

Propaganda at home and abroad

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Summary

This article summarizes and compares the principal arguments and strategies of propaganda at the home front, the military front, as well as in neutral and enemy countries. These included the Manichean approach, the ridiculing of the enemy, the use of scapegoats, the qualities of holding out, duty and sacrifice, the rewards promised for after the war, and the campaign against the enemy's political and cultural conceptions. The techniques of oral and printed indoctrination and the difficult distribution of the propaganda in neutral and enemy countries will then be analysed. The indoctrination of three target groups is studied separately: the propaganda against "own" soldiers, the enemy's soldiers and the enemy's minorities. Finally, the article discusses the thorny question of the effects of propaganda.

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“The ultimate purpose of this war is propaganda, the destruction of certain beliefs and the creation of others.” (H.G. Wells)¹

Introduction

My survey starts with a short summary of the fundamental aims of propaganda. It omits the propaganda organisations and the role of the propagandists because they are summarized in [Stephen Badsey’s](#) article “[Propaganda: Media in War Politics](#)” and in the regional thematic articles on propaganda.² The third section discusses the principal arguments of propaganda in an adaptation of [David Monger’s](#) categories of patriotism.³ This author distinguishes between the adversarial type, that is propaganda against the enemies at home and abroad the duty message fusing civic and sacrificial patriotism with the concrescent community; the proprietorial and supranational branch, evoking the ideologies of the belligerent nations; and the aspirational type promising future rewards and benefits. Two principal themes recur throughout the argumentation: first, that victory will be certain and second, that the war is fought in order to defend the fatherland against an unprovoked attack. [Italy](#) was an exceptional case since it proclaimed a war of conquest and took up the myth of defence only after the [defeat at Caporetto](#).⁴ In [Russia](#) at least, religious propaganda demanded “Constantinople and the Bosphorus [...], the cradle of our faith”.⁵

Section 4 analyses how propaganda reached its targets, and which logistical problems occurred in its distribution abroad. Indoctrination through entertainment is outlined in [Roger Smither’s](#) “[Film/Cinema](#)” as well as [Eva Krivanec’s](#) “[Staging War. Theatre 1914-1918](#)” and therefore with a few exceptions omitted. In the fifth section, selected propaganda targets are studied: the soldiers on both sides of the trenches and the enemy’s minorities. The sixth section raises the issue of whether propaganda was successful or not.

What were the aims of propaganda?

The tasks of propaganda, in popular language also called “brainwashing”,⁶ can be differentiated according to the four principal targets: home front, military front, neutrals, and enemies. At home, propaganda must mobilize a nation, maintain its [morale](#) and make its soldiers fight until they will – in the words of the British Prime Minister [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) – “knock out” the enemy. It has to arouse hatred of the foe, idealize the own [war aims](#), warn of the consequences of defeat, confirm belief in the superiority of the fatherland, and make clear that the final victory will be certain. Moreover, it must explain setbacks by blaming scapegoats from strikers to [war profiteers](#), so that the people will not question the war itself or even the social and political system. As far as the neutrals are concerned,

propaganda should win them over by encouraging friendly elements and local warmongers or, if this is not possible, at least, keep the neutrals out of the war by supporting non-interventionist or [pacifist](#) views. Propaganda against the enemy should demoralize its soldiers, encourage them to desert and stir up its civilians. Propaganda's favourite targets are dissatisfied elements such as underprivileged classes, revolutionary movements, and national minorities.

However, propaganda only has a chance if divergent sources of information can be suppressed as much as possible. Therefore, [censorship](#) was immediately established in all warring countries. In [neutral countries](#) one could only try to delay, impede or (better) destroy unfriendly and inimical information, against the enemy one had to concentrate on evident weaknesses and promise a golden future in case of defection.

What were the principal arguments of propaganda?

A fight between good and evil? The Manichean approach

The war between the Allies and the Central Powers was represented as a struggle between the forces of good and evil, a dualistic approach heavily influenced by Manichean tendencies inherent in Christian belief since St. Augustine. In all countries, the clergymen – in [Germany](#) and Russia even instructed by official Guidelines or Parish Bulletins – claimed that their nation was [chosen and supported by God](#) in order to wage a “Holy War” against “His enemies” and the champion of the Antichrist. Consequently, victory was absolutely certain.⁷ Although not all the people were still faithful believers, most of them were under the spell of values deeply rooted in Christian tradition. In fairy tales, novels and films the forces of good usually triumph over their evil enemies, thus war as well waged against sinister powers was supposed to finish happily and propaganda only needed to reinforce this conviction.

The easiest way to do this was to choose a conspicuous representative of the enemy nation. Kings, political leaders or generals were associated with negative or fear-inspiring symbols, and the resulting [emotion](#) was transferred to the people as such.⁸ Allied propaganda showed the *Kaiser* as a devil, or at least in the company of devils and death,⁹ and held him personally “responsible for all the crimes perpetrated by individuals”, even for the alleged torturing of three-year-old children, as the *Financial Times* reported on 15 June 1915.¹⁰ In Allied novels, films, theatre plays, songs, and even [children's books](#) he appeared as a monster, as the “Beast of Berlin”.¹¹ The German and Austrian propagandists never went to such extremes, but did use the hate transfer method. According to the derisory connotation of the British as “haberdashers,”¹² they depicted British Foreign Minister Sir [Edward Grey \(1862-1933\)](#) as a

shopkeeper, explaining coldly, "War is a business like any other", presenting two piles of skulls on his counter.¹³

Another very forceful weapon of Allied propaganda were the stories – real or invented – about the [atrocities](#) committed by German and Austrian soldiers analysed in "[Othering/Atrocity Propaganda](#)". It may be added that such atrocities were also committed for propaganda reasons. Already in 1915, the French psychologist [Gustave Le Bon \(1841-1931\)](#) explained: "The German General Staff justified the killings and fires by the necessity to frighten the populations so that they would ask for peace – such terrorism was employed at all times."¹⁴ Spreading fear in order to keep people quiet was indeed one of the motives of the German mass executions in [Belgium](#) and [France](#).¹⁵ In [Poland](#), the Germans hanged alleged spies at street corners explicitly in order to warn against betrayals.¹⁶ When the Austrian army summarily executed tens of thousands of alleged spies and traitors, they even took photos and had them widely distributed in order to spread fear among the population.¹⁷ Whereas the Bryce Report about the butchering of approximately 6,500 civilians in Belgium and northern France by the German military could not produce a single photo – [Alfred Charles William Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe \(1865-1922\)](#) offered £200 for this and never got one – the Reiss Report presented numerous photos relating to the Austrian atrocities, which Allied propaganda happily reprinted.¹⁸ On a much smaller scale in British army schools the main propaganda maxim was "to instil fear into the opponent."¹⁹ Germans and Austrians also spread real or invented atrocity stories. They pointed to the crimes of the [Cossacks](#) in Galicia and Eastern Prussia, the illegal shooting by franc-tireurs in Belgium, and the use by the Allies of "half animal like peoples from Africa" and [India](#) who were accused of cutting the throats of German soldiers and drinking their blood.²⁰ As Pierre Conesa put it so well: "Blind and brutal violence is always done by the Other."²¹

A special feature of Allied propaganda was the animalisation of the Germans, including the *Kaiser*, for example as apes, dragons and vultures.²² The Central Powers rarely adopted the animalisation topic and were in general much less aggressive. They also missed other propaganda chances such as the denunciation of the Allied [sea blockade](#) or the execution of alleged female spies in France while the British made a great fuss about the execution of the nurse [Edith Cavell \(1865-1915\)](#), who had helped hundreds of Allied soldiers to escape to [the Netherlands](#).²³

Equally helpless was the German reaction to the atrocity stories about their soldiers. They

tried to counter the reproaches against the German “barbarians” with positive images and films in which their soldiers were shown sharing their food with elderly women, playing with children or saving historic relics from destruction.²⁴ [French propaganda](#) very skilfully replied by showing a photographer taking a picture of a German soldier with a baby on his knees, and the soldier says: “One would not believe that I have killed the mother.”²⁵

Propagandists also reinforced [stereotypes](#) from pre-war culture in order to vilify the enemy, such as the spike-helmeted German glutton with sausages and beer, the frivolous and vainglorious Frenchman, the perfidious Englishman, the malicious and treacherous Italian, and finally the drunken and dirty Russian.²⁶ Here as well, Allied propaganda was far more aggressive than its German counterpart. Whereas French women in German drawings still looked pretty and seductive, German women in Allied cartoons and chansons were presented as ugly, fat, insipid, and without grace.²⁷ Not only journals such as *Le Figaro* and the *Chronique médicale*, but even serious scholars claimed that the Germans stank.²⁸

