

Media and Propaganda: The Northcliffe Press and the Corpse Factory Story of World War I

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Abstract:

Demonization of Germans was an early feature of British propaganda in World War I, with numerous atrocities reported in the Bryce Report, 1915. But in April, 1917, a particularly gripping, gruesome, and odium-inducing tale was given credence by the press of Lord Northcliffe, notably *The Times* and *The Daily Mail*. These papers seemed to provide convincing proof that the Germans boiled down corpses of their own soldiers for the purpose of producing useful products such as fats, bone meal, pig food and the like. The story is well known, but significant details have been obscured or misrepresented with regard to the way in which it came to be so widely believed. Our purpose here is to straighten out key elements of the record, based on archival findings, and to draw attention to the techniques employed to ensure widespread credence in this false tale. These techniques, and the principles behind their use, have recent and contemporary parallels, some of which are drawn in this paper. The Corpse Factory story succeeded in its goal, but may have made a lasting peace more difficult. Also, official repudiation of the story in 1925 encouraged later disbelief when early reports circulated about the Holocaust under Hitler, thus contributing to the early lack of response by nations asked to accept Jewish refugees.

Keywords: Arthur Ponsonby; Atrocity Stories; Brigadier General Charteris; Corpse Factory; Corpse Utilization Plant; Fake Credentials; Lord Northcliffe; Media Manipulation; World War I Propaganda

Résumé:

Le démonisation des Allemands est une caractéristique marquante du début de la propagande britannique pendant la Première Guerre mondiale, avec les nombreuses atrocités transcrites dans le rapport Bryce de 1915. Cependant, en avril 1917, des récits particulièrement odieux, révoltants et induisant à la haine ont vu le jour dans la presse du Lord Northcliffe, notamment dans *The Times* et *The Daily Mail*. Ces journaux semblaient offrir des preuves convaincantes que les Allemands avaient fait bouillir les cadavres de leurs soldats afin de fabriquer des produits utiles tels que des gras, de la farine d'os, de la nourriture de cochons et ainsi de suite. L'histoire est bien connue, mais des détails importants ont été obscurcis ou déformés en ce qui concerne la façon dont elle est venue à être crue par la population générale. L'objectif de cet article est d'éclairer certains éléments clés de ce dossier en se basant sur des données d'archives, et de mettre l'accent sur les techniques qui ont été utilisées afin de répandre cette fausse croyance. Ces techniques et les principes derrière leurs utilisations ont des parallèles contemporains et récents qui seront en partie abordés dans cet article. La fabrication de cette histoire d'usine à cadavre a réussi son objectif, mais aurait pu nuire à une période de paix durable. De plus, une répudiation officielle de l'histoire en 1925 a créé une certaine incrédulité plus tard lorsque des rapports à propos de l'Holocauste de Hitler ont été publiés, contribuant ainsi au manque de réponse des nations à qui on demandait d'accepter des réfugiés juifs.

Mots-clés: Arthur Ponsonby; Attestations Fausses; Brigadier-Général Charteris; Histoires d'Atrocités; Lord Northcliffe; Manipulation de Médias; Propagande de la Première Guerre Mondiale; Usine d'Utilisation de Cadavres; Usine de Cadavres

Atrocity stories, as a way of inciting people to war, have been successfully employed from at least the time of the crusades of the Middle Ages to the present. Incitement of hatred paves the way to war and in combat lowers the inhibition level to kill. The soldier who kills an enemy feels good about ridding the world of some evil monster, not a human being. World War I arrived at a time when nationalistic pride and patriotic fervour were at a peak, and imperialistic ambitions clashed. Devotion to country, Fatherland, "La Patrie" was such that many had no compunctions about subordinating ordinary ethical rules to the overriding needs of that object of devotion.

Target audiences must believe that the stories are true, and in that respect it helps if the stories are in fact true. But believability of the stories, and the extent to which they reverberate in the imagination and stimulate horror and revulsion, are what matter for influencing targets.

Exposing the truth about invented stories after a propaganda campaign has served its purpose and war is over is not as easy as it might seem. Media that "fell for" the stories are understandably reluctant to advertise their incompetence or connivance beyond what is necessary to restore credibility in cases where their role has been exposed.¹ Story fabricators may not want to reveal themselves to be liars, especially if the war has not gone well. A government or its

successor may also worry about preserving its credibility for future propaganda operations. Admitting to past deceptions, even of a previous administration, could impair this credibility.

For sheer magnitude, impact and durability one atrocity story from World War I stands out above others in the history of such stories. We refer to the so-called Corpse Utilization Plant story, used to demonise the Germans. (For brevity, we will call it the “Corpse Factory” story² henceforth.) According to the story, used to sustain and intensify a war already underway, the Germans were boiling down their own dead soldiers to make useful products—pig’s food, fertilizer, glycerine, lubricants, and last but not least, soap.

