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Source: *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Jan., 1961), pp. 195-205

Published by: American Journal of Economics and Sociology, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3484535>

Accessed: 25-02-2023 18:44 UTC

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The Escort of Lies

By FRANCIS NEILSON

"In war the truth must be accompanied by an escort of lies to ensure its security."

WINSTON CHURCHILL¹

Lies and Propaganda

ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT TASKS the student of the causes of war will encounter in the next generation is that of massing the evidence, extant in many books, of the lies that were told during the Second World War by official and unofficial propagandists. For the First World War a research historian, after hostilities ceased, did not find it difficult to collect abundant evidence about what had occurred because there were then no behind-the-scenes restrictions by the powers on the press. Publishers were free to issue and market works that exposed the propaganda that had been considered necessary to arouse and maintain the fighting spirit of soldier and civilian. The men who formed the Union of Democratic Control in England (with branches in many European countries) had prepared the way during the struggle for those who wished to enlighten the taxpayers as to what took place, why it took place, and why it had been necessary to delude them while the battles raged. Whether it is becoming increasingly difficult to find in public, college, and university libraries the works that were published during the war and for several years after it terminated with the Treaty of Versailles is the question now under consideration. For bona fide students in England and America inform us not only that books have been removed from library shelves, but that pages which were not to the liking of the perfervid war patriot have been torn out of works still found there.

I know of a dozen books that were put upon the Black List during the First World War which go far to support Churchill's statement about the "escort of lies." My own book, *How Diplomats Make War*, is one example. After it was published in 1915 by B. W. Huebsch of New York, I sent more than two dozen copies to friends in England and France, but I never heard that one I sent had been received. Sylvia Pankhurst obtained a copy during the war, but this must have been taken there by an

¹ Churchill made this remark during the Teheran Conference, at an afternoon meeting when Stalin was present. It will be found quoted by Field-Marshal The Viscount Alanbrooke in *Triumph in the West 1943-1946*, the Diaries edited by Arthur Bryant, London, Collins, 1959, p. 98.

American visitor, probably on an official errand to the British Government. Aside from the advertisement received from Sylvia Pankhurst, my book was not read by any of my English friends until the First World War came to an end. I could cite other works published in England that were denounced by officials and blacklisted.

However, the young student now in college should encounter no great difficulty in finding in works that have not been mutilated or removed from college library shelves sufficient material to stimulate his desire to build a case that will be rooted firmly in evidence that has not been challenged. In this respect it should be observed that a great change has been taking place in the last five years in the minds of historians who are free to express their opinions. Professor A. J. Taylor's book, *The Trouble Makers*,² is a notable example, which indicates a welcome change in the academic mind.

Professor Taylor's impulses to do justice to Edmund Morel, the chief "trouble maker," is an indication of the desire among some of our academic historians to look more closely at the propaganda of the First World War, and try to make sense of the nonsense that was served up day after day for four years to poison the minds of the electorate. Morel was sent to jail on a trumped-up charge for exposing lies. We have heard a great deal about the strong measures taken by the governments of Russia and Germany before the First World War to suppress books, newspapers and other printed matter which the politicians in power called "subversive literature," but comparatively little about British subjects who were jailed.

For the student of the next generation, Edmund Morel's book, *The Truth About the War*,³ will be invaluable as a guide to the literature issued in foreign countries which contained reports that were quite contrary to those circulated in England and, later, in America. I wonder if the budding historian who is to make his name in another twenty or thirty years has the slightest acquaintance with such works as I have named above. I often ask myself what he is doing to prepare himself for the task of turning the searchlight of reason upon the problems of propaganda. Many books are hard to find, but there is one way in which the student conscious of what he is called upon to perform can collect works not available in the libraries. He can get in touch with second-hand booksellers in England, Scotland, and Ireland,⁴ who often advertise

² London, Hamish Hamilton, 1957. Cf. my comments in "The Birth of the Third Party in British Politics," *Am. J. Econ. Sociol.*, 18 (Jan. 1959), pp. 160, 164.

