

# The Political Warfare Executive Syllabus Volume I



# The Political Warfare Executive Syllabus Volume I:

*A Crash Course in Mass  
Deception*

By

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## PREFACE

Ever since war on an organised basis began, there has been some form of political warfare in play. Leaders of nations at war have busied themselves with the seduction of enemy tribes, and even with the sowing of dissension in enemy countries before the beginning of open hostilities. Hannibal was an excellent exponent of the first method and Philip of Macedon of the second. In the Middle Ages scrolls wrapped around arrows were shot over battlements to convince those inside of the futility of their resistance. It was cheaper than sending men over the top, undermining walls, or just waiting them out. Elizabeth I's spymaster Walsingham in England and Louis XIII's Richelieu in France were masters of quiet political warfare. Napoleon knew the value of a good newspaper story. During the Franco-Prussian War, the French made extensive use of pamphlets describing German atrocities at home and abroad. It did not matter that they never happened since they were the start of rumours that had an inertia all their own. These were then recycled in the Great War and started myths that are accepted by some as truth even today (e.g. the crucified Canadian soldier). Bismarck also recognised the value of the right kind of message. He personally deleted from German communiqués any item that might in foreign papers be used against Germany. Bismarck ordered the Press Bureau to "let it be short, or no one will read it." However, it was the British at the end of World War I and during World War II who perfected political warfare, and it was through their training of the right candidates that this excellence was maintained, some would argue, until today.

Throughout the Second World War the British military, in conjunction with the Foreign Office, the War Office, the Ministry of Economic Warfare, and the Ministry of Information sought to undermine German morale through the development and implementation of propaganda campaigns. These operations were planned and executed by the Political Warfare Executive (PWE). This most secret organisation remained mostly unknown, and the files closed until recently. Though some had already been opened in the 1980s and some memoirs were approved by the British cabinet, it has remained a shadowy organisation until the publication of David Garnett's history, which appeared in 2002. While it seems to be a recent tome, in reality, cabinet permissions



show that the history of the PWE was written sometime after August 1946 and before the manuscript was found “buried” in a cabinet file in 1952. There had been a deadline of August 1948 for its completion, and there is no indication that Garnett was late in delivering the manuscript. It was then archived and closed to the public (TNA CAB 102-610). It is this manuscript that was published in 2002. While Garnett’s book is enlightening, of its 496 pages a scant ten pages are devoted to the training provided by the PWE. This book seeks to remedy this significant gap in knowledge of the PWE and its operations. Starting in the 1990s, the British archives began opening more and more of the files that dealt with the PWE’s activities, though approximately 5% of the files remain closed.

In order to undertake its work, the PWE needed trained personnel that could develop propaganda tools that would reach over the English Channel and speak directly to the German and Italian people as well as the mass of occupied nations. Training such as this was not a peacetime activity, and the British suffered from a dearth of individuals who were willing and capable of engaging in what was called by some the “most ungentelemanly form of warfare,” especially when it came to what was known as “black propaganda.” It was thus out of necessity that the PWE developed a syllabus and “college” at Wing House and then Brondesbury for white and grey propaganda. Black propaganda was dealt with at Bush House where it operated under the cover name Political Intelligence Department.

This book, for the first time, presents the training regime that the PWE candidates underwent in order to become operatives within the propaganda organisation and later as occupation officers in Germany. The syllabus and lectures will reveal not just the day-to-day hands-on skills needed by an expert propagandist but will uncover what the British thought of their various allies and enemies. The most significant contribution of this book will be a discussion of what the PWE came to understand as its primary task. It understood that the aims of political warfare go beyond the duration of open war, though the immediate aim of political warfare is to undermine the enemy’s war-effort and thus help to win the war.

The ultimate aim of political warfare, as the PWE understood it, was to win the peace, i.e. to win the war of ideas, which does not cease when hostilities end. This is the crucial orientation point in the analysis of the lectures. Since the PWE trained the occupation administrators, it is reasonable to assume that the lectures would divulge, in part, what

their objective for Germany was after the war and how they were going to ensure that Germany would attain that goal.

In addition to introducing the reader to the training regimen of the PWE and revealing British attitudes towards both the German occupiers of most of Europe and the people they subjugated, this book provides a general summary of how political warfare was understood at the time and how it might still be applicable today. For example, it demonstrates how political warfare can be defined as the systematic process of influencing the will and so directing the actions of the enemy and those in enemy occupied countries according to the needs of one's higher strategy. In addition, political warfare will be shown to be an indispensable fourth fighting arm, whose principal instrument is propaganda with its primary objective being assisting in the destruction of the foundation of the enemy's war-machine in conjunction with military action. Furthermore, it will detail the requirements of effective political warfare which involves the cooperation of the three fighting services, of aggressive diplomacy, and of those directing a wartime economy. General operational considerations are also covered. Finally, political warfare's support role as a repository of "soft" knowledge and skills, which can assist in preparation for specific combat operations.

## INTRODUCTION

# THE POLITICAL WARFARE EXECUTIVE BOOT CAMP

Troll farms, spoofing, and sniffer attacks were things beyond the imaginations of the operatives of Great Britain's Political Warfare Executive (PWE) of World War Two. Alan Turing and his colleagues were still puzzling out the basics of their electromechanical machine. It took another fifty years for this electromechanical machine to mature enough and be "networked" for the above three terms to be birthed and become meaningful. However, once they were born, they allowed for genuinely global information warfare.

