

The Stars and Stripes

January 5, 1919

GEN. PROPAGANDA EXPLAINS HOW HE WON BOCHE OVER

One Argonne Prisoner in Three Carried Fatal Pamphlets

BREAKFAST AS ADVERTISED

Powerful Weapon Borne to Enemy
by Airplane Had Share in
Winning War

There was one powerful weapon which was used by the American Army with startling and visible success in the closing campaign of the war which was never so much as mentioned in this or any other newspaper. There was one section of the service which no letter was permitted to describe, and the very existence of which the war correspondents were under stern orders to ignore.

But now the ban is lifted. So it may be said that while the artillery was pounding the German troops with shells and the infantry was shooting and slashing at them from somewhat closer range, the unsung propaganda section was silently bombarding them with arguments, busily unsettling them by suggestion.

It had the boundless satisfaction of seeing its suggestions followed. When the propaganda section would pelt the enemy areas with leaflets that broadly hinted at the wisdom of surrender and when, perhaps days, perhaps weeks later, these leaflets were found upon countless prisoners in our cages, the propaganda section was entitled to a little glow of complacency.

One Out of Every Three

Of the thousands of prisoners who passed through the examining cage of a single American corps during the first fortnight of the Meuse-Argonne campaign, it was found, upon examination, that one out of every three had our propaganda in his pocket. And this despite the fact that the German high command had decreed it a treasonable offense for any soldier so much as to have the accursed stuff in his possession. Which decree, by the way, also gave the propaganda section a little glow of complacency.

The origins of the service were interesting. At first Washington was a little reluctant, perhaps from an instinctive feeling that there must be something the matter with any weapon the German government was so fond of using. When our own propaganda was finally sanctioned, it was with this stipulation—that it should contain nothing but the truth.

The difference between our propaganda, with its scrupulously exact facts and figures—the figures, for instance, on the number of troops arriving each month in France—and the German propaganda which, in preparing for the Italian disaster at Caporetto, flooded the warm-blooded Italian troops with cunningly devised anonymous letters warning them that their wives at home were being unfaithful to them—well, it was a measure of the difference between the Imperial German Government and the Government of the United States of America.

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BREAKFAST AS ADVERTISED

"If Only They Knew"

Our propaganda section may be conceived of as having started something like this. A colonel, say—his name was probably Legion—exasperated by the Germans' blissful ignorance of the forces massing against them and by the lies their government was feeding them every hour, sighed deeply. "If only they knew the truth," said Colonel Legion.

"Then why not tell them?" some one suggested brightly. "Propaganda is nothing but a fancy war name for publicity and who knows the publicity game better than the Yanks? Why, the Germans make no bones about admitting that they learned the trick from us. Now the difference between a Boche and a Yank is just this—that a Boche is some one who believes everything that's told him and a Yank is some one who disbelieves everything that is told him. That gives us a good start. The Boche believes all this rubbish his own government has been telling him; let's see how he swallows a few facts. Boy, bring me a German printing press and four airplanes."

And so they began. Trucks, continuously supplied with the latest arguments done into neat bundles, would scout along the front—often somewhat painfully within reach of the German guns—and also supplied with the latest news as to wind and enemy movements. Thus equipped, they could direct their balloons to the places where they would do the most good, reaching Alsatian troops or the Czecho-Slovak forces with appropriate arguments.

By the Air Route

As soon as President Wilson would give an utterance intended for the world (which includes the German Army), the propaganda section would translate it into German and deliver it by the air route to all the areas within reach. All the news of the German disasters which began in mid-July, the steadily rising total of German prisoners in the Allied pen—these were done into leaflets and delivered to the German front.

There were really two phases of the propaganda—the general arguments, designed to weaken the enemy's will to fight and addressed to all the troops as far back as the airplanes could go, and the specific arguments, intended to persuade a soldier in the front line to throw up his hands and come over.

The arguments of the first class may be illustrated by such an insidious little questionnaire as this—questionnaires for him to think over in his bunk at night:

Several questions for German soldiers:

1. Will you ever again be as strong as you were in July, 1918?
2. Will your opponents grow daily stronger or weaker?
3. Have your grievous losses suffered in 1918 brought you the victorious peace which your leaders promised you?
4. Have you still a final hope of victory?
5. Do you want to give up your life in a hopeless cause?

The effect of these arguments, aimed at the German soldier in his rest area, could never be measured. The effect of the arguments directly calculated to induce surrender could be measured by the number of Germans who, having obviously read and pondered our suggestions, did actually surrender.