

H-Net Reviews

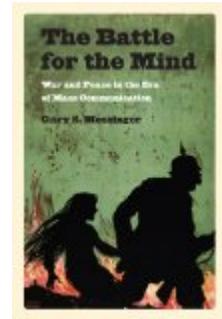
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gary S. Messinger. *The Battle for the Mind: War and Peace in the Era of Mass Communication*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011. xi + 293 pp. \$28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-853-2; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-852-5.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



War and Public Persuasion

Gary S. Messinger takes on an ambitious project: a study of ways that people have tried to influence the human mind from the beginnings of mass media to the present. Does the work cover democratic government influence? Yes, it does. Newspapers? Yes, it does. It also covers movies, radio television, dictatorships, the army, and industry. It examines these topics across war and interwar from 1850 onward—although most of the book examines the world after 1914. The world that is examined is, indeed, the entire Western world. Even part of the non-Western world is addressed, as the author considers Japan as well. Despite this enormous sweep, Messinger has produced a book of modest size. Its 293 pages should appeal to students of media and propaganda as well as general readers interested in knowing more about how mass minds have been led in war, in prewar, and in postwar.

I have not used the word “propaganda” in reflecting the author’s aim. This is because the author does not himself describe his approach in this manner. In the preface, he explains that his historical research can illuminate the origins of our present-day situation. Those pre-World War I origins coalesced into what he calls the “industrialization of communication,” and this is a key approach that the author chooses to help readers understand “the battle for the mind.” Both peacemakers and warmongers have used mass communication, he writes, as tools for goals both pacifist and militarist. “Important clues to the future of war and peace lie in understanding how they

have already been shaped by technologically amplified communication directed at billions of people” (p. xi).

Toward this end, Messinger devotes most of the text to the world wars, the interwar period, and the postwar period as reflected by authorities’ attempts to influence people’s minds. This helpful factual material does address the development of modern propaganda. In particular, the first three chapters offer quite a bit of information regarding its development before 1939. It does not, however, offer much interpretation regarding this period. Perhaps this is unavoidable. So much is covered, in so many countries, considering so many media that the author has space to offer general statements, but usually little possibility to follow up with more thorough explanation.

Some of the more arbitrary statements need a little support. For example, the author notes, “To increase the sale of newspapers, the press exaggerated the possibility of subversion by external sources” (p. 54). Does he mean the entire press? Perhaps research can show this is true—although one doubts that. Our skepticism needs to be addressed with historical evidence, here and in many other places throughout the book.

For example, the author assails U.S. newspapers for “depriving them [readers] of information that could have helped them make intelligent judgments” regarding the Russian Revolution (p. 64). But blaming the American press for purposely distorting coverage of the events of

1917-20 is simplistic. We need to recall the optimism Americans had regarding the Alexander Kerensky government, and the feeling of betrayal as Russia pulled out of a war that, in 1917, Americans felt was against an evil, worldwide threat. The United States knew Communism was extrinsically anticapitalist, and in the United States its sympathizers were launching riots and bombings. Walter Lippman and Charles Merz criticized the *New York Times*, the author notes, but they wrote in 1920. Today we can more easily assess the purported failings of journalism nearly a century ago. The nuance of historical opinion regarding this era to be fair at least needs to be addressed briefly, instead of flatly stating that the press failed.

Similarly, the author notes, regarding 1930s radio, that the H. G. Wells broadcast, *War of the Worlds*, caused a “national panic” (p. 55). Some recent journalism history research actually disputes this. I acknowledge that in a book of this expanse it is difficult to consider every historical debate regarding the significance of past media events. But sometimes it is worth noting that historians disagree, if for no other reason than to alert the reader to varying interpretations.

We see greater evidence of this tendency as Messinger moves to contemporary affairs, where he is at his most confident. The author’s analysis of Ronald Reagan’s success includes speculation still controversial—but it is devoid of research references. Most of the author’s critical view of the second George Bush administration’s propaganda attempts also are speculative, and do not seem to be based on research. I tend to believe that the author’s viewpoint is correct, but historical speculation needs to be based on sources. These sources would strengthen the book if indicated in a bibliography. We need one. Historical writing is based on primary and secondary material, and so usually historians list these to demonstrate credibility.

A reader would be able to follow a more clear focus for the text if the author provided orientation through a separate chapter discussing what he and other scholars have said about the battle for the mind. In fact, while this is a nice turn of phrase, it is clear from the text that we are talking about propaganda. What is “propaganda”? The term has been extensively debated over the last century. Is the daily newspaper propaganda? Messinger seems to suggest it is—but at what point does it become propaganda? Dictators controlled media in the 1930s. But democracies did not. Is the latter propaganda in the same way as the former? What about commercial ra-

dio? Were such politicians as David Lloyd George and Mahatma Gandhi propagandists, as suggested on page 57? Or is the propaganda only in the media reports of what they said? These are different concepts, and cannot be conflated into one single entity.

Messinger does help us by introducing the idea of “bio-behavioral” as it defined Nazi propaganda. This explains propaganda as a way to reach into human nature to manipulate opinion. But as it relates to mass media research, “bio-behavioral” is an unfamiliar term. It may very well exist in psychological literature. We have no way of knowing that without references or a bibliography. It is certainly all right for a senior scholar to introduce a new concept to help explain Fascist and Communist propaganda of the 1930s, but if he does, it perhaps needs to be explained in considerable detail with ample justification in the literature. In this case, it could even serve as a way to focus the otherwise amorphous idea of persuasion, propaganda, or other influence as practiced throughout world media and national leaders.

And what about the power of that propaganda? Is it as powerful as people have often presumed? Researchers have had quite a bit to say about media influence since 1945. Messinger briefly discusses the more famous of the scholars, Marshall McLuhan, Noam Chomsky, and Jacques Ellul, regarding mass media and persuasion. But other researchers even prior to World War II were suggesting limits to the power of mass media persuasion. We could benefit from discussion of the (now generally discredited) magic bullet theory, and the (generally still accepted) agenda-setting theory—ideas that go to the heart of this book’s premise, it seems. In fact, studies since the 1960s tend to reveal limits to the persuasive power of mass media.

The author’s conclusion could have helped the reader tie up this sprawling study of propaganda, persuasion, mind-battle, bio-behavior, or whatever term we would prefer to use in this work. An attempt to write about an ambiguous concept across all media, through all countries, through a century can leave a diffused result. A final chapter could have helped readers to see common threads—if such common threads exist.

Still, the author has produced a well-written work of the kind of reach only a mature scholar can attempt. Messinger entertains us with provocative theses and reminds us of significant facts. While the author does declare a historical approach, however, it seems primarily to be a synthesis of published work. Few primary sources are reflected in the endnotes. This produces somewhat of

a textbook, and the author perhaps intends it to be useful to students of mass media history. Yet so much is covered that so little can be said. Perhaps the publisher is to blame for asking too much of the author. Limiting the work to only newspapers, or only the United States, or only dictatorships, or only the postwar period, or only

the military, would have offered the author the luxury of expanding and focusing the historical record and debate.

Note for future editions: General Joseph Stilwell's name is misspelled (p. 131); Milo Radulovich's name is misspelled (p. 153).

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