

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Essays in
Military and
Political
History

edited by
Walter Laqueur

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and Political History**

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1 Introduction

Walter Laqueur

The second world war was the most important event of this century, the changes it caused were so enormous and so lasting that it continues to attract more interest and to provoke more controversy than any other topic. Its political and military history is heavily documented: at the last count there were 164,000 cubic feet of second world war material in the National Archives in Washington. But this was ten years ago and refers only to military records. There are other depositories in the United States, where the overall amount of material available is bound to be considerably larger. The same is true with regard to Britain and France, Germany and Italy, and presumably also the relevant archives of the Soviet Union and the other East European countries, most of them inaccessible so far to Western students. There have been many Soviet and East European publications on the war years, but the reception given in the 1960s to Nekrich's book on June 1941 clearly marked the outer limits of de-Stalinization.

Much important source material is not yet available in the West, and some presumably never will be. But even if it were, the debate would still continue. History is constantly being rewritten and the historiography of the second world war, not surprisingly, has been under attack from both 'right' and 'left' revisionist schools. The former was mainly preoccupied with the pre-history and the early phase of the war, the latter with the last phase and its aftermath. The former tried to prove that, broadly speaking, both Nazism and the Japanese were less to blame for the outbreak of the war than commonly supposed, that they had not really planned the war, that German and Japanese ambitions could have been contained but for the bellicose intentions of such Western statesmen as Lord Halifax and President Roosevelt, that Hitler's war against the Soviet Union was preventive in character.

'Left' revisionism, on the other hand, maintains that the Western governments mainly went to war to protect their imperial and

economic interests which were threatened by the Axis powers. This school is less interested in the second world war per se, and sees it mainly as a prelude to the cold war. Responsibility for the break-up of the war-time alliance is put squarely on the shoulders of the Western leaders, whose main war aim was the suppression of the 'European revolution'.

The use of the terms 'left' and 'right' in this connection is, of course, quite misleading in some respects; 'right-wing' revisionists have drawn much of their inspiration from the writings of A.J.P. Taylor and Charles Beard who can hardly be classified as men of the right. Furthermore, beyond a certain point, the dividing line between 'left' and 'right' is altogether blurred, for even though they proceed from very different starting points, they reach conclusions which, in some ways, are strikingly similar. If it was mainly a war between rival imperialist powers, Hitler and Mussolini cannot possibly have been as evil as commonly thought, whereas Churchill and Roosevelt should not be regarded as fighters for freedom and democracy.

These writings are now largely a thing of the past; the impact of the revisionist schools on historians has been on the whole negligible, even though it had a certain success among the general public, in line with political sympathies and national sensibilities. Most of the articles published in this book first appeared in two special issues of the *Journal of Contemporary History* (January and July 1981); a few were first published in earlier issues of the same journal. They are fairly typical of the current preoccupations of historians, which are quite different from those of the 1950s and 1960s. For example, during the war and immediately after, great importance was attributed to the activities of the German Fifth Column in many European countries which allegedly made an important contribution to German successes. Research has shown, however, that while there was a great deal of appeasement and defeatism among Germany's neighbours, there were few Fifth Columnists in the specific sense; militarily they played no significant role at all. It also became clear after the war that the degree of German economic preparation and mobilization had been greatly exaggerated, certainly for the period up to Stalingrad.

Other controversies still continue albeit in a lower key; it is still debated whether any military benefit was drawn by Britain and France from the delay offered by the Munich treaty; whether Hitler really intended to invade Britain in 1940; whether the turning-point

in the war came in late 1942 or well before. There is no full agreement on the importance of the air offensive against Germany and of the North African theatre within the general framework of the war. Mr Ralph Bennett criticizes in his contribution, rightly I believe, the newly fashionable tendency among some writers to 'depose the heroes of the past and to replace the story of five years uphill struggle with an insistence that the economic balance was so heavily weighted in favour of Britain, Russia and the United States that they were always bound to win, and with the assertion that the Allies should rather be blamed for the foolishness or timidity which prevented them from gaining a quicker victory than praised for the determination which enabled them to triumph in the end'.

In recent years, the impact of intelligence on the conduct of the war has been a bone of some contention. So far, only a small part of the German decrypts has been accessible — more apparently, of 'Magic', the intercepted Japanese messages. While the history of the war may not have to be completely rewritten, much of it will definitely have to be re-examined in the light of these revelations. Thus Mr Ralph Bennett discounts all talk about completely rewriting the history of the war in the light of Ultra whereas Mr Ronald Lewin elsewhere in the present volume takes a different stance: most of the significant volumes in the United Kingdom series of Official Histories of the Second World War are fundamentally misleading, inadequate and out of date: an exception, in this respect, being Professor Hinsley's history of British intelligence. But essential information was available during the war from other sources also; for example, I found to my surprise much interest in a postal censorship survey. These surveys will not be declassified for many years to come. In any case, the problem facing the historian is not just to establish that certain information existed at a given time, which is relatively easy, but whether it reached those who were taking decisions, whether it was correctly interpreted and what inferences were drawn from it — which, needless to say, is much more difficult. The time factor has always to be remembered: information may have been received, and even correctly interpreted, but it may have come too late for operational purposes; or the recipient may have been unable to use it for other reasons, such as overwhelming enemy superiority. In short, other things being equal, intelligence provides an advantage, sometimes a great advantage, but its limitations should always be remembered.

