

THE GREAT WAR ON FILM: EXAMINING THE CINEMATIC VARIATIONS
OF THREE FILMS ON THE 1916 BATTLE OF THE SOMME

by

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Abstract

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Propaganda has been an integral part of human history, and while the documentation of conflict through film began in the middle of the nineteenth century, it was not until the First World War that the production and distribution of war films as propaganda became a mass phenomenon. Moving images of the war proliferated in all Western countries at an unprecedented rate. This thesis explores the role of wartime propaganda films in Britain, France, and Germany during the First World War by assessing the achievements and missteps of cinematic variations on the 1916 Battle of the Somme. Although these films achieved varying degrees of success as both propaganda films and war documentaries, they failed to alter the fundamental opinion of the masses. Rather, they strengthened and reinforced existing attitudes about the war. More importantly, the films shaped the way people would remember both the battle and the war in future generations.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When war broke out in August of 1914, war photography was well established, having been used to record the Crimean War (1854-1855) and the American Civil War (1861-1865). The first cinematic records of conflict began with the Boer War (1899-1902) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). However, it was not until the First World War that moving images of the war proliferated to an unprecedented extent in all Western countries. Their production and distribution became a mass phenomenon, as people were eager to see what was happening at the front. The intent of this thesis is to explore the role of wartime propaganda films in Britain, France, and Germany during the First World War by assessing the achievements and missteps of cinematic variations on the 1916 Battle of the Somme. Each of the following chapters will analyze one of the films on the battle beginning with the British *Battle of the Somme*. The chapters provide a brief outline of pre-war conditions that affected how each country viewed the war and film in general before discussing the status of the film industry prior to the war and its development during the conflict. Finally, the chapters conclude with an overview of each film's content, production, distribution, and reception. The final chapter compares the three films, discussing their merits as both propaganda and nonfiction films, the relationship between the war and the film industry, and the implications of that relationship for the use of film propaganda in subsequent conflicts.

There are several terms that must be explicitly defined in order to minimize confusion while discussing First World War film propaganda. Most importantly, propaganda must be defined because the meaning of the word is very broad. At its core, propaganda is a neutral word, meaning to propagate or to sow. The term's first official use was by the Vatican in 1622, when establishing the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, a congregation tasked with

propagating the faith of the Roman Catholic Church.¹ The history of the word's neutrality is apparent in the 1913 edition of *Webster's Dictionary*, which defines propaganda as:

A congregation of cardinals, established in 1622, charged with the management of missions or the college of the Propaganda instituted by Urban VIII (1623-1644) to educate priests for missions in all parts of the world. Hence, any organization or plan for spreading a particular doctrine or a system of principles.²

It seems that over the course of the twentieth century propaganda became synonymous with lies, distortion, deceit, disinformation, brainwashing, manipulation, mind control, and palaver. A definitive definition for propaganda is therefore somewhat elusive and circumstantial. For the purpose of this thesis, propaganda is defined as it is in Garth S. Jowell and Victoria O'Donnell's *Propaganda and Persuasion*: "as the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perspectives, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."³ This definition is quite broad and could be applied to almost any situation in which one party attempts to persuade another to think and act in a specific way. That being said, the difference between persuasion and propaganda is that persuasion is an interactive process in which the desires of both parties are met.⁴ One could argue that truly affective propaganda is presented in such a way that it seems like persuasion, which is why this distinction is important. It indicates how the definition of propaganda developed over the course of the twentieth century. Jowell and O'Donnell's definition of propaganda is the most appropriate one for this study because it encompasses the transformation of the word as its use clearly changed throughout the war. In addition to the definition of propaganda, it is essential to

1 Garth S. Jowell & Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publication, 2012), 2.

2 The University of Chicago, Department of Romance Languages and Literature, "The ARTFL Project: American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language," *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1913)*, accessed on March 31, 2014, <http://www.machaut.uchicago.edu/?action=search&word=propaganda&resources=Webster%27sequicksearch=on>.

3 Jowell & O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 7.

4 *Ibid*, 1.

explicitly state the purpose of wartime propaganda during this particular conflict. As listed in Ralph Haswell Lutz's "Studies of World War Propaganda, 1914-33" they were:

To maintain the moral of the armed forces of the state, create a favorable state of mind at home, diminish the morale of the enemy, influence favorably neutral opinion concerning the reason, justification, and necessity of the conflict, and if possible, induce friendly action.⁵

The different types of films discussed in this thesis must also be defined, as the variation between each is slight but significant. As defined in the *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, short films consist of a single reel of footage, a maximum of about 350 meters (1148 feet) of film or 15 minutes screened.⁶ Short films are sometimes referred to as serials because they were screened together as a series. In light of this definition, a newsreel is considered a form of nonfiction short film. Newsreels, as defined by Kristen Thompson and David Bordwell in *Film History: An Introduction*, are "early short films showing current events, such as parades, disasters, government ceremonies, and military, maneuvers. Most newsreels recorded the action as it was occurring, but many restaged events."⁷ Newsreels are also referred to as topicals. Another category of film is the feature film. A feature film is a multi-reel film best shown in a single screening and delivered to audiences as an exhibition or feature presentation.⁸ The second aspect of this definition is important because it distinguishes the British film, *Battle of the Somme* from the other two. The British were the most successful of the three at presenting their film as an exhibition. Yet, to this definition another element must be added. A feature film is a feature because it is edited and interpreted by a film producer to present a developed and clearly articulated message. Furthermore, an official film is simply a feature film produced by a government agency. The last type of film examined in the following chapters is a documentary.

5 Ralph Haswell Lutz, "Studies of World War Propaganda, 1914-33," *The Journal of Modern History*, 5, no. 4 (December 1933), 497.

6 *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 452.

7 Thompson & Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2003), 737.

8 *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, 453.

In the same regard that a newsreel is a nonfiction short film, a documentary is a nonfiction feature film.

Film became an integral part of the propaganda campaigns undertaken by all the major powers: Britain, France, and the United States on the Allied side as well as Germany and Austro-Hungary on the side of the *Mittelmächte* (Central Powers). It was yet another front on which the Allied and the Central Powers competed for the favor—or continued neutrality—of neutral countries. The war required the use of all the latest technologies, whether in film, weaponry, or communication. Film was a new medium in transition; a number of power shifts occurred in international film circles during the war. For example, in the 1910s France was, by far, the leading producer and distributor of film; however, the French lost their superior position to the United States and never regained it. Some countries appeared better suited than others to capitalize on the benefits of film. Britain, Germany, and France met with both success and failure over the course of the war, with regards to film production and film propaganda. What each country was able to take away from the experience was the knowledge that film was a powerful medium, capable of reaching audiences unlike any previous form. The success of feature film propaganda in Britain, Germany, and France could be measured in spikes; only select films were successful propaganda and for specific reasons. So what did each of these countries do to account for the varying degrees of success in one year and failure in another? What were some of the lessons learned through the production and distribution of film propaganda that were used to improve films during the interwar period and the Second World War?

These particular films were chosen because they were produced at a point where a variety of crossroads intersected. In 1916, support for the war was unstable and officials needed to bolster moral in the face of stagnation. Britain, Germany, and particularly France felt the economic recoil of attrition warfare, and these films were a means of facilitating war loans. After two years of relentlessly insisting that film had a role in propaganda, film producers finally won

the fight with military leaders to allow cameramen on the front lines. These three films were the first attempts of officially documenting war on the Western Front in a feature film. The first chapter examines Britain's most successful official film, *Battle of the Somme*. The film was released in 1916 while the battle was still underway and just one month after being filmed. *Battle of the Somme* is a unique film because it not only broke numerous box office records, but also gave audiences their first moving images of the human cost of modern war organized into a specific narrative. Although many Europeans had seen similar images in newsreels, *Battle of the Somme* was the first attempt to sequence images to convey a specific message; it was deliberate. *Battle of the Somme* was the first feature film to link fictionalization with the representation of fact. Although the climax of the film is a re-enactment, it would be presumptuous to deny its authenticity. It was precisely this "over-the-top" scene that led audiences to accept the film as an authentic representation of the battle. The British were the first to establish a government-supervised film production company and were thus the most successful of the three countries in 1916. Unfortunately, as we shall see, their success waned as the conflict trudged on and the grim determination to win the war waned amongst Britons.

Germany had a somewhat different experience with film. Although military officials established a Propaganda Agency in 1914, the organization was overwhelmingly concerned with printed propaganda and invested few resources towards developing film propaganda. Only after the British *Battle of the Somme* did German military leaders invest seriously in film, starting with the production of *With Our Heroes on the Somme* in 1917. However, due to their inexperience with film production, they struggled to make effective propaganda films and were criticized by their successors. The French, apparently, understood the influence of film—having produced countless newsreels depicting the war behind the battlefield—but rather than establishing a government-supervised organization at the onset of conflict, they depended on private contracts with film companies to produce films and newsreels that were then censored by the military. This method was inefficient and time consuming, which is one of the reasons

few French feature length films about the war were produced between 1914 and 1917; fewer of which actually survived the war.

Each country had a unique approach to film that was reflected in their films on the Battle of the Somme. The battle is significant in many ways. Some four million men from Britain, France, their empires, and Germany fought along a front of only 40 kilometers (25 miles); it proved a huge and costly battle.⁹ For the Germans, the battle was a model contest of materiel, the *Materialschlacht* (material battle).¹⁰ It became a symbol of Germany's material and military might, despite the numerous casualties. The Somme offensive was the first conflict of the war on mainland Europe to which Britain committed significant forces. The battle's resulting casualties, losing the majority of Kitchener's volunteer divisions, imprinted the battle on the national memory as the "greatest military tragedy of the twentieth-century."¹¹ On the other hand, the Somme achieved only secondary status in French national memory, overshadowed by the memory of Verdun which was strictly a French, rather than an Allied, undertaking. Their attitude is reflected in the number and nature of newsreels committed to each conflict. The French experienced similar losses—with regards to casualties—at both battles, but for the French, 1916 would remain the year of Verdun.¹² However, the Somme changed the French definition of victory from "breaking through the German lines" to simply "holding on."¹³ Stalemate and the failure to lose became equated with winning.

The Battle of the Somme

The River Somme, which cuts across northwestern France, has lent its name to four Great War battles, the first of which took place between September and October 1914. The second—and most brutal—lasted four and a half months, from June to November 1916. The

9 Leonard V. Smith, Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *France and the Great War 1914-1918* (Cambridge, NJ: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 83.

10 Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 70.

11 John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 321.

12 Smith, et al., *France and the Great War*, 83.

13 Ibid.

third took place in March 1918 and the fourth in August 1918. The 1916 Battle of the Somme is one of the bloodiest battles in history. Considered to be Britain's "greatest battle," it had a negative effect on the British national psyche because it was the first battle in which they suffered extensive casualties.¹⁴ British forces sustained a loss of 20,000 in the first day of the attack.¹⁵ Over a million British, French, and German soldiers were killed or wounded at the Somme.

For their part, the French had done little on their side of the Somme since 1914. French units occupied the sector as a "quiet front" defended by artillery with few infantry in the front lines. Originally, Allied forces had planned to mount a combined offensive where the French and British armies met before a strictly British offensive took place in Flanders to drive the Germans from the Belgian coast and end the U-boat threat from Belgian waters.¹⁶ However, before the offensive to "end the war" could be carried out, the Germans attacked the French at Verdun, where the French suffered severe losses. Inevitably, some French divisions en route to support the Somme offensive were reallocated to Verdun, reducing the French contribution to the Battle of the Somme down to 13 divisions (versus the 20 British divisions).¹⁷ In order to relieve pressure on the French at Verdun, the original plan was aborted and a combined Anglo-French offensive was planned by the Allied High Command for the summer of 1916. By attacking the Germans, French and British generals hoped to draw the majority of the German forces away from Verdun. They also wanted to inflict as heavy losses as possible upon the German armies.¹⁸ British forces, because they outnumbered the French, would be responsible for the

14 William Philpott, *Three Armines on the Somme: The First Battle of the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 110.

15 Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2002), 23.

16 Peter Hart, *The Somme: The Darkest Hour on the Western Front* (New York, NY: Pegasus Books, 2008), 27-37.

17 Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Press of Harvard University, 2005), 291.

18 Wilfrid Miles, ed., *Military Operations France and Belgium, 1916: 2nd July 1916 to the End of the Battle of the Somme*, ed. Wilfrid Miles, Vol. 2, 2 vols. (London: Battery Press, 1992), 86.

lion's share of the offensive. However, British military leaders complied with the strategy planned by French General Joseph Joffre.

By the time the British General Sir Douglas Haig arrived on the Somme little preparation for the offensive had taken place. Under his direction, Keegan writes, the rear area of the Somme was transformed into a huge military encampment: "Cut by new roads leading towards the front and covered with shell dumps," the rear area was equipped with "gun positions and encampments for the army that would launch the attack."¹⁹ Haig's plan for the offensive was simple. An enormous bombardment, to last a week and consume over a million shells, was to precede the attack; in theory, the bombardment would destroy the German trenches and barbed wire. As the bombardment died away on July 1st, nineteen British divisions and three French—all that could be spared while the conflict at Verdun was still underway—were to move forward across no mans land.²⁰

It was assumed that the enemy surviving the shelling would be stunned into inactivity and that the Anglo-French forces would be able to pass through the broken wire entanglements, enter the trenches and take possession unopposed, before continuing on to open country in the rear. The artillery plan was for the field guns to concentrate on cutting the wire in front of enemy trenches before the battle, while the heavy guns were to attack the enemy's artillery with "counter-battery" fire and to destroy trenches and strongpoints. At the moment of assault, the field artillery was to lay a "creeping barrage" ahead of the leading wave of British infantry as it advanced across no man's land. The "creeping barrage" was meant to keep German defenders from manning the parapet opposite, so that, in theory, the German trenches would be empty when the British arrived.

The British Fourth Army was tasked with capturing 25,000 meters (27,000 yards) of the first German trench line from Montauban to Serre and the Third Army was to mount a diversion at Gommecourt. In a second phase, the Fourth Army was to take the German second position,

¹⁹ Keegan, *The First World War*, 312.

²⁰ Ibid.

from Pozieres to the Ancre and then the second position south of the Albert-Bapaume road before preparing for an attack on the German third position south of the road towards Flers. At that point, the Reserve Army, which included three cavalry divisions, would exploit the success to advance east then north towards Arras. The French Sixth Army—with one corps on the north bank of Maricourt to the Somme and two corps on the south bank to Foucaucourt—would make a subsidiary attack to guard the right flank of the main attack made by the British (see Figure 1-1 Anglo-French Objective for the Somme Offensive).²¹

On the other side of the Somme, the Germans were busy preparing their third defense line, 2,700 meters (3,000 yards) behind the first. German artillery was organized into a series of barrage sectors; each officer was expected to know the batteries covering his section of the front lines and the batteries ready to engage a fleeting target.²² According to Official German Historian General von Steinacker, the German High Command regarded the Somme offensive as “fraught with great significance as determining the outcome of the Western Front.”²³ They correctly assumed that it was designed to bring about a decisive change on every other scene of action, thereby forcing the Central Powers to assume the defense.²⁴ The Germans were securely entrenched and strategically located when the combined British-French force launched a frontal attack on a front north of the Somme River. The battlefield had been uncontested since the 1914 conflict, allowing the Germans ample time to construct the strongest position on the Western front. John Keegan describes their preparations:

The hard, dry, chalky soil was easily mined and they had driven dugouts thirty feet below ground, impervious to artillery fire, provisioned to withstand siege and linked to the rear by buried telephone cable and deep communication trenches. On the surface they had constructed a network of machinegun posts,

21 Gary Sheffield, *The Somme*, 1st Edition (London: Cassell, 2003), 64-65.

22 Graeme Chamley Wynne, *If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1940), 101.

General von Steinacker, "Official Account of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916," *firstworldwar.com*, 2014, (http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/somme_steinacker.htm (accessed March 12, 2014)).

24 John Keegan, *The First World War*, 311.

covering all angles of approach across the treeless downs, and in front of their fire trenches laid dense entanglements of barbed wire.²⁵

The German army had plenty of time to secure their position. Among the half-dozen divisions garrisoning the Somme sector, the 52nd had been there since April 1915, the 12th since

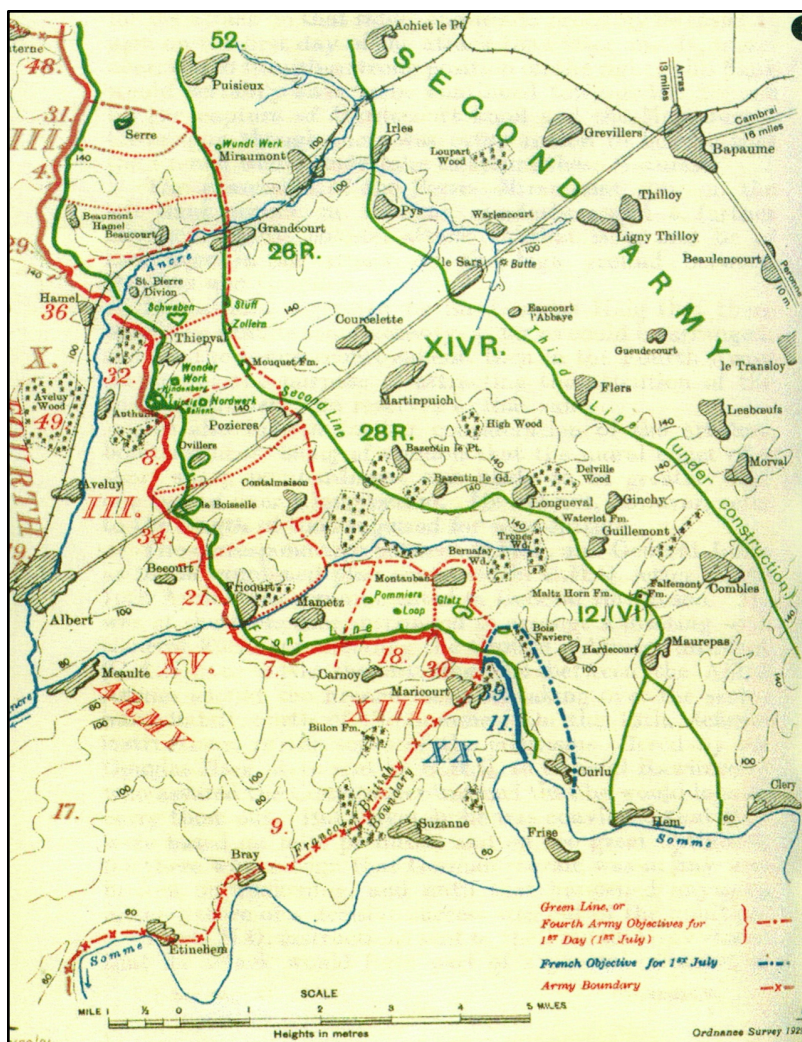


Figure 1-1 Anglo-French Objective for the Somme Offensive. Map from Duncan Youel and David Edgell, *The Somme: Then and Now—A Visual History* (New York: DK Publishing, Inc., 2006), 40.

October and the 26th and 28th Reserve Divisions since September 1914.²⁶ However, the defense had its weaknesses. The front trenches were on a forward slope in “chalk white”

²⁵ Ibid.

subsoil, making trenches easy for ground observers to identify.²⁷ German forces were also concentrated in or near the first trench. For example, any one regiment could have two battalions near the front trench and the reserve battalion divided between the first and the second lines, all within 1,800 meters (2,000 yards) of the front line. The concentration of troops on an easily recognizable front trench guaranteed that it would face the bulk of an artillery bombardment.²⁸

Despite the disadvantages of the German position, the Allied bombardment did not have the desired effect. The situation was made worse by the fact that Haig ordered the infantry to advance across no man's land in upright and straight lines rather than using the tried and tested means of "fire and movement" because he was convinced the bombardment would be a success.²⁹ The German entrenchment proved far stronger than the British intelligence had estimated. Their dugouts were almost impervious to any shell the British could fire and survived intact up to the very last days of the attack. The field guns also failed to destroy enemy wire, and the field artillery proved incapable of proving an effective "creeping barrage." A successful "creeping barrage" required a field radio to connect artillery units to advancing infantry units—technology that was not yet developed. In place of nonexistent field radios, the artillery fired based on a timetable, calculated by the speed at which the infantry was expected to advance.³⁰ Once started there was no way to call artillery support back and, regardless of whether the infantry continued to advance, the barrage proceeded. More often than not, the barrage crept away from the first wave beyond trenches still strongly held by enemy soldiers. Almost everywhere on the front the artillery departed prematurely from the infantry, who were advancing against wire that was poorly cut or intact and against trenches filled with Germans

26 Intelligence Staff, American Expeditionary Force, "Histories of 251 Divisions of the German Army Which Participated in the War (1914-1918)," (Washington, 1920), passim.

