outright censorship of films could not, however, prevent public awareness of information from other sources. Long before they had the chance to see film of the [Battle of the Somme](#) in mid-August 1916, for example, British readers of *The Times* would have registered that the regular “Roll of Honour” casualty figures with typical daily values of around 100 “Casualties to Officers” and 700 “Losses in the Ranks” in the first week of July leaped to 608 officers and “over 5,500 names” for other ranks on 24 July as details of losses began to be made known. Newspapers may not have spelled out that the battle was resulting in heavy casualties, but they published figures that pointed inevitably to the same conclusion – indeed on at least one occasion<sup>12</sup> a news story about the *Somme* film playing to packed houses appeared in a column immediately adjacent to the local casualty list. The notion that film could propagandise such awareness out of existence is not a credible one.

“Propaganda” was in any case not an easy weapon to use. Even for a domestic audience, a film might have unanticipated effects, prompting anti-war sentiment as much as the will to fight on: thus the *Manchester Guardian* editorialised about *The Battle of the Somme* that “the more of [war’s] trappings that are stripped from it, the more will men see its waste, its madness and its cruelty, as well as its glory, and the more earnestly will they cleave to



peace.”<sup>13</sup> The same unwanted negative responses could even more easily be stimulated on the international stage. When *Battle of the Somme* was screened in the Netherlands in September 1916, for example, the *Bioscoop-Courant* stated: “This film could serve as an excellent piece of pacifist propaganda, although this may not be exactly the intention of the British Government at the moment.”<sup>14</sup> Similar unforeseen consequences arose for Germany following the production of a number of films to demonstrate the effectiveness of the commerce raiders and [U-boats](#) of the *Kriegsmarine* in countering the [Royal Navy’s blockade of German trade](#) by sinking trading vessels carrying British supplies. Films such as *Graf Dohna und seine “Möwe”* [Count Dohna and his (ship) Möwe] (1917) and *Der magische Gürtel* [The Enchanted Circle] (1917), were popular in Germany, where critics duly noted the message “He who is not allowed to bring us grain should not bring the enemy coal.”<sup>15</sup> German diplomats were obliged to report, however, that these same films could have a negative effect in neutral countries where the sight of ships full of food being sent to the bottom of the ocean was not sympathetically received. The double-edged nature of U-boat film in particular was clearly demonstrated in the years immediately after the war when three of the victorious allies – Britain, the USA and France – produced versions of *Der magische Gürtel* in which virtually unaltered sequences from the original German film were adapted to anti-German purpose simply by changing the wording of the captions between scenes.<sup>16</sup>

## Patriotism, Pacifism and Escapism

Official newsreels and actuality films – short or feature length – were of course not the only forms of cinematic propaganda. Production companies in the various combatant nations made their own efforts to exploit the surge in patriotism and war-mindedness that accompanied entry into the war with a number of productions. In France, for example, the impetus might come from the urge to revenge the humiliations of the Franco-Prussian War, with films such as *1870-1871* (1913), while in Britain films capitalised on two tropes from pre-war popular fiction, [espionage](#) and invasion, with titles such as *England’s Menace* (1914) and *An Englishman’s Home* (1914). Another response to growing [militarism](#) was the anti-war or pacifist film, though events only too often overtook these heartfelt arguments. [Belgium](#), for example, saw the release of [Alfred Machin \(1877-1929\)](#) *Maudite soit la guerre* [Cursed be War] in 1914, a matter of months before the German invasion. In [America](#), one pacifist film, [Thomas H. Ince \(1882-1924\)](#) *Civilization* (1916) was actually credited with helping ensure the re-election of US President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) as the man who “kept us out of the war”, and another, [Herbert Brenon \(1880-1958\)](#) *War Brides*, appeared less than a week after polling day. Both were, however, to be significantly wrong-footed by the entry of the USA into the war in April 1917, and *War Brides* was subsequently suppressed. Even before America joined the war, however, the true neutrality of these pacifist films could be questioned: it was

noted that in these conflicts between imaginary nations it was the aggressors who wore uniforms that looked like those of the German army, conveying surreptitiously the same message as the overtly pro-interventionist (if misleadingly titled) *The Battle Cry of Peace* (1915).