Our purpose in revisiting this story is primarily to highlight the media role in getting this story implanted so thoroughly in public consciousness. The Northcliffe press role in this has been in some cases ignored, and in others under-appreciated, or insufficiently understood. We propose to rectify this deficiency. The techniques used then have counterparts in recent and current propaganda methods, as we intend to show. New techniques have certainly come into play since then, but in some cases these are simply adaptations of older principles applied in the case we examine.

In the background here, but not to be forgotten, are ethical concerns related to the postwar history of this falsehood. As an important contributor to the demonization of Germans, the story shares responsibility in some measure for the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles and reparations payments, sowing seeds for future war. Official British repudiation of the story in 1925 later led to scepticism when reports about the Holocaust emerged early in World War II.³ We also include reference to how the Corpse Factory story took on life of its own in public imagination, illustrating the difficulty of predicting the effects that flow from false beliefs instilled in public consciousness.

The main anchor for the story came with the simultaneous publication in the Northcliffe papers (notably the *Times* and the *Daily Mail*, both dated April 17, 1917) of what purported to be a translation from a French-language Belgian newspaper of a supposed eyewitness account of a Corpse Factory, juxtaposed to a translation from an authoritative Berlin newspaper, the *Lokal-Anzeiger*, seemingly corroborating the French language account. A brief mention of the German newspaper “admission” had been made by a columnist in the previous day’s *Times*, but the full impact came with juxtaposition of the lengthy French language-sourced text with the German-sourced text on April 17, 1917.

There were earlier intimations as to the existence of such an installation. In the following three sections, we deal successively with early occurrences of the Corpse Factory story, then the main deception, and finally with some parallels in recent and contemporary propaganda techniques.

Early occurrences of the Corpse Factory story

Already in 1915, rumours along the lines of the Corpse Factory story appear to have circulated in London, but without general or widespread credence. Even before that there was a front-page story in a Madrid daily, *La Correspondencia de España*, reporting on page one of its November 23, 1914 issue that the Germans were making use of a blast furnace in Belgium for the purpose of cremating their dead. The source given for the story was Lord Northcliffe’s *Daily Mail*.

On June 19, 1916, *Ha-Herut* from Jerusalem, the newspaper of the Jewish minority in— at that time still Turkish—Palestine, informed its readers about a rumour that the Germans were carrying corpses of their fallen soldiers to big furnaces, behind the front lines, where they were

being incinerated. But it quoted a German news agency claim that there was “no basis for the rumour”. It is worth noting that at that time the incineration of human bodies met with strong opposition in Christian society as “pagan” and “against all tradition”. The mere reporting as fact that Germans cremated their soldiers would have been enough therefore to cast them in a negative light. In the same year the Dutch cartoonist Louis Raemaekers depicted German corpses unceremoniously tied together in bundles of four, bound for some unstated destination.

Arthur Ponsonby (1928: 104) recounts allegations that a version of the Corpse Factory story was communicated by the German Minister to the Chinese Premier. There was indeed a story published in the *North China Herald* (1917, March 3: 446), reporting that the German Ambassador, Admiral von Hintze “triumphantly stated that they were extracting glycerine out of dead soldiers”, and that “[f]rom that moment onward the horrified Premier [Tuan Chi-jui] had no more use for Germany and the business of persuading him to turn against her became comparatively easy”.⁴ But that von Hintze, a former career Navy officer and an experienced diplomat, should have boasted before the Chinese Premier about a story that could only provoke deepest contempt for his country, seems unlikely. The possibility of British propaganda instigating this report must be borne in mind. The Germans in China, at that time, had other problems due to the rapidly deteriorating German-Chinese relations related to Germany’s declaration of indiscriminate submarine warfare February 1, 1917, which had serious consequences for the Chinese economy and the safety of the Chinese merchant marine.

The widely circulated report that Brigadier General John V. Charteris (1871-1946) was responsible for the Corpse Factory story began with a *New York Times* report of a speech Charteris gave in New York to the National Arts Club in 1925. Charteris reportedly said that he, as Chief of British Army Intelligence at British Expeditionary Force’s headquarters in 1917, had come upon two photographs, one showing dead bodies of German soldiers being hauled away for burial behind the lines. The second showed dead horses on their way to a carcass utilization plant. He simply transposed the caption belonging to the horses’ photograph to that of the dead soldiers and sent the picture to a Chinese newspaper in Shanghai. The Corpse Factory story supposedly reached its way back to England by a Chinese reader of *The Field* who wrote to that publication telling about the story appearing in China. Charteris told his American audience that a subsequent letter to the *Times* of London was critical of the translation of “Kadaver”, starting a controversy that “raged until all England thought it must be true” (Tells of British War Propaganda, *New York Times*, 1925, October 20). We could find no such letter in *The Field* from January to June 1917. Yet Charteris’s version has received disproportionate attention, tending to eclipse the Northcliffe press role. Here we can cite, as an example, Phillip Knightley (1975: 105-106) who, in his otherwise deservedly celebrated work, uncharacteristically misnames, mislocates and misrepresents the role of a key Belgian émigré newspaper, *L’Indépendance Belge*, to be described below.

