This article discusses how British propaganda influenced American journalism during the First World War. The British government, intent on drawing the United States into the European war, used media coverage of key events to portray the Central Powers as inhumane barbarians. As a result, the American press corps increasingly disregarded calls for unbiased reporting and helped propel the American public into war mode. Upon entering the war, American government officials and their allied partners pressured U.S. newspapers to whip up hatred for the Central Powers at any cost. The result was a manipulation of the truth and the suspension of certain civil liberties.

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Introduction

Historians often overlook the British cutting of the German transatlantic cable to the United States in favor of focusing on the diplomatic events that dominated newspapers in late July and early August.
1914. One of Great Britain’s first moves upon entering the war – a move that would prove instrumental in determining the war’s outcome – was to cut Germany’s transatlantic cable connection with the United States. In doing so, Britain effectively blocked the rapid transmission of news between Germany and the United States, except for the occasional transmission of fragmentary war accounts via the civilian wireless station in Sayville, New York. The Allies profited immensely from this action; one could argue that the Central Powers never recovered from this setback, as nearly all war news out of Europe had to pass through British censorship. Indeed, the majority of the war updates were written explicitly to manipulate the United States into entering the war to fight for the Allies. It would be largely up to the East Coast newspapers, politicians and novelists to whip up enthusiasm for entry into the European conflict. Once the United States began fighting, a federally managed propaganda effort propagated a “Hate Germany” message through newspapers, literature, posters, and films.

Initial Phase: Rape of Belgium

In the early months of the war, American journalists were not allowed on the battlefields. The British censored nearly all the information they made available to the U.S. press, particularly regarding the German invasion of Belgium. The reports painted a gruesome picture of German troops marching through an unprepared Belgium, carrying out atrocities that shocked the American public. These accounts ended up on the desks of the large New York newspapers’ editors, many of whom were sympathetic to the Allied cause. A number of freelance reporters in Europe further inflamed the situation by focusing on the high-paying, sensational stories of war atrocities. As Emmet Crozier (1893-1982) wrote in American Reporters on the Western Front 1914-1918: “In the mass of war news, no small amount of fakery and lies were fed to it [the American public] by unscrupulous adventurers who were not trained correspondents and had no reputation for veracity to sustain... . News, lies, local color, human interest, fakes: all went down the great public gullet in gargantuan gulps.”[1]

Fed by these often fanciful charges of German atrocities in Belgium, the American public increasingly craved stories about poor Belgium and the horrors of the German march through the countryside. New York Tribune war correspondent Richard Harding Davis (1864-1916) was one of the many reporters who stirred up this hunger. Although Davis observed the invasion from behind German lines, his description of the German army marching unchallenged into Belgium was far from objective. In his With the Allies (1914), he concluded that the German militaristic mind was largely responsible for the war and that their political aims were in conflict with American ideals.

No longer was it regiments of men marching, but something uncanny, inhuman, a force of nature like a landslide, a tidal wave, or lava sweeping down a mountain. It was not of this earth, but mysterious, ghostlike. It carried all the mystery and menace of a fog rolling toward you across the sea.[2]

This ghostly menace of a mechanized, zombie-like force sweeping across Belgium was a
masterstroke in propaganda writing and helped generate anti-German sentiment in the supposedly neutral United States. E. Alexander Powell's (1879-1957) *Fighting in Flanders* provided another example of the perceived menace posed by the Germans, offering a firsthand account of the siege of Aarschot in 1914. Powell's book was published just as Allied troops were engaging the Germans in Flanders and claimed to be an objective reportage of events. Instead, the book luxuriated in graphic descriptions of German bloodlust, the rape of countless innocent Belgian maidens, and the wanton destruction of property. In the frenzy over the atrocities, Americans ignored most of the German counter allegations in the early months of the war.

The imbalanced weight given to the British perspective could be seen in headlines all over the United States. For example, on 13 September 1914, the *Chicago Tribune*'s headlines read: ROUT WHOLE GERMAN ARMY; GREAT LOSS, AUSTRIA NEAR FINAL DEFEAT; ARMY CUT OFF, AND KAISER LOSES IN BELGIUM AND FRANCE. The bias drifted at times into complete falsehood, as in the above-mentioned article, which described the death of Adalbert, Prince of Prussia (1884-1948), Wilhelm II, German Emperor's (1859-1941) third son, who actually lived until 1948.

