

Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain: the National War Aims Committee and Civilian Morale

Review Number:

1383

Publish date:

Wednesday, 20 February, 2013

Author:

David Monger

ISBN:

9781846318306

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£70.00

Pages:

320pp.

Publisher:

Liverpool University Press

Publisher url:

Place of Publication:

Liverpool

Reviewer:

William Butler

In this fine monograph, based almost entirely on his PhD thesis, David Monger assesses the propaganda activities of the National War Aims Committee (NWAC) during the First World War, a focus which has already been supplemented by a number of journal articles in the last few years, relating to propaganda, and civilian and servicemen's morale during this period. Though much consideration has been given to the domestic efforts to produce 'general' propaganda during the initial stages of the war by the likes of Sanders, Taylor, and Haste, as well as the efforts of Wellington House to influence public opinion abroad, little academic attention has been paid to the work of the NWAC during the course of its existence. This is despite it being an organisation that, in the last 15 months of the war, held thousands of meetings across Britain, on top of distributing over 100 million publications.

In the first instance, Monger states that, at the basic level, the NWAC was a cross-party parliamentary organisation, similar to that of the earlier Parliamentary Recruiting Committee (PRC), which was established to conduct propaganda within Britain, aimed at maintaining civilian morale in the last and most draining months of the war (p. 1). In addition to detailing the activities of the NWAC and its impact, Monger seeks to answer two wider questions: namely, what is the significance of the NWAC's evocation of patriotism for general understandings of patriotism and national identity in Britain and what does the NWAC's story suggest about the war's impact on British society and culture? As will be demonstrated throughout the course of this review, he does this rather successfully, as the same time as detailing and scrutinising other key aspects of this topic with confidence. This is done by splitting the book up into three parts. Firstly, the

development and the organisation of the NWAC are discussed within the context of British public opinion after the campaigns on the Somme in July 1916. Secondly, the types of propaganda that were produced are examined, and this includes the different formats in which this propaganda was presented, along with the many, wide-ranging, themes covered by the work of NWAC propagandists. Importantly, the broader context of British national identity is outlined in order to place the work of the organisation into the wider historiographical debates surrounding national identity during the 19th and early 20th century. Finally, the impact of the NWAC both during and after the war is assessed, together with the responses of parliament, pressure groups and at a local level (largely with reference to reactions by local newspapers – 68 local newspapers have been consulted in total). Crucially, although the work itself is set out into these three distinct parts, Monger ably ties them together, giving the thesis a natural flow and a logical direction.

The first task ahead of Monger was to outline the creation and mechanisms in which the NWAC operated from its inception in mid-1917 and, in doing this, he seeks to dispel the view, put forward by Brock Millman (1), that the propaganda of the NWAC had a ‘secret repressive agenda’. Initially privately funded, but later given funding by the Cabinet, the NWAC was able to use a variety of modes to disseminate propaganda, such as hiring local public speakers, holding meetings, setting up mobile cinemas, and producing written material, both as pamphlets and for the press. These activities, particularly the public meetings in whose power and importance there was an ‘almost devotional faith’, were carried out near factories, in rural districts with perceived anti-war feeling, in military camps, and towards women, ultimately covering a large proportion of the population (pp. 42–3). Monger sees it as important that this organisation was closely associated with its predecessor, the PRC (including a close parallel of personnel), and also that it was an all-party organisation, with much of the work being turned over to the local Conservative, Liberal and Labour Party machines, meaning that any question of party politics coming into play was dispelled. To Monger, this combination of central organisation with local knowledge meant that the NWAC could be more flexible and locally responsive in its campaign, and the principle of local involvement meant that propaganda was imparted to, rather than imposed upon, the public (p. 63). This is an important point, particularly in the light of previous failures to adapt propaganda dissemination to local circumstances, most notably in areas such as Ireland (which had a unique position within this context anyway). It also shows a recognition of differing circumstances and motivations within urban and rural areas.

