

‘Conducting his own Campaigns’: Evelyn Waugh and Propaganda

Guy Woodward

ABSTRACT

This essay examines Evelyn Waugh as practitioner and critic in the field of wartime propaganda. In 1941, Waugh produced a fictitious account of a British Commando raid on German territory in North Africa for publication in Britain and the United States, an episode which reveals his skill as a propagandist, but also prompts scrutiny of his contacts with British propaganda agencies and agents and of the effect of propaganda on his writings. Waugh’s interwar fiction exhibits a sophisticated understanding of the evolving and growing power of modern propaganda, but the novels also anticipate the public relations and psychological warfare campaigns of the Second World War, specifically those carried out by the Political Warfare Executive (PWE), a secret service established in 1941 to produce and coordinate propaganda to enemy and occupied Europe. Waugh’s proximity to the PWE is suggested by a dense network of social and professional connections, and is further indicated by a series of references to the PWE and its work which I have uncovered in his fiction. Allusions to covert propaganda in *Put Out More Flags* and the *Sword of Honour* trilogy betray Waugh’s understanding of the PWE’s operations, but also provide a critique of the corrosive and unforeseen effects of information warfare waged by the secret state and offer a productive means of re-examining his much-noted anxieties regarding modernity and mid-century political change.

On the night of 19–20 April 1941, Brigade Intelligence Officer Evelyn Waugh took part in a disastrous British Commando raid on the German-held Libyan coastal town of Bardia. The aim of the raid was to attack German stores and lines of communication, and to cause enough of a commotion to divert enemy troops away from the front line. Waugh observes in a confidential memorandum on his commando service that intelligence regarding Bardia proved inaccurate: instead of being held by 2000 Axis troops the town was deserted, and the only enemy presence the detachment encountered was a motorcycle patrol, the members of which escaped unharmed. ‘In the circumstances’, he writes, ‘the raid fell flat, the only incidents being caused by our own incapacity’: in a series of blunders an officer was killed by friendly fire, a landing craft ran aground and had to be destroyed, and a party of commandos was

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left behind and captured.¹ One objective was achieved, however, when the motor-cycle patrol raised the alarm, resulting in the diversion of enemy troops to the area.

Omitting the concatenation of mishaps, the writer Evelyn Waugh wrote up the experience in very different terms for public consumption, in an article described by Martin Stannard as ‘an amusing example of how self-aggrandisement and propaganda can twist dull fact into heroic fantasy’.² In a lucrative deal negotiated by Waugh’s agent A. D. Peters, ‘A Commando Raid on Bardia’ appeared first in the London *Evening Standard* and *US Life* magazine, ensuring prominent circulation on both sides of the Atlantic.³ Noting its public relations value, Minister of Information Brendan Bracken ordered the War Office to obtain the copyright for the piece, which was circulated in an amended version as a press release and published in several other newspapers. Waugh achieved considerable celebrity and popularity as a result, to the extent that one headline hailed ‘the Story of a “Bright Young Man” Who is One of the Toughest of Our Commandos’.⁴

Waugh’s presence at the centre of a process by which a secret operation intended to deceive the enemy was transformed into a heroic mission for consumption on the home front prompts questions about his contacts with the British state propaganda apparatus, and the consequent significance of propaganda to his writings. Of course, Waugh’s interest in propaganda has not entirely escaped prior notice. Several critics have noted his apparent hostility to propaganda and public relations in his wartime and post-war fiction, exemplified by his comic attacks on the Ministry of Information (MOI) in *Put Out More Flags* (1942). Meanwhile, Waugh’s satirical reworking of the Bardia mission and subsequent publicity campaign in the second volume of the *Sword of Honour* trilogy (1952–1961), *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955), has been interpreted as ‘an act of self-criticism, or perhaps an attempt at redemption’ to atone for his part in it.⁵ Although Melissa Dinsman perceptively notes that *Put Out More Flags* depicts the invasion of the ‘private sphere’ by the mass media, scholarship has thus far sidestepped the political dimensions of this preoccupation, and has avoided examining the ways in which propaganda tactics and campaigns inflect the texts themselves.⁶ As we shall see, Waugh’s interwar novels display a sophisticated understanding of the evolving and growing power of modern propaganda, but they also anticipate the public relations and psychological warfare campaigns of the Second World War, specifically those carried out by the Political Warfare Executive (PWE), a secret service established in 1941 to produce and coordinate propaganda to enemy and occupied Europe. Unlike the better-known MOI, responsible for propaganda at home and to friendly countries, the PWE’s existence remained secret, due to its

1 *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Michael Davie (Boston, MA and Toronto, 1976), 495.

2 Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: No Abiding City 1939–1966* (London, 1992), 29.

3 Evelyn Waugh, ‘Commando Raid on Bardia’, in Donat Gallagher (ed.), *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh* (London, 1984), 263–8.

4 The headline appeared over Beverly Nichols’s article ‘Here is the Story of a ‘Bright Young Man’ Who is One of the Toughest of Our Commandos’ published in the *Sunday Chronicle* on 23 November 1941 (Donat Gallagher and Carlos Villar Flor, *In the Picture: The Facts behind the Fiction in Evelyn Waugh’s Sword of Honour* (Amsterdam and New York, NY, 2014), 89).

5 Gallagher and Villar Flor, *In the Picture*, 60.

6 Melissa Dinsman, *Modernism at the Microphone: Radio, Propaganda, and Literary Aesthetics During World War II* (London and New York, NY, 2015), 5.

subversive role in spreading covert propaganda and disinformation. The PWE's covert activities included rumour campaigns, leaflet drops, underground publications, and forgeries, all intended to undermine enemy morale and embolden resistance forces. Most notoriously, under former *Daily Express* journalist Sefton Delmer, the agency established a series of radio stations designed to sound as though they were broadcasting from inside enemy territories; one of these, Gustav Siegfried Eins (1941–1943), sought to attract listeners by transmitting obscene material.⁷

Waugh's wartime proximity to the PWE is suggested by a dense network of social and professional connections, and the agency appears to have given good thought to recruiting him in 1943; this proximity is further indicated by a series of references to the agency and its work which I have uncovered in his fiction. Allusions to the secret world of covert propaganda in *Put Out More Flags* and the *Sword of Honour* trilogy betray Waugh's understanding of the PWE's operations, but also signal his unease at the potential corrosive and unforeseen effects of information warfare waged by the secret state.

Drawing on research in the papers of the PWE in the National Archives and on accounts by propaganda agents of the period, this essay reveals how Waugh's writings were marked and informed by propaganda strategies and campaigns, even as he sought to maintain distinctions between literature and propaganda. Building on these readings and on key theories of propaganda by Jacques Ellul and Jonas Staal, I propose that researching Waugh's hitherto under-acknowledged involvement in propaganda activities offers a productive means of re-examining his much-noted anxieties regarding modernity and mid-century political change, and brings to light intriguing parallels between the work of the propagandist and that of the writer of fiction.

I conclude by suggesting that Waugh's attacks on Allied wartime dishonour and his laments for post-war British decline can also be understood as critiques of propaganda. As Staal observes with reference to Western dismissals of 'totalitarian' propaganda, critical commentaries on propaganda are themselves highly effective performances of power, in this case maintaining the (spurious) notion that 'educated and conscious' citizens of Western liberal democracies are able to recognize 'archaic models of manipulation' and exist 'beyond the realm of propaganda'.⁸ The title of the *Sword of Honour* trilogy refers to a wartime propaganda tribute to the Soviet Union which Waugh believed to be symbolic of Allied wartime dishonour, but this bitter reproach in turn embroils the novels in a prolonged cultural Cold War propaganda conflict.

