

## **British and American recruitment propaganda posters in World War I**

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### **Abstract**

The following article is an attempt to present the main ideas and tendencies which characterize British and American propaganda posters which were used during World War I. Posters were among the most common and effective means of propaganda at that time, and they are also very interesting from the sociolinguistic perspective. The authors of the presented posters made use of different methods of persuasion, and their works reflect the ideas and relations within British and American societies at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Key words**

manipulation, persuasion, propaganda, posters, World War I

### **Affiches de recrutement britanniques et américains à l'époque de la Grande Guerre**

### **Résumé**

L'article essaie de présenter les idées et les tendances principales dans les affiches de recrutement utilisées pendant la Grande Guerre. Les affiches étaient parmi les moyens de propagande le plus souvent utilisés et les plus efficaces à cette époque-là, elles sont aussi particulièrement intéressantes de point de vue sociolinguistique. Les auteurs des affiches présentées ont recouru à des moyens de persuasion très divers et leurs œuvres représentent les idées et les

relations au sein des sociétés britannique et américaine au début du XXème siècle.

### **Mots-clés**

affiches, Grande Guerre, manipulation, persuasion, propagande

## **Brytyjskie i amerykańskie rekrutacyjne plakaty propagandowe w I wojnie światowej**

### **Abstrakt**

Artykuł stanowi próbę przedstawienia głównych idei i tendencji cechujących brytyjskie i amerykańskie plakaty propagandowe wykorzystywane podczas I wojny światowej. Plakaty należały do najczęściej wykorzystywanych i najskuteczniejszych środków propagandowych owego czasu i są również niezwykle interesujące z punktu widzenia socjolingwistyki. Autorzy przedstawionych plakatów wykorzystywali różnorakie środki perswazji, a ich prace odzwierciedlają idee i stosunki panujące w brytyjskim i amerykańskim społeczeństwie na początku dwudziestego stulecia.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

I wojna światowa, manipulacja, perswazja, plakaty, propaganda

### **1. Introduction**

On the eve of the Great War, both Great Britain and the USA differed from other major powers of the period in having abandoned conscription in favor of a smaller, but professional army. However, it quickly became clear that the belligerent countries were facing an armed conflict which required the participation of a great many soldiers. Britain, after joining the conflict in 1914, had to rely on volunteers who had to be persuaded to offer their services (and lives) for their country. All avail-

able means of propaganda were used for this purpose, and posters played a key role throughout the recruitment campaign.

According to Steve Thorne (2016: 41), the word *propaganda* comes from the Modern Latin “congregatio de propaganda fide”, which means “congregation for propagating the faith”, and was first used in reference to a committee of cardinals responsible for foreign missions, founded by Pope Gregory XV in 1622. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) provides the following definition of *propaganda* in its current sense: it is “the systematic propagation of information or ideas by an interested party, especially in a tendentious way in order to encourage or instill a particular attitude or response”. Until the Second World War, however, the word had not acquired truly pejorative connotations, and was often used as a synonym of *publicity*. Propaganda is currently associated with totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, which often obscures the fact that democratic countries relied on propaganda to a similar extent as the Nazi or the Communists in order to discredit their enemies, manipulate public opinion, or achieve other desired ends.

## **2. Propaganda and techniques of manipulation**

In order for propaganda to be successful, it has to meet some essential requirements. Indeed, as C. W. Mills put it:

To change opinion and activity, they say to one another, we must pay close attention to the full context and lives of the people to be managed. Along with mass persuasion, we must somehow use personal influence; we must reach people in their life context and *through* other people, their daily associates, those whom they trust: we must get at them by some kind of “personal” persuasion. We must not show our hand directly; rather than merely advise or command, we must manipulate.

(Mills 1995: 92)

This method, as we shall see later on, was frequently used by authors of posters. Manipulation of this kind involved appealing to the personal feelings of a potential recruit, such as love for their families, pride, respect for authority, but also fear of being shamed. Well known public figures and fictional characters, images of family members and of British women urging their men to join in the fight were employed by the authors of posters.