Perhaps intended to improve British-American relations by its seeming candour, Charteris’ speech provoked a fierce denunciation of the “unprincipled methods used in national war propaganda”, by letter-writer M.C. Duvall (War Propaganda, *New York Times*, 1925, October 22). In Britain, Charteris came under fire for saying things discrediting to British propaganda, and he tried to distance himself from his remarks, claiming he had been misreported (Charteris Denies Propaganda Story, *New York Times*, 1925, October 25). Later, he directed attention to the “suggestions and speculations” in the Encyclopedia Britannica publication, *Those Eventful Years*, and elsewhere, which he says he merely “repeated”, following which they became “unfortunately turned into definite statements of fact and attributed to me”. He claimed

when he arrived in Glasgow November 3 that he “neither invented the cadaver story nor [altered] captions in any photograph nor [used] any faked material for propaganda purposes” (*New York Times*, 1925, November 4). These claims seem less than fully candid. One thing is clear: he was distorting the truth either here or in his New York speech, perhaps on both occasions.

A different source for the origin of the Corpse Factory story was given by *New York Times* reporter Walter Littlefield who traced it to an unnamed correspondent of an unnamed “well-known” Amsterdam paper, who obtained the full German text of the army order of the day of the Sixth Bavarian Reserve Division, dated December 21, 1916, that read:

It is necessary again to call attention to the fact that when corpses are delivered to the Corpse Utilization Establishments details are to accompany as to which troop units they are from, the date of death, illness, and information as to any epidemics.

(*New York Times*, 1925, November 29)

Littlefield claims that this story was circulated in January 1917, before Charteris became chief of Army intelligence. Once again the word “Corpse” was a translation for the German “Kadaver”, and thereby misleading. Words like “date of death” and “illness” make it seem as if humans were referred to, but as Littlefield points out the word “illness” is a humanized translation of the German word for “disease”, and therefore also misleading. Littlefield uses contextual analysis to indicate that “carcass” was the right translation, notwithstanding Bavarian usage of “Kadaver” in a way corresponding to the English “cadaver” (*New York Times*, 1925, November 29).

These earlier versions helped to circulate the idea of the Corpse Factory, but they lacked compelling evidence. This is what the Northcliffe press presented to its readers. The anchor for credibility came from juxtaposition of what was presented as official German admission of the existence of a Corpse Factory, together with a detailed description of such a factory by a supposed eyewitness, as will be described.

The Main Deception: Juxtaposing Real and Invented Reports

What was it about the April 17, 1917 Northcliffe publications that was so convincing? The answer is, first, that the French language Belgian émigré newspaper, *Indépendance Belge* of April 10, 1917 gave such a detailed, lengthy and gruesome description of the inside of one such installation as to give the impression that the person had to have been there. The alleged “eyewitness” testified to seeing corpses being unloaded from trains, and boiled down. There is no mention of horses. Significantly, *Indépendance Belge* did not present the story as its own, but attributed the story to another paper, *La Belgique*, described as published in Leiden, in Holland, thus making verification difficult if not impossible. No date is given for when *La Belgique* supposedly published the article. By itself alone, the story would hardly be convincing to a discerning reader.

But secondly, the German newspaper in question, the *Lokal-Anzeiger* also dated April 10, 1917 carried an account by war correspondent Karl Rosner as he travelled near the front north of Reims, France. The account was datelined April 5. Well down in his report he routinely and matter-of-factly called attention in a few lines to a “carcass utilization establishment” (*Kadaververwertungsanstalt*) that he saw and could smell from a distance. In the Northcliffe papers this long German word was mistranslated as a “Corpse Exploitation Establishment”. The

word “Kadaver”, the first part of the word, is reserved for animal carcasses in ordinary German speech as well as in military parlance, while “Leiche” refers to a human corpse.

The word “Kadaver” was not the only mistranslation in the *Times* and the *Daily Mail*. Of lesser importance, but still significant, was mistranslation of the German word “Leim”. This word means “glue” in German. Rosner reported experiencing “a dull smell in the air, as if glue were being boiled”. This would make a lot of sense if dead horses were being boiled down. At the time, the use of horses to make glue was widespread. An accurate translation would have signalled to many people the likelihood of horse carcasses, not people’s corpses, being utilized in the plant. German “Leim” sounds like English “lime” and it was easy to introduce that like-sounding word as a “translation”. The word “lime” would have sounded perfectly logical to readers, given that quicklime was often used to disinfect corpses.

What we propose to show is that the Northcliffe press was not the victim of innocent mistranslations, but deliberately concocted this misleading story, likely in conjunction with Belgian and British propagandists in London. For evidence, there is first the statement by Frederic William Wile, identified as for 10 years Berlin correspondent of the *Daily Mail*:

Whatever credit or discredit attaches to it, my brilliant colleague of the “Times”, Mr. J. E. Mackenzie, who, like myself, was stationed for many years in Germany as Berlin correspondent, shares with me the responsibility of having brought to public notice the activities of the Hun body-boilers. It was we who discovered conjointly in the Government-controlled “Lokal-Anzeiger” of April 10th, 1917, the loathsome admission that the German armies in the field maintain Corpse Utilization Establishments (*Kadaver-Verwertungs-Anstalten*) [sic], where soldier dead are “rendered down” for lubricating oils, fats, and pigs’ food.

