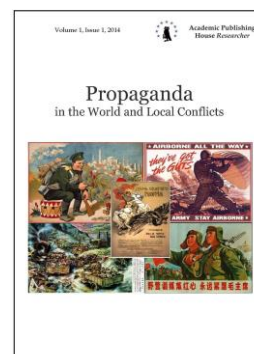


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## Weapons of Propagandists

### The Use of Leaflets as a Propagandist's Weapon in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

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#### Abstract

This paper examines the use of leaflets as a propagandist's weapon in 20<sup>th</sup> century military conflicts. Consideration is given to both the external (paper and special paints) and internal (text) characteristics of leaflets.

In conducting the research reported in this paper, use was made of specialized works on the history of military propaganda, as well as the history of collaborationism.

The study employed the principles of objectivity and historicism, which made it possible to examine the events in question in an unbiased manner and explore various related phenomena in the context of the historical situation. For instance, an analysis of several related historical facts helped come up with a new assessment of the underlying causes behind the low effectiveness of Soviet propaganda in 1941.

The author's conclusion is that careful consideration was given by 20<sup>th</sup> century specialists in the area of psychological warfare to both the external and internal characteristics of the leaflet. The design of leaflets was to be thought out down to the last detail, both in terms of text and physical appearance, while, in terms of the ideological message, each set of leaflets was to be targeted to an audience that largely represented the opposing army. In addition, of special significance was the timing of agitation activities, for it was understood that work of this kind must not be spontaneous and detached from the real situation in the combat zone.

**Keywords:** propaganda, leaflets, internal and external criticism, local conflicts, 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 1. Introduction

For 20<sup>th</sup> century military propagandists the use of leaflets was an effective means of influencing the opposing side psychologically. For instance, during World War II in the second half of 1942 alone an estimated 60,000 Soviet military personnel joined the opposing, German, army on the Eastern Front (Semiryaga, 2000: 454). This is comparable to six full-fledged rifle divisions of the Red Army.

It, therefore, is no wonder that the use of leaflets occupied an important part in influencing the opposing side psychologically. Circulating in millions of copies, propaganda leaflets were delivered by aircraft and distributed by diversionist units and local residents (Mamadaliyev, 2015: 59). According to V. Chuprin, in the war's first year alone the Soviets used an estimated 650 million leaflets on the front line (Chuprin, 2020).

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## 2. Materials and methods

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## 3. Results

### *External criticism*

It would seem that we already know everything there is to know about the use of propaganda leaflets owing to the experience with it in World War I, except just for text content, but there appears to be more to it. Here is just one example. During World War II, soldiers in the Red Army did not receive cigarettes – they were given only tobacco. At that time, it was hard to provide rolling paper for Soviet military personnel, as most of the time it was out of stock. Quite unexpectedly, a “helping hand” with rolling paper was “extended” to the Russians by Third Reich propagandists, who had started to print leaflets on this kind of paper designed to call on opposing military personnel to surrender and come over to the German side. Despite the fact that a Soviet soldier found to be in possession of such leaflets could face a court martial, just about everyone in the Red Army had it.

Another example is the use of leaflets by the anti-Iraq coalition in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century during Operation Desert Storm, when leaflets were printed on special paper protected against humidity and sunlight. In the peculiar conditions of that conflict, the use of this kind of paper was definitely timely (Tokov, Kasyuk, 1996).

### *Internal criticism*

Normally, the text content of front-line leaflets was quite simple and easy-to-understand, with Third Reich propagandists relying in their line of work on a special directive from the High Command of the Wehrmacht. The document discouraged using in front-line propaganda complex, convoluted, and artificially constructed texts (Figure 1), stressing that the simpler, clearer, and more natural the content was, the more effective it would be (Mamadaliyev, 2015: 59). Of importance in this respect was also the circumstance that the majority of military personnel in the Red Army were of little education, with most having completed just four grades in school.

However, the use of leaflets could also work the other way and cause problems if done in an incompetent or untimely manner. A classic example of this is Soviet military propaganda in the period 1938–1941. This body of propaganda was underpinned by the Comintern’s guiding idea – ‘Workers and oppressed peoples of all countries, unite!’ Between 1938 and 1939, class propaganda was employed in the Battle of Lake Khasan and the Battles of Khalkhin Gol. To conduct propaganda in this local conflict, use was made of an agit-train of the First Independent Division of the Red Army, which operated a small printery that carried Japanese, Chinese, and Korean fonts. However, the Russians’ reliance on the idea ‘Generals and the rich are the only ones who crave war’ did not work. Out of roughly 60,000 Japanese military personnel who took part in the Battles of Khalkhin Gol, only 90 were captured, with only four of these joining the Russian side willingly after falling for its propaganda (Chuprin, 2020).

The Soviets’ second attempt to employ the same cliché was undertaken during the Russo-Finnish War of 1939–1940. Specialists at the Comintern had suggested taking advantage of the enmity between proletarian soldiers and bourgeois officers. However, the important point that was overlooked was that the difference in standard of living was not great in Finland at the time. As a result, this propaganda effort failed too.

Subsequent to Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, Soviet leaflet propaganda failed big several times in 1941 – a fact recognized by several contemporary Russian researchers. Below is an outline of three such cases.



