

The writers' role in the British propaganda campaign during the First World War

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Abstract: *During the First World War, Britain initiated and used the greatest propaganda campaign the world had ever seen. The British strategy was so effective that Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels reportedly modeled the Nazi propaganda machine on the influential British prototype. The British propaganda during the Great War was a unique phenomenon in secretly using well known imaginative writers and intellectuals who wrote under their own names but published through commercial and university presses that were subsidized by the government. The writers' involvement in the war effort poses a number of questions concerning their previous and later writing or the extent to which they were influenced by what they wrote during the War. Even if modernism, that was emerging at the beginning of the 20th century, could not be envisaged dealing with propaganda, the new information matrix made that possible as they were seen as two facets of the same coin represented by modernity. Also, focusing and analyzing further the writers' propaganda activity could bring additional insight not only into the literature of the First World War, but also into the broader cultural and intellectual environment of the war.*

Key words: First World War, propaganda, British writers, mass-audience, censorship

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Introduction

The First World War was often referred to as The Great War due to its worldwide implications and effects. The war was a global conflict with complex origins and a vast scale. Thirty-two nations were eventually involved in one of the major events of the twentieth geopolitical history. Twenty-eight of these constituted the Allied and Associated Powers, whose principal belligerents were the British Empire, France, Italy, Russia, Serbia, and the United States of America. They were opposed by the Central Powers: Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire. Although it was expected to end by December 1914, the war was to last for fifty-two months. Its prolongation, sufferings, and universality brought about effects which were unpredictable when it began; the destruction not only of three empires, German and Austro-Hungarian and Turkish, but a total revolution in Russia and a significant change within the British Empire itself.

From the outset of the conflict it became evident that controlling the information would prove an essential asset of modern warfare. The first offensive initiative of the British was to cut the German transatlantic cables in order to stop the direct communication with the neutral countries, particularly the United States of America.¹ Furthermore, the British government took measures to constrict access to information at home and, on 8 August 1914, only four days after war was declared, the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) was voted by the Parliament, providing the Government

¹ M. L. Sanders and Philip Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War 1914-1918*, London, Macmillan, 1982, p. 19.

with widened powers to facilitate the war effort by all means possible. During the war, DORA was expanded to increased control over communication, including the official suppression of dissent. What is more, opposition to the war was subject to censorship and could lead to the author's imprisonment.

The writers' involvement in the British propaganda campaign during the First World War

One of the first initiatives of the Asquith cabinet was put into action on 2 September, 1914, just under a month after the outbreak of war. C.F.G. Masterman, the former Liberal MP, was charged by Herbert Asquith with setting up the British propaganda campaign which was designed in response to the overt German campaign. Masterman thought that the German methods provided a lesson in how not to act, and in consequence decided that instead of *bombing* neutral countries with official propaganda from state information services, the British would undertake a secret campaign.

Officially called the War Propaganda Bureau, Masterman's gathering soon came to be known simply as Wellington House, in part because the name would serve to hide the state's role in Masterman's publishing enterprise. Taking advantage from the great cultural prestige of British letters, Masterman secretly invited to his office in Wellington House twenty-five of England's most well-known writers. Among the invitees there were William Archer, J.M. Barrie, Arnold Bennet, Robert Bridges, G.K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, John Galsworthy, Anthony Hope Hawkins, Thomas Hardy, George Traveleyan, H.G. Wells, and Israel Zangwill. Rudyard

Kipling and Arthur Quiller Couch could not attend but sent messages offering their services. With the exception of Hardy, all those in attendance chose to help, and many others, including Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad, joined the campaign later.² Considering themselves as concerned citizens, the authors recruited into service published commissioned books under their own names through well-known commercial and university presses that were secretly subsidized by the government. The plan was so effectively secretive that most members of Parliament remained unaware of its operations for two years, and the public did not find out about the writers' participation until the early 1930s.³

Due to these famous writers' participation in the war effort, the paradigm *art propaganda* was put forth even though the definitions of art and propaganda could hardly imagine these two concepts together. While art is itself the final goal, propaganda is only a means to attain a specific result or objective, usually hidden.