The propaganda experts of today, if they are not too embarrassed to use the term, have built their theories and techniques on the PWE's first attempts to realise JFC Fuller's virtual alternative to steam and petrol warfare, a wireless, purely psychological warfare.<sup>1</sup> The PWE not only systematised this mode of operating on the battlefield of the mind and thought but were committed to fully developing its potential and then passing it on to future generations. The curriculum they developed in the darkest days of World War Two is still the fundament by which today's political/psychological warriors operate, no matter how distant their message delivery systems become from the leaflet dropping balloons of World War I.

Modern algorithms can now target people with personalised messages curated with the intention of altering a person's buying, eating, and voting habits. These formulae call upon the memory and associations of everything an individual has revealed to his or her various online accounts and calculates not only what the individual would prefer to see, but what the companies paying for the service are

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<sup>1</sup> Fuller, *Tanks in the Great War*, 1920, p. 320. Those working for the PWE, and especially those tasked with training the growing cadre of political warfare experts, were not as bothered by the term "propaganda" which today has an entirely negative association in Europe and North America.

most likely able to sell to this individual. It does not necessarily have to be goods and services; it can just as easily be thoughts, emotions, or ideas. In other words, these algorithms are built with the goal of changing people's minds and reflexive actions. What makes these algorithms and social media platforms so compelling is that most people do not even realise that their minds are being tampered with. The manner in which it can remain so easily hidden is that the algorithms never take the same approach. The approach varies as frequently as the individual. That means the people subjected to cyberprop may not even be afforded the opportunity to consider the possibility of such an attack, because they do not share a common basis for the discussion with anyone else. It will look different to each person thus they will have no common reference point for a meaningful conversation on the topic, other than in the abstract removed from their direct personal experience. The discussant's partner might be pushed in the same direction as they are, just with a different set of messages or memes calculated to achieve the same result triggering the same action.

All of the above seems so new; but, in reality, there is nothing new about it. While the delivery mechanism may change, the theory and fundamental principles involved have mainly remained the same since World War I. The Great War saw the first attempts at the systematic delivery of strategic propaganda. This is not to say that propaganda was new to conflict. In 1918, Lord Northcliffe and his fellow members of the Propaganda to Enemy Countries Committee at Crewe House in Mayfair's Curzon Street would have been the first to admit that they were drawing on the expertise of Philip of Macedon, Cicero, Sir Francis Walsingham, Cardinal Richelieu, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Otto von Bismarck among many others. In fact, during the Political Warfare Training School lectures, Northcliffe's name was merely added to this long list of propaganda and political warfare masterminds. As noted above, the novelty of Northcliffe was that he systematised propaganda and took it beyond opportunistic messages that might temporarily destabilise an enemy, to a method that was planned, intricate, and could have a very long-lasting impact upon the society at which it was aimed.

October 20, 1941, the PWE produced a document entitled "The Meaning of Political Warfare."<sup>2</sup> Judging by its content, they were still having trouble outlining for the government exactly what it was that

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<sup>2</sup> "The Meaning of Political Warfare," October 20, 1941, TNA FO 898/101.

they were doing. Clearly, in a war, two armed forces engage in battle and the outcome of that battle, or succession of battles, would be relatively clear. However, when it came to the notion of Political, Psychological, or Morale Warfare the outcome was never clear.<sup>3</sup> The PWE claimed that “[t]he distinction between news, propaganda and political warfare [wa]s not clearly grasped by the press or by Whitehall, much less so by the average person in [Great Britain].” One could easily enough see that this was the case by the discussions on the topic in letters to the editor of *The Times* and the debates in Parliament.<sup>4</sup> Both the public and the Government had heard of the term “Political Warfare,” but didn’t know what it was and tended to use the various terms interchangeably.

The PWE understood its task as taking the news as its raw material from which they then turned it into propaganda, ready for publication, with the article adapted to the strategic needs of the Government’s political warfare effort which in turn supported the regular military operations.

It was the business of those in charge of political warfare to lay down the lines along which propaganda should be produced. It was to conform to the general policy and strategy of the war. It was the business of those in charge of propaganda to fashion the news at their disposal or to create news that may be required to serve the ends of political warfare. Moreover, those in charge of news were to maintain a plentiful and regular supply of the raw material necessary for propaganda. Political warfare, therefore, was the marshalling and employment of propaganda coordinated between the Foreign Office, the fighting services and all other branches of the British war machine with the object of destroying the German ability to continue fighting and then determine the ideological basis of the peace that would presumably follow.

The PWE saw it as their responsibility to establish the direction that propaganda outside of the United Kingdom would take and then ensure its conformity with the policies and strategies of the war effort.

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<sup>3</sup> The PWE debated the efficacy of these three references to what it was they were doing throughout their existence and even used the term “Nervous Warfare” or “Nerve Warfare” in certain instances.

<sup>4</sup> The PWE would sometimes be mentioned in newspapers reporting on debates in the House of Commons as in the short reports by Our Parliamentary Correspondent, “B.B.C. Changes,” *The Times*, 9 October 1941, p. 4 or “More Ruthless Propaganda,” *The Times*, 19 Mar. 1942, p. 4.