27 Wynne, *If Germany Attacks*, 102.

28 Ibid, 103.

29 Keegan, *First World War*, 313.

30 Ibid, 314.

fighting for their lives.³¹ The French achieved more in the opening days of the offensive than the British, taking the first German line south of the Somme on July 1st. However, without the support of the British, the French were unable to maintain their lead.

The Somme offensive quickly deteriorated into a war of attrition. In September the British introduced the tank into the war for the first time, but with little impact. The tanks' movement over no man's land and trenches was cumbersome and unreliable. Torrential rains in October turned the battleground into a muddy quagmire and in mid-November the battle ended, with the Allies having advanced only 8 kilometers (5 miles) (see Figure 1-2 The Outcome of the Battle of the Somme). The Allied Powers determined the battle was a victory.

According to William Philpott, the Battle of the Somme was an immense battle, the effects of which were felt in every corner of the world:

The world had paused as three great empires, championed by their armies, staked their futures in a single great battle. The scale of the Somme was immense, a global event impacting on the lives of everyone in Western Europe and resonating beyond European shores. Millions of Frenchmen, Germans and Britons, and many thousands of colonial volunteers and conscripts—Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, South Africans, Moroccans, Algerians and West Africans—converged on that corner of a foreign field from twenty-five nations, [and] all five continents.³²

In offensive terms, Keegan writes, the attack achieved nothing. Most of the dead were killed on ground the British held before the advance.³³ The battle demonstrated that geographical objects were meaningless without the absolute defeat of the enemy's military forces.³⁴ The Allies' objective became the long-term destruction of the German army and—as a result of that single-minded focus—the Allies would fight many similar battles. The Battle of the Somme raised the threshold for total war and foreshadowed a new era of horror on the Western Front.

31 Ibid, 315.

32 Philpott, *Three Armies on the Somme*, 126.

33 Keegan, *First World War*, 317.

34 Hart, *The Darkest Hour*, 529.

Although the figures have been much disputed, the casualties from the Battle of the Somme amounted to approximately 650,000 German, 195,000 French, and 420,000 British soldiers.³⁶ Almost a fifth of the British force died, and some battalions, like the 1st Newfoundland Regiment, had ceased to exist.³⁷ In a span of four and a half months Britain lost the majority of its volunteer and veteran forces. Regiments of “Pals” and “Chums” (whole villages of military-age men that volunteered to fight together) had their first experiences of the war at the Somme, for which they were grossly unprepared. Britons at home were horrified by the extent of their collective loss. As Keegan suggests, the Somme marked the end of an age of vital optimism in British life that has never been recovered.³⁸ The 1916 Battle of the Somme became a metaphor for futile and indiscriminate slaughter. It was the first battle in which violent contact with the enemy replaced disease as the leading cause of death in warfare. More soldiers died from an expanding armament and advanced weaponry—on both sides—than in previous conflicts.

The nature of injuries also changed dramatically during the First World War. According to Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, over the course of the war, half the French soldiers wounded in battle sustained multiple wounds or injuries and the severity of these wounds increased dramatically.³⁹ What, in previous conflicts, would have been an army of walking wounded became an army of permanently disabled. Injuries of the kind and scale inflicted by the Great War were unprecedented, soldiers had inadequate defenses against twentieth-century firepower, the battlefield had expanded, and the periods of conflict extended from hours to weeks or even months. In essence, the First World War was an unprecedented war. At the turn of the century, war was completely dehumanized and even civilians were able

36 Encyclopedia Britannica, *First Battle of the Somme*, November 22, 2013, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/554099/First-Battle-of-the-Somme> (accessed February 22, 2014).

37 Ibid.

38 Keegan, *The First World War*, 321.

39 Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, *14-18*, 24.

to witness the human destruction of war from their hometowns. The entire Western world's relationship with war was irreversibly and radically altered by the advent of total war.⁴⁰

Total war was not only difficult for those involved to describe, but also for those individuals attempting to capture it on film. Film producers faced several challenges in the filming, production, and distribution of films during the First World War. Access to battle footage was reduced by military leaders' fears and consequential restrictions. Cameramen were not allowed near the trenches or were restricted to rear areas until 1916 in both Britain and France. German military leaders severely restricted the movement of cameramen on the frontlines and the content of their footage between 1914 and 1918. As a result, their "authentic" footage consisted mostly of rear area activities like supply trains and prisoner of war transfers. Even after cameramen gained access to the frontline, they were still limited by their equipment. Cameras were heavy, bulky and awkward. They had to remain stationary on a tripod, making it impractical to follow soldiers as they progressed through the battle. The quality of the images was also limited by the film's exposure time, which made filming in low-light conditions impossible. For the most part, all three films discussed in the following chapters consisted of a mixture of footage from the rear areas and staged scenes. These staged scenes were essential to completing the films' narratives where authentic footage was either unavailable or unable or to do so. Images from all three nations' Somme films were used in subsequent films and are available through numerous World War I documentaries. Although they may not have depicted the true nature of fighting on the western front, they are still valuable historical documents. Staged footage tells us something about the techniques, capabilities, and limitations of the film industry of the time, while authentic footage tells us something about the work and coordination that went into preparing for a battle and something of the conditions under which soldiers lived.

40 Total War is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as a war that is unrestricted in terms of the weapons used, the territory or combatants involved, or the objectives pursued.

Chapter 2

The British *Battle of the Somme*

The British *Battle of the Somme* is considered by many film historians to be the first official war documentary. Produced and screened in 1916, it is an early example of film propaganda, a historical record of the battle, and a source of footage depicting trench warfare in the First World War. The scenes that were staged—most notably the “over the top” scene—do not detract from the film's value as a historical document. The film also tells us something of the progression of film propaganda throughout the First World War, as it was the most well-known propaganda film from the time period.

Unique to the British film on the Battle of the Somme was the extensive marketing campaign undertaken to advertise and promote the film's screening. It is also the longest of the three films, making it the only one capable of independent screening. As a result, editor and marketer Charles Urban made the film extremely marketable and it was shown in more theaters worldwide and for more weeks than the other two films. The British continued to use the same parameters to create subsequent films, which was their ultimate downfall in terms of successful film propaganda. However, before considering the details of the film, it is important to examine the situation of film and cinema in Britain before and during the war in order to understand the conditions under which the films were produced.

The Status of Pre-WWI Film in Britain

Between the turn of the century and the First World War, Europe was already engrossed in producing feature length films. Feature films were longer in length compared to the accompanying short films (cartoons, newsreels, and advertisements, all of which were approximately 10 minutes long), were considered the main film presented in the cinema, and were given a varying range of promotion and advertisement. France, Italy, and Denmark had produced an extraordinary array of hallmark—some by national, others by international

standards—films by 1913.⁴¹ The United States was also busy meeting both domestic and international demands for feature length films. Some nations (Germany and Russia) experienced an increase in nationalistic films as a result of the war's disruption of the free flow of films and influences across borders, while others (France, Denmark, and Italy) experienced a decline. British investors expressed little interest in producing films, though British citizens seemed interested in watching them.

In *History of Film*, Thompson and Bordwell state that by the mid-1910s London was the center for international circulation of U.S. films. It is estimated that between 60 and 70 percent of films imported into Great Britain were American.⁴² Although many British firms profited from acting as agents for American films, their work inadvertently undermined any effort Britons might have made towards producing their own films. These shortsighted businessmen handed a large share of the United Kingdom's market over to the United States, severely limiting any opportunity for the development of national cinemas. While British film remained virtually unchanged, other nations developed distinctive national cinematographic styles. Britain continued to produce films in similar fashion to the *Battle of the Somme* for the duration of the war, despite the fact that they met with less success. Local film industries also evolved between 1914 and 1918, one of the many effects of the First World War on the film industry.

Despite the gloomy perspective of the film industry in Britain, most urban dwellers were regularly attending picture-houses by 1914. However, British society had a somewhat unique perspective on cinemas, which prevented propagandists from fully exploiting film at the onset of the war as the Germans had effectively done. The British elites believed that film was a cheap

41 In 1910, the Danish film company Nordisk produced *The Abyss*, a two-reel feature film starring one of the first international stars Asta Nielsen. The French Film d'Art Company produced *The Assassination of the Duc de Guise* in 1908, which would serve as the model for future art films. Using stage stars a script by a famous dramatist, and an original score by classical composer Camille Saint-Saens, the film told the story of a famous incident in French history. *The Last Days of Pompeii*, produced by Italy in 1908, was the first of many adaptations of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's historical novel and its popularity resulted in the Italian cinema's association with historical spectacle.

42 Thompson & Bordwell, *Film History*, 56.

form of entertainment that could not possibly bear upon the outcome of war. Despite their misgivings about the influences of film, officials eventually conceded, especially in light of the success of German propaganda films—the importance of film as a result of the efforts of trade papers and men like Charles Masterman, founder of Wellington House.⁴³ Collectively, they were able to convince officials that film could arouse patriotism, be utilized in military training and recruitment, as well as inform and sway the opinion of viewers.⁴⁴ The fundamental changes that occurred with the maturation of the moving picture contributed to the masses' changing view of warfare. Films could reflect the realities of war and serve as an example for the proper behavior in war. This is the essential contribution of film to the first industrialized war.

In the early twentieth century, the British working class adopted an us-versus-them mentality that never truly eroded over the course of the war. In fact, it is safe to assume that the war only agitated this hostility. By the time the Treaty of Versailles was signed, the British working class—whom also happened to make up the majority of the enlisted forces that fought in the war—believed that the mass slaughter of a single generation was a direct result of the inequality between the elite and working classes.⁴⁵ Soon after the cessation of hostilities, the British workers were inclined to view the First World War as an example of lambs led to the slaughter by indifferent shepherds. In reality, the postwar domestic economic conditions were more responsible for shaping that point of view than the conduct of the war. While wartime increases in economic output reduced unemployment to the point that some of the most

43Wellington House was the first British government organization established to coordinate propaganda directed at foreign audiences. After discovering that Germany had a Propaganda Agency, David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was given the task of establishing a British War Propaganda Bureau. Lloyd George appointed writer and fellow Liberal MP. Charles Masterman (also the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and Head of the National Insurance Commission) head of the organization responsible for the production and distribution of official films like *Battle of the Somme*.

44 Nicholas Reeves, "British Film Propaganda 1914-18," in *The First World War and Popular Cinema: 1914 to the Present*, ed. Michael Paris, 28-48 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 29-30.

45 British enlisted forces included Irish, Indian, Canadian, Australian and South African soldiers. Unlike the French or the Germans—whose armies consisted of conscripts—the British units were initially made up completely of volunteers (until 1916 when Britain began conscription).

disadvantaged members of society enjoyed significant improvement in their standard of living, other members actually saw their standard of living fall, trapped between growing shortages and rising prices.⁴⁶ The social stratification that produced the us-versus-them mentality was mirrored by the hierarchy of the British military and was no less potent in stimulating the budding film industry. British film agents and producers professed to having considered cinemas as a place for “poor people.”⁴⁷

While the British elite desperately clung to theater as the proper form of entertainment, they considered cinema a woeful substitute for the illiterate masses, which was not necessarily an entirely inaccurate description. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the film trade was trying to prove itself as an adequate replacement for theater and print (books and newspapers); as a result, in an attempt to maximize attendance, British cinemas set their costs extremely low, to attract mainly the working class. Due to its popularity among the masses, film gained a stigma. According to Nicholas Reeves, cinemagoers imposed a “noisy boisterous culture on the auditorium,” which was not a particularly inviting environment for the middle class.⁴⁸ Even the middle class film producers and agents did not attend the cinema. Therefore, British cinemas before the war were filled with the economically strained class of the industrial age that would also fill the ranks of the Royal Army. Official film, sanctioned by the British government, inadvertently united the disgruntled workers in Britain with the embittered soldiers in France. Not only did *Battle of the Somme* visually record the human costs of modern warfare for viewing and reviewing, but it also supplied evidence for the us-versus-them mentality that the Co-Operative Movement would exploit to further their own film propaganda in the 1920s.⁴⁹ Some film

46 Nicholas Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda During the First World War* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1986), 41.

47 *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* (better known as Kine Weekly): 27 August 1914, p. 64 in Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda*, 29.

48 *Ibid.*, 29-30.

49 The Co-Operative Movement was an early 20th century movement in which small retailers established co-operative consumer societies in order to combine their buying power to provide cheaper goods for their community.

historians argue that films emerged as class weapons in Britain in the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁵⁰ This is the legacy of film established and nurtured during the First World War.

According to Pierre Sorlin, film offered another version of reality by flooding the mind with images that so precisely imitated life they were considered a genuine reproduction.⁵¹ This was the power and the challenge of cinema. From the beginning of the war, there was a universal consensus in the cinema trade that film was a useful means of British propaganda. This was due in part to the success of German pamphlets, posters, books, and photo propaganda—which Britain quickly looked to counter with film propaganda—and partly due to the perceived universalism of film.⁵² Most trade papers of the day argued that film could reach those who would remain unaffected by conventional propaganda. Trade papers used a multifaceted argument to make their case in favor of including film in state-sponsored propaganda. Trade papers like *Kine Weekly* argued that film was “uniquely placed to arouse patriotism and could play an important part in military training.”⁵³ Another trade paper claimed that the people had a right to know how the war was being conducted and that film with its “special ability to record the actual likeness of the events” was especially well situated to fulfill this particular role.⁵⁴ *The Times* offered yet another argument, that film would make a dramatic impact on military recruitment because the majority of those who attended the cinema were military-age males.

While trade papers were making their case, Masterman was busy arguing precisely the same case from within the government. Masterman believed that film could play a unique role in

50 Alan Burton, "The Emergence of an Alternative Film Culture: Film and the British Consumer Co-Operative Movement before 1920," *Film History* (Indiana University Press) 8, no. 4 (1996), 446.

51 Pierre Sorlin, "Cinema and the Memory of the Great War," in *The First World War and Popular Cinema*, 5.

52 German visual propaganda excelled in adapting national mythology to the war. This was a decided success in propaganda over the British. Although Great Britain was a nation with a strong literary tradition, it lacked an epic cultural mythology like Germany's. German mythology in the Nordic tradition was perfectly suited for militaristic aims.

53 Reeves, "British Film Propaganda," 28.

54 Ibid.

the ongoing worldwide propaganda war because he recognized two distinct needs that film could fulfill: the need to counter successful German film propaganda (films of troop mobilization—including shots of great commanders, propaganda cartoons, picture puzzles, portraits of battles, and old, partially re-cut films of military exploits—which the public responded to with interest) and the need to reach the otherwise unreachable immense illiterate populations who constituted a large part of the target audience.⁵⁵ By the end of 1914, those responsible for official propaganda in Britain had come to the same conclusion as the cinema trade: that official films had an important and distinct contribution to make to the war effort.

Official Film

Recognizing the value of public desire to see the war as it was being waged, Wellington House—and later the Department of Information (1917) and the Ministry of Information (1918)—waged a nearly secret propaganda effort between 1914 and 1918. Their effort was a secret for two reasons: one, because leaders worried that viewers would automatically discredit the content of the films should they know that the government was responsible for their production and distribution, and two, because the film trade would expect to handle the films for free, which would only further discredit the film and deny the War Department desperately needed funds. Before the editing of *Battle of the Somme*, Wellington House and the War Office agreed that Wellington House would pay the War Office 40% of the profits after deducting the costs of the prints and a further 25% of working expenses.⁵⁶ This standard applied to *Battle of the Somme* and any subsequent films, although *Battle of the Somme* was the only official film to generate a significant profit. By war's end, it was estimated that official films released in the domestic market grossed approximately £70,000, with *Battle of the Somme* generating approximately £30,000 of the final profit.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid., 28,

⁵⁶ Nicholas Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda*, 60.

⁵⁷ Nicholas Reeves, "Film Propaganda and Its Audience: The Example of Britain's Official Films during the First World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* (Sage Publication, Ltd.) 18, no. 3 (July 1983), 474.

Prior to the filming of *Battle of the Somme*, the War Office also agreed to supply all the required transport and budget if the British Film industry would "supply the necessary equipment and expertise" in order to satisfy the demand for war films on the home front.⁵⁸ Without exception, those who urged the use of film propaganda argued that factual films were the only possible form official films could take. Anything else would be interpreted as insincere and misleading, ultimately stimulating anti-British and anti-Ally sentiments—the last thing Wellington House wanted. However, both the Admiralty and the War Office feared that factual films would reveal too much for the “delectation of foreigners.”⁵⁹ So the British film industry strove to strike a balance between audience desires and military limitations. Service leaders initially restricted cameramen to the rear area of the battle space where they filmed supply dumps and troop preparations, maneuvers, and parades. This caused significant delays in any real effort to produce or distribute factual films depicting combat until the autumn of 1915. On two separate occasions, negotiations were conducted with the service departments: the first was initiated by Wellington House and resulted in a single film, *Britain Prepared*, that premiered in London in December of 1915; the other—and more successful—was initiated by the trade and resulted in the appointment of official cameramen who would work on the front, regularly sending back footage for subsequent exhibitions in Britain and around the world. This second set of negotiations produced official films like *Battle of the Somme*, *Battle of Ancre* and *The Advancement of the Tanks*.

Early Filming

A very important aspect of film is that it developed as a cosmopolitan industry through permanent exchanges that combined—at random—both fiction and nonfiction. According to David Williams, the First World War created a new audience interested in both nonfiction and

58 David Williams, *Media, Memory, and the First World War* (Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 111.

59 Reeves, "Film Propaganda and Its Audience," 464.

fictional films about the war.⁶⁰ The expression of these mixed interests created many challenges for early film propaganda production and distribution teams. Propagandists had to strike the right balance between presenting the war objectively and creating an adequate human-interest element to engage audiences without viewers coming away from the film feeling cheated. British propagandists experienced the key challenge that followed film even into the current century: making questionable images seem genuine and acceptable.

Although British officials and film traders alike had established the unavoidable need for film to take a leading role in the propaganda campaign, there were those who remained skeptical. Military decision-makers considered film a “second-rate, even disreputable, form of working class entertainment, which could not possibly make a contribution to the desperately serious business of winning the war.”⁶¹ Within this precarious environment the first attempt at film propaganda—the newsreel—was created. As an approximately 12 minute short film, the newsreel was a compilation of short films from different parts of the world most often dealing with kings or other important people and items concerned with local events.⁶² Artificial as they might have been, newsreels did capture aspects of what was actually taking place in the war zone. Between 1914 and 1918, the dramatic change in the very nature of military operations was captured on film and viewed by huge national audiences via the newsreels. Newsreels enabled entire populations involved in the conflict to witness, indirectly and for the first time, what was going on in the war zone, telling them they had entered a new phase of warfare, and established what might be considered the accepted version of the War. However, these early newsreels did not always meet with an entirely favorable response, and as early as May of 1916 both French propagandists and those at Wellington House had come to the same conclusion: that there was a need for a larger more ambitious form of feature films.⁶³ Cameramen would

60 Williams, *Media, Memory, and the First World War*, 111.

61 Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda*, 29.

62 Sorlin, "Cinema and the Memory," 9.

63 Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda*, 59.

have to shoot significantly more footage in general and capture more provocative images of war, which would require them to venture closer to the action.

Cinematographers faced many physical and mechanical challenges in filming the war.

