

David Welch. *Germany and Propaganda in World War One: Pacifism, Mobilization and Total War*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014. ISBN: 978-17-80-76827-4. Pp. xii, 384. Paperback. £16.99/ \$28.00.

As the centenary of the First World War is marked around the world, it is as important as ever to challenge dominant narratives of how such events came to pass and bring new interpretations to light. To that end, David Welch's *Germany and Propaganda in World War One* is an important contribution to the historiography of the First World War. Its key contribution is to comprehensively debunk the myth of the post-war German right that imperial Germany was defeated due to its failure to recognise the importance of propaganda in sustaining domestic support for war.

Welch's argument is clear from the outset. Contrary to received wisdom, domestic morale in Germany did not collapse due to a combination of effective allied propaganda and ineffectual German propaganda. Instead, Welch contends that German propaganda was extensive and sophisticated throughout the war, sustaining German morale impressively despite the privations of total war. The collapse of domestic morale was instead due to the failure to reinforce propaganda with social reforms demanded by sections of the German population, who had tolerated a 'political truce' (*Burgfrieden*) during the war only on the assumption of a swift, 'defensive' victory (p. 1).

To reinforce the author's argument, the book examines German wartime politics and propaganda in great depth, even to the point of detailed descriptions of individual posters, slogans and their creators. At times the level of detail of the various aspects of German propaganda is overwhelming, making certain sections harder to digest. Nevertheless, this will be very welcome for researchers looking in depth at German domestic propaganda and the effects of the war on German society. Those looking to put German domestic propaganda in the context of the efforts of its enemies might find that more comparative references would have been helpful.

The brief moments when Welch does compare German efforts with its enemies provide invaluable insights that may surprise many. According to the author, British atrocity propaganda was far more cynical, whereas Germany's was more subtle, reflecting accusations of Teutonic barbarism back onto imperial Britain and the oppression associated with it (p. 50). Readers may be surprised that, contrary to Hitler's criticism of the German propaganda effort, the *Entente* considered German propaganda far more advanced than their own early in the war, particularly in neutral countries. German censorship is considered at least 'as efficient as the French and British' (p. 183). Even later in the war, Welch credits Ludendorff in particular with recognising the value of propaganda during total war, and praises the German administration for sustaining German morale impressively despite the suffering and starvation induced by allied blockade.

While the breadth of scholarship is highly impressive, certain aspects of the thesis are not wholly convincing. Welch steers clear of clearly defining the concepts of propaganda and public opinion, which some readers may see as an omission. Arguably though, this approach is more justifiable in the literature on the First World War, where propaganda and dissemination systems were easier to identify and analyse than today's networked communication environment. Furthermore, the originality of Welch's thesis and the vast detail to support it is arguably of greater value than conceptual debate, which in any case is dealt with comprehensively by the author elsewhere.¹

While the central argument is clear at the outset, it becomes less clear as the book progresses. As mentioned previously, Welch

¹ See for example David Welch, *Propaganda: Power and Persuasion* (London: The British Library Publishing Division, 2013).

initially argues that it was not that Germany failed to disseminate propaganda, but that it failed to respond to public opinion with necessary political reform. In this sense it was not propaganda that failed but German military elites, who failed to pay attention to the needs of the domestic population. However, the subtlety of this argument is sometimes lost as certain contradictions leave the reader unsure whether German propaganda was as effective as Welch originally claims. Having firstly praised German propaganda for sustaining domestic morale surprisingly well, the author later castigates German elites for lacking 'a sophisticated understanding of the psychology of total war' (pp. 211, 265). Having praised Ludendorff for recognising the importance of systematic propaganda, Welch describes his programme of patriotic instruction as 'banal and jingoistic claptrap', being fed to citizens collapsing in factories through starvation (p. 230). These statements make the author's early contention that propaganda 'did not fail' less convincing (p. 7). Indeed the author admits this, pointing out that German propaganda was an 'ultimate failure' since it failed to convince the German public that they could win the war (p. xii).

Another area in which the argument could have been clearer is in explaining the interaction between Germany's military strategy and its propaganda. It is not clear at times whether the author feels that more effective propaganda could have counteracted the effects of German military strategy or not. On the one hand, Welch describes German military strategy as 'a reckless gamble that failed' (p. 263). He identifies sophisticated early German efforts to press their case internationally, but shows how violating Belgian sovereignty placed German propagandists on the back foot from the outset. Welch also notes that strategies such as unrestricted submarine warfare, and the suffering and starvation it exacerbated, meant that by 1918 no amount of propaganda could overturn German war-weariness.

Yet having argued this, Welch later claims that political elites failed to 'prepare the morale of the people for a long war', implying that domestic morale could have been sustained for longer had propaganda been more effective (p.

265). These contradictory statements, and the mixed judgements of how effective German propaganda actually was, leave it unclear how far the author feels better propaganda could have compensated for a flawed military strategy. The author rightly notes that 'there are limits to what propaganda can achieve' (p. 7). Elaborating on what those limits were, given the disastrous effects of Germany's military decisions, could have added greater clarity to the overall argument.

Given the difficulties of proving the actual effects of propaganda, it is all too easy to imbue propaganda with immense power. So it proved after the First World War. The German right wing perpetuated the powerful myth that an undefeated military was 'stabbed in the back' by an administration that failed to use propaganda as effectively as its enemies; isolationist Americans perceived they had been duped by British propaganda into entering a European war. A century on, these interpretations remain and it is vital to challenge these dominant narratives with original, meticulous scholarship.

Despite some areas where the argument could be clearer, Welch successfully challenges dominant assumptions of Germany's domestic propaganda failure with an exceptionally detailed account. It is this thoroughness and originality of scholarship, and in reinvigorating a debate too often side-lined by the mythology of the First World War, that the book makes a valuable contribution.

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