In some countries, military-themed films continued after war broke out. Germany produced a series of melodramatic *kitsch* films known as the “field-grey” genre, as the action invariably centred on the heroism of German soldiers. Included in this genre were films with titles such as: *Auf dem Felde der Ehre* [On the Field of Honour] (1913); *Wie Max das Eiserne Kreuz erwarb* [How Max Won the Iron Cross] (1914); *Fräulein Feldgrau* [Miss Field Grey] (1914); *Ich kenne keine Parteien mehr* [I Know No Parties] (1914); and *Weihnachtsglocken* [Christmas Bells] (1914). On the whole, however, audiences did not go to the cinema for an unremitting exposure to either the arguments or the realities of the war. The inclusion of too much information or direct propaganda could be a disincentive for audiences that were not looking for such fare. Cinema proprietors knew that their premises were seen by many, possibly most, of their patrons as places of entertainment and escape: in 1916 one British theatre owner was reported to have displayed a sign outside his premises reading “We are not showing *The Battle of the Somme*. This is a place of amusement, not a chamber of horrors.”<sup>17</sup> Soldiers at the front were equally inclined to seek escape rather than instruction or indoctrination: in a letter home from Morlancourt in France, Colonel [Rowland Fielding \(1871-1945\)](#), Commanding Officer of the 6<sup>th</sup> Connaught Rangers, wrote to his wife on 5 September 1916:

To-night I have been with others to see an exhibition of the “Somme film,” which was shown upon a screen, erected in a muddy field under the open sky. Presumably by way of contrast Charlie Chaplin was also to have appeared, and I confess it was chiefly him I went to see. However, I came too late, and saw only the more harrowing part of the entertainment.<sup>18</sup>

The most popular films for most of 1914-1917 were those that provided escapism, and this was equally true in all the combatant countries. In France, for example, audiences flocked to see [Louis Feuillade \(1873-1925\)](#) crime series *Fantômas* (1913-14) and *Judex* (made in 1914, but release delayed until late 1916); Britain, meanwhile, thrilled to *Ultus: The Man from the Dead* (1916), a Feuillade-style thriller, or watched *Dombey and Son* (1917). Freed from the burden of foreign competition and encouraged by the government to produce indigenous works, the German film industry began also to attract directors and actors from the legitimate theatre. Such collaboration resulted in rare films like *Der Golem* (1915), *Homunculus* (1916) and a version of [Oscar Wilde \(1854-1900\)](#) *Das Bildnis des Dorian Gray* [The Picture of Dorian Gray] (1917) that foreshadowed the fantastic themes and sets to be

found in the expressionist films of the Weimar period.

Although escapist films remained box-office winners, the position changed somewhat in the final year of the war. The [British government](#) was inspired to import American film-making talent to make two overtly propagandist films. First, D.W. Griffith himself was brought to Europe to make *Hearts of the World* (1918) in a project originally envisaged as a means of undermining American neutrality but which was able to develop as straightforward propaganda after America entered the war. The British then employed Herbert Brenon to direct the so-called National Film, a propaganda feature that was to have depicted the horrors of an imagined German *Invasion of Britain* (one of the possible intended titles) but which remained unfinished when the war ended in November 1918. The second film, which represented a level of anti-German sentiment scarcely seen even in 1914, was the result of government concerns that the civilian population was losing its commitment to the war and needed to have it rekindled through the efforts of a National War Aims Committee. Meanwhile, the American film industry generated several patriotic calls to arms, from [Cecil B. DeMille \(1881-1959\)](#) *The Little American* (1917) to *My Four Years in Germany* (1918) and *The Kaiser, The Beast of Berlin* (1918). Many of these films revisited the image of the German soldier as rampaging barbarian, founded on the widespread stories of real and alleged [atrocities](#) in [Belgium](#) at the start of the war and recalling such episodes as the execution of [Edith Cavell \(1865-1915\)](#) and the [sinking of the \*Lusitania\*](#). Cecil B. DeMille also produced the epic *Joan the Woman* (1917), which presented the iconic [Joan of Arc \(1412-1431\)](#) as a transnational figure of unity and reconciliation for French, British, and American troops through a framing narrative set in a World War I trench.