Just some of the problems they faces are described in *Ghosts of the Somme*:

The contrast between light and dark areas of the image tends to be stark and there is little graduation of tone in shadows. Events were often fast moving and difficult to follow, the angle of the lens was fairly small, cameras were bulky, light could change or fade, and mechanical failure could occur. Focusing was normally set up before shooting and alternating the shutter blade so that more or less light was admitted when the shutter opened regulated exposure. Most cameras had no view finder and keeping the subject in shot was a matter of experience and skill...with the addition of mortal danger...Smoke and shell burst were commonplace but difficult to film. Ironically, the development of moving pictures coincided with the arrival of the "empty battlefield." Thus when filmed from any distance, attacking troops were no more than dots and defending troops were almost invisible.⁶⁴

For all intents and purposes, the trenches were not the ideal environments for filming in the 1910s. Remarkably, cameramen Geoffrey Malins and John B. McDowell were still able to capture images on the Somme. In addition to the technical limitations of the equipment, the camera itself was difficult to transport and set up. Malins actually used his driver to carry the tripod and camera because it was impossible for one man to do so on his own.⁶⁵ Weather, light, and terrain all had the potential to prevent cameramen from catching the necessary images as they occurred. Since the action was in real-time, there were few scenes the cameramen could ask soldiers to repeat and even then the likelihood of the soldiers acquiescing to their request was relatively low. It took some time before Malins and McDowell could establish working relationships with the different units, and they only filmed for 11 days. Perhaps by the end of the battle the soldiers were more accommodating, although one cannot say for sure. The limitations of the camera, particularly the narrow angle of the lens and the virtual immobility of the camera, made historians doubt Malins' claim that "he swung the camera around to capture the visual

64 Alastair H. Fraser, Andrew Robertshaw and Steve Roberts, *Ghosts on the Somme: Filming the Battle, June-July 1916* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Book Ltd, 2009), 114.

65 *ibid.*, 118.

climax of the film—scenes of British soldiers going over the top.”⁶⁶ Film historians determined that the scene was staged at a training facility to bridge the gap between actual footage from the Somme.

Inventory at British film archives suggest that although there is extensive footage of the First World War in existence, there is very little variety in its subjects or content. Prior to 1916, footage revolved around supply lines, supply buildup prior to the offensive, soldiers in route to the frontlines, and long files of returning prisoners of war because cinematographers were severely restricted by the War Office and the Admiralty. Although these images did hint at what was happening on the frontlines, it was not the blatant representation viewers craved. Early films, like *Britain Prepared*, claimed to portray the war accurately, but met with extensive criticism. As mentioned previously, the service departments feared revealing too much to the public. The combination of new technology in waging war and recording moving images overwhelmed many leaders. Without completely understanding the newly mechanized warfare, they were unprepared to share visual representation of the war zone with rest of the world. Their missteps through the process of creating official films are apparent in the reduction of wounded and dead soldiers seen in subsequent films. According to Reeves, over 14 percent of *Battle of the Somme* focused on the dead and wounded, whereas the next film, *Battle of the Ancre*, lacked any images of the dead but the wounded constituted 13 percent of the footage. With the following film, *Battle of Arras* the change was even more dramatic—footage of a dead German soldier and wounded soldiers together amounted to less than 2 percent of the film.⁶⁷

Battle of the Somme strikes a delicate balance between fact and fiction. The majority of the film is genuine footage presented quite factually, with minimal artistic creativity when necessary to maintain a cohesive narrative. There is some debate as to the true value of *Battle of the Somme* as a historical document. Some historians discredit the film as an authentic representation of the Western Front because selected footage is simulated. However, the faked

66 Williams, *Media, Memory, and the First World War*, 112.

67 Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda*, 40.

scenes are not the most valuable ones. The images that had the greatest impact on contemporary audiences—and that are most often remembered and used—consisted of the wounded, dead, or prisoners-of-war, all of which are genuine. The faked “over the top” scene and the reenacted artillery bombardment are meant to round out a total narrative of the opening days of the offensive that could not otherwise be fulfilled by conventional shooting. Without these scenes audiences would have questioned the authenticity of the entire film.

Generally speaking, *Battle of the Somme* was the most (relatively) honest official film to report the horrors of modern war. It gave contemporaries their first opportunity to understand just how different the First World War truly was. The shock of seeing genuine images of death and suffering lent to the film’s accepted realism. However, it also inadvertently contributed to the decline of interest in feature length wartime films. Those who flocked to see *Battle of the Somme* in huge numbers all but abandoned official films by the spring of 1917. By that time, propagandists had removed wounded Allied soldiers from film altogether, unsure of the wisdom in presenting the horrors of war with relative honesty. While the increasing restriction on the films themselves could explain the declining popularity of official films, an even more important explanation can be found in the changing nature of public opinion that characterized the late half of the war.

Changing Tide

The unparalleled success of the earlier trilogy (*Britain Prepared*, *Battle of the Somme*, and *Battle of Ancre*) of official film can be explained, in part, by the fact that they were the first to give domestic audiences unprecedented images of the physical devastation of war, and a real sense of the human cost of war. From that point it would seem that audiences were desensitized to the images displayed onscreen and were either grimly disinterested in seeing them again or too disturbed to want to relive them. As the war waxed on and constituents’ enthusiasm for the war waned, more government officials supported the argument that real British war films were the responsibility of “his Majesty’s Government” and that the government

was the only entity adequately equipped to produce factual film. As a result, Wellington House was assimilated into the Department of Information (DoI) and the Ministry of Information (MoI) in rapid succession.⁶⁸ Following a period of disorder, a tight system of official censorship developed. Initially, staff headquarters were content with supervising the footage shootings but after a while the authorities took film production into their own hands. By 1917, the DoI (an actual element of the government) required official reports on the state of local film industries and was leading campaigns on how best to exploit the films.

Although the Department restructured the organization when it took over and established propaganda committees abroad, they continued to use the same methods for producing and distributing official films. They were able to achieve greater efficiency with less chance of duplication, but as discussed in previous sections, were unable to address the issue of falling cinema attendance rates. These same principles applied to the MoI in 1918. According to M. L. Sanders, the changes that took place during this transition were both organizational and methodological, but these alterations were of emphasis not kind.⁶⁹ The changes dealt with the medium of propaganda rather than the content of the propaganda itself. There was, specifically, a significant reduction in print propaganda due to paper shortages, but beyond these minor changes the Ministry also failed to address the problem of audience disinterest. British film propaganda was essentially at a standstill, despite the fact that propagandists had proven the value of film as a propaganda tool. The problem was a direct result of the fact that film was a relatively new phenomenon. Propagandists, cameramen, editors, producers, and film agents alike were all unaware of how to effectively manipulate moving images to produce the desired outcome; they simply knew that film affected people.

68 The Department of Information (DoI) was the first official government agency to oversee, produce, and distribute feature films, topical films, and newsreels during the First World War. Prior to the DoI, films were produced by a loosely associated group of organizations, some government and some film trade. The DoI became the MoI in 1918, which became responsible for all manners of government propaganda.

69 M. L. Sanders, "Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War," *The Historical Journal* (Cambridge University Press) 18, no. 1 (March 1975), 142.

Perhaps the removal of film professionals contributed to the propagandists' inability to connect with the audience. When diplomats replaced film professionals, the organization did away with whatever artistic innovation they had access to. The character of the battlefield report changed and, in turn, the audience lost interest in feature length films about the front. For the remainder of the war, propagandists were unable to recoup the mass audiences that had watch *Britain Prepared* and *Battle of the Somme*, forcing them to revert back to their previous strategy of releasing short films. The production of feature length official films was short-lived but intense. From December 1915 to July 1917 propagandists focused almost exclusively on them, producing eight in less than two years.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the moment negative feedback outweighed positive, propagandists reverted back to short films instead of altering feature films to appeal to audiences.

Production of *Battle of the Somme* (1916)

The film was organized into five parts, with sequences divided by intertitles summarizing their contents. The first part shows preparation for battle behind the British frontlines, including troops moving towards the front; French peasants farming in the rear area; stockpiling munitions; General Beauvoir De Lisle addressing the 29th Division; and some of the preparatory artillery bombardment. The second part depicts continuing preparations, troops moving into frontline trenches, the intensification of the artillery barrage, and the detonation of the Hawthorn Ridge Mine. Part three begins with the first attack on July 1 1916 and shows the recovery of British wounded and German prisoners. The fourth part shows more British and German wounded, the clearing of the battlefield, and the aftermath. The final part shows select scenes of devastation including the ruins of the village of Mametz, British troops at rest and preparation for the next stage of advances.

Malins had started his career as a portrait photographer before becoming a feature film cameraman with the Clarendon Film Company. In 1914 he moved to Gaumont to work on

⁷⁰ Reeves, "Film Propaganda and Its Audience," 488.

“topicals” (newsreels) and by the end of the following year he had filmed on both the Belgian and French sectors of the Western Front. His field experience made him the obvious choice for filming the opening days of the Battle of the Somme. McDowell, on the other hand, was a member of the Topical Committee, an experienced cameraman, producer, and film company executive.⁷¹ Although he did not have any prior combat filming experience, he was exceptionally qualified. These two professionals were by no means inexperienced, but filming a major battle in 1916 was not easy, particularly for two cameramen covering approximately 20 miles of front. Malins filmed the opening of the offensive from positions near Beaumont Hamel in the northern part of the battlefield while McDowell was based further south, near Fricourt (see Figure 2-1 Position of British Kinemaphotographers). As previously discussed, the capabilities of the cameras, lenses, and film stock of the time made it difficult to film in poor light or over great distances. The British used three different cameras to film *Battle of the Somme*: the Debrie, the Aeroscope, and the Moy. The Moy was the largest and most cumbersome. It was commonly used in Britain before the war and had to be used in a fixed position, mounted on a bulky tripod, making it an uncomfortably large target for snipers.⁷² The Debrie and the Aeroscope were much smaller, the Aeroscope being the more advanced of the two, weighing less than 10 kilos, including a crank propelled by a compressed air motor that allowed for hands-free filming and a built-in gyroscope that ensured automatic horizontal stability.⁷³ It was almost certainly the disappointing nature of the attack footage actually taken on July 1 that led to the inclusion of a controversial staged “over the top” scene in the final version of the film.⁷⁴ Between June 26 and July 7-9 (there is some disparity in the final date of filming), they

71 The British Topical Committee on War Films or Topical Committee was a group of newsreel producers who organized themselves and gained permission from the War Office to film at the front during World War I; included, Gaumont, B&C, Topical, Jury's, Éclair, Kineto, and Barker. They were essential the beginning of the British film industry.

72 Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda*, 99.

73 Ibid, 99.

74 Encyclopedia Britannica “The First Battle of the Somme,” 6.

the Somme footage. He is credited with single-handedly convincing the Topical Committee to issue the material as a single 5,000-foot feature film rather than in smaller newsreels.⁷⁶ The film's style is no doubt a reflection of his "impassioned advocacy" of film-of-fact as an "educative force."⁷⁷ *Battle of the Somme* is remarkably "accurate" for a piece of propaganda. Reeves, specifically, describe the film's titles, as "factual" and "restrained," following the tradition of commercial film titling. They are a relatively sparse commentary on the attack and its consequences, presenting horrific images in a cool and dispassionate way.⁷⁸

According to Nicholas Hiley, the Imperial War Museum print suggests that although both cameramen shot approximately the same amount of footage, the final version of the film included "only 25 percent of the material McDowell took but a massive 82 percent of the footage shot by Malins."⁷⁹ Significant difference in the percentage of footage could easily be explained by the cameraman's location, had Malins been closet to the majority of the action in the North. However, significant fighting and progress was made closer to McDowell's location to the South, which leaves his timing or technique a matter of consideration. Reeves argues that Urban selected shots based on merit, suggesting that Malins obtained the majority of the desired shots whether by luck or superior capabilities. Urban's choice in footage supports Sorlin's assertion that "pictures of the period are thus primarily evidence not of how soldiers behaved but of what filmmakers were able to shoot [and synthesize]."⁸⁰ As mentioned previously, cameramen and film editors were limited by the capabilities of their equipment and untested techniques. Urban could only use the footage available and he only used the images he thought would relay the desired message. Official films combined filmmakers' storytelling, marketing, and audience interpretation.

76 Ibid., 284.

77 Luke McKernan, "Propaganda, Patriotism, and Profit: Charles Urban and British Official War Films in America during the First World War," *Film History* (Indiana University Press) 14, no. 3/4 (2002), 370.

78 Reeves, "Film Propaganda and it's Audience," 468-9.

79 Fraser, et al., *Ghosts on the Somme*, 284.

80 Sorlin, "Cinema and the Memory," 7.

The film was hastily edited and by August 2 1916 it was shown to Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and a limited trade showing was scheduled for August 7. Impressions were said to be favorable from the start. The Prime Minister said, "we can never remember in all our long experience, to have seen any picture which, for the power of appeal and intense gripping interest, come with measurable distance of this wonderful cinematographic record."⁸¹ Lloyd George even wrote a letter to accompany the first screening of *Battle of the Somme* in London on August 21 that was recited prior to the showing of the film. This was a film created and distributed in secret by a government-commissioned propaganda organization and endorsed by the highest government officials and trade papers.

Objectives of the Film

Official propaganda during the First World War fell into three distinct categories: that which was directed at the enemy, at domestic audiences, and at neutral audiences. *Battle of the Somme* happened to be directed at both domestic and neutral audiences, although the primary objective of film propaganda in 1916 was to manipulate public opinion overseas. Within a month of the war's start, British administrators recognized a need for film propaganda to sway neutral opinion and counter German propaganda, which had met with overwhelming success in Germany and among significant German populations in neutral countries. Even Malins understood the impact film could have on domestic and foreign audiences, writing, "over my head all the time...hung the thought of British public opinion, and the opinion of neutral countries. They would accept nothing unless there was great excitement in it; unless the picture contained such "thrills" as they had never seen before, and had never dreamed possible."⁸²

America in particular was a coveted battleground for wartime propaganda. In 1915, American business interests were supplying the loans for Britain to purchase military supplies, and screening *Battle of the Somme* in the States was meant to keep the "needs and sacrifices

81 Reeves, "Film Propaganda and Its Audience," 485.

82 Geoffrey Malins, *How I Filmed the War: A Record of the Extraordinary Experiences of the Man Who Filmed the Great Somme Battles, etc.*, 1st Edition (London: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1917), 87.

of the Allies” in the mind of American financiers in addition to countering the influence of German propaganda in the United States.⁸³ A significant percentage of the American population (eight million of America’s total 105 million in 1914) was German-born, making America neutrality somewhat precarious.⁸⁴ Both the Germans and the British were looking for explicit American support for the war. Since the previous feature length war film, *Britain Prepared*, met with very little success in America, it was critical for *Battle of the Somme* to be successful, if not in winning American military support, then at least by maintaining the same level of financial support for the Allies.

At home, those who were not mobilized also desired a means of “seeing” what their loved ones on the front were experiencing, understanding it, and participating in it. “Reports of the battle primed audiences’ interest, and this, along with the unrelenting advertisements, made *Battle of the Somme* the greatest craze in British cinema history.”⁸⁵ Historically, the majority of propaganda films have failed to gain popularity and access to the mass audiences for whom they were created, but not so for *Battle of the Somme*. By October 1916 it had been booked in over two thousand cinemas nationwide, and it is estimated that more than half the population of the British Isles saw the film by years end.⁸⁶ The domestic “success” of the film was a result of aggressive marketing to a population interested in learning more about the war, particularly the mass casualties suffered at the Battle of the Somme. British audiences served an important role as test subjects for the receptions of the film prior to distributing it to neutral countries. Before marketing the film overseas, Wellington House officials wanted to gauge its effect on audiences to ensure it generated the desired response. While cinema itself was a popular form of mass entertainment before the First World War, propagandists generally found it extraordinarily

83 McKernan, “Propaganda, Patriotism, and Profit,” 369.

84 Ibid.

85 Martin Gilbert, *The Battle of the Somme: The Heroism and Horror of War* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006), 149.

86 The cinema figure is from Reeves, “Film Propaganda and its Audience,” 473. The population figure is from Fraser, et al., *Ghosts on the Somme*, 13.

difficult to exploit that popularity for their own ends, which is why *Battle of the Somme* was a huge initial success and is unique in the realm of official films.⁸⁷

The film was also meant to display the wealth and power of the British Empire. Although not originally intended to do so, it was shown in eighteen Allied countries to smooth over fears of defeat and restless unease as the Royal Army struggled to advance in the actual battle.⁸⁸ It also reassured allied nations of the military might and resources available to the British. According to Reeves, "no less than 17.6 percent" of *Battle of the Somme* concentrated on Allied artillery in action, making it the most common subject of the film by far.⁸⁹ In addition to America, Russia was also a target of British official films. Because Russia had between eight hundred and a thousand cinemas, film was clearly the best way to reach a majority of the population.⁹⁰ Alfred Claude Bromhead, managing director of Gaumont in Britain, was sent to Russia to facilitate the screening of the film. In 1916, the imperial family and service audiences on various Russian fronts saw the film. It was so well received that plans were developed for 10 mobile film units to return to Russia the following year.⁹¹

Domestic Audiences

By 1916, there were approximately 4,500 cinemas in Britain with a large enough seating capacity to allow every member of the population to visit the cinema each fortnight (14 days).⁹² The film had been significantly built up through the efforts of Wellington House and the Prime Minister. It was a highly anticipated film and people waited in line all day to book tickets; thousands were turned away from the door at the film's release in London, and audiences were said to have watched *Battle of the Somme* with silent, almost religious attention.⁹³ The film broke numerous box office records with some 1 million Londoners seeing the film and

87 Reeves, "Official British Film Propaganda," 27.

88 Williams, *Media, Memory, and the First World War*, 113.

89 Reeves, "Film Propaganda and its Audience," 468.

90 *Ibid.*, 471-2.

91 Reeves, "British Film Propaganda," 44.

92 Reeves, "Film Propaganda and its Audience," 471.

93 See Williams, *Media, Memory, and the First World War*, 113 for opening day conditions and Reeves, "British Film Propaganda," 36 for description of audience.

approximately 20 million additional tickets being sold in British cinemas within the first six weeks.⁹⁴ *Battle of the Somme* was the most widely distributed and watched film between 1914 and 1918. No doubt advertisements emphasized the fact that the film was the first opportunity for cameramen to film from the trenches. The film was a great success because it gave audiences what they demanded, that is, their first authentic images of the horrors of modern war. Reeves wrote that, “the pain and trauma of the fighting can be seen all too clearly on the faces of the soldiers returning from the front lines, who invariably fail to respond to the camera, too exhausted or too distraught to care.”⁹⁵

Britons were shocked and moved by what they saw. In a letter to *The Times*, an individual wrote “I never understood their [soldiers’] sacrifices until I had seen this film. I came away feeling humiliated and ashamed, for at last I was able to realize what Britain’s soldiers were doing for her.”⁹⁶ Another individual wrote to *The Times* in response to seeing the film, “The tears in many people’s eyes and the silence that prevailed when I saw the film showed that every heart was full of love and sympathy for our soldiers, and I believe that no better means could be found of making English men and women determined to stop the repetition of such a war as the present one.”⁹⁷ Although wartime public opinion had lost some of its initial fervor by the time the film was released, it remained broadly supportive in grim resolve to “persevere—even unto the end.”⁹⁸ Propagandists assumed, correctly, that in such an environment their first films would be well received. The film provided justification for perseverance by showing audiences the human price that had already been paid, and reinforced audiences’ determination to support their military by all means available.

94 Ibid, 32. See also “Somme Battle Films: A Father writes to the Times,” *Swindon Advertiser & North Wilts Chronicle*, August 25, 1916 and “Demand for Somme Battle Films,” *Aberdeen Journal*, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, August 30, 1916.

95 Ibid., 35-36.

96 Reeves, “Film Propaganda and its Audience,” 485.

97 Ibid., 485.

98 Reeves, “British Film Propaganda,” 34.

In the summer of 1916 Walter Page, the American ambassador in London, noted that, “war has come to be the normal state of life.”⁹⁹ Despite the fact that between the defeat of Prince Charles in 1745 and 1914, Britain was almost constantly at war, only 1 percent of the population of Britain had been in the Royal Army and only a small portion of that percentage had actually experienced battle.¹⁰⁰ The rest of Britain was blissfully unaware of the violence and hardships of war, experiencing it secondhand through the accounts of returning soldiers or books, magazines, drawings, and paintings. The average Britain had an unrealistically romantic notion of combat. Sorlin describes it as, “unreal, childish, terrifying and archaic.”¹⁰¹ The Battle of the Somme was Britain’s first experience in the Great War of the contrast between the popular notion of conflict and the actual hardship. Millions of men fought in a relatively limited space without directly affecting a majority of the local population. British soldiers returning from the front became increasingly bitter about those at home who did not seem to care about or understand what they had suffered.