In all, using the NWAC’s card index (from records held at TNA), Monger establishes that a total of 344 War Aims Committees were established, out of a total of 528 constituencies or regional areas (p. 69). With this in mind, he categorises these into a number of ‘types’ (urban, mainly middle-class; urban, mixed class; urban mainly working-class; urban/rural; mining), demonstrating that local mechanisms were present in all of these ‘types’ of areas during the course of the NWAC's existence (pp. 70–3). It is from these classifications, as well as a further regional breakdown of North, Midlands/Wales, and London/South, that the selection of his case studies for further scrutiny and supporting evidence, were chosen. A total of 30 constituencies were selected to provide the basis as case studies, decided upon by the calculation of proportions of those categories mentioned above, meaning that ten case studies were used for each region. It is with these case studies that a minor criticism might be cited, specifically that case studies of 30 constituencies out of a total of 344, a little under 10 per cent, does not quite seem an adequate enough sample to be fully confident that fair coverage has been given across the board. Having said that, the risk that any major conclusions or analysis might have been missed due to this relatively small sample is low. Furthermore, the specific constituencies are listed in an appendix (pp. 275–8), along with their respective party affiliations, and it is clear from this that a fair representation of areas has been considered. In a sense, all of the ‘bases’ have been covered within the sample, especially with regard to the different classifications used, so as to be able to demonstrate responses to this propaganda from a cross-section of British society.

The second part of Monger’s work is perhaps the most important, as it analyses the imagery and oratory used to convince the British public to continue to support the war. Monger seeks to identify the ideological structure of NWAC propaganda, and determines that the core narrative of the NWAC’s message revolved around patriotic duty. This included a ‘three-pronged’ mixture, combining ‘civic patriotism’, suffused with rhetoric of ‘sacrificial patriotism’, with an evocation of what he terms ‘conrescent community’, growing

together through shared sacrifice and acceptance of duty (p. 86). Monger asserts that there was nothing greatly original about the types of patriotic ideas and imagery as used by the NWAC, that the theme of Empire was featured frequently within this propaganda, and that the propagandists working for the NWAC identified several adversaries, both foreign and domestic, rather than 'a single, over-arching 'other' against which to test British identity (pp. 89–91).

Crucially, what Monger affirms is that the NWAC utilised traditional propaganda methods and themes to present their goals, and points to the primacy of religious (i.e. Christian) imagery within their presentation, whilst also linking the continuities of this within representations of propaganda in France, Germany, and Russia during the 19th century (pp. 101–2). This is then taken further with an interesting, and contextual, analysis of the theories of 'communities' and 'identity', put forward by the likes of Peter Mandler and Matthew Vickers in existing historiography on this subject (pp. 103–5), which assist in demonstrating the NWAC's representations of 'Britishness' within their propaganda.

It is then asserted that NWAC propaganda was represented in four crucial forms which sought to articulate the core message of patriotic duty, whilst conjointly conveying the idea of British identity. Firstly, the assessment of the presentation of adversaries at home and abroad is carried out. Importantly, it is established that this 'adversarial patriotism' did not, and was not intended to, define British identity, but rather to highlight possible threats to it (pp. 138–9), including, most obviously, the threat of Germany, and to a much lesser extent Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, but also highlighting the threat of pacifists and strikers within British society. Secondly, the civilizational principles, or (as Monger labels them) 'supranational patriotisms', which celebrated Britain's similarities with, and differences from, its allies are discussed, particularly in relation to the USA, France, and the white Dominions (p. 140). This includes details of the celebration of 'France Day' on 12 July 1918, in which the tricolore was flown and the Marseillaise was played in public places. He determines that ultimately 'in claiming that the war was fought on behalf of civilisation, NWAC propaganda sought to elevate it above matters of national interests and power politics, recognising that ... they were inappropriate for maintaining civilians' emotional investment in a physically and mentally draining total war' (p. 154). Thirdly, what Monger sees as the narrative core of NWAC propaganda is discussed, namely the presentation of 'patriotisms of duty'. This revolved around the message that the British people not only had a particular national identity, but were duty-bound to maintain it (p. 169). It is within this that Monger refers back to his idea of a 'three-pronged mixture' of civic patriotism, sacrificial patriotism, and concrescent community, creating the core message of duty. He believes, as it was a flexible concept, it was capable of use as an instrument of moral and emotional blackmail, by stressing the sacrifices of servicemen, while also creating a communal tie between the civilian and soldier by emphasising a common willing sacrifice (p. 196).