(Wile, 1917: 308)

While he presents this as a “discovery” he surely must have known the German meanings of “Kadaver” and “Leim”. A corrected translation about the meaning of “Leim” appeared in the *Times* two days after the April 17 revelation (although no attention was called to the earlier mistranslation). But the same mistranslation reappears as an insert in Wile’s article of May 19, 1917.

Secondly, there is the evidence in the official British propaganda report of September, 1916, under the heading “Propaganda for the Belgian Government”, that through connections with the Belgian Relief Committee in London, “there is a constant interchange of views and information of every sort relating to actual or potential propaganda in the interests of Belgium” (Wellington House, 1916: 11, 88).

Thirdly, there is the fact, not as well known as it should be, that *Indépendance Belge* was edited in London, with the address given as “5, Dane Str., High Holborn, W.C.1”. Among the texts obscuring this fact is James Morgan Read’s *Atrocity Propaganda* where he writes that the *Times* took the Corpse Factory story “from a Belgian paper published in Holland” (Read, 1972: 38). Not so: the *Times* took the story from the London *Indépendance Belge* which gave as its source an alleged Leiden-published Belgian émigré paper, *La Belgique*. Also, the English account in the *Times* does not exactly match the French version in *L’Indépendance Belge*.

Fourthly, a check with Regional Archives in Leiden, reveals no evidence of a paper titled *La Belgique* being edited in Leiden at the time. A Leiden, Netherlands, regional archivist uncovered no evidence of such a publication: “As far as I can see, there wasn’t a journal *La*

Belgique, which was edited in Leiden” (e-mail, Ingrid Pot-Noordman, Regionaal Archief Leiden, 2010, September 23). A check with the Royal Belgium Library holdings in Brussels showed that there was a paper with the title *La Belgique* published in Brussels at the time, but inspection of all copies published up to three months prior to April 17, 1917 revealed no Corpse Factory story.

Fifthly, there is the statement by Bertrand Russell, directly implicating both British propagandists and Lord Northcliffe:

After America’s entry into the war, British propaganda, under the direction of Lord Northcliffe, was able to adopt more direct and ambitious methods. . . . The [Corpse Factory] story was set going cynically, by one of the employees in the British propaganda department, a man with a good knowledge of German, perfectly aware that “Kadaver” means “carcase”, not “corpse”, but aware also that, with the Allied command of the means of publicity, the misrepresentation could be made to “go down”.

(Russell, 1924: 381)

Sixthly, as evidence of a made-up story, we can look to internal improbabilities in the account that was supposedly a translation from *Indépendance Belge*. Here are excerpts from the *Times*, April 17, 1917:

We have known for long that the Germans stripped their dead behind the firing line, fastened them into bundles of three or four bodies with iron wire, and then dispatched these grisly bundles to the rear.

[T]he chief factory [of the Corpse Factories] . . . has been constructed 1,000 yards from the railway connecting St. Vith, near the Belgian frontier, with Gerolstein, in the lonely, little-frequented Eifel district, south-west of Coblentz. . . .

The factory is invisible from the railway. It is placed deep in forest country, with a specially thick growth of trees around it. Live wires surround it. A special double track leads to it. The works are about 700ft. long and 110ft. broad, and the railway runs completely around them. . . .

The trains arrive full of bare bodies, which are unloaded by the workers who live at the works. The men wear oilskin overalls and masks with mica eyepieces. They are equipped with long hooked poles, and push the bundle of bodies to an endless chain, which picks them with big hooks, attached at intervals of 2ft. The bodies are transported on this endless chain into a long, narrow compartment, where they pass through a bath which disinfects them. They then go through a drying chamber, and finally are carried into a digester or great cauldron, in which they are dropped by an apparatus which detaches them from the chain. In the digester they remain from six to eight hours, and are treated by steam, which breaks them up while they are slowly stirred by machinery.

From this treatment result several products. The fats are broken up into stearine, a form of tallow, and oils, which require to be redistilled before they can be used. The process of distillation is carried out by boiling the oil with carbonate of soda, and some part of the by-products resulting from this is used by German soapmakers. . . .

There is a laboratory and in charge of the works is a chief chemist with two assistants and 78 men. All the employees are soldiers and are attached to the eighth Army Corps. There is a sanatorium by the works, and under no pretext is a man permitted to leave them. They are guarded as prisoners at their appalling work.

(*The Times*, 1917, April 17: 5)

The reader has to wonder how the eyewitness reporter was able to make these detailed observations and escape to tell the story, given the tight security described.

