

## The War and the Newsreel

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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 simply 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 are 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

An interesting example of the complex challenges of propaganda management during the First World War is the use by the combatant states of newsreels. The subject of my talk is how this relatively humble motion picture form came to play a significant part in how ideas and messages about the conflict were transmitted to a mass audience during the First World War; in Britain, France, America, Germany and Russia.

## 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, 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 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.

The term 'newsreel' is too often used as a catch-all term for any sort of news or actuality film, to a point where even the studied actualities of the Lumière brothers from the 1890s have been called 'newsreels'. However, the newsreel was a specific form: 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, of course, silent. 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*.<sup>2</sup>

Newsreels were a product of cinemas. Films had been exhibited to the public for twenty years before the start of the first world war, but originally they were seen in theatres, public halls and fairgrounds as one element in a variety programme. From the mid-1900s onwards, films started to acquire venues of their own. In America, from around 1904-1905, venues adapted out of shop spaces in city streets started to show programmes of films, at a time

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

when the average film was five minutes in length, presenting these to a predominantly poor, working class audience. The price of entry was as low as a nickel, or five cents, and the venues quickly became known as 'nickelodeons'. They operated on a continuous show basis, with the day's film show (which could last less than an hour) being repeated throughout the day, and audiences able to drop in at any time and stay for as long as they wished.

The idea spread to other western countries, partly encouraged by the growing length of films. The first cinemas appeared in London in 1906, and there was an explosion of cinema construction across the United Kingdom from 1909 onwards. By the time of the First World War there were around 4,000 cinemas across the country, catering for a weekly audience of around 10 million. Such venues ranged from simple shop conversions seating a few hundred, to super cinemas that could accommodate 2,000 people or more. The audiences they attracted were chiefly working class, with a high number of children, but a process of gentrification was underway, with cinemas seeking to overcome a reputation of low product and low clientele by investing in elaborate decor, presenting longer films that came closer to the experience of seeing a play at a theatre, and by raising ticket prices.

Newsreels were a product of cinema's varied programme and the regularity with which that programme was changed. Audiences fell into a habit of a weekly or twice-weekly visit to the cinema. They were fed a consistently-structured programme of films, with the knowledge that different titles, nevertheless offering up more of the same, would be available to them at their next visit. News thrives on such regularity, because what makes the news is not simply the content of the news medium but the expectations of a particular audience. News is defined by the locality, outlook and understanding of its specific consumers. Cinemas created a particular audience clientele; they created the newsreels.

However, the newsreels did not present news as we might now expect it to be. The typical British newsreel of the 1910-1914 period did not have hard-hitting politics or exposés. The standard fare was royalty, sports, ceremonies, curiosities and celebrities. Here a typical example of a pre-war newsreel, from *Pathé's Animated Gazette*, showing aviator Gustav Hamel delivering the first ever air mail, on 9 September 1911.

The early newsreels were filmed in a most basic manner, with short titles preceding the filmed action - the films were silent, of course, and accompanied in the cinemas by live

music. The titles did not comment, they merely introduced. The emphasis was on the visual and the diverting, and the tone in general was unchallenging. The newsreels existed as part of the entertainment package that was the cinema programme, and they saw it as their first duty to entertain, and certainly not to provoke.

Yet the newsreels were also quite radical in their way, because they introduced the public choice and comparison of news media for the first time. Newsreels could not compete with the daily output of newspapers, because it took too long to process and distribute the films, but they took advantage of this by deliberately positioning themselves as part of a link in a chain of news provision, providing visualisations of stories that have been discussed in the newspapers. You've read that story about Gustav Hamel? Now come and see how he actually looked. Newspapers up to this period had had an effective monopoly on the presentation of news; now choice brought into the equation, and in doing so the newsreels put power into the minds of the audience as the ultimate constructors of news is. It is we who make the news. We take information from diverse sources and construct in our minds what the news agenda for us should be, seeking out further source to confirm, augment or challenge that which we wish to understand. This is a part of what it is to be modern, and the newsreels - humble as they were - can be said to have ushered in a world where news comes at us from TV, radio, newspapers, web and social media, and it is up to us somehow to make sense of it all.<sup>3</sup>