The biased portrayal of events is also clear in an article by Powell, entitled “GREATEST STORY SINCE THE WAR BEGAN.” Although the article focused on an interview with the German General Max von Boehn (1850-1918), in which the General was given the opportunity to explain the atrocities supposedly perpetrated during the German invasion of Belgium, the supplementary descriptions show that Powell was not primarily concerned with giving the Germans a chance to explain. In the interview, Powell questioned von Boehn about the atrocities. In perfect English, the General responded that he leveled one town because the mayor’s son walked into his headquarters and assassinated his chief of staff. The general initially denied Powell’s allegations that he oversaw the murder of women and children, until Powell revealed that he himself had helped bury the innocent victims of the retaliation. In response, von Boehn voiced his regret that the innocent were often unavoidably killed or wounded in street fighting and continued with a cliché about soldiers committing terrible deeds in the heat of battle. Powell countered by asking about the wanton German destruction of Louvain and the zeppelins’ dropping of bombs on civilians. The General’s answers lacked conviction, but he requested that Powell explain to his American readers that the atrocity stories were false and that the Allies were using them to gain American support against the Central Powers. Concluding his biased argument, Powell rhetorically asked his readers to decide how convincing the German general’s justification appeared.

This is the type of journalism that was fed to the American people during the first nine months of the war. This partiality in reporting can be seen in the results of the *Literary Digest*'s November 1914 survey. Although nearly two-thirds of the 367 English-speaking newspaper editors claimed to be neutral, five times as many of the 125 who admitted bias were pro-Allied; these tended to be concentrated in the large urban centers along the East Coast.

**Naval Blockade and Submarine Warfare**
Britain’s illegal naval blockade of Germany and subsequent German retaliation via submarine warfare became another cause célèbre for the American press. As the war progressed, many opportunistic American businessmen capitalized on American neutrality, recognizing that there was a fortune to be made in selling munitions, foodstuffs, machinery, and supplies to both sides fighting the war, despite the threat that their exports could be sunk.

This risk became a reality when the English passenger ship *Falaba*, illegally carrying thirteen tons of munitions, along with American cargo for sale in England was sunk by a German U-boat on 28 March 1915. When the submarine initially surfaced, the *Falaba* fired a shot and sailed away, alerting Allied military vessels that a U-boat was in the area. She was caught again and given twenty minutes to lower lifeboats; however, an Allied vessel soon appeared, and the U-boat shot a torpedo that detonated and killed more than 100 people. The munitions’ explosion was largely responsible for the carnage. The Germans justified sinking the *Falaba* because the supplies on board were going to Allied countries to aid their war efforts. As early as 30 March 1915, the *Los Angeles Times* published an eyewitness account entitled “Horrible Scene on the Falaba.”[3] The story highlighted that although the passengers were given ten minutes to take to the lifeboats, panic ensued and many lifeboats sunk. Rumors of the German submarine circling the survivors and laughing at their plight also surfaced. However, no mention was made of the chase and the powerful explosion. The Germans countered by simply stating that American citizens had been warned of entering the warzone. The incident was used to substantiate claims of German barbarism in a book entitled *The German Pirate* (1918), written under the pseudonym Ajax and published after the United States’ entry into the war.

Despite the uproar over the *Falaba*, the incident proved to be just a practice round for the real propaganda opportunity, which presented itself in May 1915 when the British Cunard liner *Lusitania*, carrying more than 1,900 passengers from New York to England, was torpedoed by a U-boat within sight of the Irish coast. The death of more than 100 American passengers transformed it into an incident with the power to potentially propel the United States into the war. Under the headline SAILS, UNDISTURBED BY GERMAN WARNING: NO BOOKING CANCELLED on 2 May 1915, *The New York Times* discussed a warning advertisement that had appeared the day before, “warning Americans not to travel on British steamships across the Atlantic because they ran the risk of being torpedoed.”[4] According to the article, no one took the warning seriously; Captain William Turner (1856-1933) was quoted as laughing off the warning’s seriousness. The article also denied the rumor that nearly fifty prominent passengers had received telegrams before they sailed warning them of German plans to destroy the ship. Security was high for boarding, but quotes from eminent American passengers such as Alfred Vanderbilt (1877-1915), Elbert Hubbard (1856-1915), Charles Klein (1867-1915), and David A. Thomas (1856-1918) all made light of the threat.

As news about the *Lusitania’s* sinking surfaced, outrage over the death of innocent Americans grew. The first news from England appeared in the 8 May 1915 edition of *The New York Times* and called for an all-out declaration of war with Germany. The story did not mention the warnings published by the German Embassy or the cautionary advertisement published a week earlier in the newspaper.
itself. With the Lusitania’s sinking, most American newspaper editors abandoned their façades of impartiality and began to openly attack perceived German barbarism. All sorts of exaggerations and downright fabrications appeared in American newspapers in May and June 1915. Many American news stories intimated that the Lusitania was an American ship and failed to discuss the German navy’s denial that a rumored second torpedo was fired. The Germans insisted that the explosion was caused by the illegal contents of the Lusitania’s hold. The testimony of Dudley Field Malone (1882-1950), Collector of the Port of New York, that the ship was indeed carrying munitions, only made the back pages of American newspapers, if at all. The British even circulated the story to the American press that the German government had awarded the U-20 crew a medal commemorating the sinking of the Lusitania, which was untrue, but kept the issue alive.