On that note, *Battle of the Somme* was also screened for British soldiers in French rest areas, and their response to the film was very different from that of their civilian counterparts. However, one has to take into consideration the environment in which they viewed the film. Many soldiers also had real experience in the trenches depicted onscreen. The theory behind screening the film in rest areas was—according to Martin Gilbert—to “provide new recruits with some idea of what they were about to face.”¹⁰² Clearly, military leaders valued the film as an accurate imitation of war and appreciated the power of film, enough so to use *Battle of the Somme* as a training tool. Even if new recruits found the film useful, veterans did not appreciate the film’s portrayal of war and feared recruits would get the wrong impression about battle from watching the film. Their main complaint—as it was a silent film—had been that it failed to capture the sounds of battle. No doubt the lack of smell also played a key role in the veterans’

99 Fraser, et al., *Ghosts on the Somme*, 120.

100 Sorlin, "Cinema and the Memory," 5.

101 Ibid., 6.

102 Gilbert, *The Battle of the Somme*, 150.

skepticism. Without the sounds and smells of the war zone, the film was merely a shadow of the war that was raging in France. British soldiers were disappointed in *Battle of the Somme*, because it fell short of the experiences of combat.

Despite the generally positive reception of the film in Britain, there were also those individuals who had a negative response to the film. In August and September of 1916, several letters were printed in the *Manchester Guardian* and *The Times* revealing some negative reception of the “gruesome” and unbearable images presented in *Battle of the Somme*. J. A. Farrar wrote to the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, “It is as much an insult to the army as it is to the nation to suggest that either the heroism of the one or the patriotism of the other can needs to be whipped up by spectacles of this sort. All these pretenses are cant of the first water. It had no more connection with genuine patriotism than it has with quadratic equations.” The Dean of Durham also wrote *The Times* attacking the film as “an entertainment, which wounds the heart and violates the very sanctities of bereavement.”¹⁰³ Both of these letters were highly criticized, and the film was hotly debated in the trade papers.

Still, the film achieved several objectives in Britain. It reinforced and strengthened existing attitudes toward the war, specifically that the war was a necessity and that the population had to resolutely endure to achieve a victory over evil. Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker suggest that the shift in popular opinion started in the second half of 1916, after the slaughter of Verdun, the Somme, and the Brusilov Offensive—not necessarily that it shifted in response to *Battle of the Somme*—and that it was not the validity of the war that was brought into question, but the expectation and hopes, particularly of those on the home front.¹⁰⁴ In bringing the cost of modern warfare to the public’s attention, the film also gave audiences a visual memory to nourish the seed of reprisal that led to the War Guilt Clause of the Treaty of Versailles, which impoverished and embittered Germans to the point of launching a second world war.

103 Reeves, "Film Propaganda and Its Audience," 484.

104 Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, *14-18*, 105.

The film also played an important personal role in the grieving process of those who struggled to come to terms with the death of a loved one. The Imperial War Museum website states that “for many in Britain, the resulting 1916 Battle [of the Somme] remains the most painful and best-remembered episode of the First World War.” A letter to *The Times* written by the father of a fallen soldier, appearing in the *Hull Daily Mail* on September 2, 1916 illustrates the connection relatives made to loved ones through the film:

A father writes to the “Times”¹⁰⁵—I have lost a son in battle, and I have seen the Somme film twice. I am going to see it again. I want to know what was the life, the life-in-death, that our dear ones endured, and to be with them again in their great adventure. I am proud to think of their high-hearted contempt of fear, and to share the worst that they shared is so far as I can. It is a great and energizing spectacle. I do not doubt the right feeling, nor is my self-respect diminished.¹⁰⁵

The film essentially made the event more real and therefore enabled viewers to conceptualize their relative’s death and heal. Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George’s secretary and mistress who lost her brother Paul in the Battle of the Somme, had the following to say about the cinematic representation of the battle:

It reminded me of what Paul’s last hours were. I have often tried to imagine to myself what he went through, but now I know and I shall never forget. It was like going through a tragedy. I felt like something of what the Greeks must have felt when they went in their crowds to witness those grand old plays—to be purged in their minds through pity and terror.¹⁰⁶

In response to the Dean of Durham’s letter to the editor of *The Times* condemning the film, others who lost near relatives responded with positive letters about the film. One individual wrote, “If the Dean had lost what I lost, he would know that his objections are squeamish and sentimental.”¹⁰⁷ The film had a cathartic effect on viewers whom lost loved ones in the battle. After the loss of 908,371 lives, the screening of the full-length film became an expression of collective mourning. James Douglas wrote in *The Star*:

Is it right to let us see men dying? Yes. Is it sacrilege? No. If our spirit be purged of curiosity and purified with awe the sight is hallowed. There is no

105 *Hull Daily Mail*, “The Somme Films,” September 2, 1916.

106 Williams, *Media, Memory, and the First World War*, 13.

107 Reeves, “Film Propaganda and Its Audience,” 485.

sacrilege if we are fit for the seeing. And I think the seeing ennobled and exalted us. There was a religious reverence in the silence closing over the sobs...I say it is regenerative and resurrective for us to see war stripped bare...We grow indifferent too quickly...These are dreadful sights but their dreadfulness...shakes the kaleidoscope of war into human reality. Now I know why soldiers are nobler than civilians in their tenderness and charity...I say that these pictures are good for us.¹⁰⁸

Despite the discrepancies between British soldiers and civilians, the film enjoyed positive reviews in the trade papers. *Kine Weekly* described the film as “the most wonderful battle picture that has ever been taken,” while the *Evening News* described it as “The Greatest Picture in the World,” comparing it favorably to D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915). The Manchester Guardian described the film as “the real thing at last” and *The Cinema* reiterated the point in saying that the film contained “no make-believe,” calling it the “real thing” and describing it as “war, rich with death.”¹⁰⁹ The film was quickly duplicated and entrusted to British diplomats for immediate distribution in the United States, France, Russia, and Italy. It continued to circulate among allied and neutral nations until the end of the war.

Foreign Audiences

Charles Urban was the British representative to America for British official films. Wellington House predicted that his American ancestry and experience in film would grant him access to American film markets. According to Luke McKernan, the desire to influence neutral audiences, most particularly the United States, became the object of greatest interest to British propagandists, and it was in this area that film was first made use of.¹¹⁰ In 1915, the United States had nearly four times the number of cinemas Britain had for a population just over twice as large.¹¹¹ Americans were enthralled with this new form of entertainment and—just as in Russia—film was the most efficient way to reach the masses.

108 Ibid., 485. The number of casualties comes from Hart, *The Darkest Hour*, 528 and is the total dead in the entire course of the war.

109 All periodical reviews in this paragraph are from Reeves, “Film and Propaganda and its Audience,” 480-481.

110 McKernan, “Propaganda, Patriotism and Profit,” 369.

111 Reeves, “Film Propaganda and its Audience,” 471.

Nonetheless, influencing Americans through the media of film proved challenging. In the year prior to the release of *Battle of the Somme*, American audiences had been bombarded with topical films limited to pre-war and battle preparation, which resulted in a huge backlash against films claiming to depict the war. One exhibitor explained, "If it [*Britain Prepared*] showed troopers being blown to pieces, it would go alright."¹¹² Like British audiences, Americans demanded authentic footage from the war zone. Unfortunately, when they finally received the *Battle of the Somme*, it did not have the desired effect.

To start, the film failed to completely dehumanize the German enemy, which inadvertently contributed to the anti-war sentiments. As previously mentioned, a significant percentage of the American population was of German descent, and the failure to distinguish Germans as the enemy left audiences with an overwhelming sense of the common experiences of the war, which made it difficult to rally forces against the Germans and justify the human costs of the war. The common struggle of men engaged in bitter and bloody war was a theme that recurred throughout the film. This unintentional element that actually restricted propagandists' efforts to sway neutral nations was a result of the traditionally dispassionate, factual reporting that characterized British official film propaganda from the beginning. American audiences came away from the film believing that the war was a "total" waste and reaffirmed their desires to abstain from fighting. As a result, Americans complained about the horrors of the Somme films. The official in charge of British propaganda in the United States wrote that the letters of complaint against the film were preventing recruiting and putting people against the war, to the point that it required a consultation with the French, after which they called in the film and subjected it to strong censorship.¹¹³ Once again, despite propagandists' best efforts, the film only intensified existing attitudes.

Even though *Battle of the Somme* was the most successful British official film, it enjoyed mixed reception overseas. Wartime propagandists may have embraced the new media

112 *ibid.*, 371.

113 Reeves, "Film Propaganda and its Audience," 486.

of film because they believed it spoke a “universal language,” but they underestimated the profoundly different ways in which different audiences could receive a particular film.¹¹⁴ If anything, *Battle of the Somme* demonstrated how the construction of meaning in film was—and remains—an interactive process in which the audience plays an integral role. For example, when the film was screened in Hague, Red Cross slides urging support for the anti-war league were interpolated at appropriate points.¹¹⁵ In this instance, the images of mass suffering were used to promote anti-war sentiment, the exact opposite of its original intent.

Images from *Battle of the Somme* were shocking and brutal to say the least, but initial British audiences seemed to accept them with little objection. Perhaps it was because they were unable to fully process and appreciate the scale of the destruction they were witnessing, or because they were comforted by the fact that the film had demystified the war. Either way, what little evidence there is of audience attitudes suggests that after *Battle of the Somme* was released, the audience became less and less interested in official films. Most likely the desire to see official footage died out after the initial need was met. Reeves argues that the constant repetition of the film rendered the images ordinary and commonplace, suggesting that familiarity bred a new lack of interest and in some instances contempt.¹¹⁶ Yet the change in attitude cannot be attributed solely to overstimulation. There were also significant changes occurring in attitudes towards the war overall. While the early years were characterized by patriotic fervor and enthusiasm, the second half of the war was characterized by weariness, disillusionment, and disenchantment. The duration of the war and economic hardship were just as significant in influencing attitudes, as was the film.

Conclusion

Although *Battle of the Somme* achieved much, official films as a whole in Britain were relatively unsuccessful. As previously mentioned, feature length films were a brief phenomenon,

114 Reeves, “Official British Film Propaganda,” 7.

115 Reeves, “Film Propaganda and its Audience,” 486.

116 Ibid., 483.

and British methods failed to evolve even after audience interest in official films declined. British elite attitudes also prevented propagandists from fully exploiting the medium of film. Social stigmas associated with cinema presented numerous obstacles and effectively hamstrung their efforts. Britons did not show interest in producing films before the war and resisted using film for propaganda during the war, which in itself retarded the development of film growth. They also made a mistake in following traditionally objective methods of presenting footage. Had the Britons successfully distinguished German prisoners-of-war from British soldiers and demonized them (as they were in print propaganda), the film might have had a greater impact on more audiences. In essence, the cameramen and the editor were under the archaic impression that the war was good against evil and that if they presented the battle objectively that struggle would be painfully obvious. They were working under the assumptions of an outdated ideology, which they failed to recognize over the course of the First World War. The filming and editing techniques that made audiences feel like they were part of the film were also under development and the government takeover of official films in 1917, prevented British filmmakers from doing so. These are just some of the reasons British film propaganda during the First World War fell short.

Without the First World War the cinema might have been reduced to a strictly working-class phenomenon in Britain and film production would have been retarded as it was in Russia and Italy during the war. British film propaganda helped maintain the awareness of film and the desire for it until the end of the war when proponents of the Co-Operation Movement took over in the 1920s. Throughout the course of the war the British film industry was also professionalized, establishing itself as a legitimate form of both art and communication. Although moving pictures were in existence approximately two decades before the conflict, the war gave film the chance to flourish and gain social, political, and military importance. Throughout the course of the war, *Battle of the Somme* informed and enlightened viewers by demystifying the war. It showed audiences not only the human costs and the devastation of total war, but also how that suffering

was universal to all of the war's participants. *Battle of the Somme* is also one of the earliest cinematic artifacts of globalization, making blatant the international effects of a single battle. Finally, although there is insufficient evidence to support the assumption that *Battle of the Somme* directly contributed to domestic and foreign audiences' changes in attitude towards the war, it is safe to assume that British official propaganda films strengthened and reinforced existing attitudes about the war, whatever they may have been. The mixed reception *Battle of the Somme* received indicates the extent to which content in propaganda had to be manipulated and controlled to produce the desired effect. Film propaganda emerged from the First World War as a crucial factor in ideological struggles.

Chapter 3

The German *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme*

(*With Our Heroes on the Somme*)

Despite the criticism it received, *Battle of the Somme* was a hugely successful propaganda film and thus a powerful influence on the development of the cinema industry and film propaganda—not only in Britain, but also in mainland Europe. In response to *Battle of the Somme*, both Germany and France created their own films depicting combat on the Somme. *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme* (*With Our Heroes on the Somme*) was produced by the newly founded German *Bild und Film Amt* (Photography and Film Office) or BuFA in January 1917, and *L'offensive française sur la Somme, Juillet 1916* (*The French Offensive on the Somme, July 1916*) was produced by *la Section cinématographique de l'armée* (The Film Branch of the Army) at the behest of the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Fine Arts in August 1916.

Bei unseren Helden an der Somme was BuFA's first attempt at a feature length propaganda film and was largely unsuccessful—in comparison to the British film—as both propaganda and a documentary portrayal of the battle. The film's lack of success was due in part to the increasing militarization of Germany and the strict censorship enforced by the War Ministry, which resulted in the absence of combat footage. Rather than sending cameramen to the front when audiences demanded this footage, the Germans created it using a combination of scenes staged in training areas and footage from previous conflicts. Any “authentic” footage was restricted to activities that took place far from the front: parades, supply trains, etc. However, before discussing the production or merit of the film, it is necessary to discuss how Germans viewed film in general, how the German cinema developed, and the effect of the war on the German film industry.

Pre-War Germany

By 1914, Germany was a relatively young nation compared to the other belligerents of the war. It was also Europe's foremost industrial power. In the production of steel, chemicals, and electrical engineering, Germany was rivaled only by the United States.¹¹⁷ In *Imperial Germany and the Great War 1914-1918*, Roger Chickering argues that German society was transformed within a generation.¹¹⁸ United under the leadership of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1871, the nation was transformed from an agrarian state with a small industrial basis to an industrial nation with a strong agrarian sector in a single lifetime. Germany had proven itself as an industrial and economic power through its establishment of "mammoth firms" like Krupp (steel and weaponry), Siemens (electronics), and Bayer (chemicals); its growth of gross national product; and its pioneering of "the new industrial technologies."¹¹⁹ The rapid growth of Germany's economy and industry threatened the balance of power in Europe. One bleak British analysis in 1909 read, "the ultimate aims of Germany surely are, without a doubt, to obtain the preponderance on the continent of Europe and to end on a contest with us for maritime supremacy."¹²⁰ The extensive growth of the German population and its migration to large cities also increased the size of the German middle-class, which increased internal competition and shaped the social and political rifts within the Reich. These rifts would ultimately lead to a German Revolution in November of 1918, a new republican government, and a new constitution. However, in the 1910s, German officials believed it was imperative to display the nation's might to its full potential while the country's population was in the midst of establishing a united national identity. The First World War would unintentionally achieve both of these goals

117 Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 1.

118 Ibid.

119 Ibid, 1. The "new industrial technologies refers to the developments of the Second Industrial Revolution which revolved around steel, railroads, electricity, and chemicals. Examples include the internal combustion engine, newly discovered alloys and chemicals, the telegraph, telephone, and radio.

120 *Letter from A. Nicholas to Edward Grey, St Petersburg, 24 March 1909*, Vol. 5, in *British Documents on the Origins of War*, ed. G. P. Hooch and Harold Temperley (London, 1926-38), 737.

to a degree. The collective memory of hardships endured during the interwar period and national pride in military and industry became the mean of uniting Germans for the Second World War. Furthermore, the industrialization of warfare would test the limitations of the economic and industrial capacity of Germany.

Between 1871 and 1910, Germany's population exploded by nearly 60 percent and the number of Germans whose primary occupations were in industry doubled.¹²¹ In 1913, industrial workers outnumbered farmers, effectively urbanizing the population. Germany became a model for social insurance, public education, and military reform. Chickering also writes that the German army was the "mightiest in the world" with its soldiers enjoying "enormous influence and respect in society" as a result of the country's "battlefield" legacy.¹²² This legacy had a profound and lasting impact on German society and politics, making the military an integral part of the national structure:

The authoritarian features of the German constitution were designed in the first instance to isolate the army from civilian control. The views of the generals figured significantly in councils of state, while deference to martial virtues permeated institutions of civil society....German nationalism, the civic religion of the new state, reflected the centrality of military values, as well as an aggressive confidence in Germany's growing industrial power and the conviction that German influence in the world ought to correspond to the country's economic might.¹²³

It is clear that at the start of the war, the German ruling elite had elevated military values and ethos to the highest level of importance; however, it is equally important to note that the elevated position of the military eroded significantly by 1916. Looking back on pre-war Germany from the interwar period, many scholars described its society as a population unabashedly obsessed with the army and its colorful display.¹²⁴ In 1919, Walter Rathenau, German industrialist, politician, writer, and statesman, wrote that pre-war German society was a "militarily-drilled mass" that sought "to display their acquired military arts in grand public

121 Ibid, 1.

122 Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 2.

123 Ibid, 2.

124 Jakob Vogel, "Military, Folklore, Eigensinn: Folkloric Militarism in Germany and France, 1871-1914," *Central European History* (Cambridge University Press) 33, no. 4 (2000), 488.

spectacles.”¹²⁵ Although his words seem exaggerated, Rathenau’s observation of public celebration of the military was not entirely inaccurate. According to Vogel, the pre-WWI period was characterized by the celebration of a large standing army in both Germany and France. There was a noticeable increase in the physical and visual presentation of the military in daily life; pictures depicting scenes from everyday military life, toy soldiers, military literature, and “regular annual public military celebrations” became commonplace.¹²⁶ The emergence of these “Kaiser parades” signified the interplay between the “state’s cult of the military” and the public that characterized German society in 1914.¹²⁷

Eighteenth-century Prussian feudalism had a significant impact on twentieth-century German militarism. According to historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler, the feudal landowner fulfilled the role of military commander thus “inextricably” binding the structure of the army with the land-owning aristocracy authority.¹²⁸ The aristocracy continued to fill the ranks of the officer corps, thus preserving their extensive power and authority through the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. There are many arguments with regards to the foundation of Germany’s militarism, including a program of systematic indoctrination and propaganda as an attempt “from the top down” to stamp society with military values and attitudes; a “systemic saturation with the military spirit of the entire public and private life of the nation”; and as a “bottom up” formation of an autonomous popular military culture.¹²⁹ Whatever the argument, it is clear that the population held the military in high regard, which allowed the Commanding Generals to consolidate power over the German public and institute strict censorship. As a result, military leaders were able to control how the war was presented to the public.

¹²⁵ Walter Rathenau, *Der Kaiser: Eine Betrachtung*, trans. Omer Salidzik (Berlin: G. Fischer Verlag, 1919), 42.

¹²⁶ Vogel, “Military Folklore,” 491.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire 1871-1918*, trans by Kim Traynor (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, Limited, 1993), 156.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 487-88.

The “spirit of 1914” governed the context of the war and captured the essence of Germany’s international position and unique ideology.¹³⁰ For Germans, it was the classic “good versus evil” scenario. The “western civilizations” were attempting to destroy German *Kultur*, which required a fight and sacrifice on the part of every German.¹³¹ In 1914, the majority of the urban German population was enthusiastic about the war and felt a great deal of pride and patriotism with regards to mobilization. In the opening days of the war, when the “spirit of 1914” was at its peak, huge crowds of Germans gathered in the streets. Chickering writes, “...in many places, the mood became euphoric [due] to the accompaniment of military and civilian bands, the singing of patriotic songs, the waving of flags, and the spontaneous processions, through the centers of cities, particularly in university towns, where students provided the lead.”¹³² In such a light, the relationship between the war and German intellectuals is made apparent. War propaganda may have been driven by the German military, but German intellectuals brought it to fruition.

Writers, philosophers, playwrights, journalists, poets, actors, and directors all used their talents in support of the war effort. More than a million poems were composed in August 1914 alone. A number that Kaes declares “testifies to the unprecedented affective investment of the cultural class in the nation’s cause.”¹³³ The war took on the air of a public festival and was celebrated in every corner. War was still a romantic notion; all Germans could rally behind it as a single, united people. This is precisely how the war was presented to the public: as an act to defend a united Germany. When announcing the declaration of war on Russia in 1914, the Kaiser himself announced that he recognized only Germans, stating, “I no longer recognize any

130 The “Spirit of 1914” refers to the alleged jubilation in Germany at the outbreak of the war. Euphoria erupted in August 1914 after all the political parties supported the war in a unanimous vote. Many Germans, particularly those in the middle class, believed Germany had ended its decades of bitter domestic political conflict.