When approaching propaganda we should keep in mind that "this is a far more elusive concept to define",⁴ partly because its recognition is often a function of the relative historical viewpoint of the person observing it. Taking this elusiveness into consideration, many investigators of propaganda have limited themselves to extreme situations such as war or conflicts, where

² Mark Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda British Narrative from 1900 to 1945*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 14.

³ James Duane Squires, *British Propaganda at Home and in the United States, from 1914 to 1917*, London, Humphrey Milford, 1935, p. 79.

⁴ A.P. Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda*, London, Methuen, 1983, p. 8.

it is comparatively easy to identify communication intended to demoralize the enemy or strengthen the resolve of one's own side.

Such examples of initiatives intended to weaken the enemy's morale were identified on both the Allied Powers and the Central Powers during the First World War. Related to this aspect, many episodes were registered when the British Army put out a series of broadsheets, conveniently just the right size to be slipped into an envelope being sent to the Front, containing various patriotic poems and prose pieces. Some of the material was written on demand, but much of it was taken directly from Wordsworth or Shakespeare. Also, leaflets were dropped over the enemy lines inciting the troops to mutiny, a procedure denounced as being contrary to international law. During the latter part of the War the paper balloon was the instrument most commonly used on all sides for dropping propaganda over enemy lines.⁵

As it has often been stated, this kind of activities could not have been successful without the input of the propagandist. In fact, the defining characteristic of propaganda refers to the existence of the propagandist; if we cannot establish a link between the propagandist and his or her audience, then we cannot speak of propaganda.⁶

This insistence on the identifiable presence of a propagandist can be confusing when it confirms the common notion of propaganda as "the work of a few evil men, seducers of the people, cheats and authoritarian rulers who

⁵ E.H. Carr, *Propaganda in International Politics*, London, Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 11.

⁶ Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda: Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia*, London, Barnes and Noble Imports, 1979, pp. 20 - 21.

want to dominate a population”. This view, Jacques Ellul considers, “always thinks of propaganda as being made voluntarily; it assumes that a man decides to make propaganda, which a government establishes a Propaganda Ministry, and that things just develop from there on. According to this view, the public is just an object, a passive crowd that one can manipulate, influence and use”.⁷

Propaganda has always existed, but modern propaganda, operating through techniques of saturation and multiple media channels, developed contemporaneously with literary modernism. Two developments made modern propaganda techniques possible: universal education, which led to the creation of the mass audience, and the development of new communication technologies. Ford Madox Ford, one of modernism’s most influential theorists, spoke for many when he complained in 1911 that the English were “overwhelmed every morning with a white spray of facts”⁸ from the newly dominant popular press, and the negative effects of information overload were soon exacerbated by photojournalism and the wireless.

Understanding what propaganda meant to modernists requires us to see the world’s problematic status in light of its complicated history in the twentieth century. Specialists in propaganda studies today disagree to a great extent the term that some have argued that *propaganda* is useless as an

⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*, trans. Konrad Kellen, New York, Vintage Books, 1973, p. 118.

⁸ Ford Madox Ford, *The Critical Attitude*, London, Duckworth, 1911, p. 125.

analytic tool and use *persuasion* instead, but persuasion is considered to cover too much ground.

Before World War I propagandists began to professionalize the manipulation of public opinion, the Orwellian connotations of names such as Britain's Minister of Information (MoI) or the U.S. Committee on Public Information (CPI) did not exist and propaganda was typically used as *information* always had been, in a largely neutral sense.

Nephew to Sigmund Freud and founder of public relations as a profession, Edward Bernays realized the commercial potential of engineering public opinion while working as a propagandist for the CPI, better known as the Creel Commission.⁹ His first two books present his struggle to distinguish between the honorable work of public relations and its contested progenitor, propaganda.

