

## ***Theatres of War: Propaganda, 1918-45***

by SAM KULA

**Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-45.** NICHOLAS PRONAY and D.W. SPRING, eds. London: Macmillan, 1982. ix, 302 p. ISBN 0-333-30939-1 \$40.00.

**Film and Radio Propaganda in World War II.** K.R.M. SHORT, ed. London: Croom Helm, 1983. ix, 302 p. ISBN 0-7099-2349-X, £15.95.

**John Grierson and the National Film Board: The Politics of Wartime Propaganda.** GARY EVANS. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984. xii, 329 p. ISBN 0-8020-2519-6. \$24.95.

**John Grierson and the NFB.** John Grierson Project, McGill University. Downsview, Ontario: ECW Press, 1984. ISBN 092080280X. \$8.95 (Papers presented at a conference at McGill University, Montreal, 29-31 October 1981.)

Propaganda is a venerable term dating back at least to 1622 and the establishment by Pope Gregory XV of a Commission of Cardinals, *Congregatio de propaganda fide*, charged with the management of foreign missions. It remained a respectable term until the beginning of the twentieth century and the advent of mass media serving a mass electorate. By the time the First World War ended, the only sense in which the word was generally used in the West was pejorative — the deliberate falsification of facts to manipulate public opinion at home and abroad. In the opinion of Angus Fletcher, Director of the British Library of Information in New York in 1928, propaganda was “a good word gone wrong — debauched by the late Lord Northcliffe.”

It was not all Lord Northcliffe's fault, of course, but the spectacular success of the British government's Department of Enemy Propaganda under his direction, and the control over the flow of all news media exercised by the Ministry of Information under Lord Beaverbrook during the last stages of the Great War, focused world attention on the effectiveness of propaganda as an instrument of national policy. In fact, Adolf Hitler was so impressed by the psychological warfare practised by the British that he commended it in *Mein Kampf* as a model as well as an explanation for the collapse of morale that undermined the German war effort.

Much of the British campaign of words and images was directed at American public opinion and designed to generate a positive attitude toward American involvement on the side of the hard-pressed British “Allies.” Studies published after the war revealed how America had been duped by clever manipulation of the “news.” The British had severed

the German trans-Atlantic cable as soon as war was declared and it was their “news” that reached American newspapers days, if not weeks, before the Germans could get their version across the Atlantic. Carefully selected photographs illustrating German atrocities were also fed to the American media, and the power of moving images to simulate reality became another weapon in the propaganda arsenal. The “enthusiastic amateurs” at the Ministry of Information, who at first heavily-handedly attempted to control newsreel coverage of the war by denying cameramen access to the front, were by 1917 systematically feeding the audience of millions so that newsreels reached home and abroad with “direct news” of Allied troops in action, progressively forcing the Central Powers off the map of Europe.

How instrumental this propaganda actually was in mobilizing civilian support has never been determined, although there appears little doubt that it was potent enough to generate widespread revulsion at the tactics employed. Propagandizing was not a “gentleman’s game,” and concern over the potential abuse by any government in peacetime of the deviousness developed during the war led the British to dismantle the machinery as soon as the war was over. On the other hand, perceptive critics between the wars pointed out the limitations of propaganda, although Sir Charles Robertson was aware as early as 1930 that it was fruitless to attempt to measure the impact of a single film. Rather, the cumulative effect of repeated viewing or, he insisted, “the kind of sediment which it leaves in the mind,” made the instrument so potent.