I. INTERWAR FICTION

Following the First World War, and accompanied by the rise of communist and fascist regimes which deployed propaganda as an instrument of power, Waugh's writing career began in a cultural climate in which the relationship between art and propaganda was subject to extensive scrutiny and debate; Samuel Hynes notes that the

7 Delmer gives a bombastic account of these activities in his memoir *Black Boomerang: An Autobiography: Volume Two* (London, 1962).

8 Jonas Staal, 'Propaganda Art: From the 20th to the 21st Century', PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2018, 71.

term 'propaganda' featured heavily in interwar literary criticism, often used negatively by writers who feared 'the aesthetic consequences of political commitment'.⁹ More recently, Mark Wollaeger has suggested that modernist writers were compelled to operate 'within a kind of psychosocial contact zone, a highly contested liminal space defined at one extreme by aesthetic subjectivity construed as an unsullied sanctuary for being, and at the other by propaganda as an encompassing array of manipulative discourses'.¹⁰ Waugh's adoption of a satirical mode in his fiction can be understood as a means of navigating this zone.

A series of episodes in Waugh's 1930s novels indicates an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the accelerating significance of public relations and information warfare in the interwar period. Towards the beginning of *Vile Bodies* (1930), customs officers confiscate books belonging to the novelist Adam Symes in an attempt to secure the British border against 'Subversive Propaganda'—an apparently simple joke at the expense of uncultured petty officialdom which ultimately gestures towards the complexity of the relationship between art and propaganda.¹¹ The joke turns on the apparent misuse of the term and first articulates an authorial conviction of what should and should not be deemed propaganda: it appears ridiculous that a study of economics and a manuscript draft of Symes's memoirs could fall into this category. However, the incident also evokes a newly expansive conception of propaganda encompassing multiple textual forms and styles, ultimately embodied in the slogan coined by Upton Sinclair five years earlier that 'all art is propaganda'.¹² The novel's ironically titled 'Happy Ending' endorses this conception, recognizing that propaganda has become integral to modern warfare: stranded on a battlefield in the midst of an unspecified and catastrophic global conflict, Symes receives a letter from his fiancée Nina Blount featuring news of their friends, in which he learns that publisher Sam Benfleet is 'doing very well with his 'Sword Unsheathed' series of war poets' and that journalist Van now has 'a divine job making up all the war news'—Van's invention of a story involving Symes's valour has resulted in popular clamour for the award of a Victoria Cross. Blount's own address of 'Doubting Hall', meanwhile, ventures a pun on the atmosphere of mistrust created by such fabrications.¹³ With its 'splintered tree stump', 'great expanse of mud' and 'strands of barbed wire', the battlefield is immediately evocative of the Western Front, and the cynicism of this conclusion articulates the profound disillusionment that followed the First World War, disillusionment often attributed to public weariness and distrust of the conflict's propaganda campaigns.¹⁴ Addressing the recruitment of a group of eminent British writers by C. F. G. Masterman to produce material for the government's War Propaganda Bureau, Wollaeger has argued that British propaganda operations during the conflict 'contributed to the epistemological decline of the fact', a process

9 Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London, 1992), 74, 82.

10 Mark Wollaeger, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative From 1900 to 1945* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 2006), xiv.

11 Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (London, 1965), 30.

12 Quoted in Staal, 'Propaganda Art', 141.

13 Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 217.

14 Waugh, *Vile Bodies*, 217–18.

registered by 'a wide range of modernist texts'; *Vile Bodies* certainly bears the influence of these operations in its bitterly satirical 'Happy Ending'.¹⁵

Highlighting the decisive role of propaganda in conflict, Waugh's third novel *Black Mischief* (1932) develops this theme even further, when the pugnacious General Connolly informs Emperor Seth that a recently acquired modern tank has proved useless in battle, and that the war against the forces of Seth's father Seyid had been won 'by two very ancient weapons—lies and the long spear'.¹⁶ Seyid's initial propaganda success in circulating a leaflet claiming that his son had converted to Islam, thereby sparking a wave of defections, is repelled when Connolly spreads a counter-rumour that Seth is the reincarnation of Amurath, the revered first emperor and founder of the fictional state of Azania.¹⁷ The protean scoundrel Basil Seal's later modernization programme for Azania also depends upon an extensive public relations campaign; he purchases the state's sole newspaper and successfully reconfigures it as an organ of the regime. Seth's own investment in PR offers a cautionary tale, however: his enthusiasm for birth control and desire to 'popularize it by propaganda' through the spectacle of a pageant ends in disaster when the emperor is overthrown in a coup during the parade.¹⁸

As a satire of the acquisitive venality and fundamental unseriousness of the British media establishment, Waugh's fifth novel *Scoop* (1938) likewise demonstrates its author's understanding of propaganda as a performance of power, in Lord Copper's proprietorial attitude to foreign conflicts as spectacles which entertain readers and advance the interests of media owners. The novel also targets Soviet propaganda, with its description of the day-long fictional 'Soviet State of Ishmaelia'. In addressing the co-option of culture in wartime public relations, the use of disinformation in political warfare, and the transnational impact of Soviet propaganda, each of these early novels anticipates a form of campaign which would be deployed extensively in the Second World War and to which Waugh would return in later works.

Writing in the year of *Scoop*'s publication, Waugh lamented 'an age that can only digest propaganda', but around this time his own work had taken a lucrative propagandist turn.¹⁹ In *Horizon* in December 1946, Rose Macaulay recalled her relief at the publication of *Scoop*, having feared after the publication of the biography *Edmund Campion* (1935) and the travelogue *Waugh in Abyssinia* (1936) that 'we were losing [Waugh], that the wit was being slain by the propagandist and the partisan'.²⁰ Waugh himself was keen to distance himself from this unwelcome reputation, semi-ironically promising readers 'No more fascist propaganda' during promotional duties for *Scoop*.²¹ However, the following year saw the publication of Waugh's most explicitly propagandist text, the travelogue *Robbery Under Law* (1939), which Macaulay fails to mention. This was written following a trip to Mexico paid for by the Cowdray family, whose oil interests in the country had been nationalized by the

15 Wollaege, *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda*, xiv.

16 Evelyn Waugh, *Black Mischief* (Harmondsworth, 1977), 40.

17 Waugh, *Black Mischief*, 42.

18 Waugh, *Black Mischief*, 129.

19 Waugh, 'The Habits of the English', in *Essays, Articles and Reviews*, 226–8 (228).

20 Rose Macaulay, 'The Best and the Worst: II—Evelyn Waugh', *Horizon*, 84 (December 1946), 360–76 (370–1).

21 Quoted in Donat Gallagher, 'Introduction', in *Essays, Articles and Reviews*, 153–60 (159).

Lázaro Cárdenas government earlier the same year. The text's backers are unacknowledged, although its propagandist intentions are signalled by the opening words 'This is a political book': *Robbery Under Law* goes on to address the iniquities of confiscating assets and is also critical of the Cárdenas administration's other socialist reforms.²² It has been dismissed by Stannard as the 'cheapest form of polemic', in which unsupported generalizations masquerade as universal truths.²³ The book certainly shows that Waugh was not above deploying crude propaganda tactics, as he raises a hard-to-disprove conspiracy theory that the Freemasons have played a powerful and secretive role in Mexican affairs. *Robbery Under Law* also adopted more sophisticated approaches, however. As in *Scoop*, Waugh's hostility to the Soviet Union is channelled through a focus on its iconography: a visit to the September 1938 Six Year Plan Exhibition in Mexico City provokes hostile descriptions of 'the heraldry of Marxism', of hammers and sickles and stars adorned with the names of Lenin and Marx.²⁴ Waugh also argues that under Cárdenas 'education is a department of propaganda', suggesting that classroom materials on display at the exhibition expose the 'Marxist character of the state education'.²⁵ Staal contends that 'Whereas British capitalist modernity produced a model of covert propaganda in service of elite interests, the Soviets' engagement with a revolutionary modernity aimed to produce a model of overt propaganda in service of and practiced by the proletarian masses'.²⁶ *Robbery Under Law* presents an intriguing nexus of the two models, in which we can observe the propagandist's redeployment of his enemy's overt propaganda—as Staal has shown, critical commentary on the propaganda output of opposing 'totalitarian' regimes is an effective approach when promoting the interests of capitalist liberal democracy.²⁷ Waugh's dual status as practitioner and critic here points to the path he would take in the coming conflict.

