"FREEDOM" OF THE PRESS: BRITISH PROPAGANDA AND SYSTEMS OF SELF-CENSORSHIP IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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During the First World War the British Parliament developed a propaganda apparatus which relied heavily on the burgeoning press industry, centralized under the ownership of a small number of wealthy men, to control the public narrative surrounding the war. This essay will contextualize the foundation of the state-press partnership and the role the press played in the control of public opinion during the war. Additionally, using two specific elements of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, it will show that the complacency of the press in producing and reproducing state propaganda during World War I was a result of self-censorship systems fundamentally built into the news media industry.

> None of the heroes prepared for suffering and sacrifice, none of the common herd ready for service and obedience, will be inclined to listen to the call of their country once they discover the polluted sources from whence that call proceeds and recognize the monstrous finger of falsehood which beckons them to the battlefield.
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> - Arthur Ponsonby, MP, *Falsehood in Wartime*

Over the course of the First World War, the British Parliament rushed to develop a propaganda apparatus to sway public opinion about the war. This apparatus relied heavily on the press industry, which had been largely centralized under the ownership of a few wealthy "press lords," to control and manipulate the information available to the public.[1] This essay will provide context for the foundation of the state-press partnership, the role the press played in the control of public opinion during the war and, by using two specific elements of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, show that the complacency of the press in producing and

[1]Alice Goldfarb Marquis, "Words as Weapons," *Journal of Contemporary History* 13, no. 3 (1978): 473.

reproducing state propaganda during World War I was a result of self-censorship systems fundamentally built into the news media industry.

Widespread news press emerged in England with the rise of mass literacy in the nineteenth century. The initial relatively low cost of self-publishing led to the growth of independent newspapers by the mid-1800s; many of these smaller papers were politically radical and offered alternatives to the dominant ideology of the major press outlets. Parliament found this rise of a radical press among the working class threatening, with one member of parliament (MP) stating that these alternative newspapers encouraged workers to analyze their conditions and criticize the "immutable laws" of society.[2] The state attempted to litigate these types of independent daily papers out of existence with prosecution under new libel laws and increased taxation, but these measures had a marginal effect on independent publishers. Eventually, Parliament turned to the "free market" to regulate dissenting papers through increases in production costs, associated with the further industrialization of printing technology, and the creation of joint stock companies which bought up smaller papers.[3] In the early years of the twentieth century this corporatization of the press was already evident to many, including former journalist and MP Hilaire Belloc, who warned that the rapid commercialization of the press could cause free journalism to be crushed under the boot of advertising companies and a small, centralized group of wealthy shareholders.[4] These fears were proven to be justified as the ever-increasing capital required to start or buy press companies created an insular class of wealthy newspaper proprietors. This centralization was exemplified by the Harmsworth brothers; Harold Harmsworth (who was later gifted the title of Lord Rothermere) owned five major newspapers in the UK, and his brother, Alfred Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe), founded the *Daily Mail,* owned and edited *The Times,* and controlled a number of other papers under his stock company Associated Newspapers Limited.[5] Other prominent figures included George Riddell, managing director of the *News of the World* and deputy chair of the Newspaper Proprietors Association, the Ontario born Max Aitken (Lord Beaverbrook), owner of the highly popular *Daily Express*, and C.P. Scott, owner and editor of the *Manchester Guardian*. These press lords grew wealthier as newspaper circulation rapidly increased. By the beginning of the war, Northcliffe's daily papers alone had combined circulation numbers of approximately 1,700,000.[6] At the same time, Parliament was interested in the growing idea that public perceptions and thinking could be manipulated through the newspapers due to the rising readership caused by a demand for information on

[2]Quoted in Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Bodley Head, 2008), 63.
[3]Herman and Chomsky, 63.
[4]John M. McEwen, "The National Press during the First World War: Ownership and Circulation," *Journal of Contemporary History* 17, no. 3 (1982): 478.
[5]Marquis, 468; McEwen, 478.
[6]McEwen, 471.

the war, and the highly centralized nature of the wire-service news sources that disseminated information among the numerous smaller newspapers.[7]

Before the outbreak of the war in July of 1914, the German government had already begun to employ the nation's press outlets in the creation of official propaganda, in large part due to the history of state management of the press under the government of Otto Von Bismarck and Wilhelm II.[8] Under direct control of the state, the German press mass produced written propaganda to discredit their enemies, justify their entrance into the war, and more importantly, make attempts to influence the United States.[9] Meanwhile, in England, the press opinions were confused and often conflicting at the onset of the war, with many papers criticizing other nations for joining the conflict and outright opposing Britain's participation. It was not until the start of the German invasion of Belgium in August 1914 and Britain's subsequent official entry into the war that major press outlets slowly began to support the war effort wholeheartedly.[10] In September 1914, the Parliamentary War Aims Committee concluded that immediate action must be taken to oppose Germany's propaganda campaign and that the creation of a department to organize local and foreign propaganda production was necessary. Parliament set up multiple departments and organizations to manage its propaganda effort, the first being the highly improvised Press Bureau. George Riddell was appointed as a liaison between the Bureau, the War Office and editors of the major newspapers. Riddell, who was close friends with many politicians, including Chancellor of the Exchequer David George Lloyd, used these friendly relationships to gain information which he would pass on to his conference of editors to be published.[11] At the same time, Parliament invited Liberal cabinet member Charles F. G. Masterman, head of the National Insurance Commission, to lead an organization that would establish the methodology of Britain's official propaganda campaign. Masterman called together a group of well-known British authors and academics to form an organization that was colloquially known as Wellington House, named for the apartment block that served as its headquarters.[12] This war propaganda organization operated for two years in total secrecy, producing pamphlets and books initially for distribution in allied and neutral foreign countries and eventually among the British populace. By the time Lloyd George assumed the prime minister's office in late 1916, Riddell's liaison position, Wellington House, and many smaller propaganda organizations in other government departments were incorporated under the direct control of the Foreign Office. Masterman's secretive propaganda organization was re-structured and renamed as the Department of

