

GALLERY BACKGROUND

BACKGROUND

A great debate for historians of the Great War is whether or not propaganda in Britain was effective. There is no doubt that much effort went into it and that it was highly efficient.

When war broke out in 1914, the British showed they understood the power of thought and communication. The British ship *Telconia* cut the cable links between Germany and the USA. This allowed Britain a free hand in the early days of the war in gaining US support.

In 1914 the British government set up its propaganda bureau in Wellington House under Charles Masterman. It was so secret that most MPs did not know it existed. It worked behind the offices of the National Insurance Department, which was used as a front.

The main aim of the bureau in the early stages was to control information. This meant censorship and it was strictly enforced. At the same time, the government carefully chose the facts that it gave to the newspapers. The end result was that government propaganda was all facts, it was just that the facts were very carefully chosen - especially the facts that were left out! Good examples of this were the way the propaganda section made use of the German invasion of Belgium and the German sinking of the passenger liner, the *Lusitania*. They also used stories of alleged German atrocities in Belgium to good effect.

Another key element of British propaganda in the early stages of the war was to get men to volunteer to join up. At first the volunteers flooded in, and the famous poster of Lord Kitchener saying 'Your Country Needs You' was seen as a masterly piece of propaganda. However, voluntary recruiting fell below the levels required in 1915 and the government eventually had to introduce conscription.

It may be that other propaganda appeals to get men and women to work in the factories and mines were more successful. However, it may just be that British people were patriotically committed to winning the war and the propaganda had little effect.

As the war went on, the strain on the British people increased considerably. Government was constantly concerned by the possibility that the British people would become war-weary and stop supporting the war.

In 1917 the propaganda bureau in Wellington House was replaced by a new Department of Information. In theory it was headed by the government minister, Sir Edward Carson. In practice it was run by the novelist, John Buchan. In 1918 this Department became part of a larger Ministry of Information headed by Lord Beaverbrook, the newspaper owner.

Also in 1917, the National War Aims Committee was set up to focus on propaganda at home. This Committee worked closely with the Department of Information and with voluntary organisations like the Topical Committee for War Films. This group, and other voluntary organisations like the British Empire Union, the Fight For Right Movement and countless others, held rallies and parades or produced pamphlets or made films.

Film emerged as a new and powerful medium during the war and many government documents show what an impact it had on the propaganda makers. Films like 'For the Empire' and 'The Battle of the Somme' were huge box office successes. Millions of people went to see them. However, as with all the other forms of propaganda, the fact that people went to see the films does not necessarily mean that the message behind them got through, or even that it was needed.