³ London, The National Labour Press Ltd., 3rd ed., 1918.

⁴ Harcourt Books, Dublin; Preston Book Co., Preston, Lancs. (England); Holleyman and Treacher, Brighton (England).

them. In the past five years, in searching the catalogues of these book-sellers, I have found quite two dozen works containing information of the greatest importance for the future historian.

But now the field is by no means an open one for any bona fide student of the Second World War. Perhaps we shall have to wait sixty years for another Lady Pakenham (who has just finished a thoroughly scholarly work upon the Second Boer War) to demolish the preposterous propaganda that was served to those who fought in it and survived to foot the cost of it.

I have witnessed the severe shock suffered by men who have been duped by the propaganda of the wars, when the real evidence is exposed. I could mention a dozen well-known individuals who, after the First World War, were astonished to find that they had been hoodwinked. Their heroes in Parliament (and in Congress, too) had set out deliberately to delude them by circulating and fostering lies that were known to be lies.

In both the wars Churchill was in a supreme position to know the lies told. From the time he became First Lord of the Admiralty in November, 1911, until he finished his last volume on the Second World War, he held important cabinet posts in several governments, and was often regarded with suspicion by his colleagues. Three of these I might name—Lord Haldane, Bonar Law, and Austen Chamberlain—have recorded their opinions of him. It would take a long chapter in a long book to set down the opinions of lesser cabinet ministers, historians, editors and other critics who have written of him as they knew him and not as the public prints represent him.

Delusion in War Time

THE MAKING OF PROPAGANDA is such a subtle process that it seems to elude satisfactory examination by those who have been deluded by it. Perhaps some day a brilliant psychologist will add this problem to others already dealt with in medical journals.

When I returned to England on a visit after World War I, I was soon in touch with the members of the Union of Democratic Control. Many of my parliamentary colleagues were devoting themselves to the work of this organization. One night in 1921 I was entertained in the House of Commons by a group of men who had retained their seats in the Lloyd George Khaki Election of 1918. I do not remember that they were all members of the U.D.C., but the question that seemed to be dominant among them was: How was it possible for the voters who in 1906 had given Campbell-Bannerman the biggest majority ever received by a Prime

Minister to believe the nonsense circulated by the government and the newspapers about the reasons for the war? It will be remembered that Campbell-Bannerman stood for the reduction of armaments and the maintenance of peace.

Regarding this question of propaganda, I reminded my friends that on Saturday, August 1, 1914, a day when so many political meetings were being held in the open air, over ninety per cent of them passed resolutions begging the government to observe strict neutrality. At that very time the troops of Haldane's expeditionary force were moving to the seaports across the Channel. It should be remembered that Grey did not make his speech on the crisis to the House of Commons until Monday, August 3rd. Yet, it is now known that Asquith decided to fight on Sunday night, August 2nd.⁵

The speech delivered by Grey on Monday, August 3rd, created a sensation among the Liberals who sat loyally behind the Treasury Bench. Someone remarked that at least a dozen of them began to think less of their chances of receiving peerages and knighthoods if war took place. Be that as it may, they did not withhold their applause at what they heard from the Foreign Secretary.

However, there was a disconcerting omission in the letters from Paul Cambon (the French Ambassador), which Grey read to the House. When I studied the first White Paper issued by the government, I found that Grey had not read the most important sentence in the letter from Cambon, (exchanged in 1912), which indicated a military agreement with France of which the House had been in ignorance. It reads as follows:

If either Government had grave reason to expect an unprovoked attack by a third Power or something that threatened the general peace, it should immediately discuss with the other whether both Governments should act together to prevent aggression and to preserve peace, and if so, what measures they would be prepared to take in common.

If these measures involved action, the *plans of the General Staff* would at once be taken into consideration and the Government would then decide what effects should be given to them.⁶ (Italics mine.)