## Animation and the “Star” System

Other film-related innovations employed in the cause of propaganda during the war were animation and exploitation of the emerging “star” system. Short animation films were widely employed in both Germany and Britain to promote investment in war loans or savings certificates and other patriotic duties: German examples were *Die Zauberschere* [The Magic Scissors] (1917) and *Der beste Schuss* [The Best Shot] (1918) while British equivalents include *The Story of the Camel and the Straw - New Version* (1918) and *Every Little Helps* (1918).

In Britain, more ambitious longer films inviting laughter at the enemy’s expense also began to appear. The theme of the Prussian Bully was taken up by [Lancelot Speed \(1860-1931\)](#) and his animated cartoons (known as “lightning sketches”) which sought to ridicule the Kaiser and German military might. They proved to be a great success with British audiences. Speed’s cinematic cartoons contained many topical references. In *The Bully Boy* (1915) the

audience were shown the German shelling of Rheims Cathedral – thought at the time to be the height of German barbarism. Speed (who can be seen in the film) draws a picture of Rheims Cathedral and across the sketch writes: “The World’s Greatest Gothic Work”. He then draws a large artillery weapon, similar to [Big Bertha](#), that destroys the cathedral, adding the title: “The Work of the World’s greatest GOTH!” The Kaiser appears with a devil emerging from his Prussian helmet to exclaim, “Do I hear any Cheers?” Accusations of German brutality and vilification or ridicule of the Kaiser were the hallmarks of British propaganda in the early years of the war. Films included *In the Clutches of the Hun* (1915) and *Under the German Yoke* (1915).<sup>19</sup> Other examples included *John Bull’s Animated Sketch Book* (1916), *The U-Tube* (1917) and *Britain’s Effort* (1918).

Film stars lent their names to a variety of propaganda causes on and off screen. British stars [Henry Edwards \(1882-1952\)](#) and [Chrissie White \(1895-1989\)](#), for example, portrayed a couple working out how to eat well in spite a shortage of key ingredients in *The Secret* (1918), [Matheson Lang \(1879-1948\)](#) supported the newly created Ministry of Food by appearing in the official government film to encourage the nation during a period of food rationing to *Eat Less Bread* (1918), while [George Robey \(1869-1954\)](#) appeared in person and in cartoon form to sell War Bonds in *Simple Simon* (1917-18). Popular stars such as [Ivy Close \(1890-1968\)](#) were featured in shorts such as *Women’s Land Army* (1917), calling for volunteers while declaring: “weeds, like U-Boats, must be exterminated!” as female workers are superimposed on the cornfields before the image of Britannia appears at the end to pay tribute to her “toiling sisters”. In Germany, the leading movie star [Henny Porten \(1890-1960\)](#) appeared in a Meister production *Hann, Hein und Henny* (1917) to promote the Seventh War Loan campaign.

[Charlie Chaplin \(1889-1977\)](#) made *The Bond* (1918) at his own expense to promote the sale of Liberty Bonds in the USA. Stars also appeared in person. [Douglas Fairbanks \(1883-1939\)](#), [Mary Pickford \(1892-1979\)](#) and Charlie Chaplin visited the wounded and led rallies to sell bonds and promote other good causes. In Britain, the star system was less well developed, but stage-and-screen actors such as George Robey and [Marie Lohr \(1890-1975\)](#) were filmed or photographed supporting merchant seamen or buying a savings bond at the “Tank Bank” in Trafalgar Square.

## The War’s Impact on Film Distribution and Production

Throughout the war, the ability of cinema managers to satisfy their patrons was of course dependent both on the survival of venues for the screening of films and the availability of appealing product. Neither of these preconditions was guaranteed in any of the combatant countries. The ability of cinemas to stay open during the war was threatened in many ways.

