

Newsreels and World War I

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Introduction

The First World War formed the arena in which modern, state-controlled propaganda was born. Philip Taylor, in his book *Munitions of the Mind*, says that the Great War of 1914-18 was when 'the modern "scientific" use of propaganda came of age', with Britain in particular setting the standard for the application and effectiveness of modern propaganda that others would then follow.¹ It was modern propaganda because the British state employed all of the mass media at its disposal - communications cables, newspapers, pamphlets, leaflets, letters, cartoons, posters, photographs and films - using these media to shape the narrative of the war to its own ends, employing different strategies for home, neutral and enemy audiences. It targeted elites, with the intention of influencing the most important hearts and minds. It targeted the mass, literally through the mass media.

However, there was - and remains - a double-edge to this modern propaganda. The spread of literacy, and the introduction of new forms of mass communication, gave the state ample opportunity to deliver its message. But there was an implicit weakness in such a strategy. State institutions feel the need to control the narrative not because they are powerful but because they are fearful of losing power. People are perverse things and will not always read messages in the way that those delivering them intend them to be read. It is sometimes too blithely assumed that propaganda has the effect that its perpetrators intend that it should have, but mass communications and mass literacy work both ways. The more we read, and the more we able to see, the more we may question. The First World War demonstrates the great power of the propaganda machines established by the leading combatant nations, but it also showed the management of propaganda to be something very problematic, particularly when it comes to judging its effectiveness.

An interesting example of the complex challenges of propaganda management during the First World War is the use by the combatant states of newsreels.

Newsreels

It is largely forgotten now, but for the greater part of the twentieth century, people saw the news at the cinema. From the 1910s, when cinema truly became a mass medium with some 5,000 cinemas in Britain attracting up to 10 million people per week, to the 1960s, when television took over from the cinema as the primary form of visual entertainment and information, newsreels were a standard feature of the cinema programme. If you went to the

¹ Philip Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A history of propaganda from the ancient world to the present day* (Manchester University Press, 2nd ed., 1995), p. 3.

cinema - as millions of people were doing by the outbreak of war - then you saw the week's news in the form of a newsreel.

A newsreel was a disparate selection of news stories held on a single reel of film, and released in cinemas weekly or twice-weekly - that is, a new edition would be released each week or half-week. The reels were between five and ten minutes in length, contained five to eight stories, and at this period of cinema history they were silent. There was no sound technology available, so the films were shown with descriptive titles and live music. They focussed on visual, light news, favouring sports, parades, traditions, fashion, celebrities and royalty. They saw themselves as the film equivalents of the popular photo-illustrated newspapers, such as the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Sketch*, and the six newsreels that were operating in Britain at the outset of the war each took their names from newspapers, to make the connection clear: *Pathe's Animated Gazette*, *Gaumont Graphic*, *Warwick Bioscope Chronicle*, *Williamson's Animated News*, *Eclair Journal* and *Topical Budget*.²

Newsreels had first been established in 1908 in France with *Pathé Fait-Divers*, which subsequently became *Pathé Journal*., and swiftly became a worldwide phenomenon. In America, *Pathé's Weekly* appeared in 1911, and was soon joined by such indigenous offerings as *Vitagraph Monthly of Current Events* (1911), *Mutual Weekly* (1912) and *Universal Animated Weekly* (1913). Germany had *Tag im Film* (1911), *Union-Woche* (1913), *Eiko-Woche* (1913) and *Messter-Woche* (1914). Russia had *Mirror of the World* (produced by Pathé). Innocuous in content as these the newsreels generally were, they were viewed by millions, and one of the most interesting aspects of the history of First World War propaganda is how the leading combatant states each overcame an initial revulsion towards cinema and its low-bred audiences, and turned to the newsreels to their messages across.

Great Britain

In Britain the official powers were initially contemptuous of cinema. They saw no value in using the film medium for their own purposes or allowing film companies to film at the various war fronts. Gradually there was recognition of the growing popularity of the cinema and its potential for reaching audiences who might be untouched by other form of propaganda. The covert War Propaganda Bureau, led by Charles Masterman, started to take an interest in film production in 1915. This was followed by a film trade consortium working with the War Office, the British Topical Committee for War Films, and then the creation of an actual governmental film body, the War Office Cinematograph Committee, formed in 1916 and led by Max Aitken, the future press baron Lord Beaverbrook.

