

Making Sense of the War

By [Jo Fox](#)

Summary

Claims to “just war” formed the basis for the propaganda campaigns of the First World War. Propaganda on all sides focused on three interrelated issues to endorse the decision to enter the conflict: international and natural law, concepts of civilization and barbarism, and the challenge of modernity. For all the connections between such themes, propaganda could also contain tensions, the public selecting ideas that bolstered their own personal beliefs on the origins of the conflict. This essay draws together contemporary claims to “legitimate authority”, particularly during the early years of war, and considers how those positions were made acceptable to the public.

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Introduction: The Politics of Justifying War

The politics of justifying the Great War is a live issue: it continues to be used to define ideological positions by substituting complex explanations of the past with reductive, monochromatic clichés replicating the grand [propaganda](#) narratives that justified the conflict in August 1914. In [Britain](#), for example, Michael Gove, the Conservative Secretary of State for Education, ignited the debate at the launch of the one-hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of war by denouncing “left-wing academics” and the “myths” perpetuated by the British television series *Blackadder*. Gove’s intervention emphasises the power and endurance of war propaganda. Simply repeating the tropes of the early war years, he suggested that “the ruthless social Darwinism of the German elites, the pitiless approach they took to occupation, their aggressively expansionist war aims and their scorn for the international order all made resistance more than justified.” Gove condemned *Blackadder*’s scriptwriters as adopting the “attitude of an undergraduate cynic playing to the gallery in a Cambridge Footlights revue”,

contributing little “to a proper historical debate”.¹ Far from it. Baldrick’s confusion over the ostrich and Blackadder’s difficulty in explaining the origins of the war strike at the heart of historically significant questions: how did contemporaries understand the reasons for conflict and mass mobilization? How did they make sense of the war unfolding around them? Did they believe the war to be “just”, worthy of sacrifice, and what did they understand by the notion of a “just war”? The latter question did not occur to Gove when he claimed that “The First World War may have been a uniquely horrific war, but it was also plainly a just war...” Not only is Gove’s claim to the “unique” horror of the war dubious, but he failed to acknowledge that what constitutes a “just war” is a matter of legal, moral, ethical and historical debate. It is far more important to ask how contemporaries conceptualised notions of “just war” in the context of the global conflict of 1914-1918 and to consider the close relationship between justifying war and propaganda.

The divisions of the just war tradition – the decision to resort to military action (*jus ad bellum*), how war is conducted (*jus in bello*), and post-war accountability (*jus post bellum*) – formed the bedrock of First World War propaganda and the historical debates that surrounded it.² Just as nation-centric interpretations of the origins, course and nature of the war conceded ground to “enmeshed” transnational explanations,³ historians have moved toward more complex positions regarding the interactions between official and unofficial propaganda. Propaganda provided the means of articulating justifications for war, but the public retained its power to accept or reject them.

Official justifications for war tend to remain fixed (imperial, “crusading”, obligatory, humanitarian, preventative, “liberating”, “ideological”, defensive, etc.), but may be understood variably by belligerents and the public. For [Hew Strachan](#), [war aims](#) became “a retrospective effort to give shape to something bigger”, articulated in terms of “big ideas”, philosophical and ideological constructs that held more emotive and persuasive power than “definable objectives”.⁴ All sides recognised the conflict as *Der Krieg der Geister* (War with Spiritual Weapons).⁵ [H. G. Wells \(1866-1946\)](#) ended his 1914 treatise, *The War That Will End War*, by conceptualising the “war of the mind”, a war that promised to engage

every man who writes or talks and has the slightest influence upon another creature...All the realities of this war are things of the mind. This is a conflict of cultures, and nothing else in the world. All the world-wide pain and weariness, fear and anxieties, the bloodshed and destruction, the innumerable torn bodies of men and horses, the stench of putrefaction, the misery of hundreds of millions of human beings, the waste of mankind, are but the material consequences of a false philosophy and foolish thinking. We fight not to destroy a nation, but

a nest of evil ideas.⁶

This was, Wells suggested, a transitional moment in the battle for the modern mind.