In extremis, cinemas might actually be closed by government or occupying authority, as happened in Belgium following the German invasion. Less dramatically, their ability to operate could be affected by the loss of capacity as conscription or the urge to volunteer took staff away to join the colours, or by the loss of programme content as the war disrupted domestic production and international distribution. Further threats to cinema audiences might come from ticket price increases caused by government action: the introduction of a levy on entertainment was one way for governments to seek to increase revenue in wartime and an entertainment tax introduced in Britain in 1916 added between 25 percent and 50 percent to the cost of a ticket. Later in the war, audiences became concerned that the cinema auditorium might be a place where they would find themselves at risk from new dangers such as aerial bombardment or the spread of infectious diseases including [influenza](#). The impact of many of these problems, however, was short-lived, or varied with prevailing conditions. In general, cinema audiences tended to increase during the war as civilian populations looked to the cinema for distraction and entertainment and occasionally for information or inspiration.

Disruption of film distribution was much more long lasting and far reaching than local dislocation of screening capacity. Before 1914, world cinema had been largely dominated by French, [Italian](#) and [Danish](#) productions, while traditional trading nations such as Britain had profited from participation in distribution even of films that had been produced elsewhere. On the outbreak of war, distribution of product was at best made more difficult by the circumstances of war; at worst, markets were cut off from suppliers altogether. Once at war, nations would sever all trade links with enemy countries, including those of cinema distribution: French films would no longer be screened in Germany or in the cinemas of [German-occupied Belgium](#), and German films would in the same way become unavailable in Russia. Even between allies and neutrals, the circumstances of war inhibited distribution: the combined territories of Germany and the [Austro-Hungarian Empire](#) formed a physical land barrier between film producers and many of their potential markets, while sea transport was restricted by the imposition of blockades and by the prioritisation of more important war cargoes. The First World War was thus to bring about significant change in patterns of film production, with enhanced domestic production in some countries (notably Germany and Russia) but above all with the eclipse of the old market-leaders by the new super-power of world cinema, Hollywood.

## Conclusion

The First World War brought about momentous changes in all aspects of everyday life, and none more so than in the breaking down of authoritarian attitudes towards the urban masses and a grudging recognition of their importance to the war effort and the role that cinema had

in both informing and entertaining them. The war was also an occasion for a significant shift in cultural attitudes towards cinema, and a stimulus for changes in several aspects of what was to become both a major industry and *the* popular entertainment medium of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These included both changes in the types of film that were made and a major and permanent geographic and economic shift in the location of the global centre for film production and distribution. The war also prompted new attitudes to the suitability of cinema as a medium for propaganda and engagement, although those who looked closely could see that it was not necessarily easy to ensure that the outcomes of a film propaganda initiative would match the intentions with which it was launched. A medium that had been widely despised as the war began had become a major part of politics and society by the time it ended. In 1913, the Tsar of Russia had spoken disparagingly of film as a “farcical business” but by 1922, Russia’s new ruler [Vladimir Ilyich Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#) was reported as saying that “of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important”.<sup>20</sup>

## Postscript: First World War Film after the First World War

After the Armistice in November 1918, Hollywood completed the production of some films with anti-German themes, but cinema-going audiences in the major combatant countries showed little appetite for such fare and producers generally avoided war as a topic for feature films for several years. This avoidance was not universal, however: France in this period produced the powerfully anti-war *J'accuse*, (1919) by [Abel Gance \(1889-1981\)](#), Belgium used film to reassert its independence after having suffered occupation for much of the war through films such as *La Belgique Martyre* (1919) and Hollywood produced [Rex Ingram \(1892-1950\)](#) *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), a success both because of its epic scale and its new star, [Rudolph Valentino \(1895-1926\)](#).