Newsreels were established in 1908 in France with *Pathé Fait-Divers*, which subsequently became *Pathé Journal*, and swiftly became a worldwide phenomenon. The first British newsreel, *Pathé's Animated Gazette*, appeared in 1910, followed that same year by the *Warwick Bioscope Chronicle* and *Gaumont Graphic*, and in 1911 by *Topical Budget*. The newsreels liked to stress their affinity with newspapers, particularly illustrated newspapers, hence the use of such names as *Gazette*, *Graphic* and *Chronicle*.

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). These newsreels were produced for national consumption, with sophisticated

distribution networks soon emerging which can manage the complexities of producing weekly or twice-weekly news packages, often with newsreels of several dates in circulation at once, as older newsreels were available to cinemas at cheaper rates.

Footage was exchanged with newsreel companies overseas, with the French companies Pathé and Gaumont in particular establishing strong international networks through their vertically integrated production, distribution and exhibition chains for films of all kinds. In the pre-1914 period it was France that dominated world film markets, not yet America. However, the time it took for films to be sent overseas meant that such footage lost its topicality, and one of the reasons newsreels were often composed of stories that seemed to be linked to no particular point in time was because this made them suitable for export, as well as for those cinemas showing older news because it was cheaper.

By the outbreak of the First World War, cinema was firmly established as a social habit, with a quarter of the population attending on a regular basis, and newsreels were becoming an essential component of any film programme - for many their main news source. Innocuous in content as 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.

Every film form then in existence was tried out by official bodies during the First World War: fiction feature films, short dramas, short comedies, animation films, instructional films, documentaries short, medium and long in length, and newsreels. Of these it was newsreels that proved to be the most durable, and the most effective - though just what such effectiveness was, and how to measure it, needs to be questioned. Before raising those questions, I'm going to describe the engagement with newsreels by each of the major combatant states, with illustrations of their newsreel productions.

### **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

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<sup>3</sup> 'Links in the chain: early newsreels and newspapers' in Angel Quintana and Jordi Pons (eds.), *La construcció de l'actualitat en el cinema des orígens / The construction of news in early cinema* (Girona: Museu del

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, which produced the most successful and best known of the British propaganda films, the feature-length documentary *The Battle of the Somme.*, which powerfully brought home to audiences what life was like on the Western Front, and may eventually have been seen by over half of the UK population. The film's great impact led to the creation of an actual governmental film body, the War Office Cinematograph Committee, or WOCC, formed in 1916 and led by Max Aitken, the future press baron Lord Beaverbrook.

The WOCC experimented with various form of film, from other feature length documentaries, including *The Battle of the Ancre* and *The Battle of Arras*, to short films, but it found that such films quickly lost their impact as they were replaced by other films on the cinema programme. The impact of a film such as *The Battle of the Somme* was a one-off, its particular shock effect could never work as well a second time. 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 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 on a collaborative basis 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, 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

national newspaper.<sup>4</sup> 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. 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.<sup>5</sup>

There were other newsreels that operated in Britain during the War, notably the French-based reels *Pathe's Animated Gazette* and *Gaumont Graphic*, which continued to be issued in cinemas and held the greater share of the market, despite their lack of access to official film of the war, which was all channeled through the *War Office Official Topical Budget* and other government-sponsored documentaries and information films. The official newsreel had to compete with these, not just in the war footage that it showed but in the footage that had no bearing on the war. 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. This is a complete issue dating from 7 November 1917, with four stories: PIGEON AT POSTMAN, GREAT ITALIAN STAND, POLISH LEGION IN FRANCE and PUSHING ON IN FLANDERS. It is fairly typical for its use of footage from French and Italian sources, its combination of conflict scenes filmed from a distance with the safer subject of parades and inspections. The first story is unusual, however, and is 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.

