

Propaganda at Home (France)

By [Charles Ridel](#)

Summary

A conflict that was industrial and technological, the Great War was also a war of words and slogans. To rally neutral countries, to weld together its own camp and to demoralise the enemy, France undertook an intense effort to censor information and to produce propaganda. While vertical state propaganda proved decisive, notably through the engagement of statesmen like Aristide Briand and Georges Clemenceau, or else through the creation of official organs of propaganda like Maison de la Presse, we also observe the involvement of a variety of actors in a process of horizontal mobilisation. Any study of institutions and actors, principles and contents of propaganda cannot escape the central question: what was its impact on the conduct of the French and on the course of hostilities?

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Introduction

To tackle the question of propaganda in [France](#) during the Great War requires getting rid of some received ideas that might bias our discussion. First, we have to be wary about any value judgement. For example, in [Julien Benda \(1867-1956\)](#) famous essay, *La trahison des*

clercs (*The Treason of the Intellectuals*) in 1927, he reproaches French intellectuals during the war for having deserted universal and humanist values for the sake of base national passions. Although worthy of interest, this analysis carries moral condemnation that is all the easier because the essay is retrospective. As shown by certain articles published in the French newspaper *Le Figaro*¹ in 1917, Benda himself had difficulty in raising himself “above the *mêlée*”.² Second, we should not ascribe to this war propaganda the efficacy and brutal nature associated with the totalitarian indoctrination policies of the 1930s. Certainly, social psychology had made notable progress in France before the war, particularly with the research of [Gabriel de Tarde \(1843-1904\)](#) and [Gustave Le Bon \(1841-1931\)](#)³ on the mechanisms of mobilizing “crowds”. That said, the manipulation of French opinion during the Great War was nothing like a “rape of the masses”.⁴ We have to remember that the French did not discover propaganda in 1914. The 19th century had instigated a long series of political regimes that did not spare their propaganda efforts. Since 1870, the French Republic had observed the rule of trying to root itself in the collective imagination and to promote remembrance sites⁵ – just as a veritable mass culture was appearing.⁶ In short, whether interpolated during electoral campaigns or during major political crises like the Dreyfus Affair from 1894 to 1906, whether mobilised during colonial or European tensions, French public opinion had become a stake and a major actor in political life. Public opinion was fashioned, constructed, and was conquered, but it also resisted and escaped attempts at manipulation.

In fact, there are as many mechanisms of continuity as of rupture between peacetime and wartime propaganda. Yet the very notion of “propaganda” seems to cause debates within the French historical community. For example, it does not appear sufficiently central to figure in the impressive list of concepts covered in *Historiographies*, a 2010 survey of [historical research in France](#).⁷ The *Collectif de Recherche International et de Débat sur la Guerre de 1914-1918* (CRID 1418) prefers the notion of “dominant discourse” to the term “propaganda”.⁸

For their part, the researchers at the museum and research committee, Péronne’s *historial*, prefer to encompass propaganda in the wider concept of ‘[war culture](#)’ such as discourses that give meaning to the conflict and the extent of sacrifices made.⁹ Nevertheless, these remarks do not prevent us from examining the specificity of French propaganda between 1914 and 1918 by looking first at the question of actors and institutional frameworks for the control and production of information during the conflict. Then, without masking the profusion of propaganda discourses, it is useful to identify the themes, procedures, and mediums used. Finally, we cannot escape the issue of the impact of this propaganda on the population. What

was the “social efficacy”¹⁰ of the propaganda discourses produced between 1914 and 1918? In other words, did this propaganda effort on its own produce the consent of the French people to the war, or should we look in other directions for the deep causes of their endurance until 1918?

Was the State the Exclusive Actor in the Propaganda Effort?

Establishment of Censorship: Unprecedented Control of the Press and of Information

From the first hours of the entry into war on 2 August 1914, preventive [censorship](#) replaced the liberal press regime and the circulation of information in France. In effect, the famous law on freedom of the press back in 29 July 1881 was suspended by the application of legislation on a state of siege (laws of 8 April 1848 and 9 August 1849), which gave military authorities the power to ban all publications susceptible of disturbing public order. A law passed on 5 August 1914 called for sanctions (fines, imprisonment) in cases of indiscretion by the press. This law was aimed at protecting information of a military nature (size and position of troop units, etc.), which might give a tactical or strategic advantage to the enemy. It was especially desirable to not commit the same mistake as in 1870: it was in an article in the newspaper *Le Temps* in August 1870 disseminated by the Havas Agency, falling into the hands of the Prussians, that had allowed the enemy to anticipate the movement of [Patrice de Mac-Mahon \(1808-1893\)](#) army and to defeat it shortly afterward in Sedan.

