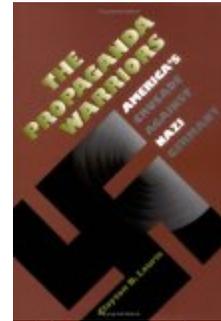


H-Net Reviews

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Clayton D. Laurie. *The Propaganda Warriors: America's Crusade against Nazi Germany*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996. xvi + 336 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0765-5.

Reviewed by Michaela Hoenicke-Moore (John F. Kennedy Institute, Free University Berlin)
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Clayton D. Laurie has written a fascinating and comprehensive study of the political and administrative conflict over America's approach to propaganda in World War II. He traces the origins of competing American conceptions of propaganda and psychological warfare and he recounts the creation, re-organization and, to a lesser degree, the actual campaigns of American wartime agencies that were charged with assisting the military effort through the use of words. We thus learn about the intricate history of the multiple governmental information agencies in 1940/41 from which the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI) and the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF) emerge as the first larger organizations, and how these were superseded in 1942 by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Office of War Information (OWI). Relatively late in the war, according to Laurie, the Army recognized the value of psychological warfare and successfully began drawing on personnel and expertise from the existing civilian agencies.

In the beginning, Laurie claims, there was Nazi propaganda. Americans, and in particular members of an interventionist and internationalist elite, were deeply impressed by it and concluded that Nazi psychological warfare had played a crucial role in the Germans' swift subjugation of half of Europe by 1940—an assessment which the author does not share, but does not disprove either. It is easy today to deprecate American suspicion of internal Nazi subversion. Yet up until 1942, 30 percent of Americans favored a negotiated peace with Nazi Germany. Concerned citizens and politicians rightly feared that this sizable minority of otherwise loyal Americans might become an easy prey to subversive fascist "information" campaigns. Recent studies on German-American organizations during that time, such as the work done by Cor-

nelia Wilhelm, confirm contemporaries' fears rather than Laurie's portrait of unwarranted hysteria.

For more than two years following the outbreak of war, only the American private sector mobilized, and Laurie emphasizes the elite character of these private organizations which monitored and counteracted Nazi fifth column activities. Most Americans did not yet share their conviction that "American survival, and civilization as it was then known, depended upon a total eradication of fascism" (p. 40). President Roosevelt understood this problem very well and Laurie is one of the few historians not faulting Roosevelt for not providing guidance in defining America's war aims and propaganda strategy—two issues closely related, as Allan Winkler has already observed in his study of the OWI. Laurie not only shows sympathy for the president's predicament of having to organize and later direct a national war effort in the face of continuing public criticism and suspicion, first from isolationist circles, and later from firm-principled intellectuals, as in the Darlan affair (pp. 151f.) or the "moronic-little-king" episode (pp. 175ff.). He also defends Roosevelt's intentionally low-profile intervention in the creation of the respective offices and their subsequent wrangling for supremacy. As a result of the President's shrewdly minimalist approach, three separate military and civilian organizations carried out their competing strategies and accomplished complementary goals "without raising the suspicions of a skeptical and propaganda-weary American public" (p. 238).

An important theme in Laurie's account is the ideological conflict between the members of the two groups, which shared an anti-fascist, interventionist outlook, yet who, due to different political and professional

backgrounds, developed conflicting concepts of effective American propaganda. OFF and OWI officials like Robert Sherwood and Archibald McLeish represented the liberal and idealistic writers, journalists, and academicians who were often devoted supporters of Roosevelt's New Deal philosophy and who propagated the creation of a new world order based on the "Four Freedoms." COI and OSS director Bill Donovan, on the other hand, personified the more conservative members of his agency which drew more heavily on a business-oriented, Ivy League-educated, east coast establishment that favored a *Realpolitik* approach to international affairs. This second group advocated the emulation of Nazi tactics, including secrecy, deception, lies and covert action in order to "beat the Germans at their own game" (p. 79). They argued that "total war ... demanded that the openness as well as the ethical and moral considerations characteristic of liberal democracies needed to be temporarily relaxed or even suspended to ensure an ultimate victory" (p. 89): the end justifying the means. In the eyes of their Wilsonian colleagues they were thus gambling away [compromising] the very soul of the nation. In contrast, the liberal humanists unwaveringly believed in the effectiveness of the word itself, of a "strategy of truth," and of "spreading the gospel of democracy" (p. 95).

U.S. military leaders were the last to enter the field of psychological warfare. Unconcerned by ideological squabbles, they made use of different methods and co-opted the staff of the civilian agencies. They imposed complete control over the resulting new formations and campaigns in Europe. The U.S. Army thus "ultimately produced the winning weapon in psychological warfare" (p. 236).

Propaganda Warriors is the history of a bureaucratic struggle. The analysis of the ideological conflict behind

it receives less attention. The reason for this relative neglect seems to lie in Laurie's personnel-oriented approach. He repeatedly cites his protagonists' general views but offers no in-depth analysis of the particular propaganda efforts that resulted from them. For that purpose one would have to engage the larger American discussion on the enemy and the ideological nature of the war itself. Only such a larger framework could, for example, have illuminated the contemporary misperception of the Holocaust as a World War I-type atrocity tale (pp. 180f.).

Laurie's book is thoroughly researched and comprehensive in scope and a welcome contribution to the field of American propaganda studies. Thus far, comparable works have either concentrated on individual agencies (see Allan Winkler's on the OWI, several edited collections on the OSS, most recently by Juergen Heideking and Christof Mauch, and Petra Marquardt-Bigman's study of the OSS' Research and Analysis Branch and Germany) or have focused on public opinion itself (see the work done by Richard Steele and Michael Leigh). Yet, Laurie's subtitle strikes me as slightly misleading. Neither the war nor Germany figure prominently in his presentation. In detailing the internal struggle the author loses sight of the object as well as the nature of the propaganda campaigns until the very last chapters. Long before 1944, however, the Third Reich had become an inexhaustible and gripping topic of research and analysis for many Americans in and outside governmental offices. Laurie's protagonists not only held conflicting views of the character of American propaganda but also of the enemy. They did not agree, for example, on whether they were fighting a government, a people or an idea. The story of how competing interpretations of Nazi Germany and disputed plans for that country translated into home front and overseas propaganda has yet to be written.

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