Sometimes older stereotypes had to be changed. Whereas before the war in Germany the French were attacked as the hereditary enemy, now they met with a certain understanding as victims of the British who were supposed to fight “till the last French soldier”.²⁹ From August 1914, Russia was considered the most important foe of the Central Powers, but in October she was replaced by the “perfidious Albion”.³⁰ The British entry in the war was unexpected, and they were hated for starving the Germans by the blockade. “God punish England” replaced “Good day” as a greeting and was also printed on postcards, wedding rings, household items and even on coal.³¹ The most popular song became the anti-British Hymn of Hate by the German-Jewish poet [Ernst Lissauer \(1882-1937\)](#). A German poster listed various deprivations such as ration cards accompanied by an Englishman and the comment “It is his fault.”³²

In contrast to the evil qualities of the enemy it was important to depict one’s own political and military leaders “as faithful, resolute and reliable servants of the nation”³³ who would guarantee the final victory. Whereas the Allies were at a loss to find such heroes because before summer 1918 their peoples were “only fed on...the paper victories of the press bureau”,³⁴ the Germans very early presented Field Marshal [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#), the famous victor of the [battle of Tannenberg](#), as a confidence-inspiring father figure. Pictures and postcards, even household items and consumer articles with his image filled German houses, and his stylised portrait became a “marketing-icon” for [war bonds](#)

propaganda.³⁵

Second to the leaders came the soldiers appearing in articles, cartoons, and films of the field grey genre “as paragons of military virtue and human mercy”.³⁶ In a [French film](#) and in drawings a lieutenant, the only survivor in a trench, cried “Get up, all the dead” and the German assailants miraculously understanding his words panicked and ran away.³⁷ Women could also be presented as heroes, for instance Edith Cavell or the wife and mother of two fallen officers in the film *The French Mothers*.³⁸

Even [children](#) were presented as splendid examples of suffering or bravery.³⁹ In 1915 Catholic priests in France, Germany and [Austria](#) organized children’s crusades, whose members engaged in permanent prayers for the victory of their respective countries.⁴⁰ More spectacular was the cult of approximately 100 [child heroes in France](#). The most famous case was thirteen-year-old Emile Després who during the German invasion gave water to a wounded French sergeant. When the Prussian officer suggested that the boy shoot the soldier in order to save his own life, he shot the Prussian and was in turn executed himself. Propaganda exaggerated the story: in reality he was, like most other child heroes, eighteen years old.⁴¹

A similar cult figure emerged in [Britain](#). Jack Cornwell, seventeen years old, was the last surviving member of a gun crew on a cruiser and although seriously wounded remained passively (!) at his post. This “heroic” deed was heavily exploited. Children all over the empire collected £18,000 for a “Jack Cornwell Memorial Fund”, the boy was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross and commemorated with portraits, plaques, and monuments.⁴² In Russia the greatest schoolboy hero, Orlov, fought in eleven battles and was finally decorated by the Tsar with the Order of St. George.⁴³ The most spectacular case in Austria was the Polish girl Rosa Zenoch. During a battle against the Russians she gave wounded Austrian soldiers water and was wounded herself. When her leg had to be amputated in a Viennese hospital, [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#) and other members of the Habsburg family visited her, agreed to pay for a prosthesis and showered her with gifts. In propaganda she was presented as an example of dynastic patriotism.⁴⁴ In [Italy](#) and Germany children played a more modest role. In Italy war orphans assisted as guards of honour at the patriotic funerals of fallen soldiers.⁴⁵ In Germany, in 1914, a film with the title *The War Hero of Twelve Years* was shown, and a few stories circulated about children helping the soldiers and performing heroic deeds, but strangely enough, all of them were of foreign nationality,

mostly Slavic.⁴⁶

A particular way to show the vileness of the enemy and the superiority of the own nation were exhibitions. The most extensive ones were organized in 1916 in Germany and Austria. They showed damaged enemy trophies and ugly enemy puppets: mischievous Belgian franc-tireurs with their [rifles](#), aggressive black cannibals with knives between their teeth, and British soldiers with the forbidden dum-dum cartridges. Compared to these sorry figures well equipped Germans and Austrians shone the more splendidly. Other exhibitions presenting modern devices for war invalids tried to convince the population that lost limbs could easily be replaced or they showed the usefulness of *ersatz* items such as egg powder, or clothes made from paper fabrics. On a much smaller scale the Allies presented examples of household economies, German atrocity scenes, captured German trophies or paintings, [cartoons](#) and photos.⁴⁷

How was the enemy ridiculed?

[Humour](#) and ridiculing were very popular. The Germans exploited the complete failure of several Allied offensives and presented the enemy soldiers as incompetent. In a German cartoon with the title *Gloire* a French soldier enthusiastically reports to his superiors that the victory at "Nowhere" is much greater than has been assumed: the army has advanced 2.53 meters instead of only 2.50 meters.⁴⁸ Britain's [recruitment](#) problems were another rewarding object. This country had no conscription and depended on volunteers. In the beginning there were enough of them, but when the heavy casualties became known, enthusiasm was very much on the wane. A German cartoon shows a British recruiting office with a poster promising volunteers a wonderful life: they will eat enormous slices of ham, obtain a huge sack of money, will be promoted to general in six months and meet *Gretchen* waiting for them in the future British garrison at Cologne. Despite all these promises, the only person who turned up last week was the charwoman.⁴⁹ This method of denigration in German cartoons was not as ineffective as was later claimed. [Sigmund Freud \(1856-1939\)](#) wrote: "By showing the enemy as small, low, despicable, comic, ridiculous, we give ourselves the enjoyment of a victory."⁵⁰ And, one may add, we also overcome our [fear](#) of the enemy.

The Allies also employed the ridiculing strategy: the *Kaiser* and Crown Prince studying the weather map of St. Helena discover that the weather there is quite lousy. This cartoon confirms the conviction that the Hohenzollern will lose the war and go into exile like [Napoleon I, Emperor of the French \(1769-1821\)](#).⁵¹ In Russia with its numerous illiterate people, traditional entertainments enjoyed a comeback. Millions of cheap war *lubki* (broadside) were

sold or shown in a peep show. In puppet theatres [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) was beaten to death by *Petrushka*, the Russian *Punch*. In circuses Wilhelm, Francis Joseph and [Mehmed V, Sultan of the Turks \(1844-1918\)](#) turned around in wheel barrows and were tormented by dancing devils. The style of the *lubki* also influenced movies with satirical episodes about the *Kaiser* or the *Sultan*.⁵²

Speaking of humour, [Charlie Chaplin's \(1889-1977\)](#) famous film *Shoulder Arms* must not be forgotten. He uses a gas mask against the odour of Limburg cheese, captures a whole troop of Germans and finally even the *Kaiser* – funny entertainment but not devoid of a propagandistic message: life in the trenches is after all quite amusing, and the Germans are stupid and will thus lose the war.⁵³ One may conclude with [Jay Winter](#): “In the great war, the enemy was mocked as much as he was hated.”⁵⁴

Which scapegoats were accused?

In the most famous French war cartoon one soldier says to another: “Let’s hope they will hold out. – Who? – The civilians.”⁵⁵ There were indeed major problems at the home front, especially concerning the supply of food, coal and other commodities. The priorities of war production, bureaucratic control of the economy, naval blockade and [submarine warfare](#) led to inflation and [food shortages](#) in all belligerent countries – problems which could not be solved by propagandistic exhortations such as “eat less bread, meat, and sugar”.⁵⁶ Profiteering and speculation aggravated these problems. Here the propagandists had an important function. It was their job to shift the responsibility from the real culprits – government and bureaucracy – to various scapegoats such as war profiteers, hoarders, defeatists, socialists, spies, shirkers, strikers, and [enemy aliens](#).

