

A MESSAGE FROM GREAT BRITAIN

British Aerial Propaganda to Germany, 1938-40

By Lee Richards

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During the last half of the First World War, Britain developed on a large scale a new form of warfare – the use of aerial dropped propaganda leaflets. These leaflets, which were literally thrown out of aircraft or disseminated by specially designed paper balloons which floated over enemy lines, were intended to reduce morale, induce surrender and to inform German troops and civilians of the Allies point of view. Because of the sudden collapse of Germany at the end of 1918 much credit in the post war era was given to the leaflets for the defeat of Germany, (arguably used as a scapegoat for Germany's military failure). Many talked of the extraordinary demoralising effects of the Allied leaflet propaganda. The German General Ludendorff wrote,

We boggled at the enemy propaganda as a rabbit stares transfixed at a snake... The Army was literally drenched with enemy propaganda leaflets. Their great danger to us was clearly recognised... we could not prevent them from poisoning the hearts of our soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

Even Hindenburg proclaimed, in September 1918, on the leaflets reaching the Home front:

Unsuspectingly many thousands consume the poison... Wilson, Lloyd George, and Clemenceau rub their hands.<sup>2</sup>

It would be seen later that leaflets were generally only effective when backed up by military success but as another conflict with Germany approached the Government began to re-examine the use of this new weapon, the "fourth fighting arm".<sup>3</sup>

In the event of war the plan was all British propaganda, domestic, foreign, and enemy, would be coordinated by a Ministry of Information. In October 1935 a Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence was formed to plan the proposed new Ministry with Stephen Tallents as its designated Director-General.

At the beginning of September 1938, the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, flew to Munich for talks with Hitler to try to prevent war after the German invasion of Czechoslovakia. The nucleus MOI staff were mobilised. Tallents prepared draft leaflets for dropping on Germany if Chamberlain's peace mission failed. These leaflets were aimed at the "good Germans", i.e. those against Hitler and Nazism, in an attempt to divide Germany resulting in the overthrow of the Nazi regime. This was a theme used in many of the early wartime leaflets. It was a naive approach. The small number of Germans opposed to Hitler could do little about it as the Nazis had a tight grip on the country and many of their opponents were either in Labour camps or in exile in foreign countries. Due to the "Phoney Peace" extracted at Munich Tallent's draft leaflets were not required.<sup>4</sup>

But this practice run highlighted the unpreparedness of an effective organisation for propaganda to enemy countries. All that had been done so far was the commissioning of a report on German public opinion and research on previous propaganda operations during WWI; a large part of which was a study of the book *Secrets of Crewe House*, by Sir Campbell Stuart. As a result Stuart was enlisted to help the Sub-Committee.<sup>5</sup>

A Canadian, Sir Campbell Stuart had previously been a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army and Vice-Chairman of the London Headquarters of the British War Commission to the US. In 1918 he became the Deputy Director of Propaganda to Enemy Countries, under Lord Northcliffe, based at Crewe House in Curzon Street, London.

In December 1938 the Ministry of Information Sub-Committee recommended the appointment of another Sub-Committee under the Chairmanship of Stuart to report on possible methods of propaganda to enemy countries and on the machinery required for the purpose. Leaflets released by aircraft and balloon were still considered the best way of getting Britain's official views across to the German public.

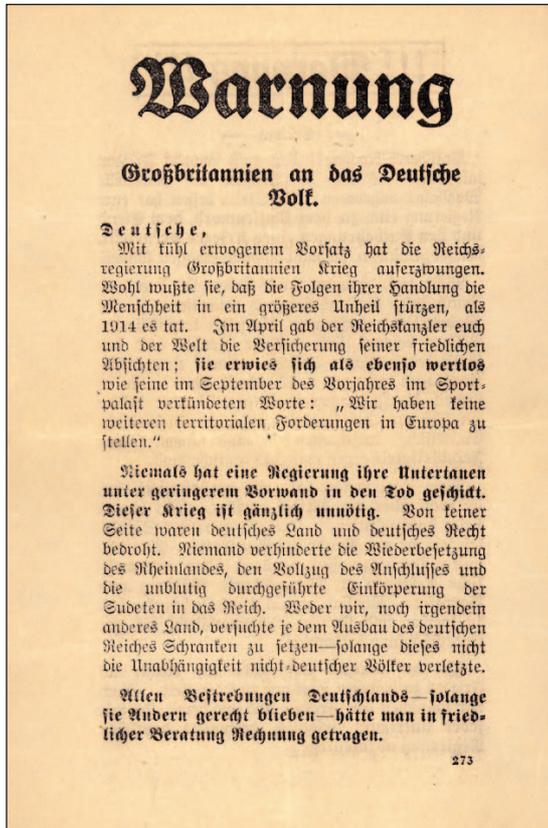
Stuart outlined in April 1939 his policy for successful propaganda, which was to stand throughout the war and was based on that of the Great War.