[7]Marquis, 468.
[8]Marquis, 469.
[9]M. L. Sanders, "Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War," *The Historical Journal* 18, no. 1 (1975): 119.
[10]Marquis, 469.
[11]Marquis, 472-473.
[12]Sanders, 119.

Information, with new sections assuming responsibility for film propaganda, wireless transmissions, and state-sponsored press articles, while Masterman continued his work producing propaganda books, pamphlets, and eventually photographs.[13] Under the leadership of John Buchan, the Department of Information fully assumed Riddell's role as the intermediary between the state and the press but retained him on its "advisory committee". This committee was composed of several other wealthy newspaper proprietors including Beaverbrook, C.P. Scott and Lord Northcliffe. The Foreign Office appointed a number of the committee members to positions within the propaganda apparatus in February 1918; Northcliffe was made director of enemy propaganda while Beaverbrook was given the title Minister of Information and tasked with organizing the new Ministry of Information. The appointments of these press lords to powerful positions within the propaganda apparatus were criticized by some in Parliament as an afront to press integrity. In the words of Austen Chamberlain, "the press loses its freedom, and with its freedom, loses its authority."[14]

Despite the outrage in Parliament, these appointments merely reinforced the existing relationship between the state and the press that had been utilized throughout the war. This so- called "loss of authority" among the press was obvious years before the creation of the Ministry of Information. From the onset of the war many of the major press outlets engaged in two key forms of propaganda: omission and misinformation. Many significant losses, such as the sinking of the battleship *Audacious* in 1914, were simply never reported by the press. Likewise, multiple instances of military mistakes were also not published. C.P. Scott, who had previously written letters and articles opposing Britain's involvement in the war, refused to print a letter from an English corporal detailing incidents of British soldiers accidentally shelling their own men which resulted in causalities and loss of territory, as he believed it was "too damaging for publication".[15] This pattern of strategic suppression of information through the press served to quell anxieties and bolster support for the military within the general public.[16] Throughout the course of the war, the British press also published stories of great crimes against humanity allegedly committed by enemy forces; many such stories originated from claims made by single witnesses and were accepted as comprehensive proof.[17] One persistent claim perpetuated by the British press was the popular narrative of the German "Corpse Factories."[18] First published in Northcliffe's *The Times* in April 1917, the narrative consisted of claims that the German government was using factories across its territories to process the bodies of soldiers into useful resources.

[13]Sanders, 124.
[14]Marquis, 473-480.
[15]Quoted in Marquis, 477.
[16]Marquis, 477-478.
[17]Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in War-Time, Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated throughout the Nations during the Great War* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1928), 75.
[18]Ponsonby, 57.

The details often varied, with some stories claiming the corpses were ground into livestock feed and others reporting that they were melted down into glycerin for use in munitions.[19] This claim apparently originated in an article published in a Berlin daily newspaper that mentioned a "Kadaververwertungsanstalt," which *The Times* had translated to "Corpse Exploitation Factory."[20] Some in the British Parliament were critical of the translation of the word "kadaver" as it could also be used for the bodies of animals.[21] *The Times* defended its translation of the article and published further articles on the topic. When the use of this claim for official propaganda purposes was brought in front of Parliament, the cabinet members refused to either endorse or deny the claim, although some acknowledged the lack of substantial evidence surrounding it. Nevertheless, *The Times* and other papers continued to propagate the narrative even years after the war, until it was finally publicly discredited by Austen Chamberlain in 1925. This example of atrocity propaganda and others like it served to further vilify the Germans both in England and abroad. The "Corpse Factory" narrative was widely published in both American and Asian press outlets to generate hatred towards the German state among the public and garner support for the allies within neutral countries.[22] The reproduction of these narratives, while often implicitly or explicitly supported by the government, was not forced upon the press through official censorship and legislation, yet was still willingly engaged in by almost every major daily publication.

