

The British Press During the Great War

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Even before the Great War, the international press covered the actions that would lead to the first shots on the battlefield. However, for the United Kingdom, the reports made from journalists would also help change the course of decisions made in the national government. Opinions relayed from troops on the battlefield managed to bring attention to Parliament, while a propaganda machine added new dimensions to what the national press could convey to their audience. In the process, the United Kingdom also managed to relay a better understanding of their sacrifices to a new ally, one that would help bring a sweeping victory to a bloody battle.

The movements of the United Kingdom's national press may not take place on the battlefield, but they prove just as worthy of consideration in the history of the Great War. The national press' efforts not only transformed how the country responded to war conflicts, but how the world's press reported on international affairs in the century since. Much of what the British press had created, thanks in part to well-known individuals in the industry and those in the government, would help shape future policy going forward.

To consider how this transformation happened, one must investigate what was the standard for the country's press industry in the time prior to the Great War. Fleet Street's reputation as a publishing powerhouse was established during the eighteenth century, as daily newspapers began to form and establish homes within the street. However, that did mean the most exciting papers were being published throughout the next century. British critic Sydney Brooks in 1915 described what was the national press' typical newspaper format prior to the twentieth century:

Up till [the twentieth century], a certain ponderosity had been the hall-mark of most British newspapers. They were extremely respectable, weighty and dull. They had, one might have said, a temperamental distrust of liveliness as something dangerous and ensnaring. Verbatim reports of everything reportable, long winded and eminently sententious editorials, and stodgy columns of Parliamentary debates, filled their pages. Occasionally some journal of unusual enterprise would send a special correspondent out to Persia or Afghanistan, would dive deeply into the profundities of European politics, would open a subscription-list for some semi-public object, or produce a new scheme of army reform. It was a decent Press and a well-informed Press. It was wealthy, pontifical, respected and "literary." But it had an extraordinarily limited range. From the every day interests of normal men and women it stood serenely apart. It made no effort to reach the mass of the people who had grown to maturity since the setting up of a national system of education. It was curiously out of touch with the commercial life of the country.¹

As Brooks noted in her work, the British press had to change in some fashion. Through the "golden age" that occurred between 1860 and 1910, that change came into effect, as several new publications and owners took center stage. One of these new owners would play not only a major role in the country's changing press industry, but in the conflict that was to come.

One figure stood out from the rest, even in the ever-changing national press of the United Kingdom. Alfred Harmsworth, more commonly known as Lord Northcliffe, could be described as a British equivalent to American media tycoon William Randolph Hearst. Like Hearst, Northcliffe acquired failing newspapers in the late nineteenth century, and worked to make them prosperous. Among these acquisitions was *The Evening News* in 1894, as well as the merging of two newspapers in Edinburgh, Scotland to form the *Edinburgh Daily Record* that same year. In addition to acquiring these newspapers, Northcliffe established new publications to his ever-growing empire. To illustrate this point, the first printing of *The Daily Mail* on 4 May 1896 represented a change in the national press at the time, with British critic Sydney Brooks citing it as "a revolution... not merely in the metropolis [of London] but of the whole kingdom."² In

¹ Brooks, Sydney. "Lord Northcliffe and the War." *The North American Review*, Vol. 202, No. 717 (August 1915), 185.

² Brooks, 185.

1908, Northcliffe would take control of *The Times*, adding to his repertoire of newspapers. This latest acquisition granted him access to the most politically influenced paper among the country's elite and a source of official information for the powers residing outside Britain. However, this also meant the acquisition of "a key organ of the British establishment," much to the chagrin of Northcliffe's critics.³ Regardless of what was being said, Northcliffe enjoyed a sizable following in the wake of the acquisitions. Two years after acquiring *The Times*, an estimate of all newspapers circulating around Britain showed that the ones that Northcliffe acquired had attained a combined daily circulation of over two million papers.⁴ Altogether, the public might have referred to the multitude of papers under Northcliffe's control as "the Northcliffe press."⁵ Considering how much control he had on all of the national press at the time, this supposedly derogatory term might have had some credence.