Poland was routed in 1939 despite the fact that it had broken the German code, and if Britain did not lose the war in 1940-41, this was due to a great many factors, of which superior intelligence was only one.

There is always the temptation facing the historian to assume that everything eventually happened as it did because it could not have happened in any other way. There is always the inclination to exaggerate necessity, to underrate the importance of historical accident. Lord Dacre (Professor Trevor Roper) rightly pointed out some time ago that if General Franco at Hendaye on 23 October 1940 had said 'yes' to Hitler rather than 'no', the assault on Gibraltar would have succeeded, the Mediterranean would have been closed to the Allies, the outcome of the war might have been reversed, and the shape of the post-war world would have been quite different. Some may argue that since the fate of the war was not decided in the Mediterranean, the importance of Franco's decision to prevaricate should not be exaggerated. Perhaps so, but then Hendaye was not the only historical accident during 1940-42. If there had been no determined leadership in Britain during the critical summer of 1940, if Hitler had given priority to the construction of nuclear weapons, there were a great many occasions during the first two to three years of the war on which the decision could have gone the other way. If the outcome of the war had been certain from the very beginning, interest in the subject would have abated long ago. But, of course, it was not, and this too is one of the basic reasons for our continuing preoccupation with it.

2 'If War Should Come':¹ Preparing the Fifth Arm for Total War 1935-1939

Philip M Taylor

When British representatives set off for Russia in September 1941 to attend the Moscow Conference, they went fully expecting the Soviets to enquire exactly how Britain proposed to win the war against Nazi Germany. The delegation had been instructed to reply:

We shall undermine them by propaganda; depress them with the blockade; and, above all, bomb their homelands ceaselessly, ruthlessly, and with ever increasing weight of bombs.²

Two years earlier, one of the British Cabinet's earliest decisions following the outbreak of the Second World War had foreshadowed this statement. Within hours of the Anglo-French declaration of hostilities on 3 September 1939, authorization was given for the Royal Air Force to initiate the psychological offensive against the Third Reich.³ That same night, Whitley bombers from RAF 4 Group showered six million leaflets over selective targets on German soil. This exercise, the technical success of which helped to pave the way for Bomber Command's crippling night-time bombing raids later in the war,⁴ launched what was to become the most vociferous war of words yet waged by belligerent powers.

That such emphasis should have been placed upon the weapon of propaganda from the very outset of the conflict stands out in sharp contrast to the situation which had existed in August 1914 when the British government had entered the First World War almost com-

The Coming of the War

It is usually taken for granted that democracies enter a war totally unprepared and there is unfortunately more than a grain of truth in this popular assumption. As far as equipment and training are concerned, neither the British nor the American or French armed forces were a match for the Germans in the early phase of the war. This lack of preparation stemmed not so much from lack of information as from lethargy. There was no lack of information: the French Deuxième Bureau actually exaggerated the number of German units (and even more the number of German tanks) on the eve of the attack in May 1940. Yet nothing was done to face the danger. It may come therefore as a surprise that in some fields thought was actually given to future action well before the outbreak of the war. This refers to the question of Swedish iron ore, a problem of major importance for the German war economy, and also to the need for a Ministry of Information in Britain. The great miracle was not that the Ministry of Information entered the war (to quote Mr Taylor) hopelessly ill-prepared, inarticulate, though not altogether speechless as in 1914. It was in many ways surprising that any thought at all had been given to the necessity to engage in propaganda. Mr Lowenthal shows in his essay that given the isolationist mood prevailing in the United States between 1937 and 1939, there was little that President Roosevelt could have done over and above what he actually did. In 1939 and in 1940, he kept in mind better than his subordinates the political requirements of the allied war effort. In 1941, however, he wavered and showed lack of resolution. By that time, all the President's major advisers (with the possible exception of Secretary of State Hull) believed that war could no longer be avoided. Roosevelt, on the other hand, by keeping his options open failed to define clear policy goals, thus creating a vacuum 'which was never authoritatively filled for the United States during the course of the war'.

pletely unprepared for the conduct of psychological warfare. Although some prior consideration had been given to the related question of censorship,⁵ as reflected by the immediate severance of the German transatlantic cables, the government was thereafter forced to improvise the machinery required for more positive forms of action in order to combat the widespread activities of an already fully-operational German propaganda machine. However, despite the establishment of Charles Masterman's War Propaganda Bureau at Wellington House in September 1914,⁶ and despite the undervalued work of the various Whitehall departments in this direction,⁷ it nonetheless took three and a half years for a full Ministry of Information to emerge and before a specific Enemy Propaganda Department was created at Crewe House.⁸ The mistake, if such it was,⁹ was not to be repeated in September 1939. On the outbreak of the Second World War, not only did a Ministry of Information spring immediately into action but preparations for the conduct of psychological warfare were also sufficiently well advanced to enable the British to launch their first offensive strike against the enemy with leaflets rather than with bombs.

