

Sex in psychological warfare

Herbert A. Friedman on the why and how of an unusual form of propaganda

All the major combatants involved in World War II used pornography as a small part of their psychological operations (PSYOP) strategy. Mostly this involved dropping propaganda leaflets using sexual themes from the air, in an attempt to demoralise enemy soldiers at the front. These materials are now collected avidly by historians, and they are also an important source for those of us interested in the role of psychology in crucial parts of human history. Why were they used? Did they work?

Why were they used?

In his book *Psychological Warfare* (Infantry Journal Press, Washington, DC, 1948), Professor Paul Linebarger wrote:

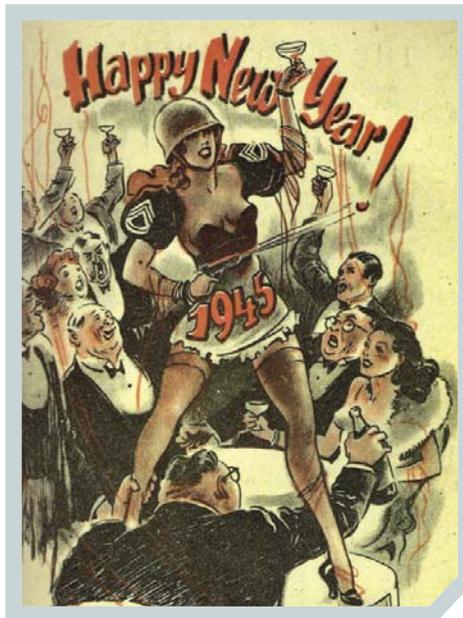
Young human beings, especially young males, are apt to give considerable attention to sex. In areas of military operations, they are removed from the stimuli of secondary sex references, which are (in America) an accepted part of everyone's daily life: bathing beauty photos, magazine covers, semi-nudes in advertising, etc. Our enemies tried to use the resulting pin-up craze for propaganda purposes, hoping that a vain arousal of oestrus would diminish morale.

In *German Psychological Warfare* (Arno Press, New York, 1972) Ladislav Farago states 'Since young soldiers are in a state of hyperactive bodily development, their immediate problems are related to appetite and sex.' He adds that 'sexual deprivation may be a motive for a soldier's suicide attempt'.

The Japanese attitude towards this subject is mentioned by Lieutenant Colonel Mahmood Kan Durrani in *The Sixth Column* (Cassell and Co., 1955). He was a prisoner of the Japanese and quotes a lecture given by a Japanese officer on how leaflets should be prepared. One of his six recommendations was:

The leaflet should have, if possible, the picture of a beautiful woman, after the method used by the Germans in the First World War. This device would insure that the soldier would be attracted and would be unable to resist looking at the picture over and over again. This would rouse his passion, and his heart would be inclined for love and to hate fighting.

There is in fact some backing for the ploy from psychological research. For example,



Edward Donnerstein says in the *Journal of Personality and Social Behavior* (Vol. 39, 1980, pp.269-77): '...the present results suggest that highly arousing nonaggressive-erotic stimuli can be a mediator of aggressive behavior by males toward other males under certain conditions.'

As well as attempting to sap motivation, leaflets were often used to drive wedges between allies. The Germans loved 'divide and conquer' themes, attempting to sour relations between the

American and British troops, soldiers and civilian 'slackers' at home, Christians and Jews, and even African-Americans and Caucasians. Sefton Delmer, a reporter with the French Army who would later become an official of the British wartime propaganda agency, recalls his visit to the French front in 1939. He was shown a leaflet 'which consisted of a small picture on a thin piece of paper showing a French soldier doing his duty at the front. However, if one held the picture to the light, the scene underwent a complete change. In place of the Brave *poilu* one now saw in minute salacious detail, a British Tommy fornicating with what the caption told us was the Frenchman's fiancée.'

To the British forces, anti-American leaflets attempted to drive a wedge between the allied forces, playing on the 'over-sexed, overpaid and over here' reputation of the American troops. One example of this type of leaflet shows an American sergeant in bed with a British girl, and the words 'You Americans are so different'. On the reverse is a brief message stating 'The Yanks are putting up their tents in merry old England. They've got lots of money and loads of time to chase after your women'.

The Germans also tried to take advantage of the alleged latent anti-Semitic feelings of the Allies. One item dropped during the early stages of the war shows a nude blonde holding a copy of the *Times*. She is wearing a British Army helmet and looking into a full-length mirror. Her image, as shown in the mirror, is that of a dark-haired, obviously Jewish woman. She is in an ape-like crouched position with a sinister smirk on her face. In her hand, the image of the newspaper is reversed and now reads 'Semit in the mirror. This is a very imaginative piece of propaganda. It has a sexual image and yet sends the message that the British are fighting the war for the Jews.'