They did not see it as their job to merely report the news. One of the lines in their explanation of what it was that they did in the Political Warfare Executive is telling. There they state that it was "to create news that may be required to serve the ends of political warfare." They also saw a division of responsibilities between what they did as the PWE and what was the responsibility of the BBC and how they then related to one another. They saw the BBC as "maintain[ing] a plentiful and regular supply of the raw material necessary for propaganda." It is not necessarily the case that this was intended to reveal any nefarious activity on the part of the PWE, but it can be interpreted as being an organisation that was not necessarily committed to being truthful. While one might interpret their *apologia* in this way, any notion of them lying in their propaganda is eliminated in numerous later statements in which they affirm that for propaganda to be effective it must also be truthful. Above all, they saw their work as fully coordinated between the Foreign Office and the fighting services which had the common objective of destroying Germany's military capabilities.

The PWE recognised that what they were doing with political warfare was something new. They knew that though the enemy was the same, technology had changed considerably since the war of 1914 to 1918. They noted that Germany had for the first time begun to engage in what today is called "total war." It is notable that the PWE uses the reference "total military war." Of interest is the notion that the PWE put forward that in the previous war it had been Germany that had been winning all of the battles until the middle of 1918.

The PWE saw the Germans as having used the interwar period to build up their military capabilities, a view that was not uncommon in Britain at the time, especially those that followed Robert Vansittart's views on Germany. However, this time there was an additional component. Not only would the Germans be able to take on the other powers in Europe militarily, but they would be able to augment that through the political warfare capabilities that military strength gave them. The PWE also suggested that at this point Great Britain had been in a steady state of decline and that France was not the military power it used to be due to internal political dissensions. This strengthened Germany's hand even more in their view. They saw Germany's diplomacy as enabled by their military strength and that it was through subversion and other political warfare tactics that the opponents were weakened and confused and then became easy targets for the Germans to overwhelm.

While the British would continue to argue that political warfare was nothing new for them, they suggested that the Germans had learned to use it far more efficiently than had been the case in the past. The PWE suggested that Germany's political warfare machinery became more potent as its military added success after success.

What all of this suggested was that the British were creating something in the PWE that already existed in Germany. Moreover, to be successful in the current war, they would need to reinforce their ability to conduct political warfare. This was especially important as Germany began having difficulty in the Russian campaign. They believed that because of this the German people would be far more willing to listen to subversive messages coming from Great Britain. It is also noteworthy that the British were operating on a coordinated basis with the United States. Later in the lectures, the cooperation between the United States and Great Britain will be discussed in greater detail.

The British were systematic in how they established the Political Warfare Executive. To maintain high standards, they needed to know what their goals were and how they could go about accomplishing them. The following is a description of the work of the Political Warfare Executive, at least regarding how it saw itself and how it wanted to propagate itself and its ideas.

To this end, the first thing that was necessary was to provide a label for what it did. Here, the PWE realised that there might be some confusion, and even they suggested that it could very easily be given a different name, however inadequate any one of them might have been within the context of "Total War."<sup>5</sup> However, with that, there was also a supposition that the underpinnings of the philosophy behind political warfare would also be changed in very nuanced ways. Political Warfare, they suggested, could also be called " Psychological Warfare," " Morale Warfare," or " Ideological Warfare." In addition to this, they concluded that for the most part people would simply refer to it as propaganda. "Each of these is a partial definition which is inadequate if the real function of Political Warfare as an indispensable component of Total War is to be understood."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The term "total war" is usually ascribed to Erich Ludendorff, a World War I German general and political compatriot of Adolf Hitler after the war, who published a book in 1935 entitled *Der totale Krieg*, in which he outlines many of the precepts that have become accepted as indicators of total war.

<sup>6</sup> Based on the confidential document produced in 1942 which attempted to describe what it was that the PWE did. The document itself was authored by a

## The Forms of Political Warfare

As noted in the introduction and repeated numerous times throughout the lectures, the Political Warfare Executive insisted that it was doing nothing new. However, they did admit that political warfare was now perhaps of greater importance than it had been in past conflicts. Political conditions had allowed this form of warfare to be more decisive in the outcome of hostilities between two nations. Regarding technology, it had become apparent that high-speed presses, long-range aircraft and wireless broadcasts played a role in making political warfare an essential feature in the modern era and even changed how war might be defined, a definition closer to that predicted by Fuller and H.G. Wells.<sup>7</sup> A further factor was that politics had changed; that is, nations no longer tended to be ruled by divine right of kings but through systems in which those that ruled had to pay some heed to the ordinary person in the street. They needed the acquiescence of the masses to carry out whatever military adventures they might have planned. This might have been a more significant factor in some nations than others, but, considering all the technology now available, it was an issue that could not be ignored no matter where one ruled.

In the minds of those directing the operations like the PWE, Ministry of Information (MOI), Special Operations Executive (SOE) and even the BBC, what they were engaged in was primarily a wooing of support for their cause. On the one hand, Britain needed to ensure that enough of its population supported the war to be able to hold Germany off. This was the job of the BBC and the MOI. On the other hand, the

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subcommittee of the committee of directors of the PWE. "Political Warfare Executive the Meaning, Techniques and Methods of Political Warfare," TNA FO 898/101.

<sup>7</sup> One need only consider the term "Cold War," which was popularized after the Second World War regarding the conflict between the Western Allies (which developed into NATO) and the Soviet Union (which was to spawn the Warsaw Pact). One of the first to use the term about the post-war realities was George Orwell who served as a liaison between the PWE and the BBC during the war (George Orwell, "You and the Atomic Bomb," *Tribune*, October 19, 1945). Notably, Walther Lippmann is credited with popularising the term in the United States with his book *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy* (1947). Coincidentally, Lippmann was an observer as a young captain in the US Army at meeting organised by Northcliffe to establish an Inter-Allied propaganda effort targeting Germany on August 14, 1918 at Crewe House (Stuart 148-150).