#### **War Office Official Topical Budget 324-1 (7 November 1917)**

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<sup>4</sup> McKernan, *Topical Budget*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>5</sup> Beaverbrook papers, E/2/18, undated draft report, quoted in McKernan, *Topical Budget*, p. 46.

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

The *War Office Official Topical Budget*, and then *Pictorial News (Official)* would continue throughout the war, and indeed beyond it, issuing its bi-weekly newsreels until February 1919, when it returned to private hands. It then continued successfully as a newsreel under its original name, *Topical Budget*, finally closing in March 1931. Its archives are now held jointly by the British Film Institute and the Imperial War Museum, and there are many examples to be found online, either through the BFI's YouTube channel, or on the IWM's own site.

### France

The *War Office Official Topical Budget* was not 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 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.<sup>6</sup> It also focusses almost exclusively on the actions of the military, which served a basic informational purpose, but meant that it did not function as an all-purpose newsreel showing all kinds of stories and able to survive in the open market.

Here is part of issue number 71, from July 1918. It shows the French counter-offensive in the Villers-Cotterêts region, and conveniently it is a bi-lingual edition:

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<sup>6</sup> 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).



### **Annales de la Guerre no. 71 (July 1918)**

<http://www.ecpad.fr/juillet-1918-les-annales-de-la-guerre-71>

*Annales de la Guerre* continued publishing to the end of the war. Its archives are now held by the French military and several editions can be found on the French Ministry of Defence's site <http://www.ecpad.fr>.

### **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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> Here's a sample issue from 1915.

### Messter Woche no. 15 (1915)

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

- Berlin: Patriotic celebration of Bismarck's 100th birthday on Königsplatz on April 1st 1915.
- Athens: Street demonstrations following news of the allied occupation of the Greek islands near the Dardanelles.
- War reports from the West.
- Bavarian snowshoe troops advancing towards the front line.
- War-time evening atmosphere. German artillery occupies a French town that has been cleared of the enemy.

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> David Welch, *Germany, Propaganda And Total War, 1914-18* (The Athlone Press, 2000), pp. 49-54.

- War reports from the East.

*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 voyny*, 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*.<sup>9</sup> 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 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.<sup>10</sup>

*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

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<sup>9</sup> Roel Vande Winkel, 'Newsreel Series: World Overview' in Ian Aitken (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* (Routledge, 2006), p. 987.

<sup>10</sup> <http://thebioscope.net/2012/05/26/news-from-the-soviets/>

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>

*1. The Moscow Union of Metal Workers celebrates the centenary of Karl Marx's birth. / A speech by the Soviet Peoples' Commissar, Comrade Lenin. / Lev Trockij, the Peoples' Commissar for Military Affairs, reviews the parade. 2. Orša: Refugees return to a province formerly occupied by the Germans. / Refugees at the demarcation line. / Lined up to receive passes. / In Orša, the border between the Russian and German-occupied areas runs through the railway station. / Negotiations between the Russian and German forces. / Due to the shortage of train cars, refugees must wait for weeks to be sent home.*

Cinema Weekly is held in its entirety by the Film Museum in Vienna, which has made newsreel available online as part of its Dziga Vertov collection.

**Part of the programme**

Why were these newsreels made, and why did the state apparatus of the leading combatant nations each become involved in their production? Partly it was a desire to manage information in this form rather than have anyone else manage it. State bodies wanted to control the newsreels that carried their messages rather than anyone else do the work for them.

Partly - and as an extension of this - it was driven by a desire to keep hold of, to and to make better use of, the profits that came from producing films. Partly it was a necessary bow towards the demands of democracy, speaking to the mass through the medium that reached so many people, namely the cinema. To address the people adequately, they had to occupy the cinema and adopt its language. Partly it was imitation - the British *War Office Official Topical Budget* copied the French *Annales de la Guerre*; the American *Official War Review* imitated both, and each of these official reels exchanged footage with one another. Moreover there was imitation of the commercial newsreels, such as *Pathe Gazette*, *Gaumont Graphic*, or in the USA *Hearst-Selig Pictorial*, whose name encouraged the British propagandists to change the name of their newsreel to *Pictorial News*. The commercial

newsreel continued to be a part of the cinema programme, and provided both inspiration and competition.