⁵ In a letter to the writer from a well-known prelate, the following is quoted as Lord Haldane's version: "Grey and I were dining at Queen Anne's Gate when a man from the Foreign Office came with a red box. Grey opened it and said, '*The Germans are over the Belgian frontier. What are we to do?*' I said, 'Let us go and tell Asquith.' So we went to Number 10. Asquith said, 'Give me five minutes.' We sat in silence till A. said, 'We must fight.' We said, 'We hoped you would decide that way.'" (Italics mine.) See F. Neilson, *The Makers of War*, Appleton, Wisconsin, C. C. Nelson Publishing Company, 1950, p. 41.

⁶ Cf. F. Neilson, *How Diplomats Make War*, New York, 1915 (5th printing, 1940), p. 279; also T. P. Conwell-Evans, *Foreign Policy From a Back Bench 1904-1918*, London, Oxford University Press, 1932, p. 49 n.

The speaker must have been conscious of the way in which these words would be taken by members who had questioned him during the years of his office about the commitments to France. Surely he knew that Lord Hugh Cecil, Jowett, King and Dillon would at once come to the conclusion that Cambon's statement was clear evidence that Grey had been lying to the House on the matter of secret arrangements (military and naval) having been made with France, in the event of war.

When I had time on the evening of August 3rd to look carefully through the White Paper and to set down on a chart the dates and places recorded in the dispatches, I determined at once to expose the many curious contradictions and omissions in it. Next day when I went to the House to get another copy, I was told that after the House adjourned the day before, orders were given at once to sweep up the paper which had been torn in shreds by the excited members in "an orgy of jingoism" and that not a scrap remained.⁷

But this part of the story of the lies Churchill must have had in mind is really episodal. I describe it thus, because Grey's lies, which revolted his closest friends when they became known, were not exposed until some years after the war when the British Ambassador in Paris wrote his book. By that time Grey's denials, before World War I, to his questioners in the House as to a military understanding with France seemed of secondary importance. Other matters, domestic and foreign, had arisen, such as the troubles in Ireland, hunger marches, depressed areas, and the jealousies and frictions of the leading politicians seeking office. These were weighing heavily upon Lloyd George's postwar "patchwork government," as it was called.

Not often does one who has been careless with the truth, acknowledge the fact by revealing himself as a deliberate liar. It was Edward Grey who accomplished this feat in a letter to Sir Francis Bertie, the British Ambassador in Paris. Here is the letter:

Foreign Office, April 10, 1911.

My dear Bertie,

There would be a row in Parliament here if I had used words which implied the possibility of a secret engagement unknown to Parliament all these years committing us to a European war. But I send you a copy of the question and answer. I purposely worded the answer so as not to convey that the engagement of 1904 might not under certain circumstances be construed to have larger consequences than its strict letter.

But Parliament would have under these circumstances to put its own

⁷ After many inquiries during the Twenties, I could not find nor did I hear of any copies of this first White Paper. The one I have is bound securely and kept in a safe place.

construction upon it. At the time of the Algeciras Conference if Germany had fastened a quarrel upon France, I think the agreement of 1904 would have been construed by public opinion here as entailing in spirit the obligation to help France. An absolute engagement on the other hand is more I think than Parliament is prepared for.

[E. Grey].⁸

The Grey-Cambon letters had been exchanged in November of 1912. In March, 1913, Lord Hugh Cecil said in the House of Commons:

There is a very general belief that this country is under an obligation arising out of an assurance given by the Ministry in the course of diplomatic negotiations, to send a very large armed force out of this country to operate in Europe. This is the general belief.

Asquith interrupted to say: "I ought to say that is not true." Again, on March 24, 1913, in answer to Sir W. Byles, Mr. Asquith told the House:

As has been repeatedly stated, this country is not under any obligation, not public and known to Parliament, which compels it to take part in a war. In other words, if war arises between European Powers, there are no unpublished agreements which will restrict or hamper the freedom of the Government or Parliament to decide whether or not Great Britain should participate in a War.