PWE saw it as its responsibility to court the supporters of Nazi Germany away from that cause and try to make them at least somewhat sympathetic to the cause of the Allies. If not that, then at least not unconditional support of that for which the Nazis stood. In addition, it was also their responsibility to ensure that those nations that had been occupied should not forget that they had a friend across the channel in Great Britain. This was also meant to ensure that the occupied nations remained sympathetic to Great Britain and did not, over time, become tacit supporters of National Socialist Germany. The PWE was to employ various political devices that were meant to isolate Germany from the rest of the world and thus act as a lever in obtaining Germany's surrender. In doing so, however, it also needed to fit into the national strategy and could not just do as it wished. That is, the PWE needed to serve a higher strategy as well.

In addition to the reasonably passive actions that people might be convinced of the undertaking, it was also the job of the PWE to instigate unrest amongst the masses. At a relatively early period in the war, this might have seemed to be an attractive option. However, as one reads through the lectures, one notes that this point becomes nuanced. That is, they support discontent amongst the masses and even uprisings, but they know that it is crucial that these be well-timed to coincide with action on the part of the Allied forces. If they were not undertaken in a timely fashion, this weapon-in-waiting, which could be very potent if employed in the right way, might be spent and not be available when the Allies needed them during the invasion of the continent.

What was described above was indeed nothing new. In various incarnations, it had already become a significant part of how war had been conducted for millennia. One could look back to the days of Hannibal and Philip of Macedon and see them doing many of the same things, just with different technologies. What changed was, as already noted, the political environment in which they operate and the nature of how that power was obtained and retained. That meant that they no longer could confine themselves to attacking just the enemy. While they would continue to spend some time and effort working with or against the political hierarchies, it was no longer something considered to be the sole target of the PWO (Political Warfare Officer).<sup>8</sup> They considered the gains that they might realise in attacking the upper echelons of the political hierarchies to be of generally lesser

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<sup>8</sup> Political Warfare Officer, or PWO, is frequently used in PWE documents to refer to those working in the field and graduates of their courses.

value than it had been in the past. However, they did recognise that in certain individual cases there could be a benefit if the hierarchies could be "stampeded." Here they point out the significance of German political warfare activities that resulted in what they called "the despair of Leopold," this was the paralysis that ensued from Leopold III's decision not to join the French and British and in trying to maintain Belgium's neutrality. A further example is the demoralisation of the French Cabinet and generals. This led to the complete disorganisation and collapse of the French Army in the face of the German invasion of 1940.

The PWE also understood that Churchill engaged in political warfare that was aimed directly at the German hierarchy and that this could be beneficial. One might also understand how the leader of a country might be able to directly engage their opposite number, something that the PWE hesitated to do. They noted that Churchill's post-Dunkirk speech attacked Hitler directly and was, at least to their way of thinking at the time, responsible for the Germans never crossing the channel and invading the island. However, it was the PWE's opinion that these sorts of single-stroke-coups were rare. Moreover, they concluded that, since hierarchies were subject to the same psychological reactions of the general population, they might as well concentrate on targeting the masses knowing that this propaganda would have a similar effect on those within the political hierarchy of any given target nation. In this way, they could create a "mass-emotion" that ultimately involved the hierarchy as well. Thus, by exploiting the "psychology," "morale" or "ideologies" held by the target population, whether in uniform or not, they would at the very least be able to impair the functioning of the other country's ability to make war. From this was developed the notion that it did not matter as much if one could convince a group of soldiers to desert their posts in the field as if one could convince a similar sized group of munitions workers to sabotage the weapons they were producing. By attacking the support mechanisms of the army in the field, one engaged the potential multiplicative effect that went beyond a temporary low-grade tactical victory in a single corner of a much larger battlefield. In doing so, one also could undermine the political and military elites who ran the machine as a collateral effect.

Psychological warfare, which the PWE considered as a subset of political warfare, was also nothing new. War-paint, war elephants, grand uniforms, Richelieu's leaflets and rumours were all intended to break down the will of the enemy. These are but a few examples of

tactical deployments of what we today call psychological warfare. However, in the past, they did not necessarily have a specific name or science attached to them. They were but part of the typical preparations leading up to the actual day of battle. In the Second World War, these forms of psychological warfare were taken on by things such as *Blitzkrieg*, the 88mm gun, and the Stuka dive bomber. In this case, it is more the idea or the thought of the weapon or tactic and the psychological impact of its existence, than what the weapon or tactic could do, that is important.

It could be argued that the 88 mm anti-tank gun and the Stuka dive bomber, as psychological weapons, were German inventions; however, the same could not be said of the term *Blitzkrieg*. According to Karl-Heinz Frieser, the Germans never applied the term to their manner of conducting military operations; it was the English-speaking press that used it to describe what the Germans were doing tactically and strategically.<sup>9</sup> In the minds of the Germans, they had merely applied new technologies to the old concept of *Bewegungskrieg* (manoeuvre warfare). However, as a propaganda tool, they did put it to use, with the mention of "*Blitzkrieg*" playing havoc with the popular imagination of both civilians and those in the military.

The notion of "morale warfare" is similar to the other two concepts but, like the other two, contains nuances that differentiate it from them. As with the previous two, it has always been a part of warfare. What sets it apart, however, is that it has always been a deciding factor in battle. If not, then the only way an army could be defeated would be by its complete annihilation. The morale of an army has always determined how quickly or how slowly it will collapse once it has engaged in battle. It is something that can take place over time or very quickly. The problem with this term is that it is challenging to point to an action that exclusively applies to morale warfare. Every action, on or off the battlefield, could be considered as contributing to morale warfare and thus a potential tipping point for a battle. For this reason, the term was sparingly used by the PWE.