II. WAUGH AND THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION

The contradictory position of a propagandist hostile to propaganda can also be seen in Waugh's reactions to the looming war over the summer of 1939, when he appears to have been torn between his aversion to propaganda and recognition that, as an accomplished writer and journalist, he was well-placed to take up a role in its production. The precedent of the First World War, during which a range of novelists including J. M. Barrie, Arthur Conan Doyle, and H. G. Wells were recruited to produce material for the War Propaganda Bureau, certainly suggested that the services of writers would be required by British government agencies.²⁸ On 27 August Waugh

22 Evelyn Waugh, *Robbery Under Law: The Mexican Object-Lesson* (London, 2011), 3.

23 Martin Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: The Early Years 1903–1939* (London, 1986), 486.

24 Waugh, *Robbery Under Law*, 180.

25 Waugh, *Robbery Under Law*, 132, 219.

26 Staal, 'Propaganda Art', 166.

27 Staal, 'Propaganda Art', 166. Covert propaganda is more often associated with secret state-backed campaigns, but seems an appropriate term in this case, given Waugh's omission of any acknowledgement of his financial backers in the text of the first edition. The political bias of the text is perfectly clear, but the author's motives for writing it remain hidden.

28 The activities of C. F. G. Masterman's War Propaganda Bureau (commonly known as Wellington House) are described by Peter Buitenhuis in *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda 1914–18 and After* (London, 1989).

confided fears in his diary that working in 'a government office' would 'finish' him as a writer, but as war broke a few days later he was pressing contacts in the nascent MOI in the hope of securing a post acting as liaison with foreign war correspondents.²⁹ On 5 September he received a letter from the ministry telling him he was 'on their list', but his efforts were ultimately fruitless, and in December he was commissioned into the Royal Marines.³⁰ One of Waugh's contacts at the MOI was A. D. Peters, whose negative reports to Waugh about activities at Senate House formed the basis for Waugh's satirical jibes at the ministry in *Put Out More Flags*.³¹ Waugh's friend Graham Greene also worked at Senate House for a period of months in 1940; his short story 'Men at Work' (1942) articulates his frustrations at the inefficiency and lethargy of the organization.

Waugh's 'main target' in *Put Out More Flags*, as Jeffrey Heath observes, is the MOI: 'As the well-head of government propaganda, censorship, and political art, the ministry excited Waugh's especial disgust and sharpened his sense of the absurd'.³² Derived from a Chinese proverb, the novel's title ironically evokes an exuberant patriotism and militarism at odds with the novel's episodic narrative, much of which focuses on the acquisitive and devious efforts made by the spivish Basil Seal to profit from the early years of the Second World War. The novel achieves considerable comic mileage by exploiting dissonances between official Home Front rhetoric and the activities and experiences of its characters: Seal's weaponization of the troublesome Connolly evacuees in a blackmail scam, for example, undermines wholesome media coverage of the time showing urban juveniles enjoying the new freedoms afforded by country living. Meanwhile, Sir Joseph Mainwaring's continual mispredictions regarding the course of the war satirize Blimpish overconfidence and warn readers against placing trust in official narratives, and Angela Lyne's twin addictions to propaganda broadcasts and alcohol appear to indicate through the latter the debilitating effects of the former.

Put Out More Flags mercilessly satirizes the production and reception of propaganda with particular reference to the MOI. Senate House is described in threatening terms as 'a vast bulk . . . insulting the sky' and 'a gross mass of masonry', but within its labyrinthine corridors lies a civil service carnival of bathos.³³ The ministry is depicted as an autosarcophagous bureaucracy and the home of a range of uncoordinated schemes and plans of dubious value, emanating from departments dedicated to folk-dancing, woodcuts and weaving, and the Arctic Circle. Marina MacKay notes that Waugh also takes aim at Penguin Specials and the Crown Film Unit as purveyors of limp liberalism and picturesque distraction, indicating a growing dissatisfaction at British wartime self-projection.³⁴ The MOI was a popular target at this time, as Greene's story demonstrates: John Lehmann recalled that 'Making fun of the Min.

29 Waugh, *Diaries*, 440. The Ministry of Information was established on 4 September 1939 to produce and coordinate propaganda at home and to Allied and neutral countries.

30 Waugh, *Diaries*, 440.

31 Waugh, *Diaries*, 439, 451.

32 Jeffrey Heath, *The Picturesque Prison: Evelyn Waugh and His Writing* (Kingston, and Montreal, 1982), 157.

33 Evelyn Waugh, *Put Out More Flags* (Harmondsworth, 1977), 61. Further references are cited parenthetically as POMF.

34 Marina Mackay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge, 2007), 121.

of Inf. became the favourite intellectual pastime of the first year of the war'.³⁵ As we shall see, however, *Put Out More Flags* ventures into new territory by engaging with British black propaganda campaigns.

III. WAUGH THE PROPAGANDIST

By the end of 1940, having failed in his quest to find a berth at the MOI, Waugh had been posted to a commando unit of the British Army. The commandos had been formed by volunteers from regular army units after the Dunkirk evacuation just five months earlier, when the outlook for Britain was bleak; unconstrained by traditional command structures and disliked by many senior military figures for their irregular and unconventional approach to warfare, the propaganda potential of the commandos was nevertheless quickly realized and exploited. James Owen explains that 'the public was ready to be inspired by any organisation which took the fight to the enemy, and the media was willing to do its bit to raise morale. So was born the image of the commando, dagger between his teeth, striking night after night in a carefully coordinated campaign of sabotage and raiding'.³⁶ Waugh's article for the *Evening Standard* and *Life* was an early entry in a large and still-growing body of work celebrating the commandos (encompassing popular fiction, film, television and memoir, as well as journalism) which has contributed to an overestimation of the force's importance in the Second World War.

The extent to which Waugh managed to transform a relatively unsuccessful assault into a heroic mission is demonstrated by Carlos Villar Flor's extended comparison of the account in the *Evening Standard* and *Life* with the secret memo. In the published article, for example, the commandos open fire on an Axis patrol using Tommy guns and grenades but 'somehow [they] got through. They were not an easy target'.³⁷ In the bathetic memo, Waugh simply notes that they 'failed to stop' the patrol: 'one man injured himself slightly with his own grenade (he reported it as enemy action until the fragments removed from his rump disproved the tale)'.³⁸ The public relations techniques Waugh mocked in his interwar fiction—and would continue to satirize in *Put Out More Flags* and the *Sword of Honour* trilogy—are here openly adopted and deployed. As Stannard has observed, the piece is written in a 'Boy's Own' register.³⁹ Waugh writes of one young troop leader that 'when I saw him with his troop I realized that his men would follow him anywhere', and recalls that on the day of the raid the commandos were 'too cheerful to rest' and instead busied themselves 'sharpening bayonets, disposing grenades about their persons, blacking gym shoes. It reminded me of the scene in *The Wind in the Willows* where Badger prepares the attack on Toad Hall'.⁴⁰ For all such bravado, Waugh's article is also open about the fact that the Bardia raid was intended partly as an exercise in disinformation, designed to trick the Axis forces into thinking a large-scale attack was being mounted.⁴¹

35 John Lehmann, *I Am My Brother: Autobiography II* (London, 1960), 29.

36 James Owen, *Commando: Winning World War II Behind Enemy Lines* (London, 2012), xxix.

37 Waugh, 'Commando Raid on Bardia' in *Essays, Articles and Reviews*, 263–8 (267).

38 Waugh, *Diaries*, 496.

39 Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: No Abiding City*, 29.