¹³¹ The interpretation of the First World War as a means of defending the German *Kultur* from Western *Zivilization* began to surface in 1916. The argument was essentially established after the fact and was is most often associated with post-war analysis and war psychosis.

132 Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 13.

133 Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 18.

parties or any demonstrations today. We are all German brothers and only German brothers.”¹³⁴

The war served temporarily as a solution to the social factionalism that characterized early twentieth-century Germany.

Under these conditions, military leaders were able to convince the German public that they were attacking France and Russia under the pretext of defending the Fatherland. The announcement of the Austrian ultimatum on July 24 had practically electrified public discourse in Germany. In towns throughout the land, newspapers frantically worked to meet the public's demands for information on the latest developments. Germans gathered at newsstands, the windows of the buildings where newspapers were published, public houses, and kiosks, in order to “learn of the most recent announcements” and to “embellish the bulletins with all manners of rumors.”¹³⁵ The written word was the fastest and most efficient means of communicating the progress of the war to a highly literate Germany.

Writers and intellectuals also set about presenting the war as the battle of classical German *Kultur* against the threat of modern Anglo-French-American *Zivilisation*.¹³⁶ An important component of this battle was anti-English sentiments that stemmed from colonial and naval rivalry. As revealed by the semi-official *Kölnische Zeitung* on 7 August, “Everyone can see what is at stake: the most powerful conspiracy in the history of the world.”¹³⁷ This belief was a driving component of the military crusade to defend the Fatherland against what Germans considered to be a hostile coalition of European nations. The writers and intellectuals that documented the course of the war for many Germans also considered cinema to be one of the decadent features of *Zivilisation*. Therefore, the cinema was viewed as an unnecessary evil. The majority of German propaganda efforts focused on print medium. Although cinema had the capacity to communicate the latest war developments to an even larger audience and with greater impact,

134 Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 17.

135 Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 13.

136 Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 17.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Chickering, *Imperial Germany*, 46.

the German elites insisted on marginalizing its use in favor of publications. In print, German elites used the nationalist ideology to support the decision to go to war.

The German Film Industry Prior to the War

As a result of the influx and popularity of foreign films, the German film industry was poorly organized prior to the First World War. Companies produced few films, which did not receive wide distribution abroad and imported films dominated the domestic market. Although Germany had cinemas and a handful of production companies, they depended on other European countries and America for the majority of the films they screened. They did not possess the fleet of major film production companies or the vast distribution network that characterized the French—and later on the American—industry. As Frank Kessler and Sabine Lenk point out, France played a leading role in international film: “Starting with the cinema’s earliest years, and continuing well into the teens, Germany’s western neighbor dominated the international market in all relevant fields: film production, distribution, as well as exhibition.”¹³⁸ Kessler and Lenk go on to say that as late as 1914, Germany companies such as Messter, PAGU and Vitascope were “unable to satisfy the demand from German cinemas out of their own production”, therefore, representatives from French firms in Germany took an active role in various trade organizations and “represented the interests of the German film industry.”¹³⁹ Despite the dominance of French firms in Germany, the United States and Britain together produced the majority of Germany’s imported films—although they did not take an active role in German trade organization—in the years leading up to the war. By the spring of 1917, however, American, Italian, French, and British films were prohibited in Germany.

Germany’s dependence on foreign films prevented the German film industry from developing; German films lacked a niche in the international market. The German film industry was set up in such a way that there existed only a few medium-sized companies with a number

138 Frank Kessler & Sabine Lenk, “The French Connection: Franco-German Film Relations before World War I,” in *A Second Life: German Cinema’s First Decades*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), 62.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 64 & 66.

of small independent production organizations. According to Wolfgang Mühl-Benninghaus, these small companies had to, “borrow studios, cameras, and funds from big companies.... because of the shortage of money, those new enterprises were not able to finance films by themselves.”¹⁴⁰ Most commentators considered early cinema “rough and uncouth” which brought Heinrich Fraenkel and subsequent German film historians to refer to this era of German cinema as “The Rascal Years.”¹⁴¹

The status of the German film industry was quite unstable in the early twentieth century. German bankers and investors did not view cinema as a sustainable source of revenue and were not inclined to invest in production companies. The shortage of investment capital, in combination with the association of cinema with the working class, contributed to the film industry’s lack of development. Although proven to possess quite a diverse audience, German cinemas were still portrayed as a “lowbrow form of entertainment” by the theatrical and arts journals.¹⁴² Emilie Altenloh conducted an extensive questionnaire in 1912 in Mannheim as part of her social science doctoral thesis and found that, “children, adolescents of either sex, and women made up a large percentage of the cinema-going public.”¹⁴³ Despite the diversity of the crowd, there was still one social group that did not attend the cinema: the German elite. Those individuals who avoided the cinema also condemned film as a source of corruption and a symbol of a declining culture. This group’s efforts not only emphasized traditional forms of entertainment (theater and literature) but also discouraged the growth of the German film industry.

140 Wolfgang Mühl-Benninghaus, "The German Film Credit Bank, Inc. Film Financing during the First Years of National-Socialist Rule in Germany," *Film History* (Indiana University Press) 3, no. 4 (1989), 317.

141 Martin Loiperdinger, "The Kaiser's Cinema: An Archeology of Attitudes and Audiences," in *Second Life*, ed. Elsaesser, 42. The era was referred to as the "Rascal Years," because scholars believed the cinema had no cultural or intellectual ties; it is described as an "uneducated creature" running wild among the lower strata of society.

142Thompson & Bordwell, *Film History*, 57.

143 Loiperdinger, "The Kaiser's Cinema," 43.

Crime serials, Westerns, melodramas and slapstick comedies were popular film genres in Germany. The educated middle class considered their content morally decaying, and they feared it had a negative impact on German youth and the national spirit.¹⁴⁴ In May 1912 a group of German intellectuals (playwrights, actors, directors, educators, philosophers, and religious leaders) boycotted the cinema; however, the strike was broken later that year as German film companies competed to sign the same playwrights and actors to exclusive contracts. By incorporating components of the theater, the film industry brought itself a step closer to being considered a legitimate art form that could be used for propagandistic goals.

Incorporating the artistic abilities of German playwrights and actors marked the “maturation” of German film.¹⁴⁵ Beginning in 1913, the German film industry developed the *Autorenfilm* or “author’s film”, which was akin to the French *Film d-Art*. The *Autorenfilm* were adaptations of renowned literary works or were original screenplays written by well-established authors. Although the *Autorenfilm* lent respectability to the cinema, its success was short lived. By 1914, it had given way to the star system, which would eventually be impeded by the war.¹⁴⁶ Subsequently, German film production companies focused on producing war films, which were in high demand. Film theoretician and writer Hermann Hafker asserted that the war quickly changed the taste of the masses: everything that was false or not genuine vanished when confronted with the war’s “awe-inspiring reality.”¹⁴⁷

Early Film Censorship

The most popular films in pre-war Germany were the so-called “junk films” (*Schündfilme*), which had flimsy plots with obvious sexual and violent overtones and were

144 Keas, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 20-21.

145 Loiperdinger, “The Kaiser’s Cinema,” 42.

146 The star-system was a method, used in both theater and cinema, of creating, promoting and exploiting actors in entertainment. Production companies would sign promising young actors and actresses to contracts of varying length, creating new personas for them. These stars were featured in a number of the companies’ films and glamorized.

147 Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 21.

similar to the equally popular pulp fiction pamphlets.¹⁴⁸ Film censorship was established out of concern for the damaging effects such films were perceived to have on the population. Many judicial and political figures believed “junk-films” were responsible for the growing crime rate, which had risen 20 percent since the late 1880s.¹⁴⁹ On May 5 1906, film censorship was introduced for the first time in the jurisdiction of Berlin; however, 2 years passed before the government in Berlin issued a censorship directive.¹⁵⁰ At this point, censorship was decided at a state-level and there were variations between each state’s censorship guidance. Film censorship was treated the same as the press censorship, and for the sake of “simplification” and “administrative relief,” Berlin cinema censorship eventually became the authority for the “entire governmental jurisdiction.”¹⁵¹ Henceforth, films could only be shown in public if they obtained the advanced approval of the Berlin Chief of Police who retained the power to ban films thought objectionable. Although Berlin was the central source of censored material, there were variations between different cities and governmental jurisdictions. In his article on film censorship in Düsseldorf, Lenk posits that although Düsseldorf was subject to national regulations, it nevertheless had “specific regulatory problems for which it had to find its own rules, according to local necessities.”¹⁵² Not surprisingly, such a haphazard handling of film censorship led to inconsistencies where a film could be banned in one district and shown in the next. It was not a tightly held regulation of what German audiences were seeing, which is problematic with regards to effective propaganda. The lack of standardization of censorship regulations made it difficult for the German film industry to create effective film propaganda

148 David Welch, *Germany, Propaganda, and Total War 1914-1918* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 42.

149 G. D. Stark, "Cinema, Society, and the State: Policing the Film Industry in Imperial Germany," in *Essays on Culture and Society in Modern Germany*, ed. G. D. Stark and B. K. Lachner, 122-166 (College Station, Tx: Texas A&M University Press, 1982), 133.

150 Wolfgang Mühl-Benninghaus, "German Film Censorship during World War I," *Film History* (Indiana University Press) 9, no. 1 (1997), 71.

151 Bundesarchiv, Abteilungen Postdam (Federal Archives, Postdam) (BA) Auswärtiges Amt (foreign ministry AA), no 33018 B. 27 in Rother Rainer's "Social Event," 527.

152 Sabine Lenk, "Censoring films in Dusseldorf during the First World War ," *Film History* (Indiana University Press) 22, no. 4 (December 2010), 426.

because a film could be banned from playing in one jurisdiction and shown to the public in others.

Despite the fact that cinema-owners complained that pre-censorship was expensive and time consuming, it was eventually accepted as standard. In 1911, Brunswick began centralizing the censorship procedures. The following January, the Bavarian Interior Ministry set up a central Board of Film Censors in Munich to examine every film shown in Bavaria.¹⁵³ In July, the Prussian Ministry of the Interior issued two decrees that eventually led to the establishment of a film censorship office. Films were automatically censored immediately after their production and, if approved, granted a certificate, which was valid throughout Prussia. The censors had the authority to remove “offensive scenes” or to “restrict screenings of a particular film to adult audiences if it was deemed inappropriate for children’s matinees.”¹⁵⁴ The Berlin film sensors were mostly concerned with material likely to undermine moral standards or endanger public order. Once certified by the Berlin sensors, the film was unlikely to be rejected by other states. In 1914, the government tried to introduce a blanket film censorship law (*Reichslichtspielgesetz*) that would apply to the whole country and regulate the number of cinemas in each district and establish the legal code regulating trading standards.¹⁵⁵ However, the bill lapsed in face of the war and would not be resubmitted until 1917, by which time war-weary and politically divided Germans did not approve it. Nevertheless, German cinemas were the most tightly regulated in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century, which would facilitate the mobilization of the medium for propaganda purposes during the war.

Pre-War Attempts at Film Propaganda

Of all the belligerents, Germany was the only power to pay considerable attention to propaganda before 1914. For some years, Imperial Germany had been attempting to influence popular and official opinion in foreign countries; therefore, they had a distinct initial advantage

153 Welch, *Germany, Propaganda, and Total War*, 43.

154 Ibid.

155 Ibid, 44.

over the propaganda of Allied governments at the start of the war. David Welch points out, “Germany had been developing a semi-official propaganda network through her embassies, legations, consular offices and branches of German banks and shipping companies...”¹⁵⁶

There were also films commissioned by militia style and military interest groups to promote nationalist sentiment and militarist propaganda. The group of organizations, collectively known as “*Vaterländische Verbände*,” (‘Association of Patriots’) seized on the new medium of film as a means of advertising their aims and generating revenue.¹⁵⁷ The German Navy League was the group forerunner in systematic film propaganda. It began in 1900 with a fairground exhibition: an actual German battleship that could be “entered and viewed by thousands who never before had seen such a big ship.”¹⁵⁸ A few months later they tried to repeat this process, but there were no ship available, so the League relied on film to present the battleship. Gustav Williger, General Manager of the *Kattowitzer AG* (German Mining and Steel Company) organized a series of film shows supported by the *Deutsche Mutoskop-und Biograph-Gesellschaft* (German Mutoscope and Biography Company). The public response to these screenings, according to Martin Loiperdinger, was overwhelming: “From March 3rd to 12th, 1891, audiences of some 24,000 attended 19 Biography performances and were enthusiastic about the maneuvers of the German navy seen on screen.”¹⁵⁹ Film also added a dimension of realism by allowing thousands to observe the capabilities of various weapons systems on the battleship. The films worked not only in the technical sense of replicating actions of the navy but also in a political sense, by making the screenings mass manifestations of popular support for the navy rearmament program.¹⁶⁰

The Navy League films were overwhelmingly successful. According to the League’s annual report of 1903, the cinematograph was credited with turning the Navy League into a

156 Welch, *Germany, Propaganda, and Total War*, 22.

157 Loiperdinger, “The Kaiser’s Cinema,” 45.

158 *ibid*, 46.

159 Loiperdinger, “The Kaiser’s Cinema,” 46.

160 *ibid*.

"*Volksverein*" (an organization with popular appeal).¹⁶¹ This was the precedence on which the German Propaganda Bureau was established in 1914; yet, it was not until 1916 that the government organization even considered producing official films. Alongside industry, which used film as a means of advertising its products, the military also used two categories of film to serve its own purpose even before the war: training and 'popularization' films.¹⁶²

The success of The German Navy League resulted in the commitment of several European nations' resources to the production of film propaganda. Unfortunately, German military leadership doubted the value of film-documentation of the war and feared that the release of authentic footage would jeopardize their strategy for the war. Therefore, they did not allow cameramen to film on the frontlines. By the time the British *Battle of the Somme* was released they had missed the opportunity to film the war, which delayed the release of a truly "documentary" film to the late 1920s. In every respect, the German film-propaganda effort fell short when it should have exceeded comparable programs.

Wartime Film Industry

The outbreak of the Great War threw the German film industry into disarray:

In the films factories, preparations were under way for the autumn/winter season of 1914/15, when the very backbone of the business was dramatically transformed: actors, directors and technical personnel were called up, many of the comedies already in production were no longer what the public wanted or the censor permitted, the raw materials essential for the production were rationed, and the French film companies which had dominated the market were declared "enemy aliens" and were closed down.¹⁶³

When it declared war on France, Germany banned the importation of all enemy-produced films. However, Germany continued to import films from neutral countries like Italy (until 1915), the United States (until 1917) and Denmark. Some French films were also smuggled into Germany and screened despite the ban. However, there was still a severe shortage of films in Germany

161 *ibid*, 47.

162 Wolfgang Muhl-Benninghaus, "Newsreel Images of the Military and War, 1914-1918," in *A Second Life*, 175.

163 Martin Koerber, "Oskar Messter, Film Pioneer: Early Cinema between Science, Spectacle, and Commerce," in *A Second Life*, 59.

and domestic film companies struggled to meet the demand. German film historian Rainer Rother writes that during the first five months of the war, the public's interest in "war pictures" provided some compensation for the shortage of films. The subsequent increase in the production of German companies and the activities of the Danish-controlled Nordic Film Company also provided some relief.¹⁶⁴ The war provided the need for more German films by leading Germans to ban the majority of the foreign films screened in its cinemas, creating a void in the market, and initiating a demand amongst the German people for war films.

Educators, clergy, and intellectuals that opposed cinema also interpreted the 1914 ban of foreign films as a victory for their cause, because, as Kaes points out, they believed the war was being fought to defend German high culture against Western civilization. As early as October of 1914, Hafker, boldly proclaimed:

So far the war has been the greatest cinema reformer of all. Beyond all else it has accomplished what we have barely dared to dream. It has eliminated the large foreign-rooted business organization representing and guaranteeing the success of trashy movies....This organization, which can be traced back to the Páthe model, is broken, and if we have even the slightest understanding of what we want, it shall never return.¹⁶⁵

When America entered the war in 1917, Germany banned the importation of all Allied films due to the anti-German content of some of the films. However, the ban did not prevent Allied films from being seen in Germany altogether. For example, films starring Charlie Chaplin were extensively screened in Germany for the duration of the war and the actor maintain popular in Germany until his 1940 film *The Great Dictator*. Furthermore, not all American films were Anti-German; as a matter of fact, there were an equal number of pro-German films produced in the United States. Films like *Motion Pictures of the Great War*, *The German Side of the War*, and *Battle of Przemyśl* (1915) were just a few pro-German films produced by American

164 Rainer Rother, "The Experience of the First World War and the German Film" in *The First World War and Popular Cinema*, 219.

165 Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 21.

companies.¹⁶⁶ This ban was another key moment in the growth of the German film industry. Strict regulations forced German production companies to develop a national film industry that was concerned with producing a favorable image of Germany and promoting nationalism among the German population. As a result, Germany felt growing pressure to build a national film industry that could compete with the productions of enemy countries:

Thus a national cinema was born—not only in the middle of the war but also in the very spirit of cultural warfare: German cinema had to be superior to the cinemas of France and the United States. Above all, it had to be German.¹⁶⁷

Germany's film industry might not have developed without the war. As Wolfgang Mühl-Benninghaus argues, cinematography also advanced technically during the war due to its application to military purposes.¹⁶⁸ The institution of cinema experienced an important increase in status under the influence of trench warfare and the massive mobilization of Germany's forces by reinforcing the process of linking war and ideology through film.

Wartime Censorship and Militarism

During the war, the German military exercised extensive influence over the course of social and political developments in Germany. In a 1915 decree, the Deputy Commanding General of the Seventh Army Corp, General Freiherr von Gayl, declared broad executive powers over his home-district, which curtailed the local civilian administration. Von Gayl reserved authority over matters of personal liberties, the seizure of property, censorship of publications, the inspection of mail, and the imprisonment of political opponents.¹⁶⁹ Other Commanding Generals evoked similar authority in their home-districts, adding another layer to an already sprawling bureaucratic system. Most applicable to the development of film censorship was the Commanding Generals' authority to prohibit certain publications, to

166 Richard Abel, "Charge and Countercharge: "Documentary" War Pictures in the USA, 1914-1916," *Film History* (Indiana University Press) 22, no. 4 (December 2010), passim.

167 *Ibid.*, 20.

168 Mühl-Benninghaus, "Newsreel Images," 175.

169 "Decree of the Deputy Commanding General of the Seventh Army Corp Regulating the Jurisdiction of the Civilian Authorities," 23 June 1915, Munster, Abt., lb Nr. 14676-Staatsarchiv Munster, Zgg. 2/51, Nr. 394, Band 2. trans by Jeffrey Verhey. Accessed online via German History in Documents and Images.

suppress newspapers—temporarily or permanently—and to prohibit the publication and circulation of books and other printed materials. In 1915, Commanding Generals were not yet concerned with the censorship or prohibition of film beyond the blanket ban of enemy films. Although no direct reference to film is found in General Von Gayl's memorandum, these powers of discretion were eventually extended to films two years later.

Commanding Generals gained authority over every aspect of society, which only increased previously established German militarism. The War Ministry continued to take steps to ensure absolute control over the censorship of newspapers and films. German military leaders did not want to share information with the general public; they were generally suspicious of anything that might jeopardize the army's public image or had the potential to disclose sensitive strategic information. In the first Censorship Guidelines published by the War Ministry, military authorities stressed the need for press censorship:

In this critical time the military leadership turns to the press, the medium whose words are being carried far beyond Germany's borders...Even German newspapers have unknowingly passed many an important piece of information on to our enemies during our own recent great struggles...If we wish to secure ourselves favorable prospects in the war, our military measures must be kept secret from the enemy as well as from our own country...¹⁷⁰

This fear prevented German military staff from allowing cameramen to film on the frontlines and generate the kind of authentic footage required to rival the British *Battle of the Somme*. Military commanders prevented cameramen and photographers from shooting "the real thing" for the first two years of fighting, despite the demand for it. As early as August of 1914, *Der Kinematograph* (The Cinematograph, a German film trade paper) complained about the lack of film coverage from the front.¹⁷¹

170 Auszüge aus dem Merkblatt der Militärbehörden für die Pressen betr. Die Behandlung militärischer Nachrichten [Excerpts from the Memorandum from the Military Authorities to the Press Concerning the Treatment of Military News], August 1, 1914. Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv Freiburg i. Br., MA/Adm, No. 2413, P18, duplicate. trans by Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering. Accessed online via Germany History in Documents and Images.

