

‘Munitions of the Mind’: From Psychological Warfare to Psychological Operations, and from PSYOPS to Information Support (and back again?) - A Brief History

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Introduction

It is almost mandatory in any military presentation about PSYOPS to begin with the quote from Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese military strategist, that ‘to subdue the enemy without resort to force is the acme of skill’. The history of mankind, however, is replete with wars and battles where this did not occur. In a sense, Sun Tzu was talking about deterrence. But when nations go to war because deterrence has failed, or because they wanted to in pursuit of their national interests, they have to use any and every weapon at their disposal in order to win – and this includes psychological weapons targeting the full range of human perception that results in changes of behaviour on the battlefield and beyond. These ‘munitions of the mind’ may have become ever more sophisticated in their application and methods of dissemination but they have always had one thing in common: they are directed at people.

The ‘P’ Word

What we are essentially talking about is ‘propaganda’ which nowadays tends to be regarded as a dirty word. It wasn’t always a pejorative term. Invented by the Catholic Church in the 17th century to describe an organisation designed to combat the growth of Protestantism, propaganda was initially about the sowing of ideas and values – and it was about faith. In particular, it was about faith in institutions and the people who ran them in accordance with ‘God’s Laws’. In ancient times, before the advent of Christianity, commanders like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar understood all too well the need to not only motivate their soldiers to fight but also to sustain popular support for military campaigns being fought by fathers, brothers and sons who could only be away from the land they farmed until Harvest time. Ancient battles were therefore short, brutal, seasonal affairs and victory was the subject of great celebration in public monuments, art, sculpture, re-enactments and ceremonies. Battlefield were places where people (men) made their place in history, and performance on them influenced the ability to better oneself in society or, in wars where religion was a major factor, in the afterlife.

The Art and Science of Propaganda

Until the 20th century and the age of industrialised warfare – and the scale of slaughter that came with it – the conduct of propaganda was unsystematic and dependent on individuals who instinctively understood the importance of psychology. With the growth of science and the loosening of ‘God’s Laws’ as a means of understanding ‘why we are here’, the workings of the human brain became the object of growing fascination. While

everyone still understood that basic human instincts – the need to breathe, eat, drink, sleep, reproduce – were still important, psychologists began to delve deeper into the workings of the human mind, including the process of being rational or irrational. While Freud and Jung were probing, advertising became a social phenomenon and sociologists became interested in things like crowd behaviour and individual choice. The process of persuasion – for that is what propaganda, in a strictly value-neutral sense, is – also became of interest to politicians because the spread of the vote meant that people's choices now mattered. New technologies like the telegraph, radio, cinema, and even the telephone, created an information explosion in response to widening literacy and popular politicisation. The Information Age (sometimes called 'The Age of Propaganda' by scholars) was upon us.

The Great War of 1914-18

Not everybody at first understood the significance of this – especially in the military. The traditions of secrecy and hierarchy were the antithesis of these newer developments in publicity and democratisation. So when the First World War broke out, patriotism – that phenomenon inbred into people from birth by the environment around them, including the glorification of national achievement in battle or elsewhere – not propaganda as such was the order of the day. Lord Kitchener's intimidating finger said it all: 'Your Country Needs You'. (Note: not 'Our Country'). It was only with the huge losses of 1915 and 1916 in a war that was supposed to have been over by the first Christmas that the British government began to recognise that new weapons – among them tanks, aircraft and propaganda – would be needed to break the stalemate. When sheer weight of numbers had failed to budge a few yards of mud, anything was worth trying.

This slow evolution towards a more systematic deployment of propaganda on the battlefield can be traced through several key events:

- In 1915, the Germans dropped some leaflets over British lines. When it was suggested that the British retaliate in kind, General Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, scoffed at the idea, saying that 'the thing is to kill Germans'.
- In 1916, conscription was introduced in Britain for the first time and the element of compulsion required greater attention to explaining the need for personal sacrifice beyond crude patriotism. A government more conscious of public opinion headed by Lloyd George replaced the initial Asquith government
- In 1917, the USA entered the war, and Russia left it under the pressure of revolution. As the fourth Christmas approached, war weariness was setting in, mutinies were occurring in the French armies and 'morale' – both at home and in the field – became more of an issue.
- In 1918, Lloyd George created Britain's first Ministry of Information under Lord Beaverbrook (owner of *The Daily Express*) to look after home and allied morale through propaganda (below, left). The Enemy Propaganda Department at Crewe House was created to deal with what we now call 'psychological warfare'. It was

headed by the founder of modern popular journalism, Lord Northcliffe (owner of *The Daily Mail* and *The Times*, below right).