While the broad terms of the debate may have been set by intellectuals, “the high diction of 1914 was speaking to a mood, not dictating it”.⁷ The propaganda of the First World War is defined by the interconnection between the “big ideas”, and the interaction between official and unofficial discourse resulting in the proliferation of messages contained within state-orchestrated campaigns. This was a two-way process: the public were active participants in the creation and dissemination of the message.⁸ “The war of ideas” tapped into deeply held beliefs and values that led to self-mobilisation and the popular replication of well-known stories, events and themes, particularly those resonating with domestic concerns. Popular demand fuelled and shaped propaganda, and propaganda fuelled and shaped popular demand. This was sometimes motivated by less altruistic concerns: as [Jay Winter](#) argues, “the war was recreated in a romantic or romanticised form primarily because it sold. The myth of war enthusiasm was good business. Profit-making and proselytising were far from incompatible activities”.⁹

Justifications for war were manifold. Themes often coalesced and were self-reinforcing. This essay explores three connected propaganda themes: [international](#) and natural law, concepts of civilization and barbarism, and the challenge of modernity. For all the connections between such themes, propaganda could also contain and hold tensions, the public selecting ideas that bolstered their own personal beliefs on the origins of the conflict. This essay draws together contemporary claims to “legitimate authority”, particularly during the early years of war, and considers how those positions were made acceptable to the public.

Intellectual Justifications

In his analysis of the “ideas of 1914”, Strachan points to the fusion of international law, designated through treaties and conventions, and natural law, claiming moral authority, frequently on behalf of organised religion. “Law”, Strachan asserts, “was...indivisible: the law which regulated international relations was in principle the same as that which upheld the rights of property, the sanctity of marriage, and the workings of credit”.¹⁰ His observation derives, in part, from [G. W. Prothero’s \(1848-1922\)](#) identification of “law” as comprising the foundations of civilised society and providing for international political and economic stability:

...if treaties are thus to be broken with impunity, if the most solemn international agreements can be thrown aside the moment they prove irksome to a great military Power, what

becomes of all international morality? ... If international morality is regarded as of no account, a heavy blow is dealt at commercial and private morality as well. The reign of Law, the greatest mark of civilisation, is maimed in all its parts. We should not tolerate, because we cannot afford to tolerate, such conduct between man and man. Why should we condone it between nation and nation?¹¹

The German invasion of [neutral](#) Belgium on 4 August 1914 was interpreted as a simultaneous assault on moral order, the rule of law, Christian values, and civilisation. Allied propagandists made much of German Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg's \(1856-1921\)](#) denunciation of the Treaty of London as a mere "scrap of paper". This became the strapline for hard-hitting visual propaganda,¹² while authors lost little time in condemning Bethmann Hollweg's pronouncement to the Reichstag that "necessity knows no law".¹³

G. W. Prothero's intervention was redolent of early publicity campaigns that sought to justify war. These campaigns were primarily an intellectual affair characterised by scholarly exchange and infused with claims to "high culture" that legitimised national political positions. The British "Authors' Declaration", published in the *Times* on 18 September 1914 and coordinated by [Charles Masterman's \(1873-1927\)](#) central propaganda agency at Wellington House, saw [Rudyard Kipling \(1865-1936\)](#), [Arthur Conan Doyle \(1859-1930\)](#), [G. K. Chesterton \(1874-1936\)](#), H. G. Wells, [Thomas Hardy \(1840-1928\)](#), and [G. M. Trevelyan \(1876-1962\)](#) among others declaring the war to be "righteous". Britain had come to the defence of the "Sanctity of Treaties and the rights of small nations" lest "they count for nothing before the threat of naked force". Blurring legal and moral authority, the Declaration moved deftly between the rational and emotional, asserting, in particular, that "to permit the ruin of France would be a crime against liberty and civilization".¹⁴ Such statements fused British and French intellectual interventions, the latter characterized by the "Manifesto by French Universities to the Universities of Neutral Countries" on 3 November 1914 and [Henri Bergson's \(1859-1941\)](#) address to the *Académie des science morales et politiques* on 8 August 1914.¹⁵ The former was itself a response to the German *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt* ("Manifesto of the 93") of 4 October that argued for war as a defensive, pre-emptive measure against French and Russian encirclement, adopting a Social Darwinian perspective that characterized Prussian militarism as progressive and asserted the German right to expand:

As representatives of German Science and Art, we hereby protest to the civilized world against the lies and calumnies with which our enemies are endeavoring to stain the honor of Germany in her hard struggle for existence – in a struggle that has been forced on her... It is not true that we trespassed in neutral Belgium. It has been proved that France and England

had resolved on such a trespass, and it has likewise been proved that Belgium had agreed to their doing so. It is not true that our warfare pays no respects to international laws...; It is not true that the combat against our so-called militarism is not a combat against our civilization, as our enemies hypocritically pretend it is. Were it not for German militarism, German civilization would long since have been extirpated...