171 Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 25.

In October 1914, a few film firms were finally given permission to shoot footage on the front; however, film companies who sent cameramen to the front prior to this point were forced to recall their operators and were forbidden to show their footage in cinemas. Companies had to meet the following criteria to obtain a license to film on the front:

1. The company must be completely German, must be controlled by men of a patriotic, German persuasion, must have sufficient capital and work within the German currency area.
2. The company must use only German recording equipment; German manufacturing apparatuses and German film stock, and the entire factory must be company-owned.
3. The company must not only have a reputation for reliability in every respect, but must also be responsible for dispatching representatives to the theater of war. Photographing the theater of war and territories captured by German troops is subject to the approval of the chief of the General staff of the military in the field. Applications should be addressed to the press department of the military's Deputy General staff. The recording of cinemagraphic material requires a special license. Photographs and similar graphic footage may only be reproduced, distributed and exhibited with the prior permission of the military censor. The activity of photographers and reporters without a pass and a member of the general staff are quickly prohibited.¹⁷²

Although these restrictions prevented foreign companies from obtaining war footage that could damage the German cause, it also reduced the industry's ability to capture the war on film. German film stock was not of the highest quality, nor was it in abundance, especially as the war progressed. German recording equipment also had its limitations. The camera's size and bulk made it difficult to use in the trenches; it had to remain stationary. Its exposure method also made it impossible to record trench life due to the lack of light. Little, if any, of the films' content would have been discernible. Audiences would have been disappointed with authentic film if they had really seen it.

One of the noticeable differences between German and Allied film propaganda was how they presented the enemy. While the Allies attacked and disparaged their German enemy (although that was not the case in either the French or the British films on the Battle of the Somme), the Germans essentially neglected the enemy's image. Although Germans did include

172 Mühl-Benninghaus, "Newsreel Images," 176.

images of the enemy, they were presented in such a way as to invoke pity rather than hatred; footage of the enemy consisted mostly of wounded enemies being evacuated and well cared for. This was due in part to the censorship regulation forced on the press by the military. In 1914, the War Ministry instructed the press to refrain from using an “insulting or belittling tone” when writing about the enemy, asserting that, “the purity and greatness of the movement which has gripped our nation demands a dignified language.”¹⁷³ Rother points out the same restrictions applied to newspapers, journals, newsreels, and feature films. He goes on to say:

Despite the change in attitudes towards film, the restrictions on content remained. As a result, the overwhelming majority of the preserved footage gives the impression of a war that was traditional in nature and which had simply been given an added dimension in the new form of weaponry.¹⁷⁴

By the time Germany military leaders changed their mind about the role of film in propaganda, the Battle of the Somme was over and there was no authentic German battle-footage to be had. In response to the censorship-induced lack of footage, German propagandists elected to construct German war documentaries from a combination of archived footage and staged scenes. The German film industry continued this practice even after the war ended.

Official War Films

Kaes points out that most of the movie theaters in Berlin were closed on August 1 1914 when the news spread that Germany had declared war on Russia. He wrote that, “there was no need for films that day, not on the days that followed—the action had moved to the street.”¹⁷⁵ In the days that followed, Germans crowded the streets in anticipation of the latest news. Newspapers tried to quell the insatiable hunger for information by printing multiple editions each day as well as hourly one-page bulletins with gigantic captions, turning the streets into a

173 *Letter from the Prussian War Ministry to the Military Commanders: Transmission and Explanation of the Supplements to the Memorandum for the Press*, Vol. 1, in *Military and Domestic Policy in the World War, 1914-1918*, trans. Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering, 81-83 (Dusseldorf: Droste, 1970).

174 Rainer Rother, “The Experience of the First World War and the German Film,” 220.

175 Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 16.

newsroom buzzing with reports, stories and rumors.¹⁷⁶ For the moment, cinema was all but forgotten in face of the novelty of war. All of this affected how the German populace and the German leadership viewed cinema and films.

Germany was slow to establish its own practices in film propaganda. According to Mühl-Benninghaus, the cinematic trade press was initially reluctant to carry out its first assignment in the service of the war, but eventually succumbed to the public's demands for war footage:

Once the Germans realized the extent to which foreign cinema defiled German honour, they also decided to take action. In circles, which, in the past, had taken hostile attitudes towards film, much activity was sparked by the desire to restore the damage done to Germany in the international arena. People in the higher reaches of press, industry, trade, tourism and culture—as well as representatives of the Foreign Ministry—joined forces to develop an antidote.¹⁷⁷

Although meant to be an antidote, the first film propaganda looked far less aggressive than what was being produced in France, Great Britain and later in the United States. Germany's primary goal in producing official film propaganda was not to vilify their enemy but to justify entering into war at a time when a global war was thought to be impossible.

German culture was the perfect setting for film propaganda to be its most effective. Kaes continues by asserting that, "the traditional melodrama [film] genre with its emphasis on vehicle for ideas about the individual's responsibility to the nation in wartime."¹⁷⁸ As previously mentioned, the link between war and national ideology was essential to its propaganda campaign. Within this framework of total mobilization in defense of culture, war footage appeared—first in newsreels, then official films—in German cinemas. These films were eventually classified into three categories: educational, orienting, and propaganda, although in practice it was not always easy to differentiate between the three.¹⁷⁹

176 Ibid.

177 Bernadette Kester, *Film From Weimar: Representation of the First World War in German Films of the Weimar Period (1919-1933)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 37-38.

178 Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 25.

179 Mühl-Benninghaus, "Newsreel Images," 176.

Ironically, the first German film propaganda organization established during the war was not created by the government. In November 1916, interested parties created *Deutsche Lichtbild-Gesellschaft* (The German Photo Company or DLG), which was tasked with formulating a first response to allied anti-German propaganda. DLG concentrated mainly on the production of short propaganda documentaries, which showed the “success of German industrial development, the beauty of the German landscape and the riches of German culture.”¹⁸⁰ Although these films showed Germany in a positive light, they were not effective enough to combat the negative image of the Germans portrayed in Allied films.

The War Ministry officially established BuFA on January 30, 1917, but the first public notice of its existence seems to be the premiere of *With Our Heroes on the Somme*.¹⁸¹ Its purpose, according to Kaes, was to coordinate the various film initiatives and to use the new medium to mobilize the masses. Modeled after the French army’s *Service Cinématographique*, its main task was to deliver German films to the western and eastern fronts as well as to foreign countries, and to supervise the import and export of films.¹⁸² BuFA produced several official films over the course of the war, but they all suffered due to their length. They were too short (approximately 30 minutes) to be run as a single film and were usually sandwiched between two entertainment films. As part of a “package deal” the official films were largely ignored in light of the entertainment films.¹⁸³ The brevity of the films also made international distribution difficult. Mühl-Benninghaus writes, that Austro-Hungarian film markets refused to show “short” films all together and Scandinavia only took a small number of “first-class” short films.¹⁸⁴ In addition to BuFA, the government established *Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft* (The Universal Film Company or UFA) on December 18, 1917, effectively consolidating all film services and agencies under a single entity. The government’s involvement in UFA was hidden from the

180 Ibid.

181 Rother, “The Creation of a Social Event,” 527.

182 Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 31.

183 Mühl-Benninghaus, “Newsreel Images,” 184.

184 Ibid.

public and the company was presented as privately funded to prevent cinemagoers from dismissing its productions as state propaganda.¹⁸⁵ After the war, UFA became a leading film company as modern and efficient as Hollywood's. The company would eventually become the primary producer of Nazi propaganda films in the 1930s.

With Our Heroes on the Somme (1917)

Very little is known about where and when the footage for *With Our Heroes on the Somme* was filmed or who edited and produced the film. What is known, however, is that it was the German response to the British *Battle of the Somme*. Surviving evidence suggests that it was the first German attempt to depict the western front in film. When the British film was shown in neutral countries—where it had only weak competition from German films—officials in charge of German film propaganda received dramatic pleas for help. The Scandinavian official, Mr. Binz, sent a cable to Berlin insisting that viewers were begging for “the most gruesome, sensational scenes of battle, similar to the English Somme film.”¹⁸⁶ There were also domestic demands for authentic footage. In an edition of *Die Fackel*, Karl Kraus wrote:

Would it not also be desirable for Germans behind the front to see such lifelike images of recent events? The deeds of our soldiers, demonstrated in picture, would give truthful enough material for more than one movie and there would be a huge interest in such demonstrations among the people that depends more on images than on words.¹⁸⁷

However, the “German answer” to the British film would ultimately fall short of demands.

Analogous “authentic” battle scenes were nonexistent. No camera teams were permitted to film at the front during the battle and, as a result, most of the scenes were staged.

With Our Heroes on the Somme is 30 minutes in length (15 minutes shorter than *Battle of the Somme*) and consists of three parts. Part I depicts the situation behind the Somme front; Part II, an advance through the Saint-Pierre-Vaast forest; and Part III, an engagement near Bouchavesnes. Unfortunately, their dependence on *Battle of the Somme* led German

185 Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 34.

186 See Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 30 and Rother, “Social Event,” 527.

187 Karl Klaus, “No. 437-442,” *Die Fackel*, October 31, 1916, 24.

filmmakers to imitate, rather than reflect, the German realities of the same conflict. Although documentary footage—consisting mainly of daily life behind the western front, showing reinforcements and supplies brought to the line, German doctors caring for wounded enemy soldiers, village inhabitants evacuated due to allied bombardment, etc.—was used throughout the first part, both the second and third parts were reconstructed to “show” what happened on the Somme front. Rother has determined that the footage was a compilation of film from a number of earlier conflicts and from training areas. He specifically points out that the forest scene in the second part is, “completely free of damage,” that “every tree is in perfect shape” and that “there were no signs of bombardment” suggesting that the forest is not Saint-Pierre-Vaast.¹⁸⁸ There were also inconsistencies in the type of helmet worn by German soldiers; both the pickelhaube and the steel helmet, which replaced the pickelhaube in 1916—appear throughout the film. Rother also questions the position of the camera in several scenes, arguing “the camera positions are so often above the trenches that it seems highly unlikely that they are from the battlefield” and that other scenes required the cameraman to film from enemy territory.¹⁸⁹ In the end, the required blending between authentic and faked was not achieved. Yet the press campaign that accompanied the film dwelled on the film’s excellence. *With Our Heroes on the Somme* was presented as a documentary, but the gap between authentic and staged scenes was too enormous to allow for long-term success.

Press Coverage

With Our Heroes on the Somme was not only the first German “official film” but also the first film to warrant extensive press coverage. It was presented favorably, as a turning point in cinematic representation of the battlefield. The advanced publicity, written by Hans Brennert, appeared midday on January 17 in the *BZ am Mittag*, two days before the film’s premiere.¹⁹⁰

188 Rother, “Social Event,” 528.

189 Ibid.

190 Ibid.

Brennert's article adopted what Rother describes as an "extraordinarily enthusiastic tone" shared by numerous later reports of the film's premiere:

From the hell of Somme, from the flaming earth of the Saint-Pierre-Vaast forest, heroic German film team operators, at the command of the highest military leadership, have created the greatest cinematic document of this terrible war. Steel helmets on their heads, cameras in hand, they faced direct enemy fire with the long transports of the storm troops. They attacked the first trenches with the storm troops, moving from crater to crater, over forest and field, through barbed wires, ditches and wild forest streams, with the minelayers, between sharp blows of heavy shells and bursting mortars until, aided by the wall of fire from our barrage, they tossed hand grenades at the feeling enemy.¹⁹¹

The "extraordinarily enthusiastic tone" characterizes the remainder of the announcement of a film event and a description of the three parts of the film. Rother argues that this advanced publicity, "used a verbal artillery barrage to create a specific audience response."¹⁹² Brennert's article also touches on another fictitious element played up by the press, which were the lives sacrificed to obtain the footage. In *Die Fackel*, Karl Kraus wrote, "Four operators have fallen during the recording of the film, but [other operators] always came new in its place, until finally the whole work was completed, that our descendants will proclaim the glory of the heroic fighters."¹⁹³ Despite the fact that Kraus's claim is unfounded—there are no records to indicate any cameramen died during the Battle of the Somme—the claim is commented upon time and again in the press.¹⁹⁴

The tone of every single notice following the Berlin premiere on January 17, 1917 was the same: the uniqueness of German propaganda was underscored and the "factual" authentic of the film was praised.¹⁹⁵ The "officialness" of the film was also reemphasized. One such article insisted, "Here are not 'staged' war scenes, no genre shots from the stage with French grandmothers drinking coffee and genial peasant militiamen. This is authentic, actual war....In the middle of a typical day one had the opportunity—minute-by-minute—to look at actual war in

191 Ibid.

192 Ibid.

193 Karl Kraus, "No. 454-456," *Die Fackel*, April 1, 1917, 25.

194 Rother, "Social Event," 529.

195 Ibid, 530.

the face.”¹⁹⁶ The *Berliner Volkszeitung* noted, “This film gives us some shots of the Somme battle. Today it is already history.” The film’s documentary nature was also a reoccurring theme in the press: “Here is a true accomplishment, a document of the great and hard time of the world war”; “our military leaders have created an example of never-before-seen strength” and “Is this a picture, only a picture? Even the weakest imagination will be enhanced by this part of the reality of battle.” These were just some of the words about the effect of the films authentic nature.¹⁹⁷ Overall, the film was presented as a hugely successful endeavor.

Despite propagandists’ efforts, however, there was some negative press coverage. According to Rother, the day after the premiere, the *BZ am gontag* challenged the perceived impact of the film:

Over all, the film prettifies! Man, who patiently suffers in war, is so small and insignificant in modern battle. The optical lens, an aesthete without feeling, takes distant bits of landscape, composes, and is the architect of wonderful landscapes, seen through a silver cloud...It never looked this way in the eyes of a soldier, and never felt this way in a soldier’s heart.¹⁹⁸

This is the only clear challenge to the authenticity of the footage used for the second and third parts of the film. A second review, in the *Vossischen Zeitung* expresses skepticism in the capacity of film in general:

This film is a sort of pinnacle of film reporting, but from its height one sees as well the limitations. One cannot hope that cinema is fully capable of writing history. It will and must remain as an illustrated companion to the written and printed word, to be sure more full of life than was the ease in earlier times...For much that happens the excerpts presented on film will never be sufficient.¹⁹⁹

The criticism, although not directly related to the content of the film, speaks to its limitation. Images of wounded enemy soldiers were assumed to be inadequate representation of victory and were therefore left out of German propaganda films including *With Our Heroes on the Somme*.

196 Ibid.

197 Ibid., 531.

198 Ibid., 530.

199 Ibid., 531.

Audience Reception

The audience response in Berlin to *With Our Heroes on the Somme* was moderately successful. The relatively short film ran for three weeks at the *Taentzienpalast*, one of Berlin's premiere theaters, as a second feature in tandem with Joe May's *Die leere Wasserflasche* (The Empty Water Bottle), a "Detective-Adventure-Satiric Drama in Four Acts" and *Satans Opfer* (Satan's Victim), an American Play in Five Acts²⁰⁰ This made it difficult for propagandists to impress upon the audience the seriousness of the film and failed to keep the audience engaged. Clearly, the film was not successful enough to remain as a supporting film for long and was too short to screen without accompanying films. According to Rother, cinema owners complained that the film "either bored the viewers or drove them out of the cinema altogether because the images did not contain the spectacular battle scenes the advertisements promised and the audiences had come to see."²⁰¹ The brevity of the film also became an issue when it came to distributing the film abroad. It is unknown how many copies were made and distributed domestically and in neutral countries. Advertisements and reviews for *With Our Heroes on the Somme* did not appear in any major American newspapers and the U.S. market was already flooded with American-produced pro-German films. It is logical to assume that there was little demand for the film in American theaters.

Conclusion

The success of the British film in 1916 apparently jolted the German High Command into action, but not enough to create an effective propaganda film. German officers knew the effects of the British film, as indicated in an official report:

Recently a film about the Battle of the Somme was shown in England, which celebrates English bravery and attempts to downplay our success. It is highly likely that this film, which has enjoyed such enormous success, will now be seen in Canada, Australia, and other parts of the Dominion, and in neutral countries.²⁰²

200 Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema*, 33.

201 Rother, "The Experience of the First World War and the German Film," 219.

202 Letter, Prussian War Ministry to the Reich's Chancellor, 21 October 1916, Bestand R 901,

Officers quickly abandoned their arrogant stance that film was unfit to serve the national cause and set to work creating an official propaganda organization to produce an answer to *Battle of the Somme*; however, BuFA struggled to produce effective film propaganda. Some historians cite the military leaders' lack of empathy with cinema audiences as the main cause for the film's failure to capture audiences.²⁰³ Extensive censorship and militarism prevented German propaganda organizations from connecting with their audiences, however clear audiences made their desires. In comparison to *Battle of the Somme*, *With Our Heroes on the Somme* proved less successful.

The German film failed for a number of reasons, not least of which is the quality of its footage. Although the British proved how effective producing "authentic" footage could be the Germans were incapable of producing similar footage after the fact. Cameramen were not allowed on the front in 1916 due to censorship restrictions. By the time military leaders allowed cameras on the front, the battle had become stagnant, and it was impossible to obtain footage that portrayed a German victory. BuFA was forced to use images that were dated, taken far from the front lines, or were studio reenactments.

The film also failed to revive the traditional images of German bravery and sacrifice. Like the British, the German people were looking for a tangible connection to the soldiers and the war itself. By not showing wounded or dead Germans, the film only alluded to bravery and sacrifice via the titles. The film lacked the necessary imagery to captivate audiences and impart to them a lasting impression of the human costs of the Battle of the Somme. The film also failed to vilify the enemy just as the British *Battle of the Somme* failed to vilify the enemy. Although Rother argues that shots of wounded enemy soldiers (in this case British and French troops) on stretchers being put on railway cars represented the success of the German Army on the

Akte 947, p. 33.
203 Mühl-Benninghaus, "Newsreel Images," 182-3.

battlefield, it arguably had the opposite effect on Germans' opinion about the enemy British and French.²⁰⁴

Same Footage, Different Outcome

Despite the film's lack of success, it remained the model for subsequent propaganda films until roughly 1920. By the 1930s, the staged footage of the German war films was used to invoke human interest and facilitate the telling of a story (narrative). Much of the footage from *With our Heroes on the Somme* was used in subsequent films about the Great War. The reception of two specific films, *Der Weltkrieg* (1927) and *The Somme* (1930) was much more positive than the original German Somme film. According to Bernadette Kester, "the film cycle *Der Weltkrieg* was the first post-war attempt to represent the period of 1914 to 1918 in a documentary way."²⁰⁵ Although several war films were produced in the years following *Der Weltkrieg*, *The Somme* (1930) was considered the next best "war documentary" created in Germany after *Der Weltkrieg*. The two films were reconstructed using both archival and reenacted footage. Although, this is the same technique used by BuFA in 1917 to produce *With Our Heroes on the Somme*, later films met with better reception among German film critics and audiences.

204 Rother, "Social Event," 531.

205 Kester, *Film From Weimar*, 90.

Chapter 4

The French *L'offensive française sur la Somme, Juillet 1916*

(The French Offensive on the Somme, July 1916)

Although France was the leading film-producing country in the 1910s, the war inhibited its ability and ambition to produce war films like the British *Battle of the Somme*. France produced many great war films like Abel Gance's *J'accuse* (I Accuse, 1918) and *Croix de Bois* (Wooden Crosses, 1932), but only after the war had ended. There were some "patriotic" films produced between 1914 and 1916, most of which did not survive and others that are of little note. The majority of France's efforts in film were committed to producing newsreels; all four major French production companies (Gaumont, Pathé, Éclair, and Eclipse) were hard at work producing newsreels even before the war began. Frenchmen were not alone in viewing these newsreels. Surviving versions with intertitles in English, Flemish, Polish, and Spanish suggest that they were also exported for screening in other cinemas.²⁰⁶ The newsreel fulfilled the purpose of film propaganda in France.

The French Offensive on the Somme, July 1916 is a compilation of footage from newsreels pertaining to the opening weeks of the Battle of the Somme. The footage was compiled in August and released shortly thereafter. Although the French compilation was released about the same time as the British *Battle of the Somme*, it received less advertisement and was sparingly disseminated. It is difficult to say with any degree of certainty why a country with such a robust film industry would choose to produce newsreels instead of feature length films, even after the success of *Battle of the Somme*. However, there are a number of points that shed light on the matter.