In "Crystallizing Public Opinion", published in 1923, Bernays detects a connotative shift that was about to take place and admits that the average person probably thinks of the public relations counsel as someone who "produces that vaguely defined evil, propaganda".¹⁰ In 1928 when Bernays published his second book on public relations, he titled it "Propaganda" and proclaimed that "propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government". Bernays welcomed as a fact that "in almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct

⁹ Edward L. Bernays. *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel Edward L. Bernays*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1965, p. 155.

¹⁰ *Idem*, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1923, pp. 11 - 12.

or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull wires which control the public mind, who harness old social forces and contrive new ways to bind and guide the world”.¹¹ A more complex understanding of propaganda emerged later on in the work of Jacques Ellul.

Ellul’s importance in propaganda studies derives from his focus on propaganda as a sociological phenomenon made necessary by the nature of modern society rather than as a political weapon of a particular regime or organization. Ellul’s book, published in 1962, “Propaganda”, uses some of the ideas introduced by Bernays, and his definition of “sociological propaganda as the penetration of an ideology by means of its sociological context” echoes Bernays’s idea of *the new propaganda*, which “sees the individual not only as a cell in the social organism but as a cell organized into a social unit”.¹² Slower and more diffuse than political propaganda, integration propaganda operates through political, economic, and cultural structures, and produces “a progressive adaptation to a certain order of things, a certain concept of human relations, which unconsciously molds individuals and makes them conform to society”.¹³

It was said that “truth has died many deaths over the twentieth century”, but the role played by the British propaganda campaign in World War I is fundamental to understanding the new media environment faced by

¹¹ Idem, *Propaganda*, New York, Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1928, pp. 9 - 10.

¹² Jacques Ellul, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

modernist writers and its effects on attitudes toward truth, factuality, and rhetoric. The plan was unique among its European counterparts in the sense that it emphasized facts over overt persuasion, disguised the official origin of its propaganda, and placed literature at the heart of its efforts.

By the end of World War I, it was generally agreed that British propaganda entirely dominated the field, and most historians consider that the British campaign played some role in persuading the United States to enter the war, contributed materially to shortening the war by undermining German morale, and was a powerful influence on the punitive nature of the Treaty of Versailles.¹⁴

After Masterman gathered the writers, the first objective to attain in the order of business was to organize an “Authors’ Declaration” in support of the war in response to a letter that had already been published by German academics; the Declaration appeared in *The Times* both in England and the United States of America on September 18:

The undersigned writers, comprising among them men and women of divergent political and social views, some of them having been for years ardent champions of good-will toward Germany and many extreme advocates of peace, nevertheless are agreed that Great Britain could not without dishonour have refused to take part in the present war.

Also, The “Authors’ Declaration” already anticipates themes that would dominate official British propaganda: the altruistic duty of a united British Empire to protect Belgium, the militarist aggression of Prussia as

¹⁴ Mark Wollaeger, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

distinct from the refinement of the German arts, and the war cast as a clash of civilisations. Related to this, extremely relevant seems H.G. Wells's critique of "Prussian Imperialism":

Ever since the crushing of the French in 1871 the evil thing has grown and cast its spreading shadow over Europe. Germany has preached a propaganda of ruthless force and [...] materialism to the whole uneasy world. 'Blood and iron,' she boasted, was the cement of her unity, and almost as openly the little, mean, aggressive statesmen and professors who have guided her destinies to this present conflict have professed [...] an utter disregard of any ends but nationally selfish ends, as though it were religion.¹⁵

Similar to those who signed the "Author s' Declaration", H.G. Wells laid much of the blame for Germany's war-mongering on the "aggressive statesmen and professors" who had guided their nation-the Junkers who bolster and justify Prussian aggression. Wells did not reflect however on how his and his peers' own connections to the British government might have resembled those of the German intellectuals whom he accused. For the authors signing the declaration, Great Britain simply had a "destiny and a duty to uphold the rule of common justice between civilised people to defend the rights of small nations and to maintain the free and law-abiding ideals of Western Europe against a rule of blood and iron". These authors' statements were presented as if they were independent and free from any government influence; however heartfelt they may have been, many of the signatories had already secretly agreed to volunteer for the War Propaganda Bureau program