The Sacrifice of Edith Cavell

The Lusitania Affair set the stage for further biased reporting against Germany. The drift toward American engagement in the war was ratcheted up another notch during the Edith Cavell (1865-1915) saga. Nurse Cavell was an English middle-class woman who acted as a conduit for nearly 300 Allied soldiers trying to return to England or France. Cavell was caught, pleaded guilty to the crime and was sentenced to death. The American minister to Belgium, Brand Whitlock (1869-1934), appealed for clemency on Cavell’s behalf, but the Germans denied his request. The British took advantage of Whitlock’s efforts, realizing that they had a potential martyr to hand to the American press. Edith Cavell became a Joan of Arc (1412-1431) figure in the popular press - an “innocent” victim of the German war machine.

Within a day of her execution, the American press was fed details of the story from the American Ambassador to England, Walter Page (1855-1918), who had been informed by Whitlock of his failed intervention. The British papers had already run the outline of the story, and the following day in Trafalgar Square all heads were bared in honor of the brave nurse who, wearing a small Union Jack pin, had faced the German firing squad without an eye covering. So stirring was her behavior that her executioners wept while placing her body in the makeshift grave. The supposedly neutral American newspapers immediately embellished the sensational story and portrayed Cavell as a patriot who had sacrificed her life for England’s just cause. The Chicago Daily Tribune discovered that Cavell came to Chicago when she was nineteen and ran a front-page story on her. Even German-Americans were appalled by the manner in which the Germans handled her case. The Tribune reported that Herman Ridder (1851-1915), editor of the Staats-Zeitung, was saddened to learn of the German military’s decision to execute a woman.[5] Newspapers failed to discuss the validity of the charges against Cavell or the fact that German authorities had warned her several times to cease aiding Allied soldiers. The fact that her innocence was taken for granted, and that she became a romantic figure who had been victimized by the German war machine made for sensational news, and the British were delighted to use this piece of propaganda for their own cause.

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Politically Motivated American Press Coverage

As 1916 progressed toward Woodrow Wilson’s (1856-1924) reelection, with his pledge to keep America out of the European war, Allied supporting newspapers and magazines began to look for new tactics to stir up animosity among neutral Americans. Staunchly anti-interventionist news agencies such as William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951) newspapers, were trying their best to neutralize the bad press given to the Germans. They were somewhat successful by concentrating on the Irish question, shedding a negative light on England.

Pro-Allied publications employed the strategy of creating the “enemy within.” This effort required newspapers to publish stories convincing the American people that German spies, with their malicious sabotage, were threatening Americans’ democratic way of life. These allegations were not entirely lacking in substance, since Germans correctly realized that the United States was an Allied supply base and did indeed send agents to damage American shipping docks and munitions plants. Among other acts of sabotage, they blew up a cargo of explosives in Seattle, crippled key loading docks in the New York Harbor, and even exploded a bomb outside the Capitol. These clandestine acts served to confirm suspicions that all Germans, whether German-Americans or foreign-born, were enemies of the United States.

The British Admiralty’s Secret Service Agents were responsible for uncovering many of the supposed German plots in America. Captain Guy Gaunt (1870-1953) made a deal with John Rathom (1868-1923) of the Providence Journal in order to achieve the most publicity for his discoveries, and The New York Times was delighted to substantiate his stories. The revelations were highly unlikely; for example, one front-page news story claimed that an immigrant Dutchman had offered to sell Gaunt secret notes with Johann Heinrich Graf von Bernstorff’s (1862-1939) seal from the German Embassy.[6] The British Naval Attaché feared that the offer was a trap, so he turned his information over to American authorities, and the secret letters were confiscated.

Historians disagree about why German responses to Allied atrocity charges were not better organized or more effective. One explanation was that the German high command was so sure of victory that the idea of explaining their military actions detracted from the war effort. Other historians felt that the German concept of total war did not require explanations, just results. Atrocities and civilian deaths, if they did unfortunately occur, were the price of warfare. If, as in the invasion of Belgium, civilian snipers impeded the troops from arriving at a particular position, then they had to be taught severe lessons. Lastly, the German government realized that the Allies already had the emotional sympathy of the newspapers and journals covering the war, and it did not seem worthwhile to spend time and effort convincing the American public otherwise.

**America’s Entry into the War**

It would take the Zimmerman Telegram and commentary by prominent government officials, such as that by the retired U.S. Minister to Holland, Henry Van Dyke (1852-1933), whose unashamedly
biased articles appeared in *Scribner’s Magazine* and described Kaiser Wilhelm II. as the “chief werewolf in a dreadful morality play,”[7] to finally propel the country into war, a mere five months after Wilson was elected on a platform founded on keeping America out of it.