Chiefly, of course, the aim was to propagandise - to control the war's message in as persuasive a manner as they could.

The cheap, short-form newsreel was economic, manageable, and persuasive. Reporting actuality on a regular basis, it was the bearer of simple, positive messages inserted into a form of publication that served a mass audience with the information it urgently sought, slipped into cinema programmes without intruding too greatly onto the rest of the films in a evening's entertainment. A motion picture industry which bridled against propaganda films that occupied too much of the programme saw less to object to in a form that took up no more than five per cent of the cinema programme. Propagandists who wanted to get messages across in a reliable, regular form without interference from the mercurial cinema industry found the newsreel ideal for their purposes. Audiences could see the progress of war in an entertainment venue, without having time in the auditorium spoiled by too much concentration on that war. The cinema was predominantly a means of escape from the war for them, not means of engagement with it. Having the newsreel there was just enough for audiences chiefly in search of diversion, we may reasonably deduce. The newsreels lacked the glamour of the major documentary and fiction features that the propagandists made, films such as *The Battle of the Somme*, *Hearts of the World* or *Pershing's Crusaders*, and there is scant evidence of audience reception of the newsreels compared to these high-profile efforts. But the newsreels' very unobtrusiveness within the cinema programme may have been their greatest strength.

### **How can we measure propaganda?**

How can we measure the 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.<sup>11</sup>

Can this possibly be true? The British official 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 a quarter of the UK population was 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 arguably different in France and Russia, where watching the propaganda newsreels was unavoidable, but audiences had still made the choice to attend the cinema in the first place).

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 a proportion of 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.

### **Newsreels after the war**

As for the newsreels themselves, they endured. Newsreels played a significant role in communicating information about the Second World War. In Britain the newsreels had become too powerful to permit government to take over one of them as had happened in the First World War. Instead a pooling, or rota, system controlled the footage that was supplied, and all newsreels were subject to official censorship. In the USA a similar rota

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in A.J.P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (Hamish Hamilton, 1972), p. 144.

system was introduced, with all footage censored and processed by the War and Navy Departments. The US government financed its own newsreel for overseas exhibition, *United Newsreel*, taking material from the five commercial newsreels. Similarly in Britain, the Newsreel Association produced the composite *British News* for consular and British Council use. In Germany official control was absolute. Newsreels had been used to prepare the German people for war, and in 1940 all newsreel production was re-organised under one title, *Deutsche Wochenschau*. Goebbels used the newsreel to glorify early Nazi triumphs, then to present a sanitised picture of the war as public resistance to what Nicholas Reeves describes as the "remorseless optimism" of the newsreel demonstrated the ultimate futility of offering a news that ran counter to people's experience and understanding of events.<sup>12</sup>

Newsreels continued as a standard part of the cinema programme in Britain through to the end of the 1960s, and in some other countries into the 70s and 80s. It was television news that brought about the end of newsreels, because television news could be broadcast daily, and live, making the newsreels both quaint and late with the news. Yet if the newsreels of Pathé, Gaumont, Topical and others disappeared from our cinemas, losing their function as purveyors of current information, they have endured in archives that supply footage to the broadcasters of today.

The newsreels' footage of the First World War now plays a fundamental part in our understanding of the war, endlessly replaying it as we stare at those black-and-white images and try and find some connection, some understanding of the past. Knowing that these were images crafted to persuade, to inform, even to console, helps explain the function of the newsreel in wartime, and reminds us that all such images were constructed, because they served a particular purpose. Yet there will always be more to them than their intended function, because what makes a film, and what makes news, is not the producer but the audience. We make the news, and it was the newsreels of the First World War that gave us the greater means to do so.

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<sup>12</sup> Nicolas Reeves, *The Power of Film Propaganda: Myth or Reality?* (London/New York: Cassell, 1999), p. 125