At the time of the Great War, Northcliffe had cultivated an immense amount of control over the opinions of the British public. In a time before television news, or even radio, this was especially noteworthy as nothing like it has been experienced since that time.⁶ By the time of the Great War in 1914, Northcliffe's newspapers had forty percent of the country's morning circulation, forty-five percent of the evening circulation, as well as fifteen percent of the newspaper circulation on Sundays.⁷ This fact was diminished in the wake of Northcliffe selling off his *Daily Mirror* paper to his brother Harold, known under the title of Lord Rothermere, that

³ J. Lee Thompson, "Fleet Street Colossus: The Rise and Fall of Northcliffe, 1896-1922." *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2006), 116.

⁴ McEwen, John M. "The National Press during the First World War: Ownership and Circulation." *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (July 1982), 466.

⁵ Brooks, 190.

⁶ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989), 233.

⁷ Thompson, 115.

same year.⁸ Even with that purchase in mind, historian J. M. McEwen wrote that Northcliffe was more interested in “controlling the wave” of the support garnered through his publications and believed that his control could equal that of some government officials, including David Lloyd George.⁹

The national press, through Northcliffe’s stakes in various publications, was mostly under his control by 1914. As for the publications that were not under his control, like *The Guardian*, their importance to the structure of Fleet Street remained as vital as ever. But as a major catalyst for a future conflict soon emerged, how would the country’s publications respond to the news?

The assassination of Austria’s Archduke Ferdinand has been widely considered by many to be the catalyst for the Great War. While the significance of this event was underestimated by many, some members of the British press had played a role in downplaying the impact Ferdinand’s death had on the world stage towards the country’s public. Whether that was to dispel fear into the public, or because the press was not sure of how boiling tensions would play out has not yet been determined. Nonetheless, what was said at the time provides an interesting perspective from a time before the conflict.

The Guardian, then edited by C.P. Scott, provided its opinion on the recent passing. The day following the assassination, the 30th of June, the paper published its headline for the day: “World’s Sympathy with Aged Emperor,” detailing the archduke’s recent appearance in London prior to his death, as well as the fact that the archduke’s uncle had held the position of a British field marshal. The article is where the downplaying of the assassination’s significance comes

⁸ McEwen, 467.

⁹ McEwen, J. M. “Northcliffe and Lloyd George at War, 1914-1918.” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (September 1981), 653.

into play, as is written: "Comments on the crime, all expressing friendly feelings for the Emperor, are made by all the European papers, most of them, as is natural while the shock is still fresh, attaching an over-importance to the political consequences."¹⁰

In another article, which analyzed the assassination's cost on European politics, the paper did make certain that while the assassination had managed to increase tensions between Austria and Serbia, in addition to the fact that the probability of a Russian-led retaliation towards Austria was possible, the event would not have an overall impact on European politics in general.¹¹

In these articles, in addition to articles published until the declaration of war against Germany, *The Guardian* remain stagnant on its opposing towards such a conflict. One such article, dated 1 August, had Scott himself declaring this opposition, believing that it would "violate dozens of promises made to our own people, promises to seek peace, to protect the poor, to husband the resources of the country, [and] to promote peaceful progress." But when the declaration was made to intervene on Germany just four days later, the paper declared its opposition was no more: "All controversy therefore is now at an end. Our front is united."¹² Now that the front was made clear, how did certain individuals in the country's press handle the crises that were to come from the battlefield? One such crisis in 1915 would illustrate how the press used its intimidation to make changes possible.

In the planning for British involvement in the Great War, strategic plans decided to favor the use of shrapnel weapons. This gave artillery shells the lesser advantage in the war, and

¹⁰ Richard Norton-Taylor, "How the Guardian Played down the Assassination That Sparked World War," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, June 27, 2014), (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/27/guardian-1914-analysis-archduke-franz-ferdinand-shooting>)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

strategists underestimated the firing rate over a long period of time. Therefore, a shortage of artillery shells became apparent sometime in early 1915. On 27 March, Sir John French, the British Commander-in-Chief Field Marshal, gave an interview to *The Times*. In this interview, French made a call for more ammunition on the battlefield.¹³ With this interview, the firing line of the national press was about to fire back on the officials leading the government. Among those was Lord Northcliffe, who made no hesitation in making his target clear in the wake of French's announcement. His nephew was among the soldiers who were killed in action in the war, so whatever attacks he would bring onto officials was to have a personal twist. Among those targets was Secretary of State for War Herbert Kitchener, who Northcliffe believed was responsible for putting one of his family into the grave. On his *Times* paper, an article dated 7 April had him suggesting that there had been an "extraordinary failure of the Government to take in hand in business-like fashion the provision of full and adequate supply of munitions".¹⁴