40 Waugh, 'Commando Raid on Bardia' in *Essays, Articles and Reviews*, 264, 266.

41 Waugh, 'Commando Raid on Bardia' in *Essays, Articles and Reviews*, 265.

Waugh's aptitude as a propagandist is evident on a number of levels: his inclusion of a reference to Kenneth Grahame's comfortingly familiar children's tale is a skilful means of fostering identification on the part of British readers for the military men. The article also helped advance the interests of a nascent branch of the armed forces in the face of the resistance and jealousy of longer-established branches (tellingly, Royal Marines officials were angry that the article was published without their having been consulted). Finally, we can also infer that the article's publication in *Life* was designed to augment the standing of the British military in the United States: a sub-heading proclaims that 'Commandos Are a British Innovation'.⁴²

Facing in so many directions at once, Waugh's article also exposes an issue that would complicate Second World War propaganda operations: the difficulty of controlling information flows in the age of mass media. Propaganda intended for the home front could be read and digested relatively easily by enemy intelligence services, while propaganda campaigns directed at enemy forces produced unforeseen effects at home. This was especially true of rumours, which circulated and mutated beyond the control of their originators. The integration of operations required by Total War meant that it also became harder to distinguish between overt and covert propaganda and between military and public relations campaigns. Jan Mieszkowski notes that 'to 'win' a battle [is] as much to secure control of the story in the popular imagination as to rout the opponent's forces or take control of the particular locale'; we might assume that propaganda campaigns are designed to supplement and support military operations, but the Bardia operation questions this hierarchy.⁴³ Mieszkowski's observation accords with Jonas Staal's definition of modern propaganda as a 'performance of power', while Staal's consequential assertion that propaganda as a performance 'contains both a political and artistic component' is exemplified by Waugh's participation in the operation and subsequent article.⁴⁴

Through the comparable subplot in *Officers and Gentlemen*, depicting the staging of a military operation for the purposes of propaganda, Waugh implies that British wartime Special Forces were established in part for PR reasons and had become dependent on sympathetic press coverage. When the fictional Hazardous Offensive Operations agency (HOO)—a 'bizarre product of total war' staffed by 'experts, charlatans, plain lunatics, and every unemployed member of the British Communist Party'—is threatened with closure, its planners decide to launch a PR offensive.⁴⁵ Operation 'Popgun' is mounted solely in an attempt to maintain HOO as a going concern by securing public credibility ('We must mount an operation at once and call in the press' (SOH 285)). The bathetically named Popgun is an unambitious plan to mount a commando raid on an uninhabited island near Jersey, with the aim of destroying a German radar station. Due to fog, however, the eight-man landing party end up in France, where Ian Kilbannock and Trimmer are shot at by a farmer

42 Evelyn Waugh, 'Commando Raid On Bardia,' *Life*, (17 November 1941), 63–74 (63).

43 Jan Mieszkowski, *Watching War* (Stanford, CA, 2012), 4.

44 Staal, 'Propaganda Art', 17.

45 Evelyn Waugh, *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* (Harmondsworth, 1984), 255. Further references are cited parenthetically as SOH. This may be interpreted as a swipe at the Special Operations Executive, which was often accused of being a hotbed of communism (Bickham Sweet-Escott, *Baker Street Irregular* (London, 1965), 13).

who mistakes them for trespassers and end up achieving nothing, although sappers who have ventured further inland make an opportunistic raid and blow up a section of railway track. Back in London, Kilbannock, a former journalist, produces an official citation crediting Trimmer for the leadership of a successful sabotage mission, and hailing his ‘exemplary coolness’ in carrying this out (SOH 311). Sticking scrupulously to the facts, this short paragraph allows readers to observe the means by which a farcical episode is converted into a public relations triumph; it also illustrates James Purdon’s observation in *Modernist Informatics* (2016) that wartime readers ‘Confronted with a constant stream of wartime propaganda’ were compelled to read ‘between the lines’ as a means of interpreting official reports.⁴⁶ A further transformation may be noted when Kilbannock suggests to his superior that ‘a little colour’ will need to be added for the press release; in the next scene, Crouchback’s father—making no attempt to read between the lines—is heartened and stimulated by reading newspaper accounts of the raid, which describe the former hairdresser Trimmer’s leading role in ‘one of the most daring exploits in military history’ (SOH 312). The weary and cynical Ivor Claire, by contrast, dismisses news of the raid as ‘Some nonsense of Brendan’s, obviously’ (SOH 313), expressing a corrosive assumption that the operation was directed by the then Minister for Information (who had been responsible, of course, for boosting Waugh’s Bardia article).

IV. WAUGH’S CONTACTS IN THE FIELD

As far as we know, Waugh never worked directly for the British propaganda agencies during the war, but his military activities and social life brought him into contact with these organizations on multiple occasions and he was by no means innocent of their workings.⁴⁷ Like many of his contemporaries, Waugh’s writings of this period certainly reveal an ongoing preoccupation with the production and reception of wartime propaganda, and convey a profound anxiety regarding its effects. They also reflect the feedback loop outlined by Staal, whereby artists and writers seeking to address the topic are compelled to engage with its forms and conventions. Waugh’s hostility to the willing co-option of literature and culture was forcefully expressed in his fierce response to the October 1941 *Horizon* manifesto ‘Why Not War Writers?’, signed by a group of prominent writers including Arthur Koestler, George Orwell and Stephen Spender, all of whom worked in British propaganda during the war years. The manifesto had proposed an official writers scheme: writing as an anonymous ‘Combatant’, Waugh—presumably with his recent experiences on Crete and in North Africa in mind—deplored this proposal to ‘go on jaunts’ and to ‘assume the privileges of commissioned ranks without its obligations’.⁴⁸ Waugh’s antagonism was also rooted in aesthetic and political prejudices, of course: the letter is contemptuous of ‘poets (of a kind) and Left-Book-Club-sub-group-assistant-organizing-secretaries’ and questions *Horizon*’s categorization of such writers as ‘creative’ (the placing of the

46 James Purdon, *Modernist Informatics: Literature, Information, and the State* (New York, NY, 2016), 180.

47 I can find only one mention of Waugh in the papers of the PWE, in a November 1944 report by Lord Birkenhead for the agency’s Director General, R. H. Bruce-Lockhart (Earl of Birkenhead, ‘Report to R. H. Bruce-Lockhart on mission to Yugoslavia’ (23 November 1944), (London, the National Archives, FO 898/159. Hereafter referred to as TNA)).

48 ‘Combatant’, ‘Letter: Why Not War Writers?’, *Horizon*, 24 (December 1941), 437–42 (438).

term within quotation marks is a particularly mocking touch).⁴⁹ These barbs imply that Waugh disliked the openness of the commitment as much as the commitment itself; the growth of covert propaganda during the Second World War, meanwhile, suggested that there were other more inventive ways of doing business.

Having returned to Britain, and following an unsuccessful spell in the Royal Horse Guards in 1942–1943, Waugh reported to his wife in September 1943 that he had been ‘negotiating’ with the Political Warfare Executive and had had ‘several cordial interviews’ with the agency, while he waited to see if a preferred role in the Special Air Service would materialize.⁵⁰ It is unclear who instigated these negotiations, but R. H. Bruce Lockhart, who had been appointed the PWE’s Director General the previous year, was one of the contacts Waugh had approached on the eve of war to offer his services.⁵¹ It is also unclear what the agency’s plans for Waugh might have been, but Waugh’s friend and biographer Christopher Sykes suggests that the PWE approached him because they wanted to make use of his ‘intellectual abilities’.⁵² Waugh’s skilful manipulation of modes and registers in his writings would presumably have served him well, as would his extensive experience of foreign travel; other transferable skills included his visual literacy and ability to produce copy to order—as shown by the *Evening Standard* and *Life* article.