Most likely, this story was an invention, either by the British or the Belgian expatriates, or conjointly. As already mentioned, the supposed translation in the *Times* does not match exactly the French language version in *Indépendance Belge*, leaving open the question which text was original and which was translation, or whether both were original in part, at least. Educated and learned francophone Belgians, to whom the *Indépendance Belge* text was presented in 2009, could not detect any signs that would point to a possible translation from an English language draft.⁵

Here it will be helpful to give the Rosner text in its entirety. We begin with the translation provided in the *Times*:

We pass through Evergnicourt. There is a dull smell in the air, as if lime were being burnt. We are passing the great Corpse Exploitation Establishment (Kadaververwertungsanstalt) of this Army Group. The fat that is won here is turned into lubricating oils, and everything else is ground down in the bones mill into a powder, which is used for mixing with pigs' food and as manure.

(*The Times*, 1917, April 17)

The German text reads:

Durch Evergnicourt geht die Fahrt—ein fader Dunst, als ob da Leim gekocht würde, liegt in der Luft. Wir ziehen an der grossen Kadaververwertungsanstalt der Armeegruppe vorüber. Das hier gewonnene Fett wird zu Schmierölen verarbeitet, alles andere in der Knochenmühle zu einem Pulver zerrieben, das als Beimengung zu Schweinefutter und als Düngemittel Verwertung findet. Nichts darf ungenützt verkommen.

(*Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, 1917, April 10)

Those who believe, as some have done, then and since⁶, that Karl Rosner's account refers to the same Corpse Factory installation as the *Indépendance Belge* account have to reckon with the fact that the two locations referred to, Evergnicourt and Gerolstein, are some 150 miles apart.

There is an interesting question whether British military intelligence conspired with Belgian propagandists and the Northcliffe papers to ensure that the timing of the *Indépendance Belge* account coincided with that of the *Lokal-Anzeiger* to create the illusion that the two Corpse Factory accounts referred to the same installation. If Rosner's dispatch, dated April 5 were sent by telegraph and intercepted (British were masters at this), there would seem to be enough time to affect a publication in London dated April 10. However, the edition of *Indépendance Belge* in question proclaims that it was available for sale on Saturday, which would mean going to press

by April 7. April 6 fell on Good Friday, a holiday. If an intercept of April 5 were sent the same day to London, it would have been theoretically possible to make the deadline, particularly if both French and English versions had been pre-prepared, waiting for an opportune moment for publication. The speed required would explain the omission of Rosner's expression, "pig's food", that surely would have added colour to the Belgian paper's account.

One alternative to this speculation is to suppose that British propagandists were handed this gift in timing purely fortuitously. The date of publication for *Indépendance Belge's* Corpse Factory account, on this account, just happened to coincide with the date of publication of the *Lokal-Anzeiger*, thus allowing the Northcliffe papers to exploit the propaganda potential of Rosner's "admissions" on the 16th and 17th of April and later.

Other news media also played a role in spreading the Corpse factory story worldwide. Already in 1911, Reuters news agency had made a secret agreement with the British government to spread "official news" through its Imperial News Service, a daily service distributed to all British colonies and dominions. During the war, Reuters' General Manager Roderick Jones, headed the News Section of the Department of Information (Putnis & McCallum, 2005). In the French language community, *Agence Havas*, and in the USA, United Press can be identified as the main purveyors of the Corpse factory story to the press. The story made its way also to the Eastern front (Poland, Romania) by ways not yet known.

In the course of time, the Corpse factory story became more and more an "urban legend" and developed a life of its own. It was told and retold in the trenches and at home. Allied soldier dead were added to the "input". Scientists discussed technical details and the profitability of the German corpse factories, and artists expressed disgust and horror in widely publicized cartoons. In the USA and in Eastern Europe, "soap" became more and more the alleged major "output" of the factories. This certainly had different reasons. When the USA entered war, soap suddenly became a scarce commodity (as can be seen from the newspapers that incessantly called for saving soap), the lack of which was felt by everybody, while Eastern Europe had a folkloristic tradition of scaring unruly kids with "a man who would make soap of them".

With the beginning of World War II, the Corpse factory story resurrected as a "Soap factory" rumour in the ghettos of occupied Poland, from where it spread like wildfire. In mid-1942, it had reached the interior of the Reich. In August 1942, it had crossed the seas into Great Britain and the USA as an integral part of the news about the Nazi extermination of the Jews. US media eagerly took up the issue and fed their readers and listeners with stories about factories, in which the Germans boiled their victims to soap and other war-vital commodities. The striking similarity to the Corpse factories of World War I, however, made decision-makers brush the news aside as mere Polish-Jewish propaganda: "No one wanted to be misled for the second time within one generation" (Laqueur, 1982: 9). Among Holocaust scholars there is little doubt that the Corpse Factory story contributed to the deplorable fact that decisions that might have rescued many Jewish lives were taken hesitantly, and often too late.