The WOCC experimented with various form of film, from feature length documentaries to short films, but it found that such films quickly lost their impact as they were replaced by other films on the cinema programme. What they want was to be able to show films that promoted their message on a regular basis to a captive audience. A newsreel was the logical solution.

It was not an easy solution, however, since the film trade had no wish to have parts of it taken over by the government - it wanted instead licence to film the war as it wished, under War

² Luke McKernan, *Topical Budget: The Great British News Film* (British Film Institute, 1992), p. 6.

Office supervision. Moreover a government-sponsored news source was surely not going to have great appeal for audiences, and the cinema trade needed to sell tickets.

Initially the War Office tried to work with one of the three British newsreels that was still in operation by early 1917, *Topical Budget*. The newsreel was renamed the *War Office Official Topical Budget*, but the relationship became fractious and towards the end of 1917 the War Office bought up the company and ran the newsreel itself, through to February 1919, with an eventual change of name to *Pictorial News (Official)* and oversight from the Ministry of Information, formed early in 1918 and led by Lord Beaverbrook.

The *War Office Official Topical Budget* was, in commercial terms, a success. It is estimated to have reached around 3 million people per week, comparable to the reach of a British newspaper.³ The interesting element is the degree to which the War Office found itself producing a conventional newsreel with ordinary news items that had little or no bearing on the war, even though it had exclusive access to the films shot by the various official cameramen that were operating. Lord Beaverbrook produced a memo with this interesting, apologetic defence of the newsreels' output:

It is sometimes found desirable to produce and distribute films which have no apparent propaganda value. This applies more particularly to The Pictorial News, which as a bi-weekly news service must necessarily include many pictures having no direct bearing on propaganda aims. As a whole, however, The Pictorial News is an instrument of undoubted propaganda value.⁴

To make your propaganda film popular, you had to ration its propaganda element. It was a nice dilemma for the propagandists.

Let's see an example of the newsreel. I've chosen this example from November 1917 as a particular favourite of mine, not for its aggressive propagandising, because the *War Official Official Topical Budget* was seldom aggressive in form, abiding as it did by the British policy of a propaganda of facts - or letting the images speak for themselves - but for its skillful cinematic wit. The item is entitled *Pigeon as Postman*.

Pigeon as Postman (War Office Official Topical Budget 324-1) (7 November 1917)

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060005437>

France

The *War Office Official Topical Budget* wasn't the first government-sponsored newsreel to go into production. It was anticipated by a few weeks by the French official newsreel, *Annales de la Guerre*. This was produced by the French Army's Photographic and Cinematographic Section. France was the home of newsreels, with four in operation at the start of the war, but none proved susceptible to takeover, and it proved easier for French officialdom to establish its own newsreel from scratch. The British and French official newsreels regularly exchanged

³ McKernan, *Topical Budget*, pp. 46-47.

⁴ Beaverbrook papers, E/2/18, undated draft report, quoted in McKernan, *Topical Budget*, p. 46.

footage, and each served as a yardstick by which to measure the performance of the other. But, unlike the situation in Britain, where the *War Office Official Topical Budget* had to compete in the open market alongside other, non-governmental newsreels, cinemas in France were all obliged to exhibit *Annales de la Guerre*. This leaden approach to informing audiences must have been counter-productive; certainly the content of *Annales de la Guerre* itself is efficient but lacking in variety, and it fails to display the lively inventiveness and engagement with the mass audience that the British newsreel at its best was able to demonstrate.⁵

Here is part of issue number 24, from August 1917. It shows French artillery during the Verdun offensive.