In the beginning of the war, irresponsible propaganda produced a real spy fever. In Germany, fanaticised gangs lynched twenty-eight innocent people.⁵⁷ Allied propagandists followed close, and in France, Britain, and Russia thousands of people, most of them enemy aliens, were falsely inculpated, interned and their apartments and shops were looted. In Britain, even stage plays re-enacted such scenes inciting further incidents until July 1917.⁵⁸ In Russia, hundreds of thousands of German settlers were expropriated and deported to Siberia and Central Asia, and in the [USA](#) after their declaration of war German immigrants risked to be tarred and feathered.⁵⁹ In films of the Allies, spies and saboteurs, usually enemy aliens, were presented, especially in the United States, because they were the only menace of this country propaganda could find. The film *War Brides*, shot before the declaration of war, was

even withdrawn and re-edited with a German bias.⁶⁰

The war profiteers were especially hated by the people because they contributed to the soaring cost of living. As an English saying put it so well, “they were bleeding the country contrary to those who were bleeding for the country.”⁶¹ Propaganda ridiculed their pretentiousness, vulgarity, and bad taste and accused them as “profit pirates” who helped the enemy and jeopardized the victory.⁶² In an Italian cartoon, Emperor Francis Joseph congratulates the Italian profiteer with the words: “Bravo, you are working for the Austrian victory.”⁶³ In France, Britain, and Austria war profiteers and speculators were reported to the authorities and in order to appease the disgruntled population some of them were indeed prosecuted.⁶⁴

The strikers were accused of stabbing the soldiers in the back.⁶⁵ “To go on strike now helps the enemy,” stated a German poster, and the very popular German film *Not expiable* reinforced this agitation.⁶⁶ Pacifists and socialists were accused of high treason and collaboration with the enemy.⁶⁷ In the United States and Italy, pacifists were naturally very active before these countries joined the war, and were thus particularly attacked by the warmongers. Nevertheless, the danger of organized pacifism was rather exaggerated by official propaganda, “it had little impact on the war itself”.⁶⁸

Propaganda also accused shirkers pretending to be sick, nearly blind or mad,⁶⁹ but the real trick to avoid the trenches – well placed connections – was not to be discussed. It was the people’s counterpropaganda, which in Germany interpreted the abbreviation *k.v.* (*kriegsverwendungsfähig*) meaning fit for military service as *keine Verbindungen* (no connections). In a war, which did not seem to end, there were more and more defeatists and yellow-bellies, and it was difficult to fight them through propaganda. In France, it even invented a town called Trouilleville – where the *trouillards* (yellow-bellies) were supposed to take refuge and treat their fear.⁷⁰

From 1917 not only in Germany and Austria, but also in England, France, and Italy the food situation worsened, rationing cards had to be introduced, and more and more people demanded negotiations about armistice and peace; in France thousands of women went on strike claiming, “We want our husbands back.”⁷¹ Government propaganda reaction was swift and efficient. In Britain, the German atrocities were brought up again and rumours about the *Hidden Hand*, an alleged group of arch-traitors inside Britain, working for the German victory

were launched.⁷² In Italy, so far without any official [propaganda](#), the [government](#) after the catastrophic defeat at Caporetto in October 1917 was obliged to step in. In November it established an under secretariat for propaganda abroad and in February 1918 a General commissariat for Civic Assistance and Domestic Propaganda, but it was the High Command which in January 1918 organized the most efficient *Servizio P* (Propaganda Service) which distributed propaganda material not only at the [front](#) but throughout Italy.⁷³ When in May 1918 pacifists and trade unions in France organized important strikes and violent demonstrations in favour of peace negotiations, Prime Minister [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#) was able to stop this by producing falsified documents about their connections with the German secret service.⁷⁴

How was the clash of civilizations proclaimed?

According to the Manichean argumentation, the propagandists affirmed that their country was fighting for civilization against enemies who were nothing but a bunch of barbarians. For instance, the French philosopher [Henri Bergson \(1859-1941\)](#) declared on 8 August 1914: "The combat against Germany is the combat of civilization against barbarity."⁷⁵ The Central Powers used the same argument against Russia.⁷⁶ When the Western Allies, later joined by the American President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#), declared to fight for individual liberty and worldwide democracy against German [militarism](#) and "Kaiserism",⁷⁷ the Germans retaliated forcefully. In several instances professors and writers denied the atrocities in Belgium and affirmed the unity of militarism and *Kultur*.⁷⁸ Thereafter, with the support of sympathetic neutrals such as the Swedes [Rudolf Kjellén \(1864-1922\)](#) and [Gustav Steffen \(1864-1929\)](#), and the germanized Englishman [Houston Stewart Chamberlain \(1855-1927\)](#), they forged a specifically German conception of democracy, the Ideas of 1914, which would substitute the timeworn notions of the French Revolution. Liberty was to be replaced by "German freedom", defined as "authority and obedience", equality by "solidarity and discipline", fraternity by "duty and the service to the community".⁷⁹ The widespread poster *Are we the barbarians?* contrasted in exact figures the German cultural achievements such as the number of Nobel prizes, patents, and published books, the percentage of alphabetisation, and the social security benefits with the rather modest ones of the British and the French.⁸⁰ The Allies answered by comparing German *Kultur* with the war crimes of the German army. In a cartoon the Germans posing as the new Salvation Army proclaim "Kultur or Death" and explain: "If we shoot you, it's only for your good."⁸¹

In a more popular form of the polarisation between Germany and the Allied powers all foreign

influences in language, fashion, culture, and dances were to be stamped out. Contemporary and sometimes even classical enemy authors were banned from theatres and opera houses.⁸² Thousands of naturalized Germans in Britain preferred to adopt English names, followed in July 1917 by the English Royal Family, which changed its name from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Windsor.⁸³ Theatres, cafés, streets, and even dishes had to be re-named: *Sauerkraut* became liberty cabbage, in France half a dozen villages lost names like d'Allemagne,⁸⁴ and German school children had to pay five pfennigs if they used a word of foreign origin such as "interessant".⁸⁵

What was the role of duty and sacrifice?

With the exception of Italy, all [governments](#) claimed that they went to war only in order to defend the fatherland. This was evident in the case of the Belgians and the French, but more difficult for the British, whose "single biggest propaganda message"⁸⁶ was that they were not responsible for the war and only intervened in order to defend "poor little Belgium". It was not impossible for the Austrians who invented a Serbian attack at Temes Kubin,⁸⁷ and even the Germans pretended to have been attacked by Russians and French alike. Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) through skilful diplomatic manoeuvres blamed the Russians and falsely accused the French of having started the war by bombarding Nuremberg and Karlsruhe – the biggest propaganda lie of the whole war. Even the invasion of Belgium was sometimes justified by the alleged presence of French troops in Namur and Liège.⁸⁸ Already on 1 August 1914, Admiral [Georg A. von Müller \(1854-1940\)](#) commented in his diary: "The government has been fortunate enough to make us appear as being attacked."⁸⁹ Thus, a defence myth was created which permitted to apply the concept of civic patriotism or dynastic loyalty with its emphasis on duty and holding out.⁹⁰ These values were key notions for soldiers and civilians alike⁹¹ and became so popular that even commercial publicity used them: for example, a shoe factory proclaimed: "We will hold out, we shall hold out with our leather soles..."⁹² French soldiers' [letters](#) reveal the efficiency of this ideology of duty: they evoke obedience, authority and the respect of orders.⁹³

Intrinsically intertwined with duty was sacrifice. Whereas the soldier had to be prepared to contribute the "blood tax", that is to accept death as the ultimate sacrifice, the civilian was exhorted to accept food restrictions, longer working hours, and financial losses.⁹⁴ Italian [nationalists](#) even propagated the idea that the soldiers after their supreme sacrifice would

continue to live in the resurrection of the modernised fatherland.⁹⁵ The religious background with its conception of martyrdom is clearly recognisable.⁹⁶

The most important duty of the civilians was to contribute to the war expenses – “financial conscription” as the German state secretary of the Treasury, later of the Interior, [Karl Helfferich \(1872-1924\)](#), called it.⁹⁷ There were money collections in the streets, gold collections, and huge campaigns for war bonds with numerous advertisements and posters displaying persuasive figures of women, soldiers, and generals, as well as door-to-door soliciting by “men of confidence” of the central banks and even by school children.⁹⁸ Specific arguments were “For victory”⁹⁹ and, exclusively used by the Allies, “For liberty”.¹⁰⁰

A special way to extract money in Germany and Austria was through nail statues.¹⁰¹ Several thousand wooden crosses, doors, animals, [weapons](#), statues of generals and saints and even of a Madonna were erected,¹⁰² into which people would hammer iron, silver or golden nails in exchange for donations between one and 100 marks or crowns. The biggest statue was the Iron Hindenburg in Berlin, which was fourteen meters high and weighed twenty-six tons.