The importance of propaganda was quickly noticed. In his work on the language of war, Thorne (2006: 50) quotes Dave Saunders, who states in his book *Twentieth Century Advertising*:

By the end of World War One, governments of the leading powers had realized the potential role of advertising in the dissemination of information and the rallying of support. Posters were the primary medium of mass communication and many artists and designers were called on to reverse their usual role of promoting products and use their persuasive talents to encourage the public to spend less and to conserve resources. The creative process required was much the same, but the sense of urgency that war brings created a crop of innovative ideas and high quality artwork that was frequently copied and had a major effect on later advertising.

The only arguable point in this quotation is the information that the role of advertising was realized only by the end of the war; innovative and ingenious artwork appeared much earlier, and it used very sophisticated techniques of manipulation. According to Pabijańska (2007) all such techniques “are founded on very simple patterns and social mechanisms which are rooted in our minds on a certain level of our lives”. Most of the principles use the notion of conformism, which is a tendency to change one’s behavior, views or beliefs as a result of other people’s influence. It is present in two kinds of situations: if we have no knowledge of the current situation so we

follow the opinion of others and when we feel the need to be socially accepted and appreciated (Pabijańska 2007: 26).

Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson distinguish between four major techniques of manipulation. The first one concerns gaining control over the situation, which means creating an atmosphere favorable to communication. This process is called preliminary persuasion or pre-persuasion which refers to the way we present the issue. An effective pre-persuasion establishes what is assumed “we all should know” and “what everyone considers obvious”, though in reality it may not be the case. A manipulator who is able to formulate the issue in a clever way and define the method of discussing it may influence our cognitive reactions. The sender of the persuasive message can make us agree or do something he or she wishes without giving the impression of having such an intention.

The second stage consists of creating an appropriate image of the situation in the receiver’s perception, which is called derivation plausibility. The key issue is the autopresentation of the sender, who should seem to be sympathetic, trustworthy and well-informed. The third technique is to create a message which would focus the listeners’ attention exactly on what the sender intends. The aim of this is to distract their attention from arguments against the presented stance.

The last method mentioned by the authors is based on controlling the emotions of the receivers and intends to arouse certain emotions and then prompt a way to deal with them, the prompted behavior being the one desired by the manipulator.

Manipulation techniques work in a concealed way, as sometimes it is enough to use a certain word in a given context or put the words in the right order to make the utterance persuasive. The person who is being manipulated does not know about it and therefore the action is subconscious. Dantalion Jones writes: “Language patterns work for many reasons, a primary one being that they bring about an emotional state and then suggest an action to accompany the emotion. The

truth is that someone can be talked into bed, a business partnership, or sold a product or service – just with words” (Jones 2008: 2).

The fact that effective propaganda is a matter of effective manipulation, not of reasoning or persuasion, and that it must appeal to the feelings of the manipulated person, was widely used by many types of totalitarian regimes. As one of the most notorious propagandists of all time, Joseph Goebbels, said:

Success is the important thing. Propaganda is not a matter for average minds, but rather a matter for practitioners. It is not supposed to be lovely or theoretically correct. I do not care if I give wonderful, aesthetically elegant speeches, or speak so that women cry. The point of a political speech is to persuade people of what we think right. I speak differently in the provinces than I do in Berlin, and when I speak in Bayreuth, I say different things than I say in the Pharus Hall. That is a matter of practice, not of theory. We do not want to be a movement of a few straw brains, but rather a movement that can conquer the broad masses. Propaganda should be popular, not intellectually pleasing. It is not the task of propaganda to discover intellectual truths.

(www.wiki quote.org)

Goebbels’ leader, Adolf Hitler, perceived effective propaganda in a similar way: “Its effect for the most part must be aimed at the emotions and only to a very limited extent at the so-called intellect. All effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan” (quoted in Pratkanis and Aronson 1991: 250f.).