The Political Warfare Executive concluded that "ideological warfare" was an essential factor in war. At some point, most of those engaged in combat, and even those civilians that may be far away from the fighting, will ask the fundamental question, why are we fighting this war. For this question to be neutralised the answer will already

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<sup>9</sup> Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West*, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005, p. 4-5.

have to have been provided, because, if some individual starts looking for reasons to fight, then the leadership is already back-footed. Whatever reason the leadership of a nation has for going to war, bad or good, they must already have made their case. The PWE approached warfare from the point of view that it represented a fundamental conflict of ideas and that war was primarily an effort to supplant one form of government, religion, or even racial concept with another. The problem, of course, is that the PWE did not consider the question of whether one concept is right and the other wrong. Alternatively, what if one happened to be on the wrong side? Their approach was one that saw the ordinary citizen as a pawn that could be manipulated by the elite. Considering the education and backgrounds of those leading the PWE, this would not have been a concept that would have been foreign to them. It was their task to provide the man-in-the-street with the ideological comfort that enabled him to go and fight and die for the political elite.

While many of the elements of political warfare were not new, there were two aspects of its execution that were utterly different from that of the past. These were the new technologies that changed the speed and the range of its effect. Moreover, the military and its political leadership had begun to grasp how individuals and groups could be manipulated at a distance. Assembled, they now knew how they might influence large groups of people in another country almost immediately. With some ingenuity, they could do it without anyone suspecting that they had been manipulated by a force that did not necessarily have their best interest in mind.

In the First World War, war approached totality. There was the combination of mass-mobilisation of men and materials, economic warfare and propaganda and counter-propaganda. Added to this was the integration of military, political, ideological and economic tactics. Though the Germans were often incorrectly touted as the inventors of total war, it was the British who were its master. They organised the gigantic military machine that waged war on three continents; they detached Italy from the Triple Alliance; won over the United States; secured the co-operation of Greece; enlisted 30 other Allies; and secured the support of both the Arabs and Jews. They forced upon the world the blockade which produced the economic strangulation of the Central Powers. "They used propaganda to accentuate racial, ethnic and class differences everywhere. They created distrust in the motives and methods of the enemy regimes. They destroyed the faith of the Central European powers in their fighting services and produced

peace overtures which weakened and finally disrupted the enemy.”<sup>10</sup> All of this was to become the basis of what they would call the Fourth Fighting Arm. They saw themselves as engaging the enemy in a new frontier. Traditionally, there had always been two fighting arms, the Army and the Navy. With the First World War, this changed. From 1914 onward, there was a third fighting arm, the Air Force.

In World War II this changed once again. The PWE saw the collective mind of the nation, or nations, as another battlefield. It was the one on which they were going to prepare their students to fight. As the machines of war became more complicated, so did the men who serviced them. One might even argue that the PWE was the most complicated of weapons of war. They realised that to mobilize and garner the acquiescence of the vast population that they needed to service these new machines of war, they would have to first win the battle for the minds of those who would operate the tanks, aircraft, missiles and create the propaganda leaflets and broadcasts of this new way of conducting war.

## **The PWE's Establishment and Mission**

What the PWE considered to be its primary mission was what it passed on to its students. At least “openly” these precepts were how it understood itself, even if others did not necessarily view the PWE in that way. While idle discussions in interoffice memos about the nature of political warfare might have been helpful from a theoretical point of view, the PWE needed to explain to their political bosses in succinct language what this “Fourth Fighting Arm” was trying to accomplish.<sup>11</sup> Concisely, it was trying to systematically influence the thoughts and actions of individuals and groups in enemy and enemy-occupied territories while remaining subordinate to the general higher strategy of the war.

The people that they were trying to accomplish this with were the dissident elements within the enemy ranks or people who could sympathize with the Allied position. All this, hopefully, was to culminate

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<sup>10</sup> “Political Warfare Executive the Meaning, Techniques and Methods of Political Warfare,”

<sup>11</sup> The PWE published the confidential document “Political Warfare Executive. The Meaning, Techniques and Methods of Political Warfare” for limited circulation in early 1942. In it they explain their approach to assisting in the war effort. TNA FO 898-101.

in the destruction of the fundament of Germany's war machine. The PWE aimed to break the will of the enemy and thus bring an end to the war by co-opting not just military collaborators but also the civil and industrial sectors.

While the other fighting arms dealt with the physical destruction of the enemy, the PWE saw its goal to be the winning of the war of ideas. As a result, the PWE's war did not necessarily end with the battlefields one can find on a map falling silent. Instead, in some ways, everything up to that point had been preparation for the winning of the peace that followed.

Not only did they need to have the military arms collaborate with them, but they also needed to be able to coordinate the activities of the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Economic Warfare, and other agencies that could assist in carrying out the necessary operations.

The PWE's rationale for its existence also made clear that political warfare operated on two different levels. On the one side, it openly sent leaflets and broadcasts to Germany and countries that were under Germany's occupation. That is, there was no attempt to hide the fact that this was an agent of the British government trying to influence the listener or the reader. The other end of political warfare was covert or so-called "black" propaganda. Here the strategy and the tactics employed, and the source of the material, were hidden from the enemy.