Annales de la Guerre no. 24 (August 1917)

<http://www.ecpad.fr/les-annales-de-la-guerre-n%C2%B024>

USA

The USA was of course neutral at the start of the war, and found itself the target of propaganda from the combatant nations, which wanted America's moral and financial support, and then on Britain's part for America to join the war on the side of the Allies. Once America became a combatant nation, in April 1917, it keenly embraced propaganda through the cinema. The Committee on Public Information was formed, led by George Creel, which acted as the conduit for footage being shot by America's Signal Corps in France. The CPI issued three main documentary features from the material, *Pershing's Crusaders*, *America's Answer* and the post-war *Under Four Flags*. The remaining footage it mostly distributed to the newsreels. However, the CPI was facing the same trouble as the British propagandists had faced, which was that it was far harder to place a motion picture item before its intended public than it was to place a story in a newspaper. There was little sympathy for the CPI from the American film trade, which resented government intrusion and found government films an audience turn-off. Just as in Britain, while American audiences had originally responded with enthusiasm to the first major war actuality films that they saw, their interest swiftly palled. The CPI had also to face the sort of response one exhibitor gave to *America's Answer*, who asked, "why not have woven a little heart-interest story through the genuine scenes from France?"

The CPI's solution was to follow the example of Britain and France and produce an official newsreel. This was named *Official War Review* and was intended to be an outlet for all of the official footage from all the various sources, American and British, that then existed. It proved to be a solid commercial success, reaching 3.5 million people daily at its peak, and like the British reel having to survive in a free market so that it had to be propaganda that appealed - propaganda that people would happily pay to see, knowing that it was propaganda.⁶

⁵ For the history of *Annales de la Guerre* and French actuality film during World War I, see Laurent Veray, *Les Films d'actualités français de la Grande Guerre* (SIRPA/AHRC, 1995).

⁶ Luke McKernan, 'Propaganda, Patriotism and Profit: Charles Urban and British official war films in America during the First World War', *Film History* vol. 14 nos. 3-4, 2002, p.p. 383-385.

Sadly, although a few issues of *Official War Review* do survive, there is none in a UK collection that I know of, and none available online.

Germany

In Germany the path to state involvement in newsreel production was a different one. There was the inevitable initial repudiation of motion pictures by the German High Command, but the initiative was seized by the country's leading film producer Oskar Messter, whose business in 1914 included the newsreel *Messter-Woche*. Messter offered his services to the High Command and was taken on by its press department in September 1914. This official position gave his company all the advantages of the sanction of the military, including exclusive filming permits, and *Messter-Woche* became in effect the German state official newsreel, even if never owned by the state. Released fortnightly, *Messter-Woche* enjoyed high popularity among a German cinema audience keen for any images from the war fronts, but despite Messter's special association with the High Command, military commanders on the ground were as wary of cameras as ever, and the cameramen were generally kept away from the front and restricted to relatively anodyne scenes set well behind the lines.⁷ Here's a sample issue from 1915:

Messter Woche no. 15 (1915)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hjo-8pj6f1I>

Messter-Woche would continue through the war, but in 1917 a military Photographic and Film Board - BUFA, or Bild und Filmamt - was created to manage propaganda filmmaking about the war, which was then superseded and eventually absorbed by the state film studio, UFA, which was to play such a huge role in the great outpouring of German cinema in the immediate postwar period.

Russia

The situation in Russia, with the revolution occurring towards the end of 1917, puts its newsreel history in a different place, one that is directed towards internal transformation rather than managing information about the war, from which Russia withdrew after signing an armistice with Germany in March 1918. But for completeness sake, this is a summary of the situation.

There was a number of newsreels issued in Russia at the start of the war, of which the leading example was probably *Zerkalo voiny*, or *Mirror of the World* (produced by Pathé). With the overthrow of the Tsarist regime in February 1917, an official newsreel was produced under the control of Kerensky's provisional government, *Svobodnaia Rossiia* or *Free Russia*.⁸ Following the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917, this was succeeded by various state newsreel initiatives, of which the leading example was *Kino-nedelja* or *Cinema Weekly*, produced by the Moscow Film Committee of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment. This newsreel ran for forty-three issues between May 1918 and June 1919, documenting daily

⁷ David Welch, *Germany, Propaganda And Total War, 1914-18* (The Athlone Press, 2000), pp. 49-54.