After the defeat of Germany, "Jewish soap", together with "lampshades" allegedly made out of Jewish flesh (a Buchenwald rumour, spread by US and Soviet media after the end of the war as "fact") have become icons of the Holocaust. As "final products" of the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" and allegedly produced by the Germans on an industrial scale, they have considerably contributed to the image of the Holocaust in public perception (Neander, 2005; 2008), especially in the USA and Israel. One should not, therefore, be surprised to find, in 1989, an Israeli scholar who believed that the Corpse factories of World War I had not been a mere

propaganda hoax and thinks that they most probably had existed in reality and served as blueprints for Auschwitz, Belzec, and Treblinka (Cashman, 1989).

The Corpse Factory Story and Modern Propaganda Methods

Writing in 1938, A. J. Mackenzie set down a list of features of successful propaganda. These were: repetition, colour, a kernel of truth, building the propaganda around a slogan, directedness toward a specific objective, concealment of the motive, and use of appropriate timing (Mackenzie, 1938: 50-71). The Corpse story had all of these to some degree.

Repetition: The story was repeated day after day in the Northcliffe papers beginning with a letter from C. E. Bunbury in *The Times*, April 18, as he repeats the mistranslation of Rosner's words and states: "Really, the mind of the ordinary civilized human being stands appalled at this last development of German *Kultur*". Doubts about accuracy of translation, letters about reports from China, corroboration from other more dubious sources kept the issue alive.

Colour: The imagery of the Belgian newspaper account is vivid and nauseating. It recalls the gruesome descriptions of a Chicago meat packing plant by Upton Sinclair (1906; 2002) in *The Jungle*.⁷

A kernel of truth: From the beginning there was always the existence of the carcass utilization plants.

A slogan: While not exactly a slogan, the phrase "Germans are ghouls" had sticking-power.

Directedness toward a specific objective: The goal of increasing hatred and loathing of Germans, thereby strengthening the will to fight them was successful judging by passages such as the following in the widely read "country gentleman's" newspaper, *The Field*:

When we remember that those who treat their dead soldiers with such shameless callousness are also those who are increasing their own population by methods just as shameless and even more bestial in consequences, it will be realized that the limits of public comment have been reached, even if the Prussian has yet to teach us that there are no limits to the grossness of his depravity.

(The Field, 1917, May 5: 653)

War-mongering Australian Prime Minister William "Billy" Hughes, on re-election tour at the time, expressed a similar sentiment: "A nation that will do that ... has ceased to have the right to exist in the civilised world" (Melbourne *Argus*, 1917, April 23: 8).

Concealment of the motive: The combination of having the story ultimately sourced in a Leiden, Holland, newspaper and in the war correspondent for the *Lokal-Anzeiger*, successfully concealed the involvement of British propagandists.

Use of appropriate timing: Whether fortuitous or planned with elaborate cunning, the publication of the Belgian "eyewitness" account of a Corpse Factory, coinciding exactly with the date of the *Lokal-Anzeiger* "admission" that such a plant existed, was exceptionally well-timed.

Mackenzie's list, apt for what it contains, still leaves inadequately appreciated the influence achieved by juxtaposing the German and Belgian accounts. More than just concealing the propaganda motive was achieved. They were providing the public with what seemed unimpeachable authority for the story, as the German account seemed to endorse the Belgian one. Much of contemporary propaganda, public relations and advertising is devoted to getting

reputable scientists, upstanding citizens, icons of popular culture, and the like to endorse some study, policy, plan or product. In this, the Corpse story can be seen as an early case of the faking of credentials, for which many contemporary parallels exist.

Modern Parallels

Modern propaganda analysis would pay attention to a lot more than Mackenzie's list. Distraction, framing of an issue, the big lie, deceptive language, appeal to emotions, all come to mind. But much of what Mackenzie wrote is clearly relevant today. An obvious parallel is with the atrocity story of the Iraqi soldiers, falsely portrayed as killing hundreds of Kuwaiti incubator babies in 1990. Here repetition, colour, concealment of motive, and timing clearly applied. Publicizing of Amnesty's corroboration (Amnesty had been duped) came just before Christmas, when the story would have resonated with that of King Herod's massacre of the innocents. Care was taken not to reveal the identity of a key witness, Nayirah, daughter of the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the United States. Had the general public been aware of this identity, less credence might have been given to her story.⁸ In this case it was the suppression of a relationship that enhanced credibility. In the Corpse story it was the introduction of a supposed relationship, that of identity, between German and Belgian accounts that established credibility.

Juxtaposition, a key element of the Northcliffe press Corpse story deception, has been frequently used in newspapers where the CIA has sought to bring down a socialist government. The technique involves prominently displaying pictures of, e.g., rape victims next to targeted politicians. The stories will be unrelated, but the juxtaposed pictures subtly convey a negative association in readers' minds (Landis, 1982, May).

If we focus not on the atrocity story as such, but on the elaborate means by which false or misleading claims can be given credence, other parallels with the Corpse story can be drawn.