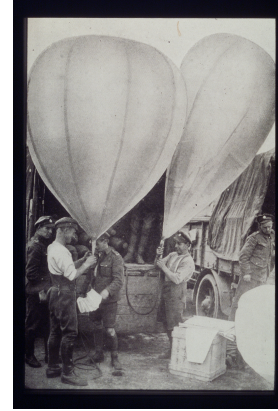
This separation of home/allied propaganda on the one hand and enemy propaganda on the other allows us for the first time to distinguish between the conduct of propaganda – by which was meant persuasion largely at the strategic level – and psychological warfare – conducted largely at the tactical level. Put another way, it distinguished between propaganda which was directed at civilian audiences and psychological warfare directed at enemy soldiers (because dissemination techniques were not yet available to reach the German civilian audience located a long way from the German armies in France).

Lessons learned from World War One:

Lord Northcliffe claimed that ‘good propaganda probably saved a year of war - and a million lives’. He would, wouldn’t he? In an age before audience research, few challenged the reputation for British success. One of its main admirers was Adolph Hitler who, in *Mein Kampf*, devoted two chapters to the wartime experience. Interestingly, as a serving soldier on the western front, Hitler noted that the trickle of leaflets that began as early as 1915 had turned into a stream and then a flood. His commanding officer, General Lundendorff, argued that ‘we were hypnotised as a rabbit is by a snake’ and that ‘our soldiers learned to think the way the enemy wanted them to think’. Northcliffe was nicknamed ‘The Minister for the Destruction of German Confidence’. Yet Northcliffe was only appointed in 1918. Who was doing the work before then?

In fact, it was the War Office and in particular its section known as MI7b. History has largely forgotten this unit, but in fact it oversaw the distribution of all psychological warfare material at the fighting fronts *throughout* the war, even after the creation of Crewe House. That distribution, at least on the western front, was done largely by balloon. This was because in late 1917 two captured RFC pilots were tried in a civilian

court as war criminals for dropping leaflets. To avoid repetitions – even though the pilots were eventually treated as normal PoWs – the RFC and its successor, the RAF, refused to allow air dropped distribution by plane: the beginnings of a long tradition of resistance to risking air crew lives for the sake of ‘bullshit bombs’



Into the shadow world

Britain was embarrassed by its reputation for successful wartime propaganda. At the end of the Great War, it dismantled its propaganda machinery leaving only the News Department of the Foreign Office as a surviving remnant. This Whitehall press office predated that created at 10 Downing Street by around ten years, and reflected the growth of what we would now call ‘official public relations’ or ‘spin doctoring’. Abroad, however, Europe was undergoing traumatic disruption with the arrival of a communist regime in the Soviet Union and the emergence of anti-communist fascist regimes in Italy, Germany and elsewhere (like Franco’s Spain after the Spanish Civil War). This ideological confrontation generated a new activity in foreign affairs, namely the conduct of international propaganda, utilising the new media of radio and sound cinema to compete for the hearts and minds of a European population coming increasingly under the control of authoritarian regimes of left and right persuasion. Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin all took an enormous interest in propaganda as an instrument for securing and retaining political power. For all their differences, they shared a common enemy – the democracies, especially a Britain still at the height of its Empire and the only true world power at that time. Having pioneered the use of propaganda in the First World War, the British now found themselves on the defensive.