Towards the end of the war in late 1944 and early 1945, the Germans became more desperate. The leaflets became more pornographic in a last-ditch attempt to somehow slow the Allied forces. Messages focus on what the troops are missing at home:

At first she tried very hard to remain faithful but she lost this battle against herself as thousands of wives and girls back home did before her. It all started with an evening out, with going to the movies and to some bar, but soon it became real love. Only by the picture at her side she is occasionally reminded of her husband who is - for months now -

somewhere in Western Europe, fighting a stubborn enemy, freezing and suffering in a muddy foxhole. But as time passes she thinks of him more and more seldom. Now she does not even turn his picture to the wall when another man is staying with her and holding her in his arms.

One Japanese leaflet used against the Americans in the Philippine Islands was simple and tasteful. It depicts a beautiful woman's lips and the word 'Remember?' The back is in the form of a handwritten note, saying: 'Darling, can't you find a way to come back to me? I miss you so. I send all my love, and my kisses are on the other side of this card.'

The British government also authorised the manufacture of a very few pornographic leaflets during World War II. There are three different items known to have been printed, including one of Hitler holding his circumcised penis, probably designed to feed the rumour that Hitler was indeed a self-hating Jew. The British leaflets were discussed in some detail by one of the major British wartime propagandists, Sefton Delmer, in an article – 'H.M.G.'s Secret Pornographer' – published in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 21 January 1972. Delmer reported that his

cloak-and-dagger friends in the Special Operations Executive (SOE) were constantly clamoring for printed pornography. But I still took the same view of printing pornography as I had in France in 1939. Looking back, I do not think my unit produced more than three items of printed pornography during the whole of the war, not because I was squeamish, but simply because I did not think the effort involved on our part would be justified by the subversive effect on the Germans.

Did they work?

So did soldiers finding the leaflets become emotionally crippled and unable to carry on their duties and responsibilities? No, in fact just the opposite occurred. The 'pin-up' pictures became collectors' items sought after by the troops who greedily collected and swapped them. If anything, the leaflets raised morale. There is no doubt that they were the most heartily appreciated propaganda leaflets used in World War II. We can probably state that they were the most widely read and circulated enemy documents of any war.

We know this from the letters troops sent home, and subsequent historical accounts. For example, in *Beyond the*



Beachhead: The 29th Infantry Division in Normandy, (Joseph Balkoski, Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA, 1989):

The enemy's leaflets were nothing more than appeals to the American soldier's sexual instincts. A typical leaflet featured a sketch of an attractive and scantily clad woman in the arms of a happy male civilian. The caption asked what the G.I.'s thought they would be doing if they were home instead of in the army. The 29ers chuckled and hoped the Germans would send more over the lines. The leaflets were a lot safer than real artillery shells, and the sketches were fairly interesting.

"The 'pin-up' pictures became collectors' items sought after by the troops"

The same sort of things was happening on the Japanese front where sex leaflets were being dropped by the enemy on Allied troops. Some comments on the subject from *Prisoners of the Japanese* (Gavan Daws, William Morrow & Co., New York, 1994):

The Japanese were dropping propaganda leaflets... And for the friendliest of friendly persuasion, pictures of a beautiful blonde stripper, private parts and all: 'You too can enjoy this if you surrender.' The propaganda bombers came droning over every day. It was like having the paper delivered. Some of the troops

started trading the leaflets like baseball cards.

One American soldier assigned to the 35th Infantry Division in February 1945 recalled receiving pornographic leaflets in an artillery barrage. He told me 'we used the leaflets for toilet paper'. This seems to bolster a comment once made by Sir Arthur Harris, Air Marshall of the Royal Air Force during World War II: 'My personal opinion is that the only thing achieved (by dropping leaflets) was largely to supply the continent's requirement of toilet paper for the five long years of the war.'

It could be that the leaflets had other positive impacts. I once interviewed the top British forger of the war, and he said that the leaflets 'did nothing to the enemy, but they were popular among the "adolescents" working for me. They did not demoralise the enemy, but they were excellent for the morale of the British agents who handled and distributed them.'

An American propagandist once told me that he did not like to disapprove these strange and exotic concepts because it tended to stifle the creativity of his artists. It seems that on the Allied side at least, sex leaflets were produced mostly because the bosses thought it was a good way for their people to stretch their imaginations and remain creative.

But perhaps these imaginations were not stretched far enough: some examples show how a lack of knowledge of the

