

Pack up your Pocket Book; A study examining the reception and cultural significance of the Armed Services Editions in World War II.

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Abstract

With Nazi Germany seeking control over both minds and bodies, the 1933 book burnings signalled the start of what was to become one of the most eagerly fought wars in history, known as The War of Ideas. Knowledge gained through reading was regarded strictly as a threatening weapon, thus the formation of the Armed Service Editions (ASE's) in 1943 not only served to comfort and entertain soldiers on the front, but armed them with the skills that later proved to be culturally invaluable. This article will examine the reception and sociological significance of such publications ranging from Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, to R.A Saville- Sneath's *Aircraft Recognition*, illustrating how the creation of a cheap, widely disseminable paperback changed the lives of millions serving in conflict and became a symbol of hope and freedom which is still regarded as one of the greatest publishing enterprises today.

Key Words

Armed Services Editions (ASE's), Penguin Publications, Reception, Social and Cultural Significance, Ideas.

Introduction

Roosevelt wrote in 1942, “A war of ideas can no more be won without books than a naval war can be won without ships.” [Newman. 2011] In today’s society, where the spread of ideas exists on both a cyber level and printed form, conflict can easily arise from the exchange of sensitive information being manipulated in order to serve a new purpose. Arguably, the most notable historical example of the power of such is the creation of the Armed Services Editions [ASE’s] in 1943 by the Council on Books in Wartime. Intended to entertain and divert soldiers on the front, these publications were more than just mere recreational tools, acting as poignant symbols of the war effort reminding disheartened civilians what they were ultimately fighting to achieve. [Newman]

Penguin, known for their iconic typographical covers and simple banded design, attempted a similar model for British troops. [Hare 2013, 6] The Forces Book Club ran for a year with subscribers receiving a hundred and twenty books representing the best in contemporary literature, often being fortunate enough to receive their copy in advance of the general public. [Hare 1995, 112] However, due to lacking publicity and a disregard for the overall general consumer preference this endeavour was ultimately unsuccessful, with their individual subscription scheme later going on to sell other selections of the main publication list in alternative packaging. [113]

This article will look at both models of light, portable service editions in relation to their reception and sociological impact during the wartime period. In looking at a cross section of varying titles representing differing genres, I aim to prove the significance of books in providing a foundation for the cultivation of knowledge and individual cultural appreciation.

Furthermore, in combining both the reception of Penguin’s publications and the American ASE’s, the similarities between distribution methods and chosen titles aims to illustrate the importance of the forces in creating a successful cheap portable paperback.

Brief Historical Background

[i] Armed Services Editions

On May 22 1944, the *Publishers Weekly* announced the first plans for a portable, widely disseminable paperback edition intended to be distributed among the ranks in monthly packages. The intention was that soldiers in need of mental relief from ongoing conflict would interchange such titles among themselves sharing in common ground and gaining cultural capital through developing a love for reading. [Laughlin. 1978: 31] This notion perfectly highlights the council's mantra that "books are weapons in the war of ideas." [Newman] Chester Kerr, serving in both the domestic and overseas offices of War Information reiterates this by stating "If enough Americans are given an opportunity to learn what a book can do for them in wartime, they will have a new appreciation for its value and uses in peacetime." [Hench. 2010: 61]

Distributed with the objective of being "strictly expendable," [Laughlin. 31] these publications were designed with careful consideration of the conditions in which they would be read. Produced on an idle magazine press, too bulky for normal paperback production, ASE's were printed in the form of a double page spread, the upper half of the page being one book and the lower another.

Coming in two standard sizes, a short [less than three hundred and twenty words], and a long [over five hundred and twelve words], the font varied from point seven point five to eleven with the majority of additional material being either not included at all, or printed subtly in italics at either the front or back of the book. [34] This automatically gives it a wartime feel with strict paper rationing determining the quality from the outset, whilst ensuring the practical light nature of this new format and encouraging camaraderie. It was

not uncommon for a soldier to rip off a portion of the text already read to give to the next man stating that he will save his pages for them, or for one to start a story whilst the other finishes. [32] [Newman]

In terms of the varying genres and titles available, there was a considerable range from crime, mysteries, sports, to travel, adventure and general fiction. The most popular titles being those that evoke memories of friends and family back home. [Newman] The latter part of this article will explore in greater detail the differing reception of such titles, to highlight how books in wartime stemmed from this new edition, became a more popular pastime than athletics in the trenches. [Laughlin. 31]

[ii] Penguin Armed Forces Editions

Arguably, it is important at this point to refer back to Penguin's model. Seeing the potential for books supplied directly to a market populated by men and women keen to broaden their knowledge through reading, the Forces Book Club was established with the first distribution being made in October 1942, well over a year before their American counterparts. [Hare. 112] Bundled in a similar manner, each monthly package contained ten books distributed to subscribing military units at three pounds a year, a sixpence per copy.

With Penguin gaining a reputable reputation, the current list satisfied the need for well-written, factual, yet entertaining books promoting current literature of high quality. [106-7] Colour co-ordinated by month, a notice on the title page instructed users to leave it behind once completed for others future enjoyment.