The PWE, having outlined what it defined as propaganda, had at its core a broader understanding of what its mission was. That is, it was not just to antagonise the enemy with aggravating propaganda messages but to affect political change in the enemy nation and thus disrupt its ability to fight. To achieve this goal, propaganda deliberately tried to direct the thinking of the target. If done correctly, the target would then at the right time, having received instructions, undertake the actions that the PWE was aiming at with their propaganda.

A distinction was also made between propaganda and what they termed "mere publicity." The PWE thought of publicity as simply presenting arguments for or against a case and then leaving it to the judgment of the recipient. With "mere publicity," it was assumed that there was goodwill between the PWE and whoever received the message. That is, there was no reason to be sceptical of the message being sent nor the good intentions of the recipient. A further assumption was that the PWE would provide information that the recipient wanted and that the PWE was willing to give. The understanding was that the PWE was providing "information," nothing more, nothing less. It was up to the recipient to act at his or her

discretion. Propaganda, on the other hand, involved tilting the table in favour of a point of view represented by the PWE that might well go against the best interests of the recipient.

There was, however, a *caveat*. This is where propaganda and publicity overlapped. It was called "pseudo-publicity" by the PWE. It was to be used in specific cases only, and students at the training school were made aware that this should be used judiciously. "Pseudo-publicity" was where propaganda was presented as if it were information. It might have been presented diplomatically, but it was designed in such a way that the recipient would not necessarily know the purpose of them having that information. They also thought of it as counter-propaganda, that is "information" that was intended to contradict the propaganda being produced by the enemy.

The PWE believe that propaganda could be presented overtly without it losing its effect. That is, there was no need to hide the fact that what the reader or listener was receiving was propaganda. The difference was that the propaganda was presented in a seemingly objective format, though the PWE admitted that it was never actually objective but was only intended to seem that way. Also, this type of propaganda needed to conform to what the government of the day was saying regarding its stated policies and goals.

Above all else, propaganda needed to be truthful. It needed to be able to pass rigorous scrutiny. This did not mean that it could not be discerning in the truths that it told. Selectivity in the facts that were released was essential in ensuring that when they asked their audience to perform a task that conformed to the strategy of the war planners that that action would indeed be taken. Without there being consistency between what they heard from the PWE and what they had empirical knowledge of, the audience might hesitate to believe the PWE's message, even if it were true.

The need to train individuals in the art of political warfare was apparent even before the PWE was officially created. The first meeting indicating the need for a training facility for something that was akin to political warfare took place on October 20, 1940.<sup>12</sup> Present were

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<sup>12</sup> "Short Record of a Meeting Held on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1940," TNA FO 898/98.

Hugh Dalton,<sup>13</sup> Gladwyn Jebb,<sup>14</sup> Sir Frank Nelson,<sup>15</sup> Rex Leeper,<sup>16</sup> C.F.A. Warner,<sup>17</sup> (George) Valentine Williams<sup>18</sup> and Hugh Gaitskell.<sup>19</sup>

The October 1940 meeting had as its primary focus the training of “propaganda agents.” Nine points were covered in this discussion. It was recognized that the war effort would need a more extensive training scheme than had been implemented up until then. It also noted that all of those involved would not necessarily be British. The various nationalities, no specific nationalities were mentioned at this point, were to be taken through a course that involved several stages with the recognition that not everyone would be suitable for propaganda work. It became clear to them that the actual propaganda training did not need to be carried out on a large scale but could be concentrated on a “limited number of qualified persons.”

Instructors at the training facility were also an important point of discussion. However, part of the dissatisfaction felt by what was later to become the PWE was that this committee directed that instructors be appointed wholly at the discretion of SO2 (which became the SOE). This left SO1 (which eventually became the PWE) entirely out of the decision-making process. The SO2 did make one concession by suggesting that they have regional representatives of SO1 “pay visits to the trainees of their particular countries.” It strikes one that there was a considerable amount of distrust between the two organisations, at least at the upper echelons. The distrust may have stemmed from the fact that SO1 had a good number of newspaperman and journalists as part of their cadre, a group that was not necessarily trusted by the

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<sup>13</sup> At that time Minister of Economic Warfare.

<sup>14</sup> Hubert Miles Gladwyn Jebb was a member of Ministry of Economic Warfare and its temporary Assistant Under-Secretary and served as Chief Executive Officer of the Special Operations Executive.

<sup>15</sup> Chief of the SOE.

<sup>16</sup> Leeper was a member of the Intelligence Bureau of the Department of Information in the First World War and then served at the Political Intelligence Department. He was made head of Britain's Political Intelligence Department in 1939.

<sup>17</sup> He was a functionary within the Foreign Office and later employed directly by the PWE, where he became the Regional Director for Scandinavia.

<sup>18</sup> He was a journalist and joined MI6 at the start of the war. He vetted potential agents for the service. He then was transferred to the British Embassy in Washington in 1941 and then went on to Hollywood and worked as a writer.

<sup>19</sup> Gaitskell was Dalton's Private Secretary and trusted adviser.



civil servants and politicians that made up the majority of those working in SO2.

One area in which the committee was forward thinking was in the pedagogical methods to be employed in the training school. It did not believe that a set of lectures would provide their students with sufficient background in order that they might do their jobs. Instead, they recommended that a more direct method be taken. Instead of merely handing information down from the expert to the pupil, it assumed a certain level of interest, knowledge and desire to gain knowledge on the part of the student. It recommended that the classes remain small and that specialist information be imparted through discussion rather than “teaching.”