The Allies mocked these nailings and compared them to “Negro fetishes”.¹⁰³ However, from autumn 1917 the British National War Savings Committee started raising millions of pounds in a similar way with the “tank banks”. Visitors could inspect the inside of [tanks](#) against the purchase of a war savings certificate.¹⁰⁴

Which rewards were promised?

An Allied leaflet of July 1918 compares 1914 and 1918. In 1914, it shows the German people as a donkey drawing a chariot with Germania, a prince and a general on it and following a carrot called “Victory”. In 1918 Germania, the donkey and the chariot are completely worn out, accompanied by two fat war profiteers and following a carrot called “*Ersatz* Victory”.¹⁰⁵ Whatever the situation was, a victorious peace was promulgated as the great reward for all the sacrifices and sufferings during the war,¹⁰⁶ and the conviction that the nation would win usually boosted morale. Thus, propagandists of both camps always affirmed that their troops were on the road to victory.¹⁰⁷ It was equally important to deny any defeats. A good example is the [battle of the Marne](#) in August/September 1914. When the German army had to stop their offensive and retreat hastily leaving 50,000 [prisoners](#) and thirty cannons behind, the German war communiqué spoke of a strategic reshuffle and the capture of fifty cannons and thousands of prisoners. On the other hand, the French High Command proudly announced

this German defeat, to the great consternation of the public, which had never been informed before that the Germans were so close to Paris.¹⁰⁸ Other propaganda lies tried to bring home that the enemy was nearly finished, so when [French newspapers](#) affirmed: "The enemy has lost five million men" or "Half the German shells are made of cardboard, they don't even burst",¹⁰⁹ initially most people believed such news. When in September 1914 Allied newspapers reported that Berlin was in a state of famine, an American visitor brought provisions for three weeks including two huge sacks of flour.¹¹⁰ Prophesying the bad fate of the enemy's leaders could as well reaffirm people that victory was near. A German cartoon showed the guillotine waiting for French President [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#), and a British comedy had Kaiser Wilhelm sitting on a stone with the inscription "St. Helena".¹¹¹

Charismatic figures such as Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and Hindenburg proclaiming slogans of fighting such as "up to the very end", "until the knock out", and "victory is certain" represented not only the unfailing confidence in final victory but also a typically military standpoint refusing any peace of compromise.¹¹² General [Erich Ludendorff's \(1865-1937\)](#) "Guidelines for the Patriotic Instruction" emphasized as well: "The result of the war is already at our favour, we only have to safeguard this" – an argument repeated as late as 19 July 1918 when the war was definitely lost.¹¹³ French propaganda emphasized the moral inferiority of the enemy and their failures, the great number and the heroism of the Allies and, last not least, the hope-inspiring argument "Germany will pay", which presupposed the German defeat.¹¹⁴

Another argument was the appeal to fear. After a "bad peace", that is a peace after a defeat, Britain would be at the mercy of the *Kaiser*,¹¹⁵ and conversely, if Britain were victorious, the Germans, crushed under enormous war indemnities and high food prices, would be slaving along for the Allies in Europe and even in the Sahara. Popular were also hate-filled quotations from the Allied press, such as, "The only good German I know is a dead one".¹¹⁶ A poster of 1918 cleverly summarised: "If, with his army and his hate, the enemy wins, the workshops will be empty. The doors will be closed, and hungrily you will have to go away."¹¹⁷ The only alternative was: "We must hold out and win at any cost."¹¹⁸

Rewards to combatants also served propaganda purposes: decorations, promotions, leave, or, as in Italy, more assistance for their families.¹¹⁹ Army chaplains told soldiers that after death on the battlefield they would go straight to heaven.¹²⁰ Civilians got no immediate rewards but were promised a golden age after the war, a chimera which in Italy was inspired

by the “Wilsonian myth”.¹²¹ In France and Britain they were led to believe that after the defeat of Prussian militarism eternal peace would reign on earth.¹²² In Italy land was promised to peasant soldiers but after the war nothing came out of it. In Britain cheap housing under the slogan “homes fit for heroes” was announced, but the low-rent housing construction scheme starting in 1919 was abolished a mere two years later.¹²³ In all countries class distinctions were supposed to disappear and an “egalitarian community” or *Volksgemeinschaft* would emerge with equal votes and social reform.¹²⁴ In touching films and stage plays an alleged camaraderie of the trenches, a trench community between noblemen, bourgeoisie and workers was demonstrated, which culminated in unbelievable marriages between the different social classes.¹²⁵ Some measures were adopted, such as more adequate war pensions and better allowances for soldiers’ families, and various economists elaborated more or less detailed plans about [future social welfare policies](#), “Christian” or “German” socialism and the participation of workers in corporate direction, called in Germany *Mitbestimmung*.¹²⁶ However, the political leaders preferred to leave everything vague. For instance, German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg in a speech in the *Reichstag* only vaguely mentioned the “enormous political, intellectual, economic and social tasks which were supposed to be solved after the war”, but refused explicitly “to reward the people for what it had done [during the war].”¹²⁷

Let us not forget the rewards promised to neutral countries if they entered the war: the Allies offered to Italy Trento and Trieste plus vast Slavonic and German-speaking territories, but held their promises only partly after the war. In vain Germany offered Gibraltar to [Spain](#), Savoy, Nice, Corsica and Tunis to Italy, and Texas and California to Mexico.¹²⁸ Both camps also promised liberation and statehood to the oppressed people in the multinational [empires](#) and colonies, though only to those, of course, who lived under the rule of the enemy.¹²⁹

How did the techniques and the distribution of propaganda function?

Propaganda penetrated the entire cultural fabric. Films, stage plays, operettas, songs, concerts, staged pageants, *tableaux vivants*, [novels](#), [toys](#), children books, [photos](#), posters, cartoons, gramophone records, exhibitions – everything was related to the war. [Newspapers](#) published [war poems](#), phonograph cylinders re-enacted the conquest of a fortress, millions of patriotic postcards circulated, statuettes, plates, matchboxes, vivat ribbons, medals and tear-off calendars (for instance the German Crimes Calendar with an atrocity for each month and the British Victories Calendar). All carried propaganda messages.¹³⁰ Some of these

propaganda instruments (postcards and posters, for instance) continued until the end of the war. Others, such as stage plays and films, reverted to escapist entertainment as early as 1915, because people wanted to forget the terrible war for a few hours. As posters, films, photos and stage plays are analysed in "[Staging War. Theatre 1914-1918](#)", "[Film/Cinema](#)", [Hilary Roberts' "Photography"](#), and [James Aulich's "Arts and Advertising as War Propaganda"](#), I refer to them only exceptionally and concentrate on oral and printed indoctrination.

How were people orally indoctrinated?

The most elementary medium to brainwash people was still oral indoctrination. Politicians, mayors, teachers, clergymen, and trade union leaders organized numerous meetings with patriotic songs, recitals, and speeches. Teachers brainwashed children, clergymen their flocks, trade-unionists their workers, and last but not least, officers their soldiers. University professors were especially active, with lectures at home and at the front, in occupied territories and in neutral countries.¹³¹ For instance, in spring 1916, [Alfred Baudrillart \(1859-1942\)](#), professor at the Catholic Institute of Paris and president of the Committee for propaganda in neutral countries, toured Spain for five weeks.¹³² In the United States, British and German propagandists competed for winning public opinion, often with the help of locals, but those in the cause of German service were mostly of German origin and not familiar with the American way of thinking. As Horace Peterson points out they were constantly preaching, intemperately and pugnaciously, without moderation, tact or finesse.¹³³

In Britain the Public Recruiting Committee (PRC) organized 800 mass rallies throughout the country. Local bands played patriotic songs and proficient speakers urged all able-bodied men to take up arms. Many of them were frequently pushed to enlist on the spot by the cheering crowds, especially by women of the Order of the White Feather who insulted procrastinators and decorated them with white feathers.¹³⁴ In France as well women started a witch hunt against alleged shirkers, harassing young men in the streets and even sending denunciation letters to the authorities.¹³⁵ In Austria "information workers" travelled round the country indoctrinating soldiers and civilians alike with lectures and slide shows.¹³⁶

The undisputed masters of oral indoctrination in World War I were the so-called "Four Minute Men" of the American propaganda organisation Committee on Public Information (CPI). They spoke in public buildings and especially in cinemas during the usual four-minute intermission between movies. They were 75,000 usually local men addressing the crowds in familiar language, but the topics of the campaigns were developed centrally in weekly changing bulletins with detailed instructions of how to present them. Altogether they held 1 million

speeches including in the most remote towns and villages and in colonies such as the [Philippines](#).¹³⁷