In late 1915, Home Secretary John Simon met with Riddell to discuss new censorship legislation. Simon's proposed mandate would give Parliament the power to suspend any newspapers it considered to be violating the recently passed Defense of the Realm Act. Riddell was alarmed by this potential threat to his businesses and rallied the Newspaper Proprietors Association to pressure the Home Office into dropping the proposed legislation. Subsequent attempts by Parliament and the War Office to exert legislative control over the press also failed.[23] This raises the question as to why nearly all the major papers, which ostensibly had a duty to the British public to publish accurate information regarding the course of the war, chose instead to willingly engage in this suppression of information and production of propaganda, despite the lack of policy mandating they do so. One potential answer can be found by employing the first two "filters"[24] of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model to contextualize the circumstances of the press during this period. Although Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model is based primarily on events from the 1960s to present, the analysis that helped define their

[19]Ponsonby, 58
[20]Quoted in Ponsonby, 57.
[21]Quoted in Ponsonby, 59.
[22]Ponsonby, 57-64.
[23]Marquis, 477.
[24]Herman and Chomsky, 62.

first two filters specifically identifies power structures that came into being within the press industry of the early twentieth century.[25]

The previously established centralization of a majority of press ownership in the hands of a few owners and stock company shareholders, as well as the close political and social relationships they had with the state, serve as evidence for the existence of this first filter of self-censorship within the press at the time. Proprietors and shareholders such as Northcliffe, Riddell, and Beaverbrook had significant power over the editors and journalists of their respective papers, and thus the positions of entire newspapers could be swayed by the personal ideologies of a few individuals. These press moguls, and certain journalists, were given land, titles, and social standings in exchange for complying with official propaganda narratives. Even before the war, membership in at least one of London's many prestigious gentlemen's clubs was necessary for the success of any newspaper proprietor. These clubs also included high ranking political and military officials, who could easily revoke the membership of any news editor or owner who allowed the publishing of stories or information that ran counter to the state's narrative of the war.[26] Additionally, the press companies and their owners depended on Parliament not only for direct social and political gain but also for more general policy support. Like any other large business, the proprietors of the newspapers would not want to risk Parliament making changes to tax or labor laws in retaliation for not keeping in line with official propaganda. These political and profit-oriented restraints, which are intrinsic to any company with power and capital to the degree of the press companies, acted as the first filter that affected the press companies in choosing what to publish.[27]

The second filter of self-censorship was also present before the outbreak of the war and is a fundamental element of news media to this day. The rapid growth of the major newspaper corporations in the early twentieth century was assisted in large part by the rising popularity of printed advertisements. Papers that could attract advertisers could offset the rising production costs and charge consumers less, while papers that were deemed unattractive for advertisers could not, and as such, many papers failed as a result. Therefore, Britain's free market of the press was beholden to the influence of advertisers, in addition to the press moguls and stock companies.[28] The outbreak of the war led to powerful new opportunities for advertising companies. Advertising for everything from soap to firearms took advantage of slogans, stereotypes, and atrocity stories perpetuated throughout the war. By using these tactics to market to both civilians and the soldiers on the front

[25]Herman and Chomsky, 63, 74.
[26]Marquis, 478; McEwen, 477.
[27]Herman and Chomsky, 73.
[28]Herman and Chomsky, 74.

lines, profits surged with little to no restrictions from the state.[29] The press was effectively coerced into furthering these narratives to keep reader engagement high and maintain a profitable environment for advertisers or risk losing their primary source of income. Thus, advertiser interest acted as this second filter of self-censorship.

Both filters worked interconnectedly to restrict the press while still maintaining the illusion of free journalism. Many of the editors and journalists that operated under these systems did so with integrity and the belief that their work was objective; but these systems of self-censorship were so entrenched within the press industry that to most at the time, any alternative perspective was considered ridiculous.[30]

For years after the First World War, much public criticism arose around the use of propaganda by both Britain and Germany. In 1929, Baron Arthur A.W.H. Ponsonby, an MP and vocal anti-war activist, published a book detailing many of the lies and propaganda tactics used by both the press and government in England. Ponsonby argues that the widespread use of misinformation especially within the press would lead to distrust among the public; on this he writes "with a warning before them, the common people may be more on their guard when the war cloud next appears on the horizon and less disposed to accept as truth the rumors, explanations, and pronouncements issued for their consumption."[31] Yet those who financially benefited from the British propaganda system during the war praised its use; Northcliffe wrote in *The Times* that he believed the propaganda effort had potentially saved the country from another year of war.[32]

Regardless of the ethics or effectiveness of British propaganda during the First World War, there is little debate on the key role the "free" press played in its proliferation. Through the close partnerships between the state and the centralized news companies, a relatively coherent, one sided and pervasive narrative of the First World War was manufactured. This narrative was maintained through ingrained systems of self-censorship that arose from fundamental elements of the capitalist press industry, primarily centralized corporate ownership and the power of advertisers. One hundred and three years later, through the advent of TV news networks and online news media, these systems have grown exponentially and further intensified the contradictions within them.

[29]Simon Armstrong, "WW1: How Firms Cashed in on the War," *BBC News Magazine*, December 10, 2014, 1-4.
[30]Herman and Chomsky, 62.
[31]Ponsonby, 2.
[32]Marquis, 493.

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