In these intellectual treatises, the ideas of 1914 confronted the ideas of 1789, both mobilized by scholars in an attempt to lay claim to the future.¹⁶ Propagandistic discourse played out a clash between stasis and reinvention. Although this discourse had the potential to fragment justifications of war, it instead pointed to propaganda's ability to hold conflicting views if underpinned by an overarching conclusion: that this was a war for the defence of "civilization". This process is best explained through J. Turner Johnson's theory of just war as the search for a just peace, in which the search for peace becomes "a dynamic concept that introduces a progressive element into just war thinking". War has the potential to "improve" society and the international structure,¹⁷ a notion prevalent in both progressive and conservative views of the purpose of war in 1914.

The German invasion of [Belgium](#), therefore, was interpreted variously as a challenge to the status quo that ripped the fabric of civil society, reigniting fears of the instability created by 18th and 19th century European revolutions, and an affront to the principles of "liberty, fraternity and equality" enshrined in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man. One of the striking aspects of the just war propaganda was the dominance of notions of rebirth or renewal. The established [Church](#) invoked the term "Holy War", seizing an opportunity to reposition religion within national life in an increasingly secular age.¹⁸ The Bishop of London, [Arthur Winnington-Ingram \(1858-1946\)](#), appealed to congregations in crusading terms:

The church can best help the nation first of all by making it realize that it is engaged in a Holy War... Christ died on Good Friday for Freedom, Honour, and Chivalry, and our boys are dying for the same thing... You ask for my advice in a sentence as to what the Church is to do. I answer; MOBILIZE THE NATION FOR A HOLY WAR.¹⁹

The Russian Orthodox Church pronounced it the "duty of the clergy to use symbols of the church to encourage and incite patriotic feeling for the war".²⁰ [France](#) drew on the national symbol of [Joan of Arc \(1412-1431\)](#), with Auxerre Cathedral's newly installed stained glass window carrying the words: "I have been sent by God the King of Heaven to drive you out of all France."²¹ In Belgium, [propaganda](#) emphasized the attack on the Church, symbolized by the destruction of Louvain. This became a call to local resistance,²² while German troops

justified their actions by claiming that Catholic priests were part of an illegal insurrection, the basis of which lay in the identification “of Belgian Catholicism and its intellectual institutions as an expression of cultural identity which was Germany’s enemy”.²³ Propagandistic slogans simplified complex theological justifications by claiming spiritual preference: *Gott mit Uns, Gott strafe England, Dieu protège la France*.²⁴ [Religious supplications](#) were put to work in conceiving the war as a form of salvation that purged modern ills.

War’s ability to reinvent the modern world also found expression in the defence of democratic values. [James Montgomery Flagg’s \(1877-1960\)](#) 1917 recruitment poster for the New York Mayor’s Committee features a sleeping Liberty, with civilization in need of her assistance.²⁵ The idea that war could revitalize or awaken democracy provided an additional justification for war. Casting the war as an opportunity to complete the Revolution, [Jean-Richard Bloch \(1884-1947\)](#), enlisting in France on 2 August 1914, wrote: “The war of the revolution against feudalism is reopening. Will the armies of the Republic assure the triumph of democracy in Europe and perfect the work of 1793? That will be more than the unavoidable war for home and hearth, that will be the awakening of liberty”.²⁶ [Italy’s](#) futurists championed war’s ability to clear away the old order to make way for the new.²⁷ In the “Futurist Manifesto”, published in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1909, [Filippo Tommaso Marinetti \(1876-1944\)](#) suggested the transnational appeal of redemptive war prior to 1914, describing battle as “the world’s only hygiene – [militarism](#), patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman”.²⁸ This was a pan-European phenomenon – with German historians and philosophers drawing connections between imperial expansion, war and [social Darwinism](#), and the challenge of young nations with modern values to old nations holding onto 19th century powerbases.²⁹