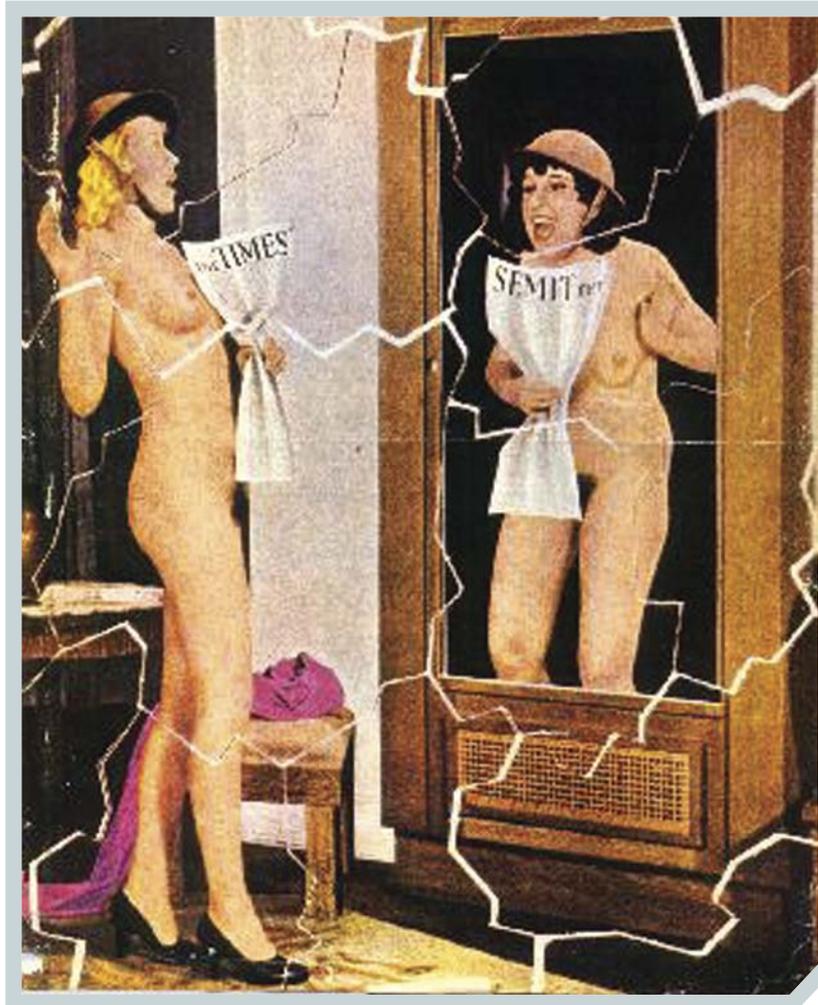
looking back

psychology and cultural values could hinder attempts to get inside the mind of the enemy. For example, in his thesis on the use of propaganda in the Vietnam War, Midshipman Jason Thomas Chaput says:

Other messages such as those of the sex appeal leaflets acted to turn the reader off to entertaining the idea of the Chieu Hoi program because they were anchored in American values and not those of the Vietnamese. The sex appeal propaganda which depicted bikini-clad, over endowed Vietnamese women stated that the soldier could find true happiness and the satisfactions of life which every man was entitled if he chose to rally to one of the program's centers. The individuals drafting the propaganda mistakenly believed that Vietnamese soldiers saw the world through the same masculine goggles as did American GI's. The U.S. advisors failed to understand that the Confucian ideals held by a majority of the Vietnamese directed them to be in harmony with their environment by adopting a middle path in all areas of conduct. The effect of the sex appeal leaflets was to turn off the Vietnamese by solidifying their views that the corrupt outside Western influence present in their country had to be defeated.

Of course, the leaflets may also have succeeded in their negative intentions, particularly those not directly related to the pornographic message. Despite official denial that the United States of America ever engaged in sexual propaganda, some extremely explicit and pornographic items have been discovered in wartime files and scrapbooks of the Office of Strategic Services. They feature themes of homosexuality, bestiality, lesbianism and

child molestation. I spoke to the author of these leaflets many years after the war, and he was quite proud of them. He told me: 'The six *Bilder* [pictures] were not just idle pornography. The "fun" part served, as you rightly observed, to achieve wide and rapid dissemination of the material, which was not designed simply to stimulate raging hormones. Its purpose was to stimulate second thoughts – a



nagging suspicion and discomfort as to the possibility of actual events, even though depicted in pornographic caricature. Could it be that my young son is being corrupted and violated by his Hitlerjugend fuehrer? Is my wife's yearning for sexual fulfillment satisfied by a surrogate, perhaps a neighbour's dog?

A more direct approach

So it appears that using sexual themes in an attempt to demoralise the enemy is a largely unsuccessful strategy. Instead of becoming emotionally crippled and

unable to carry out their duties, 'pin-up' pictures become collector's items and often have the effect of raising morale. But there are examples of more direct effects of sexual propaganda on the enemy. John L. Plaster tells of an unauthorised 'black' use of sex by America's secret soldiers in *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam* (Simon & Schuster, New York,

1997). He says: But the most mind-blowing dirty trick I ever saw was conceived by my good friend Floyd 'Pippen' Ambrose. He went all the way to Bangkok to have a printed poster of his own design, showing a nude, large-breasted Asian woman, which he'd tack on trees beside major enemy trails. Imagine the shock of an NVA soldier, raised under a straitlaced Communist orthodoxy that prohibited pornography, who came upon Floyd's poster – not to mention the provocative headline, which boldly asked in Vietnamese, 'Who's sleeping with your wife, and has she got jugs like these?' As the message grew more inflammatory, the print became smaller, luring the engrossed soldier

closer – and closer – and he'd forget caution and step on the small mine Floyd had planted and lose a foot.'

For a much more comprehensive account, see www.psywarrior.com/sexandprop.html

Herbert A. Friedman is a retired Sergeant Major now living on Long Island, NY, where he continues to research and write on psychological operations
smbert@hotmail.com