206 Laurent Veray, "1914-1918: the first film media war of the twentieth century: The example of French newsreels," *Film History* (Indiana University Press) 22, no. 4 (December 2010), 412.

Due to the timing of the film's release and the nature of the battle itself, the British *Battle of the Somme* had a greater impact on German propaganda film efforts than it had on those of the French. The French industry demonstrated more continuity with its pre-feature period during the war by building existing formats.²⁰⁷ That being said, the French did not want to bring additional attention to the Battle of the Somme for a number of reasons. For one, the battle was suppose to be reprisal for the German attack on Verdun, but the offensive failed to have the desired effect, even though the French were far more successful in obtaining their objectives during the offensive than the British. Sorlin also suggests that the French did not consider the offensive a French victory because it was a combined offensive.²⁰⁸ But because the French were unable to drive the Germans completely out of France to end the war, they did not claim a victory and did not want to highlight the shortfalls of the operation.

The French Offensive on the Somme, July 1916 is similar to the British *Battle of the Somme* in many ways. Both films stress the capabilities of their armies while showing little of actual combat. Neither film acknowledges the part played by the other nation. However, the French film is unique because four production companies—each with its own particular emphasis on subject matter—contributed footage; and, although much of their footage was taken during the initial assault, the crews continued to film during the months of August and September, incorporating later footage into *The French Offensive on the Somme, July 1916*. That being said, it is essential to understand the events that shaped the French film industry leading up to the film's production before going into further detail on the film.

France Before the War

In *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Alexis de Tocqueville described French people as:

...talented enough at anything, but who excel only at war. They adore chance, force, success, flash and noise, more than true glory. More capable of heroism

207 Abel, *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, 453.

208 Sorlin, "French Newsreels," 510.

than virtue, of genius more than good sense, they are suited more to conceiving immense plans than completing great enterprises.²⁰⁹

Before the war, Frenchmen held a romantic notion of war. The French were more interested in performing bravely in battle and acts of valor in precisely executed strategy than a straightforward victory. It would seem they were more captivated by the perceived glory of war rather than they were driven by the desire to win, which necessitated more prolonged and mundane efforts. Over the course of the nineteenth century, France had gone to war many times and had, in general, “fared poorly at it.”²¹⁰ The least successful was the conflict with Prussia in 1870, which resulted in a unified Germany. In losing, France had to pay a large indemnity and surrender Alsace-Moselle and most of Lorraine to the Second Reich. As a result, the French became embittered and suspicious of the new power to the east. Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau, and Becker posit that the French had to prepare for a new war with Germany immediately after the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) and that it was not until the end of the Second World War that France would begin to feel safe.²¹¹ The constant tension of the situation with Germany explains why the French were less than enthusiastic about the First World War; they had been mentally dreading it for decades. During the latter-half of the nineteenth century, the Third Republic made alliances in order to contain the much larger, wealthier, and militarily stronger Germany.²¹² Both France and Germany pursued policies of deterrence through superiority, essentially gathering allies to prevent future conflict. Unfortunately, these alliances provoked rather than deterred Germany and its ally Austria-Hungary. Smith, et al., writes, “In the crisis of August 1914 France had little room for maneuver, because of diplomatic and

209 Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1856), 242. Quoted in Leonard V. Smith, Stephane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *France and the Great War 1914-1918* (Cambridge, NJ: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

210 Smith, et al., 9.

211 Ibid, 10.

212 Webster’s Dictionary defines a republic as “a government having a chief of state who is not a monarch and who in modern times is usually a president. Although Great Britain did have an elected parliament and constitution, both key components of a republic, it maintained a monarchy rather than elected or nominated chief of state.

military choice made decades earlier.”²¹³ France essentially assumed the inevitability of the First World War.

As the only republic among the Great Powers of Europe, France occupied a unique position. France’s national identity was well developed by the outbreak of war. Its social stability, industrialization, and the establishment of a professional civil service defined the Third Republic.²¹⁴ After nearly a century of social turmoil, Frenchmen were invested in their parliamentary government. Through massive investment in institutions such as the education system and the army, the French forged one of the most cohesive national communities in the world.²¹⁵ In his book *Peasants into Frenchmen*, historian Eugen Weber traces the process of “civilizing” French villages during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this time, he claims, the “savage” peasants of France were indoctrinated into a more civilized national society, economy, and culture, that was, “the culture of the city and of the city par excellence, Paris.”²¹⁶

French culture was also heavily influenced by militarism. Parties and factions at all points of the political spectrum competed for the army and navy’s favor. Yet, despite their admiration for the military, most Republicans looked on the army with suspicion and assumed that professional officers were enemies of the state, an opinion that only intensified with the Dreyfus Affair.²¹⁷ Republicans supported the military because they did not wish to appear unpatriotic, but they distrusted the leadership. In the decades leading up to the Great War, the French Army and the Republic were constantly at odds. Conscription was a significant point of

213 Smith, et al., 10.

214 Encyclopedia Britannica , *The Third Republic*, November 1, 2013, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/592441/Third-Republic> (accessed April 2, 2014), 10.

216 Eugen Weber, *Peasants to Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 1976), 5.

217 In December 1894, French Captain Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of having given secret French military documents to the Germans. The case rested on solely on evidence provided by the counter-espionage unit of the army general staff. The suspicion surrounding the handling of the case put the army at odds with the Republic and reinforced Republican suspicions.

friction. According to Smith, et al. there existed a wide range of views in France on mobilization and the citizen-soldiers it produced:

While conservatives and reactionaries certainly advocated a large standing army, they believed that the recalcitrant masses drafted into the colors could be controlled only by a powerful and professional officer corps—the very corporate entity that had worked so hard to frame Dreyfus.²¹⁸

Throughout the early years of the twentieth century, conscription laws in France reflected continuous compromise among varying opinions about the strength and leadership of the French army. The army and the Republic finally found common ground in May 1913 through the passage of the Three-years Law.²¹⁹ The true significance of the law was political in the way it heralded the national consensus that would carry France through most of the Great War.²²⁰ The French army was shaped greatly by French political culture, and vice versa. In August 1914, The French army reflected the variety of antagonisms and compromises at work in the preceding decades.

France Declares War

Recent research suggests that the majority of Frenchmen were not willing to confront Germany in the early 1910s.²²¹ More than any other country—besides Belgium and perhaps Serbia—France was forced into the conflict. They responded with grim resolution rather than the patriotic fury felt by other belligerents. The war culture of 1914-18 resulted from what historian Pierre Chaunu described as, “the immense emotional investment, on a national scale, of the French in France.”²²² There was what Charles Rearwick describes as an “immediate

218 Smith, et al, *France and the Great War*, 18.

219 The Three-Years Law allowed the French military to quickly increase the size of the active army by incorporating a recruitment class into military service in the same year that they were recruited. For all intents and purposes, the recruitment class year and the mobilization class year for conscripts became one in the same. This enabled the army to call up two classes in 1913. Additionally, each soldier was required to serve 28 years in the military, including three years in the active army,

220 Smith, et al., *France and the Great War*, 19.

221 Sorlin, “France: The Silent Memory,” 115.

222 Pierre Chaunu in Smith, et al., *France and the Great War*, 59.

need for an energetic defense of the fatherland.”²²³ In general, the war seemed to temporarily end factionalism in France, just as it had in Britain and Germany. With unexpected swiftness French elites and commoners put aside their differences and joined in union to protect their beloved France against the Germans. The national commitment of 1914 stemmed from outrage at the German invasion and the atrocities that accompanied it.²²⁴

The country’s initial cultural response was to exalt the patriot, who was so devoted to the common struggle that he or she readily gave up ordinary indulgences and pleasures.²²⁵ The idea of patriotism was an important one in early twentieth-century France, and intellectuals worked tirelessly to elevate the image and reputation of the French soldier (*poilu*).²²⁶ The elevation of the military’s social status in France was similar to the militarism seen in Germany. French intellectuals also played a crucial role in creating the war culture that sustained France for the duration of the war. Those who did not volunteer for the front committed their energy to producing a positive image of the military. Much like Germany, France depended on the medium of print to create the French war culture. Magazines were particularly useful because they reinforced words with photographs. Magazines were also important because they preceded newsreels, which substituted for feature films in France.

French intellectuals going to the front, whether through volunteering or conscription, meant not only that intellectuals were responsible for the development of French war culture, but also that the French lost some of their greatest minds as a consequence. In addition to authors and artists that were sent to the front, numerous cameramen and directors were also called to arms. By this time, French cameramen had established their own special section of the

223 Charles Rearick, *The French in Love and War* (Rochester Hills, MI: Data Reproductions Corporation, 1997), 2.

224 Smith, et al. *France and the Great War*, 59.

225 *Ibid.*, 4

226 *Poilu* means the “unshaven” ones and was akin to doughboy or GI, the American nicknames for soldiers.

film operator's union and were considered "professionals."²²⁷ Included in the announcements of their deaths were mentions of the film company they had worked for.²²⁸ The loss of these creative minds explains—however partially—the lack of initiative shown by private film companies to produce feature films about the war that French audiences actually wanted to see.

From the beginning, home front newspapers and periodicals referred to French soldiers as brave heroes, whose devotion to *la patrie* (country) deserved the emulation of others.²²⁹ By early 1915 the press was popularizing a "tough and manly" image for French soldiers. Articles printed by numerous French periodicals focused on the life and sacrifice of French soldiers. Photos of *poilu* activities on the front and upbeat stories were also commonplace. In 1914, *Le Miroir* published a photograph showing soldiers fishing several kilometers from the enemy, between assaults; in November, *L'illustration* showed showers and a barber shop constructed by French soldiers six hundred meters from the German trenches. Obviously, the French were doing an uncommonly good job depicting *poilu* life on the front with periodicals and newsreels. Therefore, French audiences were already accustomed to seeing images from the front without feature films.

To minimize the negative effects of the "grim" outlook taken by most Frenchmen, the country's intellectuals used their varying talents to crystallize the body of ideas and representations underpinning the war culture. According to Smith, et al., intellectuals and artists—not state officials—were the driving force behind the war culture in France because they derived their elevated social position from a "national tradition" dating back to the Enlightenment, which held them in high regard as public figures.²³⁰ Intellectuals were able to

227 Priska Morrissey, "Out of the Shadows: The Impact of the First World War on the Status of Studio Cameramen in France," *Film History* (Indiana University Press) 22, no. 4 (December 2010), 479.

228 *Ibid.*, 480.

229 Rearwick, *The French in Love and War*, 6.

230 Smith, et al., *France and the Great War*, 53.

use their position to create a coherent narrative out of seemingly chaotic events. Their efforts were the first real attempt at French propaganda.

In light of the intellectuals' efforts, it would seem that the state took a back seat to establishing domestic support for the war. Indeed, official propaganda efforts were more focused on suppressing information than giving the war meaning. The French state created a censorship bureaucracy of nearly 2,000 people, which was able to prevent most opposition to the war from reaching the public sphere; however, the justifications for going to war (in defense of the fatherland and the "culture of the city") were established by French citizens:

Tens of thousands of people created the images that mobilized the French between 1914 and 1918—journalists, teachers, writers, actors, popular singers, photographers, painters, designers, film directors, artisans, industrialists, and many others. A surprisingly broad cross-section of the French population developed and disseminated the themes constructing the war, themes then interiorized by their compatriots....It seems clear that the authorities and the instruments of the state played no more than a secondary role in the largely spontaneous creation of a national war culture. French society during the Great War reconfigured itself primarily through a horizontal and decentralized process rather than through passively accepting orders.²³¹

This process of horizontal rather than vertical indoctrination is most likely a result of France's republicanism. France was the only republican power to enter the war in 1914 and the only country to experience this phenomenon. This process would also explain why France did not establish a government organization for cinematography. Military leaders in France could easily have been just as disconnected from the general population as the German leaders were from their own constituents. As it was, the French were generally unenthusiastic about going to war but supported the idea of defending France and accepted the inevitability of war as a result. Unfortunately, their commitment to the inevitable began to falter in 1917 after Verdun and the Somme. This is also the point at which film took on an increasingly valuable role in presenting the war in a more favorable light.

231 Ibid., 54.

The French Film Industry Leading up to the War

In 1894, Frenchman Louis Lumière began experimenting with American inventor Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope and Kinetograph. He made the improvements necessary for projection filmstrips that were lacking in Edison's machines, which resulted in the *cinématographe*. Three machines in one—camera, developer, and projector—Lumière's machine made filming capabilities portable, allowing scenes to be shot wherever light permitted. Thus, the film industry in France was born. "If the Americans had been the first to contrive a way of producing an illusion of motion with successive images, Pierre Sorlin writes, "The French had been able to transform a scientific principle into a commercially lucrative spectacle."²³² The Lumière brothers (Louis and Auguste) became two of the best-known French film producers in the world. The first films they produced were "*actualités*," "short films of actual people, conditions, or facts, constituting...unmanipulated activities of more or less general interest."²³³ The *actualités* developed into newsreels, which were relatively cheap to make and appealed to the public. In addition to disasters, fires, and explosions, there were also many military scenes, namely parades and cavalry charges.²³⁴ Even before the war, some French film was influenced by a degree of militarism. By 1910, France became the leader in international film production. Their films were most often seen around the world and their techniques were superior to their European counterparts.

In addition to the production of short films, French companies were also engrossed in producing newsreels. In 1908, the French Pathé Company, then a leading film producer in the world, created newsreels from archived footage concerning recent events.²³⁵ Gaumont, Eclipse, and Éclair (three of the four major French production companies) soon followed suit. Pathé and Gaumont also created nationally registered subsidiaries in other countries. In contrast to print magazines, which focused mostly on national problems, newsreels incorporated a mixture of

232 Sorlin, "The Silent Memory," 115.

233 Williams, *Media, Memory, and the First World War*, 108.

234 Sorlin, "The Silent Memory," 115.

235 Sorlin, "French Newsreels," 505.

foreign and domestic events. They were so successful that on the eve of the First World War, the four major French production companies were able to offer twice-weekly issues.²³⁶

Although France was further along in the development of its film industry than Germany or Britain, many of its resources and much of its manpower was reallocated for the war effort. In support of the troops, many French men and women gave up what they considered “frivolous pleasures” in the face of conflict. In the first half of the war, there was not much of a cinema audience to cater too. According to Rearwick, centuries of experience taught the French that war meant sacrifice: “While the mobilized men risked their lives and suffered in combat, the rest of the people felt obliged to show respect by abandoning normal frivolity.”²³⁷ Their collective sacrifice concurs with de Tocqueville’s assertion that the French seem better suited for suffering than victory. Film was part of the amusements sacrificed in the wake of the Great World War. Only after the French realized that a decisive victory was impossible did they begin looking for an escape from the realities of a new kind of war; films (at this point, mostly American films) facilitated this escape. The public grew weary of the novelty of *actualités* and became increasingly aware of the medium’s narrative potentials. In fact, theatrical impresarios like George Méliès perfected the *cinématographe*’s ability to tell stories that looked like *actualités*.²³⁸ French audiences simply were not interested in seeing a feature-length film about the battle of the Somme that was made the old-fashioned way. Instead, French distributors found in the United States a large supply of fresh films unburdened by war concerns.²³⁹ Therefore, French film producers put little effort into making propaganda films like the British *Battle of the Somme*. In short, France had a unique perspective on the war and the role of film in portraying the war.

Mobilization of the French Film Industry

As soon as war was declared, film companies quickly churned out patriotic films; as Sorlin describes them, “extravagant stories of heroic individuals who captured or killed hundreds

236 Ibid., 506.

237 Rearwick, *The French in Love and War*, 4.

238 Williams, *Media, Memory, and the First World War*, 110.

239 Rearwick, *The French in Love and War*, 20.

of terrorized Huns.”²⁴⁰ The vast majority of these films dealt with “fanciful” aspects of army life and depicted units resting well behind the front lines.²⁴¹ Week after week, *la Service Photographique et Cinématographique de l’Armée*—the organization that oversaw filmmaking—commissioned private filmmakers to make propaganda films for public consumption.²⁴² Although the production of French newsreels, an effort headed by the production companies, provided a greater degree of freedom and self regulation for film companies in France, the process was also time-consuming and often resulted in unusable footage.

These “quickies” were widely accepted among French cinema audiences because they were usually sandwiched between better films or newsreels; however, feelings changed as it became apparent that victory would not be quick. 1916 was a crucial year for film in France due to the battles at Verdun and the Somme. That year, people “manifested their dislike for movies which offered a scandalously optimistic view of the front line” and studios stopped producing them.²⁴³

French audiences demanded that a more realistic view of the war be depicted onscreen; however, French military leaders fell victim to the same fears of espionage experienced in both Germany and Britain. As a result, there was little production companies could do. They faced a number of challenges during the war: most employees had been mobilized, laboratories had been requisitioned for war industries, and the remaining operators had no access to barracks, training areas, or the front.²⁴⁴ In place of “patriotic” films, Pathé, Éclair, Gaumont, and Eclipse focused their efforts on filming what little was available to them in the way of military subjects to produce newsreels. However, by 1915, it was clear to the French military leadership that their policies were not conducive to producing war films. So the Minister of War, Alexandre Millerand—in accord with the military—signed into effect an agreement that

240 Sorlin, “The Silent Memory,” 120.

241 Ibid., 117.

242 Robert Cole, *A Traveller's History of France*, 7th Edition (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2005), 137.

243 Ibid.

244 Sorlin, “French Newsreels,” 507.

allowed film producers to continue filming as before, but under the “directives” and “direct supervision” of the War Ministry.

As a result, two organizations, *la Section Photographique de l'armée* (SPA) and *la Section cinématographique de l'armée* (SCA) were established to film the war. Their purpose was to spread information within the country, spread propaganda abroad, and provide a record of the conflict.²⁴⁵ The SCA consisted of four cameramen, each representing one of the four companies. When one of these operators was assigned by the *Bureau des information's militaires* (BIM) to film a specific sector of the front, he was guided by a staff officer to “choice subject matter” the negatives of which were sent to one of the four companies to be developed and assembled for censorship. Once the films passed military censors, the companies could use their material freely.²⁴⁶ According to Sorlin, more than 5000 shorts, newsreels and documentaries were produced under these conditions between 1915 and 1917.²⁴⁷

As it became more apparent that the war would be of an extended duration, the French film industry increased its production, but never to its prewar scale. The majority of the French films on the subject of the Great War were not produced until the 1930s.²⁴⁸ SPA and SCA merged in 1917 to create an Army Cinema Section (SPCA), which was responsible for the production of all footage dealing with the war, particularly the weekly newsreel, *Les Annales de la Guerre* (Annals of the War).²⁴⁹ This merger marked the advent of more ambitious projects. In March, the SPCA produced its first feature documentary *La Puissance militaire de la France* (The Military Power of France), a five-part exploration of “what France has had to do for three years, to improvise a war for which she had, through good faith, not prepared.”²⁵⁰ The film was distributed throughout France and the United States.

245 Véray, “the first media war of the twentieth century,” 410.

246 See Véray, “the first media war of the twentieth century,” 410 and Sorlin, “The French Newsreels,” 507.

247 Sorlin, “France,” 121.

248 Thompson & Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 56.

249 Sorlin, “France,” 121.

250 Véray, “the first media war of the twentieth century,” 411.

Filming on the Battlefield

For both technical and security reasons, SPA cameramen did not film on the firing line. Above all, cameramen were hampered by the 40 kilos of their movie cameras, their tripods, and their numerous boxes of raw film, which made it impossible to climb over trenches or follow an attack.²⁵¹ There was, therefore, an absence of combat footage. SCA cameramen used the Debrie camera. "Authentic" footage on the French front consisted of "bombing and explosions from afar, guns firing, the range of weapons used" and the 'background' of war: parades, visits of dignitaries to the front, the daily lives of soldiers in the trenches, and in rear areas.²⁵² In 1915, "background" scenes were appreciated by the public as a "vivid testimony to the excellent state of Army morale."²⁵³

Despite the inaccessibility of the front, a number of cameramen were killed or wounded while filming the war. Morrissey writes that, despite the inherent danger, cameramen maintained their sang-froid in the face of direst circumstance, "daring to brave any and all dangers to capture filmed images from the battlefield."²⁵⁴ Some even received military awards for their service. *L'Annuaire général de la cinématographie française et étrangère 1917*, published by *Ciné-Journal* in 1918, listed at least three well-known cameramen that were awarded the Military Cross for their service as cameramen.²⁵⁵

In general, the status of cameramen on the fronts oscillated between hero and draft dodger; it was only after the war that it was fixed on a positive image.²⁵⁶ The image of the SCA cameramen risking their lives to bring back historic images was quickly established and, in fact, four SCA cameramen were killed in action.²⁵⁷ The Battle of the Somme was actually the first occasion in which the cameramen were allowed to go near the line of fire to film a real attack. It

251 Sorlin, "French Newsreels," 508.

252 Véray, "the First Media War," 411.

253 Ibid.

254 Morrissey, "Out of the Shadows," 480.

255 Ibid.

256 Ibid., 482.

257 Ibid.

was, however, impossible for them to follow the fighters after the attack began; even in the best case, all they could do was wait for the fighters return to film the wounded, survivors, and prisoners.²⁵⁸ By 1916, it was apparent that images of the fight itself would remain illusive.