To downplay the growing concerns made public by Lord Northcliffe and his publications, Prime Minister H. H. Asquith made known that British forces had enough ammunition in a speech to Newcastle on 20 April. This assurance, while promising, was made on the basis that Kitchener had promised the Prime Minister. However, further failures on the battlefield only weeks later only caused additional concern for the Asquith administration. In the wake of the unsuccessful Battle of Aubers Ridge on 9 May, *Times* war correspondent Colonel Charles Repington reported to the newspaper that a lack of the artillery shells was still in effect. Nearly a

¹³ Richard Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal: A Life of Sir John French* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2004), 287.

¹⁴ Ian F. W. Beckett, "The Man and the Hour: Lloyd George's Appointment as Minister of Munitions, 26 May 1915," in *The Making of the First War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 68.

week later, *The Times* reported on Repington's accounts under the headline: "Need for shells: British attacks checked: Limited supply the cause: A Lesson From France."¹⁵

Another article, this time for *The Daily Mail*, dated 21 May 1915, had Northcliffe making sure Kitchener knew what mistakes were made, as the article was titled "The Shells Scandal: Lord Kitchener's Tragic Blunder. Our Terrible Casualty Lists." By informing the public of the number of soldiers' lives being lost because of the artillery shortage, Northcliffe was hoping for some changes to occur.¹⁶ Needless to say, changes did happen – although some elements panned out differently than what the press mogul was expecting.

While Northcliffe utilized the article to get Kitchener out of office, the resulting events did not rule out in his favor. In what could be described as a blunder for Northcliffe, Kitchener's stature proved immovable, meaning a much more fervent response towards the Secretary of State for War. A sign of protest towards *The Daily Mail* resulted in the day's paper being burned in front of the Stock Exchange. Another sign of protest was that subscriptions were being cancelled by the minute, displaying the public's empathy towards Kitchener and immense disliking towards the press mogul's opinions. David Lloyd George had to inform Northcliffe of these new developments, showcasing how miscalculated the press mogul was in achieving his goals.¹⁷ The efforts to get Kitchener out of office was basically anything but productive for "the Northcliffe press." However, what Northcliffe did manage to shape in the British government nonetheless proved valuable in resolving the munitions issue.

¹⁵ Holmes, 287-289.

¹⁶ Beckett, 68.

¹⁷ Holmes, 288-289.

In the time between *The Times*' report and that of Northcliffe's article, the British government underwent some changes amid the scandal. John Fisher resigned from his post of First Sea Lord on 15 May, because of the differences he was having with First Lord Winston Churchill over an unrelated matter. Nonetheless, his timing was not good for the Asquith administration, as a meeting with opposition leaders two days later became the source of frustration for the Prime Minister. As a result, Asquith forcefully requested the resignation of his ministers shortly thereafter, and thus creating a new coalition government. Among Asquith's new appointees was David Lloyd George as the Minister of Munitions, who would prove vital in the coming months.¹⁸

With the passing of the Munitions of War Act 1915 on 2 July, the crisis received a response through Prime Minister Asquith's new coalition government. By increasing the output of munitions and bringing private companies into the war effort under the Ministry of Munitions, British forces began to receive a consistent supply of munitions. As a Conservative member of Parliament, J. A. R. Marriott, mentions in his book, *Modern England, 1885-1945: A History of My Own Times*, the act allowed for the following:

"no private interest was to be permitted to obstruct the service, or imperil the safety, of the State. Trade Union regulations must be suspended; employers' profits must be limited, skilled men must fight, if not in the trenches, in the factories; man-power must be economized by the dilution of labour and the employment of women; Private factories must pass under the control of the State, and new national factories be set up. Results justified the new policy: the output was prodigious; the goods were at last delivered."¹⁹

¹⁸ Holmes, 288.

¹⁹ J. A. R. Marriott, *Modern England, 1885-1945: A History of My Own Times* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1960), 376.

With the Shell Crisis of 1915, the British press displayed power that resonated in the months and years to come. In 1916, the Asquith administration came to an end for it to be replaced by the government of David Lloyd George. The new government continued in the war efforts, assisting in the development of a new breed of war assistance that would try to dismantle the German's spreading of information on a worldwide basis.