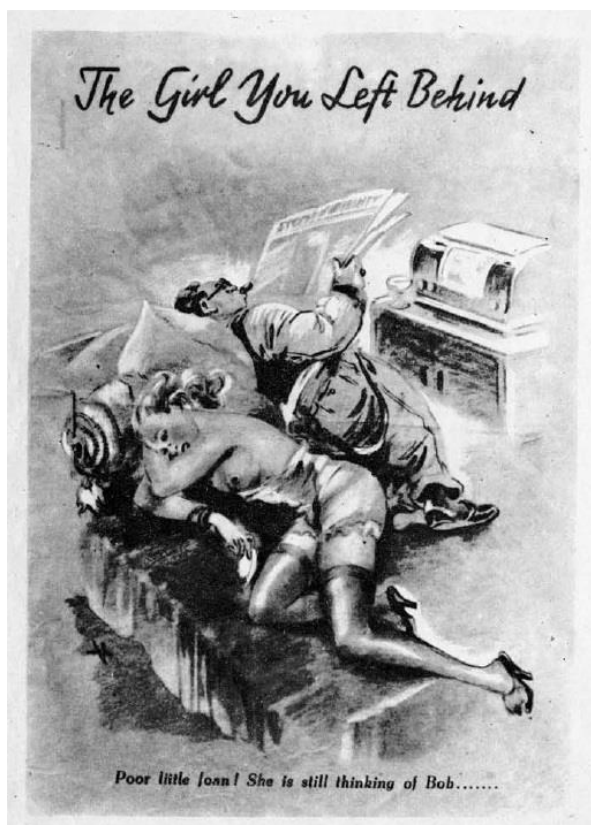
**Fig. 1.** German ‘Come Over to Us!’ leaflet

Following Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the Political Administration of the Red Army undertook a “class propaganda” campaign. The agitators used leaflets to call on German proletarian military personnel to topple the Nazi regime and join the “brotherhood of workers and peasants”. According to researcher V.G. Krysko, it was a preposterous thing to do at that point in time, considering that the Red Army was retreating (Krysko, 1999: 49).

It is important to note that (linguistic or stylistic) mistakes in the internal content of leaflets could also reduce the quality of psychological impact, so no improvisation was allowed, as it could lead to inverse results, i.e. a boomerang effect.

The Soviets’ second major mistake in handling their propaganda targeted at the opposing military forces in early 1941, which eventually would do them lasting damage and undermine their reputation, was to follow a directive from the chief of the Main Political Administration of the Red Army, L.Z. Mekhlis, and publish sexually-oriented leaflets. Normally, such leaflets contained a photograph of a naked woman in bed with a man, accompanied by an inscription of the following kind: “See what your wife is up to while you are at the front”. It is to be noted that while erotic propaganda was employed by different nations both in World War I and in World War II (Figure 2), this was done only in cases where the opposing side had lost the lead and suffered extensive losses. In 1941, the use of such leaflets by the Soviets led the German side to term it “class-pornographic propaganda” (Krysko, 1999: 59). This kind of propaganda “masterpieces” by the Soviets not only failed to undermine the morale of German units – just on the contrary, they sparked excitement and buoyancy among German soldiers, who would collect such leaflets as erotic cards.





**Fig. 2.** German 'Poor Little John' leaflet

Finally, we learn from V. Chuprin that on June 27, just five days into the war, the Soviets released their first 'To the German Soldiers!' leaflet, which called on the Germans to end the senseless war and come over to the Red Army (Chuprin, 2020). Obviously, one should hardly have expected a leaflet like that to be highly efficient just five days into the war.

Let us do some summing up. There is one pattern that cuts across all Soviet propaganda initiatives undertaken in 1941 – the untimeliness of the start of propaganda activities. The use of such leaflets could have been a lot more effective had they been used between 1944 and 1945. However, it is not quite right to accuse the Main Political Administration and the Comintern of unprofessionalism, for the World War I experience must have been studied by the Soviets during the prewar period quite meticulously. It may be argued that all of those leaflets had been printed in the USSR prior to the German invasion, with the conflict having been presented to Soviet military propaganda specialists as an offensive operation of the Red Army aimed at getting the opposing side to lose the lead, defend, and suffer extensive losses. This appears to be the only scenario where it would have made sense for the Soviet leadership to undertake the propagandist initiatives it did in 1941.

There were some even more substantial propaganda failures of the Soviet leadership. Military writer K.M. Simonov mentions the fact that in the summer of 1941 the Soviet Air Force engaged for some time in dropping leaflets on areas controlled by the opposing side. The leaflets were intended for compatriots and meant to warn them of an air attack planned for the following day. The air strike was going to be targeted at the German military personnel. For this reason, the civilian population was advised to evacuate themselves to a different location or hide – apparently, in the hope that opposing military personnel would be huddled up on the surface and its assembly points would be easier to target. As well-intended as these initiatives were, they also, however, worked the other way, with the Germans, quite naturally, becoming keen to have pulled all of their available air-defense systems and fighter aircraft into the area by the scheduled time. As a result, hardly any of the Soviet bombers would make it back to its airdrome (Pyriev, Reznichenko, 2001: 244).

The physical damage from such agitation campaigns was significant (e.g., wasteful use of the leaflet stock (nearly 650 million leaflets printed in 1941 alone); bombers being used to deliver leaflets instead of being of real help to the retreating Soviet troops; Soviet air units being directly

hurt through suffering more extensive losses as a result of the opposing side learning of upcoming air strikes). Add to this the possibility of reputational damage, for there is hardly anything more morale-boosting to a soldier than realizing that you are fighting a bunch of dilettantes.

#### 4. Conclusion

Careful consideration was given by 20<sup>th</sup> century specialists in the area of psychological warfare to both the external and internal characteristics of the leaflet. The design of leaflets was to be thought out down to the last detail, both in terms of text and physical appearance, while, in terms of the ideological message, each set of leaflets was to be targeted to an audience that largely represented the opposing army. In addition, of special significance was the timing of agitation activities, for it was understood that work of this kind must not be spontaneous and detached from the real situation in the combat zone.

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