If largely absent from screens in feature film form, however, the war was seen there in a number of documentaries. Several nations produced series or single films re-telling the story of the war through compilations of contemporary footage with titles such as *Our Empire’s Fight for Freedom* (UK, 1918), *The World’s Greatest Story* (UK, 1919), and *A la gloire du troupier Belge* (Belgium, 1919), *Pictorial History of the World War* (USA, 1919); the 1927 Soviet documentary *Padeniye dinasti romanovikh* [The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty] produced by [Esther Shub \(1894-1959\)](#) to mark the tenth anniversary of the [Bolshevik Revolution](#) represents possibly a high water mark of this tradition. Commercial distributors and individual lecturers also recycled film from the more picturesque theatres of war for a peacetime second life: [Lowell Thomas \(1892-1981\)](#) projection of his exploits *With Lawrence in Arabia* (1919) is the most famous example of this trend, but very far from the only one. A

series of films made by British Instructional Films between 1921 and 1927, successfully combining actuality film of the war with staged reconstructions of particular episodes, from *The Battle of Jutland* (1921) to *The Battles of the Coronel and Falkland Islands* (1927), stimulated the production of similar films in other countries, for example [Léon Poirier \(1884-1968\)](#) *Verdun, visions d'histoire* (France, 1927) and *Unsere Emden* (Germany, 1926).

From the mid-1920s, the war returned as a subject for films, including a number of epic productions deploying the full resources of major film studios, often with the cooperation of armed forces. In keeping with the atmosphere of the time, the sympathy of these films was, however, generally with the suffering of those affected by a war the purpose of which was often far from clear. Even the more spectacular films, such as *The Big Parade* (1925) and *Wings* (1927) spoke of the futility of war, and the tendency became more direct in the 1930s. Three films from 1930 – *Vier von der Infanterie* [“Four from the Infantry”, also known as *Westfront 1918*] from Germany, the filmed version of *Journey's End* (UK) and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (USA) – openly invited an anti-war response, while two further German films in 1931, *Niemandsland* [literally “No Man’s Land”], released in the USA as “Hell on Earth” and *Kameradschaft* [“Comradeship”] (1931) explored the common humanity of people traditionally expected to be enemies, the latter substituting a mine in a border area for actual trenches. The National Socialist regime that came to power in Germany in 1933 suppressed such films for their “defeatist” tendencies, being happier with films like *Morgenrot* [Dawn] (1933) that offered a more conventional approach to heroism; the [Fascist](#) regime in Italy also favoured films such as *Le Scarpe al Sole* (1935) and *Tredici Uomini e un Cannone* (1936) as showing a conventionally acceptable approach to the First World War. Elsewhere, however, the war continued to be reviled, as in *Forgotten Men* (1934), or analysed for its illogicality, for example in [Jean Renoir \(1894-1979\)](#) classic *La Grande Illusion* (1937); it could however also be used simply as an introduction to comedy or a crime film, as [Stan Laurel \(1890-1965\)](#) and [Oliver Hardy \(1892-1957\)](#) *Block-Heads* (1938) or *They Gave Him a Gun* (1937). On the very eve of America’s entry into the war, [Howard Hawks \(1896-1977\)](#) *Sergeant York* (1941) devoted itself to a First World War American hero – but one with his roots in pacifism and with no taste for glory after he had earned it.

Since the Second World War, a large majority of war films have centred on the more recent conflict, which has enjoyed the box-office advantages of a stronger presence in national memory and greater clarity of moral issues and outcome. A small number of films about the earlier World War have still appeared from time to time. The methods used by films of this type have ranged in scale from large set-piece battles, as in [Stanley Kubrick \(1928-1999\)](#) *Paths of Glory* (1958) or Steven Spielberg’s *War Horse* (2011), to small-scale, almost intimate dramas such as *King and Country* (1964), and in style from the exuberant pantomime of *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969) to the carefully accurate re-enactment of *The Trench* (1999). There