In summer 1917, oral indoctrination in Britain and Germany reached new dimensions in order to boost the morale of war-weary soldiers and civilians alike. In Britain, the successor of the PRC, the National War Aims Committee (NWAC), founded in July 1917, held approximately 100,000 meetings until the end of the war.¹³⁸

In Germany instruction officers now joined the usual propagandists and “reliable” soldiers, who helped them organize patriotic assemblies and campaigns for war bonds.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, the teachers, especially in smaller towns and at the countryside, remained the most important propaganda agents of the state.¹⁴⁰ Workers in Germany and Britain were indoctrinated in the factories because they would not voluntarily come to propaganda meetings.¹⁴¹ Great importance was attached to personal conversation,¹⁴² for instance between a teacher and a war widow or between a solicitor of war bonds and a distrustful customer.¹⁴³ In France, oral propaganda remained in the hands of the teachers and private organisations such as the Union of the Great Associations against Enemy Propaganda.¹⁴⁴ In Italy, from January 1918, the CPI, American [Red Cross](#) and [YMCA](#) supported teachers and clergymen.¹⁴⁵

Oral propaganda in enemy countries was more difficult and only the French succeeded: they smuggled approximately 400 propaganda agents from Switzerland to Germany where they could rely on a network of members of the war-hostile Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD).¹⁴⁶ A special variety of oral indoctrination comprised international conferences with their effect being multiplied by press coverage.¹⁴⁷

How were people indoctrinated by the media?

In a world without radio, television, and internet the most common instrument of propaganda was printed matter: newspapers, leaflets, brochures, and books, except in Russia, Italy, and [Turkey](#) where a great part of the population was illiterate. Such propaganda at home was relatively easy because it was efficiently supported by censorship. Propaganda material was lavishly distributed and press conferences were convened. Their main task was not to convey information but to spread propaganda and downright lies. A well-informed witness, [Hellmut von Gerlach \(1866-1935\)](#), editor-in-chief of the German weekly, *Welt am Montag*, later reported how the press conferences functioned. They were held by officers according to military principles. Questions were allowed but not necessarily answered. The journalists

were explicitly encouraged to publish patriotic lies.¹⁴⁸ [War correspondents](#) worked under even stronger constraints. They could not move freely but had to travel in pool with colleagues and were always “embedded” by officers. Even their reports had to be written in pool and were heavily censored, so that they finally resigned themselves to group auto-censorship.¹⁴⁹

Propaganda material to neutral countries had to be prepared very well. The most important targets were Spain, the United States before their declaration of war, and Italy before and after her declaration of war. Backward states such as Russia and Austria-Hungary did very little whereas Britain, France, and Germany heavily invested in propaganda abroad. Their offices functioned along similar lines and were divided into various sections:¹⁵⁰

- Analysing the foreign press, collecting cuts and writing reports.
- Preparing brochures, leaflets, special newspapers and posters, and sending them abroad.
- Collecting the addresses of foreign institutions and individuals as receivers and multipliers of propaganda.
- Receiving foreign journalists and organizing conferences and tours for them.
- Establishing missions abroad, recruiting agents, and selecting speakers.
- Coordinating private propaganda organisations.

Later, sections for photo and film were added.

Newspaper propaganda in neutral countries was much easier than one might expect. Even before the war, articles in foreign newspapers were easily placed against appropriate payment. These activities not only continued but reached unprecedented heights.¹⁵¹ Newspapers were regularly bribed, subsidized, completely bought or even founded. Agents bought the complete circulation of an enemy-friendly newspaper and destroyed it, and acquired distribution firms and made sure that at their newsstands only friendly newspapers were sold. They denounced enemy bribing cases to the local police and had editors and enemy agents arrested. Sometimes Germans and French would try to bribe the same journalist, and this man would simply tailor his articles in favour of the highest bidder.¹⁵² Clever people such as [Salvador Cánovas Cervantes \(-1949\)](#) the editor of the Spanish newspaper, *La Tribuna*, and [Juozas Gabrys \(1880-1951\)](#), the editor of the *Annales des Nationalités*, *Pro Lithuania* (in French) and *Litauen* (in German), received money from both sides.¹⁵³

The sums utilized for corruption fluctuated between £100 to £1,000 per month, depending on the importance of the newspaper. To buy or to found a newspaper cost £8,000; to bribe a foreign news agency could cost up to 600,000 French francs per year.¹⁵⁴ However, there was no guarantee that such substantial expenses would lead to noticeable results.¹⁵⁵

The system of bribing newspapers even functioned in enemy countries: the Germans bribed *Le Journal*, *Le Bonnet rouge*, and *La Tranchée républicaine* with limited success because their machinations were finally discovered. *Le Journal* did not change its patriotic tendency, the two latter journals were suspended and the journalists involved were executed, one of them secretly strangled in his prison cell after having threatened "to spill the beans".¹⁵⁶ The French tentative attempt to bribe the *Kölnische Volkszeitung* failed completely; the money was transferred through an unreliable intermediary, and the political course of the newspaper remained staunchly Pan-German and anti-Allies.¹⁵⁷

How was propaganda material distributed?

At the home front private propaganda organisations, central and regional propaganda offices of civilian and military authorities, even specialized School Institutes distributed propaganda material to newspapers, [schools](#), parsonages, townhouses, parliaments, workers' organisations and trade unions. In Germany, private editors supplied subscriptions of special war brochures to the population with most of them being cancelled as early as 1915.¹⁵⁸

Propaganda to neutral countries was usually transmitted by ship or train and thence transferred to embassies where numerous propaganda agents – the German embassy in Bern alone employed 500-600 people – would forward them to editors' offices, libraries, hotels, barbers' shops, public reading rooms, doctors' waiting rooms, social clubs and thousands of private addresses. In some countries locals were hired as propagandists, often expatriates who in some cases founded propaganda organisations themselves.¹⁵⁹

Propaganda abroad was especially difficult for the Germans, because at the outset of the war the British cut the undersea telegraph cables. At first it was possible to transmit the material via neutral countries such as [Sweden](#), [Switzerland](#) and Italy, but soon the Germans faced major problems when the sea blockade was tightened and even neutral ships were searched. Now British postal censors opened all letters and parcels between neutral countries and could therefore closely survey all correspondence of [German propaganda](#) agents and even replace German propaganda with their own.¹⁶⁰ Finally, the Germans had to resort to special techniques such as reducing newspapers and leaflets to four times the size of a postage

stamp, smuggling them to a neutral country and having them enlarged again.¹⁶¹ An alternative method for transmitting propaganda news was by [wireless](#), via the transmitter in Nauhen. The Overseas Transocean Company took care of this.¹⁶²

In order to pass propaganda to enemy countries even more sophisticated methods were necessary. Switzerland was the European centre of spies and propaganda agents. The French smuggled propaganda to Germany and the Germans sent some propaganda to France from Switzerland and Spain,¹⁶³ but usually considered France as immune to propaganda and concentrated their efforts on Italy. Books and brochures were sent with camouflage covers; leaflets were put in leather sacks or bottles and floated down the Rhine, or across the Lake Constance or Lake Lugano, tied underneath boats; hidden in chests with a double floor; in books carried by school children; thrown over a frontier fence, or sent by post with fake wrappers or jackets from falsified official addresses.¹⁶⁴ Agents passed the frontier with false passports, placed the material in restaurants, trains used by [soldiers on leave](#), railway stations and in the mailboxes of workers and left-wing socialists.¹⁶⁵

Sometimes [espionage](#) accompanied propaganda. The American Secret Service tapped the telephone wires of the German and Austrian embassies in Washington, and Czech undercover agents infiltrated them and stole compromising photos and sabotage plans, which were then widely publicized in American newspapers.¹⁶⁶ The officers and other “men of confidence” of the Italian Propaganda Service, *Servizio P*, created in January 1918, were not only supposed to refute defeatist ideas and to spread propaganda among the soldiers but were also formally asked to spy out suspect individuals and denounce them to the commanders. Thus an early variety of the ill-famed Russian political commissars evolved, which finally led to a terrible “witch hunt” against soldiers and civilians alike.¹⁶⁷

Which groups were especially targeted?