But the organisational arrangement of censorship was actually born on 3 August 1914 with the creation of a *Bureau de la Presse* within the War Ministry. Its role was dual: both to elaborate censorship guidelines on the basis of instructions sent by General Headquarters and the various ministries (War, Foreign Affairs, etc.) and at the same time to supervise its application by the written press and the news agencies, especially Havas. The *Bureau de la Presse* was therefore divided into four sections of censorship: for the daily papers, periodicals, telegrams, and the local press. These offices functioned in teams, around the clock, that scrutinized the *morasses* [page proofs] of papers before the final printing. This system was centralised in Paris, backed up with a network of Commissions to supervise the local press installed in the twenty-one French military regions. After the resumption of artistic activity in the capital in December 1914, another Parisian authority exercised a form of censorship: the *Préfecture de Police* was charged with granting visa rights to theatre productions and to songs performed in the *cafés-concerts*.

In Army zones, control of information was even stricter. It was under the exclusive authority

of the General Headquarters of the French Army (*Grand Quartier Général*), which forbade access to any non-resident civilian, to any parliamentarian or journalist. The penetration of newspapers from behind the front-line was closely watched in the combat zone. In August 1914 the nationalist writer and chronicler at the *Echo de Paris*, [Maurice Barrès \(1862-1923\)](#), were already offering his services to the French chiefs of staff, who firmly declined his proposition. In theory, then, no information coming from the front could escape the *Grand Quartier Général*, especially its second bureau for information and political affairs. Jealous of its prerogatives over the conduct of the war and very attached to the principle of censorship that it defended in guidelines sent to the *Bureau de la Presse* at the War Ministry, the general staff distilled the news into droplets in communiqués that were often laconic and insipid, published three times a day, at 11:00, 15:00 and 22:00.

From an Embryonic Structure to an Organised and Coherent System

Conceived in the context of a war that everyone believed would be short, this system underwent significant changes, given the unprecedented stakes of a conflict that had settled in for the long term. To discern, influence, and possibly correct the opinions of soldiers became an explicit objective of the ruling powers. From 15 August 1914, the Minister of War created a *Bulletin des Armées de la République*: distributed each day to all the units of the French Army, the goal of this publication was to show soldiers “the importance of their individual efforts in the national effort, so that this thought will create among them a spirit of generous emulation.”¹¹ Starting in January 1915, the *Grand Quartier Général* set up postal control of the mail destined to and from the front, a system that actually stabilised at the end of 1916. The idea was to sound out regiments regularly and to intercept the most pessimistic letters. At the height of their activity, commissions of postal control were opening 180,000 letters – but out of the 5 to 7 million that were exchanged each week.

The government was also concerned to rationalise the propaganda effort. The *Président du Conseil* and Minister of Foreign Affairs [Aristide Briand](#) in November 1915 merged the embryonic propaganda services into the fifth office of the General Staff – “Information and Propaganda”. In January 1916, he created the *Maison de la Presse*. Installed in Paris, it was equipped with telephonic and telegraphic apparatuses and with a postal office that enabled receiving and sending information throughout the world. The 400 personnel (writers, journalists, linguists, diplomats serving in the armed forces, etc.) were divided into four sections, embracing multiple domains of official French propaganda: the diplomatic section, the military section, analysis and the translation of the foreign press, and the propaganda section properly speaking, which sent representatives on missions abroad. More than two hundred magazines and foreign newspapers covering the main geographical areas involved in the conflict (or areas that might become so) were read and translated each week.

How many *ad hoc* missions or services (essentially ministerial or military) were added to this centralised and vertical structure? In this context we may cite the creation of the *Section Cinématographique de l'Armée* (The army's Cinematographic Section, or SCA) and of the *Section Photographique de l'Armée* (The army's Photographic Section, or SPA) in February and May 1915. These two sections derived from the desire to create new archives of the conflict, but also to ensure the dissemination on the home front (as well as abroad) of propaganda material. The operators on the ground were bound by strict instructions and by the presence of a General Staff officer. The censorship office carefully combed through their productions before the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would release them for dissemination in the national and foreign press. In 1917, the SPA and the SCA merged into a *Section Photographique et Cinématographique de l'Armée* (The army's Photographic and Cinematographic Section, or SPCA). Entertainment also entered into the propaganda framework, since the military authorities founded an Army Theatre that gave its first performance at the front in February 1916.