The fourth form of presentation used by NWAC propagandists was that of promises for the future, or 'aspirational patriotism', and this section of Monger's work deserves a more detailed review. It is established that the content of the propaganda 'prophesied a more harmonious and equitable society in post-war Britain, extending rhetoric about the social ameliorations already stimulated by the war'. Furthermore, issues such as reconstruction, social and electoral reform, class and gender harmonisation 'were all presented as rewards for the patient wartime services and sacrifices of servicemen and civilians, with the implicit corollary that any calls for such improvements before peace were selfish and short-sighted' (p. 199). In this assessment Monger is correct, what is perhaps lacking within this section, however, is a contextual analysis of this form of propaganda, as displayed in previous chapters. In particular, it is not discussed whether a similar presentation was used in the propaganda of other countries, especially that of France, the USA, or even within the Empire. This might establish, and further support, the notion that NWAC propaganda was largely unoriginal, following standard patterns of representation. An additional comparison might also have been carried out in relation to visions of the future displayed in the propaganda of agencies during the Second World War. In particular, the activities of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA) might have been discussed, given the widely held view that the many promises of the future (especially the establishment of a welfare state) put forward in its propaganda, contributed, at least in a small part, to the Labour Party election victory in 1945. Perhaps, in this particular section of the book, it was not the place to discuss this kind of

outcome, but certainly would have had some place in the final section of the book, which looks at the impact of the NWAC.

The impact of the NWAC is discussed by Monger in two different strands. The response of Parliament, pressure groups, and the national press is at first outlined. It is summarised that 'notwithstanding the generally agreed importance of maintaining civilian morale, the existence of a publicly funded body intended to persuade civilians to act and think in certain ways offered troubling possibilities of future exploitation', or a premium on corruption (p. 217). Critics of the NWAC maintained that its establishment was a shambolic failure, while the press often portrayed general indifference, with occasional criticism of particularly poor work. As Monger points out, however, these critics, paradoxically, demonstrated concern about its influence, above all during the general election campaign (p. 240). Within this, the Committee was also deemed to be an official organ, supporting the interests of the Coalition Government but (as Monger demonstrates throughout much of his work) it was actually able to keep away from party politics for the majority of its existence. Secondly, the impact of the NWAC at a local and individual level is assessed, and it is here that Monger demonstrates that the Committee had its most important outcome. Primarily, what the NWAC did, according to Monger, was to maintain a presence in small communities, linking them with the nation by reminding them of issues outside of their immediate horizon (p. 267).

Ultimately, it is established that the perception of First World War propaganda is one centred on the cynical manipulation of the public by the state, and that this has encouraged equally cynical interpretations of propaganda (p. 273). What Monger does successfully in his study is to look at the NWAC and its propaganda within the context of the period, whilst also contextualising it into a wider understanding of patriotism and identity within the early 20th century, demonstrating that the sentiments expressed within this propaganda were considered valid and meaningful by large sections of the population at this time (p. 274). Monger has been able to shed important light on a crucial propaganda organisation, existing during the last months of the war when the maintenance of morale had become so important, and successfully presents this in a fashion that would interest anyone concerned with the employment of propaganda in the early part of the 20th century.

Notes

1. Brock Millman, *Managing Domestic Dissent in First World War Britain* (London, 2000). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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