That the government should have been prepared for propaganda in 1939 in a way that it had not been in 1914 was made all the more remarkable in light of the situation which had existed during the Munich crisis merely twelve months before. On 5 September 1938, Stephen King-Hall, the distinguished publicist and expert on international affairs, had been convinced that

a moment might arrive when the whole situation might be saved by an immediate and nation-wide appeal to the German people. If we are involved in a war, a shower of pamphlets over Germany should precede a shower of bombs over the Ruhr (I hope we've got the bombers).¹⁰

Yet even if the bombers had been available, the Air Ministry had still to be consulted as to its willingness to release the necessary men and machines for what would obviously be a highly dangerous mission. Moreover, there did not at that time exist a pamphlet, even in draft form, let alone one translated, printed and ready for dissemination. There was thus a very real danger, as King-Hall warned, that 'if the crisis gets worse . . . we may be caught with our trousers down' in so far as propaganda was concerned.¹¹

Despite some impressive improvisation in the weeks that followed, including the drafting of various leaflets¹² and some experimen-

tal leaflet-dropping raids carried out by the RAF in the north of England,¹³ such an embarrassment was avoided only by Neville Chamberlain's third flight to Germany to bring Europe back from the brink of war by signing the Munich Agreement. In other words, Britain would almost certainly not have been prepared for psychological warfare in September 1938. Clearly, therefore, much progress was made during the final year of peace. Several recent publications, most notably Ian McLaine's *Ministry of Morale*¹⁴ and Michael Balfour's *Propaganda in War*,¹⁵ have thrown much new light on that progress but, overall, the authors tend to be somewhat critical of the pre-war planning process in view of the disastrous start made by British propagandists during the initial stages of the Second World War. Whereas many of those early mistakes can undoubtedly be attributed to the peacetime preparations, others cannot. The difference between the anticipated nature of a future war and the reality of experience is often very wide. When, for example, the long feared 'knock-out blow' from the air failed to materialize in 1939, British propagandists had to deal with the peculiar problems (such as boredom) raised during the period of the 'phoney war'.¹⁶ Similarly, when the *Luftwaffe* did begin to appear over British cities, it was learned that aerial bombardment often served to consolidate rather than shatter civilian morale. Moreover, not only do Balfour and McLaine tend to examine the pre-war preparations from the retrospective standpoint of the 1940s, but they also examine the planning process in isolation from the considerable peacetime propaganda machinery which the British government had been developing throughout the 1930s and in isolation from developments elsewhere in Whitehall which were to affect considerably the wartime organization for propaganda. This article will therefore attempt to re-examine those preparations in light of these factors and in light of the lessons provided by the 1914-18 war and by the Munich crisis.

During the 1930s, there was a widely held conviction that, if war should come, it would be a long war of attrition in which a strong economy would serve as the fourth arm of defence.¹⁷ Although Chamberlain's policy as Prime Minister was to suffer dearly from his own restraining influence while serving as Chancellor of the Exchequer,¹⁸ he remained determined to ensure that Britain's preparations for war did not weaken the nation's capacity to actually wage

war. The roots of this conviction lay in the experience of the First World War. The use of the economic weapon, whether in the form of the Allied blockade of the Central Powers or Germany's attempt to starve Britain into submission by the unrestricted U-boat campaign, had been designed to weaken the capacity of the other side to continue the struggle on the field of battle. From the British point of view, the successful application of the former, combined with her ability successfully to resist the stranglehold of the latter, was felt to have played a critical role in determining the final result. The cost of doing so, however, had been high. True, Britain had emerged victorious, seemingly at the height of her power, but in reality Britain also emerged from the war in a process of both relative and absolute decline. A repetition might signal her complete collapse as a great world power.