Horizontal Propaganda that Exceeded Expectations

The decisive actor in the propaganda effort, the State nevertheless relied on a very widespread dynamic of social mobilisation. Quite apart from any government injunction, spontaneous cooperation abounded on all sides and demonstrated that the "[Sacred Union](#)" was not a vain slogan. Most especially, men of the press rapidly felt an ethical duty to inform, which was combined with a patriotic duty to mobilise minds. The scarcity of information decreed by the Grand Quartier Général was accepted – when journalists did not themselves practice a form of self-censorship. [Thus Albert de Mun \(1841-1914\)](#), columnist in the right-wing paper *L'Echo de Paris*, wrote at the height of the combat in August 1914: "Of the rest we know nothing [...] and today I repeat with a deep conviction that we *ought* to know nothing."¹² In the infinite variety of its nuances, patriotism was the intangible editorial line of the very great majority of French newspapers, from *L'Humanité* on the left to *La Croix* or *L'Echo de Paris* on the right. It is revealing that [Gustave Hervé \(1871-1944\)](#) renamed his paper: *La Guerre Sociale* ["The Social War"] became *La Victoire* ["The Victory"] in January 1916.

The involvement of French intellectuals in the propaganda effort is just as manifest. All academic disciplines in the French universities participated in ideological mobilisation, convinced that the battle was also being played out on that terrain. The famous medieval philologist and professor at the Collège de France, [Joseph Bédier \(1868-1934\)](#) quickly put his erudition and mastery of German at the service of the French war effort by joining the publishing committee of the series "*Etudes et Documents sur la guerre*" created in 1915 by the Armand Colin publishing house. In 1915, he published two works denouncing the

“atrocities” committed by German troops during their march through [Belgium](#) and Northern France in August 1914:¹³ *Les crimes allemands d’après des témoignages allemands* (“The Hun’s Diary: German Proofs of German Crimes”, 1915) and *Comment l’Allemagne essaye de justifier ses crimes* (“How Germany Seeks to Justify her Atrocities”, 1915). Reading the titles of this editorial venture leaves no doubt about the intentions of Armand Colin publishing; the authors were recruited among the most prestigious French academics¹⁴ to legitimate the combat waged by the French armies, faced with an enemy responsible for “crimes” that had crossed a threshold in war violence. Thus leagues, reviews, and associations proliferated, all invested in an effort at (counter) propaganda that was both prolific and chaotic. This was the reason for the founding, at the start of 1917, of the *Union des grandes associations français contre la propagande ennemie* (Union of French Associations against Enemy Propaganda, or UGAFCE): soliciting the help of intellectuals, UGAFCE published articles, issued posters, and worked in close collaboration with the services of the *Maison de la Presse*.

Artists who could not be mobilised also sought an outlet for their patriotism. [Abel Faivre \(1867-1945\)](#) produced posters for war bonds, while [Jean-Louis Forain \(1852-1931\)](#) published his drawings in the press, before he enlisted in the Camouflage Section in 1917.¹⁵ Others participated in artistic missions to the armies organised by the Under-Secretary of State for the Fine Arts. The intention was to set up a collection of artworks about the conflict that would tour France in itinerant exhibitions. The first of eighteen such tours of war art began in February 1917. Ending the following December, this operation mobilised a hundred more or less well-known artists.

This engagement in propaganda has often been explained by a feeling of culpability, since the age of these established figures kept them out of the armed forces and hence any risk of death, whereas their sons and nephews were in uniform. In fact it was difficult for Joseph Bédier to remain a simple observer of the conflict when his two sons were at the front. Similarly, participating in writing “Etudes et Documents sur la guerre” was for the sociologist [Emile Durkheim \(1858-1917\)](#) a way of exorcising his feeling of uselessness and his anguish over his son André, his son-in-law Jacques Halphen, and his nephew [Marcel Mauss \(1872-1950\)](#), all fighting in the war. No doubt there is another explanation for this commitment: absorbed by the “all-powerfulness of events,”¹⁶ these intellectuals were in fact exhibiting defensive patriotism, like a great part of French society as a whole. While this horizontal propaganda was no doubt the prerogative of a cultural and social élite, it arose more fundamentally from the existence of national and patriotic feelings that had been transformed and self-mobilised since 1914 in the form of a war culture.