As one such example we may consider the takedown of Quebec premier Lucien Bouchard in 1997, by media owned by Conrad Black, and with the help of people in government. As if orchestrated, different media under Black's ownership came out with the same message: that Bouchard was mentally unstable. The September issue of *Saturday Night*, on the newsstands in late August, featured on its front cover an image of a crazed looking Bouchard. The headline read "Is Lucien Bouchard stable?" followed by "The Chrétien government had a psychiatrist on his case. His report is in".

The assault on Bouchard's character began Saturday August 23, 1997 with a banner front-page headline in the *Ottawa Citizen* proclaiming, beneath unflattering head-shots of Bouchard, "The secret analysis of Bouchard's volatile mind". This was followed in smaller type by "Is the premier of Quebec unstable?" The story was taken from a *Saturday Night* article by Lawrence Martin, in turn an excerpt from his new book. It featured an analysis of Bouchard by a distinguished psychiatrist, Vivian Rakoff, with weighty credentials. Despite those credentials, Rakoff made use of terms of his own invention, not accepted in psychiatric terminology, such as "aesthetic character disorder", and "emotional zoning", where "a person shuts out the past and becomes totally committed to the scene of the moment". Dr. Rakoff had not interviewed Bouchard, but his opinion still came across as weighty by the prominence and length (a page and a half) that the newspaper gave it that day.

This was followed by a second front-page story in the next day's *Ottawa Citizen*, with the headline "'Flattery' key to Bouchard", and the subhead "Toronto psychiatrist advises Prime Minister's Office not to provoke Quebec's Premier". This time Dr. Rakoff's analysis was

presented as “controversial” and “informal” but again, the credentials of the psychiatrist and the prominence given to his opinion gave powerful support to the idea that Bouchard was unstable, reinforced by the image on the front cover of *Saturday Night*.

Other newspapers, not owned by Black, were more sceptical. The *Globe and Mail* of August 25 quoted Quebec Deputy Premier as saying Dr. Rakoff’s study was a “pseudo-scientific mockery that dishonours anyone who would use such methods”. The story underlined two significant facts when it said, “Dr. Rakoff, a federalist who displayed a strong distaste for nationalist movements . . . did not interview Mr. Bouchard”.

The Montreal French-language newspaper *Le Devoir* was scathing: A banner front page headline proclaimed “Le pseudo-profil psychologique de Bouchard indigne la classe politique”, roughly translated as “The pseudo-psychological profile of Bouchard has riled politicians”. It quoted Dr. Rakoff in a sub-head: “Je n’ai pas écrit cela en tant que psychiatre” (“I did not write that as a psychiatrist”).

The combined weight of the Black media, together with other media who felt that the story could not be ignored, had the effect that Bouchard resigned, presumably disgusted by this character assassination.

It is not necessary to assume that Conrad Black was personally and specifically involved in the orchestration of stories, which could have been motivated by a sense of controversy and the aim of selling newspapers and a magazine. But editors are likely to know the concerns of the owners, and Black’s opposition to separatism and his willingness to compromise journalistic standards to combat it have been well documented by Black himself in his autobiography, *A Life in Progress*, where, e.g., he describes his polling methodology (1993: 125). This was not fair and impartial journalism.

Comparisons of the Bouchard takedown with the Corpse Factory story are more limited here than in the case of the incubator babies story, but three stand out. First, there is the matter of credentials, anchoring the story in a highly respected psychiatrist. Honest reporting should have given more prominence to his own disavowal that his opinion was not given in his capacity as a psychiatrist. His report was personal opinion, not peer-respected analysis. Downplaying such an important fact affecting belief-worthiness of the report foisted a kind of deception on readers. The comparison is with the mistranslation and misrepresentation of the views of the *Lokal-Anzeiger*, from which spurious authority was derived.

Secondly, there was the seeming corroboration in both cases from the fact of different media reporting what was or seemed to be the same story. Those familiar with Conrad Black’s ownership of the Southam chain (including *The Ottawa Citizen*) as well as *Saturday Night* might have seen the two sources as one perspective, whereas most readers would likely have seen the two sources as separate and therefore reinforcing each other. The comparison here is with Lord Northcliffe’s newspapers combining to reinforce acceptance of the Corpse Factory story.

Thirdly, there was two-day, front-page repetition of the story in the daily newspaper, and the appearance for a full month of a grossly distorted image of Lucien Bouchard on the cover of *Saturday Night*. This provided a day-to-day repetitive reminder of the reports.

Many current examples with similar parallels can be found. In the case of Secretary of State Colin Powell’s presentation of dubious “facts” and images to the United Nations Security Council February 5, 2003, it was a matter of his own *ethos*, which at the time was high. There were later indications that he may not have been as to what he proclaimed to be objective truth, even if he may have felt justified politically in making his statements.