- 1.) That propaganda to be successful must be related to a defined policy [of war aims].
- 2.) That propaganda must be rigorously truthful, and
- 3.) That propaganda must never be self-contradictory.<sup>6</sup>

EH, as his new secret department became known, was mobilised on 25 August 1939 by the Chiefs of Staff and moved to Woburn Abbey from its previous location at Electra House (the Imperial Communications Centre on London's Victoria Embankment) to avoid bombing and to help keep its existence secret. When war was declared on 3 September EH had ready a leaflet for immediate distribution over Germany.

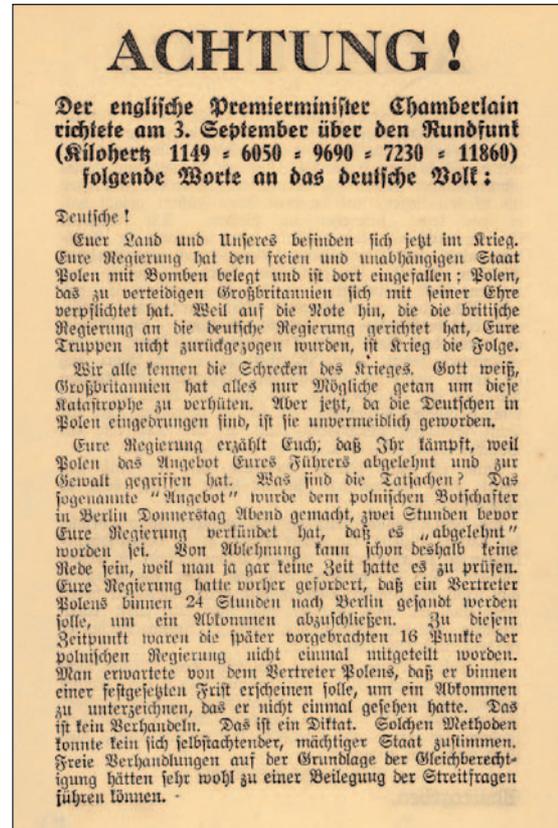
The leaflet entitled *Warning! A Message from Great Britain* was an appeal to the German public informing them that the British, "desire peace, and are prepared to conclude it with any peace loving Government in Germany", i.e. not the Nazis.

That night, on the decision of the War Cabinet, seven RAF Whitley bombers of 58 Squadron together with three of 51 Squadron made a reconnaissance flight over Germany, and in the process also disseminated *Warning! A Message from Great Britain*. Nearly six million copies of the leaflet were scattered over Bremen, Hamburg, and the Ruhr district. All aircraft of 51 Squadron returned safely but despite no opposition being encountered from either the *Luftwaffe* or from Anti-



*Above left: Leaflet EH.273, Warning! A Message from Great Britain.*

*Above right: Leaflet EH.280, Prime Minister's Radio Broadcast.*



aircraft guns, three aircraft of 58 Squadron had problems; one aircraft landed early because of shortage of fuel, another landed in France due to engine failure, and the third aircraft was reported missing.<sup>7</sup>

Again on the night of 4/5 September, three million more leaflets were dropped and throughout the first week of the war combined leaflet and reconnaissance operations were carried out. In total over 20,000,000 leaflets were disseminated during the month of five different types, one being a copy of the Prime Minister's radio broadcast of 3 September.<sup>8</sup>

These early raids are vividly retold in the Ministry of Information booklet, *Bomber Command*, published in 1941,

On the night of 1/2 October [1939] the first leaflet raid on Berlin took place. It was on this occasion that pamphlets were dropped giving the amount of the personal fortunes hidden away abroad by Nazi leaders. Weather conditions that night were particularly severe. One aircraft arrived over the German capital at 22,500 feet. The oxygen supply momentarily failed; two of the crew collapsed and part of the mechanism of the rear turret froze so that the air gunner could not open his door. The pilot carried on, the navigator went back to assist the two unconscious members of the crew. He dragged one twelve feet along the fuselage into the cabin and connected him with the oxygen supply. He then threw overboard two-thirds of the leaflets before collapsing in turn.<sup>9</sup>



*Above left:* RAF aircrew load an aircraft with propaganda leaflets for dropping over Germany, 1940 (Crown Copyright).  
*Above right:* Leaflets being distributed over Germany by releasing them through the flare chute of a Whitley bomber, 1940 (Crown Copyright).

A memorandum summarising the effects of dropping leaflets on Germany was circulated to the War Cabinet at the beginning of October. Sir Campbell Stuart informed the cabinet,

Reference by Göring to British leaflets and the drastic and extensive measures taken to prevent them being read by the German public have clearly indicated that the Nazi Government regard them as an effective weapon.

But other reports contained in this memo disagreed – the unfavourable reports outweighed the favourable ones. For example one report from Copenhagen, read,

...that reliable neutrals arriving from Berlin all took the view that the British leaflets had an unfortunate effect. Unless bombs were also dropped the Germans could think that Great Britain and France were afraid to fight.