Outside the East Coast, very little jubilation was displayed at the thought of entering the war. Despite extensive biased media coverage in the preceding years, a survey of editorial comment from newspapers outside the major eastern cities suggested an attitude of resignation rather than excitement about defeating the Central Powers. Aware of the divided state of American opinion in the months leading up to the declaration of war, the government established the Committee on Public Information, headed by George Creel (1876-1953), to organize an official propaganda effort.

Once mobilized, the American press corps, using modern advertising techniques, began to propagandize the American public with great sophistication. The monographs *The Red, White, and Blue* and the *War Information Series* began appearing throughout the United States, arguing in favor of the government’s position and highlighting the need for physical and moral support for the troops. As the war progressed, censorship became a major issue in the United States, and draconian methods were adapted to ensure that printed magazines and newspapers abided by the tight guidelines set up by the Committee of Public Information, and reinforced by the Espionage Act of 1917.

American newspaper editors were forced to accept a voluntary censorship code and to promise not to publish articles that could negatively affect the war effort. Only eighty American war correspondents were allowed access to the front in 1917-1918, and military censors vetted their coverage. Likewise, military censors had to approve all civilian war photographs before they could be published. These censors ensured that any article or photo deemed harmful to American domestic morale, or that demonstrated any disrespect toward the federal government, the American flag, or the American soldier’s uniform would not reach the public.

Almost immediately after the Creel Commission was up and running, articles appeared in various publications regurgitating German war atrocities: recycling stories about Germany’s secret war preparations, the rape of Belgium, the bayoneting of babies, and the sinking of the Lusitania. The Austrian-born newspaper editor of the socialist-leaning *Milwaukee Leader* and House of Representatives member, Victor Berger (1860-1929), was sentenced to twenty years in prison for violating the Espionage Act. His paper had suggested that the war was being fought for capitalist bosses at the working man’s expense.

Five Irish-American newspapers faced postal censorship because they supposedly charged Great Britain with certain forms of perfidy in their dealings with the Irish quest for independence. Concerns had surfaced that the Irish were secretly plotting with the Germans against Britain, now officially one of America’s allies. Coverage of suggested disloyalty to Allied war aims gave credence to the censorship of these newspapers. The Hearst newspapers were the only press that supported the Irish cause, and even they came under serious scrutiny by the American government. The Hearst
papers were accused of not fully supporting government policy. Charges were brought against them that they had not sufficiently lamented the Lusitania’s sinking and that they were not enthusiastic enough about Allied victories. Rumors circulated that William Randolph Hearst was being paid to be “a spokesman for the Kaiser.” In truth, Hearst had been outraged at the sinking of the Lusitania, but did not feel it was an adequate cause to go to war. He argued that the American military should be bolstered, and supported conscription, but simply did not feel the United States had any substantial reasons for entering the war.

Conclusion

By the time the war ended, a strong backlash against the censorship of newspapers and magazines had begun. The five-month continuation of censorship after the war in order to protect delicate matters of national security and ensure the completion of treaty negotiations was not popular. However, given the imagined post-war threat of a Bolshevik revolution in the United States, censorship of socialist and pacifist magazines and journals continued.

It took nearly five years before the U.S. government tacitly admitted that the propaganda machine it had instituted during the war had perhaps gone too far. In *The Nation*, Admiral William Sims (1858-1936) admitted that many of the atrocity stories concerning German submarine warfare were untrue. Newspapers had been so hungry for stories to print that the U.S. Navy had simply provided them, true or not. Sims claimed that all combatants used these strategies during the war, arguing that if truth is sacrificed for a good cause (presumably victory), then there is no harm done.[8] His final comment intimated that he believed that at times it was unpatriotic for a newspaper to provide the truth, confirming Aeschylus’s observation nearly twenty-five centuries earlier that “the first casualty of war is truth.”

Patrick Quinn, Chapman University

Section Editor: Edward G. Lengel

Notes

5. ↑ Chicago Tribune: 23 October 1915, p. 1

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Citation


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Journalism in America began as a "humble" affair and became a political force in the campaign for American independence. Following independence, the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution guaranteed freedom of the press and speech and the American press grew rapidly following the American Revolution. The press became a key support element to the country's political parties but also organized religious institutions. The National Press Club is the world's leading professional organization for journalists. It serves its members through activities that bolster their skills, through services, and through social activities. The National Press Club (NPC) will host a virtual event on May 3 - World Press Freedom Day - highlig Learn More. June 3, 2021. Top 29 educational institutions USA with journalism, programs for international students. Reviews are available. Free application and admission support. No extra charges. Discounts are available, please check discounts section. Study journalism in USA. List of 29 best institutions, prices and rankings. Popular destinations Questions and answers about studying abroad. Education information. Faculties of Journalism at Best U.S. Universities for International Undergraduate Students.