
Great War Propaganda in Popular Literature in France

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to study propaganda through a particular approach: popular literature. Focusing on France, this article will try to answer the following questions: What role did popular literature actually play in the diffusion of propaganda? What was the publishers' and the authors' position on propaganda? What was their relationship with the readership? To try to find answers to these questions, we will study theories about mass popular culture and war-time propaganda. We will apply these theories to the particular market of the press. One aspect of these periodical publications will be looked at with special attention in this article: the *roman-feuilleton*, or serial novels. This serialised literature developed in earnest during the 19th century, especially in France. The study will look for recurrent themes in war-time novels that can be attributed to propaganda. We will also draw a comparison with the situation in Great Britain during the same period.

Key Words

Propaganda, Serialised fiction, Popular literature, Press, Mass media, First World War, France, Great Britain.

Introduction

The phrase “popular literature” applied during the late 19th century and early 20th century in France is very closely linked to the expansion of the press during the 3rd Republic and the appearance of the *roman-feuilleton* in the 1840s. Indeed, from 1870 to 1914, 50 to 70 daily newspapers circulated in Paris alone. The daily print run greatly expanded, going from one to five million copies during the same period. The press also expanded in other French cities, such as Toulouse, Lyon and Bordeaux (Quéfellec, 2007). The *roman-feuilleton* was a very important item in these periodical publications. The idea of serialising novels in a daily or weekly newspaper materialised in 1836. Émile de Girardin had just reduced the price of his daily newspaper *La Presse*, and needed a way to increase the sales in order to remain in profit. He thus started publishing the first *roman-feuilleton*, *La Vieille fille*, by Honoré de Balzac. The success of the serial novel was so great that it “made [the *roman-feuilleton*] a model for all progressive dailies” (Law 2000, 36). The *roman-feuilleton* was indeed a very efficient way for the newspaper’s publisher to attract more and more subscribers. Balzac and other mainstream writers of the time, such as Eugène Sue and Alexandre Dumas (who first created the dedicated phrase “to be continued” at the end of each episode¹) represent the early period of the *roman-feuilleton*. According to Lise Quéfellec, it was a time when serial novels were dominated by “Romantic chroniclers [...] who appeal to a very wide social cross-section” (Law 2000, 36). Indeed, the progressive laws about education in the late 19th century promoted the creation of a large reading public. We could apply to this context T. S. Eliot’s (1948) arguments about the education of what John Carey called “the mass” (Carey,

¹ Thiesse, Anne-Marie. 1984. *Le Roman du quotidien. Lecteurs et lectures populaires à la Belle-Époque*. Paris : Le Chemin Vert.

2002). Indeed, the press in the late 19th century can be considered the first mass media. From Eliot's point of view, it would be a useful tool to educate society, in making the lower classes read novels which promote moral and republican values. Indeed, popular literature emphasised the class division, because the intellectual class Eliot calls "the elite" considered popular literature as an inferior literature, not worthy of being called so. But another vision can be contrasted to Eliot's thesis. Michel Nathan, a French scholar, wrote about popular literature in a study (1990). According to him, there was a very ambiguous definition of popular novels in the late 19th century because higher social classes would both despise popular novels and fear them, since they were so widely read and asked for by the public. This dual attitude towards popular novels shows that the higher class admitted the power and influence of this literature on its readers. This popular literature could indeed become a way for the elite to educate the mass through entertainment. By the beginning of the 20th century this romantic period defined by Lise Queffélec had been replaced by a much more critical context, both in literary and in political terms. In fact, Lise Queffélec points out that the republican myth of the union of classes had ended, destroyed by the political scandals of the late 19th century (e.g. the Dreyfus case), and the idea of an imminent war was a more and more frequent subject in serial novels. Studying serialised novels in the popular press in France during the First World War suggests the following questions: What changes occurred in popular literature released through the press in such a troubled context? Was the *roman-feuilleton* a channel for war propaganda? How was it managed, and what results did it have? We will try to answer these questions by applying several theories on book and publishing history to French periodical publication at the beginning of the 20th century, more precisely

from 1900 to the 1920s. First, we will consider if propaganda was backed up in France by official organisations or if it was a spontaneous action; secondly, we will study the recurrent elements of this propaganda in serialised novels; finally, we will try to evaluate to what extent this way of disseminating information was a success. We will also include comparisons with the press market in Great Britain in the same period.

Defining and Organising Propaganda: Government Operation or Spontaneous Action?

First of all, it seems important to remember the exact meaning of the word “propaganda”. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines it as “information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view”². In times of war, particularly in the case of the First World War, this was a central concept for authorities. In France especially, the expansion of the reading public and of the printed press since the middle of the 19th century had made the government suspicious about what citizens were reading and how they were influenced by their reading. Official organisations had existed since the early 19th century, when Napoleon gave the Police Minister power to monitor and control the press (Holtman, 1950). An interesting article by Jean-Noël Jeanneney (1984) points out the importance of censorship for the French authorities during the First World War. He argues that, for the historian, newspapers are only a deformed reflection of opinion but *de facto* they influence facts because they influence opinion.

² <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/propaganda?q=propaganda>, page last consulted on Monday 17th, 2014.

