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THE FOREIGN OFFICE AND BRITISH PROPAGANDA DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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In July 1918 it was the considered opinion of Lord Northcliffe that propaganda and diplomacy were incompatible. When, only five months earlier, Northcliffe had accepted Lloyd George's invitation to take charge of the newly created department of enemy propaganda, his appointment, coupled with that of Lord Beaverbrook as Britain's first minister of information, had held out the promise of a new phase in the efficiency and co-ordination of Britain's conduct of official propaganda in foreign countries. It was then, in February 1918, that the Foreign Office had finally been forced to relinquish its control over such work. However, the creation of the two new departments had produced an intolerable situation. After three years of inter-departmental rivalry and squabbling over the conduct of propaganda overseas, Whitehall closed ranks on Beaverbrook and Northcliffe and united behind the Foreign Office in opposition to any further transference of related duties into their hands. Now, after five months of continued obstruction, Northcliffe expressed the view that:

As a people we do not understand propaganda ways... Propaganda is advertising and diplomacy is no more likely to understand advertising than advertising is likely to understand diplomacy.¹

This interesting, if questionable, observation by the 'Napoleon of Fleet Street' was the verdict of a man who was becoming increasingly disillusioned with his work after a series of major clashes between those recently entrusted with the control of British overseas propaganda and those traditionally responsible for Britain's relations with other countries.

Moreover, if Northcliffe's experience had not been a happy one, that of Lord Beaverbrook had arguably been worse. The minister of information recalled that, in the months following his appointment, he found himself engaged in 'a remorseless battle... without compensations'² and complained that he had to employ a full-time secretary 'simply and solely for the purpose of conducting the diplomatic correspondence with the Foreign Office, as with a neighbouring and none too friendly power'.³ The implication to be drawn from the

¹ Northcliffe to C. J. Phillips, 12 July 1918. Cited in G. Harmsworth and R. Pound, *Northcliffe* (London, 1959), p. 653.

² Lord Beaverbrook, *Men and power, 1917–18* (London, 1956), p. 290.

³ A. J. P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London, 1972), cited p. 145.

complaints of both men was that, if British propaganda was at all successful in helping to bring about the end of the war, which they maintained it did, little credit for this was due to the attitude of the Foreign Office.

Although it is impossible to measure in any exact terms how far these views were justified, it was undoubtedly true that the Foreign Office continued to prove obdurate throughout the final year of war. Why should this have been so? Why did the ministry of information and the department of enemy propaganda at Crewe House provide the focal point for the animosity of Whitehall? What were the underlying sources of friction? Moreover, why did the Foreign Office lose its control over the work in the first place? In order to answer such questions one must examine the wartime origins and early development of British official involvement in an activity which, for all practical purposes, began in August 1914.

The necessity for British official propaganda in foreign countries was initially recognized as a response to the anti-British activities of other countries. Shortly after the outbreak of the war, it became apparent to the cabinet that a constructive effort was required to counter the detrimental effects of German propaganda upon British interests and prestige, particularly in neutral countries.⁴ There was, however, no precedent nor did there exist any blueprint for such an eventuality; having entered the war completely unprepared for the control and influence of foreign opinion, the government was forced to improvise the necessary machinery hurriedly.

The initial plans for the conduct of propaganda abroad were formulated in an atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty. The Foreign Office, as the department of state primarily responsible for relations with other countries, appeared to be the proper authority for the supervision of any propaganda conducted abroad, and among the first tentative steps was the creation of a small section designed to meet the increased demand for news and information concerning a war fought on foreign soil from the British and other newspaper correspondents in London. This section comprised a nucleus staff of two or three permanent officials and soon came to be known as the news department of the Foreign Office. It was originally made directly answerable to the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, but was, before the end of 1914, placed under the general supervision of the parliamentary under-secretary of state for foreign affairs, at that time Frederick Acland.⁵

Progress was cautious and gradual, based on experience gained as the work developed. In the early months of the war the work received only reluctant consideration, perhaps because it marked a significant departure from estab-

⁴ H. H. Asquith to the king, 31 Aug. 1914. P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice], CAB 41/35/38.

⁵ H. O. Lee, 'British propaganda during the great war, 1914-18', PRO, INF 4/4A. The exact dates remain vague and even this document, the 'official' history written shortly after the war but before the papers relating to First World War propaganda were destroyed in 1920, fails to throw light on the early chronological developments. For a detailed study of the news department see Philip M. Taylor, '"The projection of Britain": British overseas publicity and propaganda, 1914-39, with particular reference to the news department of the foreign office', Leeds University Ph.D. thesis, 1978.

lished diplomatic tradition and, as such, was viewed with distaste and suspicion, or possibly because of the short-war illusion. Nevertheless, from an early stage the news department expressed a preference for 'information' work, concerning itself more with the dissemination of news abroad and the cultivation of relations with the British and foreign press than with the actual production and distribution of propaganda material such as leaflets and pamphlets. More direct methods of propaganda involving attacks upon the aims and actions of the enemy and the presentation of the British case were left to the various unofficial patriotic committees⁶ and, in particular, with two semi-official propaganda organizations which had meanwhile come into being, the Neutral Press Committee and the War Propaganda Bureau at Wellington House.

These two organizations were established independently of the Foreign Office arrangements. The Neutral Press Committee was formed under the auspices of the Home Office on 11 September 1914 in connexion with the Press Bureau.⁷ A fortnight later the committee was placed under the able direction of G. H. Mair, the recently retired assistant editor of the *Daily Chronicle*. His work was essentially concerned with analysing the neutral press, promoting the interchange of news between English and foreign newspapers, the promotion of English newspaper sales in neutral countries, the postal distribution of propaganda articles and, before long, the inauguration of a wireless news service.⁸

Earlier in September 1914, Prime Minister Asquith had invited his close friend Charles Masterman, chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster and chairman of the National Insurance Commission, to take charge of the production and distribution side of the work, and Masterman began to establish his literary bureau at Wellington House. Working in strict secrecy under the aegis of the Foreign Office, Wellington House rapidly developed into the most active of all the propaganda departments, arranging for the production and overseas dissemination of books, pamphlets and periodicals as well as photographs, lantern slides and picture postcards.⁹ By June 1915 the bureau was producing its own illustrated periodicals printed in foreign languages.¹⁰ Extreme care was taken to disguise the source of all material produced in order to preserve the credibility of the views expressed, a factor which was of particular importance in that most vital neutral country, the United States of America.¹¹

⁶ For an excellent review of the numerous unofficial propaganda bodies see J. D. Squires, *British propaganda at home and in the United States from 1914 to 1917* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), pp. 16-25.

⁷ The work of the Press Bureau has been described by Sir Edward Cook in his *The press in wartime* (London, 1920) but awaits a modern study.

⁸ G. H. Mair, 'Report on [the] propaganda of [the] Neutral Press Organisation', undated. PRO, FO 371/2555, 12467: memorandum by J. A. Simon, 'The Neutral Press Committee', 8 Oct. 1915. CAB 37/135/14.

⁹ 'The activities of Wellington House during the great war', undated, unsigned. INF 4/1B.

¹⁰ Lee, 'British propaganda during the great war, 1914-18', INF 4/4A.

¹¹ For a more detailed examination of the work of Wellington House see M. L. Sanders, 'Wellington House and British propaganda during the First World War', *Historical Journal*, xviii, 1 (1975), 119-46.