The development of radio broadcasting and the introduction of “talking pictures” placed an even greater arsenal in the hands of the propagandists. Even so, Anthony Eden, as British Foreign Secretary in 1937, astutely observed that “good propaganda cannot remedy the damage done by a bad foreign policy,” a fact that Mussolini was to learn to his cost. E.H. Carr, in an influential pamphlet entitled *Propaganda in International Politics* which was published in October 1939, warned totalitarians on both the left and the right who had seized the new media to propagate their ideologies that “the success of [all forms of] propaganda in international politics cannot be separated from the successful use of other instruments of power ... if a nation is militarily weak its propaganda will not be effective by virtue of its inherent excellence of content.” As the Germans and the Japanese learned in the Second World War, and as the Americans later learned in Vietnam, it is far easier to mobilize public support at home and to influence neutral opinion abroad when the army in the field is victorious. Given a period of stalemate or a series of reversals, the sacrifice demanded on the part of the civilian population during a “total” war cannot solely be sustained by rhetoric in words and images.

All parties to the conflict between 1939 and 1945 exercised complete control over all media. The machinery was not as direct in application in Britain, the United States, or in the Commonwealth (although no less effective), as it was in the Soviet Union and the Axis Powers. The Nazis in particular discovered the truth behind the old saw that one can lead a horse to water but cannot make it drink. After the declaration of war in September 1939, as the German army smashed its way across Europe, Goebbels boasted that his newsreels, which were expanded from ten to twenty minutes in length, were more popular than the feature films they preceded. Although they were a compulsory component of every programme, they were greeted with genuine enthusiasm by audiences eager to witness the glory of the early victories. To achieve their objectives as propaganda they had only to present the facts in as stirring and dramatic a form as the cinematography, the editing devices, the music, and the narration would allow. By the

end of 1941, when the tide had turned in the Soviet Union and the cost of the war effort on both fronts began to weary the civilian population, the newsreels became so unpopular that Goebbels had to order all cinemas to lock their doors after they began. Audiences were forced to sit through the newsreels or miss the entire programme!

In contrast, the British propaganda machine, disorganized and lacking expert direction in 1939, and faced with the reality of Dunkerque, stumbled from blundering misreadings of the public attitude to the "phoney war" to ineffectual efforts modeled on the successes of the First World War. The British produced simplistic appeals to jingoistic patriotism that met with wholesale derision by what had become fairly sophisticated consumers of the media. It was only when the full force of the real war, in the blitz on London and on civilian targets throughout the country, stiffened the resolve of the nation and when films began to reflect that reality in *London Can Take It*, *Listen to Britain*, or *Fires Were Started* that propaganda won wide acceptance. Lord Reith, the architect of the British Broadcasting Corporation and Minister for Information during the war, fully appreciated that successful propaganda utilized a "strategy of truth": "facts, if not *the* facts, truth, if not the *whole* truth." In his words, "news is the shock-troops of propaganda" and the BBC under his direction developed an enviable reputation in the free world and in the occupied territories as a credible source for "news." By careful selection (bracketing well-established truths with half-truths) the BBC and British film documentaries achieved a "propaganda of fact" that dominated public opinion in the wake of the Allied invasion of Europe.

By the early 1970s, the thirty-year access rule made the records of the war years on the activities of Britain's Ministry of Information accessible to researchers. The result was a series of conferences organized by the Inter-University History Film Consortium, an organization which links historians concerned with film as historical evidence in nine British universities. The first, on the theme of the role of the Ministry of Information as propagandist, was held in 1973. The results were G. Balfour's *Propaganda in War, 1939-1945* and the comprehensive, descriptive catalogue *British Official Films in the Second World War* edited by Nicholas Pronay and Frances Thorpe. The second conference, held in 1979, dealt with political propaganda in the period 1918-1945, and Pronay and D. W. Spring have edited a selection of the papers delivered at the conference under the title *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-45*.

It is possible to piece together a history of the use of film as propaganda from a close reading of the papers in this anthology. Pronay's introduction provides an overview, but the bulk of the papers concentrate on the British experience. There are papers on political polarization and the role of the cinema, feature films and documentaries in France between 1934 and 1939, the media in the Soviet Union, documentaries in the period 1917 to 1940, and newsreels during the war years. The rest of the papers describe and analyse the means employed by the British government to control the flow of information.