It is a strange turn of fate that Churchill during World War II should have taken special note of the "escort of lies." For in the First World War he had been a member of the inner cabinet (as First Lord of the Admiralty) which perpetrated these very lies on a trusting House of Commons. In Conwell-Evans' book we read the following account:

At the beginning of the 1911 crisis the plan was further revised by the General Staff. 'In April last, when the recurrence of tension between France and Germany seemed not improbable, the possibility of at once despatching six instead of four Divisions besides the Cavalry Division came under consideration, and revised tables for the larger force with accelerated dates of mobilization were worked out. The tables for movements by rail, embarkation, sea transport, and disembarkation were similarly revised. . . . It was submitted and explained in detail at the Committee of Imperial Defence on 23 August last (1911), the Prime Minister presiding, and Sir Edward Grey, Mr. Lloyd George, Mr. McKenna, Mr. Winston Churchill, and the First Sea Lord being present.'⁹

I think John Dillon was the only man in the House of Commons who read the French newspapers day by day. He often remarked that the

⁸ This and the following letters will be found in T. P. Conwell-Evans, *op. cit.*, Appendix II, pp. 178-9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

easygoing Liberal-Imperialists sitting behind the Treasury Bench would be shocked if they knew how the French editors took stock of the questions and answers on foreign policy. I was told that men sitting at the tables of cafes on the Boul. Mich. knew more about the future of foreign affairs in Europe than men in the House of Commons. Lloyd George was perfectly right when he said the House was being kept in the dark by the secret meetings of the inner cabinet for nearly eight years.

Propaganda and Hate

THE PROPAGANDA of warring governments has occupied much of my time for the past sixty years. My interest in the subject began at the time of the Second Boer War. From Richard Harding Davis and others I learned the real import of the propaganda that was put out in support of Chamberlain, Rhodes, and Milner. It was about this time that John Macqueen gave to the British public *The Narrative of the First Boer War*, by Thomas Fortescue Carter, the *Times* correspondent.

The chief reason why I have made a study of propaganda is a moral one. During those early years—say from the beginning of the century to three or four years after the First World War ended—whenever I spoke to a man who had been drugged by propaganda, I found that it was eating into his fiber, and when he gave vent to his feelings, it was undermining his self-possession. I do not remember a single case during that time when a man who asked me for an opinion about the Boer War or the First World War changed his mind after hearing what I thought about it. Worse still, whenever I have recommended some book that would treat the subject impartially or, at any length, without bias, I do not remember that the advice was followed. I could expatiate at length on at least a score of well-known people who suffered a kind of mental anguish when they began to doubt what they had formerly believed was true.

The motive of war propaganda is detestable. It fosters hate and destroys every rational impulse to restore peace and bring good will to men. Another strong objection to it that might be urged is one that touches nearly all those men in high political circles and in the halls of learning, who have to undertake the task of writing books and documents upon the wars. Among the majority of historians today we notice a lack of conviction, a kind of cowardice, which seems to have emasculated their minds. I asked one if he thought a knowledgeable reader of his book would accept what he had read as all the information that he possessed. I did not get a straightforward answer. He evaded the issue by remarking, "Well, you know the last word has not been said on many of these prob-

lems." I asked him when the last word would be said upon any problem of public interest.

But there it is, and the man who knows his way through the literature that has been written upon the wars can easily point to the gaps in the story, which indicate that the author has either shirked the issue or toned down a salient factor by minimizing its importance.