With the rapid expansion of propaganda work during the first year of the war, it soon became important for the news department to establish and maintain close contacts with both the Neutral Press Committee and Wellington House. Indeed, before long it began to serve as a general co-ordinating centre, furnishing them with advice, information and material obtained in co-operation with other government departments that began to take an active interest in the work. Apart from purely press activities, the news department was also responsible for the daily transmission of news telegrams to diplomatic and consular missions, which had instructions to make use of them for purposes of publication as they thought suitable to local conditions.¹² In addition, the missions were further supplied with special news telegrams sent on the occasion of, say, an important speech by a cabinet minister, along with any other material produced by the other propaganda agencies. In this way, the diplomatic and consular services served as the news department's publicity agents in the field, although special areas required special arrangements. In the United States, for example, great care was taken from an early stage to avoid the appearance of a propaganda organization in order to avoid offending American sensitivities any further than German propaganda was already doing.¹³ In Russia, the Anglo-Russian Commission was established at Petrograd in December 1915 to receive telegrams, articles and bulletins relayed by the news department with a view to securing publication in the Russian press.¹⁴ Elsewhere, local committees of British residents and anglophiles were established to help missions distribute propaganda material in both allied and neutral countries.¹⁵

The news department further advised the Press Bureau on all matters of censorship connected with foreign affairs and received any questionable material for final decision.¹⁶ However, this work proved to be time-consuming, and the effort required was found to be generally disproportionate to the results achieved. There were, inevitably, some early difficulties which may be put down to inexperience on the part of permanent officials unfamiliar with the peculiar demands of the British press. Before long, Geoffrey Dawson (né Robinson), editor of *The Times*, complained:

Why in the world the P[ress] B[ureau] or the Foreign Office should always be trying to score off the newspapers, I cannot for the life of me imagine.¹⁷

Similarly, the Foreign Office frequently had occasion for dissatisfaction with the behaviour of the British press, the inevitable result of a government

¹² Unsigned memorandum on the news department, 29 Jan. 1915. FO 371/2555, 12467.

¹³ One official observed in 1914: 'The contumely with which the German propaganda has been visited shows very clearly that Americans would dislike any kind of machinery for the manipulation of their public opinion.' A. Willert to G. Robinson, 20 Nov. 1914. Willert MSS, T[he] T[imes] A[rchive].

¹⁴ Foreign Office memorandum, 'British propaganda in allied and neutral countries', 20 Dec. 1916. CAB 24/3, G. 102.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ J. Tilley and S. Gaselee, *The Foreign Office* (London, 1933), pp. 279-83.

¹⁷ Robinson to Willert, 31 Dec. 1914. Willert MSS, T.T.A.

department utilizing the publicity potential and reputation abroad of a medium which cherished liberal traditions of freedom to criticize. In October 1914 the foreign secretary was recorded as having become increasingly alarmed at receiving,

almost daily, accumulating evidence of the harm which is done in neutral countries by articles which have appeared in the British Press. He wishes to have the attention of Editors drawn to this evil, which undoubtedly undoes much of the work which he endeavours to do with a view to securing a friendly attitude on the part of neutrals.¹⁸

A warning issued to the press on these lines merely served to enhance tension, and Fleet Street continued to resent the incursions of the censorship upon its jealously guarded freedom¹⁹ until October 1915 when, following the enlightened appeals of Lord Robert Cecil, the political censorship of material relating to foreign affairs was discontinued.²⁰ This departure heralded a new period of frankness and mutual co-operation between the Foreign Office and the press. It also left the news department with more time to concentrate upon propaganda, although it did continue to advise the chief cable and postal censors at the War Office and naval censor at the Admiralty until the end of 1917.²¹

Given the uncertainty with which the work had begun, and the somewhat casual manner in which the work developed, it is hardly surprising that British propaganda during the first eighteen months of the war was fraught with innumerable difficulties. Robert Donald²² subsequently observed:

The system was started without any policy having been defined, or any clear conception arrived at about the way propaganda should be carried on. Mr Mair drifted between the Home Office, Press Bureau and the Foreign Office – which began to take an interest in the work without being altogether reconciled to it.²³

Yet if the Foreign Office as a whole remained uneasy about the news department's growing involvement in propaganda, it was quite prepared to leave the more overt or direct methods in the hands of outside organizations, such as Wellington House, provided it retained ultimate control over questions of policy. This became increasingly more apparent during 1916 and 1917, when in the face of mounting criticism, the Foreign Office tenaciously fought to retain its control over the existing system.

As government departments other than the Foreign Office were increasingly

¹⁸ Unsigned memorandum, 27 Oct. 1914. FO 371/2555, 12467.

¹⁹ It was later noted that 'in the early days of propaganda, even Westminster was found to be too far from Fleet Street'. General notes on propaganda, undated, unsigned. INF 4/1B.

²⁰ Cecil, then responsible for the news department's work in his capacity as parliamentary under-secretary of state for foreign affairs, had insisted that 'the Foreign Office could allow very considerable latitude to journalists, and would even go so far as to abandon any preliminary submission of matter connected with foreign policy at all'. Memorandum by J. A. Simon, 27 Oct. 1915. CAB 37/136/34.

²¹ For further details see Rear Admiral Sir Douglas Brownrigg, *Indiscretions of the naval censor* (London, 1920), ch. III.

²² Robert Donald: Editor, *Daily Chronicle*, 1904–18; appointed by Lloyd George to investigate British propaganda organization in 1917. ²³ Donald to Lloyd George, 9 Jan. 1917. INF 4/4B.

drawn into greater involvement with the mechanics of propaganda, there developed problems of overlapping, duplication of effort and a general lack of co-ordination. The result was that the system was characterized by inefficiency and inter-departmental jealousies – factors which proved disastrous in work which required continuity and speedy action. It was this situation which prompted the director of special intelligence, Brigadier-General C. R. Cockerill, to urge on 29 November 1915 that the war of words should now demand ‘as much attention as the economic war’.²⁴ This plea provided the signal for a series of clashes between the Foreign Office on the one hand and the service departments on the other.

On 10 December 1915 the Army Council brought to the attention of the Foreign Office ‘the multiplicity of organisations concerned and the lack of one central controlling authority [which] prove[s] a serious bar to effective action’, and proposed an inter-departmental conference to discuss the means by which efficiency could be improved.²⁵ The War Office was thinking in terms of entrusting the work to an executive committee under the leadership of ‘a Civil Servant of position and standing’. Hubert Montgomery, who had been involved in the news department’s work from the outset, admitted the need for more co-ordination but dismissed outright the War Office proposals:

I should have thought the Army Council had plenty of other (from their point of view) more important matters to consider: moreover in the one respect in which they could really have aided us in combating enemy propaganda i.e. in giving facilities for neutral and allied correspondents to visit the front and centres of military interest, and in supplying news, they have signally failed.²⁶

Sir Claud Schuster, Masterman’s chief executive officer at Wellington House, supported Montgomery but was even less generous in his opinion of the proposals:

... I must say that I find it sickening that the War Office and the Admiralty, after pursuing a policy of deliberate obstruction for about seventeen months, should finally complain that the policy has produced its natural results, and then propose so wholly absurd an expedient as that described in their letter.²⁷

Elsewhere, Schuster maintained that if the pro-German press in neutral countries was being better served with news than were those newspapers sympathetic to the allies this was not, as the Army Council maintained, due to any lack of effort on the part of the three main propaganda bodies but rather to the strict censorship insisted upon by the War Office and Admiralty combined with their reluctance to comply with continued Foreign Office requests for the extension of facilities to the press.²⁸ This line of argument became the stock reply to all subsequent criticism.

²⁴ A history of the work of M.I. 7, 1914–19. INF 4/1B.

²⁵ Sir R. Brade to Foreign Office, 10 Dec. 1915. FO 371/2579, 188244.

²⁶ Minute by Montgomery, 10 Dec. 1915. FO 371/2579, 188244.

²⁷ Schuster to Montgomery, 13 Dec. 1915. FO 371/2579, 190927.

²⁸ Schuster to Sir E. Troup, 13 Dec. 1915. FO 371/2579, 190927.