Propaganda Media and Functions

A Variety of Media and Procedures

Profiting from this large-scale mobilisation, propaganda would utilise most of the old mediums as well as the new mass media. Paper was still the essential medium of propaganda discourses: the printed press (embellished or not with drawings), postcards,¹⁷ posters, and illustrated magazines all made the war their favourite theme, for reasons both patriotic and commercial. The propaganda effort also encompassed a considerable production of objects (statuettes, ceramics, [children's games](#)) and images: [caricatures](#) published on the front page, pictures at exhibitions, films by the SPCA (the army's photographic and cinematographic section) that were projected in home-front cinemas. Nor should we omit the immaterial supports of propaganda, especially the thousands of songs that resonated at the battlefield and the home front, and whose principal source of inspiration was patriotism, even for the singer-songwriter of the pre-war red revolt, [Gaston Brunswick \(1872-1952\)](#), known as Montéhus.

The procedures utilised by the propaganda discourse were strongly classical: exaggeration and distortion of facts, omissions and falsehoods, irony and coarse humour. There was little place for nuance when one was witnessing a "nationalisation of the truth".¹⁸ Representations of the German attest to this: whether dealing with ordinary soldier, [Wilhelm, Crown Prince of Germany \(1882-1951\)](#), or [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#), propaganda was pleased to ridicule the German, stereotype him on the physical level, even to animalise him. A German was brutal and barbarous, and incidentally drunk, dirty and thieving. These images became even stronger as the spectacle of a [total war](#) and the anomie of the fighting seemed to validate them every day. Thus as [John Horne](#) and [Alan Kramer](#) have shown,¹⁹ French propaganda exploited the stories of Belgian or French refugees and dramatized the destructions by Germany (houses in ruins and the Cathedral of Reims bombed). Images of children "with hands cut off" and "women with breasts cut off" – entirely concocted – allowed the violence of war to be hijacked as a propaganda theme – "German war atrocities". The speed with which this system of representations was set up also illustrates the preponderance of the memory of 1870 and the Germanophobe sentiment maintained by the Third Republic. For example, the use of the word "Boche" in France does not date from 1914-1918, but from the end of the 1890s.²⁰ More than mobilisation, it was actually re-mobilisation of an old ideological antagonism.

A Diversity of Recipients and Objectives

Paradoxically, the enemy was not the priority target of the French propaganda discourse. Certainly some cards and tracts were dropped over German trenches with the purpose of demoralising their occupants, but we do not know at what rate or intensity, nor especially with what effect. It was more the neutral powers that focused the attention and reflection of French propaganda services. To ensure the maintenance of their benevolent neutrality (or to provoke their entry into the Allied camp) was much more than a minor stake in this war of attrition. French propaganda brochures in the collection "*Etudes et Documents sur la guerre*," for example, were systematically translated and distributed abroad, as and when the stakes were considered to be major. Propaganda missions were organised by the Foreign Affairs Ministry's propaganda office: actors from the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier (for example, [Jacques Copeau \(1879-1949\)](#), [Charles Dullin \(1885-1949\)](#) and [Louis Jouvet \(1887-1951\)](#)) obtained leave in 1917 to perform at the Théâtre Française in New York. The opening of the first season took place on 27 November, featuring great classic dramas like *Les Fourberies de Scapin*.

In reality, the enormous propaganda effort that was deployed essentially targeted the French themselves, both civilians and soldiers. Foremost, it was a matter of justifying the combat ideologically, of making it into a war to defend civilisation, but also of giving people confidence. Depreciating the enemy and (on the contrary) showing the "*poilus*" (French infantrymen, literally "hairy ones") determined and comfortably installed in their trenches – were both part of this effort. The French had to be enjoined to rise to the demands of the conflict by inviting them to invest their savings in war bonds, to respect food [rationing](#), to demonstrate discretion in their letters and their conversations, as in the famous government poster titled "Keep quiet! Beware! Enemy ears are listening to you". While propaganda generally exploited the positive figures of war (the *poilu*, the nurse, the "godmother", the wife waiting for her husband), there were other figures with a more ambiguous status, like the image of the "dodger".²¹ The *embusqué* referred to the French soldier who refused to fight on the front line by seeking out quiet postings at the rear. Cowardly, effeminate and chic, the dodger's uselessness haunted the administrative services behind the lines. This figure of war was the physical and moral antithesis of the *poilu*; it was supposed to unite all Frenchmen in unanimous reprobation and heap guilt on those who wanted to remain outside the conflict.