The ideological conflict of the inter-war years saw some rudimentary British psychological warfare activities conducted in the realm of the secret services. Because the official files are still largely closed, we know very little about this but during the Munich Crisis of 1938, when Europe went to the brink of war over Czechoslovakia, the British did get involved in a remarkable ‘black’ operation. This was using Radio Luxembourg to beam into Nazi Germany the British government’s position over the crisis – technically a violation of an international agreement brokered by the League of Nations to prevent the use of radio for ‘propaganda’ purposes. More honoured in the breach by the dictators, the very fact that the British should effectively launch an appeal

directly to the German people rather than through their government could be said to be the final nail in the coffin for the principle that nation-states should not 'interfere' with the internal affairs of other countries.

The Second World War

Although, during the Great War, it had taken several years for the British to build up to a concerted psychological warfare effort, the next time was different. Indeed, the opening night of the war saw RAF bombers pepper Germany with paper. The leaflets reassured the German people that Britain had not declared war on them, but on the Nazi leadership. This theme, so beloved of PSYOPs today, was soon to be abandoned in the Second World War, especially after the declaration of Unconditional Surrender by the Allies in 1942. From a PSYWAR point of view, this was arguably the single biggest policy mistake of the entire war. The policy, by insisting on complete surrender and by promising no negotiated armistice and peace treaty (as in 1918), deprived PSYWAR of key themes, such as 'rise up against your government and you can return to the community of nations' (as in 1918) or even 'surrender' messages since surrender may result in war crimes prosecution. Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels was delighted. In a stroke, the policy had linked the destiny of the German people to the fate of the Nazi Party after the war in a way that none of his own propaganda had been able to achieve. It enabled the Nazis to promote their own themes such as 'Victory or Death' and to urge fighting to the bitter end because the consequences in defeat would be dire.

The German army and people did indeed fight to the bitter end. But in the opening months of the war, such a likelihood seemed remote to say the least. As German armed forces blitzkrieged their way through Poland and then Western Europe, the axiom that successful propaganda loves a winner was plain for all to see. It was the British who were on the defensive, both militarily and psychologically, as they stood alone in their 'finest hour'. After Dunkirk, propaganda and psychological warfare were amongst the limited offensive options that remained open to the British. In this respect, they held a trump card: the BBC. Within a generation of its foundation in the 1920s, the BBC had become a 'national institution'. Within the six years of the Second World War, it was about to become an international institution with a reputation for credibility worldwide matched by no other broadcaster.

The War of Words

The BBC was left in charge of Britain's 'white' (or overt) radio propaganda working relatively independently of Ministry of Information (MoI) control. Not that it was called propaganda. That was something the enemy engaged in. 'We' told 'the truth'. Or, as the MoI put it, 'to tell the truth, nothing but the truth – and, *as near as possible*, the whole truth'. When the BBC began extending its remit to broadcasting in the foreign languages under Nazi control, this principle was applied rigorously – and it greatly aided the development of the institution's credibility as the most reliable of wartime broadcasters. The Nazis were so frightened of this alternate view of the war that they banned the listening of foreign broadcasts, punishable by death. There was to be no hypnosis of the enemy this time.

This presented the British with a formidable challenge from the psychological warfare point of view. Although, of course, many people in occupied Europe did listen to the BBC, the latter valued its reputation for credibility created by its news-based approach. In the Political Warfare Executive (PWE) there was a need to generate *views* in support of the Churchill-inspired mission ‘to set Europe ablaze’ with rumours (or ‘sibs’), espionage and insurrection. It was Sefton Delmer of the PWE (below) who came up with the idea of using ‘black’ radio transmissions to help achieve this goal.



Using the codename ‘Research Unit’, Delmer established several black radio stations, including Soldatensender Calais and GS1 (or Gustaf Seigfreid Eins, an apparent German dissident in fact played by Delmer himself). The point of these transmissions was that ordinary law abiding German citizens could come across these stations without realising that they were emanating from Britain. The aim was simple: to sow seeds of doubt about the possible existence of internal German opposition to the Nazis. Similarly, amongst the German armed forces – always recognised as a tough psychological nut to crack made even tougher by the policy of Unconditional Surrender – the aim of allied broadcasts and leaflets was more ‘informational’ than propaganda designed to provoke desertion, defection, surrender or insurrection.