It was, at least in part, a justifiable retort. The news department had been trying since the start of the war, but without success, to persuade the military authorities to permit journalists to visit the front and report on conditions for themselves rather than having to accept the unsatisfactory coverage provided by the 'official eye-witnesses'.²⁹ Similarly, the Admiralty had only allowed newspapermen to visit the fleet for the first time in October 1915.³⁰ However, the problem derived not merely from the Foreign Office's continued emphasis on press propaganda which was, by itself, limited. For, as Schuster wrote,

In any circumstances the course of military events would have rendered it easier for the Germans than for us to influence neutral opinion through the Press. The early efforts to convince neutrals that we were right were completely successful, partly because the work was, in my opinion, well done, but far more, because we had a good case. Neutral opinion is now interested, not in the cause, but in the probable results of the war, and for obvious reasons, until we have a change in the military situation, it is far more difficult to explain that we are likely to win, than to explain that we were just.³¹

The Foreign Office was learning two of the basic needs of successful propaganda, namely that no amount of words, however well argued, could alter the harsh realities of military facts, and that its work would continue to suffer in the absence of a coherent declaration of British war aims.

On 14 December the Foreign Office informed the Army Council that it had already recognized the need for improved co-ordination³² but would make the appropriate changes internally; there was accordingly no point in convening an inter-departmental conference.³³ The terms of the Foreign Office reply sought to check any further incursions by the service departments into a field which it now considered its own:

... the direction in which both the War Office and the Admiralty can be of the greatest assistance in influencing opinion in neutral and allied countries is in affording as many facilities as possible for newspaper correspondents to visit or accompany the British forces in the field ... and in issuing Military and Naval news as frequently and as fully as military and naval considerations will permit.³⁴

The War Office, in particular, resented this allotted subsidiary role especially at a time when it envisaged greater involvement in the work through the creation of a special propaganda and censorship division known as M.I. 7, as part of the overall reorganization of the Imperial General Staff.³⁵ The Foreign

²⁹ P. Knightley, *The first casualty; the war correspondent as hero, propagandist and myth maker from the Crimea to Vietnam* (London, 1975), pp. 80–112; Brig.-Gen. J. Charteris, *At G.H.Q.* (London, 1931), pp. 79, 94, 114–16; C. Hazlehurst, *Politicians at war* (London, 1971), pp. 147–51.

³⁰ Brownrigg described Montgomery and Mair as resembling 'eager bridegrooms, ever pressing and coaxing me, the elusive bride, to grant them more and yet more favours in the shape of permits to visit the fleet'. *Indiscretions of the naval censor*, p. 79.

³¹ Schuster to Troup, 13 Dec. 1915. FO 371/2579, 190927.

³² This was, in fact, accurate. See Montgomery's proposals of 2 Oct. and 6 Dec. 1915. FO 371/2579, 190927.

³³ Maurice de Bunsen to War Office, 14 Dec. 1915. FO 371/2579, 190927.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ A history of the work of M.I. 7, 1914–19. INF 4/1B.

Office's response also ran counter to the conclusions of a pre-war investigation by a C.I.D. planning sub-committee, inspired by a War Office initiative in the wake of the Fashoda crisis of 1898, which had considered means of preventing the leakage and publication of military and naval information likely to be of use to the enemy in time of war.³⁶ It was therefore not prepared to let the matter rest here.

Meanwhile, the Foreign Office set about putting its own house in order. On 16 December Montgomery sounded out the Home Office as to the possibility of rectifying the anomalous position of Mair's Neutral Press Committee by transferring responsibility for its work into the hands of the Foreign Office. This, he maintained, would not only provide greater efficiency and economy but would also ensure 'more security that what is done is consistent with the interests of our foreign policy'.³⁷ The home secretary, Sir John Simon, proved unenthusiastic about the proposal despite his admission that:

We have never considered him [Mair] as in any sense acting under our directions, and in fact, so far as his operations are guided by any Government Department, it is by the Foreign Office.³⁸

Instead, Simon wished to see a return to the original concept of Mair's position whereby he would act on his own responsibility 'and that the Government should not be bound by anything he might have done'.³⁹ Although he was prepared to discuss this further, the implication of Simon's reply was that, in order to continue the government's policy of secrecy in the conduct of official propaganda and the disguising of the source of any views expressed, the Neutral Press Committee should remain on the Home Office (Secret Service) Vote.

Cecil was not convinced. He pointed out to Simon that much of Mair's work was identical with that of the news department and, despite good relations with him, 'as things stand we cannot and have no right to give directions to him as to what exactly he should do and what we should do. The result is a certain want of unity and loss of effort'.⁴⁰ He further assured Simon that Mair was not simply a pawn in the dispute with the War Office:

Nothing is further from my thoughts than to try and filch some work from the Home Office and give it to the Foreign Office, and if it were practicable I should be only too glad to push the whole of the propaganda business on to your shoulders, but the difficulty is that, since it affects foreign countries, it necessarily must be done either by us or under our guidance.⁴¹

While not seeing the need for an inter-departmental conference, Cecil none

³⁶ Report and proceedings of a standing sub-committee's enquiry regarding press and postal censorship in time of war, press censorship, 31 Jan. 1913. CAB 38/23/6. See also P. Towle, 'The debate on wartime censorship in Britain, 1902-1914' in B. Bond and I. Roy (eds.), *War and society: a yearbook of military history* (London, 1975).

³⁷ Memorandum by Montgomery, 6 Dec. 1915, enclosed in Montgomery to S. W. Harris, 16 Dec. 1915. FO 371/2579, 200406.

³⁸ Simon to Cecil, 20 Dec. 1915. FO 371/2579, 200406.

⁴⁰ Cecil to Simon, 22 Dec. 1915. FO 371/2579, 200406.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

the less agreed to attend if one were called, but he saw no point in asking Nicolson, the permanent under-secretary, to accompany him 'because he really does not know or care anything about news or propaganda'.⁴²

On 26 January 1916 Cecil reluctantly attended the long-awaited inter-departmental conference at the Home Office presided over by the recently appointed home secretary, Sir Herbert Samuel.⁴³ The meeting proved to be a shambles and degenerated into a fiercely fought contest between the War Office and the Foreign Office. It was unanimously agreed that greater co-ordination was a vital prerequisite to further progress but it was the different proposals for achieving that aim which created the tension. However, Cecil successfully resisted a War Office demand for the creation of a separate organization for the central control of all government propaganda under the direction of a 'responsible head – e.g. Lord Onslow'⁴⁴ and supervised by an advisory committee. He achieved this by convincing those present that the Foreign Office was already in possession of adequate machinery and that the necessary improvements would be made internally.⁴⁵ Masterman informed Cecil a few days later:

Heartiest congratulations to you and the Foreign Office and Grey for having slaughtered your enemies last Wednesday in what I think is the most effective destruction that any Office has given to any of its critics during the eighteen months of war.⁴⁶

Victory, however, proved to be short-lived.

The dispute between the War Office and the Foreign Office essentially centred on their different interpretations of propaganda techniques. Cecil maintained that the problem was merely one of increasing the quality and quantity of news from the various government departments supplied to the press by the news department. On the other hand, Sir Reginald Brade, representing the War Office at the conference, did not consider the Foreign Office approach sufficient to counter the intensive German propaganda. 'The really important thing', he insisted, 'was not the facts, but the way in which they were presented.'⁴⁷ This interpretation of propaganda was alien to the Foreign Office conception, and the insistence on the value of accurate news and information constituted the basic principle on which all subsequent news

⁴² Ibid. This statement reveals an important point. In the first half of the war, any reference to the 'Foreign Office attitude' concerning propaganda really means a small group of officials centred on Montgomery and Cecil. Grey and Nicolson rarely played an active role in the work. Their successors, however, Balfour and Hardinge, were more prepared to involve themselves, although perhaps more by force of circumstance than through personal choice.

⁴³ Samuel had succeeded Simon following the latter's resignation over the issue of conscription on New Year's Day 1916. It appears that he was more amenable than Simon on the transference of Mair to the Foreign Office. Cecil to Samuel, 21 Jan. 1916. FO 371/2835, 17981.

⁴⁴ Lord Onslow had been permanent private secretary to Sir Edward Grey and Sir Arthur Nicolson, 1911–13, but was at this time a member of M.I. 7.

⁴⁵ Record of proceedings of a conference at the Home Office, 26 Jan. 1916. INF 4/9.

⁴⁶ Masterman to Cecil, 31 Jan. 1916. FO 371/2835, 20631.