The practice of “Astroturf”, where a government or corporation tries to win public support by organizing and financing a “grass roots” group of seemingly ordinary citizens, whose messages are guided by the financial backers, is another example. The credentials one attaches to citizens sincerely motivated by the public interest are misidentified when attached to these artificially created “grass roots” organizations.⁹

Summary and Conclusion

In the spring of 1917, British and Belgian propagandists, in a concerted action with privately owned media, launched an invented story about “Corpse Factories”, where the Germans allegedly boiled down their own soldier dead to lubricants, fertiliser, pig fodder, and soap. The aim was to vilify the Germans, especially among American and Asian countries, which Great Britain wanted to drag into the war on her side. Its efficiency in mobilizing anti-German sentiments made the “Corpse Factory” the “master hoax” of World War I propaganda. Millions world-wide who still believe in its offspring, the World War II “Nazi human soap factory” legend, show its longevity.

In this paper we have documented the way in which the Northcliffe press made this story believable, and we have suggested how recognition of the technique used can pay dividends for our understanding propaganda technique in general, but especially, we now venture to say, where the interests of news media owners coincide with those of political leaders beholden to corporate interests responsible for their election campaign financing.

The Corpse Factory story succeeded in its aim. Elaborate deceptions worked. But contrary to the expectation of bringing the war to an earlier end it may have contributed to prolonging it. The legacy of hatred and contempt contributed to the punishing terms of the Treaty of Versailles, paving the way for economic dislocation and the rise of Hitler. When the story was officially repudiated in Parliament in 1925 there were many people who resolved not to be fooled again in this way. Thus, when reports of the Holocaust began to emerge early in World War II, there were doubts about the truth of these stories as people remembered the Corpse Factory and other deceptions.

As we contemplate the legacy of suffering, ill will, and mistrust generated by the U.S.-led wars in Iraq in 1991 and 2003 and the deceptions preparing the way for these wars, we have good reason to look for brakes upon deceptive propaganda for war. Giving more attention to international law, and its prohibition of propaganda for war, is one route. But exposure of propaganda techniques, the main purpose of this paper, is another. A citizenry educated to recognize propaganda technique in a timely way can take counter-active steps, especially with the possibilities offered by the new media. Propaganda thus exposed can be, it is our belief and hope, propaganda nullified.

Notes

- 1 The elaborate apology by the *New York Times* May 26, 2004 for its uncritical acceptance of stories by Iraqi informants, defectors and exiles, such as Ahmad Chalabi, supported by hardliners within the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush, may seem to be

- an exception. But the earlier silence of major media about their journalistic lapses had been the subject of a critique by Greg Mitchell in *Editor & Publisher*, March 29, 2004, and web-based media reminded readers of the *New York Times*' failings. The apology appears to have been at least as much a response to pressures as spontaneous.
- 2 The present account of the Corpse Factory story overlaps with earlier treatment of the subject in Marlin (2002: 71-76). There is updated information here relating to mistranslation of the German word *Leim*, location of the *Indépendance Belge* editorial offices in London, and the questionable existence of the supposedly Leiden-based *La Belgique*, the newspaper represented as the source for a key report reprinted in *Indépendance Belge*. Some of this updated information has appeared in Marlin (2008).
 - 3 See on this Walter Laqueur (1982: 9, 219).
 - 4 *The North China Herald*, Peking (1917, March 3: 446), archived at North Texas University. Thanks to Susan Martin for providing a facsimile of the original.
 - 5 E-mail from Mme Annette Anciaux de Faveaux, Brussels, Belgium, to Joachim Neander, March 23, 2009.
 - 6 Shimon Rubinstein (1987) is clearly under the impression that Karl Rosner's account carries an amount of detail comparable to the *Indépendance Belge* account. He refers on page 35 to Rosner's writing "the original report", as if the Belgian account was derived from Rosner. Rubinstein wonders "how he [Rosner] acquired the detailed information he included in his news story", saying it would be "regrettable" if Rosner were never interviewed by an historian. But as we have pointed out, there was no such detailed information in Rosner's account. Rubinstein acknowledges a deficiency in not being able to consult the original issue of the *Lokal-Anzeiger* (Rubinstein, 1987: 4). As we have indicated, the original issue (available in the British Library, Colindale) makes it clear that Rosner makes no mention of seeing the inside of a so-called Corpse Factory.
 - 7 As an example, there is the long, gruesome description of a hog-processing plant in pages 36-39 of *The Jungle*, part of which reads: "They had chains which they fastened about the leg of the nearest hog, and the other end of the chain they hooked into one of the rings upon the wheel. So, as the wheel turned, a hog was suddenly jerked off his feet and borne aloft" (Sinclair, 2002: 37).
 - 8 For more on this, see Marlin (2002: 194-200). See also the award-winning CBC documentary "To Sell a War", from the program *fifth estate*, 1992.
 - 9 For more examples, see PR Watch and SourceWatch on the Internet, and Marlin (2008). An excellent film by Australian film-maker Taki Oldham, [Astro]Turf Wars, describes the backing of groups like the Tea Party by corporations that stand to gain from popular opposition to government regulation (Fitzroy, Victoria: Larrikan Films, 2010).

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