¹⁵ H.G. Wells, *The War That Will End War*, London, Frank and Cecil Palmer, 1914, p. 11.

with the intention of creating materials to justify Britain's war with Germany.¹⁶

After Masterman assembled his writers, and the “Authors’ Declaration” was released, he moved on to consider the long-term plans of the propaganda campaign. Knowing that the United States was particularly hostile to overt appeals from its former colonial overlord, Masterman asked Gilbert Parker, who benefited from a well-known reputation as a writer and social status among the American people, to consult the American “Who’s Who” and compile a list of prominent and influential people. These people were to receive the books written under the auspices of the Propaganda Bureau with a note from Gilbert or the author, as if from one private individual to another. The same tactic was used with other neutral countries. Commercial publishing houses cooperating included Hodder and Stoughton and T. Fisher Unwin; Oxford University Press was also involved by publishing several volumes, most notably “Why We Are at War” (1914) by the Oxford historians. Arnold Toynbee wrote several books for Wellington House as did Lewis Namier, Hugh Walpole, Arthur Conan Doyle, Mrs Humphrey Ward, Hilaire Belloc, Gilbert Murray, and G.M. Travelyan contributed at least one each. The writers’ focus extended beyond English writers, Wellington House also solicited and translated works by foreign authors, including “Who Wanted War” (1915), co-authored by Émile Durkheim, and “The Trail of the

¹⁶ Anurag Jain, *The Relationship between Ford, Kipling, Conan Doyle, Wells and British Propaganda of the First World War*, London, University of London, 2009, p. 6.

Barbarians” (1917), written by Pierre Loti and translated by Ford Madox Ford.¹⁷

It is very difficult to estimate precisely the cultural influence used by Masterman’s gathering of writers. “The novelists, poets, short story writers, critics, and dramatists at Masterman’s meeting” as Gary Messinger observes

*were all part of an Edwardian literary establishment that had no competition from radio or television and whose representatives enjoyed remarkable prestige throughout the world among both elite and mass audiences. Not only through their writings, but also through the earnings they amassed, the access they were given to the social networks of the politically and economically powerful, and the letter-writing correspondence they maintained with numerous loyal readers, these men were as influential a group of writers as the world has ever produced.*¹⁸

The most positive view of British propaganda refers to the fact that it was primarily designed to disseminate factual accounts to counter rumors, gossip, incomplete stories, and fabrications already in circulation. The German propagandists, confident in a quick victory, resorted early in the war to lies or misinterpretations concerning enemy losses, territories captured or landmarks destroyed. In response, counterpropaganda would be effective simply by means of factual enumeration. As Lord Robert Cecil emphasized in a memo “in war – time it is the facts that count, not words. All we can do to help by propaganda is to let foreigners know what is actually happening”. Masterman too sustained the importance of delivering facts and according to the documents many British officials honestly believed that factual

¹⁷ Mark Wollaeger, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ Gary S. Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War*, Manchester, Manchester Univ. Press, 1992, p. 35.

enlightenment and persuasion amounted to almost the same thing. They considered that facts would speak for themselves, and the world would recognize the truth of Allied accounts and the virtue of Allied aims.

The British factual emphasis developed in response to the pressures represented by Germany's already established campaign. When war broke out on August 4, Germany had been using official propaganda bureaus, openly identified as such, to serve the world with its version of political tensions in Europe for decades. By the fall of 1914, many European neutrals resented the endless stream of German pamphlets. Masterman therefore decided to rule out direct appeals to neutral countries: "Strict secrecy has been observed as to any connection of the Government with the work", he reported: "every recipient of material distributed gratuitously should receive it from an unofficial source" and the material itself would not "bear any sign of having been produced under the auspices of the Government".¹⁹

What is more, Masterman acknowledged the power of popular journalism by scheduling a meeting with influential editors and journalists. At Masterman's urging, representatives from the *Daily Chronicle*, *Daily News*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *British Weekly*, "Times" and others agreed to work with the government to coordinate the release of official news in exchange for assurances that censorship would be minimal.²⁰ Later on, David Lloyd George, who replaced H. Asquith as Prime Minister, recognized that he could co-opt the press even more effectively by appointing prominent publishers to key administrative positions. Thus Lord

¹⁹ Mark Wollaeger, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁰ Gary S. Messinger, *op. cit.*, pp. 36 - 38.