⁴⁷ Record of proceedings, 26 Jan. 1916, INF 4/9.

department activity was based. But it was a conception which was ultimately to lose the Foreign Office its control over wartime propaganda.

For the moment, however, the Foreign Office was held responsible for the improvement of its existing system. Two days after the Home Office conference, Cecil submitted a scheme for increased efficiency and co-ordination of the available machinery. The main proposal was for the appointment of 'news officers' by the various interested government departments to help improve the supply of official information to the Foreign Office machinery.⁴⁸ The news department was subsequently reorganized in such a way as to make it an appropriate nucleus for the conduct of British overseas propaganda. Co-ordination with the Press Bureau was also improved, to aid domestic publicity.⁴⁹ After some initial reservations caused by fear of losing some of its status,⁵⁰ Masterman was reassured that Wellington House would be expected to continue the initiative it had already begun,⁵¹ and Mair's committee was amalgamated into the news department.⁵² In February 1916 Lord Newton became nominal head of the improved organization,⁵³ and it seems that he was appointed partly 'to lend the prestige of a great name to the work'⁵⁴ and partly to appease the War Office desire for a 'responsible head' without actually appointing a War Office man. Nevertheless, with the aid of Montgomery as his capable assistant, and with a wealth of talent on his staff, including Miles Lampson (in charge of film propaganda), the poet Alfred Noyes, John Buchan, J. D. Gregory and Stephen Gaselee, Newton expanded the work along imaginative lines.⁵⁵

Despite the visible improvement both in organization and in the range of material produced, the War Office remained dissatisfied with the system which was, it claimed, merely a continuation of the former arrangements on a grander scale but with all the inherent deficiencies remaining. The War Office considered that Cecil's scheme made 'no serious attempt to provide what is required' and fell 'far short of the essential minimum'.⁵⁶ Grave doubts were expressed about the Foreign Office's 'very limited conception of the realities of the case':

Until the idea is grasped of combating enemy propaganda not merely by news, which it is impolitic to fabricate, but also and even mainly by views, which it is quite possible to propagate, it seems hopeless to expect that any progress will be made towards designing an organization suited to the necessities of the case.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ Memorandum by Cecil, 28 Jan. 1916. FO 371/2835, 17981.

⁴⁹ E. T. Cook to Montgomery, 31 Jan. 1916; Montgomery to Cook, 1 Feb. 1916. FO 371/2835, 20630.

⁵⁰ Masterman to Cecil, 31 Jan. 1916. FO 371/2835, 20631.

⁵¹ Montgomery to Masterman, 31 Jan. 1916. FO 371/2835, 20631.

⁵² Minutes by Cecil, 6 and 7 Feb. 1916. FO 371/2835, 21459.

⁵³ Lord Newton, *Retrospection* (London, 1941), p. 218.

⁵⁴ J. D. Squires, *British propaganda*, p. 33.

⁵⁵ It is from this point that the administrative records of the news department begin, and for the remaining two and a half years of the war there exist about 250 volumes in the FO 395 series at the PRO.

⁵⁶ War Office memorandum on press propaganda, 1 Feb. 1916. INF 4/9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Following the reorganization of the General Staff in February 1916, and the improvements made to the War Office propaganda machinery, tension with the Foreign Office increased steadily, with the efficiency of British propaganda the major casualty. The squabbling continued throughout the summer. In July General Charteris, of the intelligence branch of Haig's general staff, observed:

Both the Foreign Office and the War Office are worrying a great deal about propaganda, particularly in France, and there seems to be great confusion at home as to who is responsible... The trouble about propaganda work at home appears to be that while the Foreign Office wants to publish favourable news, the War Office wants to withhold anything that tends to show that the Germans are hard hit... To the outside world there is no doubt that we have tended to discourage confidence in ourselves by always holding back that which is favourable.⁵⁸

He also commented on 'a little war within a war between the War Office and the Foreign Office all about films',⁵⁹ and concluded that 'the trouble is that the Foreign Office, Home Office, War Office, Admiralty and Masterman's absurd committee are all working separately and each is jealous of the other'.⁶⁰

As criticism of the Foreign Office continued to mount and gain wider currency, so also did the pressure for increased centralization. But the Foreign Office only became more determined than ever to retain its control over propaganda. The situation was not helped by differences of opinion within the Foreign Office itself. For example, Miles Lampson wrote to Montgomery:

To be quite frank, the situation is *not* in hand at present. I know you disagree with me: but my opinion remains and *will* remain the same, until some more methodical organisation is working than is now the case.⁶¹

Montgomery's reply illustrates the *impasse* reached:

I am afraid we will have to agree to differ about this. I don't know in what respect the situation is not in hand! It is true that there is no one stately building that one can point to and say 'That is the Maison de la Presse where all these things are done' but *results* are the main point and results are not at all unsatisfactory.⁶²

Had the Foreign Office been more prepared to accept that parts of the system were deficient and to rectify the faults, it might have served to disarm the pressure for reform. Instead the inflexible stance adopted merely served to reinforce the belief of its critics that it was incapable of effective responsibility for propaganda work.

The dispute reached a dramatic climax in December 1916 when Lloyd

⁵⁸ Charteris, *At G.H.Q.*, diary entry for 22 July 1916. See also exchange of letters between Montgomery and Cockerill of 11 and 12 July 1916. FO 371/2835, 136247.

⁵⁹ Charteris, diary entry for 2 Aug. 1916. Miles Lampson, commenting upon the 'incredible and discreditable' lack of public interest in war films, informed Charteris that 'all the people want to see is Charlie Chaplin'. *Ibid.* p. 166.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* diary for 19 Sept. 1916.

⁶¹ Lamson to Montgomery, 28 July 1916. FO 371/2835, 184995.

⁶² Minute by Montgomery, undated. FO 371/2835, 184995. See also the undated War Office memorandum enclosed in Macdonagh to Newton, 14 Sept. 1916, and Newton's reply (not sent) of 18 Sept. FO 371/2835, 193134.

George became prime minister. Indeed, at the very first meeting of the new war cabinet, it was decided that the whole question of propaganda required immediate attention.⁶³ This decision provided the signal for a renewed campaign by each of the government departments principally involved in the dispute, each striving to secure cabinet approval for its own particular views on propaganda at the expense of the other. The Admiralty considered that hitherto British propaganda had been too defensive and passive in nature, and advocated greater activity in the United States under the general supervision of the naval attachés.⁶⁴ The War Office once again reiterated its scheme for a central propaganda bureau which would unite under one independent head all the various information sources, producing houses and distributing centres. It was further suggested that special officers should be appointed in the various countries in order to relieve the pressure of work on the diplomatic, consular and secret services, particularly as there were certain activities 'which are hardly compatible with the dignity of His Majesty's Representatives abroad, and which, therefore, they cannot carry out satisfactorily'.⁶⁵

The Foreign Office argument was the longest and the most comprehensive. Far from constituting a mere apologia for past errors, the Foreign Office memorandum presented a thorough and convincing defence of the existing machinery and methods employed while being, at the same time, a persuasive critique of the proposals to establish a separate propaganda authority, unless, of course, that authority was to be placed under the aegis of the Foreign Office. After indicating that the chief difficulty with which the news department had to contend was the 'tradition of silence [of government departments] only very slowly breaking down', the author, Montgomery, wrote:

A hankering after an institution on the lines of the *Maison de la Presse* in Paris has from time to time manifested itself in some quarters, but I am convinced, after an experience dating from the early days of the war, that the general control of propaganda in Allied and Neutral countries should continue to rest with the Foreign Office, and that the headquarters should be at the Foreign Office, as it is now. It is that Office which is concerned with most of the current questions about which the foreign, and especially the American correspondents want daily information... The correspondents... will come much more freely to the Foreign Office, which is the natural place for them to seek information and facilities from, than they will to an Office known to be established for propaganda purposes.⁶⁶

Moreover, he continued,

It would be quite unworkable to have our various organisations in foreign countries independent of the Embassies and Legations, which would necessarily be the case if they were placed under the control of a separate authority in London.⁶⁷

⁶³ CAB 23/1, 1(4). 9 Dec. 1916.