To control public opinion, and thus facts, the government used several tools. First, official organisations were created in 1916 to support propaganda: a “press and information” office, and then the *Maison de la Presse*. Its aim was to organise propaganda towards the neutral countries in order to make them join the Allied forces. A parallel can be made between this organisation and the one that was created in Great Britain in 1914. The British official back-up for propaganda took the form of a commission gathering authors under the leading figure of the publisher Charles Masterman. These authors agreed to join their efforts to promote Great Britain’s interests during the war and to counter German propaganda in neutral countries. Those two organisations can also be compared because they were both ambiguous about their statute. Since government initiated them, they seemed to be official, but their activities were surrounded by secrecy. In Great Britain, the works were published under a private publisher’s imprint, with no mention of any official support. The idea behind this practice was to make those writings look like spontaneous initiatives on the part of patriotic authors. In France, the secret was kept about the government’s strategy to control newspapers: it was a well-established practice to buy newspapers in order to control their content. This strategy implied massive financial investment. According to J.N Jeanneney, it was a failure because the newspaper agents who were “bought” by government were not reliable and hardly ever answered to the authorities’ requests. The results were thus very slight compared to the amount of money invested.

But despite this inefficient technique, the French government could easily spread propaganda via the channels of the press. To demonstrate this, we can apply the communications circuit theorised by Robert Darnton (2002) to the *roman-feuilleton*

published in the French press market during the First World War. First, the relationship between the author and the publisher should be carefully studied. Indeed, there was very often a contract binding the author to the newspaper. It was a way for the publisher to ensure the exclusivity of the serial novel. It also gave both the publisher and the author a financial stability. Secondly, there was a very special relationship between the author and the readers. The serialisation of the novel created a long-term relationship in which the author was not anonymous but, on the contrary, was a known figure that the readers trusted and maybe admired. This element also introduced stability in the market. As Michel Nathan points out, the readership was essential to the existence of popular literature. The production stages of Darnton's circuit were in this case much shorter than in the book market. In fact, newspaper production was rapid and short-term. The distribution channels were very well established because the press market had been expanding since the middle of the 19th century. The circulation of propaganda was thus very quick and easy. Finally, war brought important changes in the economic, social and political conjuncture. The entire circuit was indeed subject to the government's censorship and control. The war economy made commodities (especially paper) more rare and thus more expensive.

The French press market was a convenient channel of distribution for authorities to disseminate propaganda, whether this propaganda was initiated by an official organisation or by a patriotic author. We can now study in further detail what was contained in these propagandist writings.

Writing Propaganda: Authors, Genres and Themes

The main feature of propaganda in French popular literature during the First World War was the demeaning of the enemy, often described as the devil. In France, this tradition of a *roman revanchard* (revenge novel) had developed since the defeat of the imperial French army against the Prussian troops at Sedan in September 1871. This great military and political failure had a considerable impact on the general morale of the population. Indeed, the loss of territories (Alsace and Moselle) inspired a desire for revenge in French public opinion. In this context, patriotic authors such as Maurice Leblanc (*813*, Arsène Lupin series), or Paul Bertnay (*Orphelins d'Alsace*), demonized Germans. According to those popular stereotypes, the German soldier was evil in many aspects: his body was fat and stocky; he was stupid, stubborn and cruel. By contrast, the French characters were elegant, witty, dignified and brave. These negative stereotypes of Germany were used by authors to maintain a hatred of the enemy in the popular consciousness. They were mostly present in adventure and spy novels, because those genres were most likely to set a proper background. The study of the title is also a good indicator of the message conveyed in the novel. Indeed, they often expressed patriotic spirit and the idea of revenge: *Coeur fidèles*, by Marie de La Hire; *Les Fiancés de la Revanche*, by Jules Cardoze. This "germanophobia" eventually came to an end during the 1920s, as a pacifist movement emerged from a weakened post-war France.

In Great Britain, propaganda seemed to be less guided by hatred of the enemy than by a governmental will to counter German propaganda in British public opinion and in allied or

neutral countries, especially the United-States³. To this end, Wellington House's authors would write war fantasies celebrating the courage of British soldiers defeating the enemy. These war fictions were also a way to compensate for the lack of actual news from the fighting front. Indeed, since the citizens at home were deprived of news, they were very keen on reading sensational war stories. Peter Butenhuis points out that this appetite for war stories, added to by the fact that the public was gullible and uncritical, allowed for the quick and widespread dissemination of rumours. One important figure among the war-time authors was Rudyard Kipling. His military career made him eligible to write about war (*The Lost Legion*), but he also wrote from a civilian point of view (*Mary Postgate*). The genre of the novel was also an important factor for the reader. As Anne-Marie Thiesse demonstrates in her sociological study⁴ the choice of genre was very often linked to the reader's sex. For example, adventure and spy novels were usually addressed to a male public, while romance and sentimental novels were most likely to be chosen by a female readership. This idea is also developed by Jane Potter⁵: she explains how the "influential press baron" Lord Northcliffe published periodicals explicitly addressed to women (*The Girl's Own Paper, The Girl's Empire, The Girl's Friend, Horner's Pansy Library, Home Chat* and *Cosy Corner*). This way of segmenting the readership allowed publishers to market their product more accurately, and thus to sell more copies. Thus propaganda took several forms according to the targeted public. But both in France and in Great Britain, the use of visual propaganda

³ Butenhuis, Peter. 1987. *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda, 1914-18 and After*. London: Batsford.