⁸ Roel Vande Winkel, 'Newsreel Series: World Overview' in Ian Aitken (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* (Routledge, 2006), p. 987.

life in Russia, the civil war, and the aftermath of Russia's involvement in the World War, in the months following the revolution of October 1917.⁹

Cinema Weekly certainly has its propagandist edge, and is loaded with the excitement of social and political change, with some propagandist language ("Soviet border guards congratulate their German comrades for liberating themselves from the bonds of monarchical slavery" reads one title). But rather charmingly it mixes this with the everyday, either reports on the ordinary (buildings being constructed, several reports on snow, a children's festival) or by revealing the ordinary carrying on in the background. It is notable for film history because the future film theorist and great innovator of newsreel form, Dziga Vertov, began his career in film working on *Cinema Weekly*. Happily several issues of the newsreel survive and are available online. This is issue number 1, from 20 May 1918:

Kinonedelja No. 1 (20 May 1918)

<http://www.filmmuseum.at/jart/prj3/filmmuseum/main.jart?rel=en&content-id=1336731140071&reserve-mode=active>

Conclusion

How can we measure propaganda value of these newsreels? This was the great challenge for the propagandists of the First World War, who were people learning their art as they went along, faced with new media forms, a vast and varied audience, and war on an unprecedented scale. How does propaganda work? How can you judge the degree to which you have made people think in a way other than they might otherwise have thought? How can you assume that all, or even, part of the audience, thinks as you would want them to think? How different would things have been had you not managed information in this way at all?

The propagandists in each of the combatant countries seem to have found the answer in how they played their part in maintaining home front morale, particularly as the war dragged on and little good news could be found from the battle fronts themselves. Lord Beaverbrook made this extraordinary claim for the *War Official Official Topical Budget*:

The Topical Budget shown in every picture palace was the decisive factor in maintaining the morale of the people during the black days of the early summer of 1918.¹⁰

Can this possibly be true? The newsreel wasn't shown in every picture palace - it was probably seen in a quarter of them - and not everyone went to the cinema, though maybe a quarter of the population was now doing so on a regular basis. But it did express what the propagandists wanted to see expressed, and in a form that had some form of measurable appeal, since you could count the number of people going to the cinema. The remarkable thing about these newsreels is that people paid to see them; they paid to be propagandised. (The situation was different in France and Russia, however, where watching the propaganda newsreels was unavoidable).

⁹ <http://thebioscope.net/2012/05/26/news-from-the-soviets/>

¹⁰ Quoted in A.J.P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (Hamish Hamilton, 1972), p. 144.

It is precisely because *Topical Budget* was *not* shown in every picture palace that made its success all the more gratifying to Beaverbrook and his fellow propagandists. It meant that the mass audience was, at least to some degree, seeking it out. Whether that was for the newsreel's propagandist message, or because it functioned as an ordinary commercial newsreel with appealing non-war content, or whether it was simply that the audience wanted to see the feature film that came afterwards, they had no real way of knowing.

Background reading

- Ian Aitken (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* (Routledge, 2006)
- Kevin Brownlow, *The War the West and the Wilderness* (Secker & Warburg, 1978)
- George Creel, *How We Advertised America* (Harper and Brothers, 1920)
- Luke McKernan, *Topical Budget: The Great British News Film* (BFI, 1992)
- Nicholas Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda during the First World War* (Croom Helm, 1986)
- Laurent Veray, *Les Films d'actualités français de la Grande Guerre* (SIRPA/AHRC, 1995)
- David Welch, *Germany, Propaganda And Total War, 1914-18* (The Athlone Press, 2000)

World War I newsreels online

- Austrian Film Museum – <http://www.filmmuseum.at>
- British Pathe – <http://www.britishpathe.com>
- Colonial Film – <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk>
- ECPAD – <http://www.ecpad.fr>
- Imperial War Museums – <http://www.iwm.org.uk>
- ITN Source – <http://www.itnsource.com>
- News on Screen – <http://www.buafc.ac.uk/newsonscreen>
- Screenonline – <http://www.screenonline.org.uk> (UK educational and library users only)