⁶⁴ 'British propaganda in allied and neutral countries; Admiralty notes on the use of the press in the United States of America', 20 Dec. 1916. CAB 24/3, G. 101.

⁶⁵ 'Note by the General Staff on the organisation of propaganda', 23 Dec. 1916. CAB 24/3, G. 103.

⁶⁶ Foreign Office memorandum, 'British propaganda in allied and neutral countries', 20 Dec. 1916. CAB 24/3, G. 102.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Robert Cecil endorsed these views entirely, and in submitting the Foreign Office case to the cabinet he made five general observations based on his experience of the work conducted so far. (1) Official propaganda known to be such was 'almost useless' with the exception of published documents and State papers. (2) 'It is much easier to do harm than good by propaganda', in other words, great care was required at all times. (3) 'Our national habit of self-depreciation is a handicap. Moreover, in many countries we are suspected of arrogance and the most moderate criticism of foreign countries is, for this and other reasons, bitterly resented.' (4) It remained important to avoid the appearance of propaganda in the United States where the only plan was 'to do good by stealth'. (5) 'Lastly, in wartime, it is the facts that count, not words. All we can do to help by propaganda is to let foreigners know what is actually happening. If the events are discouraging, they will be discouraged. No doubt we may also offend people by stupid observations, but we can never explain away disagreeable facts.'⁶⁸ Here, in these five basic guidelines, lies the key to the Foreign Office's attitude towards the conduct of propaganda.

The arguments of the three principal government departments were not considered by the war cabinet until 24 January 1917,⁶⁹ by which time they had already been pre-empted by a cabinet decision of some three weeks earlier to accept 'in principle' the creation of a separate propaganda organization to take control of the work.⁷⁰ Lloyd George had chosen to rely on the objectivity of a man outside the civil service and had invited his friend Robert Donald to investigate the entire situation and make his recommendations.⁷¹ Donald's report was ready a week later. He did not feel that the 'reorganization' of spring 1916 had introduced the necessary improvements, and claimed that there was still a lack of co-ordination. While praising the activities of Wellington House and of several news department officials, Donald nevertheless considered that Lord Newton had not proved a wise choice: 'He is not solely occupied with the work,⁷² and he does not profess to have any knowledge of publicity methods.' The report proved highly critical of the existing arrangements, thereby vindicating the views of the War Office, and also expressed doubts as to the competence of permanent officials at the Foreign Office to supervise an activity for which they had little experience and flair and which required a degree of freedom not always available in Whitehall. 'Personally,' he wrote, 'I think the less they have to do with it the better.'⁷³

Donald's report further confirmed the War Office belief that the only solution was to establish a separate organization with an independent head. On Lord Milner's recommendation John Buchan, who had served as Newton's liaison officer with G.H.Q. in France, was appointed head of the department of information established at the end of January 1917⁷⁴ which, although

⁶⁸ Note by Cecil, 29 Dec. 1916. CAB 24/3, G. 102.

⁶⁹ CAB 23/1, 43(7).

⁷⁰ CAB 23/1 29(9). 2 Jan. 1917.

⁷¹ Lloyd George to Donald, 1 Jan. 1917. INF 4/4B.

⁷² Newton was also head of the prisoners of war department of the Foreign Office.

⁷³ Donald to Lloyd George, 9 Jan. 1917. INF 4/4B.

⁷⁴ Donald to C. P. Scott, 29 May 1917. INF 4/7.

independent, was instructed to maintain 'the closest possible association with the Foreign Office in regard to the policy to be pursued'.⁷⁵

Once presented with this *fait accompli*, the Foreign Office changed its tactics in an attempt to salvage as much control over the new department as was possible. Hubert Montgomery insisted that the Foreign Office should command the major share of responsibility for the new organization because, he wrote,

The general policy of propaganda in Allied and Neutral Countries must necessarily run parallel with the work of the Foreign Office and be subject to the Foreign Secretary, and it is essential that the person who is responsible for the administration of propaganda work should be in constant touch with the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of Blockade, or with those carrying out their directions.⁷⁶

Eric Drummond, Balfour's private secretary, enlisted top-level support for this view⁷⁷ and the foreign secretary submitted Montgomery's observations to the war cabinet, stating that they deserved careful consideration 'before any fundamental severance is effected between those who are responsible for conducting foreign policy and those who are responsible for talking about it'.⁷⁸

The outcome was almost a classic example of compromise. In theory the department of information was an independent, centralized propaganda bureau directly responsible to the prime minister but working in close contact with the Foreign Office. In practice, however, the department effectively functioned as an annex of the Foreign Office. In constructing his new organization, Buchan was fully aware of his dependence on the facilities and co-operation which would be extended to him by the Foreign Office. The department was divided into four main sections: administrative; the literary branch (at Wellington House); the press and cinema division (at the House of Lords); and intelligence (at 82 Victoria Street).⁷⁹ Buchan, himself a former news department official, chose Montgomery as his assistant and as head of the administrative division – the most important of the four sections. Buchan further located his headquarters in the Foreign Office building, where the news department effectively functioned as the administrative division. The cabinet approved Buchan's scheme on 20 February 1917.⁸⁰ A much more significant indication of the Foreign Office's continued influence was that the work abroad remained in the hands of diplomatic missions and local patriotic committees under their supervision. With only a minimum of fuss, therefore, continuity in personnel and facilities was largely preserved. Indeed, far from constituting any radical departure from previous arrangements, the department of information was, in effect, merely a streamlined version of the original model.

While it is undoubtedly true that the department of information did benefit

⁷⁵ CAB 23/1, 43(7). 24 Jan. 1917.

⁷⁶ Note by Montgomery, 3 Feb. 1917. PRO, FO 800/384, Pp/17/2.

⁷⁷ Drummond to Balfour, 3 Feb. 1917. FO 800/384, Pp/17/3; Drummond to Cecil (now minister for blockade), 4 Feb. 1917. FO 800/384, Pp/17/4.

⁷⁸ Note by Balfour, undated. CAB 24/6, G.T. 2.

⁷⁹ Note by J. Buchan, 'Propaganda – a department of information', 3 Feb. 1917. CAB 24/3, G. 128.

⁸⁰ CAB 23/1, 75(13).

from the lessons of the earlier experience to increase efficiency and co-ordination and to generally improve the quality and quantity of Britain's overseas propaganda, it none the less ultimately failed to rectify the basic deficiencies inherent in the system. The department continued to operate from four or five different buildings scattered about Whitehall. The absence of a ministerial head to champion the cause of propaganda in the war cabinet was also a serious handicap, the more so because Buchan lacked the necessary authority and prestige to deal with other ministries on an equal basis. Moreover, one of Buchan's major innovations, the advisory committee to the department of information, proved to be a constant source of criticism, although admittedly this was largely of Buchan's own making. This committee, composed of leading newspapermen and publicity experts such as Robert Donald, C. P. Scott, Lord Burnham and Lord Northcliffe (who was subsequently replaced by Lord Beaverbrook), had originally been appointed to provide Buchan with a 'cabinet'. Buchan chose not to consult it, preferring instead to receive advice on questions of policy from the Foreign Office. Donald, in fact, soon became dissatisfied with the new arrangements for which he had been partially responsible complaining that

the propaganda headquarters are still at the Foreign Office, and are more entrenched there than ever... Mr Buchan is under the Foreign Office almost as much, I believe, as if he were an official, and I do not think this is desirable.⁸¹

Even following the personal intervention of Lloyd George on behalf of the committee,⁸² the position remained unsatisfactory and criticism of the department of information as a whole continued to mount until the end of the year.⁸³

Buchan was well aware that the new arrangements left much to be desired but claimed that, although directly answerable to the prime minister, he did not in fact have direct access to him. Accordingly, in September 1917, following constant appeals for ministerial representation for the department of information, the war cabinet decided that Sir Edward Carson 'should extend his sphere of supervision and act as Minister in charge of all propaganda, whether at home or abroad'.⁸⁴ Carson, however, did not prove to be a wise choice; there was little evidence of enthusiasm for his new task.⁸⁵ Consequently, Lloyd George once again turned to Robert Donald, who was invited to re-examine the situation with a view to finally placing the system on a sound basis.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Donald to C. P. Scott, 29 May 1917, INF 4/7.