Northcliffe, founder and publisher of the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*, ran the Committee for Propaganda in Enemy Countries out of Crewe House, and Lord Beaverbrook, who held controlling interest of the *Daily Express*, ended up running the Minister of Information.

With an influence which covered multiple cultural domains, British propaganda's commitment to empirically verifiable information contributed to a great extent to the increasingly equivocal status of facts. To a certain degree the British were true to their ideals, but their propaganda techniques indicate that they also knew that information flows best when "channels are properly greased, that factual accounts must be tailored to suit different audiences around the world, and that the power of facts to make an impression varies according to the media through which they are disseminated".

Related to this aspect it was admitted that the single most effective piece of propaganda disseminated during World War I, Lord Bryce's "Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages", published in May 1915, gave Germany ample grounds for its clever glossing of the Allies' information services as *All-lies*. Though based on dubious research, the Bryce Report bore all the signs of detached objectivity: depositions, extensive appendices, and photographs of German soldiers' diary pages. Whereas Belgian committee reports refer to the "chivalrous and heroic resistance of the Belgian nation" against Germany's "devastating and murderous hordes", the language of the Bryce Report remains scrupulously legalistic and matter-of-fact. In 1922 a Belgian commission could not substantiate any of the gruesome reports of children's hands having been lopped off or of citizens

having been buried alive. But for the war years, Wellington House made mutilated Belgian children as real as actual German brutalities by translating the Bryce Report into thirty languages and circulating it throughout the world.²¹

Therefore, the report shows how factuality was becoming detached from empirical grounding and transformed into a form of rhetoric. At the time, it firmly established one of the dominant myths of World War I: “English civilization was fighting a war against German barbarism”. Soon after the German army marched into Belgium on August 4, atrocity stories began to appear in the press. Belgian women were said to have been raped in the streets, children’s hands cut off, and citizens massacred, burned, and buried alive. The introduction of the report insisted that all the depositions taken from Belgian and English soldiers were “tested” and the dubious ones rejected: “though taken at different places and on different dates, and by different lawyers from different witnesses, they often corroborate each other in a striking manner”. Along with the depositions, the three-hundred-page appendix includes excerpts from the diaries of German soldiers, together with ten photographs of sample pages. Viscount Bryce himself, recipient of honorary degrees from German universities and popular former ambassador to the United States, was convinced that German soldiers had systematically engaged in war crimes against the Belgian people.²²

²¹ James Morgan Reid, *Atrocity Propaganda, 1914-1919*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1941, pp. 52 - 54

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 203 - 204.

The truth, in accordance with the existing documents, is that the Bryce Report is filled with exaggerations, partially true statements, and probably some outright fabrications. The depositions corroborate one another because they were taken from Belgian refugees in England who had plenty of time to trade stories; the committee never went to Belgium and never interviewed anyone face to face. The diary entries in appendix, moreover, do not actually corroborate any of the notorious atrocities, though they do record the usual business of war, including looting and the execution of Belgian citizens. The Germans admitted that their strategy was to shorten the war by advancing through Belgium with extreme ruthlessness, but when a Belgian commission investigated in 1922, none of the terrible reports of torture or mutilation could be substantiated. Being advertised as an official government document, the Bryce Report was an aid to Wellington House's efforts to ensure that other publications, such as F.M. Ford's books, bore no trace of their state sponsorship; this heightened the rhetorical power of their factual grounds. Well-known authors writing for Wellington House, including Arthur Conan Doyle, Arnold Toynbee, and Mrs. Humphrey Ward, published their books and pamphlets through commercial and university presses that were subsidized by the government through secret funds, and the publications were sent abroad to influential individuals accompanied by letters of recommendation.²³

