

The Atlantic Monthly

March, 1938

page 874

-the first of four pages-

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PROPAGANDA

BY JEAN PRÉVOST

WHAT is propaganda, as conceived at present by some of the European nations, but the mark of a psychosis, an attempt to compensate for a feeling of inferiority?

Propaganda has been compared with advertising; yet this is an error, for advertising is concerned always with commercial gain. On the other hand, propaganda often makes itself felt in lands far removed — lands which are necessarily neutral in time of conflict and from which nothing is to be gained. Moreover, effective advertising invariably advises you to choose such-and-such a product *for your own good*, because it has certain qualities. In other words, advertising is an exchange of service. But propaganda urges your approval — and promises nothing in return.

Up to the present, advertising has been generally successful. On the contrary, propaganda has been rather a failure. Only within the past twenty years have the nations been keenly concerned with what was thought of them abroad. Before that, the daily press had no particular orientation in that direction. Newspapers which published foreign affairs preserved a solemn, diplomatic mien. In countries like Italy or Germany it was the sovereign, not the people, who was the victim of foreign indignities. A third of a century ago, when the Italians suffered the defeat at Adua which they avenged in 1935, it was not the people who were attacked; it was the king of Italy, in person, whom French caricatures — frightful ones, too — represented as a lookout or scout. When English public opinion, during the Boer War, and later during the World War, was turned against Germany, it was William II who was belittled in *Punch* and in the music halls. Without doubt, a nation may feel put upon because of like attacks upon the person of its king; but such hurts are not deeply personal.

To-day, international matters are so intense, so far-reaching, even to the most inaccessible districts of every nation, that peoples have become overpoweringly self-conscious. This new feeling, even among nations which are not sending forth propaganda, has produced incalculable moral consequences.

Since the war, all countries have labored incessantly to put aside their traditional reputations.

For the most part, man accepts the reputation by which he is known. Our character is ours, suggested, perhaps, chiefly by others — because the force of circumstance upon the individual is constant and strong. Yet the pressure of circumstance upon peoples is not overpowering; for it acts only as a kind of irritant. An individual is more or less obliged to remain true to character. But, with a nation, generations succeed each other and do not resemble each other; in fact, they have a horror of so doing.

When youth learns that its native land is regarded in a certain light by the world at large, youth accepts that view — but considers it true only with reference to

OldMagazineArticles.com

-the second of four pages-

its elders. Youth believes quite the opposite. What young American really wants to resemble the traditional figure of Uncle Sam? And yet Uncle Sam is one of the least displeasing of the collective national figures.

In 1930, I visited Cambridge University. The anti-Kipling rage, even among young conservatives there, was in full course. It was denied that Kipling had any feeling for color or rhythm, or even the capacity for describing the most elementary sensations. But these were only pretexts. He was despised because he represented an England content with itself, imperialistic, scorning inferior races; because his world was that of the 'old school,' prejudiced and solid. As much despised as Kipling were the old 'honor' and 'good English qualities' of Queen Victoria's time.

Young England was struggling and is still struggling vigorously against the English 'type' of tradition. Rejecting the temperate, English youth chose that master of paradox, George Bernard Shaw, as prophet; later Lawrence and Joyce, whose books, admirable works of verbal intoxication, traverse the very bounds of human intelligence. Finally, youth has come to enjoy the subtle psychology and dialectics of Aldous Huxley. This is not merely the revolt of an elite; it is a turning away on the part of the whole English nation from positive action in the foreign political sphere, as well as a revolt against the old attractions of imperialism.

Of all peoples the Germans care most about how they are regarded by outsiders. Despite appearances, they are the least calculable of any. On the eve of the war, they were chagrined and at the same time exasperated by their reputation (very much exaggerated by the Allies) for being obedient automata, pedants, and heavy beer drinkers. In the post-war period they displayed an extraordinary taste for racing sports, beauty treatments, night clubs, and 'sex.' Every German you encoun-

tered tried to explain his individuality (it was said that all Germans were alike) and related all the details of his private life (yet Germans were supposed to be secretive). Purposely, they gave the world the impression that the country was politically disorganized, with its future undetermined, just to dispel the general conception of the efficient Prussian officer and the Hohenzollern mind.

But they soon perceived that these endeavors were relatively useless; they simply were not loved. (More than once I have been truly touched by the despair of the German who complains to every chance acquaintance, 'The world does not love us!') Germany was regarded as a conquered nation, accepting its defeat, and revealing that its orientation, at least in part, was toward the East.

Once again, a reputation of this sort was not to be endured. Naziism has not actually improved the lot of the Germans, but it has been successful in Germany because it has given the Germans the impression that the outside world no longer considers them a conquered nation. German propaganda is a heartfelt attempt — an unfortunate and sometimes touching attempt — to make Germany universally liked and respected. A really strong nation cares little for what others may think of it. But Germans cannot bear criticism; they have even prohibited from the country a large proportion of independent foreign newspapers. They pay for their propaganda as you pay a lawyer to represent you in a case that is already lost before it gets under way. At least it is some consolation that someone has spoken as *you* wanted him to speak.