In the early years of the war, Germany initiated a propaganda machine, spreading their explanations of being in the war to an international audience. For the United Kingdom, it represented a critical objective to tackle. To address that objective, a series of organizations and efforts to bring together a counterreaction resulted in Britain developing their own propaganda machine.

One such reaction to the German propaganda machine occurred on the end of August 1914, when Lloyd George urged the British government to consider "an organization to inform and influence public opinion abroad and to confute German mis-statements and [fallacy]." ²⁰ Cabinet member C.F.G. Masterman delved deeper into what the German's "mis-statements" could provide for a British-run organization. Believing that their enemy's propaganda provided "an admirable object lesson in how not to do it," the cabinet member thought that an in-house propaganda machine could dismantle the German's shortcomings.²¹ In early September, the Cabinet decided to take heed on such an organization, at least for the duration of the war. Masterman was to spearhead the new operation, which he took on immediately by holding two conferences on 2 September and 7 September. Following those conferences, Masterman

²⁰ M.L. Sanders, "Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War." *The Historical Journal* 18, No. 1 (1975), 119.

²¹ Mark Wollaeger, "Impressionism and Propaganda: Ford's Wellington House Books and the Good Soldier," in *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900 to 1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 130.

established the new organization in a set of flats in Buckingham Gate, commonly known as Wellington House.

In the time that followed, Wellington House became a hotbed for the British propaganda machine. However, it was not public knowledge at the time, as Wellington House was shrouded in so much secrecy that even Parliament was not let in on what was happening. Regardless of its secrecy, Wellington House's linguistic-based structure demonstrated its unique position amongst similar organizations around the world[?]. "National sections" had individual sections, each focused on one country like Scandinavia and Portugal. The United States, on the other hand, was under the helm of "a most important special branch."²²

But Wellington House was not the only propaganda machine in the country, as amateur propagandists proved beneficial and problematic for the organization. In response, the organization unceremoniously coordinated an effort in directing, and restraining, these amateur organizations into a role of distributors for the propagandists at Wellington House. This promise of a more passive role was not met with overall acceptance, a report from February 1916 indicated that these amateur networks provided a "considerable expansion" in the propaganda field.²³ This also extended to two other government-organized institutions, the News Department of the Foreign Office and the Neutral Press Committee.

The Neutral Press Committee was under the helm of former Assistant Editor of the *Daily Chronicle* G. H. Mair in September 1914. Under the Neutral Press Committee, it was Mair's responsibility to ensure that countries neutral to the conflict received news about the war. The committee was split up into four departments: the trade of news services between Britain and

²² Sanders, 120.

²³ Ibid, 121.

foreign countries, international promotion of British newspapers, spreading news articles, and telegraph transmission of news. As for the News Department of the Foreign Office, that organization had similar objectives. But as their title suggests, their position in the government structure meant they provided foreign outlets on anything concerning British policy. While initially their responsibility was to focus on censoring the press, their focus on propaganda emerged when the Foreign Office relinquished the former objective in October 1915.²⁴

With so many propaganda organizations on the move, the Foreign Office decided to do something about it. During a conference on 26 January 1916, representatives from all the propaganda organizations were informed that the control of propaganda would be under the Foreign Office's responsibility, with Mair's organization now to distribute the material. The News Department and Wellington House, under this new reorganization, were now under the umbrella of the Foreign Office. Masterman was not pleased with the recent revelations, as he was hoping that Wellington House would be at the forefront of matters that had no effect on diplomatic affairs. Nonetheless, this reorganization would be complete by that spring.²⁵

Under the new Foreign Office reign, the new department was now to be separated into three sections: one that was to be somewhere around Fleet Street and the Foreign Office, one at the Foreign Office, and one at Wellington House. The Foreign Office location acted as the new headquarters, focusing on the former national sections, as well as a section dealing with enemy propaganda. The then-undetermined location was now on both cable and wireless transmissions, filmed propaganda, as well as handling press articles. And the former Wellington House location remained in charge of written and visual propaganda, particularly pictorial propaganda

²⁴ Sanders, 122.