Another important achievement of Masterman's gathering within Wellington House refers to the use of the cinematic propaganda. By the end

²³ Mark Wollaeger, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133.

of the war, film propaganda was being shown in cinema houses and through Cinemotor, a mobile film unit whose large trucks gave “improvised open-air cinema shows” in rural areas and near the front. Cinema trade groups approached the War Office early in 1915 to offer their services, and though Masterman immediately realized film’s potential, the War Office Cinematograph Committee was not formed until October 1915,²⁴ when a trade group, supported by Masterman, finally convinced the War Office that the political value of war films outweighed the estimated high costs.

At the beginning, cinema houses were perceived with great suspicion and reluctance by both the military and the government. One explanation for this perception would be that cinema was known as the “poor man’s theater”; most seats cost less than competing forms of entertainment, and as a result the working-class attendance was very high. During the war the attendance was even higher and the people spent as much on cinema as on all other forms of entertainment put together.²⁵ As a response to the working-class public, local governments took measures to regulate cinemas by adding provisions to the 1909 Cinematograph Act, the first act of Parliament specifically concerned with the cinema, and Parliament intervened again in 1916 with new entertainment taxes.

In 1916 “Britain Prepared” became Wellington House’s first film and set the dominant approach to the great majority of British propaganda films

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 18-19.

²⁵ Nicholas Hiley, “The British Cinema Auditorium”, in: Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (eds.), *Film and the First World War*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1995, p. 162.

during the war. A three-hour silent film with few titles, “Britain Prepared” shows scenes of the British navy, munitions work, and the army in training. Adopting a factual approach by giving people in search of authentic war footage a sense of what the country was doing to win, the film was extremely well received by the public. As expected, the visual facts are presented from a British point of view managing to get “a respect, a sympathy even, for the men and women whose experience of war was recorded on film”.²⁶

The War Propaganda Bureau produced official publications such as the atrocity reports, speeches for ministers, interviews and articles for the press, original and pre-existing books and pamphlets such as Conan Doyle's “To Arms!” (1914) and Ford's “When Blood is Their Argument” (1915) and “Between St. Dennis and St. George”. It also disseminated books for distribution that the WPB did not produce such as Kipling's wartime pamphlets. All of these materials were sent to neutral nations with the use of direct mailing campaigns, steamship companies, religious societies, and patriotic organisations. According to Sanders and Taylor, the War Propaganda Bureau also monitored the activities of independent pro-war organisations, reining them in when they made comments that might have been detrimental to the British war effort.²⁷

One of the authors who contributed with his writing to the war effort was Arthur Conan Doyle. As a famous author and the creator of the well-known detective Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle knew he could also

²⁶ Nicholas Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda During the First World War*, London, C. Helm, 1986, p. 259.

²⁷ Sanders and Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

volunteer his writings to rouse public support for the war, to encourage younger men to volunteer to fight, and even to appeal to the civilian German population who were dragged to war by the Prussian Junker elite. In a letter of late August 1914, Conan Doyle explained to his brother Innes that he had “been drawing up small leaflets which (in German) are to be scattered about wherever we can go to show the Germans that it is really their own tyrants, this damned Prussian autocracy that we are fighting”.²⁸ His first pamphlet, “To Arms!”, was already written by the time he attended Masterman's War Propaganda Bureau authors' meeting in early September, and was published by the end of the same month.²⁹ His other pamphlets included collections of his war journalism and articles in “The World War Conspiracy” (1914) and “The German War” (1914), as well as his protestations about the treatment of British prisoners of war in Germany in “The Story of British Prisoners” (1915), and his reportage of his trench visits in “A Visit to Three Fronts: Glimpses of the British, Italian, and French Lines” (1916). Conan Doyle also donated stories and poems in support of the war to charity books such as “Princess Mary's Gift Book” (1914) and “The Queen's Gift Book” (1915).

