CHAPTER I

THE ROOTS OF PEACETIME PROPAGANDA

Provision for the systematic use of propaganda as an integral part of the implementation a nation’s foreign policy has largely come about in the past half century. Revolutionary developments in mass communications and the broadening of the basis of political interest and participation have increased the importance of the ability to influence public opinion abroad.

Although the United Kingdom had engaged actively in international propaganda campaigns during World War I,¹ His Majesty’s Government of that time did not consider propaganda a suitable or essential instrument of peacetime foreign policy. With the ending of hostilities the propaganda organisation which had been built up during the war was quickly disbanded. In the years to follow, there was little support for the idea that Britain should engage in international propaganda activities even when it became apparent that some other nations were launching extensive propaganda programmes.

Consciousness of the need for propaganda in peacetime grew slowly in pre-World War II Britain, but gradually limited moves in an effort to meet these needs were made on an ad hoc basis. In the 1920’s, Press Attachés were appointed by the Foreign Office at a few of the more important embassies abroad and the British Library of Information was established in New York. The latter was to develop into the British Information Services in the United States while the former were the precursors of the Information Officers in Her Majesty’s Missions overseas today. The Press Attachés were not active propagandists but were responsible for advising their ambassadors of the currents of press and public opinion in the country, and to a lesser extent advising them on matters of public relations. They also acted as liaison officers with the

¹ See bibliography for accounts of British Propaganda activities in World War I.

J. B. Black, Organising the Propaganda Instrument: The British Experience
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local press and foreign correspondents in the country to which they were posted.

In addition, the News Department of the Foreign Office provided links with domestic and foreign press correspondents in London and produced the "British Official Wireless" for transmission abroad. This service of non-copyright material was transmitted by radio and could be picked up directly by news agencies and newspapers who were then free to use it as they desired. The "British Official Wireless" was designed to correct misleading reports being circulated by other agencies abroad and to provide at least a basic file of news from a British perspective. As an "official service" it was of necessity limited to British news and was somewhat restrained in its commentary. Nonetheless, it was a valued service which was used extensively by news outlets in various parts of the world, and formed the basis for the London Press Service still being operated by the Central Office of Information.

Establishment of the British Council

At the conclusion of the 1914–1918 war, the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury placed a general rule upon the News Department of the Foreign Office prohibiting it from becoming involved in any form of cultural propaganda. The Commissioners felt that "a general desire to spread British culture throughout the world" would be dangerous, and that it would not "be possible to defend in Parliament or in its Committees expenditure on such a purpose." As a Foreign Office memorandum written in 1935 states, "During the following ten years this rule was rigidly adhered to, although numerous requests were made by His Majesty's representatives abroad and others interested in establishing and strengthening existing cultural contracts between foreign nationals and organisations in this country." Some very limited "cultural propaganda" activities were undertaken in the early 1930's, but official expenditures in this area amounted to only a few hundred pounds per annum. At the same time, however, attempts were being made to fully utilize all the available resources and voluntary organisations. With the active support and encouragement of the Foreign Office, particularly Rex Leeper of the News Department, a group of business men and educationalists met in London in November 1934 to consider means of furthering the teaching of

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2 Quoted in the "Introductory Memorandum" to Correspondence and Relative Papers respecting Cultural Propaganda, Foreign Office, 1935, FO 431/1, p. 1.

3 Ibid.