Once again, however, credibility was essential. When for example in 1943, the Americans dropped a leaflet over German forces in Italy stating that, in the event of surrender, German PoWs would be treated well, including a breakfast of bacon and eggs – which was true - the German soldiers simply refused to believe it.



The record of WW2 Psywar

Over the past 30 years, as the wartime record of codebreaking and intelligence became clearer, historians have concluded that the ability to break the German 'Enigma' codes probably saved the allies two years in the defeat of Germany. They can make no similar claims for propaganda and psychological warfare. Perhaps this was down to the policy of Unconditional Surrender. Perhaps it was due to the effectiveness of Nazi domestic propaganda and the allies' inability to break German military and civilian morale. This was not for want of trying. Over 1.5 billion leaflets were dropped by the allies between 1939 and 1945. Ingenious techniques involving deception were tried and tested for the first time, including Operation Fortitude which fooled the Germans about the actual location of the D-Day Landings. But regardless of the overall allied record, it is important to emphasise that this was a 'Total War' in which the gap between the military and civilian fronts narrowed substantially. Because of the advent of the bomber, civilians were in the front line now too. And because, for the British at least, the war lasted for almost six years, 'Total Propaganda' was the order of the day.

This propaganda had several characteristics which made it different from the type of propaganda being conducted by Britain's enemies. These include:

- It was based on 'credible truths' in accordance with the Anglo-American democratic recognition of 'the Strategy of Truth'. This does not mean the whole truth was told.
- Censorship was an essential component of this but news was censored at source prior to distribution to the media in case enemy agents (a 'fifth column' – in fact non-existent in Britain) were scouring the media.
- British propaganda was based on the importance of censoring news (for OPSEC and morale) rather than views.

- British 'political warfare' conducted by the PWE set the standard for the approach adopted by the Psychological Warfare Department of the Supreme Headquarters of Allied Command in Europe once the Americans entered the war.
- This was a combined civilian and military effort, essential for any campaign targeting soldiers *and* civilians.

The Cold War

As with the aftermath of the Great War, the British chose to dismantle their Second World War propaganda machinery. This time, however, some of it survived in the form of the Central Office of Information to conduct government 'publicity' campaigns relating to such issues as public health and road safety - a recognition of the permanent need for government to explain itself in peacetime to the citizens who elected it. But Britain's position in the world was in decline, epitomised in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s by the 'retreat from Empire'. Two superpowers had emerged from the war in the shape of the USA and the Soviet Union. As Britain lost its Empire and struggled to find a new role in world, or European, affairs, the outbreak of the Cold War from around 1947 onwards meant that the ideological struggle between two conflicting ways of life involved a global propaganda struggle for hearts and minds – and one in which the British took a back seat.

They did contribute in what was often a covert struggle, conducted through the media, in the form of the secret Information Research Department of the Foreign Office. But in what was essentially a worldwide strategic psychological warfare campaign that was to last for another 40 years, the British involvement was minor by comparison to the efforts of the CIA and KGB. On an overt level, the Americans established the United States Information Agency (USIA) to counter the 'disinformation' campaigns of the numerous Soviet propaganda agencies attempting to bring the newly independent countries of the 'Third World' under Russian influence. Indeed, it was in those former British colonies where independence movements resorted to armed guerrilla warfare that the British military relearned the importance of psychological warfare. In Malaya, in Aden, Cyprus, Kenya and in the Suez Crisis, the British resorted to leaflet drops and broadcasting to tell their side of 'the truth'. The most famous exponent of psywar in Low Intensity Conflicts was General Templar whose experience in Malaya was drawn upon by the Americans in the early 1960s as they increased their involvement in Vietnam.

By that time, the separation of white 'propaganda' conducted by civilian diplomatic and strategic agencies such as the USIA, covert propaganda conducted by the intelligence agencies and overt psychological warfare at the tactical level conducted by the military had been institutionalised.



Co-ordination between the various agencies had become an essential necessity, although it didn't always happen in practice. The explosion of propaganda in what was now being termed 'the information age' had become a fact of life. 'We' still told 'the truth' while 'the enemy' still told lies, but the prominence of 'propaganda' only really became apparent to the general public in times of war, such as the Falklands Conflict of 1982. Northern Ireland was a different matter.....