In his text on the relationships between language and power, Rajend Mesthrie (2009: 323) notices that “emotional language, creation of associations and connotations, repetition and simplification of reality are the key elements of propaganda”. In Nazi propaganda, for instance, most popular were constructions using terms such as honour and nobility. “Labour enobles” (*Arbeit adelt*) was a popular slogan repeated continu-

ously on radio, in film and the press. Other constructions connected the area of work to the area of war: “Soldier of work” (*Arbeitsarmeen*) and “German Labour Front” (*Deutsche Arbeitsfront*). This brings to the fore the idea of different orders of discourse which were applied in the manipulation, a method which shall be discussed further on in this article.

When analyzing the theoretical background of the main techniques of propaganda and manipulation, one should mention Dorwin Cartwright, who in his famous article “Some principles of mass persuasion” (1947), wrote about the main conditions for such techniques to be effective:

- The message must be received by those who are to be influenced by it.
- The message must be accepted by the receiver as a constituent part of his/her cognitive structure.
- If the message does not correspond to the pre-existing cognitive structure, it will either be rejected or changed in such a way that it does correspond, or there will be a change in the cognitive structure.
- The behavior which the propagandist wishes to encourage in the receiver must be recognized by him/her as a means of achieving an aim which is in his/her own interests.
- To bring about a specific behavior the receiver’s behavioral patterns must be controlled by an adequate motivational system, which, at the decisive moment, leads the receiver to the intended behavior.

Another scholar who investigated the methods and principles of mass persuasion was Dantalion Jones, who in the book *Mind Control Language Patterns* (2008: 31-34) enumerates several methods which can be applied in order to achieve one’s desired goals. The first of these is using presuppositions. He understands presupposition as implicit information which is not directly uttered by the speaker. In other words, as a result of an utterance we presuppose that something will happen or someone will behave in a desired way.

Another technique is connected with the use of verb tenses. It has been noticed that people unconsciously tend to talk about certain actions, feelings or emotions using the verb tense that indicates whether the problem still belongs to the present or if it already pertains to the past. Another, and a particularly effective mind-controlling method is the use of a “weasel phrase”. This term refers to a considerable amount of phrases “which evoke the feeling of something personal and meaningful, but in reality their purpose is to avoid the use of a direct command while setting up a strong suggestion”.

There are also embedded commands; these are commands which are not expressed directly, but somehow concealed in the utterance. The efficacy of this technique is based on the merging of the command with the rest of the sentence, which is usually not connected semantically with the hidden message. In spoken language, the key words may be uttered in a slightly louder voice or a tone different from the rest of the sentence. In writing, especially in the case of posters, they should be visible, yet not intrusive. The command itself should be as simple as possible.

Another effective method is the “I-You” pattern, often used in everyday speech in order to evoke certain emotions in the interlocutor. Basically, the idea is to use the second person “you” instead of the first person “I” while giving an account of an event or talking about some experience.

There is also the values elicitation technique. The goal of this method is to reach the set of deepest values of the person who is the object of manipulation. Finally, there are several words used every day which may have significant impact on the interlocutor. Examples of such words are *but* (it negates everything that has been said before and diverts attention from it), *because* (it introduces an explanation or justification; even if it is unfounded, it may be convincing to many people), or *not* (which is especially effective in the imperative mood).

### 3. Recruitment propaganda posters

Let us now pass to some examples of recruitment propaganda posters created in Great Britain and the USA during World War I.

#### 3.1. Examples

When we compare the first two posters, we can see the difference between the early approaches to propaganda posters and their fully developed versions. The “Why Aren’t You in Khaki” poster still looks quite primitive, although it already displays some of the features which will become typical of future propaganda of a similar kind. The first and obvious feature is the direct address to the addressee. Moreover, in this particular case, the intention of the question asked is to evoke a feeling of guilt and shame in the person who has not yet contributed to the military effort. The connotations brought by the word *kha-ki* are obvious: that was the color of British Army uniforms on the eve of World War I (a great contrast to the traditional red jackets, so iconic of the Victorian era and before).