Although as a business model and marketing strategy, Penguins initial attempt to produce cheap copies failed, the core ideal of a publication aimed at soldiers and those affected by the war lived on in other formats. The many unsold copies of previously unwanted titles were rebound through alternative channels, such as the Prisoner of War Book Service Editions and the Penguin Services Editions. [Hare. 7] The former in particular, was subject to

strict censorship finding a captive audience in German concentration camps; for this reason, a full list and surviving editions are almost non-existent. [7] Likewise, the Services Editions produced towards the end of the war, are limited in nature with only fifteen titles.

Having said this, it is worth noting the significance of Penguin as a precursor to the American ASE's as despite being sparse in quantity and short-lived, by promoting reading as a tool for the cultivation of ideas, Penguins were an essential aid in influencing later political and economical advancements. [10] It was said that owning such a publication acted as an unspoken code, 'if there was a Pelican or Penguin sticking out of a back pocket of battledress' then you were regarded as different and thus special. [Hare. 113]

General Reception of Service Editions

When considering the reception and social impact of these works, it is important to note that successful publications catered to what soldiers wanted to read, as well as having invaluable educational potential. As there were often brief periods of intense conflict dispersed between endless hours of waiting, fighting boredom was often a chore, so books needed to have the capability of stimulating the imagination transporting the individual on a journey and allowing them to temporarily forget the torment of silence. [Hare. 3] [Newman] A corporal stationed in New Guinea praised the Council of Books for this new form of entertainment:

The days when no mail is received are not so lonesome when there is an unfinished story around, [...] reading takes the mind away from concentrating on all the discomforts [present] [...] and [stops the chance of] becoming a slave to pity (Newman)

Quickly realizing the power of escapism that a good book could hold, officers greatly encouraged their troops to read, the sentimental value of the text far exceeding the life of the material publication itself. On one occasion, a lieutenant guarded a collection of ASE's so dearly that it prompted him to 'refuse to let any man have a book unless he agreed to read it aloud'. [Newman] This serves to underline how reading became a spiritual and emotional

release, as well as a means to increase the general literacy and cultural appreciation of the uneducated common man.

George Orwell re-emphasizes this in stating that “the average book which the ordinary man reads is a better book than it would have been three years ago.” [Lewis. 2005] By this he means to explain that by providing soldiers with literature they can enjoy, the notion of acquiring cultural capital becomes a more obtainable reality.

From a publishing perspective, although initially selling the rights to ones most profitable and treasured texts seemed too much of an unreasonable risk, it provided the opportunity for previously unsuccessful titles to be reborn and excel in a new market. One such idiosyncratic example is *The Great Gatsby*. Initially only selling a hundred and twenty copies, the rebranded Service Editions lifted this classic out of obscurity to become one of the greatest successes of 20th century fiction. [Appelbaum. 2014]

Case Studies

[i] *The Great Gatsby* F. Scott Fitzgerald

The success of this novel primarily lies in a reconsideration of the main target readership. Whereas before the female audience struggled to identify empathetically with the main protagonists, in rebinding the same story shifting the emphasis to male soldiers a greater emotional catharsis was able to be achieved. This is due in part, to a new and arguably stronger focus on Gatsby as a source of hope. Emily Miller Danton, a librarian states that “The soldier at the front needs to have a cause in his heart as well as a gun in his hand” [Manning. 2014: 31] which is exactly what reading a novel such as *Gatsby* afforded them.

In conveying the message to fight for a goal, which may seem unobtainable, “boats against the current” [Fitzgerald], soldier’s general morale and determination to stand for the greater good was continually reinforced. Furthermore, the act of passing around this material symbol of hope, a book, had a more significant cultural message. Nazi Germany

demanded control over citizen's free thought and beliefs as well as physical bodies. [Manning. xvi]

The first burnings organized across thirty four college towns in 1933, reduced a massive twenty five thousand books to ash and by 1938 more than eighteen categories of books were officially banned. [Newman] By providing a source of comfort and promoting the idea of individual cultural education, for the first time the common man could access "good literature" and *Gatsby* among these works epitomized on a humanistic level mans struggle for freedom. In terms of entertainment value, the glittering sensational parties of the 1920's described so vividly by Fitzgerald, were perfect for escaping the cruel reality of surrounding war and thus on a spiritual level the belief of the American dream conveyed in the novel, arguably translates to soldiers revitalized hope and determination to fight for their country.