As a Frenchman, I have little patience with Hitlerism — but how can I forget that Germany's aggressiveness conceals a bitter rancor? She feels cut off from the world. She is trying to create an autarchy out of that separation, a capacity and pride in bearing her cross. Why be surprised, then, that her propaganda miscarries?

OldMagazineArticles.com

-the third of four pages-

With Italy it is quite another matter — although just as clear. The Duce is a former journalist; or rather, he is *still* a journalist. He reads daily every criticism of his country and he often replies to it. Moreover, Italy attracts more tourists than any other country in Europe, and consequently finds herself in direct contact with foreigners. The world forgets that Italians, in private life, have a very great sense of humor. Their native camaraderie and pleasantries, even during the war, were not understood by their allies. And the old stories of the lazzaroni who prefer death to work, of trains that run intermittently, were phenomena which a nation could not tolerate forever. The triumphant cry of Fascism, after one year in power and even now, is: 'Our trains run on time!' And the recent Ethiopian campaign was above all a revenge for an old humiliation.

As for us French, we had a defeat psychosis right up to the beginning of the war, akin in many respects to that of the Germans since the war. After our defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, we in France had our own struggles with a kind of National Socialism, in much the same way as Hitlerism gained strength in Germany. But the crisis was safely passed, owing to the uninspired leadership of General Boulanger and the political foresightedness of the country as a whole. There remained only the fervent desire not to appear 'frivolous.' For fifty years French literature has been just as *sober* as possible.

In 1921, France was very much surprised not to be generally supported when she demanded the payment of reparations by the Germans. We were reputed to be misers, exacting and heartless skinflints who insisted on the letter of the law and who did not mind letting our next-door neighbor perish as long as he paid his debt. The report spread that we had military designs and were ready for intervention under any pretext. The substitution of M. Briand for M. Poin-

caré recognized this conflict involving our national reputation. Unfortunately, we may no longer be reproached for being too strict in the matter of debts. For the last year and a half we have been most abstemious, against our interest, in order not to appear militaristic.

One of the most interesting phenomena in Soviet politics and propaganda during recent years has been the changing light in which foreigners have been regarded. For centuries the Russians were scorned by Europe and considered mere imitators. They were granted a certain moral and mystical worth. But Communism's attitude toward foreigners changed all this; and the change was the more striking because the majority of the Soviet leaders had lived in exile and profoundly resented this inherited reputation.

Also, they desired to teach Europe; they no longer asked for instruction — they gave it. Their propaganda was eminently pedagogic in kind. This propagandist attitude, like all such, did them much harm in the mind of the West. They were no longer regarded as barbarians struggling with insufficient means, although with unconquerable will, against difficult problems, heart-breaking setbacks, ignorance, and secular disorder. The world believed that they wanted to impose their system everywhere.

To-day they appear perturbed by what the outside world thinks of them. They do not like being regarded as a cynical, cold-blooded dictatorship, and they send out long legal documents explaining their domestic affairs. They discuss passionately everything that is written about them. They even feel the need of being defended by foreign rather than domestic witnesses. And their greatest ambition of the moment is the conquest of public opinion in the United States.

It is a curious fact that of all the countries of the world the dictatorships are by far the most eager to cultivate foreign regard. Dictatorships spend the

OldMagazineArticles.com

-the last of four pages-

most for propaganda — often with the least success.

Nevertheless this fact, curious though it may seem, is not inexplicable. Human endeavor, individual or collective, requires outside support in order to secure impartial and positive appraisal. The man who can discuss himself, who can stand self-criticism, knows how to deal with criticism by others. But the presumptuous man, who has abolished personal criticism, is always listening to what others have to say of him and angles for compliments wherever he may. Likewise, a régime which does away with free criticism within its country will look for it abroad, seeking at the same time to change it through propaganda. The head of a dictatorship is fully aware that the smallest praise uttered abroad by a free man is worth more than the sum of the entire official and controlled press. For instance, strong as is German national pride, it is not strong enough to permit the opinion of a German to count equally with that of a Dane. (And I have chosen

Denmark as an example because she is not one of the powers able to figure importantly in a possible future war.)

Peoples as a whole are really much younger in spirit than the average adult; for it is only recently that peoples have been endowed by the press with nervous systems. Propaganda is by no means a profound manoeuvre, cleverly directed by brilliant minds; it is an infantile reaction of nations against a feeling of inferiority — a reaction which facile leaders disguise whatever way they can as a sensible and intelligent undertaking.

Propaganda is truly a false way out, but at least it has proved that the disinterested opinion of neutrals has become indispensable to all nations. When nations comprehend that deeds alone count, that propaganda deceives nobody, then we shall have in the political sphere, domestic as well as foreign, a kind of spontaneous arbitration. Before presenting their case, nations will take special care to listen to the judge. That judge will be the world at large.

OldMagazineArticles.com