They did, however, maintain a strict separation of the two operations. SOE agents who worked in the field were later brought in for specialist lectures at the PWE Training School. For the most part, they would be like Nicolas Bodington, one of the more dashing SOE operatives in France. He had extensive connections to the French resistance, not to mention the German *Sicherheitsdienst*. Upon reading of his exploits, the missions he undertook seemed to be more about the adrenaline rush than about accomplishing any specific task he might have been given before being taken across the channel to France. While Bodington did later lecture at the PWE training school on the topic of France and the resistance, it is hard to imagine him paying much heed to any “whispers” that an SO1 officer might ask him to disseminate while on the continent. While the notes for the meeting paid lip service to the “a spreading of oral propaganda... [that] should meet one another’s requirements,” in practice there seems to have been considerable resistance to what the SO1 leadership wanted the operatives to do while in France. In fact, there seems to be a considerable barrier erected so that SO1 could only operate insofar that SO2 permitted. In the sixth point of the notes regarding the meeting, it has made clear that SO1 officers were not to approach SO2 personnel regarding the spreading of morale propaganda. It was up to SO2 to find a suitable conduit.

While the above may be considered a general discussion about what SO1 and SO2 might do, there were some decisions reached in the meeting meant to be carried out regardless of the conclusions to which they had come. It was decided that SO2 would oversee all training, including that of propaganda agents. This point caused considerable consternation within the ranks of the future PWE, since they were the ones that formulated the propaganda in the first place. To them, it

might have seemed as though they should be the ones training future propagandists. Regarding the propaganda itself, it was made clear that SO1 was meant to produce propaganda material, while SO2 oversaw delivering it. However, it was also apparent that if SO2 felt so inclined, it could also produce its own propaganda initiatives, while SO1 could not independently deliver “whisper” campaigns on the continent.<sup>20</sup>

After the SOE and the PWE were split into separate entities, the PWE did indeed begin training its officers in the art of propaganda warfare. According to David Garnett, the first officer trained for political warfare purposes in the field was a certain Lieutenant Colby, who visited Woburn Abbey (usually referred to as CHQ) for 48 hours in March of 1942.<sup>21</sup> He was being prepared for the occupation of Madagascar and was treated as an initial test of their capabilities. Garnett does say that they learned much from their experience with him and used it to improve their preparation of officers for Operation Torch, the landings in North Africa. Garnett also indicates that Lieutenant Colonel Sedgwick, in November of 1942, had submitted a complete report of the 24 officers trained for the North African landings and the four additional personnel being prepared to deliver political warfare to Italy from North Africa.<sup>22</sup>

In the meantime, the issue of a training school for the PWE had once again become significant. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 1942, a document classified “Most Secret” and entitled “Training of PWE Personnel for the Second Front,” addressed the issue of the PWE’s ability to provide Political Warfare Officers (PWOs) for any future operations on the continent. It noted that as soon as the British Forces were to land in Europe, they would require trained personnel to conduct “frontline propaganda.” In addition to this, they were to collect intelligence from prisoners and civilians in order that they might feed this information back to the PWE Headquarters in London. The purpose of this was to ensure that propaganda being produced on the front line and that being produced on what they called “the back line” were coordinated with one another. That is, they were to ensure that the same message

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<sup>20</sup> A “whisper campaign” referred to the systematic release of rumours in a theatre of operation. The size of the intended operational area could be anything from a small community to an entire country. Due to the nature of rumours, confining rumours to a specific operational area was impossible.

<sup>21</sup> Garnett 397.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

was being sent from both sources and that they, perhaps most importantly, not contradict one another.

While the war had still not been decided at this point, the PWE realized that it would take some time for them to produce fully qualified PWOs and that they were pressed for time. This is not to say that they knew when any landing might take place, but that they anticipated that it would and that starting as early as possible would only be to their benefit. It is for this reason that they “suggested that preliminary plans for the establishment of a training school at Woburn Abbey should be examined and approved without delay.”<sup>23</sup>

## **The Talent Scout**

As planning for the PWE Training School moved forward, it was quickly realised that they would need to be very careful in selecting their recruits because they were planning for a war that was going to be fought two to three years in the future. It would take that long to organise the school the physical facility, arrange for a curriculum, find instructors, and recruit students. The trainees would then need to complete the program in sufficient numbers to be integrated into the Army as regular units in the order of battle. All of this, in turn, affected what the curriculum was going to be since they estimated that by this time the Anglo-American Allies would have invaded the continent. This meant that the PWOs they produced would be an essential part of the liberation of Europe and the conquest of Germany which entailed disarming Germany materially, psychologically, culturally, and ideologically.

In order to find the instructors and students, the British established the Joint Selection Board. This body was responsible for finding and training those who would eventually take up responsibilities in the newly reoccupied countries of Western Europe and Scandinavia after the invasion that was planned for spring or summer of 1944. In addition to this body, the PWE also recommended that the Joint Selection Board employ what they called “a talent scout.” The individual that they selected was Major Valentine Leathley Armitage.

Even for the PWE Major Armitage was rather old. However, he did come with the necessary skills that would have been very difficult to replicate in someone younger. He had been born in Heidelberg,

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<sup>23</sup> “Training of P.W.E. Personnel for the Second Front,” TNA 898/98.