The French Offensive on the Somme, July 1916

Newsreels were France's solution to the demands for official documentation of the war. Even the feature films—what few there were—created between 1915 and 1917 were a series of newsreels spliced together. The French produced short propaganda films rather than feature-length propaganda films. They were definitely one-note, offering only, as Sorlin describes, “a biased vision of military life” and little information about hotspots.²⁵⁹ The Battle of the Somme, for instance, lasted 5 months and was the subject of thirty-eight newsreel items out of over 400 shot in 1916. The joint offensive launched on July 1 was given the majority of the year's coverage constituting twelve of the thirty-eight items.²⁶⁰ While the British *Battle of the Somme* was being screened in Britain, across the channel, the French spliced together sequences from the Somme newsreel to produce their own feature film on the Battle of the Somme, *The French Offensive on the Somme, July 1916*.

The film has three parts, the first of which described preparations for the offensive with infantrymen massed in the trenches and the initial assault by the artillery. Part II, shows German trenches devastated by French guns, long files of prisoners and mountains of arms taken from the enemy. Finally, Part III depicted the villages liberated by the offensive: ruined houses, smashed barns, crumbling churches, burnt carts, wounded men and corpses along the streets while prisoners crossed the screen in batches.²⁶¹ Images of the damage sustained by France were seen throughout the conflict. Shots of shattered landscapes and ruins constituted solid

258 Véray, “The First Media War,” 414.

259 Sorlin, “The Silent Memory,” 121.

260 Ibid.

261 Ibid, 121-22.

evidence of the suffering endured by France, and demonstrated the “savagery of German aggression.”²⁶²

There are many similarities between the British and the French Somme films, not the least of which is the emphasis on modern weaponry: “Both [films] stress the firepower and perfect readiness of their respective armies but show almost nothing of the combats, do not explain why the offensive did not put an end to the war, and...do not allude to the part played by other nations.”²⁶³ On the other hand, there were also some noticeable differences between the films. While the British (and the Germans) mobilized the press sector behind their films and expertly advertised them, the French government did little to publicize their film, and its dissemination was extremely limited. Sorlin argues that the Somme footage received little attention in France because the French were consumed with filming and screening action at Verdun, which they held in a much higher regard:

When the counter-attack started, information flowed quickly; two special issues, *Defense of Verdun* and *The French Revenge at Verdun* were widely distributed throughout the country. The reports on the Somme were very matter-of-fact about the affair and stressed the technical aspects of the War. In contrast, the items on Verdun were lyrical and paid tribute to the bravery of the French soldiers....²⁶⁴

All four companies sent cameramen to Verdun in turn. Pathé started in March, Eclipse in April, Gaumont in May, and Éclair soon thereafter. Gaumont produced four items that showed “a small sector of the citadel with its guns carefully shielded,” German prisoners, and military ceremonies.²⁶⁵ On the whole, Éclair produced the most telling item. *Around Verdun* was shot from a lorry and a boat moving down the river presenting an “impressive panorama of the besieged city.” At the end of the film a cameraman, having been wounded, was evacuated, demonstrating how dangerous filming could be.²⁶⁶

262 Véray, “The First Media War,” 413.

263 Sorlin, “French Newsreels,” 510.

264 Sorlin, “The Silent Memory,” 122.

265 Sorlin, “French Newsreels,” 508.

266 Ibid.

1916 marked a cultural turning point for France. While, in the beginning, French war culture operated on the basis of homeland defense and German invasion and atrocities, the war culture of 1916 began to collapse as a result of Verdun and the Somme. “The more the nation mobilized, the less likely it seemed that France would ever be able to expel the invader.”²⁶⁷ In February 1916 the Germans began their nearly ten-month siege of the collection of forts surrounding the city of Verdun; this attack was the first in their strategy of attrition. The Germans chose Verdun because it was weakly defended and it could easily be bombarded by German artillery. Although warned by Colonel Émile Driant, a deputy serving in the army, that the Verdun sector was weakened to the point of being targeted by the Germans, Joffre refrained from sending reinforcements for fear of jeopardizing the major joint offensive with the British scheduled for the summer.²⁶⁸

While the fighting was not continuous, Verdun was the longest battle of the Great War—from late-February to mid-December 1916. In combination with the duration of the battle and the *Noria* system used by French 2nd Army commander General Philippe Pétain, Verdun was an “exceptionally generalized experience throughout the French army.”²⁶⁹ Of eighty-five divisions in the French army, seventy served at Verdun at some point in the battle.²⁷⁰ The French suffered nearly 380,000 casualties at Verdun, just 40,000 more than at the Battle of the Somme. Despite the comparable casualties, the Somme achieved secondary status in the French national memory. The defense of Verdun coincided with the war culture created by French intellectuals. The “energetic defense of the fatherland” was more apparent in the defense of Verdun than the offensive at the Somme. Verdun remained the supreme symbol of French sacrifice and of the enmity between France and Germany.²⁷¹ Perhaps that is why

267 Smith, et al., *France and the Great War*, 59.

268 Ibid, 82.

269 The *Noria* system rotated troops in and out of the front lines every few days, so that units could be moved away from concentrated combat before they were completely destroyed by German assaults.

270 Smith, et al. *France and the Great War*, 82.

271 Ibid.

Verdun was glorified in film while the Somme was presented matter-of-factly. Although there were just as many newsreels on both battles, the mood of their presentation was quite different. According to Sorlin, during the first weeks of the attack on Verdun, almost nothing was shown in newsreels for fear of revealing too much sensitive information.²⁷² Military officials feared a disaster at Verdun, but when the counter-attack started, in response to the relief provided by the Somme Offensive, information flowed quickly. A number of films on Verdun were produced, but not until after the war. The general tendency to favor Verdun over the Somme in France is apparent in the number and length of newsreels dedicated to each, rather than the immediate production feature films. Put simply, French production companies gave more attention to the action at Verdun than that at the Somme.

Another reason the French neglected to put a conscious effort into producing a feature film about the Battle of the Somme was because they were trying to downplay it. Some Frenchmen believed that the Battle of the Somme would extract a measure of revenge on the Germans for attacking Verdun. It was hoped that the attack would quickly break the German defense. However, without a clear victory at the Somme, most Frenchmen wanted to ignore, rather than celebrate, the battle. As the offensive slowed to a halt, in August and September, newsreels on the battle became fewer and fewer. Later newsreels consisted mostly of "ruins, prisoners, heavy guns, with an emphasis on the close contact between reconnaissance aircraft and artillery."²⁷³ According to Sorlin, these side aspects of the battle concealed disappointment about the limited effects of the attack.²⁷⁴ So, the French simply documented the Battle of the Somme. There were countless feet of war footage collected in A French archive that failed to make it past the military censorship; however, it was preserved rather than destroyed. French cameramen had the most liberal restrictions of all the belligerent powers' cameramen in the field when it came to the places on the front they had access to and what they were allowed to film.

272 Sorlin, "French Newsreels," 510.

273 Ibid.

274 Ibid.

Conclusion

In comparison to the British *Battle of the Somme*, *The French Offensive on the Somme* is extremely similar with regards to content. The film itself was a success in terms of film propaganda because it was part of a systemic effort to present a positive spin on the battle, but not in the way of being a feature propaganda film because it was essentially an elongated newsreel. Like the German Somme film, it suffered from the brevity of its running time, being too long to be considered a traditional newsreel and too short to be considered a feature film. It did, however, continue the traditions of the pre-war French film industry, and although the industry had declined from its previous glory, the production companies' work in newsreels sustained them and had an international impact. There is no doubt that Pathé, Gaumont, Éclair and Eclipse made their newsreels, in general, marketable to other countries. However, there is insufficient evidence to explain why *The French Offensive on the Somme* was not widely disseminated or advertised. Was it because it was merely a compilation of previously screened footage? Was it because the Battle of the Somme was already depicted on-screen by the British? Perhaps it was more so because the French did not wish to celebrate the Somme offensive. What we do know is that the French possessed the means and comparable footage to produce a French film on par with the British *Battle of the Somme*, but chose not to. Unlike Germany and Britain, the French generals, politicians, and film producers had difficulty reconciling the role of film in depicting the war. While military leaders wanted to share as little as possible with regards to operations, politicians felt it was necessary to reassure the public with copious amounts of optimistic news. On the other hand, film producers were merely trying to survive the austere state of the film industry brought on by the war.

The French produced film propaganda to the extent that their reduced circumstances would allow. They were limited by manpower, equipment, and indecisiveness on the part of the country's leaders. They were not, however, limited by the capabilities of the industry itself. The French film industry consisted of professional and self-regulating individuals that produced

systematic film propaganda through newsreels. Although these newsreels were not in the same league as the British *Battle of the Somme*, they were effective and managed to sustain the war culture that helped the French continue to accept the material and emotional sacrifices required, even at the worst moments of the war.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The first impression that emerges from the study of film propaganda in the Great War is one of generally uncoordinated improvisation. However, by war's end, efforts were well organized, coordinated and, in some cases, profitable. It is impossible to judge each country's entire propaganda campaign based on a single film. However, there are some important trends that can be observed from the accomplishments and deficiencies of each film. These films made lasting impressions on the development of film propaganda. Successes or failures, they were the first of their kind, a nonfictional attempt to record and retell what would prove to be one of the deadliest battles of the war.

The three films shared many important similarities, some of which reflected one or more aspects of the general purpose of wartime propaganda. Propagandists overcame similar struggles with military officials to accept film as an appropriate and effective medium for propaganda. The films also suffered from similar technological limitations—despite the fact that each country used its own version of the moving picture camera—and they used the same method of staging and reenacting scenes or using archived footage where authentic film was unable or unavailable to do so. Finally, the films shared some similar content: enemy wounded and prisoners of war, the destruction of the landscape and buildings, as well as weapons and war materials. Each country manipulated the similar aspects of content in different ways to fulfill the general purposes of wartime propaganda. For instance, the Germans used images of the damaged French countryside to influence opinion concerning the reason, justice, and necessity of the conflict. The French and the British stressed the firepower and readiness of their armies to create a favorable state of mind at home. The effectiveness of each film in achieving their

proposed propaganda purposes varied. Some of the key differences between the films also played a significant role in their degree of success.

A significant variation in content was Germany's inclusion of images of enemy wounded soldiers but their refusal to show wounded German soldiers. The absence of their sacrifice onscreen made it difficult to reinforce German valor and create a favorable state of mind at home. The marketing and advertising committed to each film and their length directly influenced the size of the audience they reached. More people saw *Battle of the Somme* than *With Our Heroes on the Somme* or *The French Offensive* because it was long enough to show on its own as a feature film. It also ran longer and in more theaters both domestically and abroad. Although German journalists extensively advertised their film's premiere, its length restricted where and for how it could be shown. Screening with detective stories and melodramas also detracted from the film's intended message. It failed to deliver the promised battle scenes and, ultimately, to engage audiences. The film was apparently dull in comparison to the accompanying short films. The French situation was even less favorable with both marketing and length working against the film. Even though they had quality footage spanning the course of the Somme Offensive, few people saw it and were influenced by it. France was arguably the only country that used actual footage from the Somme exclusively, which means the French film was the most "authentic" one despite its deficiencies in length and marketing. *Battle of the Somme* was a superior film because it followed a specific narrative while the other two presented seemingly random aspects of battle. Their images were presented in no particular order and although *Battle of the Somme* began that way, it eventually followed a narrative that intrigued viewers, making the film an experience rather than a presentation. British propagandists were able to connect with their audiences by giving them the "authentic" images they asked for.

The primary purpose of *Battle of the Somme*, as indicated by Wellington House, was to manipulate public opinion abroad, namely in America. In that regard, *Battle of the Somme* was a successful propaganda film because the United States continued to support the Allies financially

and eventually committed military forces to their aid. However, it would be inappropriate to assume that these things happen solely as a result of the film. These changes took place and as a result one may assume that the film contributed to the course of events. Although the film did not change public opinion outright, it managed to strengthen existing attitudes and shaped the way Britons remembered the battle and the war. Based on content, the fact that most of the images are from the front, the length of the film, and its extensive marketing, *Battle of the Somme* is also an example of a successful World War I documentary. The images immortalize the conditions of trench warfare and the industrialization of the war.

The primary purpose of *With Our Heroes on the Somme* was to defend German *Kultur* by repairing the German image and rationalizing the invasion of Belgium. The overall effect of the film as propaganda was unremarkable because its message was contradictory; the film did not follow a specific narrative; and it failed to connect with audiences for the previously mentioned reasons. The reason the message was contradictory was because its creators tried to improve the German image by showing how well enemy wounded and civilian noncombatants were treated, while deliberately withholding images of wounded German soldiers. The images of enemy wounded invoked sympathy from audiences, which negated propagandists' attempts to justify the war by blaming the Allies for the destruction in France. This attempt was not deliberate or systematic, although from this film the Germans learned the importance of systematic and deliberate propaganda and would make it so in future attempts. Films like *Der Weltkrieg* and *The Somme* benefited from *With Our Heroes on the Somme*'s lack of success. German propagandists learned that the images themselves were not necessarily as important as the way they were presented, which is apparent in their use of archived footage in later films. *With Our Heroes on the Somme* is not a successful propaganda film because it failed to shape perspectives as intended by the propagandists. Furthermore, it is not a successful documentary. However, that is not due solely to the fact that the majority of the footage was reenacted—which plays a significant role—but rather it is because propagandists failed to

present the film as an exhibition that audiences could experience. The German film is more akin to the definition of a newsreel than a documentary.

The purpose of *The French Offensive on the Somme* was to inform and reassure the French people that they were not losing or, more accurately, to help audiences accept the modified meaning of the word “victory.” Looking back to the introduction, by 1916, the French definition of victory had changed from breaking through the German lines to simply holding on. *The French Offensive on the Somme* is an example of successful wartime film propaganda because it was part of a deliberate and systematic attempt to overwhelm audiences with copious amounts of optimistic news. This compilation and other newsreels produced throughout the war sustained the French war culture. Just as *Battle of the Somme* had done in Britain, *The French Offensive on the Somme* strengthened resolve and strengthen existing behavior. However, as previously mentioned, it lacked the marketing and run-time to be considered a successful documentary, although it did successfully document the war. Due to the closure of theaters in France, the communal sacrifice of frivolity, and the lack of resources available to the film industry, the film was not screened on the same level as the British film. Although it had comparable footage, the French film’s failure to reach the majority of the domestic population was its most significant failure as propaganda.

Much like the offensive itself, French and British film propagandists also suffered from their lack of coordination, which resulted in two distinct efforts that delivered a muddled message about the enemy. Rather than effectively vilifying the enemy in these two films on the Somme, they illustrated the universal suffering of war when they meant to explain why the offensive had to take place. These films had the potential to communicate any message to the audience and—at that particular moment—film producers and propagandists failed to capitalize on its ability, especially given the use of staged and reenacted scenes. These fabrications were easily manipulated and could have been better utilized, particularly by the Germans who used mostly “faked” film. They could have told whatever story they wanted, but because they did not

understand their audience, how to manipulate footage, or how to develop scenes, they were unable to deliver a compelling story that could sway perspective.

Generally speaking, audiences used the films' content, regardless of the way it was presented, to justify and reaffirm preexisting opinions about the war. There was no radical change in public opinion as a result of these films. Instead, the films enhanced and made more vivid some aspect of the war, which enabled audiences to come to terms with the war in their own ways. For the British, *Battle of the Somme* served as a means of collective mourning. It helped Britons accept the death of their loved ones, because it brought the fight home for them to see and experience. For the French, the film was a means to an end. The efforts to film the war in France were led by the production companies so they reflect the needs of the industry, more so than the government. The French focused their efforts on newsreels because short films allowed for a varied program with little financial risk resting on any particular title. They required only one projector, no reel change, and allowed for a regular turnover of audiences in a relatively small theater.²⁷⁵ Focusing their efforts on short films was the best option for the conditions in France. It sustained the French film industry and made film part of the collective sacrifice and mass mobilization characteristic of the French during the war. Their work must have been interpreted as patriotic. Lastly, the German film served as an advertisement of industry and a reaffirmation of the military's authority. German propagandists struggled to engage their audiences, but by showing how vital German industry was to success on the front, the film quelled working-class discontent. It gave important purpose to their hardships. Although technically a result of propaganda, this was not the intended purpose of the film, but rather an unexpected yet welcome reaction.

Battle of the Somme, *With Our Heroes on the Somme*, and *The French Offensive on the Somme* achieved a number of goals. In the political realm, government agencies were able to produce films that bolstered nationalism. Although they failed to change mass opinion, they

²⁷⁵ Abel, *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, 452.

affected the way people envisioned the battle and remembered the war. All three struggled in some way to connect with their audiences, but that was due to an overall lack of experience with the medium. What each country was able to take away from the experience was the knowledge that film was a powerful medium, capable of reaching audiences unlike any previous form. They also learned that total war required a systematic attempt to link war and ideology through film propaganda.

Without the advent of total war, military officials in Europe might have remained handicapped by fears and preconceived notions about a medium they were only vaguely familiar with. All three countries maintained a robust system of printed propaganda throughout the war while those in the film trade clamored to produce propaganda films for the state, no doubt to illustrate its potential as a legitimate medium for shaping perspectives, manipulating cognitions, and directing behaviors. The role of film in early twentieth-century Europe was precarious and those who were part of the film industry strove to acquire a lasting market before being dismissed as a passing trend. The war culture of each country certainly benefited from the film industry. Those who did not have a robust system of film production developed one for the sake of the war effort. If Europeans learned anything from Germany's invasion of Belgium, it was that war was inevitable. If film could become an integral part of waging war there would always be a use for it. It is safe to say that the film industries in Britain, France, and Germany were encouraged by the war and the international film industry would not be what it is today if not for the First World War and the role film fulfilled in it. Once the medium became "purposeful" rather than merely entertaining, officials devoted resources to it, establishing a position for the young technology at a time when it could have easily been discarded.

Before the war, Britain circulated rather than produced films. By war's end, Britain had produced 28 official films in a little over three years.²⁷⁶ Before the war, a national film industry in Germany was virtually non-existent. The German ban on foreign film also took a large piece of

276 See Appendix 1 of Reeves, "Film Propaganda and Its Audience," 488.

the market from France. Although France had a robust film industry before the war, the production of newsreels prevented the French from sacrificing the film industry altogether. The nationalized or weakened status of the European film industries also provided the opportunity and market to support the growth of the American film industry. While the European industry struggled to survive and establish a solid place in the war, the United States took possession of their former markets. The war simultaneously brought about the decline of film production in Europe and offered it a lifeline. It destroyed many countries' resources and ability to make films, but also increased the size of the market for films. Overall, the war promoted growth and development in film, even in the countries where few films were produced.

These films also influenced the lessons people took away from the war and supported their feelings of injustice about the perpetration of atrocities during the inter-war years. Immediately after the war was when the real propaganda war began. The Allies centralized their propaganda efforts to persuade neutral opinion of Germany's absolute guilt and responsibility for the conflict. When it came to the development of the film industry, the First World War prompted Britain and Germany to develop their own film industries and establish distribution offices throughout the world, which were virtually nonexistent before the war. They were able to develop the narrative technique (the practice of combining separate pieces of film to create a coherent story) and national styles. These First World War developments were improved upon during the interwar period, thus making Second World War propaganda efficient and compelling. Cinemas became a serious battlefield in the 1930s and 1940s as a result of the propaganda films produced in the First World War.

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