EH commented that their leaflets were being “coloured by the ‘leaflet versus bomb’ controversy and as a result have in some quarters been regarded with unfair disfavour”. Leaflets were intended to assist as part of the military strategy and not be a single weapon in itself, considered as the fourth fighting arm and not the first and only weapon.

The Government also received complaints from the Belgian, Dutch, and Danish Governments about the accidental dropping of leaflets on their territory.<sup>10</sup>

Later seemingly more favourable reports on the effects of the propaganda were forthcoming. The German government took great steps in the collection of the leaflets, the Police, SA, and Hitler Youth being employed to do so. Just the fact that RAF bombers had been overhead reduced morale, especially when Göring had strongly assured the party organisation and the German population of their security from enemy air attack. Consequently the German press tried to imply that all British leaflets were disseminated by balloon rather than aircraft.

As a result of this memorandum by Department EH the War Cabinet agreed that no certain conclusion could be reached based on the conflicting evidence available on the effectiveness of the raids and decided that the leaflets should “continue to be dropped, not at regular intervals, but as occasion offered”.<sup>11</sup>

The Government not only received criticism from abroad. The British press did not always support the leaflet raids; one comment being it’s a policy of “kid gloves and confetti”. EH countering this said,

The decision of the government to make the terms of British leaflets actually distributed in Germany available to members of Parliament and to allow them to be published in the Press may have been inevitable, in view of the apparent reasonableness of the argument that it would be absurd to keep from the British public matter freely given to its enemies. It has, however, had some unfortunate effects. The criterion by which leaflets should be judged is, of course, the German version. The public which is generally ignorant both of German and the German mentality naturally judges the leaflets from British standpoints. At any time public controversy in regard to a particular leaflet which offends particular British susceptibilities may arise. Such a controversy would obviously give the German propagandists an excellent opening. The fact that leaflets have now to be considered from the point of view of Parliament and the Press as well as that of the German reader presents, of course, an additional difficulty to those who draft them.

Leaflets, moreover, may often have to be prepared in the light of information not generally available to the public and, indeed, unsuitable in the public interest for public disclosure. Their purpose therefore may easily be misunderstood. It must also be remembered that there is an inevitable anomaly in giving publicity to the output of a secret Department and thus challenging discussion of its methods.<sup>12</sup>

As a result propaganda leaflets were given a secret document classification. This obviously didn’t really help matters. It is alleged that one journalist who approached a Ministry of Information official asking for copies of leaflets was turned down, the official blurting out the excuse, “Well, you see they might fall into enemy hands.” To bypass the official restrictions placed on the publication of leaflets the British press used the neutral foreign press to obtain copies of them.

On the whole British propaganda during the first years of the war had little effect on German morale. While Germany remained undefeated in battle it is

unrealistic to assume that British leaflet propaganda could have had much effect. This does not mean that the leaflet operations to Germany were a waste of time and effort during those early years. Apart from giving the RAF invaluable operational experience while they built up their bomber force, it gave time to Department EH to improve the contents and layout of its leaflets and to develop other methods of propaganda, principally radio. Campbell Stuart realised he could do little at that time but was optimistic:

It is not to be expected that until deep divisions appear in Germany, propaganda can do no more than sow doubts and misgivings. The effect at which it aims will, however, only be achieved by steady and persistent effort. It may, at the moment and for some time, be impossible to hope for more than the establishment of a reputation for trustworthiness; but it would be an achievement indeed to realise this aim.<sup>13</sup>

EH soldiered on and in the winter of 1940 Campbell Stuart went to France to coordinate policy. Up until then British and French propaganda had been contradictory. British propaganda was taking an anti-Nazi view, whereas the French took a more anti-German line. After the defeat of the French in June, leaflet operations by the RAF temporary stopped. The situation had changed dramatically, Winston Churchill became Prime Minister and EH became part of a new organisation, the Special Operations Executive.

## SOURCES

This essay is based mainly on the surviving British Government records held at the Public Record Office (PRO), Kew, Surrey. The following list of sources gives the PRO file reference (e.g. FO 898/1) and the document title. Secondary sources are also listed.

1. Ludendorff, Erich, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen, 1914–1918*, Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, Berlin, 1919.
2. Hindenburg's Message to the German Army, August 1918.
3. PREM 1/374. Memorandum by Sir Campbell Stuart, 19 March 1939.
4. CAB 16/127. MIC 15, *Standing Sub-Committee to Prepare Plans for the Establishment of a Ministry of Information. Information in Enemy Countries*.
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6. PREM 1/374. *Propaganda in Enemy Countries*, 17 April 1939.
7. AIR 24/200. Bomber Command Operations Branch, *Operations Record Book*, 1936–1940.
8. AIR 14/2664. Bomber Command *Night Bomb Raid Sheets*, Vol. I, September 1939–April 1940.
9. *Bomber Command*, Ministry of Information, 1941.
10. CAB 66/2. War Cabinet Memorandum, WP(39) 82, *The Effect of the Dropping of Leaflets in Germany*. 9 October 1939.
11. FO 371/23101.
12. See note 10.
13. See note 10.