Germany, to British parents, in 1888, making him 55 years old at the time of his posting with the PWE Training School. This was not the first time that he was to give service to Britain. He had already served with the Northamptonshire Regiment during World War I, having been commissioned in 1915 and distinguishing himself for gallantry, being awarded the Military Cross. Before that, after his studies in linguistics at Oxford, he taught for two years at the University of Rennes (1909—1911) and then became a schoolmaster at the Grange and Folkstone. After his time in the military, which he ended with the Provost Corps, he spent three years at Saint Bees School and then in 1925 became the headmaster of Bloxham School. During his tenure there he engaged in an ambitious building program that saw the school expand during times when most other schools were contracting. Moreover, the Officer Training Program at the school became one of the best in the country under his reforms. A significant part of his work was also raising funds to undertake these projects. That meant that he was very well connected and was accustomed to many of the social niceties required of someone who is going to ask the well-heeled for money. He was also very used to dealing with students and recruiting them to a school. In many ways, he was the ideal administrative person for the project.

Armitage, however, suffered under several restraints that hampered his ability to recruit the candidates that he needed. Severe limitations were placed upon him regarding whom he could approach and how it was done. A second issue that he had to work with was the fact that he was not allowed to approach individuals already serving. That is, those who already held a position, no matter how menial, were out of bounds. There were ways in which they could mitigate this, such as talking to their commanding officers prior to an approach, but this often did not yield positive results, because most commanding officers did not want to lose competent personnel. One might note as well that Armitage would most likely have been suspicious of anyone whose commanding officer did not make a fuss if there was the chance that they might lose them.

Armitage did try to make his job a little easier by recommending that they limit themselves to an age range between 38 and 55.<sup>24</sup> He did

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<sup>24</sup> “Draft of Letter Seeking Approval from Colonel Chambers of the War Office to Circulate Recruitment Letter to Individuals in Reserved Occupations,” TNA FO 898-98. Colonel Chambers had been put in place to oversee the security clearance of those being recruited. Chambers insisted that individuals receive security clearance before they appeared before the Joint Selections Board for

have one further obstacle that he was never able to overcome. While it was relatively easy to recruit personnel who could speak French, Dutch, Flemish, or Norwegian, to mention just a few of the languages that the PWE worked in, he had considerable difficulty finding available German speakers. As Garnett points out, all the competent German speakers had already been drafted into various existing departments within the Army, Navy, and Air Force, with the surplus being of dubious quality.

As noted earlier, linguistic competence was necessary for a PWE officer. However, beyond a working knowledge of the language of the country they were working in, it was also crucial for these officers to have first-hand knowledge of the country and its people. They needed to have a feel for what was going on around them and be able to react in a very natural way to customs that might not be particularly British.

At this point in the establishment of the PWE Training School, the executive board still tried to emphasise the need for military qualifications or experience of some sort. As will be demonstrated later this was not always possible for the PWE. Seldom were they able to recruit people with the type of experience for which they were looking. The important thing in all of this is that the individuals needed to have experience, that is, it was not require that they be in the military at this point. This meant that they could recruit civilians who had at some time served in the military. Age was also an important factor in recruiting individuals for the reoccupation of Europe. In the case of technical experts and liaison officers, it was suggested that the lowest limit be 41. However, they did make an exception in the case of technical experts due to the rarity of the qualifications and were prepared to accept candidates at any age.

Further to the difficulties in recruiting, on more than one occasion Armitage brought up the question of recruiting women.<sup>25</sup> It is hard to say with complete certainty whether he was keen on recruiting women, but he was persistent in asking the question. Eventually, a few did go through the training program in preparation for specialised assignments. The PWE's official position was that Armitage ignore the possibility of recruiting women at that time, though they note that they would push for a final decision because they would need to make provision for housing the women. They were open to the possibility,

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an interview. He even suggested that the individuals be cleared before they knew they were being considered for recruitment.

<sup>25</sup> "PWE Training," Dated 31.8.1943, FO 898/98.

but the concern at the time was most likely that some of the PWE units did operate in active combat zones and thus they would need permission from SHAEF before women were made part of the PWE training program.

While the PWE was looking for people with general qualifications, the most important was the ability in the language of the area that they were going to operate, though they also had some tasks that required specialised skillsets. In this case, they looked for people with these aptitudes in the appropriate trade journals. Specifically, they needed people who could work as technical experts; that is: 1) they worked in radio either as engineers or the production of radio programming, 2) they had experience in the publishing industry, had distributed films or books, or had worked in the press.<sup>26</sup> All these people would be critical to the smooth operation of any one of the PWE's field offices.

In addition to that, they also needed officers who were specialists in political surveys. That is, these were people who saw to the intake of intelligence for the Political Warfare Executive. These officers would oversee collecting and analysing intelligence obtained within the country that they were working. They would review all this information from the political warfare point of view and how it might be employed for propaganda purposes. The Information Officers, on the other hand, supervised supplying press representatives in occupied/liberated regions with approved news from the outside world. In other words, they ensure that the local press received news that had been approved through PWE channels.

Another specialist task was the censoring of communications coming in and going out of a given region. This was perhaps important in the initial period after liberation; but, as was demonstrated in Germany, these censors played a significant role in the first two years of Germany's occupation. Communications officers and Information Services Officers were also required. They would take care of the everyday communications of the field office and ensure that they had intelligence material on hand for whatever propaganda campaigns they might undertake.

An essential role in every one of the PWE offices was that of the individual charged with liaison responsibilities not only with the local population but with other Allied authorities. An office that had

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<sup>26</sup> The information for this segment has been taken from "Qualifications Required of Candidates to be Trained for Work Under C.I.S.O. in Friendly Countries in Western Europe Reoccupied by Allied Forces," TNA FO 898/98.