References to secret propaganda work are scattered across his war fiction. In *Put Out More Flags*, Basil Seal, who has arrived at Senate House with a plan to annex Liberia, is advised to consult a Mr Digby-Smith, who handles ‘propaganda and subversive activities in enemy territory’ (*POMF* 67). The research activities in the building are described bathetically for comic effect in the novel, but in fact closely resemble the kind of granular, laborious and unglamorous analysis recalled by figures involved in the PWE and its predecessor agencies: ‘Two yards distant the Nonconformist minister was checking statistics about the popularity of beer-gardens among Nazi officials. The Church of England clergyman was making the most of some rather scrappy Dutch information about cruelty to animals in Bremen’ (*POMF* 113). Memoirs by the PWE’s black propaganda supremo Sefton Delmer and propaganda agents Thomas Barman and John Baker White all stress the importance of scrutinizing enemy source material for scraps of intelligence; historian Charles Cruickshank reports that by spring 1940 the PWE’s predecessor propaganda agency Department EH was receiving 90 German newspapers and periodicals, 100 newspapers from allied and neutral countries, and a large number of publications produced by refugee groups in Britain.⁵³

Other fiction makes more direct reference to wartime covert propaganda activities. Alluding directly to the PWE, the 1949 postscript to ‘Work Suspended’ (1939) notes that bourgeois and comfort-loving Communist Roger Simmonds spent the war ‘in the office of Political Warfare’, while in the short story ‘Tactical Exercise’ (1947)

49 ‘Combatant’, ‘Letter: Why Not War Writers?’, 438.

50 *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. Mark Amory (London, 1980), 169.

51 Waugh, *Diaries*, 439. Bruce Lockhart records meeting Waugh in July 1929 at the house of Lady Rosslyn, a friend of the older man; Waugh was a friend and Oxford contemporary of Rosslyn’s son, James Alexander Wedderburn St Clair-Erskine (*The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart Volume Two: 1939–1965*, ed. Kenneth Young (London, 1980), 95).

52 Christopher Sykes, *Evelyn Waugh: A Biography* (London, 1975), 233.

53 Charles Cruickshank, *The Fourth Arm: Psychological Warfare 1938–1945* (Oxford, 1981), 60.

Elizabeth, a linguist, works during the war 'in a clandestine branch of the Foreign Office'.⁵⁴ Officially a Foreign Office operation, the PWE used the FO's 'Political Intelligence Department' as cover for its operations. *Sword of Honour*, meanwhile, makes reference to the establishment of other secret agencies: searching for a suitable role at the outbreak of war, Guy Crouchback in *Men At Arms* (1952) hears tantalizing rumours of 'mysterious departments known only by their initials or as 'So-and-so's cloak and dagger boys'. Bankers, gamblers, men with jobs in oil companies seemed to find a way there; not Guy' (*SOH* 21). The recruitment of agents for secret service work from the banking sector has been well documented; the reference to oil companies is suggestive both of Waugh's work for the Cowdray family and of Robert Byron, a close friend of Sykes and acquaintance of Waugh who had worked in publicity for Burmah Shell during the 1930s.⁵⁵ In spring 1938, when war seemed likely, Byron briefly became involved in planning propaganda campaigns to Germany at the embryonic MOI.⁵⁶ Other friends and acquaintances played diverse roles in the field. Sykes, to whom *Men at Arms* is dedicated, served in Cairo and Tehran with the Special Operations Executive (SOE) in 1941–1943, building up a propaganda unit in the Egyptian capital.⁵⁷ His novel *High-Minded Murder* (1944) captures the febrile and duplicitous atmosphere in the secret services in Cairo, where Waugh visited him in 1941. Graham Greene spent a short period working for the PWE in June–July 1944, running a section with the writer Antonia White which produced a literary digest entitled *Choix* for distribution in liberated France.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, Moray McLaren, whom Waugh supported financially after the war, was the PWE's Regional Director for Poland, the cartoonist Osbert Lancaster, a contemporary at Oxford, worked on 'secret campaigns' at the agency's country headquarters at Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire, and another university acquaintance, John Betjeman, served for a time as 'PWE's chosen instrument in Dublin' disseminating 'sibs', rumours designed to deceive the enemy, to undermine enemy morale, or to damage perceptions of the enemy.⁵⁹

The density of the overlapping social and professional networks from which propagandists were recruited is redolent of Waugh's novels, within and between which a fluctuating and recurring cast of characters circulate. Waugh's own later wartime encounters with propagandists reflect this. In August 1944, having been invalided out of Yugoslavia the previous month to receive treatment for injuries sustained during a plane crash, Waugh stayed in Rome at the flat of the PWE's John Rayner.⁶⁰

54 Evelyn Waugh, 'Work Suspended' in Ann Pasternak Slater (ed.), *The Complete Short Stories and Selected Drawings* (New York, NY, London, and Toronto, 1998), 225–320 (320); Waugh, 'Tactical Exercise' in *Complete Short Stories*, 405–18 (406).

55 James Knox, *Robert Byron* (London, 2003), 189–223. These recruitment practices are described by Sweet-Escott in *Baker Street Irregular*, 44 and David Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance 1940–1945: A Survey of the Special Operations Executive, with Documents* (London and Basingstoke, 1983), 21.

56 Knox, *Robert Byron*, 394–404.

57 This is indicated by a cipher telegram from Cairo despatched on 8 May 1943, which appears in Christopher Sykes's SOE personnel file (London, TNA, HS 9/1433/9).

58 Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene: Volume Two: 1939–1955* (London, 1994), 187.

59 Heath, 266; Peter Quennell, *The Wanton Chase: An Autobiography from 1939* (London, 1980), 14; Eunan O'Halpin, *Spying on Ireland: British Intelligence and Irish Neutrality During the Second World War* (Oxford, 2008), 210. The word 'sib' derives from the Latin 'sibillare', meaning to hiss or whisper (Delmer, *Black Boomerang*, 66).

60 Norman Page, *An Evelyn Waugh Chronology* (Basingstoke, 1997), 77.

An expert on typeface and design who had revolutionized the appearance of the *Daily Express* in the 1930s, Rayner served the PWE in a number of areas during the war, including printed propaganda, radio broadcasting, and the production of sibs. Waugh records in his diaries that he hardly knew Rayner before arriving at his flat on the Via Gregoriana, but the two men appear to have developed a rapport, dining together most evenings during the novelist's convalescence.⁶¹ Waugh's stay in Rayner's flat was arranged by another figure who worked in propaganda, Edmund 'Mondi' Howard, then attached to the Psychological Warfare Branch (PWB) of Allied Forces Headquarters.⁶² On his return to Croatia in September, Waugh served with Randolph Churchill (son of the wartime Prime Minister) on a branch of British envoy Fitzroy Maclean's military mission to the Yugoslav partisans; they were joined in Topusko by Lord Birkenhead in October.⁶³ Waugh's diary suggests that part of the mission's role was to receive and disseminate propaganda, and that he had direct access to these publications: he records on 5 November that an air drop had 'brought a vast assortment of PWB material and Randolph made the living room uninhabitable apportioning it'.⁶⁴ The veracity of Birkenhead's report on the mission for the PWE's Director General has been questioned—its upbeat tone is certainly at odds with Waugh's dejected account in his diaries of his time in Croatia—but certainly suggests that propaganda was one of the mission's primary objectives.⁶⁵ As the second half of this article will show, Waugh's contacts with Britain's wartime propaganda apparatus provided crucial source material for his extended fictions of the Second World War.

