

Patriotic Purposes. Investigating a Language of Persuasion *By David Monger*



David Monger was appointed Lecturer in History in 2009

My research has thus far included two major focuses — the First World War and ideas of patriotism and national identity. In both cases, I am interested in situating specific examples in wider contexts. My PhD thesis, ‘The National War Aims Committee and British Patriotism’ offered a detailed organisational study

and an extensive analysis of patriotic language which challenges existing interpretations. One of my key arguments is that patriotism is purposive. People deploy patriotic rhetoric to serve specific persuasive purposes, and by paying attention to this it is possible to develop a qualitative, rather than quantitative, interpretation of such language.

I began my research largely convinced of the primary influence of ‘otherness’ in ideas of national identity, and this seemed to be demonstrated by the extensive use of anti-German rhetoric by propagandists. However, after examining a wide range of cartoons, articles, pamphlets and speeches, I developed instead an interpretation suggesting a far more wide-ranging underlying patriotic narrative behind National War Aims Committee (NWAC) propaganda. The identification of negative difference became only one (albeit very heavily discussed) of several elements of this narrative that helped to contextualise the propaganda’s real core, a multi-faceted evocation of duty that both celebrated civilians’ previous efforts while exhorting them to work even harder in the future.

Talking at length about things like the brutality and iniquity of Germany; the moral fortitude of Britain’s allies and imperial partners; Britain’s heritage of commitment to civilisational values like liberty, democracy, justice and honour; or the material, social and civilisational benefits that the war’s end would deliver rhetorically elaborated the meaning and purpose of duty. Propagandists were able to tailor their comments to the experiences and attitudes of specific audiences by using different combinations of these narrative elements. In this way, patriotism was a flexible and adaptable language, rather than (as Peter Mandler suggests) a ‘vague’ form of national consciousness.

The war’s historiography must be much more firmly linked to the wider historiography of modern Britain, to reduce the misconception of the war as a moment of fundamental disjunction. My research addressed this to an extent by tracing nineteenth-century precursors of the patriotic language I discussed. Moreover, despite my main focus on national forms of identity, I also considered other forms.

Locality, as both an essential organisational level and a continually relevant form of identity, was extensively addressed, as were ideas of supranational identities and links. I am very interested in understandings of ‘community’, particularly in the context of national identities, but also as an independent factor. Further, I engage with other forms of identity, notably gender and religion, in my work.

To get the most from available sources, I created several databases, enabling revealing quantitative analysis which offers a richer and more rigorous understanding of the NWAC’s role in British society than existing accounts. Through this, I chose thirty local constituencies across Britain, representing varying social compositions, to scrutinise more closely, allowing a fuller assessment of local conditions and conceptions. I am now converting this research into a monograph entitled *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain: the National War Aims Committee and civilian morale*, which will be published by Liverpool University Press in 2011. Areas of the research for which there was no room for extended discussion — particularly related propaganda towards soldiers — have also been written up into articles, one of which, on representations of home and civilian life in sporting journalism, will soon be published by *Sport in History*, while I have also agreed to produce a chapter on ideas of supranational identity in propaganda for a volume to be produced by Brill.

My next project will greatly expand my study of British patriotism and national identities in the First World War. This remains an under-investigated gap in historical knowledge, which the history of NWAC activities in 1917-18 only partially fills. To gain an adequate understanding of such issues, and to tie the war to surrounding historiography, it is necessary to carefully trace understandings of the nation from pre to post-war Britain, surveying a range of experiences and attitudes. I will look at the views of men and women, civilians and servicemen, governors and governed in a variety of times and places, to

develop a comprehensive picture of continuities and changes in national consciousness.

Now that I am based at Canterbury, I hope also to incorporate imperial perspectives in my future work, both by considering the level of similarity between official representations of patriotism in Britain and New Zealand, and seeking out perspectives from the private papers of New Zealanders, particularly first-generation British expatriots. I hope that the war's impending centenary will provoke increasing interest in it, and — once I have properly settled into my new position — I plan to organise a conference around the subject of national identities and

the war, and to try to foster extended collaborations with other scholars in New Zealand and Australia. Additionally, I hope that being based at Canterbury will enable me to explore and develop wider concepts of Britishness, while trying not to tumble out of sight in the large footsteps of JGA Pocock!

I would, of course, be very glad to talk to and share ideas with colleagues, including postgraduates, across Humanities with interests in the war or issues of national and other identities, and anyone else who'd like to say hello...