Confessions of Attlee and Morrison after World War I

THE EVIDENCE of Churchill's "escort of lies" is overwhelming. There may be a dozen ways of conveying to a reader that someone has been guilty of speaking or writing what is not true. The polite ways of introducing this are many, and the use of such epithets as "misrepresentation," "distortion" are parliamentary in their connotation. Others may prefer to cover the ugly word by resorting to "delusion," "deceit," "hyperbole." Two of the men who expressed themselves upon the work of the escort during the First World War are Clement Attlee and Herbert Morrison. They became peers of the realm. When the time came for sackcloth and ashes after the war, these men courageously confessed they had been deluded. Attlee said:

When we entered this war we were too credulous—we believed the Government. We should have been wiser if we had listened to the Union of Democratic Control, and less to the other voices. . . .¹⁰

Herbert Morrison was more precise. He said:

All the governments of all the warring nations deliberately deceived their citizens and their fighting men. They founded propaganda departments for this special purpose, paying men out of public funds to deceive their fellows by the spoken and written word. The government suppressed truth, newspapers, books, and organizations, and imprisoned good men and true.¹¹

It should be noticed that the words of the men who confessed that they had been deluded were carefully chosen and would have passed the most strict parliamentary form of address. However, it was quite different with the daily press. So that the young historian will have no reason for doubting Churchill's remark about the escort of lies, I will cite three instances of downright repudiation of propaganda by three of the most important daily papers published in Great Britain. The *Daily News*, May 17,

¹⁰ U.D.C. meeting, Nov. 11, 1920, Kingsway Hall; see *Foreign Affairs* (London), Vol. II, No. 6, Dec. 1920, p. 91.

¹¹ See *For. Aff.*, Vol. I, No. 8, Feb. 1920, p. 14. Fuller excerpts of their confessions will be found in my article "The 'British War Party' in the Inter-war Period," *Am. J. Econ. Sociol.*, 19 (October 1959), pp. 65-80.

1919, had the following to say about the work of those emissaries of the government who, week after week during the war, sedulously poisoned the minds of the people who were paying for it:

. . . The truth is about to be unmuzzled. For four and a half years she has been in quarantine. The public has been spoon-fed with an official diet. . . . Now the truth is about to come out into the daylight and open her lips. She will be very unlike what we thought her to be—very unlike the fiction that has flaunted itself in the public eye.¹²

The *Yorkshire Observer* dealt with the propaganda that was served during the war, and castigated the emissaries of lies in the following terms:

. . . We have only the vision of the kaleidoscopic jumble of bits of coloured news, doctored news, flatly contradictory news, official news (telling part of a story), censored news, excluding carefully that which is true but inconvenient.¹³

The editor of the *Manchester Guardian* was C. E. Montague, one of the most highly esteemed editors of the British press. After the war he wrote a book called *Disenchantment*.¹⁴ It is a scholarly exposition of the insidious propaganda that maintained the fighting spirit of civilian and soldier for more than four years. Although difficult to obtain, it might be found in the catalogue of some secondhand bookseller. Montague says that Britain had mobilized her whole press under a single control—"a Father-General of Lies, the unshaming strategic and tactical lies of 'the great wars' which . . . make mendacity a virtue."¹⁵

For some years before the Second World War began, students from a few colleges and two universities came to me, recommended by their teachers because they were studying the genesis of the First World War. In looking over the papers they brought, and questioning them about their sources, I was amazed to find that they had only the haziest ideas of what had taken place since the secret understanding between Russia and France was made in 1891–92. One young man who brought his notes to me was saturated with the venom of propaganda put out by the least intelligent section of the gutterpress. He asked me where he could get information that would correct his views, and I told him that I had collected documents, British Government White Papers, the colored books of the other powers, letters and newspaper articles. I made a parcel of them and presented them to the library of his university. This I did because not a few young

¹² *Foreign Affairs*, July 1919, Vol. I, No. 1, p. 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ New York, Brentano's, 1922.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

people were interested in the problems of the war, and because I was then under the impression I would not need these papers, for at that time I never dreamed there would be a Second World War. Some months after this interview I learned, after a search had been made, that the parcel had been pushed into a corner and was found still unopened. When I spoke to the president of the institution about this, he told me that the librarian at that time was a man capable only of looking after a library of Sunday School scholars.

