

*The Good German: Consensus and Dissent in the Development of British Wartime
Subversive Propaganda*

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Abstract

With particular attention to the Political Warfare Executive (PWE), this paper discusses a cultural-historical perspective on the conception of German mentality in British foreign propaganda during the Second World War. While British subversive propaganda was largely the work of journalists and civil servants, a small but valued contribution was made by social scientists. Archival documents pertaining to British foreign propaganda are frequently expressed in scientific rhetoric, particularly the tropes and terminology of psychology and psychoanalysis; further to this, PWE's Brondesbury propaganda school, which was staffed by social psychologists, economists, and political scientists as well as seasoned propagandists, strived to articulate a scientific view of German mentality. In the context of a teleological understanding of German history and mythology, PWE was able to develop through the social sciences a psychological subject that they believed was particularly susceptible to morale subversion. After historicizing the PWE conception of German mentality, this paper will argue that, owing to a combination of factors, the social sciences functioned to justify convenient perspectives on German mentality rather than to problematize long-held prejudices.

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In March 1944 a group of British and American officers attended a lecture by a Lieutenant Colonel R.L. Sedgwick entitled "Note on a Method of Attacking German Morale." According to Sedgwick, the secret to undermining the German will to fight was "to be found in the psychological theory that the fundamental attitude to life of all Germans is really Defeatist" (TNA: FO 898/99). He turned to "the mythology of the German race" for proof: "Study [a nation's] mythology and in this will be found its way of living and thinking, its beliefs, and in a very real degree, its destiny... German mythology is exceptional because its tales end throughout in defeat and decay" (TNA: FO 898/99). This was the German "Achilles Heel" to be exploited by Allied subversive propaganda.

This lecture was arranged by the Political Warfare Executive (PWE) as part of the Brondesbury Training School, a three week course on propaganda intended to instruct occupation forces ahead of D-Day. Other lectures in the series covered such diverse topics as German soldiers' opinions based on prisoner interrogations, or the propaganda value of psychological conditions peculiar to Germans such as Anticipation-Neurosis. One lecture pathologised German national character via the perceived "[c]lumsiness, violence and power of [the German language]" (TNA: FO 898/99). The Brondesbury lectures articulated what was dogma within PWE in 1944, but as late as 1941 many British propagandists saw Germany along different lines and for very different reasons.

PWE oversaw all propaganda from Britain to enemy and occupied Europe, including open, or "white," propaganda such as the BBC European Service, and clandestine, or "black" propaganda, which disguised its British origins and was disavowed by the Government. PWE was a powerful medium of cultural influence in both Germany and Britain but the PWE perception of Germany, a historically contingent and dynamic topic, has not yet been the subject of significant research. Without a consideration of the intellectual heritage of PWE's Germany, the story of British wartime propaganda, and of German wartime experience, is necessarily incomplete.

In defining a German subject, PWE engaged in a creative act. This isn't to say that the Germany PWE addressed was fantastical. Rather, it was derived from extensive research and experience. However, the imaginative construction of Germany correlates with more than simply developments on the continent. The volatility and systemic weakness of the organisation allowed for strong personalities to steer the direction of foreign propaganda. PWE's changing perception of Germany demonstrates the fickleness and ease with which tropes of Germanism could be deployed to further personal interests. Departmental politics, characterised by the influence of popular discourse, of strong personalities, and even the influence of an oblique kind of patronage, were brought to bear on the inconstant conceptualization of the Germany to which Britain spoke. The careers of propagandists Richard Crossman and Sefton Delmer speak to this point.

Previous research into British foreign propaganda does not adequately account for PWE's mutable construction of Germany. As such, the aim of this paper is to address a lacuna in our understanding of wartime Britain and make a small contribution to the discourse on twentieth-century Anglo-German relations. This paper draws on a contextualised close reading of extant archival material. The PWE files are problematic, a significant volume having been deliberately destroyed after the war, which accounts for some of the gaps in the literature. The surviving documents amount to tens of thousands of pages. Contextualising and interpreting this archive is an ongoing project.