have also been attempts to re-visit the successes of the pre-war period, with a transposition of *Journey's End* to the war in the air in *Aces High* (1976) and attempted re-makes of *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1962) and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1979). At least as often, however, films explored these themes at one remove from the battlefield, looking at the impact of war through stories of soldiers wounded physically or mentally – included in this group would be *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971), *Regeneration* (1997) and *La chambre des officiers* [The Officers' Ward] (2000) – through those left to deal at home with the effects of the war, as in *Testament of Youth* (2015), to those tasked with trying to tidy up its aftermath, as in *La Vie et rien d'autre* [Life and Nothing But] (1989) and *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* [A Very Long Engagement] (2004). Another group of films worth noting are those that use the war to make points about emerging national identity, such as *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Light Horsemen* (1987), both exploring an [Australian perspective](#) on the war, *Passchendaele* (2008) for the Canadians, or *Hedd Wyn* (1992) for the Welsh. In these films, national issues as well as class ones are raised, as incompetent or heartless British commanders treat “colonial” troops as cannon fodder.

Almost as many films notionally “about” the First World War have, however, avoided the “real” issues raised by the carnage of the ground fighting on the [Western Front](#) and found more appealing possibilities in the air war – examples would include *The Blue Max* (1966), *Von Richthofen and Brown*, also known as *The Red Baron*, (1971) or *Flyboys* (2006) – or in epic adventure in exotic settings, exploring issues of personal character and motivation rather than anything directly relating to the war, as in *The African Queen* (1951) and even perhaps *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). A number of films have strayed still further from the reality of 1914-1918, using the war simply as a backdrop to flights of fancy such as *Zeppelin* (1971), *Biggles: Adventures in Time* (1986) or *Britannic* (2000) and the horror film *Deathwatch* (2002).

A medium that emerged from the war as a widely accepted vehicle for propaganda and patriotic commitment has thus become in the course of the next ninety-five years a routine opportunity for anti-war and other anti-establishment sentiment. Where films were once seen as an opportunity to bring the reality of a current war home to the civilian population, newer productions include several where the Great War has become no more than a generic backdrop for stories that could just as easily have been framed as westerns or as science fiction films. Both tendencies reflect, perhaps, the transition of the war from an aspect of shared memory to a mere part of history.

Roger Smither, Imperial War Museums, London



## Selected Filmography

*Bei unseren Helden an der Somme* (Germany, 1917)

*Cabiria* (Italy, 1914, Giovanni Pastrone)

*Der magische Gürtel* (Germany, 1917)

*Hearts of the World* (USA, 1918, D. W. Griffith)

*Intolerance* (USA, 1916, D. W. Griffith)

*La Femme française pendant la guerre* (France, 1917)

*L'altro esercito (La mobilitazione industriale italiana)* (Italy, 1918)

*Maudite soit la guerre* (Belgium, 1914, Alfred Machin)

*Mrs John Bull Prepared* (Great Britain, 1918)

*Quo Vadis?* (Italy, 1912, Enrico Guazzoni)

*The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* (Great Britain, 1917)

*The Battle of the Somme* (Great Britain, 1916)

*The Birth of a Nation* (USA, 1915, D. W. Griffith)

*The Little American* (USA, 1917, Cecil B. DeMille)

## Notes

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## External Links

- [Bundesarchiv: Bei unseren Helden an der Somme, Germany 1917 \(Filmportal\) \(Video\)](#)
- [DeMille, Cecil B.: The little American, 1917 \(Internet Archive\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Der magische Gürtel, Germany 1917 \(European Film Gateway\) \(Video\)](#)
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- [Griffith, D.W.: Hearts of the world, USA 1918 \(Internet Archive\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Griffith, D.W.: Intolerance, USA 1916 \(Internet Archive\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Griffith, D.W.: The Birth of a Nation, USA 1915 \(Internet Archive\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Leyda, Jay: Kino: A history of the Russian and Soviet film, London 1960 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Machin, Alfred: Maudite soit la guerre, Belgium 1914 \(European Film Gateway\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Messter-Woche newsreels \(European Film Gateway\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Mrs John Bull Prepared, Great Britain 1918 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)
- [The Battle of Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks, 1917 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)
- [The U-Tube, 1917 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Primary Source\)](#)

- [War Office: Britain Prepared, Great Britain 1915 \(Imperial War Museums\) \(Video\)](#)
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