The Volumes of *Foreign Affairs* Are Invaluable

IN THIS CONNECTION, I have frequently had reason to congratulate myself upon keeping the four volumes of *Foreign Affairs*, the monthly organ of the U.D.C. Its value to the historian of today and tomorrow is incalculable. The background it surveys, regarding the politics and diplomacy of the powers for twenty-five years before the first shot was fired in the War of 1914, is amazing. There is scarcely a country from the Bay of Biscay to the borders of Persia which is not brought to the reader's notice for its subjection or complicity in the war.

One of the indispensable documents in these volumes is the lengthy article written by Robert Dell, under the title, "What We Owe to Lord Grey."

Dell was the Paris correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian* for years, but unlike most English correspondents in the capital of Europe, he was a European—a linguist, who had no difficulty whatever in conversing with the ministers and attachés accredited by their countries to France. He also enjoyed a wide association with people of the Right and the Left, which enabled him frequently to ponder both sides of a problem while it was ripe for discussion. It was due to his influence and work that the *Manchester Guardian* at one time had a reputation of being the best-informed journal in Britain upon foreign policy and the international cliques interested in the partition of African dominions, notably Morocco and Tripoli.

In his scathing exposure of the British Foreign Secretary, he reveals with inside information the intrigues of Delcassé, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as those of Lord Lansdowne. I do not know a single work published since the First World War ended that gives so thorough a history of these events as that to be found in Dell's articles. Moreover, I do not know how the historian of the future will be able with convincing evidence to present his story of the war that turned Europe upside down unless he knows the background of it all which is supplied

by Dell. In summing up, he says: "Montesquieu said that the responsibility for war rested, not on the man who declared it, but on the man who made it inevitable. *In that case no man living is more responsible for the War than Lord Grey of Fallodon.*"¹⁶ (italics in original)

The fabricators, with their "escort of lies" so far as British policy from Lansdowne until the outbreak of World War I is concerned, have striven to do everything in their power to hide the truth. There are scores of works written by responsible investigators of these affairs which show clearly that Germany was not solely responsible. Indeed, it has only to be pointed out that Sir Arthur Nicolson, the man who knew more about what was taking place at the Foreign Office than anyone else, "followed the peace negotiations with interest and apprehension. He was appalled by the Treaty of Versailles. Particularly did he resent the paragraph which obliged Germany by force to admit that she was solely responsible for the war. He considered that paragraph both undignified and meaningless. . . ."¹⁷

The student who is beginning a course in what is loosely called political science will encounter some shocks, as he proceeds, which may discourage his idea of becoming a teacher. One of these will be the discovery that politics, as practiced by the powers, is not a science but a craft, and an invidious one at that. If he pursues his studies, he will find it necessary to know much about the history of Europe from the time of the Franco-German War to this year 1960. If he gains this knowledge of the vast canvas he will have to examine, he may quail and decide to make a living in a vocation that will call for far less preparatory work.

I have known young people full of enthusiasm for a course in political science, but not one who came to me for advice and information ever became a teacher or even wrote a book upon what he had learned. I have no doubt whatever concerning the difficulties that discourage them. The two dominant problems of this particular study, which perhaps are not met with until the initiatory course comes to an end, are: power politics and secret diplomacy. Where is the work on political science that deals with these in a forthright manner? Not one that I consulted before the Second World War (and I looked into many as they were published) contained anything of instructive value upon these two weighty problems—problems that now concern some of our chief historians in Europe.

Port Washington
Long Island, N. Y.

¹⁶ *For. Aff.*, Jan. 1923, Vol. IV, No. 7, p. 139.

¹⁷ Harold Nicolson, *Sir Arthur Nicolson, Bart., First Lord Carnock*, London, Constable, 4th printing, 1937, p. 433.