⁸² Lloyd George to Donald, 6 June 1917; Buchan to Donald, 6 June 1917. INF 4/4B.

⁸³ Northcliffe, for example, wrote: 'We were in high hopes when Mr Buchan was created "Director of Information", a sufficiently comprehensive title. But Mr Buchan turns out to be virtually a subordinate of the Foreign Office where he works. His work, we are sure, is of the greatest national importance. The point is that it is merely that of an addition to the existing "publicity" departments, not that of a supreme co-ordinating centre.' *The Times*, 7 Aug. 1917.

⁸⁴ CAB 24/3, 230(15). 10 Sept. 1917.

⁸⁵ Beaverbrook, *Men and power*, p. 266.

⁸⁶ Lloyd George to Donald, 19 Oct. 1917. INF 4/4B; H. A. Taylor, *Robert Donald* (London, undated), pp. 156-7.

Donald advocated a strengthening of the role of the advisory committee⁸⁷ and still further centralization. Indeed, his second report, produced in December 1917, reiterated many of the criticisms of the first: the system was still dominated by the Foreign Office; lack of unity and co-ordination remained serious problems; Buchan had not taken reorganization far enough; further centralization was essential.⁸⁸ Indeed, unless changes were immediately introduced, the advisory committee threatened to resign *en bloc*.⁸⁹

Buchan, for his part, did not deny that the system was imperfect, but he objected to the hasty manner in which Donald had reached his conclusions. Propaganda work was, he claimed, highly complex and required the perpetual analysis of foreign opinion so that it might be tempered in accordance with the fluctuating moods of public opinion abroad. Criticism that little or nothing was being done was unfounded and partly derived from the intense secrecy which surrounded the work. Moreover, he claimed, experience had shown that the most effective approach involved the dissemination of accurate news combined with an honest explanation of Britain's policies, a view fully endorsed by the Foreign Office.⁹⁰

By the end of 1917, however, the question was no longer that of a strengthened machinery. The changing demands of the military and economic situation, particularly after Brest-Litovsk, made a fundamental change of approach in propaganda necessary. With the failure of the more conventional methods of warfare to secure decisive results on the field of battle, alternative methods of breaking the military deadlock were sought. Universal war-weariness and the instability of the internal structure of the Central Powers convinced many observers that the time had come to transform British propaganda from its hitherto defensive character into an all-out psychological offensive against the enemy.⁹¹ The emphasis on publicity and information was no longer considered to be an adequate method of combating enemy activities;⁹² what was now required was an adventurous and resolute propaganda campaign. The Foreign Office, followed by the department of information, had been too cautious in its approach to the subject, too hesitant to expand and develop earlier activities in accordance with the changing demands of the war, and too casual in its treatment of proposals for change. Moreover, the Foreign Office had concentrated primarily on propaganda for allied and neutral countries; little attention had been given to the subject of propaganda direct into enemy countries, except where pro-British material had reached the enemy

⁸⁷ Donald to Carson, 25 Oct. 1917. INF 4/4B.

⁸⁸ Robert Donald, 'Inquiry into the extent and efficiency of propaganda: reports on various branches of propaganda work, and recommendations'. 4 Dec. 1917. INF 4/4B; CAB 27/18, PAC 3.

⁸⁹ Burnham, Riddell, Beaverbrook and Donald to Sir Edward Carson, 14 Dec. 1917. INF 4/4B.

⁹⁰ Buchan to Carson, 28 Dec. 1917. INF 4/5.

⁹¹ Memorandum sent to M. P. A. Hankey and covering note by Sir E. Carson, 'A psychological offensive against Germany', 11 Dec. 1917. CAB 24/35, G.T. 2941.

⁹² See the unsigned memorandum prepared by M.I. 9a entitled 'German propaganda in 1917: some notes on its methods, material and manipulation'. INF 1/715.

public through neutral channels such as Switzerland. Indeed, to many critics it appeared that the Foreign Office had forfeited the right to supervise Britain's overseas propaganda, and the arguments that had been advocated by the War Office since the end of 1915 were now considered the more valid. Following the resignation of Carson in January 1918, the way was left clear for the emergence of a full ministry of information, forcing the Foreign Office finally to relinquish its remaining control over propaganda.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this was, to a considerable extent, the work of Lloyd George, who had always expressed an active personal interest in publicity and propaganda. He had been responsible for the innovative publicity campaign of 1912 when the Insurance Commission had organized a corps of lecturers, recruited mainly from outside the civil service, to tour the country explaining the intricacies of the new National Insurance Act.⁹³ It was Lloyd George who, in August 1914, had first suggested the idea of an official propaganda bureau,⁹⁴ a proposal which resulted in the establishment of Wellington House. As secretary of state for war in 1916 he was undoubtedly introduced to the views of his permanent officials concerning the creation of a centralized propaganda organization, a concept only fully realized when he became prime minister. His contacts with influential journalists, such as Robert Donald and Lord Riddell, are as well known as his mistrust of diplomats and his interest in, and flair for, publicity – eventually underlined by his purchase of the *Daily Chronicle* in 1918. One historian has written that, in contrast to the majority of his contemporaries who disliked propaganda intensely, Lloyd George, 'if anything, rated the influence of propaganda and the press too highly'.⁹⁵ The establishment of the ministry of information under Lord Beaverbrook in February 1918, and of the enemy propaganda department at Crewe House under the direction of Lord Northcliffe, can thus be seen as the logical outcome of the prime minister's personal interest in propaganda, his sensitivity to mounting criticism of the Foreign Office and the increasing pressure for reform of the system on a sound basis.

The gradual erosion of Foreign Office control over propaganda has been placed in the wider context of the prime minister's increasing personal involvement in diplomacy at the expense of Foreign Office influence in the making of British foreign policy.⁹⁶ The creation of the department of information did not seriously threaten the Foreign Office's influence on either policy or propaganda largely because John Buchan chose to work with, rather than against it. Neither Beaverbrook nor Northcliffe, who were both made directly answerable to Lloyd George, proved to be as co-operative. Moreover, once it was fully recognized that policy and propaganda were interdependent, tension

⁹³ Sir F. Clark, *The central office of information* (London, 1970), p. 23.

⁹⁴ H. H. Asquith to the king, 31 Aug. 1914. CAB 41/35/38.

⁹⁵ A. J. P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, p. 137.

⁹⁶ R. Warman, 'The erosion of Foreign Office influence in the making of foreign policy, 1916–18', *Historical Journal*, xv, 1 (1972), 113–59.

with the Foreign Office was to increase. It became important for the propagandists to persuade the government to issue a definite statement of war aims, the previous absence of which had deprived British propaganda of any real consistency and purpose.⁹⁷ At Crewe House it was believed that propaganda, to be effective, 'must be inspired by policy, but at the same time, its varying needs also suggest policy'.⁹⁸ It was this latter assertion which was challenged by the Foreign Office throughout 1918. It may have lost its control over propaganda, but it was determined not to allow the same to happen with regard to policy.

The department of enemy propaganda was essentially designed to reveal to the enemy the futility of their cause and the certainty of allied victory. To this end, Northcliffe considered that it was first necessary for the British government to declare its aims so that the propaganda departments of allied countries could pursue a uniform line. Immediately upon his appointment, he and one of his officials, Wickham Steed,⁹⁹ began to try to push Balfour into issuing a definite statement of policy towards the 'oppressed nationalities' of Austria-Hungary.¹⁰⁰ Crewe House had selected Austria-Hungary as its initial target because that area offered the greatest prospect of immediate success, but the question was complicated by the problem of minority groups and the overall issue of self-determination.¹⁰¹ Balfour became anxious at the incursions of both Crewe House and the ministry of information into the exclusive realm of foreign affairs, complaining to Lloyd George that their activities extended 'a good deal beyond anything I, at least, have been accustomed to describe as propaganda, using that word even in the widest sense'.¹⁰² It has been suggested that:

Had Crewe House been as willing as Wellington House to accept dictation from the Foreign Office on matters of foreign policy there would have been fewer problems. . . [but] Northcliffe's innovation was not that he made propaganda consistent with policy, but that he tried to alter foreign policy to make it consistent with propaganda formulated by Seton-Watson and Wickham Steed.¹⁰³

Furthermore, the appointment of special propagandist agents in neutral countries gave the ministry of information, as Beaverbrook recognized, the potential to develop into 'a second Foreign Office at home with a new set of representatives abroad'.¹⁰⁴ The situation was clearly unacceptable to the

⁹⁷ Note by the intelligence department of the department of information, 4 Jan. 1918. CAB 24/38, G.T. 3226.