PWE's files were declassified in the mid-70s, which led to a handful of authoritative narrative histories. These accounts focus on the broader strategy of political warfare, and the tactics with which the strategy was implemented. Philip M. Taylor summarises the conclusion made by these texts: "[t]he main reason why PWE failed to emulate the experience of 1918 was the policy of Unconditional Surrender announced at the Casablanca conference of January 1943" (Taylor, "Introduction" to *Allied Propaganda in World War II*, 11). Whatever the merits of this thesis, it forgoes any serious interrogation of PWE mentality and methodology. Michael Stenton's 2000 monograph on PWE's involvement in European resistance amends this to some degree; however, he largely ignores PWE's German section, which is the focus of my own research.

Established under the Chamberlain government, Britain's first foreign propaganda service was the imaginatively named Department for Enemy Propaganda. Churchill's election saw this department replaced in July 1940 by SO1, the propaganda arm of the Special Operations Executive under the Ministry of Economic Warfare. The Foreign Office and the Ministry of Information were not happy with this arrangement. After a year of Ministerial disputes, SO1 was separated from SOE to become PWE on 11 September 1941 under a tri-ministerial committee comprised of Foreign Office, MOI and MEW. In 1942, however, the Minister for Economic Warfare was promoted out of office. His replacement had no interest in propaganda, which left PWE to MOI and Foreign Office. This arrangement held until VE day when PWE was shut down. Throughout the war there was some continuity of staff across these organisations, but each change at the top came with its share of hiring and firing.

Good Germans and Naughty Nazis

For British propagandists, the Germany of the Phoney War was a land of good Germans and naughty Nazis. At this early stage, there was a hope that the German people might find an alternative to Nazi rule and so propagandists were tasked with persuading "the non-Nazi nation to yearn for a possible peace" (Stenton, *Radio London*, 7). The advent of Churchill's National Government in May 1940 meant significant changes in propaganda policy, leading to organisational instability, which persisted until early 1942. This dynamic period correlates with a number of shifts in the departmental picture of Germany.

In July 1940 the old Department of Enemy Propaganda was replaced by SO1, under the Special Operations Executive. Vocal opponents of Appeasement replaced the senior staff. New blood included Rex Leeper and Robert Bruce Lockhart of Foreign Office and

Robert Vansittart, advisor to the socialist Hugh Dalton, the Minister for Economic Warfare. These men were old friends with Germanophobic pedigrees who provide a tidy example of partiality within the new organisation (Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 32). Michael Stenton's research reveals that Leeper had in fact recommended Vansittart to his position at MEW; returning the favour, Vansittart then recommended Leeper to the Executive of SO1 (Stenton, 17). Dalton had intended to reinstall the old director before Churchill himself intervened (Stenton, 16). Associations with appeasement carried an undesirable taint.

An appreciation for the Germany that the anti-Appeasers brought to subversion is illuminating. For example, Rex Leeper defended the use of pornography in propaganda, arguing that "[t]here is a sadism in the German nature quite alien to the British nature... and German listeners are very far from being revolted by the sadistic content of some of these broadcasts" (TNA, FO 898/60). Hugh Dalton's advisor Vansittart published in 1941 a polemic entitled *Black Record: Germans Past and Present* in which he argued that Nazi aggression and criminality represented the will of every German and that "Hitler is no accident. He is the natural and continuous product of a breed which from the dawn of history has been predatory and bellicose" (Vansittart, *Black Record*, 16). And in 1941 Dalton pre-empted the mythohistorical stereotypes that were later de rigeur within the department, arguing that in subversive propaganda "[we] should... appeal to [Germans'] instinctive feelings of 'doom' or ineluctable fate, culminating in a 'Gotterdammerung'" (TNA, FO 898/13). This anti-appeasement set identified something in the German people that was previously indiscernible.

"Vansittartism," incidentally, became shorthand for a broad anti-German sentiment in Britain. Despite a stark difference in ideology, conservative Vansittartism was not anathema to Dalton's ardent democratic socialism; Dalton wore two hats comfortably. He owed his portfolio under Churchill to his anti-Appeasement stance and, as historian Isabelle Tombs demonstrates, he was one of three highly placed Labour Socialists with persistently strong ties to Vansittartist groups throughout the war.