Own Soldiers

Normally it was the officers’ task to instruct the soldiers and to sustain their morale. All armies also employed army chaplains for the same purpose, but in different numbers: from two chaplains per division in Prussia to 2,700 plus 24,000 other [clerics in the Italian army](#). The Russians employed 2,000 plus 3,000 Orthodox priests who were not chaplains, and also Catholic priests, rabbis and mullahs, all of whom had to inculcate the soldiers with “unquestioning obedience to authority...and devotion and loyalty to the point of self-sacrifice for the Tsar.”¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, the press offices of the High Commands or of the War Ministries

published official newspapers for the soldiers, usually written by bourgeois intellectuals.¹⁶⁹ In Germany, approximately 100 private firms also issued war newspapers to their workers at the front to intensify patriotic “corporate identity.”¹⁷⁰ The soldiers were usually bored by this official indoctrination and preferred to publish their own [trench newspapers](#), which, often in a humorous way, discussed the usual problems of trench life and sometimes also parodied the propaganda of civilian newspapers.¹⁷¹ However, in Italy they were under the complete control of the army and in Germany, from spring 1916, the authors were obliged to insert some propaganda articles explicitly prepared for them by the Field Press Office.¹⁷²

In order to give propaganda a better chance the armies tried to mix it with entertainment. They organized theatre and film performances, songs and musical sketches, free beer, dances, acrobatic shows, and collective singing.¹⁷³ The Germans and the French also created professional mobile front theatres which instead of patriotic messages usually presented humorous lines.¹⁷⁴

“In the spring of 1917 soldiers on all sides were losing the will to do it anymore,”¹⁷⁵ and the High Commands had to react. The first to step up propaganda for the armed forces was Erich Ludendorff with his Patriotic Instruction of July 1917. Special directors of propaganda organized compulsory lectures for the soldiers, and university professors gave lectures to officers. A mixture of conferences and sermons with theatre and film entertainment was recommended, but the authoritarian military approach was retained: “In the sessions of the patriotic instruction discussions are not allowed.”¹⁷⁶

In the Austrian army in March 1918 an Enemy Propaganda Defence Agency was created with the task of training propaganda officers.¹⁷⁷ However, it came too late and did not consider the rear and the home front where the people, among them many roaming deserters, were either indifferent or in open revolt.¹⁷⁸ In Italy in 1918, the Servizio P distributed propaganda material at the front and organized patriotic lectures, but in view of the high rate of illiteracy preferred personal indoctrination by its “men of confidence.”¹⁷⁹ In the British army from 1915, officers gave lectures about war aims, and twenty professional lecturers spoke to the troops behind the lines. When in spring 1918 Britain was faced with the Wilsonian and Bolshevik slogans of peace without victory, the number of chaplains was considerably increased, more additional education officers were appointed and a formal program of “political education” was envisaged.¹⁸⁰

In France, propaganda was considerably strengthened by a famous war novel, *Le Feu*, published in 1916 by [Henri Barbusse \(1873-1935\)](#), which was for a long time misunderstood as a pacifist work.¹⁸¹ His argument was: this war is terrible, but we have to fight “till the very end” and even sacrifice our life because once we crush German militarism, eternal peace will reign on earth. Welcomed and encouraged by French propaganda authorities the author continued to spread his arguments in articles and brochures with phrases such as this:

“Continue this war until the end of the war, in order to end all misery, suffering, misfortune and shame that war spilled over the world since millions of years, *sacrifice yourself and give the utmost* so that one day your children won’t have to do what you did.”¹⁸²

The Enemy’s Soldiers

Propaganda against the enemy’s soldiers started reluctantly because of reservations of the High Commands and was not fully developed before 1917/1918. In spring 1917 the Central Powers started directing propaganda at the Italian and Russian fronts, and somewhat later also against the Romanians and the Serbs in Saloniki. In winter 1918 it was the turn of the Italians and the British at the [Piave front](#) to make propaganda, and from Autumn 1917 British and French leaflets flooded the German [Western Front](#). The Germans did not retaliate there because they considered their enemies too nationalistic and propaganda resistant and even refused the proposition of French socialist prisoners to write propaganda texts.¹⁸³ Only in late summer 1918 when the situation of the German army became desperate, a frenetic propaganda campaign against the Allied soldiers began.¹⁸⁴

Propaganda was transmitted with information boards, megaphones, gramophone recordings, and in appropriate cases even with bottles and buoys via waterways. Leaflets were thrown directly by hand or in cans, fixed to the enemy’s [barbed wire](#), shot over the front by bow and arrow, and later, with “propaganda grenades” and rockets fired by mortars, which gradually improved their range from 200 meters to five kilometers.¹⁸⁵ On the [Eastern Front](#) as well, contact patrols of deserters distributed propaganda material and invited their former comrades to join them.¹⁸⁶

A much better transmittance possibility was by [planes](#) or balloons. Although the first leaflets had been dropped in August and October 1914,¹⁸⁷ regular distribution of propaganda by planes did not start before spring/summer 1915. The Germans dropped the *Gazette des Ardennes* over the French front and the [occupied areas](#) and the French Service of Air Propaganda, founded in August 1915, dropped *La voix du pays* over the latter as well.¹⁸⁸

Today the best-known cases of leaflet propaganda are the campaigns of Lord Northcliffe's propaganda office Crewe House against the German and the Austrian fronts in 1918.

Whereas it did indeed help to destabilize the Austrian Front at the Piave in spring 1918,¹⁸⁹ it did not produce leaflets for the Germans before 4 September 1918 when the fate of Ludendorff's army was already sealed. It was not Crewe House but the Military News Service M17B2(4) of the War Office under [George K. Cockerill \(1867-1957\)](#) called the "Propaganda Library and Aerial Propaganda over Enemy Lines" which from June 1916 produced propaganda against the Germans and also distributed Northcliffe's leaflets until the end of the war.¹⁹⁰ The Americans did not send their first leaflet to the German lines until 29 August 1918.¹⁹¹

Because of legal protests by the Russian and [German High Commands](#) followed by the court-martialling of captured aviators,¹⁹² the British for a while switched to another technique: dropping leaflets from balloons.¹⁹³ The leaflets were attached to woven tinder, which was fixed to the balloon. When the balloon was released, the tinder was lit and after forty minutes the balloon was driven by the western winds between twenty and 100 kilometers, sometimes more, into the German lines where the tinder burned out and the leaflets fell to the ground. Each balloon could transport two kilos of paper. Until November 1918, 30,000 balloons dropped 60,000 tons of paper, that is, 60 million leaflets and 10 million newspapers in several languages.¹⁹⁴

The principal aim of the propaganda was to convince the enemy's soldiers to give up the fight and desert. Accordingly, it tried to destroy their conviction that the war was defensive and that they would certainly win. The French bombarded the Germans with lengthy brochures about German war guilt whereas the British preferred short comparisons between patriotic lies and extracts from authentic speeches by deputies of the USPD maintaining that "it is a war of conquest with imperialistic aims".¹⁹⁵ However, their most convincing argument was the numeric superiority of the Americans. An impressive cartoon showed a long line of American soldiers arriving in Europe with the text: "The first million".¹⁹⁶ Reproducing authentic letters and forbidden German pamphlets the Allies also illustrated the catastrophic reality at the enemy's home front.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, Prussian Junkers, the bloodthirsty *Kaiser*, and war profiteers were blamed for "duping and sacrificing the soldiers".¹⁹⁸ Accompanying cartoons illustrated this message: one of them, distributed in June 1918, showed the *Kaiser* and his six sons on a parade, copied from a well-known photograph, and contrasted with hundreds of dark skeletons clenching their fists in rage and despair. The commentary said:

“One family which has not lost a single member.”¹⁹⁹ French brochures and leaflets appealed to mass strikes, desertion, and revolution.²⁰⁰ German propaganda told Russians, French, and Italians that they were sacrificed for British interests and pointed to British atrocities against France from [Joan of Arc \(1412-1431\)](#) being burnt at the stake via Napoleon being banished to St. Helena to the French victims of British bombs in the occupied areas.²⁰¹