Those powerbases rested in part on imperial possession. One of the most fascinating and multi-dimensional explanations of the just war, *King Albert’s Book: a tribute to the Belgian King and people from representative men and women throughout the World* (1914), contained homilies from Sir Sultan [Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III \(1877-1957\)](#), the Viceroy of [India](#), [Charles Hardinge, Baron Hardinge of Penshurst \(1858-1944\)](#), Sir [Francis Reginald Wingate \(1861-1953\)](#) of Khartoum, and Earl [Frederick Sleigh Roberts \(1832-1914\)](#) of Kandahar.³⁰ German propagandists seized on the inequities of [empire](#) to point to British hypocrisy. Propaganda did not focus on the right to self-determination (a theme exploited by the Nazis in the Second World War). Instead it accused the British of preventing emergent nations from expansion, denying them access to the resources and territories the British had exploited for so long.³¹ [German propaganda](#) reworked the imperial narrative of “civilization”

and barbarism to conclude that the Allied war effort brought “primitive” soldiers from the colonies to commit [atrocities](#) on European soil, just as their own image as a civilized nation was under allied scrutiny.³²

Despite appeals for the continuity of European empires, war came to be seen as a moment of national (re-)birth elsewhere, particularly in the dominions and colonies. In [Australia](#), appeals to the “Sons of the Empire from overseas” to “come to the aid of the Mother Country” increasingly gave way to new forms of national identity, epitomized by the Australian journalist and historian [Charles E.W. Bean’s \(1879-1968\)](#) identification of war as “the supreme test” of nationhood;³³ in India, the mechanized violence of war called “western civilization” into question and promoted the return to a pre-colonial nation, championed by, among others, [Mahatma Gandhi \(1869-1948\)](#);³⁴ and the distraction of war in Europe offered space for [China](#) to reassert some control over its resources.³⁵

However, *King Albert’s* book went beyond the defence of empire. It represented an international coalition against German aggression, championed by political and religious leaders to artists and authors. It showcased, for example, a dedication from [Claude Monet \(1840-1926\)](#) and sheet music for [Victor Hugo’s \(1802-1885\)](#) *Pour La Patrie*, alongside rich colour illustrations from across Europe. The volume seemed to demonstrate that (at least temporarily and superficially) wartime unity overcame pre-war division: this applied to politics, religion, gender and nation. The early months of the war saw a universal pull to unity. [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#) conjured the nation as a family, a community seamlessly bound together by a shared heritage and soil, through France’s [Union Sacrée](#).³⁶ The British “Authors’ Declaration” emphasised unity in their interpretation of the causes of war and Britain’s obligations, despite divergent political standpoints. Oxford’s historians consolidated their arguments with claims to objectivity and scholarly convergence: “we are not politicians”, they declared, and “we belong to different schools of political thought. We have written this book to set forth the causes of the present war, and the principles we believe to be at stake. We have some experience”.³⁷ A national truce was proclaimed in [Russia](#), while Bethmann Hollweg pronounced the *Burgfrieden* in Germany.³⁸ The latter was a fragile construct. While the notion of a political truce and war as an antidote to domestic strife held some sway, as [David Welch](#) has argued, it “could not survive a long war... [T]he superficial harmony of 1914 was a far cry from the ‘national community’ (*Volksgemeinschaft*) invoked by the *Burgfrieden*”.³⁹ Despite the tensions between propaganda and the lived reality on all sides, the cumulative effect of the battle for hearts and minds had a profound influence on the public, creating a multi-faceted and layered psychological offensive that blurred the

distinctions between the propagandist and propagandee. This dynamic process generated an explosive environment replicating [Jacques Ellul's \(1912-1994\)](#) identification of the interplay between horizontal propaganda (that produced, arguably, spontaneously from within society to meet specific needs) and vertical propaganda (that emanating from the state).⁴⁰