The second poster is a classic of the genre. It was designed by Alfred Leete, a former designer who turned his hand to war-time propaganda. Leete’s famous Lord Kitchener poster design first appeared on the front cover of the weekly magazine *London Opinion* in September 1914, a month after Britain had declared war on Germany.

To the British public in 1914, Kitchener’s face and his famous moustache were instantly recognizable, so his name was omitted from the poster. Currently, this somehow grotesque figure, symbolic of the greatness of the British Empire, would probably be unrecognizable to the younger reader, but at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Lord Kitchener enjoyed the status of a British national hero. After the Battle of Omdurman (2 September 1898), where he crushed the Mahdist Rebellion in Sudan (a historical event Polish readers are familiar with

thanks to the book *W pustyni i w puszczy* by Henryk Sienkiewicz) and successful further participation in the Boer wars, he was perceived to be the right person to take over the post of Secretary of State of War in order to organize the biggest volunteer army in the history of Britain.

In the poster he points at the reader and addresses him in a very straightforward way. He wants YOU (personally) in YOUR country's army. The poster is also filled with patriotic clues ("Britons", which addresses all inhabitants of the country, regardless of ethnic origin, plus the "God save the King" slogan, so often used and abused in literature, songs, and official propaganda).

The British poster might have been an inspiration for the extremely successful poster issued after the American government's decision to join World War I. Indeed, the "I Want You for the US Army" poster proved to be so effective that it was reproduced when the following great conflict broke out, just after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The symbolic Uncle Sam, dear to so many Americans as the personification of the United States, points at you and tells you what to do: go to the nearest recruitment station. The message is clear and concise, with no unnecessary information to distract the reader's attention.

After Lord Kitchener's death on 5 June 1916,<sup>1</sup> new British recruitment posters had to be designed. One of the most famous was the one presenting the fictitious character John Bull, once again pointing directly at the viewer. This time, however, the message is different: "Who's absent? Is it you?". The idea is to evoke a feeling of shame or guilt, and in this respect this poster is similar to the first one presented in this article ("Why aren't you in khaki?"), although it bears a superficial resemblance to the American "Uncle Sam" poster.

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<sup>1</sup> Kitchener drowned en route to Russia to take part in Allied negotiations. The cruiser he was sailing on, HMS Hampshire, struck a mine and sunk.



**Figure 1**  
“Why Aren’t You in Khaki ?”



**Figure 2**  
“Britons...”



**Figure 3**  
“I Want You for the U.S. Army”



**Figure 4**  
“Who’s Absent ?”

Figure 1 source: <<http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-world-war-one-british-recruiting-and-propaganda-poster-issued-in-1915-29341846.html>>. Accessed 20.04.2016.

Figure 2 source: <<http://pw20c.mcmaster.ca/case-study/british-first-world-war-recruiting-posters>>. Accessed 20.04.2016.

Figure 3 source: <<http://www.authentichistory.com/1914-1920/2-homefront/1-propaganda/>>. Accessed 20.04.2016.

Figure 4 source: <<http://www.firstworldwar.com/posters/uk.htm>>. Accessed 20.04.2016.

### **3.2. The role of women in World War I war posters**

The role of women is an interesting issue with regard to recruitment propaganda in World War I. Generally speaking, the picture of British or American women in posters of that time is still ambiguous, being as yet undefined. There is still a long time to wait for typical World War II propaganda, urging women to contribute directly to the war effort (not on the front line, but in all sorts of auxiliary military services and, above all, in weapon and equipment production as factory workers). There are, however, several World War I posters depicting women as wives/mothers/daughters/fiancées, whose task is to motivate and encourage men to join the military and participate in the war. A very good example of such propaganda is the “Women of Britain Say: Go” poster. Two women (and a child) look through a window at a marching troop. They seem passive and powerless, but their safety is the true motivation that makes their men join the passing soldiers. The poster, therefore, evokes a feeling of duty which has to be fulfilled.