The reward factor also played an important role. Numerous Allied leaflets, most of them with facsimile letters from prisoners and impressive photos promised a wonderful life in the prisoner-of-war camps: [prisoners of war](#) (POWs) were wined and dined in elegant halls and enjoyed beautiful gardens, football fields and swimming pools.²⁰² Many German soldiers, however, deeply distrusted such promises because of gruesome stories about cruel treatment and [forced labour](#) of POWs in African desert zones and eyewitness testimonies about the shooting of combatants who had surrendered.²⁰³ German propagandists had not much to promise: Russian deserters would get seven roubles and vodka if they brought over their guns. Uninspiring photos of German prisoner-of-war camps matched the misery of [Russian POWs](#) many of whom were starving.²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, German propaganda was after all not so ineffective because throughout the war 22 percent of the Russian soldiers were captured of whom numerous ones had voluntarily surrendered.²⁰⁵

Allies and Germans also tried to enlist POWs for their own armies, setting up propaganda newspapers for them and even encouraging and supporting “camp newspapers” published by the prisoners themselves.²⁰⁶ The Russians after some hesitations organized the [Czechoslovak Legion](#) of 80,000 men – of whom only a few once fought against the Austrian army and who later roamed Siberia and were finally shipped to France.²⁰⁷ Russians and French also asked Alsatians to fight on the French side, but only 8 percent of their POWs accepted.²⁰⁸ The Germans established comfortable camps for Flemings, Ukrainians, Balts, Irish, and Muslims, and installed special “men of confidence” there trying to win them over, for instance at the *Halbmondlager* (“Crescent Moon Camp”) at Wünsdorf near Berlin. Finally, 2,000 Muslims, (1,133 out of some 4,000 from Wünsdorf alone) joined the Ottoman army on the [Mesopotamian front](#). In the end, a rather modest result, but still better than the Irish Brigade expected to join Sir [Roger Casement’s \(1864-1916\)](#) uprising in [Ireland](#), which finally did not fight at all.²⁰⁹

The Enemy’s Minorities

One of the most important propaganda slogans of the war was the right of self-determination

for all nationalities.²¹⁰ However, on both sides there were multinational states [destined to fall apart](#) once this principle was put into practice, namely, [Austria-Hungary](#) and Russia. Furthermore, Britain, France, and Germany had colonies: Britain oppressed the Irish, Germany the Poles, the Alsatians, and the Danes. Finally, the Central Powers and, rather belatedly, the Allies as well, promised self-determination – but only to those nationalities living under the enemy’s yoke. Germany promised to liberate the alien peoples of Tsarist Russia – [Poles, Ukrainians and Balts](#) – and offered them freedom and political influence as autonomous, but dependent satellite states bound to Germany in military, political and economic matters.²¹¹ The propaganda for this project proudly called [Mitteleuropa](#) was quite impressive. For instance, in March 1916 the German-Lithuanian landowner [Friedrich von der Ropp \(1879-1964\)](#) supported by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and numerous deputies of the Reichstag founded the “League of the Alien Peoples of Russia”. This organisation sent a dramatic appeal to President Wilson, instigated brochures such as *Do you know Russia?* and organized in conjunction with another German agent, the Lithuanian politician Juozas Gabrys, the Third Nationalities Congress at Lausanne in June 1916. At this congress, more than 400 delegates denounced British colonial rule and Russian oppression of national minorities and completely discredited the Allied assumption of fighting for the freedom of the small peoples – one of the greatest triumphs of German propaganda during the war.²¹² After the proclamation of the Polish kingdom in November 1916 by the Central Powers, German propaganda tried to recruit Polish soldiers for the war, in vain, because the new Polish state consisted only of former Russian territory and the creation of a separate Polish army was not permitted.²¹³

The Russians promised to liberate all Slavic peoples of Austria-Hungary and to unify Poland as an autonomous state within the Tsarist Empire.²¹⁴ The Western Allies hesitated to promise anything to the Poles and even to the Czechs because of their alliance with Russia and the project of Lord [Arthur James Balfour \(1848-1930\)](#) to keep Austria-Hungary intact as a counter-weight against Germany.²¹⁵ But finally they supported the Polish and Czechoslovak national movements, recognized their National Councils as nuclei of the future national governments and started dropping leaflets for Polish soldiers in September 1917.²¹⁶ In April 1918, the Allies organized a congress in Rome with members of the oppressed nationalities of Austria-Hungary where Italians and [Yugoslavs](#) pretended to agree over their territorial quarrels.²¹⁷

A great advantage for German propaganda was the publication of the secret treaties between Tsarist Russia and the Western Allies by the Bolsheviks, which blatantly violated the right of self-determination. Italy would annex German and Slavic territories in Austria, and Britain and

France would divide up among themselves the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire.²¹⁸ The Middle East played a special role in the propaganda war but will be treated in "[Jihad, Holy War](#)".

Besides the propaganda for the Slavic and Arabic peoples other targets played only a minor role. The Germans appealed to the Irish, showing the Irish freedom fighter "Sir Roger Casement hung by the thugs" and promising to the [African American soldiers](#) a nice life in Germany without Ku-Klux-Clan and lynch justice.²¹⁹ French propaganda also tried to stir up the Bavarians and Badenians against the Prussians, and promised the reestablishment of an independent "Kingdom of Bavaria in a German Federation".²²⁰

Conclusion: How successful was propaganda?

This question is usually posed indirectly as "What kept the soldiers in the trenches for long years?" There are two traditional answers: the "consent school" attaches great importance to hate, patriotic sentiment and the influence of "[war culture](#)"; the "coercion school"

emphasizes brutal oppression at the front.²²¹ It seems, however, that the binary interpretation between consent and coercion is no more accepted: by comparing the various coercive factors with the chances of getting away safely, several authors in this encyclopaedia argue that soldiers had in practice very few chances to escape war.²²² One should perhaps distinguish between the different types of war: in trench warfare, escape was difficult, in a war of movement this was much easier, as the number of German deserters during the "military strike" in summer 1918 has shown.²²³ The question if propaganda had any influence is discussed in the encyclopaedia only by Bruendel, who answers it in the negative.²²⁴

I would like to evaluate the influence of propaganda by looking at the special situation in Great Britain. Until January/March 1916, there was no conscription there. By examining the British example under the question "What brought them into the trenches?" I have the chance to evaluate the effect of propaganda with greater accuracy. Of 5 million men fit for military service approximately 2.5 million, e.g. roughly half of them, enlisted voluntarily, one-fifth of them in the enthusiasm of the first six weeks of the war.²²⁵ However, quite a few of these "volunteers" were forced to join the colours due to outside pressure by landowners, corporations, social aid authorities and even theatre managers refusing engagement to actors.²²⁶ Thus the number of volunteers was less impressive than some authors would have it, and only fervent hate and atrocity propaganda lead to impressive upsurges of enlistment. "The Germans were", as John M. Bourne put it, "in many ways the perfect enemy [...]"

galvanizing public opinion in support of the war effort”.²²⁷ Their first and greatest blunder was the invasion of Belgium and Bethmann Hollweg’s qualification of the international treaty of Belgium’s neutrality as a “scrap of paper”. This was immediately exploited by [British propaganda](#) with pamphlets, brochures, songs and posters such as the one entitled “The scrap of paper, enlist to-day.”²²⁸ Further enlistment figures corresponded exactly to the next German atrocity cases: the destruction of Louvain, the two bombardments of the British coast, the [sinking of the *Lusitania*](#), the Bryce Report and the execution of Edith Cavell.²²⁹

When the volunteers were confronted with the reality of the front, they were deeply shocked. In his memoirs an officer characterizes the atmosphere in June 1915 in his platoon as follows: “There was no patriotism in the trenches. ... they [the soldiers of his platoon] don’t believe in the war, they don’t believe in the staff ...] to get a cushy one is all that the old hands think of.”²³⁰ A “cushy one” is a shot causing a light wound but heavy enough as to incapacitate the soldiers to continue fighting. Once arrived in a [hospital](#) in such a state they might sob and beg adamant doctors not to be sent back to the front.²³¹ When in October 1915 the so-called Derby Scheme was adopted, under which civilians could attest to be willing to serve, some people formally signed in the hope that in this way the voluntary system would at least be preserved. However, as only 24.59 percent of the men signed,²³² conscription was introduced in 1916. However, even then men could appeal for exemption to tribunals, which practically everybody did.²³³ Other conscripted men successfully shirked: either they did not enlist or they did not turn up for enlistment or they bribed civilian clerks in order to be removed from the recruitment files so that throughout summer and autumn 1916 the authorities used to round up apt looking men in the streets and in entertainment places.²³⁴ Between March 1916 and March 1917, 370,000 men were enlisted whereas 780,000 were either exempted by compliant tribunals or got away with forged exemption certificates. The total number of exemptions finally amounted to 2,740,000 men, with the number of conscripts slightly higher (2,770,000).²³⁵ The conclusion is clear: neither “feather” and poster blackmail nor the propaganda rallies of PRC and NWAC brought enough Britons into the trenches. Only atrocity propaganda succeeded – temporarily – and nearly half of the men were not only unimpressed by propaganda but even successfully thwarted the military service act. One can assume that in the other countries the situation would have been the same.