Civilisation and Barbarism

High-minded ideas alone were insufficient to compel the man in the street to enlist or to justify conscription. News of the violation of the Treaty of London was quickly supplemented by allegations of atrocities perpetrated against Belgian (and later French) civilians. This marked out a brutal, ruthless war that flouted the [Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907](#). [Nicoletta Gullace's](#) research has brought into sharp focus the relationship between appeals to uphold international treaties and the rule of law and emotive [atrocities propaganda](#). She argues that justifications of war were frequently gendered, intended to enrage popular sentiment and incite action, without entirely neglecting the legal, theological and diplomatic debates. "Although atrocities propaganda did not adequately represent the political aims of the Allies or even accurately portray the brutality of the German army", she argues, "it was central to the privileging of an image of international law and a definition of the liberal state that located the safety of women and the family as the primary issue of the public realm".⁴¹ Echoing G. W. Prothero's consolidation of legal and moral order, popular appeals blended treaty violation, the violation of women, and threats to the sanctity of the home. The Dutch illustrator [Louis Raemaekers \(1869-1956\)](#) seemed to capture the moral and legal justification for war whilst offering a sensationalised interpretation: that the destruction of conventions and treaties equated to the slaughter of the highly feminized "Belgium" at the hands of a masculine, barbaric foe. The significance of Raemaekers' illustration may be found in the shift from textual to visual justifications for war.⁴² Imagery could condense and simplify complex political, legal and moral issues: take, for example, [Wladyslaw Starewicz's \(1882-1965\)](#) 1915 animated allegorical short film, *Liliya Belgii* (*Lily of Belgium*), that saw a peaceful and defenceless (Belgian) forest, ravaged by (German) stag beetles, and saved by (Russian) pine cones.⁴³

Claims to civilization and the denunciation of barbarism, inherent within intellectual justifications for war, lay at the heart of the ubiquitous textual and visual atrocities propaganda of the First World War.⁴⁴ German *Kultur* stood in opposition to the individualism of the French philosophical tradition, inspired by a new Fichtean *Geist*.⁴⁵ This quickly took on negative connotations at the hands of Allied propagandists, who contrasted the intellectual construction of German "civilization" with their conduct in war. Accounts from across Europe

formed the basis of a series of official enquiries. Forensic scientist Professor [R. Archibald Reiss \(1875-1929\)](#) categorised and quantified the types of atrocities perpetrated by Austro-Hungarian troops against the Serbs. His report was both graphic and precise in tone; it mobilised emotion, notably in the [sexualised torture of women](#), the murder of innocents and the brutality of the acts themselves, but it also used evidence, “fact” and testimony that afforded authority and legitimacy.

Reiss’s account was similar to several publications of the same period, including the “Colour books”, and, most well known, the Report of the Commission into Alleged German atrocities, or the Bryce Report, named after the Chair of the Committee, a former British Ambassador to the [United States](#), member of the House of Lords, and known German sympathiser before 1914.⁴⁶ The allegations contained within Allied reports were almost universal: the destruction of homes, historical monuments, medieval libraries, and religious buildings; acts of violence against civilians and the use of [weapons](#) forbidden by the Hague Convention; the violation of women; and the murder of innocents – women, [children](#), the elderly, men of God. This was a transnational phenomenon which made the propaganda appear all the more convincing and credible. It was total and ubiquitous.

Individual testimonies from the reports were extracted to provide for salacious [newspaper articles](#), exhibitions (such as that by Louis Raemaekers in London in 1915), or popular books. [William Le Queux’s \(1864-1927\)](#) characterisation of the Germans as “one vast gang of Jack-the-Rippers...frothing with military Nietzscheism” and excited by “a primitive barbarism” was replicated in numerous forms, creating a dynamic, transformative and self-reinforcing propaganda environment.⁴⁷ In particular, acts of sexual violence provoked moral outrage and confirmed the need to go to war. Sensationalised accounts, an “expressive and creative act”, in the words of the historians [John Horne](#) and [Alan Kramer](#), conveyed the emotional force of the war and those who experienced it. The illustrated *Livre Rouge*, for example, gave official accounts a visual identity and made them populist in tone. One plate depicted the fate of a woman aged twenty-three who lived in Maixe. The caption claimed that on the night of 23-24 August, nine German soldiers raped her. The representation of gang rape, perpetrated by a primitive horde, dehumanised by the illustrator’s decision to obscure their eyes, underscored, as Ruth Harris observed, “the traumatized sentiments of an invaded nation which, especially in the early days, strongly felt the possibility of dismemberment”.⁴⁸

Reports of children and husbands being present during such violence, most evocatively captured by [Abel Faivre’s \(1867-1945\) Ma Maman](#),⁴⁹ served not only to bolster the image of the heartless, brutal German, but to emphasise that such acts had been *witnessed*, claiming an authenticity for the atrocity stories. Collectively, the atrocity stories provided an

interpretative framework for each new act perpetrated by the Germans. The power of the atrocity stories was derived from their cumulative effect – individual events and acts may have had a particular resonance, but it was the collective nature of the propaganda that made it so potent. This provided a basis for propagandists to intensify the psychological effect and seemingly provide incontrovertible evidence to justify war.

