2 ‘Showing the world what it owed to Britain’: foreign policy and ‘cultural propaganda’, 1935-45

D. W. ELLWOOD

In his latest volume of memoirs, called 'Wartime', the Yugoslav writer and former revolutionary leader Milovan Djilas, gives us a tantalising glimpse of a most unusual occasion, a meeting in 1951 between himself and his country's former ally and then adversary, Winston Churchill, now a useful friend again. Only a few lines of their conversation are recorded. They run as follows:

Djilas: Now you too regard Yugoslavia as useful?
Churchill: I have always done so.
Djilas: But you made the 50-50 agreement with Stalin.
Churchill: Yes, but that agreement had to do not with territory but with influence.1

We might do well to ponder what that word 'influence' and its near-relation, the grand-sounding phrase 'spheres of influence' really meant in the context of Britain's international position towards the end of the Second World War, when the famous percentages-of-influence deal with Stalin was arranged. The Americans, of course said they hated the whole concept of 'spheres of influence', (their own system in the western hemisphere being somehow different). To them it smacked of imperial rivalries, of realpolitik, of cynical nineteenth-century style power bargaining. In their 'one world' of free trade and collective security, there would be no place for such primitive

1 N. Pronay et al. (eds.), Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918–45 © Nicholas Pronay and D.W. Spring 1982
methods as such either. E. H. Carr recalled in 1947 that there had been outrage in American circles when at the end of the war the British had thought of capitalising on their presumed influence in western Europe to create some sort of alliance system or bloc. It was wasted anger said Carr for 'had the power been there, a positive policy on the part of Great Britain would scarcely have been needed to bring the western bloc into being. Since it was not there, no positive policy could have availed'.

To study the propaganda, information or 'cultural' policies of nation-states in the twentieth century is one way, perhaps the most concrete, of discovering how they see their role in the international arena, how they perceive their own influence, how they measure their own prestige. For propaganda and information policies represent ways of managing these things, of organising influence and mobilising prestige to reach certain policy objectives, in alliance with the normal instruments of power. In other words, in these policies we have a means of looking at the confusing interplay between national power and national influence in a given historical context.

In the case of Great Britain in the first half of the twentieth century this is a theme of outstanding interest. It brings us to the questions of how the British Empire and its machinery reacted to their loss of weight and cohesion between 1918 and 1945, how Britain herself sought to relate to the newly emerging world powers of Russia and the United States and how the British governing class strove to compensate for its deteriorating power position in a world of permanent technological revolution, social upheaval and fierce ideological competition.

Of all these new factors in the international situation of the interwar years, the most exasperating according to many contemporary observers was the last in this list, the unprecedented ideological challenge thrown down to most of western civilisation by the so-called totalitarian powers, Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. T. S. Eliot, writing at the end of the Second World War, saw political thought attempting to seize by force the title of 'queen of the sciences', prepared to organise every department of life, even culture itself, according to set schemes. Eliot wrote

The conviction, which seems to be deeply implanted in the Muscovite mind that it is the role of Mother Russia to