V. PUT OUT MORE FLAGS AND BLACK PROPAGANDA

Readers of *Black Mischief* will be aware that Basil Seal's pre-war career was chequered and transnational, and featured several roles in media and public relations. *Put Out More Flags* provides further details: Seal has been leader writer on Lord Copper's *Daily Beast*, 'given the first of what was intended to be a series of talks for the B.B.C.', worked as a screenwriter and as 'press agent for a female contortionist' (POMF 48). Significantly, the novel ends with Seal joining the commandos, ensuring his offstage participation in future Bardia-style propaganda campaigns. Constantly calculating and terminally insincere, Seal's modus operandi is explicitly characterized as that of an aggressive and determined propagandist, ideally placed to profit from the outbreak of war:

Basil was in the habit, as it were, of conducting his own campaigns, issuing his own ultimatums, disseminating his own propaganda, erecting about himself his own blackout; he was an obstreperous minority of one in a world of otiose civilians. He was used, in his own life, to a system of push, appeasement,

61 Waugh, *Diaries*, 575.

62 Waugh, *Diaries*, 575.

63 Waugh, *Diaries*, 582.

64 Waugh, *Diaries*, 589.

65 Martin Stannard suggests that Birkenhead's report of a 'harmonious atmosphere' to the mission was a 'diplomatic lie' (Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh: No Abiding City*, 121).

agitation, and blackmail, which, except that it had no more distant aim than his own immediate amusement, ran parallel to Nazi diplomacy. (POMF 49)

Taking Seal's identity as a propagandist seriously, we can see that beyond Waugh's comic fatalism, his anti-hero's acquisitive and amoral pursuit of his interests through a series of mini campaigns designed to alter the thought processes of others shows how the tactics of the propagandist are replicated in human relations. Specifically, Seal's actions replicate the strategies and tactics of black propaganda as practised during the war by Waugh's friends and associates in the PWE and its predecessor agencies. The sociologist Jacques Ellul makes a useful distinction between covert (black) and overt (white) propaganda, writing that:

The former tends to hide its aims, identity, significance, and source. The people are not aware that someone is trying to influence them, and do not feel that they are being pushed in a certain direction. This is often called "black propaganda." It also makes use of mystery and silence. The other kind, "white propaganda," is open and aboveboard. There is a Ministry of Propaganda; one admits that propaganda is being made; its source is known; its aims and intentions are identified. The public knows that an attempt is being made to influence it.⁶⁶

In one episode towards the end of *Put Out More Flags*, the Jewish writer Ambrose Silk plans to publish *Monument to a Spartan*, a memoir of his German lover Hans, a committed member of the Hitler Youth until his Nazi comrades discover that he is Jewish. Basil's entrapment of Silk is complex: he persuades the writer to edit the piece until it appears to promote Nazi ideology, then on its publication promptly presents it to an intelligence officer as evidence of Silk's fascist sympathies. Seal's material rewards are a senior role in intelligence (having smeared the officer, he takes over the man's post) and Silk's flat in Bloomsbury (Seal helps Silk escape to Ireland disguised as a priest).

In manipulating Silk, Seal's manoeuvres resemble propaganda techniques deployed by the PWE: in a manual compiled by the agency in the same year as the novel's publication, propaganda is defined as

the deliberate direction, or even manipulation, of information to secure a definite objective. It is an attempt to direct the thinking of the recipient, without his conscious collaboration, into predetermined channels. It is the conditioning of the recipient by devious methods with an ulterior motive. Propaganda emphasises those facts which best serve its purpose. It creates the atmosphere in which the audience is most susceptible to suggestion. By power of suggestion, which in favourable circumstances becomes instruction, it secures positive action.⁶⁷

The resemblance to Ellul's definition is striking, but so too are the discernible parallels between the crafting of propaganda copy, as directed above, and the practice of writing fiction. These parallels have been identified by Wollaeger, who suggests that

66 Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York, NY, 1973), 15.

67 'The Meaning, Techniques and Methods of Political Warfare', London, TNA, FO 898/101.

propagandists and modernist writers both strove ‘to make meaning effective through ambiguity’, and Gayatri Spivak, who makes the chilling observation that ‘Literature buys your assent in an almost clandestine way and therefore it is an excellent instrument for a slow transformation of the mind’.⁶⁸ The centrality of literary texts to the episode signals Waugh’s awareness of these parallels: in the novel, Seal at first suggests that Silk includes ‘a little poem in praise of Hitler—something like that’, at which the writer demurs, observing that ‘as far as I know no one has written a poem like that’. Seal’s reply—‘I dare say I could rake one up for you’ (*POMF* 190)—can be interpreted either as an offer to find such a poem through intelligence work, or—more likely—to fabricate one himself (an allusion, perhaps, to the PWE’s extensive counterfeit and forgery operations, detailed by Howe in his memoir *The Black Game* (1982)). When Silk refuses the offer, Seal takes another approach:

‘No,’ said Ambrose. ‘What did you think of *Monument to a Spartan?*’
 ‘All the first part is first rate. I suppose they made you put on that ending?’
 ‘Who?’
 ‘The Ministry of Information.’
 ‘They’ve had nothing to do with it.’

‘Haven’t they? Well, of course, you know best. I can only say how it reads to an outsider. What I felt was—here is a first-class work of art; something no one but you could have written. And then, suddenly, it degenerates into mere propaganda. Jolly good propaganda, of course; I wish half the stuff your Ministry turns out was as good—but propaganda. An atrocity story—the sort of stuff American journalists turn out by the ream. . . .’ (*POMF* 190–1)

Ellul observes that in psychological warfare ‘the propagandist is dealing with a foreign adversary whose morale he seeks to destroy by psychological means so that the opponent begins to doubt the validity of his beliefs and actions’, and in this exchange Seal deploys a series of tactics familiar from such wartime campaigns.⁶⁹ ‘Conditioning the recipient’, as the PWE manual suggests, he undermines Silk’s confidence in his own work by raising the suspicion that the MOI is interfering with the work of writers; raising this in the form of an assumption, rather than a question, he forces Silk on the defensive and then takes full control of the situation, bombarding him with a volley of assertions reinforced through (significant) repetition of the word ‘propaganda’, while simultaneously flattering him (‘a first class work of art’) and granting him agency (‘you know best’). This also accords with Charles Cruickshank’s description of British black radio broadcasts: ‘There was no direct attempt to order listeners to do anything. It was left to them to ponder the news story they had just heard, and then of their own volition to do whatever the propagandists had planned they should do’.⁷⁰ Seal’s mention of propaganda undermines Silk’s work but also raises the troubling possibility that war news in the form of ‘atrocity stories’ are being fabricated, and foments a greater and potentially existential crisis of

68 Wollaeger, xiv; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2012), 38.

69 Ellul, *Propaganda*, xiii.

70 Cruickshank, *The Fourth Arm*, 80.

mistrust. Self-aware dismissals of enemy narratives as propaganda—thereby acknowledging the existence of a propaganda conflict—was itself an important tactic in wartime propaganda. Most importantly, however, Seal's approach conforms to Ellul's conception of a propagandist operating with the objective of provoking action and achieving a material change in circumstances (the 'positive action' specified by the PWE manual), rather than a mere change of mind.