[ii] *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* Betty Smith

Similarly, accounts from soldiers readings of Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, poignantly illustrate the reliance on text and imaginative scope in maintaining composure and faith in the war effort. Demand for this title was so high that it prompted the release of a second edition, with the author receiving over four letters a day from servicemen thanking her for the nostalgic and powerful inspirational quality of the book. [Newman]

One particular Marine accredited his survival on being given an armed forces edition whilst hospitalized, claiming that:

I went through the war with a dead heart and dulled mind having lost the ability to feel, [yet on reading this inspirational tale] "something inside me began to stir, my heart becoming alive again and a surge of confidence [renewing the feeling] that perhaps a fellow has a fighting chance in this world after all." [Manning. xi-xii]

Given the conditions of the harsh reality of conflict, this emotional detachment was particularly common which is why a book as identifiable as *A Tree in Brooklyn* gained popularity quickly providing reassurance for soldiers in times of severe hardship. The tree growing in Francie's yard against all obstacles, acted as a comfort to soldiers who also lived, despite the ever increasing odds stacked against them. [Manning. 2014] In addition, this metaphor served to illustrate a dream, which never dies, thus relating back to the core concept of the dissemination of ideas and free thought being of the utmost importance. Helen Keller, writing a fiercely passionate letter to the student body of Germany during the 1930's re-emphasizes this dream:

History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas [...] You can burn my books and the books of the best minds in Europe but the ideas in them have seeped through a million channels and will continue to quicken other minds.

[Keller quoted in Onion. 2013]

From a plot perspective, the reminiscent homely nature conveyed throughout this novel reminded soldiers of loved ones providing light relief from the stressful torment of everyday conflict. A commanding colonel noticed on one occasion during a fierce shelling that a man was chuckling reading a copy of the tale. After reciting a section aloud to the other forces, they shared in brief bursts of joy between blasts. Likewise, a common interest in reading lessened daily irritations promoting camaraderie and bettering the lives of millions of Americans inevitably facing death. [Manning. 2014]

[iii] *Aircraft Recognition* R. A Saville- Sneath

Returning to Penguin publications for this final example, *Aircraft Recognition* was a more hands on practical guide to recognizing military planes. Every schoolboy and Home Guard was recommended to carry a copy arming general citizens with the knowledge of protection from enemy advances. [Hare. 6] Like the ASE's, the Americans soon caught on to the profitability of such titles, branching out to include all soldiers being issued with this text under the imprint of *The Infantry Journal*; "a series of uninspired booklets primarily consisting of training manuals." [Hare. 6] By mixing military titles with more general relevant reading, Penguin's popularity among the ranks soared becoming central to life on the front. [Hare. 10]

In terms of its social and cultural significance, it was the knowledge that such texts afforded the common man, and practicalities of a small widely distributed publication that ultimately lead these non fiction titles to exceed fiction in becoming bestselling items on Penguin's wartime publication list. Moreover, the political and economical value of such titles provided a secure foundation off which a more diverse post-war cultural appreciation arose.

[iv] Modern ASE's

Before drawing a conclusion, it is worth noting the extent to which Penguin's failed model for a Force's Book Club expanded through the original ASE's to modern day equivalents. The Legacy Project, founded in November 2002 by Andrew Carroll includes many of today's major publishers; Simon and Schuster and Dover Publications being among the first to distribute the new free ASE's to American troops stationed overseas and on U.S warships.

The publications mimic the originals, formatted in the same pocketable size with a similar vintage design. Being a voluntary organization the output is still relatively small, yet the aim is the same as the original World War II ASE's, "to continue to inspire a generation of lifelong readers". [Clarence. Strowbridge: 2005] The fact that modern day publishers still value the old concept of providing entertainment for those on the front line illustrates the poignant significance of how an idea can evolve and proliferate in numerous forms.

Conclusion

Overall when considering the reception and cultural impact of ASE's, indisputably the most important successful factor is the material form. Light, cheap and portable, soldiers shared each edition until it was no longer usable. They were regarded as "the most dependable distraction" readily available to transport the reader elsewhere. [Manning. xvi] Furthermore, the core concept of providing a means by which the common man can gain cultural capital through reading "good literature" levels the artistic field and in many respects, helps prompt the paperback revolution being regarded as "the greatest mass publishing enterprise of all history." [Hench. 52]

The vast range of titles available ensured that every individual was catered for. Whereas fiction titles allowed for an empathetic or cathartic response to the text having a great spiritual and symbolic merit, Non fiction practical titles, equipped the forces with invaluable knowledge to promote awareness of conflict and impending danger. Likewise, the politically centred publications guided the general population post-war produced in anticipation allowing for the cultivation of a more diverse and economically knowledgeable landscape.

Whether it was a story or a handbook, soldiers treasured their ASE's; a Washington University professor recalls these publications as "the most positive memories of his service days." [Cole. 1984: vii]

In terms of the differing countries, this article has focused mainly on the American ASE's being larger in scope with government backing. However, it is still significant to note how Penguin being one of the only publishers to expand exponentially during the war years capitalizes on this notion of a new, culturally educated mass reading public. [Hench. 54] Although the Forces Book Club was ultimately a failure, Penguin still broke into the wartime market through alternative channels repackaging their publications to suit differing purposes. As the scope of this investigation primarily focused on the social and cultural significance of the ASE's as a collective whole, a further study exploring Penguin's abroad editions in the Middle and Far Eastern market would be worthwhile in investigating to what extent Penguin Service Editions differed in approach and social standing than their American successors.

To conclude, it is worth noting that the profound effect a small dispensable publication had on millions of citizens worldwide, perfectly illustrates how a book's spiritual and educational power can far exceed its material life thus, the notion that "books are weapons in the war of ideas" serves only to skim the surface of what power reading truly affords the previously neglected masses.

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