⁴ Thiesse, Anne-Marie, *op. cit.*

⁵ Potter, Jane. 2005. *Boys in Khaki, Girls in Print: Women's Literary Responses to the Great War, 1914-1918*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

must not be underestimated. Indeed, serial novels in newspapers were often illustrated, and posters and post cards were widely distributed.

Reading Propaganda: the Public's Reception

Finally, we should consider the reception of propaganda disseminated through the popular press. To achieve this, we will use Gérard Genette's theory about the publisher's paratext⁶. By applying it to the case of the *roman-feuilleton*, we will be able to draw a hypothesis about how the reader was influenced by this particular paratext. According to Lise Quefélec, this paratext was uniform in the whole press production. Compared to a regular book's paratext, a *roman-feuilleton's* paratext is most unusual. First of all, the novel is divided into parts. The narrative continuity is broken in order to establish a serial effect and to create suspense. These two aspects have a commercial aim: they are meant to make readers loyal to the newspaper so they will buy the next issue. The position of the novel inside the newspaper is also important in the reception of this form of literature. It was usually displayed in the bottom quarter of the page. Because of this particular position, called the "*rez-de-chaussée*" (ground floor) of the page, serialised novels were quickly demeaned and associated with low-value literature. The readers were thus easily considered second-rate readers by the literary elite. The length of the novels is also a remarkable aspect of the *roman-feuilleton*. Indeed, the longer the novel was, the more both publisher and author would profit from it. As a result, readers who would normally be

⁶ Genette, Gérard. 1997. «The Publisher's Paratext », in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

considered short-novel readers would actually read unusually long ones. This factor could have changed the elite's perception of what they considered second-rate readers. The layout obeyed press standards: the text was displayed in columns, with few margins mostly due to the lack of paper during the war. This layout made the novels less easy and comfortable to read than an actual book but it had the crucial advantage of being cheaper and thus more widely affordable. In a newspaper the publisher's identity was more obvious than in a book. Indeed, the entire newspaper was the authentication of the publisher. It meant that when the reader bought the newspaper, he probably did so because he agreed with its editorial policy and the ideas expressed in it. But we can also assume that some readers would buy the newspaper only to read the sequel of the *roman-feuilleton* they started, regardless of any political opinion. Either way, the publisher sold more copies. These characteristics of the *roman-feuilleton* were assets for the good reception of propaganda. Firstly, the cheap cost of newspapers ensured their wide circulation. This economic factor was in addition to the fact that more and more people could read by the beginning of the 20th century. Secondly, the kind of literature that was delivered in this way was the sort that appealed to this mass public. The author's style was generally easy to read and to understand, the characters were sympathetic and appealing, and the stories were sensational and thrilling. The readers would thus identify with the characters and they would subscribe to the values and ideas expressed in the novel. This was a way for authors and newspaper publishers to disseminate the recurrent negative stereotypes mentioned above.

But despite these hypotheses drawn from Genette's theory, we should also consider whether this propaganda was entirely successful. In fact, Peter Butenhuis explains that the organised propaganda in Great Britain faced some failures, especially due to authors' opinions about war effort and patriotism. For example, the British writer Ford Madox Hueffer was employed by Wellington House to write propagandist stories, but he felt more and more guilty about the fact that he was staying safely at home while young British soldiers were fighting at the front, just as he encouraged them to do through his writings. Hueffer eventually stopped writing for Wellington House and enlisted in 1915, sensing it was his duty. As war carried on, more and more authors became sceptical about the merits of the war (e.g. H.G. Wells).

In France, the second reason to stop writing propagandist novels seems to be the most plausible. Indeed, the year 1917 was a turning point in the war, partly because of the general tiredness in the trenches and at home. The earlier great battles of the Somme and the Marne in 1916 had caused terrible damage and the morale was low. Belligerent propaganda was less and less accepted, as a pacifist tendency rose from several authors such as Romain Rolland (*Aux peuples assassinés*, written in 1916), Marcel Martinet (*Tu vas te battre*, written in 1917) or Noël Garnier (*Dans la tranchée*, written in 1920). Even if they were usually censored and sometimes published long after the end of the war, those writings show that propaganda faced resistance and did not manage to keep the population united in the war effort until the very end.

To conclude, we can say that popular literature, especially under the form of serial novels released through the press, was a major channel for disseminating propaganda. Official as well as non-official organisations were created to build and distribute this propaganda. The newspaper's publishers, as well as the authors, were central actors in this particular press market. But even if the *roman-feuilleton* was a well-established reading practice at this time, it was not an infinite opportunity for authorities to spread propaganda and the reading public eventually grew tired of these government-dictated stories. Also, the act of reading in itself was on the verge of being put aside by other up-coming mass media, such as radio and moving pictures, brought to the public by the development of new technologies.

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