⁹⁸ Report of the work of the department of propaganda in enemy countries, undated, unsigned. CAB 24/75, G.T. 6839.

⁹⁹ Henry Wickham Steed: Foreign editor, *The Times*; appointed editor-in-chief, 1919-22.

¹⁰⁰ Northcliffe to Balfour, 24 Feb. 1918. FO 889/4, No. 764.

¹⁰¹ For further details see Sir Campbell Stuart's *Secrets of Crewe House: the story of a famous campaign* (London, 1920), ch. III.

¹⁰² Balfour to Lloyd George, 31 July 1918. FO 800/207.

¹⁰³ K. J. Calder, *Britain and the origins of the new Europe, 1914-18* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 177.

¹⁰⁴ Beaverbrook to Lloyd George, 24 June 1918, enclosed in Northcliffe to Balfour, 7 July 1918. FO 800/212.

Foreign Office.¹⁰⁵ The resultant tension proved to be a major hindrance to the work during the last year of the war.

The news department of the Foreign Office effectively became the news division of the ministry of information, a loss which was, to some extent, offset by the transference of the intelligence branch of the department of information to the Foreign Office, where it was reconstituted as the Political Intelligence Department (P.I.D.). An examination of the ensuing debate over the P.I.D. is central to the dispute between the ministry of information and the Foreign Office. When Beaverbrook assumed control over propaganda, he tried to secure the intelligence division for his new ministry. The Foreign Office resisted, maintaining that intelligence work was not strictly concerned with propaganda, its function being to compile, principally from diplomatic dispatches and telegrams, periodical summaries of the political situation in foreign countries for the use of the policy-makers.¹⁰⁶ However, because these summaries were also invaluable in propaganda work, Beaverbrook argued that intelligence should form an integral part of his ministry.¹⁰⁷ Accurate intelligence was indeed a vital component of propaganda; without it, propaganda lacked its basic raw material. But Beaverbrook's mistake was to assume that intelligence was only of value to the propagandist. Ironically, Whitehall closed ranks on him. The three interested government departments were united in defence of duties for which they had been traditionally responsible. Balfour, the foreign secretary, wrote:

It is quite true that propaganda must be based on knowledge; but the knowledge required covers only a fraction of that involved in the day to day work of the Foreign Office, Admiralty and War Office; and the creation of a new department, which regards it as one of its functions to co-ordinate all the most confidential information which three other departments have collected for their own purposes, is not only indefensible from the point of view of organisation, but would render secrecy even more difficult to maintain than it is at present.¹⁰⁸

It was also suggested that Beaverbrook's argument was based upon a fundamental fallacy: 'Propaganda and Intelligence are two entirely different functions; the former depends on the latter for inspiration, but in their inherent nature and method of operation they have nothing in common. Diplomacy and Intelligence have; the one is the essence of the other.'¹⁰⁹

In the face of such opposition, Beaverbrook submitted the dispute to the war cabinet for arbitration,¹¹⁰ but the issue was in turn passed on to an inter-departmental conference which convened on 5 March 1918. Beaverbrook

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Cecil's views on the subject cited in Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, pp. 148-9.

¹⁰⁶ Memorandum by Balfour, 5 Feb. 1918. CAB 24/41, G.T. 3547.

¹⁰⁷ Memorandum by Lord Beaverbrook, 'The need for an intelligence department of the ministry of information', 20 Feb. 1918. CAB 24/43, G.T. 3788.

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum by Balfour, 28 Feb. 1918. CAB 24/43, G.T. 3788.

¹⁰⁹ Foreign Office memorandum, undated, unsigned (but probably by Hardinge), enclosed in a memorandum by Balfour, 28 Feb. 1918. CAB 24/43, G.T. 3788.

¹¹⁰ CAB 23/5, 349(11), 29 Feb. 1918.

succeeded in reversing the initial arrangement: the intelligence division was to be part of the ministry and not of the Foreign Office.¹¹¹ But on hearing this decision, the staff of the P.I.D. resigned *en bloc*, each member apparently reaching his decision independently.¹¹² Beaverbrook was forced to submit; better to have an intelligence division in the Foreign Office than none at all. Accordingly, the staff of the P.I.D. were reinstated and became Foreign Office officials.¹¹³

The struggle for control over intelligence was quite simply one of power. Whitehall resented the incursions of the upstart ministry into areas of traditional responsibility and was not prepared to allow an outside, and probably temporary, department to interfere with the cherished duty of collecting and utilizing the political information upon which government policy was formulated. If the Foreign Office was not properly equipped or experienced to conduct propaganda, and was therefore ultimately prepared to surrender the work to a group of press lords who claimed to understand it better, it was less prepared to relinquish a responsibility which predated the propaganda experience and which constituted a vital aspect of its work. Moreover, propaganda was regarded as an instrument of warfare, and a distasteful one at that, a temporary expedient made necessary only because of the activities of the enemy. Whatever its future role, established diplomatic practices would continue after the war had ended; there might be serious consequences if a group of temporary officials – particularly those recruited from Fleet Street – were allowed direct access to information which normally would be kept secret. Furthermore, once it was fully appreciated, albeit late in the day, that propaganda was dependent for its success upon well-defined policy and accurate intelligence, the Foreign Office unwittingly held the trump card, which it retained so long as its traditional status and duties were preserved. When these issues became clear, and their implications recognized in the winter of 1917–18, the P.I.D. became the key to the Foreign Office door. Beaverbrook was permitted a free rein over propaganda partly because the Foreign Office had always preferred to keep such work, if not completely outside the door, then in the front hallway. That he found the door bolted from the inside on the twin issues of policy and intelligence was a reflexion of the limited power of the ministry of information, a situation of which Beaverbrook was fully aware. It remained a constant source of frustration and irritation to him and he felt that, without control over intelligence, he would be forced to accept that ‘a Ministry of Information “functioning on its own” was not called for, and that, in fact, all it could do was to function as a Department of the Foreign Office’.¹¹⁴ Indeed, as the dispute continued, he despairingly informed Balfour:

¹¹¹ Minutes of a conference held in General Smuts’ room, 5 Mar. 1918. CAB 24/44, G.T. 3823.

¹¹² Minutes of a conference held in General Smuts’ room, 13 Mar. 1918. CAB 24/45, G.T. 3942.

¹¹³ FO 366/787, 44472.

¹¹⁴ Enclosure in Balfour to First Lord of the Admiralty, 11 Apr. 1918. FO 800/207.

If you face the facts the Ministry of Information is not really a Department independent of the Foreign Office, but one subsidiary to it. And what is the case in fact had much better be so in name too, if friction and waste of time are to be avoided.¹¹⁵

Yet friction did continue for most of the year, with periodic threats of resignation from Beaverbrook. The Foreign Office, even so, usually emerged triumphant.