²⁵ Ibid, 122.

and visually created propaganda art. These new changes would be approved by the War Cabinet in February 1917, under the roof of the Ministry of Blockade and to be named as the Department of Information.²⁶

Wellington House was not the only representation of the British government's propaganda efforts, as a familiar media figure was willing to take on a mission. In what was described by historian J. Lee Thompson as a "hastily called evening meeting" on the 30th of May 1917, Lord Northcliffe accepted an offer from Lloyd George and the War Cabinet, against his better wishes. As only someone of his credentials could cover, his offer was to act as the chairman of the British War Mission, wherein he would travel to the United States for the sake of strengthening British publicity and to better understand their new ally in the international conflict.²⁷ Considering that Northcliffe had already made himself accustomed to the country, possible through twenty previous trips since 1894, his understanding of American customs rivaled very few in his native Britain.²⁸

As evidenced by the Shell Crisis two years' prior, the British government was aware of Northcliffe's tendency to make his opinions very clear to the public. And with the Americans entering the conflict, the idea of keeping secrets from their new ally now seemed impossible. Even after considering whether Northcliffe would be able to "run amok" in the United States, American diplomat Edward House and British intelligence officer William Wiseman decided to

²⁶ Sanders, 124.

²⁷ J. Lee Thompson, "'To Tell the People of America the Truth': Lord Northcliffe in the USA, Unofficial British Propaganda, June-November 1917." *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (April 1999): 243.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 245.

keep Northcliffe on a short leash. Through this mindset, it was concluded that people who would keep the chairman on the straight and narrow would accompany him on his travels.²⁹

In the five-month period between June and November 1917, Lord Northcliffe traveled across the continental United States, speaking at every stop he visited, whether it was in public gatherings or private events.³⁰ On the East Coast, the press mogul spoke during a meeting of the Washington Press Club in early July, though the exact comments he made about censorship and espionage were not reproduced for the press. This was done to prevent any misconceptions being spread around what was said. On the public front, the British chairman spoke to a crowd over fourteen thousand individuals of the public at the Madison Square Garden on 21 July, receiving a favorable reception. One such notice came from *The New York Times*' Alexander Humphries, commenting that he wished someone like Northcliffe was present in the country's affairs.³¹ As for the Midwest, this area would represent the apex of the chairman's American efforts. During the month of October, Northcliffe would visit the region

Shortly after Northcliffe's return to the United Kingdom on 12 November, his position as chairman of the British War Mission would not last much longer. Rufus Isaacs, known at the time as Lord Reading, took on the mantle previously held by Lord Northcliffe in February 1918, now in charge of the movements that Northcliffe had managed to develop in the United States.³² The movements that were created gave way to a new understanding for the Americans of the conflict they were entering, as well as knowledge of just how much the British had already put in into the conflict so far. And for the first time, the traditionally unwieldy Northcliffe had a sense

²⁹ Thompson, "To Tell the People of America the Truth", 247.

³⁰ Ibid, 255.

³¹ Ibid, 254.

³² Ibid, 261.

of accountability – Thompson noted that for the press mogul, the five-month task was “the most important task of his life.”³³

Through the efforts of Wellington House, the British had developed a viable propaganda machine that would endure through the rest of the Great War. Despite the difficulties made throughout Wellington House’s presence, the innovations created allowed for a better understanding of how to communicate towards the public about why their involvement mattered. Assistance from Lord Northcliffe allowed the British to communicate their message towards the United States, forging a new relationship with an ally.

With the Great War, the British press became a powerful source of influence and control over the British government, even to the point of the government being influenced by the press. Newspaper owners like Lord Northcliffe had developed an empire that managed cultivate influence over the war matters, possibly even more than the British government itself. The national press’ role in reporting on the assassination of Franz Ferdinand downplayed just how important to the impending conflict it would be. Events like the Shell Crisis of 1915 illustrated how the national press could help inspire changes in the British government’s responses to future crises on the battlefield. As for the government itself, their efforts to muster up a propaganda machine had managed to develop internationally, thanks in part through Lord Northcliffe’s efforts in the United States, as well as the efforts of the organizations through Wellington House and its successors.

Through these events, the British press had reached heights that could never be attained again in the decades to come. Fleet Street’s presence as a publishing powerhouse would

³³ Thompson, 262.

diminish throughout the twentieth century, as the street's newspapers moved elsewhere in London. Even with the changes made throughout the century since the Great War, the actions of the British press during that four-year period had nonetheless helped shape the future of journalism on an international scale.

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