The Gulf War of 1991

Partly because of the American defeat in Vietnam, military psychological warfare entered a period of decline and discredit. It was Ronald Reagan, the President known as the 'Great Communicator', who revitalised psyops. At the strategic level, communications was used as means of flooding the Soviet bloc with western truths, especially after the arrival of satellite television and the arrival of New Communications Technologies such as the videocassette and the fax machine (and later the mobile phone). The extent to which these NCTs helped to end the Cold War remains a matter of much debate, but it is hard to imagine the fall of the Berlin Wall and the downfall of the Ceausescu regime without them.

At the tactical level, the first indication of the value of a revitalised military psyops campaign came with the 1989 Panama episode. Then, following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, President Bush was persuaded to incorporate psyops planning as an integral part of Operation Desert Storm. Although the British contribution (Operation Granby) constituted only 5% of the overall war effort, and indeed there was only one full-time British psyops officer at that time, the success of the American psyops campaign in the Gulf was to signal a new era for what was now being termed 'a combat force multiplier'. 69,000 Iraqis surrendered or deserted – many more than were actually killed – and at a relatively small cost to the overall war effort.



Operations Other Than War

The post Gulf War era witnessed a series of international crises – in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti and Kosovo – which all saw psyops deployed in support of these military operations other than war. The clumsiness of this phrase reflected a recognition that there was now a ‘New World Order’ (some would say ‘disorder’) where new ways of thinking were required to address what many saw as a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). This revolution, together with new rules of operation in world affairs, was driven by advances in technologies, especially in communications. Psyops was seen as a genuinely useful tool in support of these operations, although the products – and even the philosophy behind them – was very different from the use of ‘traditional’ psychological warfare. The essential characteristics and context of this new type of thinking revolved around the following phenomena:

- Intra-state conflict (i.e. conflicts within states) were replacing inter-state conflicts as the norm.
- Internally collapsing states, often ravaged by civil war and highly destructive of civilian infrastructures, produced harrowing images of ‘innocent women and children’ that were broadcast immediately around the world by the new international television services such as CNN.
- This ‘CNN Effect’ forced policy makers into ‘doing something’, i.e. international interventions or, as in Northern Iraq in 1991 or Somalia 1992, ‘humanitarian’ interventions.
- As military forces were now increasingly interacting with civilians in such operations other than war, there was a need to communicate effectively with them if, for example, a peacekeeping mission was to succeed.
- A range of what might really be termed ‘public information’ or ‘information support’ rather than psyops in the old sense was thus required, from mine awareness campaigns to assisting food relief distribution.
- This shift from traditional battlefield to operational spaces required new ways of thinking which was hard for many military personnel schooled in the old ways.
- In these new spaces, communications and information assumed a much more central position than ever before; indeed success or failure of the mission could depend on this (Somalia, 1992-3).

- Hence the lines between psyops, civil-military relations and public affairs/public information became more blurred in practice than those clear delineations specified in doctrinal documents.
- It is this new reality which is exercising military planning today, including in emerging information operations doctrine.

Conclusion

Despite surviving political nervousness about the ‘P’ word – hence the British change of name in 1999 from 15 (UK) Psychological Operations Group to 15 (UK) Information Support Group – psychological operations today have moved a long way from the ‘dirty tricks’ image of the past. They are still about changing or reinforcing human perceptions, but now they are more about not just helping the mission but also about helping the people the mission is there to assist. As this is more today about peace support than traditional warfighting – although psyops is still required for that, as evidenced by the 103 million leaflets dropped over the Serbs during the 1999 Kosovo conflict – we are left with essentially with the same moral aspect: is it better to persuade someone to live or to kill them?



Further reading:

Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the mind: a history of propaganda from the ancient world to the present day* (Manchester University Press, 1995)

Philip M. Taylor, *British propaganda in the Twentieth Century: Selling Democracy* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999)

Anthony R. Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson, *Age of propaganda: the everyday use and abuse of persuasion* (New York, W.H. Freeman, 2001).