Inevitably, the contributions are uneven. In comparison with Pronay's detailed and emphatic analysis of the British newsreel during the war, a mine of data he has worked before, many of the papers appear sketchy and clearly indicate that the official record, especially on the production of "black news" (complete fabrications designed to confuse the enemy) did not survive the war, if it ever existed at all.

A more complete picture emerges if *Film and Radio Propaganda in World War II*, edited by K.R.M. Short, is read in conjunction with Pronay and Spring's anthology. Although there is some overlap, this set of papers, prepared for the 1982 Bellagio Conference organized by the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, the journal of the International Association for Audio-visual Media in Historical Research and Education (IAMHIST), was designed to complement the earlier publication. The fifteen papers concentrate on the French, Italian, Russian, and Japanese exploitation of propaganda for national purposes. And Philip M. Taylor provides an historical overview of the use of propaganda during the interwar years.

The British contribution to the development of the "fifth arm" has been the subject of several major studies by Pronay and Taylor among others, and there are more than a dozen books on the method and content of Nazi cinema. The notes that accompany the papers provide the references, but neither book is equipped with a bibliography. Pierre Sorlin, however, whose paper on the struggle for control of French minds between 1940 and 1944 appears in the Short anthology, adds a useful bibliography on that topic which includes his own seminal work now in translation as *Films and History*.

The papers at the Bellagio Conference also cover aspects of the American use of film to further the national interest. David Culbert deals with the Office of War Information and the production of the celebrated *Why We Fight* series directed by Frank Capra; Short himself contributes an analysis of Hollywood's treatment of anti-Semitism and the curious phenomena of Jews in control of major studios during the 1930s deliberately skirting the issue in order, Short argues, to avoid calling attention to their own position; and Thomas Cripps reviews the attempt to involve black Americans in the war effort through the production of *The Negro Soldier*. The official American propaganda machine was somewhat reluctantly cranked into operation in 1941, but Hollywood's dominance of world screens was so powerful that an "official" effort was perhaps unnecessary (even the concerted efforts of the Nazis had only reduced the American presence on German screens to 40 per cent of available time by 1938). As the *London Morning Post* commented as early as 1923, "the film is to America what the flag was once to Britain. By its means Uncle Sam may hope some day, if he is not checked in time, to Americanize the world." A prophetic commentary, and other observers were quick to point out that in the twentieth century trade has followed film, language, and literature. This fact conditioned the cultural export initiatives that emerged from national "information" programmes in the 1930s. The exact relationship between Hollywood and Washington at any given moment has never been precisely determined. The situation appears to have paralleled that of Whitehall and the press in Britain. There was no overt control such as exercised in Berlin and Tokyo, but a tacit "agreement" with the key people who controlled the media that certain subjects were not to be explored and that the "line" presented by the government was to be followed in spirit, if not in letter.

Noticeably absent from both the anthologies under review is any mention of the control of information and the use of film and radio propaganda in the countries of the Commonwealth that shared British and American war aims. The Canadian experience in particular was influenced by and sheds light on the British and American approaches. Like Britain, Canada reorganized the remnants of a national film production activity into a powerful propaganda machine (the National Film Board) in 1939 and harnessed the CBC as the voice of the war effort in much the same way as the BBC was used in the United Kingdom. It is intriguing that the person selected to manage the Canadian

production programme was John Grierson, the leading theorist in the British documentary movement before the war who said, "I approach the cinema as a pulpit." Grierson not only served as Film Commissioner between 1939 and 1946, but for one crucial year (1943) he was General Manager of the Wartime Information Board as well. He controlled almost the total information apparatus of the Canadian government, and when it was suggested that he take on the chairmanship of the CBC too, he demurred with the words, "no man should have such power."