The “Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War” poster makes use of the portrayal of children instead of women, but is of particular interest nonetheless. Again, it appeals to the feeling of duty, but also of shame. We can speculate that the scene takes place after the war, two children are playing with their father; the daughter is reading a book (maybe about the war) and the son is playing with toy soldiers. The question about their father’s participation in the great conflict is left without an answer. He seems, however, to feel uneasy about it. Maybe he avoided military service when everybody else was fighting for their country and now he does not know what to say? The message is: if you do not want to find yourself in such an embarrassing situation in the future, do your duty now, be a patriot, do not disappoint your family by bringing shame on them.



**Figure 5**

“Women of Britain Say: Go !”



**Figure 6**

“Daddy, What Did YOU Do in the Great War ?”



**Figure 7**

“Queen Mary’s Army Auxiliary Corps”



**Figure 8**

“Wake Up America”

Figure 5 source: <<http://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/patriotism-and-nationalism>>. Accessed 20. 04. 2016.

Figure 6 source: <<http://cristianaziraldo.altervista.org/propaganda-world-war-one/>>. Accessed 20.04. 2016.

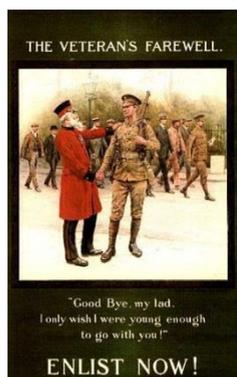
Figure 7 source: <<https://ieper.wikispaces.com/WW23+Impact+on+Women>>. Accessed 20.04.2016.

Figure 8 source: <<http://time.com/3881351/world-war-i-posters-the-graphic-art-of-propaganda/>>. Accessed 20.04.2016.

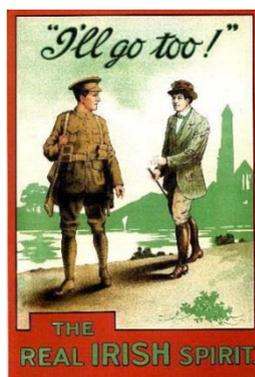
The “Queen Mary’s Army Auxiliary Corps” poster introduces a new kind of woman character. These ladies are encouraged to “enrol to-day” and to participate in the conflict in a more active way than merely motivating men. Still, however, the place of woman is quite clearly specified: she is “the girl behind the man behind the gun”. In other words, weapons are not the sort of toy a lady should play with. On the other hand, the US poster “Wake up America” depicts a woman resembling Freedom leading people to the barricades similar to the famous French painting by Eugene Delacroix. In one hand she holds a lamp, which gives light, makes things clearly visible and shows the way. In the other hand she holds the American flag. The message is clear: “Americans, follow me!” As a symbol of freedom and a personification of liberty, the figure of a heroic woman is a far better choice than Uncle Sam could ever be.

### **3.3. The appeal to patriotism and spirit of adventure in World War I propaganda**

Patriotic attitudes were enhanced by military propagandists who stressed the values of tradition and community of all citizens of the Empire. In “The Veteran’s Farewell” one can see an old former soldier, still wearing the traditional British Army red jacket, encouraging a young recruit by reassuring the lad that only his old age prevents him from going to the front line again. Now it is the young man’s task to show he is worthy of the glorious tradition of the old veterans. The following two posters are attempts to increase the number of enlisted men by either appealing to minorities, some of which were traditionally in opposition to British rule (like the Irish), or by persuading people of British origin living in other parts of the world (like the USA) to join the army. None of these campaigns, however, were particularly successful.



**Figure 9**  
“The Veteran’s Farewell”



**Figure 10**  
“I’ll Go”



**Figure 11**  
“Britishers – You Are Needed”

Figure 9 source: <<https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/331155378821220019/>>. Accessed 20.04.2016.