Atrocity propaganda peaked in 1915 due to a confluence of events: [Zeppelin](#) raids began in January, unrestricted [submarine warfare](#) was declared in February, [poison gas](#) was used in the second [battle of Ypres](#) in April, the [Lusitania](#) was sunk in May, and [Edith Cavell \(1865-1915\)](#) was “assassinated” in October. Once again, it was the transnational nature of these incidents that enabled the propaganda message to be replicated and reinforced in several contexts. Poison gas did not discriminate, and the poignancy of Cavell’s story transcended the nationality of the victim. Italian, French, Belgian and British illustrators set to work capturing the moment of her death and her resurrection as a symbol of the “just war”. The sinking of the *Lusitania* was presented as a brutal assault on innocent victims from Britain, [the Netherlands](#), [Sweden](#), [Norway](#), [Persia](#), [Greece](#), Russia, Mexico, Belgium, [Poland](#), [Finland](#), Argentina, France, [Ireland](#) and the United States. The targeting of women and children gave rise to hard-hitting [photographic](#) representations of the dead.⁵⁰ The atrocity prompted “Lusitania riots”, directed at the [German population living in Britain](#).⁵¹

However, [Adrian Gregory](#) warns against over-emphasising the international over the domestic. In Britain, “If Louvain was the ‘intellectuals’ Sarajevo’, for the mass of the population the definitive moment which proved beyond question the barbarity of their opponents was the bombardment of Hartlepool and Scarborough”.⁵² Early raids in Britain and France prompted denunciations that mirrored the debates over international and natural law. The *Times* commented on 21 January 1915 that “The German Government and the German people alike have made it clear...to the whole world that they are ready to commit any outrage and do not propose to obey any of the laws of GOD or man... We will fight honourably, in the assurance...that the earth will be purged of these relapses into barbarism”.⁵³ Such appeals were supplemented by dramatic visual imagery invoking the sanctity of the home and the protection of innocents, equating enlistment with a carefully crafted notion of [masculinity](#). Rather than widespread panic, argues [Susan Grayzel](#), the raids prompted a “stoicism” that “created an equivalency between soldiers and civilians, and between home front and front lines”, a defining feature of the 20th century’s “[total wars](#)”.⁵⁴

Allied propaganda revealed how different thematic strands, not necessarily created by an organized, coordinated, and consolidated global propaganda campaign (this would be

exceptionally difficult in any case), combined to create an intoxicating environment. Narratives built on pre-existing beliefs and, as such, did more to confirm and reinforce than to create opinion anew. The campaigns also drew healthy profits for the media: “Being beastly to the Hun was good business; fair-mindedness might be ruinous”.⁵⁵ Press magnates knew their market, and exploited it to the full.

German propaganda simply could not counter the sheer volume and international scale of these campaigns. German attempts to accuse the Russians, French and Belgians of similar crimes (in 1914 and in the past) did not reach or convince an international audience, and instead simply detracted from a clear statement of war aims at home.⁵⁶ Moreover, by responding to Allied accusations, the Germans seemed to confirm their actions. The “Manifesto of the 93” legitimised the retaliation of German soldiers against illegal civilian resisters, asserting that German troops had acted within international law. The German Foreign Ministry’s “White Book” also sought to exonerate German troops as the victims of an illegal and unrelenting “people’s war” conducted by Belgian civilians, the *franc tireurs*, a spectre of the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian war that continued to haunt German soldiers.⁵⁷ Their strategy centred on denouncing allied claims of barbarity by asserting intellectual and social superiority. Such claims fell flat: indeed in the hands of the Allies, they simply became yet another means of justifying war to the public.