But the blockade had not simply been designed to deprive the enemy's armed forces of their basic equipment and supplies. It was also directed towards the mass of the enemy population. Indeed, the First World War substantially narrowed the distance which had previously existed between the military and civilian theatres of operation. Sections of the community which had hitherto remained generally uninvolved in the exigencies of national survival now found themselves directly affected by events at the front line. Nor could the military afford to ignore events on the home front. For the British, the introduction of conscription in 1916 was a major step on her road to total war in which the entire resources of the nation had to be mobilised against the entire resources of the enemy before victory could be secured.¹⁹

The impact of these developments, combined with the lessons to be drawn from the alarming frequency of mutinies within the mass conscript armies and the outbreak of revolutions in Russia, central Europe and elsewhere, led to a heightened appreciation within the British governing élite of the role which the masses would henceforth play in the survival of the state or, alternatively, in its destruction. This in turn led to an acceleration of the development of means to influence and control the opinions of people whose actions were becoming increasingly more significant with improving standards of literacy and education, growing politicization, and the broadening base of political power. Morale and opinion thus became military assets and propaganda began to emerge as the principal instrument of control over them. By 1918, it had become the fifth arm of defence.

In Germany, British war propaganda seemed more like an effective weapon of attack than of defence. Evidence of its profound impact was readily available in the form of testimonies by such prominent enemy personalities as Ludendorff and Hindenberg. In the 1920s, Adolf Hitler was to perpetuate further the British reputation for success by stating in *Mein Kampf* that the German army had not been defeated on the field of battle but had lost the war due to the disintegration of morale from within, a process which had been 'brilliantly' exploited by British propaganda. Admittedly, Hitler used this line of argument for propaganda reasons of his own — the 'stab-in-the-back' theory was but its logical conclusion — but the fact remains that British propaganda was believed by friend and former foe alike to have played such a decisive role in Allied victory that its revival in any future war seemed virtually guaranteed.

However, at the close of the 'war to end all wars', such a possibility seemed inconceivable. Accordingly, just as the British armed forces were gradually demobilized and reduced, so also was the wartime propaganda machinery dismantled in optimistic anticipation of a lasting peace in which neither would be necessary. Although a skeleton organization remained in the form of the Foreign Office News Department upon which to build in future should the need arise, the likelihood of it being so used seemed remote. Not that the British were particularly proud of their wartime reputation for being successful propagandists. Propaganda, as Baldwin said in 1918, was 'not a word that has a pleasant sound in English ears'.²⁰ It was regarded as a necessary evil of war, an 'un-English' activity associated with subversion and secrecy. Indeed, such was the overwhelming degree of prejudice against its continued use in peacetime that the British government was prepared to forfeit the considerable lead it had gained by 1918 and surrender the initiative to other governments which were less reluctant to put this new weapon to peacetime use. As a result, during the inter-war years, Soviet Russia, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany utilized the lessons of the British wartime experience and combined them with new developments in communications technology in order to mould propaganda into a powerful weapon of peacetime nationalistic expansion.

As the lofty idealism of the post-war era came to be progressively eroded by the aggressive policies of Japan, Italy and Germany, the prospect of another war had to be considered as a distinct possibility. When, therefore, British defence planners were forced to con-

sider the question of contingency plans for a future war in the wake of the abandonment of the Ten Year Rule, the painfully slow death of the World Disarmament Conference and the production of the Defence Requirements Committee's first major report, there was every reason to assume that propaganda would play an even greater role in the next war than it was believed to have done in the last. The advent of the first truly mass media in the form of radio and sound film, combined with the widespread peacetime exploitation of propaganda by the totalitarian regimes, merely served to reinforce this conviction. But there was one significant addition to the anticipated nature of total war: the bomber. During the 1930s, the fear of the bomber and of an aerial knock-out blow 'critically affected the making of British defence and foreign policy'.²¹ It also affected the planning for propaganda in the next war.

Britain's insular position could no longer protect her people from direct involvement in a continental war as the bomber reduced still further the distance between soldier and civilian. British cities were vulnerable to attack in a way that they had not been before. If this threat was portrayed as something of a fantasy in Alexander Korda's 1936 science fiction film, *Things to Come*, the reality could only have been driven home by newsreels showing the bombing of Guernica and Madrid during the Spanish Civil War.²² It was therefore not unnaturally assumed that, if war should come, civilian morale was likely to prove a critical factor, and indeed it might be assumed that film would have a key role to play in helping to sustain the populace through the dark hours of saturation bombing. But, in fact, the overriding assumption that the bomber would always get through led to the decision to close all cinemas in the event of war in an attempt to reduce the potential devastation and loss of life.²³ Clearly, only if Britain could survive the *Luftwaffe's* anticipated initial knock-out blow from the air would the fourth and fifth arms of defence begin to play a decisive role. Even so, during that crucial initial phase, propaganda would still have an important role to play, both at home and abroad, and it was therefore felt that Britain would need to be sufficiently well-equipped for such work from the outset.

Significantly, the initiative came from the Air Ministry. The precise origins of the decision to begin planning for propaganda in the next war remain somewhat vague but it does appear that, during the summer of 1935, as the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) was preparing for the impending clash with Italy in the