Figure 10 source: <<https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/361906520030293635/>>. Accessed 20.04.2016.

Figure 11 source: <<https://pl.pinterest.com/greathistory/wwi-propaganda-posters/>>. Accessed 20.04.2016.

Finally, posters that appealed to young people's fascination with adventure and modern technology should be mentioned. The poster "The Navy Needs You" suggests that by joining the military we are not just reading American history, but creating it. Such a statement would give a young recruit the perspective of becoming someone important, maybe famous – like the people he used to read about in books or newspapers as a boy. It can be speculated that such motivation would have been quite effective, especially if we consider the fact that the poster was made for a Navy recruitment campaign, and that the Navy was usually associated both with adventure (e.g. trips to distant countries, which otherwise people from the lower classes, who constituted the vast majority of ordinary seamen, could have never afforded on their own), and with technological advancement. There is a common belief too that "boys like toys", even if by "toys" we mean weapons and other military equipment. The cartoon-like poster "Join the Tanks" seems to fulfill these expectations. It is not about war and death, but rather about "treating them rough"; we are not talking about suffering, therefore, because we join the army to have fun and punish the enemy.

When analyzing the final two posters we can also refer to the concept of varied orders of discourse. In his article on different orders of discourse in the language of politics, Paul Chilton calls attention to the obvious fact that

types of talking and writing play different parts in different institutions of a society (an entire society can be thought of as being constituted from several interconnected "orders of discourse", referring to education, political institutions, law, religion, medicine, journalism, commerce, and so forth; and this structuring of a social and political entity has also been called "an order of discourse" – a set of codes, conventions, and norms which are structured in a particular way).

(Chilton 2001: 588)

Norman Fairclough (1995: 94-102) goes further and introduces the distinction between *congruent* and *metaphorical* orders of discourse. He claims that such a distinction is an extension of a terminology used by Halliday (2003). A congruent application is “the use of a discourse to signify those sorts of experience other than that which it most usually signifies”. Further, he claims that “metaphorical applications of discourse are socially motivated, different metaphors may correspond to different interests and perspectives, and may have different ideological loadings”. Fairclough’s argumentation is based on a selection of newspaper reports from the First Gulf War, especially in relation to the way in which the Iraqi side, especially Saddam Hussain are depicted. He notices that when talking about the war a selection of different orders of discourse was used by the press, such as the authoritarian discourse of family or school discipline (“More than 100 Allied jets... gave tyrant Saddam Hussain a spanking”, “The allies launched 114 war planes to teach defiant Saddam a lesson”), religious (“Retribution in the Gulf”), medical (“Removing the Iraqi cancer”), and many others. Although Fairclough’s analysis referred to a war which took place at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, his method may also apply to the way in which much earlier events were presented. As such, the application of the same principles that Fairclough describes when analyzing information provided by the press during the First Gulf War also seems to apply when we refer to recruitment and propaganda posters issued in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of an order of discourse typical to war, they offer orders of discourse associated rather with adventure stories or types of games (maybe also street fights), respectively.



Photo # NH 63411-A-KN Poster painting by Flagg

**Figure 12**

“The Navy Needs You”



**Figure 13**

“Treat Them Rough”

Figure 12 source: <<https://pl.pinterest.com/pin/325385141803583672/>>. Accessed 20.04. 2016.

Figure 13 source: <<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/world-war-propaganda-posters/>>. Accessed 20.04. 2016.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As was mentioned at the beginning of the article, both Great Britain and the United States entered the First World War with small professional armies and scarce reserves; none of these countries had conscription, which at first put them at a disadvantage compared to countries such as Germany, France or Russia. Volunteers had to be motivated and persuaded to join the military services. Recruitment propaganda posters, meanwhile, were one of the most important tools in achieving that goal; in fact, they turned out to be extremely effective, as millions of Britons and Americans voluntarily decided to fight in the war.

Many of them regretted it.

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