VI. SWORD OF HONOUR AND THE WARTIME INFORMATION SYSTEM

Stimulated by his contact with and involvement in a range of propaganda operations, Waugh, in the *Sword of Honour* trilogy, continues to unpick the lack of synchrony between the lived experience of those on the ground and the rhetoric of Home Front wartime propaganda; Donat Gallagher notes that the novels expose 'the gap between real events and how they are officially reported'.⁷¹ The centrality of this exposure to the narrative is indicated sotto voce by Kut Al Imara, the name given to the gloomy boarding school in which Guy Crouchback's Halberdiers are billeted in *Men at Arms*. Villar Flor explains that this derives from Al Kut in Iraq, the location of a disastrous siege in 1916 in which tens of thousands of British troops were killed or wounded by Ottoman forces.⁷² Despite this, the disaster was later celebrated in propaganda as a heroic episode. With cynicism, economy, and precision, Waugh describes how episodes and scenes from the early stages of the Second World War are likewise transformed into propaganda successes; enabled by the post-war vantage-point, the exposition of this process presents an ironic contrast with Crouchback's uncritical consumption of war news during this period. In early 1940 his newspapers are filled with news of the Winter War in Finland: Crouchback reads romantic accounts of 'Ghostly ski-troops' repelling 'mechanized divisions of the Soviet who had advanced with massed bands and portraits of Stalin, expecting a welcome . . . Russian might had proved to be an illusion'. With anticlimactic understatement, the narrator then states that 'quite suddenly it appeared that the Finns were beaten', and attention moves on (*SOH*, 112). Crouchback's newspapers also provide vociferous commentary on the Altmark affair of February 1940, in which the Royal Navy cornered and boarded a German supply vessel in Norwegian waters, freeing 299 captured British sailors. Both British and German propagandists made much of this contentious operation.⁷³ British newspapers dubbed the vessel 'the Hell Ship' and used the incident to foment hostility to the enemy: Crouchback reads 'long accounts of the indignities and discomforts of the prisoners, *officially designed* to rouse indignation' (*SOH* 99, italics mine). The narrator observes, however, that those roused to indignation were 'quite indifferent to those trains of locked vans still rolling East and West from Poland and the Baltic, that were to roll on year after year bearing their innocent loads to ghastly unknown destinations' (99). Waugh draws a deliberate contrast here between the transformation of a relatively minor incident into a noisy propaganda event and the apparent silence at the time surrounding the

71 Gallagher and Villar Flor, *In the Picture*, 308.

72 Gallagher and Villar Flor, *In the Picture*, 35.

73 See Martin Doherty, 'The Attack on the Altmark: A Case Study in Wartime Propaganda', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38 (2003), 187–200, for a thorough exploration of media coverage of the incident.

epoch-defining crimes of the Holocaust and Stalin's deportations; in *Officers and Gentlemen*, Kilbannock's campaign to convert Trimmer into a plebeian action-hero for the benefit of a group of US newspaper men is similarly suggestively juxtaposed with Crouchback's grim concurrent experience of the disastrous British evacuation of Crete in June 1941. Both of these juxtapositions illustrate the means by which the conflict was mediatized for home front consumption. As Walter Lippmann argued in *Public Opinion*: 'In order to conduct a propaganda there must be some barrier between the public and the event. Access to the real environment must be limited, before anyone can create a pseudo-environment that he thinks wise or desirable'.⁷⁴

Perhaps the greatest British propaganda success of the Second World War was the speedy transformation of the Dunkirk evacuation of May–June 1940 from humiliating retreat into a heroic example of endurance and ingenuity—thanks in large part to J. B. Priestley's radio tribute to the 'little pleasure steamers' and their part in an 'English epic', broadcast on the BBC Home Service on 5 June.⁷⁵ In Waugh's fictional universe, however, this process is actively contested. Ivor Claire's Military Cross—awarded for shooting three territorials attempting to swamp his boat during the evacuation—indicates his scepticism towards this prodigious example of mythmaking; in *Men at Arms*, the news of Dunkirk certainly arouses no excitement:

A staff officer arrived from far away and produced a proclamation which was to be read to all troops, contradicting reports spread by the enemy, that the Air Force had been idle at Dunkirk. If British planes had not been noticed there, it was because they were busy on the enemy's lines of communication. The Halberdiers were more interested in the rumour that a German army had landed in Limerick and that their own role was to dislodge it.

'Hadn't we better dispel that rumour, sir?'

'No,' said Colonel Tickeridge. 'It's quite true. Not that the Germans are there yet. But our little operation is to meet them there if they do land.' (SOH 160)

The exchange shows how one form of propaganda, the officially delivered proclamation (a deliberately anachronistic term, as of course is the name 'Halberdier'), has been outpaced by another, the covertly disseminated rumour, and suggests that the state's control of information flows is less certain. The origin of this rumour remains unclear, but the potential of misinformation to destabilize military operations and create strategic confusion is evident, while the reaction of the Halberdiers testifies to their military inefficacy and degrades the power of the Dunkirk myth.

Broadcast over the airwaves and disseminated by agents in neutral cities around the world, rumours were central to PWE 'black' operations during the war; as noted, Waugh had spent an extended period convalescing at the Rome flat of John Rayner, who had been heavily involved in the production and dissemination of 'sibs' earlier in the war. It is possible that his discussions over dinner with Rayner informed the reference in *Men at Arms* to one of the PWE's most successful rumours. On a later mission to Sierra Leone, the Halberdiers are consoled by 'a rumour, quite baseless,

74 Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York, NY, 1922), 32.

75 J. B. Priestley, 'Wednesday, 5th June 1940', in *All England Listened: The Wartime Broadcasts of J. B. Priestley* (New York, NY, 1967), 3–7 (5).

which was travelling the whole world', suggesting that a German invasion fleet had been repelled in the English Channel, which was now 'full of charred German corpses' (SOH 182). Waugh refers here explicitly to a notorious rumour originally spread by British black propagandists in summer 1940; its originator, the PWE's John Baker White, details its genesis and dissemination in his memoir *The Big Lie* (1955). Claiming that this rumour above all others had discouraged the planned German invasion, Baker White confesses that he remains unsure how the story made its way back to Britain, where it remained in circulation at the time of writing 10 years after the war's end—he describes visiting an admiral in Portsmouth who has become utterly convinced that hundreds of charred corpses were discovered on Chesil Beach in Dorset, and concludes with suspicious naivety that 'Imagination is a very powerful thing, as we were to discover many times before the war was over'.⁷⁶ The *Sword of Honour* trilogy is similarly animated by anxieties regarding the circulation of information. Once launched, the novels suggest, propaganda campaigns can break free from the control and direction of their originators or coordinators, creating an uncertain, ever-shifting and threatening environment. This is given physical expression in *Men at Arms* when a package containing propaganda for French West Africa, and marked 'Most Secret. By hand of officer only', falls apart as it is carelessly loaded onto a ship at Liverpool, whereupon a breeze scatters thousands of leaflets across the quayside (SOH 172). The scene is echoed in the following novel, *Officers and Gentlemen*, when Crouchback accidentally drops a bundle of confiscated Scottish Nationalist propaganda leaflets reading 'ENGLANDS PERIL IS SCOTLANDS HOPE. WHY HITLER MUST WIN': again, a gust of wind intervenes, distributing the 'treasonable documents' across the Isle of Mugg (SOH 245). In a subsequent vignette articulating Waugh's deep antagonism to the vast wartime expansion of state bureaucracy, one of these leaflets arrives on the London desk of Colonel Grace-Groundling-Marchpole, recently promoted head of a 'most secret department', who is investigating Crouchback on a wrongful suspicion of subversive activities and Axis sympathies (SOH 252). Crouchback's hapless role in disseminating the leaflet is added to his file as further evidence of these. The episode suggests that power derives from the accumulation of information rather than knowledge; Grace-Groundling-Marchpole's plans for the exercise of this power are as yet unformed, and the threat to Crouchback remains lurking within the system.