The increasing hostility towards Germans, rather than the Nazis, was felt most strongly by idealistic propagandists such as Socialist Oxford Don Richard Crossman. In a 1941 paper Crossman wrote: "[i]t has been suggested that we have insufficiently exploited the motif of Fear in our propaganda to Germany: in particular that the distinction frequently drawn between the Regime and the German people removes from the German people a sense of their responsibility and guilt" (TNA, FO 898/178). According to Stenton, it was Crossman's avowed opinion "that there was nothing much wrong with Germany that a free election and a natural socialist majority could not put right" (Stenton, 72). This echoes the Phoney War sentiment and later places him in a minority. Crossman's paper was one of the last attempts to rescue the good German from obscurity within PWE.

Although Crossman was hired prior to Dalton's tenure, his rise to prominence in the early history of the department - he became Director of PWE's German Section in very short time - can be understood only through Dalton's socialism. From October 1940 Richard Crossman was running Radio of the European Revolution, a black agitprop broadcast

operation staffed by former members of *Neu Beginnen*, a revolutionary arm of the German Social Democrats (Garnett, *The Secret History of the PWE*, 42). Crossman's revolutionary radio boasted no great successes, but continued broadcasting up until June 1942. In February 1942 it happened that Dalton was promoted out of MEW to the Board of Trade. Ellic Howe, a PWE contemporary, suggests that the station owed its longevity to Dalton because, in Dalton, Crossman had the support of a politically likeminded patron (Howe, *The Black Game*, 76). Whatever the case, Dalton's departure left PWE in the hands of Tories Anthony Eden and Brendan Bracken. Shortly thereafter Crossman's agitprop station was shut down. In early 1943 Crossman himself was promoted out of PWE to work on propaganda with the Americans in North Africa. Without the Socialist Dalton, Leftist propaganda withered.

According to Ellic Howe, Rex Leeper's executive became convinced that "what was required for the Germans was a more robust dose of subversion than the political idealism of Crossman's 'revolutionary socialists', who addressed their remarks to a vague audience of 'good Germans'" (Howe, 102). Contemporary to the termination of Crossman's revolutionary radio, a document appeared restating the "general objective of black propaganda to Germany." It claimed that "[w]e do not appeal exclusively to their higher instincts or their idealistic opposition to the regime. We try to exploit against the German war effort the ordinary German's 'Schweinehund', his desire for self-preservation, personal profit and pleasure, his herd instinct to do as others do and his ordinary human passions of fear, lust and jealousy" (TNA, FO 898/67). The document was left unsigned but it echoed the argot of another prominent propagandist who came to dominate the organisation.

Military historian Charles Cruickshank argues that "experience" steered the propagandists away from resistance or opposition radio programmes toward "a more subtle approach," namely the style of propaganda developed by Sefton Delmer in a subversive broadcast operation called Gustav Siegfried Eins (Cruickshank, *The Fourth Arm*, 104-105). Gustav Siegfried professed patriotic support for Hitler and the Wehrmacht, while decrying the corruption and criminality of the SS; it was dependent on, and tailored for, a coarsened, bellicose German mentality. To quote one of his contemporaries, Delmer had a "phenomenal capacity for 'tuning in' to, or penetrating the German mind and its mental processes, almost as if he himself resembled an ultra-sophisticated radio receiving set" (Howe, 19). Vansittartism sat comfortably with the cynical spirit behind Delmer's new style of black propaganda. Delmer's conception of Germany – fine-tuned while working as Berlin correspondent for Lord Beaverbrook's tabloid, *The Daily Express* – was integral to the admiration felt by those around him. Drawing on the concept of the *innere Schweinehund*, the inner pigdog, he articulated a capricious, low view of the average German (Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 41). Angela Schwarz argues that, for British travellers in the Reich before the war, there was "a constant temptation" to engage in "commonly accepted images and stereotypes in confronting the German dictatorship" (Schwarz, *Image and Reality*, 400). Delmer, the tabloid veteran, bowed to this temptation like it was a voaction.

Delmer quickly won the favour of his employers. He had early support from both Leeper and Vansittart who found his work highly amusing (Delmer 63). According to Muriel Spark, employed as duty secretary for Delmer's unit, "His brilliance and ingenuity stimulated admiration" (Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 148). Crossman's biographer goes so far as to field a rumour that Delmer had "royal protection" owing to a visit by George VI, during which the King "had apparently been very impressed by what he saw of the 'black' propaganda side of the business" (Howard, *Crossman*, 99). As it happens, the Queen's brother, David Bowes-Lyon, also worked for PWE and held similar views to Delmer, particularly with regards to the ungratefulness and senseless idealism of socialist German exiles in British employ (TNA, FO 898/60).