One reservation must be made. In all armies there were soldiers who enjoyed the war and identified with propaganda because it reinforced their personal convictions. First of all, there were the eternal lansquenets, “the princes of the trenches”, as [Ernst Jünger \(1895-1998\)](#) called them, soldiers who enjoyed fighting.²³⁶ One of the most outstanding examples was

Jünger himself who already when a secondary school student had tried to join the [French Foreign Legion](#). Then came the privileged “base-wallahs” who did not risk their lives at all and lived quite comfortably in the rear or, if they were Germans, even more comfortably in the occupied territories.²³⁷ No wonder that in the French army between January 1916 and January 1918 their number increased from 19.7 to 28 percent: in absolute numbers there were 730,000 non-combatants compared to 1,870,000 combatants.²³⁸

Acceptance of patriotic propaganda also depended on class. The elites, the intellectuals and the middle classes were more receptive to it than workers and peasants. In Britain 40 percent of the professional and commercial classes enlisted, against 27 percent of the industrial workers and 22 percent of the [rural population](#).²³⁹ In France, Germany, and Italy the results are comparable.²⁴⁰ Consequently, at the front relations between conscripted working classes and *Kriegsfreiwillige*, volunteering middle class students, called *Kriegsmutwillige* (“war wantons”), were usually quite bad.²⁴¹

The home front presented a similar image. People from bourgeois and petty bourgeois families readily accepted the patriotic arguments of war propaganda whereas the workers who distrusted official information, considered newspaper articles as lies and front reports as laughable.²⁴² As early as 2 August 1914, there were Germans who openly characterized the alleged French bombardment of Nuremberg as a lie and explained: “Berlin is only looking for a reason to strike out at the French.”²⁴³ Workers were less exposed to propaganda because they had neither the time nor the money to buy newspapers and other elements and gadgets with propaganda messages.²⁴⁴ It seems, however, that in France and Britain a more important part of the working class was patriotic than in Germany, Austria, and Italy.²⁴⁵

Nevertheless, in all countries a counter movement among the public arose with dangerous rumours, gossip and criticism.²⁴⁶ As at the military front privileged groups profiting from soaring prices such as war profiteers, black marketeers, farmers, shop keepers, and restaurateurs did not care if they were correctly informed or not, but greatly enjoyed the situation. For instance, a wholesale clothier and his employees at Tours were happy to see the war going on, owing to the high profit and the good wages they were receiving.²⁴⁷ In a critical French cartoon with the title “The expensive life” a happy restaurateur says: “Let’s hope that this will go on.”²⁴⁸ Such people were convinced before and did not really need propaganda as Klaus-Peter Müller put it for Baden: “The patriotic meetings of the bourgeoisie attracted only those whose national conviction did not need to be strengthened.”²⁴⁹ And in

Britain a school inspector complained: "It is always the same people [...] already won over, who form the audience."²⁵⁰ Thus, propaganda only succeeds if there is a certain resonance on the part of the addressees.

For those who refused the war and its propaganda messages the authorities in all countries applied disciplinary measures as harsh as those at the front. Demonstrations and protests against the war were crushed by the intervention of police forces or troops. Strikers, rioters, and pacifists were either shot, jailed, in some cases put in mental hospitals, moved to forced labour in the colonies or sent to the front and placed as cannon fodder in the most exposed trenches.²⁵¹ The quantity and ferocity of interventions, however, varied from country to country. In Italy, the authorities were especially distrustful because only a minority of warmongers backed the war and the majority of the people hated it and called it the war of the *signori*.²⁵² Thus, it was not surprising that workers risked being dispatched to the front from the very beginning of the war. Those considered as militant opponents to the war, others for minor offences such as having smoked or talked during work or having expressed "defeatist" ideas, and especially in 1917/1918 strikers and "agitators" who as an alternative were also incarcerated without even being questioned.²⁵³ In Austria in 1918, half the army was needed in order to crush riots and mutinies.²⁵⁴ In Germany especially after the widespread strikes in January 1918, 200 workers were jailed and thousands of them, according to one report even 40,000, were dispatched to the front and placed there in the most dangerous sectors.²⁵⁵ In France the peace movement was relatively feeble, furthermore impeded by strict surveillance, monstrous calumnies, efficient censorship, and overwhelming war propaganda, so that only several hundreds of pacifists and strikers were jailed, sent to forced labour in Africa or to the front.²⁵⁶ In Britain, unions were quite patriotic and workers so much intimidated that a simple threat to send them to the front stopped strikes immediately.²⁵⁷ At least Britain was the only combatant country to recognize [conscientious objectors](#), although they were badly treated – some were even confronted to mock executions – and could only choose between civilian service and jail, where seventy-one of them died.²⁵⁸ In the United States the Espionage Act of 15 June 1917 and, in May 1918, the even more draconian Sedition Act permitted imprisonment for up to twenty years or a fine of up to \$10,000 for all persons who criticized government, army, or the sale of war bonds by "false report or false statements". 2,000 cases were brought before a court until the end of the war, for instance a movie producer was jailed for ten years because in his film about the War of Independence he had shown historically confirmed atrocities of the British army.²⁵⁹ If oppression occurred in the enemy country, it was considered as "a proof of German tyranny,"

if at home “it was accepted as evidence of our sturdy defence of liberty”.²⁶⁰ The shrewd combination of state propaganda and police oppression was most clearly recognized by the liberal British weekly newspaper *The Nation*:

The government is to push its own propaganda of opinion by press and public meetings and circulars, using public money for the purpose, but opposing opinions are to be crushed by fines and imprisonments. That is one way of getting national unity. But what is worse than a unity based upon ignorance, silence, and repression?²⁶¹

Especially in the last two years of the war prominent people who were immune to war propaganda and demanded to start peace negotiations were jailed with or without formal trial in an “epidemic of prosecutions” in order to “decapitate” the protest movements. Examples included the socialist deputies [Karl Liebknecht \(1871-1919\)](#) and [Wilhelm Dittmann \(1874-1954\)](#) in Germany, the former Minister of Finance [Joseph Caillaux \(1863-1944\)](#) in France, the philosopher [Bertrand Russell \(1872-1970\)](#) in Britain, the socialist leader [Costantino Lazzari \(1857-1927\)](#) in Italy and the socialist politician [Eugene V. Debs \(1855-1926\)](#) in the United States, the latter one week after the armistice.²⁶²

Another point has to be made: acceptance and refusal of propaganda fluctuated with the time depending on the supply and the military situation, from [early enthusiasm](#) in 1914 when the [Union sacrée, or Burgfrieden](#) (“peace inside the beleaguered fortress”) and the Union of Tsar and People were proclaimed, to rising frustration in 1916/1917. For instance, the mood of the people in Berlin, usually rather depressed since autumn 1915, improved considerably after each military success, climaxed during the initial success of Ludendorff’s [offensive of spring 1918](#) and reached the lowest point after the catastrophic German defeat in August 1918.²⁶³ In the same year public sentiment on the Allied side quickly changed from hopelessness to such high spirits that the British army could drop an intended program of “political education”.²⁶⁴ Let us examine also an individual example: on 3 August 1914 a German girl noted in her diary that her school mates were happy because of the war against the hereditary enemy (France). When on 10 August 1915 a message of the *Kaiser* was read at school, she regretted that as a girl she could not enlist as a volunteer. On 1 February 1918 she wrote: “We must not believe any more the lies of the old people. We were children, students, and all of them in the school, with the director and the teachers in the forefront, had cried: Hurrah.”²⁶⁵

In conclusion, I would say that there was not one single, but several reactions to propaganda. Ernst Jünger wrote: “After all every man experiences his own war.”²⁶⁶ I would add: everybody

reacted to propaganda in their own way, depending on the influences of their class, their social milieu and their political convictions, the degree of frustration in their country, their individual situation, and also the factor of time. Nationalist right-wingers in Germany remained under the sway of war propaganda even after 1918. In their unshaken belief in the superiority of the German army they explained the defeat by the [stab in the back legend](#).

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