The conclusion of the trilogy features an even darker reminder of the threat posed by the intersections between propaganda and the politics of information. As in *Put Out More Flags*, Waugh continues to satirize the output of the MOI (the 'Mystery of Information' as it is dubbed by Kilbannock) and other agencies, and again takes aim at the dubious co-option of literature and culture by the British wartime propaganda machine (SOH 271). In the context of the Cold War, however, propaganda emerges as a more dangerous and potent phenomenon than was apparent at the time of the earlier novel's publication in 1942. Based on Waugh's first-hand observations, *Unconditional Surrender* (1961) describes a motley assortment of figures based in Bari in Italy towards the end of the war and concerned with propaganda to the Balkans:

76 John Baker White, *The Big Lie* (London, 1955), 22.

a melancholic English officer who performed a part not then known as ‘disc-jockey’, a euphoric Scotch officer surrounded by books with which he hoped to inculcate a respect for English culture among those who could read that language; by the editors of little papers, more directly propagandist and printed in a variety of languages by the agents of competing intelligence systems; by a group of Russians whose task was to relabel tins of American rations in bold Cyrillic characters, proclaiming them the produce of the USSR, before they were dropped from American aeroplanes over beleaguered gangs of Communists; (SOH 517)

An air of futility and solipsism surrounds the first two projects here, while the mention of ‘competing intelligence systems’—coupled with Waugh’s reflex dig at the Soviet Union—alludes to the growing fissures between the Allies: the passage indeed signals from its contemporary viewpoint that British attempts to exert leverage on the ideological reconstruction of Europe were doomed.

Propaganda is most tightly bound into Waugh’s critique of Allied pusillanimity and incompetence towards the end of the novel, when Crouchback passes on some ‘illustrated American magazines’ sent from Bari to a Jewish woman he attempts to befriend in Croatia (SOH 561). The dangerous and toxic potential of seemingly innocuous publications is made clear when she and her husband are subsequently sentenced to death by a Yugoslav Partisan People’s Court, one of the charges against them being a ‘whole heap of American counter-revolutionary propaganda’ found in their home (SOH 568). Waugh’s earlier treatment of this episode in the short story ‘Compassion’ (1949) is even more explicit: the story describes the distribution of immense packages of ‘assorted literature’ by ‘one of the more preposterous organizations which abounded in Bari. This department aimed at re-educating the Balkans by distributing *Fortune*, *The Illustrated London News* and handbooks of popular, old-fashioned agnosticism.’⁷⁷ Research in the PWE papers confirms that the two magazines cited in the story were in fact two of many selected for ‘infiltration’ into Yugoslavia in 1944–1945 by the PWE’s sub-mission in Bari, along with a range of newspapers, MOI publications and literary texts; others included the *Economist*, *Spectator*, *New Statesman and Nation*, *Radio Times*, *Punch* and *Tribune* and, we can infer, formed part of the ‘vast assortment’ of material mentioned by Waugh in his diary recording his experiences in Topusko.⁷⁸ As in the later novel, the discovery of ‘foreign propaganda publications’ in the home of a Jewish couple is produced in evidence in a People’s Court hearing; again, the couple are condemned and executed.⁷⁹

Heavily critical of Allied propaganda campaigns in the Balkans, the brutal conclusions to these narratives indicate the potentially terrible consequences arising from the circulation of information. Waugh may also be attempting something more subversive and playful here, however, by publishing details of the infiltration campaign in plain sight in his novel, details which otherwise remained hidden until the records of the agency were opened to the public nearly 30 years later in 1976. With considerable circularity, this tactic itself recalls the PWE’s wartime dissemination of

77 Waugh, ‘Compassion’ in *Complete Short Stories*, 419–40 (436).

78 ‘Infiltration Report for Period Dec 26th 1944 to Jan 10th 1945’, London, TNA, FO 898/142.

79 Waugh, ‘Compassion’, 439.

propaganda lines in print or over the airwaves secreted within or between seemingly innocent materials.

From its post-war vantage point, the *Sword of Honour* trilogy addresses the circulation of propaganda as both cause and manifestation of a far-reaching national and global political shift towards state control opposed by Waugh. The title of the trilogy itself refers in part to a propaganda event, the presentation of the ceremonial Sword of Stalingrad by the British state to the Soviet Union in 1943. Cast to commemorate the bravery of the besieged city, the sword was presented by Winston Churchill to Stalin at the Tehran conference in November 1943—the meeting at which Britain and the United States effectively agreed to the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, a geopolitical concession which Waugh deplored. Before the sword's presentation, it was displayed to the public at Westminster Abbey, a scene with which the third novel of the trilogy *Unconditional Surrender* opens, and in which Waugh attacks all four estates of the British establishment—the monarchy, government, church and press—for their complicity in the gesture.

Hinted at in his early novels, Waugh's preoccupation with the conception, production and effects of propaganda clearly intensified during the Second World War: *Put Out More Flags* and the *Sword of Honour* trilogy are certainly more heavily thematically influenced by developments in the overlapping fields of overt and covert propaganda. However, although Waugh attempts critiques of all facets of the wartime propaganda machine, it is also clear that the *Sword of Honour* novels are themselves deeply propagandist, advancing ideological positions using a compelling satirical mode permitting righteously inflected anger and broad comedy; as Stephen Trout observes, Waugh 'adopts fiction as, one could say, a 'sword of honour,' as a means of openly attacking the modern age and explicitly asserting an alternative set of values'.⁸⁰ Specifically, the novels seek to undermine two hugely successful transnational wartime propaganda campaigns, those on behalf of the Soviet Union and Tito's Partisans. In this respect, the novels adopt a classic propagandist strategy, of attacking propaganda itself.

VII. CONCLUSION

In January 1944 Waugh wrote to the officer commanding his Household Cavalry regiment, requesting unpaid leave of absence from army duties for three months in order to write the novel which would become *Brideshead Revisited* (1945). This novel, Waugh stressed, would 'have no direct dealing with the war and it is not pretended that it will have any immediate propaganda value'.⁸¹ The first of these caveats acknowledges the restrictions placed on writers by censorship at this time; the second hints at an aversion to wartime propaganda but also displays an awareness of how British writers and their works had been recruited by the Allied propaganda machine. *Brideshead's* propaganda value was in fact more immediate than Waugh could have anticipated: in 1946 the novel was one of a range of classic and contemporary texts selected by the British government's Book Selection Committee for

80 Steven Trout, 'Miniaturization and Anticlimax in Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43 (1997), 125–43 (125).

81 Waugh, *Diaries*, 557.

circulation in the British Zone of Occupation in Germany, as part of a campaign which sought to 'set out to propagate English literature as one method of re-educating the German populace to democratic values'.⁸² Waugh's unintended and unwitting participation in this project highlights the impossibility of maintaining secure boundaries between literature and propaganda under the conditions engendered by Total War and the subsequent Cold War, when literary texts and publications were extensively deployed in the services of ideological objectives.

Over three decades, from *Vile Bodies* (1930) to *Unconditional Surrender* (1961), Waugh's writings were consistently preoccupied by, and apprehensive of, the evolving power of propaganda. Although never directly employed by either the MOI or PWE, during the Second World War Waugh was closely involved with the production and distribution of propaganda at home and in the field, and had direct contacts with individuals across a variety of propaganda agencies. His novels addressing the war frequently thematize propaganda, showing his understanding of its centrality to the conflict. References to propaganda in his fiction tend to be interpreted in terms of a broad hostility to modernity, yet, as this essay has shown, such readings fail to take account of the means by which his writings reflect and appropriate tactics and strategies of wartime propagandists, thereby providing a penetrating anti-bureaucratic critique of a new politics of information, in which the accumulation of intelligence and the circulation of propaganda materials pose a profound threat to the individual.

Durham University, UK

82 Rhys W. Williams, "The Selections of the Committee are not in accord with the requirements of Germany": Contemporary English Literature and the Selected Book Scheme in the British Zone of Germany (1945–1950), in Alan Bance (ed.), *The Cultural Legacy of the British Occupation in Germany: The London Symposium* (Stuttgart, 1997), 110–38 (116, 110).