There is no shortage of literature on Grierson. Forsyth Hardy has written a definitive biography and collected his writings in *Grierson on Documentary*. The National Film Board years have been well documented, and two new works which focus on that period have appeared in the past year. Gary Evans's study, *John Grierson and the National Film Board: The Politics of Wartime Propaganda*, is a full-scale study of those hectic years; *John Grierson and the NFB* is a collection of papers presented at a seminar organized by the John Grierson Project at McGill University in 1981. With an abundance of evidence drawn from the Mackenzie King Papers and diaries, the Department of External Affairs files he was allowed to consult at the Public Archives, and interviews with Grierson's colleagues at the Board (notably Tom Daly, Ross McLean, and Stuart Legg), Evans demonstrates that Grierson drastically overestimated his authority when his judgement or politics were questioned by the War Cabinet. He stated, somewhat flippantly, in a newspaper interview that "I stood one inch to the left of the Liberal party in power and I would stand one inch to the left of a CCF party in power...." When he and his colleagues moved beyond the inch, they were sharply reminded that making policy, particularly foreign policy, was a Cabinet prerogative.

The degree of freedom Grierson did enjoy throughout the war years was still extraordinary. Either the Cabinet did not have time to view the films the NFB produced in the series *Canada Carries On* and *World in Action*, or it secretly concurred with the avowedly internationalist stance the films adopted on every issue they treated, whether it was food as a weapon of war or the re-settlement of refugees. The assumption seems to have been that under the pressure of leading a nation at war, there simply was not enough time to worry about what Grierson and his maverick "civil servants" (all on short-term contracts — as was Grierson) were actually saying in those films.

The comparison with the British experience is interesting. Nicholas Pronay describes the projection of peace aims in Britain and how a small group of socialist-leaning filmmakers, including Basil Wright and Paul Rotha, presented future options for Britain that would have disturbed the Conservative government if it had troubled to focus on the films being distributed as information. The "message" had to be sub-textual, however, as the Crown Film Unit had been instructed to avoid "war aims." Churchill's sole war aim was to defeat Hitler. With rare exceptions the British productions were therefore instructional in nature, or of the "shot and shell" genre designed to boost morale on the home front.

In 1939, Mackenzie King and the Canadian War Cabinet also had only one war aim, the overthrow of fascism, and yet almost from the outset Grierson and Stuart Legg, one of his first recruits from the British documentary "movement," began to explore international postwar co-operation and a re-structuring of the world economy from a perspective that was considerably to the left of the vast majority of King's Liberals.

The Prime Minister knew from the reports of his advisors that Grierson was producing films that were the best of their type; they promoted national unity, properly credited Canada's role in the Allied war effort, and were enormously popular, not only in Canada but in the United States as well. Unlike the British, who offered their films free of charge if the reluctant exhibitors would only project them, Grierson *sold* the *Canada Carries On* and the *World in Action* series to Columbia in Canada and to United Artists in the United States. This not only guaranteed access to thousands of theatres in North America, but generated such a high return for the Board that Grierson disguised the figures for fear of arousing jealousy and public opposition from the private sector industry in both countries. The Board's audience research statistics indicated that by 1944 the *Canada Carries On* series was reaching 2.5 million people a month through Canadian theatres and the vast non-theatrical circuits that Grierson developed. "There are more seats in Canada," he said, "than there are theatre seats." The *World in Action* was reaching 2 million in Canada and over 10 million in the United States. The large American audience pleased Grierson's political masters most as Canada's contribution to the war effort was being consistently ignored in the American media.

Grierson believed in propaganda which informed, instructed, and illuminated. *Canada Carries On* was expected to give the people of Canada what they "need to know and think about if they are going to do their best by Canada and themselves." The approach was deliberately populist, humanist, and internationalist, very much one people, one world. As Grierson explained in an essay entitled "Searchlight on Democracy," "when there has to be propaganda in a modern society, the very nature of a democratic society imposes a severe restraint on the style and methods of propaganda.... Our searchlight on democracy will in the end turn out to be a quiet, soft light under which little things are rounded in velvet and look big."