Adults were not the only targets, since propaganda was also aimed at [children](#). In this respect, [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau](#) has shown to what extent the schoolbooks and homework at primary schools, children's literature, games and toys all placed the child at the heart of

the propaganda discourse.²² By seeking to give meaning to this war, by making the sacrifice of fathers heroic, a relief team in the next generation was being prepared.

Therefore propaganda tried to strengthen the patriotic and moral unity of the country. Many of the censorship instructions elaborated by the Press Bureau of the Ministry of War derived from a desire to increase morale on the home front, also expressed by the confiscation of some soldiers' letters when they were intercepted by postal control. Theatre plays and songs that might have an emphatic defamatory or naughty effect did not receive a visa from the Paris Police Prefecture. The same fate befell communications that were thought to carry allusions to the violence of war or to the frightful living conditions at the front.

Limits of Censorship and the Usury of Propaganda

A Criticised and Bypassed System

In a great variety of tones and registers, French propaganda discourses did nothing by half-measures. The [press](#), frustrated by the penury of information, sometimes dared to publish articles that were totally disconnected from reality. In its edition of 24 August 1914, *Le Matin* predicted victory by proclaiming in a triumphal headline: "Cossacks at Five Stops from Berlin". Exaggeration and chauvinism quite often reduced propaganda to a grotesque caricature: they presented German gunners bound to their own cannons to prevent them from deserting, or French trenches so comfortable that they offered a veritable rest and open-air cure for their occupants. Doctor Bérillon went so far in Germanophobia as to maintain in 1915 before the medical society of Paris that the Germans were suffering from fetid sweating and abundant excretions.²³

Such statements soon alerted the French population to propaganda excesses. Some press leaders criticised the "Anastasia cuts" – named after a cantankerous old woman armed with a pair of scissors who symbolised censorship she was caricatured for the first time in 1874 by [André Gill \(1840-1885\)](#). Now the image used the likeness of [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#), whose paper *L'Homme Libre* (when it was suspended for a week in in the fall of 1914 for having revealed the scandalous conditions in which the wounded were evacuated in animal carts) then reappeared under the title *L'Homme enchaîné*. In fact, Clemenceau criticised the shift from a censorship of military information – which was legitimate for him – to a censorship that was political and general. This is why his paper proudly proclaimed the items that had been chopped out, those white spaces that on the front page signalled to readers the presence of censorship. The daily *L'Œuvre* was a past master at challenging censorship by using in its headlines and its banners perfidious allusions or double meanings alluding to the role of censors from the Press Office. One expression quickly became popular

to characterise the nature and quality of official information: “*bourrage de crane*” (brain-washing). The enterprise of disinformation and manipulation resulted among combatants only in vigilance and hostility, as witnessed by this letter from a soldier to his parents: “You do not know what hatred I feel for the apologists of the carnage [...] who (it is claimed) are inspiring admiration and worship among schoolchildren.”²⁴ It is scarcely surprising in these conditions that performances by the Théâtre aux Armées were not appreciated, especially when they put on stage professional actors from the home-front who had come to seek glory by performing plays of an incongruous patriotism.²⁵ The principal risk of the propaganda discourse was indeed there: to play in a void by establishing a complete gap between the powerful sources and public opinion, to dig a chasm between a home-front that was under-informed about the actual conditions of the fighting (and hence susceptible of believing the propaganda) and a war-front that did not understand the home-front and was thus more inclined to commune with the enemy in the same community of suffering.

However, with the usury of the war, especially after 1916-1917, the caricatured kind of propaganda tended to attenuate. In November 1916, the novel *Le Feu* by [Henri Barbusse \(1873-1935\)](#) won the Goncourt Prize, an index of the need felt for truth and soberness about the war. We are far from the jingoistic patriotism of [René Benjamin \(1885-1948\)](#) in *Gaspard*, the Goncourt Prize-winner in 1915. Moreover, there were a thousand ways to get around censorship and the information scarcity. It was still possible to read foreign newspapers like the *Journal de Genève*, or to read between the lines of a French press that surreptitiously spread news and criticism. When the editorials of Clemenceau were censored, they were frequently sent in sealed envelopes to subscribers. The birth of the *Canard Enchaîné*, a satirical and anti-conformist weekly, also belongs in this context of defying censorship²⁶ and declining self-mobilisation. The fissures that appeared in the Sacred Union in 1916-1917 likewise had the effect of provoking the birth of many papers that were very attached to their freedom of speech, notably within the ranks of the Socialist minority.²⁷