The Challenge of Modernity

The particular manifestation of [modern war](#) “provided...an existential as well as political shock” and caused a shift in the “paradigmatic perception of war for most Europeans and Americans in the twentieth century”.⁵⁸ Reference to reinvention and palingenesis were frequently accompanied by allusion to the problems or opportunities presented by modernity. Author G. K. Chesterton captured the tension between “progress” and humanity in his accompanying caption to a 1916 cartoon by Raemaekers:

Europe is represented as dragged and broken upon the wheel as in the old torture; but the wheel is that of a modern cannon, so that the dim background can be filled in with the suggestion of a wholly modern machinery. This is a very true satire; for there are many scientific persons who seem to be quite reconciled to the crushing of humanity by a vague mechanical environment in which there are wheels within wheels.... The artist had not to draw pain but to draw despair; and while the pain is old enough the particular despair is modern. The victim racked for a creed could at least cry ‘I am converted.’ But here even the terms of surrender are unknowable; and she can only ask ‘Am I civilized?’⁵⁹

Allied propagandists turned German claims of advancement into ethical questions over the deployment of technology in [warfare](#), accusing [Germany](#) of flouting the Hague Conventions governing *jus in bello*. [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) condemned Germany's "vacuous voice of Krupps' artillery".⁶⁰ [Technology](#) did not guarantee human advancement or civilization. Depictions of aerial attacks once again mobilized chivalric tradition to posit that Prussian military culture "[embodied] a deviant masculinity" that victimised the innocent,⁶¹ its Zeppelin raiders "infertile rapists", according to a song by Jean Bastia.⁶²

After the use of poison gas at Ypres, the *Daily Mail* denounced German savagery for its "cold blooded employment of every device of modern science, asphyxiating bombs, incendiary discs and the like, irrespective of civilized warfare...The bewildering blend of primitive barbarity, low cunning and highly trained intellect which he comprises in the word 'Kultur'."⁶³ In Raemaekers' cartoon, the unorthodox (and illegal) weapon of war (represented by the snake) fells the unsuspecting soldier. [Eden Philpotts's \(1862-1960\)](#) accompanying caption reminded viewers that:

It is the force behind this application of it that has brought German Science to shame. A precious branch of human knowledge has been prostituted by lust of blood and greed of gain until Science, in common with all learning, comes simply to be regarded by the masters of Germany as one more weapon in the armoury, one more power to help win 'The Day.' ... Be sure an iron cross quickly hung over the iron heart that conceived and developed this filthy arm; for does it not offer the essence—quintessence of all 'frightfulness?' Does it not challenge every human nerve-centre by its horror?⁶⁴

Whether all belligerents used poison gas or whether its use contravened the law regarding the conduct of war was immaterial. Propagandists took the line that science and technology were in the service of an undeserving ideology. This message, once again, was entwined with debates over the rule of law, morality and ethics, and clearly drawn lines between "civilization" and "barbarism".

Conclusion

The First World War established propaganda as a force in modern society, for good or for ill. The 1920s and 1930s saw intense debates over the appropriate place for the persuasive arts in social, political, cultural, and economic spheres, the debate polarizing victors and vanquished, liberal democracies and emergent dictatorships. With the [Russian Revolution of 1917](#), propaganda found a place within internal peacetime politics. Regardless of one's stance on propaganda as a solution to or a cause of modern problems, all sides accepted that

it had profoundly influenced the outcome of the war. The perception mattered more than the historical reality.

Subsequent scholarship has rightly questioned the “silver bullet” or “hypodermic needle” effect of propaganda; it was instead a two-way process involving the public and the state in creating acceptable justifications for conflict that tapped into deep seated and long standing social beliefs, prejudices, and aspirations. The First World War demonstrates, if anything, the power of the masses in shaping its own narratives of conflict, for a propaganda campaign of this scale, scope, and intricacy could not have been created by state organizations alone. It is easy to emphasise the negative edge to atrocity propaganda; however, it could not have functioned without the positive flip side: the promotion of liberal democratic values and the rule of law. It was the deep links between debates over international and natural law, the (very real) atrocities committed during the war, and the battle for the future that made propaganda seeking to justify the Great War so potent – so potent, in fact, that it is possible to see its legacy in politicized explanations of the outbreak of war in 2015.

Jo Fox, Durham University

Notes

1. Michael Gove in: Shipman, Tim: Michael Gove blasts ‘Blackadder myths’ about the First World War spread by television sit-coms and left-wing academics, issued by Daily Mail, online:
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