Certainly in comparison with Goebbels's bombastic and spectacular production, the NFB's voice of calm reason appealed to the mind rather than to the emotions, although it is now difficult to accept the omniscient, stentorian voice of Lorne Greene, who narrated all the films in the major series and who was the embodiment of the Platonic discourse that was Grierson's ideal. The films were unabashedly didactic; they probed global strategies with the aid of animated maps (with creative, innovative contributions by Norman McLaren and Evelyn Lambert) and graphics that fused the "documentary," as Grierson had originally styled the form, with the educational.

Evans is very thorough in reviewing the key films in both *Canada Carries On*, the more event-oriented series, and *World in Action*, the more reflective and futuristic series. He has apparently viewed them, a prerequisite which is not so apparent in the work in recent years of several commentators on the Board's wartime productions; and his copious quotations from the narration, always the heart of the Grierson-Legg filmic discourse, are very helpful in conveying the structure and political orientation of the films.

The circumstances surrounding Grierson's departure from the Board in 1945 are not so clear. He had always maintained that his stay in Canada would only be temporary, a tour that was prolonged by the extraordinary opportunity to test his documentary theories in practice. Nevertheless, Grierson developed an elaborate plan for a peacetime Board, attached to the Department of External Affairs, which would promote peaceful coexistence in a cooperative world; and there is reason to believe he would have stayed in Canada if the government had been receptive to his ideas.

Evans interviewed Grierson on his options at the time. Although it is true that Grierson announced his plan to establish a documentary unit in New York and consulted officials at the United Nations before September 1945, the King government had already indicated that Grierson should consider moving on. There had been specific accusations that the Board was meddling in foreign policy. As a result, *Balkan Powderkeg*, which was released in January 1945 and was critical of British policy in the area, was withdrawn and re-edited twice before its final release as the much shorter and innocuous *Spotlight on the Balkans*. Grierson and Legg's avowed internationalism and support for peaceful coexistence worried the prime minister and provided opposition members with the ammunition to attack the Board and the government. By 1945, the government "was ready to heed Lester Pearson's earlier admonition, 'Watch out for St. John and his disciples.'"

The Gouzenko Affair and the impact of the Communist "conspiracy" investigations that followed effectively terminated the Canadian government's experiment with political propaganda in pursuit of "progressive democracy." The Board's achievements of the war years were inextricably bound up with Grierson's character and personality. And with his departure the "hot war against fascist aggression" rapidly became a cold war against Communist ideology. The "one world of peace and plenty" that Grierson and Legg had postulated became divided into two armed camps.

The participants in the Grierson Project Seminar, colleagues from the Board, and students from the 1970s at McGill, where Grierson tried to transmit the spirit of the film documentary "movement" to a generation raised on television, are unanimous in their appraisal of the force of his personality, the passion of his convictions, and the value of his legacy. They must also chronicle the frustrations and failures of the 1950s, the emasculation of the production programmes in Canada and Britain, and the wasted opportunities in a world in which "progressive democracy" and many of the catchwords of Grierson's rhetoric became synonymous with Communist propaganda. The "outbreak of peace" ended the marriage of convenience between Grierson's vision of an enlightened and truly educational film production unit and the Canadian government's need for an efficient mechanism to promote national unity and to mobilize public opinion in support of the war effort.

As a student of government propaganda and one of its most renown practitioners (national film boards in Australia, New Zealand, and India are also part of his legacy), Grierson was well aware that any documentarian in the service of a government could never be a completely free agent, but he was also aware that the pressures in the market place could be just as restrictive. He discovered that to his own cost in the 1950s. The National Film Board that survived was not the organization he had envisaged it would become in peacetime, and he was harshly critical of the "artsy" and "indulgent" productions he reviewed from time to time, but if he were alive today he would probably be on the ramparts defending the Board against the charges that it has outlived its usefulness.