Moreover, civilians and combatants were not without resources. The army’s supervision of the post, with a maximum of five per cent of letters intercepted between the front and the rear, was not infallible and showed that many soldiers still kept their freedom of speech. Those on leave also bore stories or protest songs like the “[Chanson de Craonne](#)” that they spread at the rear and on the home front. After 1915 the French troops had [Soldier Newspapers](#) or trench newspapers; these little war gazettes, often ephemeral and printed under rudimentary conditions, were disseminated at the level of the regiment or division, but it was not rare for them to reach the home front. Using humour and irony, this fighting press contained confused impressions and accents of the truth about the rigours of the front, the anguish of death, the hatred of “*bourrage de crane*”, and the ambivalent feelings that lay

behind them.²⁸ Nothing comparable appeared in the very official Bulletin des Armées de la République that, struggling with the constant disaffection of the troops, had to interrupt its publication in 1917.

Despite these challenges, those in power intended to keep prerogatives regarding censorship and propaganda. A victim of the Anastasia cuts when he was editor-in-chief of his paper, Clemenceau, once he was named president of the Council in November 1917, did not fundamentally question this practice. The testimony of General [Jean Jules Henri Mordacq \(1868-1943\)](#), his military chief of staff, confirms this. Greedy for information about his former colleagues, Clemenceau had named as head of his civilian cabinet [Georges Mandel \(1885-1944\)](#), who seemed to master perfectly how to spread information among journalists: "He received them each evening, and very skilfully indicated to them what should or should not be divulged. This regimen gave the best results."²⁹ In May 1918, the Clemenceau government created the *Commissariat général de la propagande* and the *Centre d'action de propagande interne contre l'ennemi*, two inter-ministerial bodies placed under the tight authority of the Council's presidency.

Prescriptive and Effective Propaganda?

The basic issue is the impact and results of these propaganda discourses. Were the campaigns of information and "manipulation" among [neutrals](#) finally responsible for the entry into the war of Italy, Rumania and the United States on the side of the allies? It is difficult to give a definite answer. John Horne and Alan Kramer assert that the dramatization of German destructions and "atrocities" had undermined Germany's credit among the neutrals, especially in the [United States](#), where newspapers like the *New York Times* in 1915 reproduced images of the destroyed Reims Cathedral. That is certainly true, but the United States did not intervene in the conflict until two years later, in 1917, in reaction to the outrage of the submarine warfare launched by Germany, but especially in response to the content of the Zimmermann telegram communicated to the White House on 1 March 1917 by the British information services.³⁰

Next, what can we say about the effect of censorship and of propaganda on the behaviour of the French? Was propaganda the causative factor or simply the reflection of the ideological cohesion of France during the conflict? And was there a differential impact of these discourses on the French people as a function of their social or geographical origins? Here, too, the answer is difficult.

Undoubtedly, the censorship of sensitive events or information (casualties, the mutinies of 1917, or the strikes of spring 1918) helped to preserve, if not the reality, then at least the

illusion of a Sacred Union in the eyes of the French. We now know that the reality of French mutinies reached French public opinion only in a very diffuse and tardy way, as it reached the German general staff, which was thus not able to exploit this passing crisis in the French Army. Similarly, the working class strikes in the spring of 1918 were subject to a blackout on the part of a press that was strictly censored by the government. However, those in power had neither the ambition nor the means for a total control of information, which would have required thousands of additional censors. The historian Olivier Forcade estimates that about a third of the censorship instructions were not even applied.³¹ Nor did the state have an interest in censorship being total and implacable, for this would risk generalising self-censorship, systematic defiance, and silence. Propaganda's objective was above all to know the morale and the worries of the population, no doubt to contain the latter, but also to respond better to them. The General Staff, by setting up postal surveillance and by indulging newspapers in the trenches (from which some extracts were then spread in the French and foreign press) applied that partial strategy.