Nevertheless, the ministry of information represented the culmination of that process begun in 1914 whereby propaganda was elevated into a major responsibility of government. Because, for the first three years of the war, the Foreign Office was primarily responsible for its conduct abroad, the style and character of British propaganda were moulded essentially by a small group of permanent officials who lacked the necessary credentials for work which involved considerations generally alien to their traditional concept of foreign affairs. Propaganda therefore developed along highly individual and idiosyncratic lines, determined by the particular role which the Foreign Office saw for it during the various stages of wartime diplomacy. It attempted to conduct the work by the honest presentation of facts, albeit after careful selection. Straight news therefore formed the basis of all British official propaganda, a principle largely continued by Beaverbrook and Northcliffe. By 1917-18, however, the preoccupation with the presentation of the British point of view in allied and neutral countries was becoming less important than the demand for propaganda in enemy countries. Both Beaverbrook and Northcliffe recognized the potential power of propaganda over mass opinion and how it could be used to influence that opinion directly in order to alter events within a society and thereby alter the course of the war. In July 1918 it was claimed that:

There are two ways, and two ways only, in which the Allies can win the war and impose their will on the rulers of Germany. One is by victory in the field. The other is by breaking down the determination of the German people to support their Government in its resistance to the Allies' demands. When that determination, and the patriotic idealism by which it is sustained, has been broken down, when the bulk of the German people has been brought, not necessarily to a spirit of revolt, but to a condition of distrust and passive hostility resembling that of the masses in Austria, the end of the war will be in sight.¹¹⁶

Crewe House directed its propaganda to the lower echelons of enemy societies in the belief that by convincing the subject races of the incapacity of their ruling elites to govern, they would force their rulers to sue for peace, or else replace them with a government which would. This in turn became the approach adopted by the other allied propaganda departments which attempted to

¹¹⁵ Beaverbrook to Balfour, 21 May 1918. FO 800/207.

¹¹⁶ Memorandum by E. Percy and A. E. Zimmern, 17 July 1918. FO 371/3474, 108951.

make it clear that the chief object of the Allies is the changing of Germany, not the destruction of the German people; and that the German people can hope for an adequate position in the world and for admission into a future society of nations, when they have qualified themselves for partnership with civilised communities by making the necessary reparations and restorations (primarily in the case of Belgium), and by overthrowing the system known as Prussian militarism, and when they have effectively abandoned all designs of mastery over Europe.¹¹⁷

Such was felt to be the power of opinion and the role of propaganda that it was directed to all levels of society, from soldier to civilian, from civilian to politician, and from politician to potential revolutionary.

This type of propaganda could not have been conducted from the Foreign Office. It had neither the heart nor the conviction for such an approach. It was for this reason that, during the first three years of the war, Foreign Office propaganda had been directed to a much more selective audience. The concept of mass public opinion was generally incomprehensible to the exclusive and sheltered members of the 'foreign policy-making elite'. Rather, mass opinion was to be influenced only indirectly. Foreign Office-inspired propaganda was directed towards the opinion-makers, such as journalists, publicists and politicians, rather than to the mass of foreign peoples, 'the principle being that it is better to influence those who can influence others than to attempt a direct appeal to the mass of the population'.¹¹⁸ News, information and guidance emanating from the news department and Wellington House was accordingly directed towards leading personalities in foreign societies. The great emphasis was on personal propaganda. Prominent men were invited to see for themselves the merits of the British cause or the extent of Britain's commitment to the allied effort. In this way, it was believed that the confidence and goodwill generated by one elite to another would ultimately be transmitted to larger numbers of people who might, in turn, express sympathy for Britain in various ways often without realizing that their own leaders were acting, in effect, as propagandists for the British government. As one official wrote:

The importance of secrecy need not be laboured... The intrusion of a Government, or of persons notoriously inspired by Government, in the sphere of opinion, invariably excites suspicion and resentment... It is not to be desired that all converts to the British point of view should proclaim their conversion: the object to be aimed at is rather to ensure that opinion in neutral countries shall not be based on imperfect or distorted information regarding the nature of the British case.¹¹⁹

In sharp contrast to the methods employed in 1918, direct mass activity was not considered to be an effective approach. Yet it was entirely compatible with the Foreign Office's somewhat limited concept of 'public opinion' and its preference for allowing others to conduct propaganda on its behalf; the emphasis upon secrecy was not simply a device to prevent clean hands from

¹¹⁷ Report of the policy committee of the inter-allied conference on propaganda in enemy countries, enclosed in H. K. Hudson to M. P. A. Hankey, 21 Aug. 1918. CAB 24/61, G.T. 5492.

¹¹⁸ Schuster to Robinson, 3 Dec. 1914. INF 4/1B.

¹¹⁹ Enclosure in Schuster to Montgomery, 18 Dec. 1914. FO 371/2207, 88913.

getting dirty, but derived from a genuine belief in the value of disguised, indirect propaganda.

Between 1914 and 1917, therefore, British propaganda was restrained in character and cautious in approach. The uncritical tone adopted was later considered too defensive. The Foreign Office was, however, always hindered by the lack of any declaration of war aims and the secrecy which surrounded the work. By stimulating and promoting friendly relations with influential foreigners, it was believed that British propaganda would serve the national interest in a constructive, though perhaps invisible manner. By the winter of 1917-18, however, it was felt that:

Camouflage and the indirect appeal were no longer necessary, and that those who were in charge of the nation's propaganda could now 'speak out loud and bold', developing with special energy the most direct and effective known forms of publicity – personal propaganda, propaganda by film, by wireless and by cable.¹²⁰

Accordingly, it was decided to appoint proven experts in these areas, men who were well versed in dealing with public opinion in its widest sense – many of the newspapermen employed by the government in 1918 had been instrumental in pioneering the 'new journalism' at the end of the nineteenth century. The advent of the 'Press Gang', as they were known in Whitehall, made a widening of the audience of British propaganda inevitable. The Foreign Office did not lose its control over propaganda simply as a result of its previous mistakes or because of professional ineptitude. It was because the requirements of propaganda in 1918 were entirely different from those which had prompted the creation of the system in 1914, requirements for which the Foreign Office lacked the necessary experience and vocation. As T. L. Gilmour, the head of the press and cinema division of the department of information, recognized in 1917:

The conditions of modern warfare have now so enormously increased the value of the moral factor that it is less a question of armies being arrayed against armies than of nations against nations – so that the civilian front is scarcely, if any, less important than the fighting front.¹²¹

In short, the Foreign Office was no longer equipped to supervise an activity such as propaganda which comprehended public opinion on a mass scale as a determinable factor not only in the internal affairs of a country but also in international affairs.

Beaverbrook, who considered propaganda to be 'the popular arm of diplomacy',¹²² saw the First World War as a struggle in which 'the munitions of the mind become not less vital for victory than fleets or armies'.¹²³ He argued that since strength for the purpose of war entailed the total strength of each

¹²⁰ H. O. Lee, 'British propaganda during the great war, 1914-1918'. INF 4/4A.

¹²¹ G. C. Bruntz, *Allied propaganda and the collapse of the German empire in 1918* (New York, 1938), cited p. 8.

¹²² Taylor, *Beaverbrook*, p. 145.

¹²³ Memorandum by Beaverbrook, 'The organisation and functions of the ministry of information', Sept. 1918. INF 4/5:

belligerent, and because the war encompassed neutral countries to an unprecedented degree, many of which were potential combatants, it was imperative to cultivate foreign opinion as a military asset. As Beaverbrook explained to Lloyd George:

...since our appeal lies not to the diplomatic representatives of foreign countries, but to the public opinion of those countries, our methods must be different from those of the Foreign Office. We have a diplomacy of our own – a popular diplomacy – and for this we must have our own special organisation... The Foreign Office has, however, both in principle and in practice refused to recognise this duty of the new Ministry from its inception. It says in effect that the doctrine of popular diplomacy implied a setting up of a Foreign Office at home with a new set of representatives abroad, and a policy possibly divergent from that of the Foreign Secretary.¹²⁴

It was this fundamental difference of interpretation as to the role of propaganda which prompted Lord Northcliffe's statement that propaganda and diplomacy were incompatible. Indeed they were, but only in so far as the propaganda of the ministry of information and of Crewe House proved incompatible with the wartime diplomacy of the Foreign Office.

¹²⁴ Beaverbrook to Lloyd George, 24 June 1918. FO 800/212; also cited in F. Owen, *Tempestuous journey* (London, 1954), pp. 433–4.