Even without royal patronage, Delmer's work drew admiration from all the right places. This admiration was not based on evidence of successful morale subversion. Delmer's cynical essentialized conception of Germany was Right Thought, which anticipated and articulated the developing PWE dogma. As this perspective moved into the ascendant, expressly ideological operations such as Crossman's revolutionary station became unfashionable. Germany was no longer something to reason with, but rather something to seduce and manipulate. After Crossman's departure for North Africa, Delmer became Director of PWE's German Section and ultimately Director of Black Propaganda to Europe (Pronay and Taylor, *An Improper Use of Broadcasting*, 8). His promotion meant a damnable Germany and a consistent Germany.

Behind the Beastliness

PWE's own research suggests that while black productions were the subject of much German barrack room gossip, the BBC German Service enjoyed a far greater audience (TNA, FO 898/65). Despite a paucity of evidence speaking to its efficacy, black propaganda was expanded from 1940, with the largest growth experienced after Delmer joined the Department in mid-1941. Delmer's line prevailed but it wasn't for a weight of evidence.

PWE faith in black propaganda was affirmed by "evidence of reception" reports, which routinely demonstrated that they had an audience, but gave little consideration as to how the audience interpreted their propaganda. PWE faith in the power of subversion was terrific; a proposal put to Eden for a new subversive station hosted by captured German General Thoma, for example, argued that PWE radio was "so demonstrably popular with the rank and file that there are grounds for hope that the virus they contain will work to the advantage of the United Nations on and after D-day of OVERLORD" (TNA, FO 898/51). PWE imagined a passive audience who would listen to black broadcasts uncritically. Intention and effect were frequently confused. A similar issue with regard to propagandist intention and audience interpretation, incidentally, plagued the Ministry of Information's domestic propaganda (Fox, *Careless Talk*).

Cruickshank's argument stresses the effects of experience and increasing professionalism in improving the quality of British subversive propaganda as the war progressed (Cruickshank, 74-75). While holding true, this argument glosses over the underlying

ideas - often taken as axiomatic - that were at play in British propagandists' perception of Germany. Writing about Britain's tacit pre-war acceptance of Nazism, diplomat and author Harold Nicolson stated that

[the] average Englishman can endure almost anything except cerebral discomfort; when faced with conditions involving tremendous and most unpleasant mental effort, he escapes from that effort by pretending that these conditions are easily remediable, or much exaggerated, or actually non-existent (Nicolson, "*Is War Inevitable?*" 2).

All irony aside, this statement could be taken as a fair assessment of PWE's ongoing problem of understanding and speaking to Nazi Germany. The inconstant but frequently essentialised conceptualisation of German identity effectively provided PWE with a means of circumventing so much unpleasant mental effort. Sincere PWE engagements with racial science, for example, or empathetic considerations of the effect of a police state on individual behaviour are quite rare. The *innere Schweinehund*, meanwhile, went unquestioned when it entered the PWE discourse as a trait of the working classes generally and the German working classes in particular. Delmer's Germany was an easy sell.

Conclusion

Experience may have been a driving factor in the development of new modes of propaganda as Cruickshank argues, but the Germany addressed in subversive propaganda was an imaginative construction, the product of a creative act that was preceded by an environment in which influence, patronage and a congenial attitude could determine a career just as easily as talent. Vansittartism and the inner pig-dog conception of Germany, once established within PWE, preceded, or at the very least polluted, intelligence on their German audience so that by 1944 Delmer's Germany meant a stable audience first and a subject for study and consideration only second. The essentialised but mercurial nature of PWE's Germany betrays the political expedience with which it was deployed. Delmer's cynical approach to propaganda was ingenious and much praised, but it can no more claim to have undermined German morale than a straight news bulletin on the BBC. Despite this, Delmer found growing support from the conservative elite surrounding PWE, to the point where his Germany came to dominate the outlook of the organisation.

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