Conan Doyle's “To Arms!” was published as a thirty-two-page penny-pamphlet on 30 September 1914. The first impression of 91,650 copies was followed up by a further printing of 50,000.³⁰ It was later reprinted under the title “The Causes of the War” in his wartime collection, “The

²⁸ Jon Lellenberg, Daniel Stashower, and Charles Foley, *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, London, Harper Press, 2007, p. 604.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 605.

³⁰ Richard Lancelyn Green and John Michael Gibson, *A Bibliography of Arthur Conan Doyle*, Oxford, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1983, p. 278.

German War". Conan Doyle claimed it was his duty to write about the war: "if there is a doubt in the mind of any man as to the justice of his country's quarrel, then even a writer may find work ready to his hand".³¹ His work was aimed at addressing those people who were unsure as to why Britain was at war with Germany. He thus sought to establish the case for going to war and to persuade readers to volunteer for the fight:

*All our lives have been but a preparation for this supreme moment. All our future lives will be determined by how we bear ourselves in these few months to come. Shame, shame on the man who fails his country in this its hour of need! I would not force him to serve. I could not think that the service of such a man was of any avail. Let the country be served by free men, and let them deal with the coward or the sluggard who flinches.*³²

Conan Doyle disapproved of forcing men to serve under government conscription; instead, he wished 'free men' might recognise that volunteering to fight was a way of defending their country and attaining honour, as well as of avoiding shame. The pamphlet reaffirms the twin notions of pride and shame in its conclusion:

*Have you who read this played your part to the highest? If not, do it now, or stand for ever shamed.*³³

He urged brave British men to shoulder the responsibility for protecting their nation - the alternative was to live with a lifetime of shame and never to be able to look your children in the face when asked about the

³¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *To Arms! (1914)*, London, Rupert Books, 1999, p. 14.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 13.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

war. These same sentiments could be seen in the famous war poster “Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War” in which a boy is playing soldiers at the feet of a seated man with a small girl on his knee; the girl reads a book that inspires her to ask her father about the war- instead of responding, his pensive stare is fixated on the viewer. Evoking similar notions of duty and shame in his pamphlet, Conan Doyle argued that while a man could die happy knowing he had sacrificed himself for his country, “who could bear the thoughts of him who lives with the memory that he had shirked his duty and failed his country at the moment of her need?”³⁴

Conan Doyle contributed to the war effort in Britain in a variety of ways, including volunteering for a civilian reserve, researching a history of battles, issuing recruitment pamphlets, and bringing his most popular creation Sherlock Holmes out of retirement to fight against German spies.

Conclusions

However, it is also important to admit that government propaganda did not completely control perceptions or actions, nor can it be blamed for all the beliefs and fears that people had during the war. Conan Doyle's invasion fears that emerged from his first Holmes story were not born from government discourse, for example, but instead were consistent thematically with much of his pre-war writing. The remarkable predominance of rumour during the war lends emphasis on the suggestion that propaganda does not

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

function hierarchically, from the state downwards, but instead from stories and legends that are dispersed through many vectors in any-given society.

Two decades after the Great War, Ernest Hemingway declared “that the last war, during the years of 1915, 1916, 1917 was the most colossal murderous mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth and any writer who said otherwise lied”. Of the writers “who were established before the war”, he noted, “nearly all sold out to write propaganda”; and following the war, Hemingway argued, “their reputations steadily slumped”, because they “never recovered their honesty” afterwards.

However, as many historians and researchers of the period have stated, the writers involved in the war effort were true in their support for the war. Undoubtedly they had their internal contradictions, issues, and tensions, but in volunteering their efforts for British war propaganda they did not appear to experience an ethical imperative to question their affiliation to the War Propaganda Bureau. For them, it was not a crime to support the government decision to go to war, but rather it was perceived as an expression of duty. They were not lying, they were bringing arguments that they genuinely believed in.

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