Rare are the war letters of soldiers that positively and precisely echo the discourses, images, and media that French propaganda produced in enormous quantities. Was this a sign of repudiation? No doubt the reality is more complex and somewhat paradoxical. Refusing to submit to the brainwashing behind the lines, soldiers at the front became experts in producing legends and rumours. Reflecting on the false news of the Great War, the historian [Marc Bloch \(1886-1944\)](#) helps us understand the relation of the French to propaganda discourses, which can be summarised in a simple formula: "One easily believes what one needs to believe."³² A veteran himself, Bloch had personal experience of this subject: "I remember," he wrote in 1921, "that when during the final days of the retreat [in August 1914], one of my officers told me that the Russians were bombarding Berlin, I did not have the courage to fend off this seductive image; I vaguely felt the absurdity and I would certainly have rejected if I had been capable of thinking about it; but it was too agreeable for a depressed mind in a tired body to have the strength to not accept it at all."³³ This reaction was more frequent than one might think, as [Léon Werth](#) shows in *Clavel Soldat*.³⁴ But did this singular psychological mechanism described by Bloch (to hold as true what one perfectly well knows is false) persist beyond the year 1914? In any case, we should consider that throughout the duration of the conflict – and despite the appearance of divisions within the Sacred Union – the French horizon of expectation seemed to be a victorious end to the war. Everything that propaganda was able to provide on this horizon probably had some influence, whether momentary or durable, superficial or profound, as a function of the context or temperament of each French person.

Conclusion

Whether like a caricature, crude or subtle, Manichean, rational or irrational, mobilising varied actors and exploiting the daily horrors of the war, French propaganda produced a profusion of discourses, images and slogans that reveal the parameters of a war culture. The intention of the State was indeed to control information and to produce an acceptable and legitimate vision of the war in order to keep intact the morale of the French, both at the front and behind the lines. In theory the propaganda effort wanted to be coherent and on a par with this total war: in order to obtain participation by all the French people in the war effort, it dehumanised the enemy and it targeted categories of individuals to be influenced (soldiers, civilians, men, women, children). Still, propaganda was not able to entirely take the place of reason and the deep logic that together explain the endurance of the French after 1914. To the indisputable process of “routinisation” of the war (soldiers often speak of professional duty to justify the fact that they held on), should be added other explanatory factors: the conviction of conducting a defensive war in the name of an invaded homeland, the necessary liberation of many occupied *départements* in the north and east of France, and the memory of hundreds of thousands of deaths that could only be honoured by the defeat of Germany.

Whether it aroused the adherence or the exasperation of contemporaries, the object “propaganda” carries an undeniable heuristic value for the historian who wants to understand a society at war: it reveals the mental universes of individuals, their anxieties, their hopes, prejudices, their political cultures; it unveils a whole system of representations constructed prior to the war, and at the same time subject to challenge and the usury of the conflict.

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Notes

1. In his article “Les moralistes de la violence” published in an issue of *Le Figaro* (27 May 1917), Julien Benda feeds the traditional rivalry between French civilisation and German Kultur: “Germany is a country where philosophy invented something incredible: the morality of violence, that is to say, this doctrine that poses the supreme morality of the life of prey and the feelings it carries [...] The dogmatic exaltation of the ferocity as a moral value is indeed a German invention,” *Le Figaro*, 27 May 1917, p. 1. [↑](#)
2. One of the only dissident voices in the Sacred Union was that of Romain Rolland (1866-1944), who published in the 22-23 September 1914 issue of the *Journal de Genève* his pacifist article “Au-dessus de la mêlée”. [↑](#)

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27. *La Vague* was created in May 1916 after the Kienthal Conference; *Le Populaire de Paris* was founded in 1917 by Jean Longuet, like *La Vérité* by Paul Meunier, and *Le Journal du peuple* by Henri Fabre. ↑
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34. The soldier Clavel, narrator of this autobiographical war testimony, was in fact reacting to a speech by Paul Deschanel (1855-1922), the president of the Chamber of Deputies, on Italy’s entry into the war sur. Despite the fact that it uses very classical war rhetoric (making France the “mother or law” and the “cradle of the world”), this speech still had a certain effect on a soldier who was very critical about the ambient propaganda, as we can witness: “The power of words! Clavel felt tears come to his eyes. He had nine months in the trenches... For nine months, he had nourished with all his flesh and brain a hatred of war and the grand slogans with which it was justified. These tired and empty words aroused in him some sentimental and lazy assent.” Léon Werth, *Clavel Soldat*, Paris, Editions Vivian Hamy, 2006 [1919]. ↑

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