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British Newsreels at War, 1939-45: A Significant Source for Scholars

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ABSTRACT

Subject to wartime restrictions, the five British commercial newsreel companies continued to produce cinema newsreels throughout the Second World War. This article summarises the voluntary and compulsory censorship arrangements for newsreel content and the rota system for filming to indicate how the Ministry of Information and the Services implicitly and explicitly controlled wartime newsreel production. As the unrivalled form of mass-communication of visual news media during the period, the newsreels contributed significantly to British wartime propaganda, and the purpose of the article is to argue for the value of the wartime newsreels as a source for scholars of the conflict.

Preparations for War

The average number of British cinema tickets sold in 1939 was over nineteen-million and included in the price of every ticket was a newsreel film.¹ Audiences had come to

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¹Average weekly admissions to cinemas in Britain was 19.03 million. The average annual admission total was 990 million. H. E. Browning and A.A. Sorrell, 'Cinemas and Cinemagoing in Great Britain', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 17, 2 (1954), pp. 133-170 (p. 134). As has been noted by other historians, the number of admissions does not account for multiple visits, and, therefore, does not indicate the number of cinemagoers. Anthony Aldgate highlighted how, in his article about the audience and producers of British newsreels in the 1930, Nicholas Pronay misinterpreted the figures published in Simon Rowson, 'The Statistical Survey of the Cinema Industry in Great Britain in 1934', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 99, (1936), pp. 67-119 to claim that because there were 18.5 million admissions, this meant that 43% of the population were going to the cinema. Nicholas Pronay, 'British Newsreels in the 1930s I. Audience and Producers', *History*, 56, 188 (1971), pp. 411-477. Anthony Aldgate,

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expect the full assemblage of shorter films that supported the main feature, and the term 'full accompanying programme', seen frequently in the cinema listings of local newspapers, included a newsreel.² The newsreel's entrenched position within the cinema programme meant that it was a form of visual news, possessing well-established exhibition networks, and the wide-reaching transmission through the screens of almost five thousand cinemas in Britain was an attractive prospect for the British government.³ What made the cinema an even more desirable channel of communication was, that for the combined total of nearly four million cinema seats, the majority of people occupying those seats were working-class people – a stratum of society that the government had found difficult to engage via other outlets.⁴

Early in their preparations for the outbreak of an impending war, the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) recognised the potential that newsreels offered as a medium for conveying government messages, and agreed that it would be vital to integrate them into the government's wartime communication to the public.⁵ However, the best way to approach the newsreel industry was uncertain. During the First World War, the War Office Cinematograph Committee (WOCC) had been able to take control of one of the four British commercial newsreels, Topical Budget: first releasing the newsreel as an 'outlet for Official propaganda film' in May 1917.⁶ In this initial

Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War, (London: Scholar Press, 1979), p. 54.

²'Tivoli', *Burnley Express*, 2 December 1939. 'Savoy', *Northampton Mercury*, 15 September 1939.

³Richard Farmer, *Cinemas and cinemagoing in wartime Britain, 1939-1945: The utility dream palace*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), p. 8.

⁴Evidence for working-class attendance at the cinema is contained in Rowson's survey. The survey indicated that the majority of admissions were the cheaper seats, whether this was through choice or of necessity. Aldgate proposed that this was an obvious implication that 'cinema was most popular among the urban working class' – Anthony Aldgate, *Cinema and History*, p. 56.

⁵The Committee of Imperial Defence was 'formed for the purpose of preparing broad guidelines for the establishment of a Ministry of Information on the outbreak of war.' Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 12.; The newsreel companies had been contacted as early as 1938 by the skeleton Ministry of Information. See; The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) INF 1/178, Letter from *Newsreel Association of Great Britain and Ireland* to D E O'Neill Secretary to R. Hon Leslie Burgin MP – Ministry of Transport. 28 September 1938.

⁶Luke McKernan, 'The Supreme Moment of the War': General Allenby's entry into Jerusalem', in Luke McKernan (ed.), *Yesterday's News: The British Cinema Newsreel Reader*, (London: British Universities Film and Video Council, 2002), pp. 41-67 (p. 47).

government intervention, the WOCC had agreed with William Jeapes, owner of Topical Budget, that he could continue to run his newsreel as before with the addition of exclusive film of the war provided by the WOCC. In acknowledgement of the new government involvement, the newsreel was renamed Topical Budget Official War News Film and then War Office Official Topical Budget.⁷ However, the lack of sales of the newsreel combined with the strained relationship between Jeapes and the WOCC led Lord Beaverbrook, head of the WOCC, to buy Topical Budget outright in November 1917.⁸

The newsreel was then exhibited as Pictorial News (Official) from 23 February 1918, at which point it began to enjoy commercial success. Under Beaverbrook's control and the editorship of Holt-White, whom Beaverbrook had installed, the sales of the newsreel doubled, and it even posed a threat to the top newsreel at the time, Pathe's Animated Gazette.⁹ This commercial success was beneficial in its own right but, more importantly, by doubling the sale of Pictorial News (Official), Beaverbrook had secured a much larger audience for a newsreel endorsed by the government and controlled by ministers. Beaverbrook's commercial success, however, did not provide a model for those tasked with incorporating newsreels into the propaganda of the Second World War. The CID planners failed to benefit from any precedents set in the previous war, as 'very little information about the various propaganda, censorship and news agencies of the First World War could be found'.¹⁰

In any case, the newsreel industry with which the CID was dealing in 1935 had developed significantly since 1917, and they were faced with a newsreel industry of increased power. The five companies (British Movietone News, British Paramount News, Pathe Gazette, Gaumont-British News, and Universal News) had formed a 'tight oligarchy' over the British newsreel industry by 1939 due, in part, to their backing from larger distribution companies: 20th Century Fox and Lord Rothermere UK, Paramount USA, ABPC UK and Warner Bros. USA, Gaumont-British UK, and General Distributors USA, respectively.¹¹ In lieu of distributing a state-produced newsreel as Beaverbrook had done in World War I, the planners at the CID adapted their strategy to reflect the changes in the commercial newsreel industry. The British

⁷Ibid.

⁸Luke McKernan, *Topical Budget: The Great British News Film*, (London: British Film Institute, 1991), p. 44.

⁹ McKernan, 'General Allenby', p. 50.

¹⁰Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale*, p. 13. McLaine outlines the struggles of the Committee of Imperial Defence to obtain any records relating to Northcliffe's decisions in pages 12-14.

¹¹Nicholas Pronay, 'The newsreels: the illusion of actuality', in Paul Smith (ed.), *The Historian and Film Journal*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) p. 112.

newsreel companies were approached for their co-operation in the case of a state emergency – an arrangement which the companies duly accepted. The newsreel producers were largely Conservative in their leanings and, in wartime, they felt that it would be their duty to contribute to the war effort through the production of newsreels. Safe in the knowledge that the newsreel companies had proved their willingness to toe the establishment line in peacetime, the government agreed that they could allow them to continue functioning relatively unsupervised.¹² Despite this arrangement, the newsreel companies did not evade all government control.

Conditions of Wartime Production

The first condition of wartime newsreel production imposed upon the newsreel companies by the government was the requirement to submit content as part of a voluntary censorship scheme. The newsreel companies were required to submit any content over which they had concerns might breach censorship regulations, to the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC).¹³ The British Ministry of Information (MOI) needed the co-operation of the newsreel companies ‘more, possibly than that of every other branch of the cinema industry’, and so, after initially proposing to make newsreel censorship compulsory, the government chose instead to implement a voluntary system after concluding that the heads of the newsreel companies would respond best to this approach.¹⁴ Despite the newsreel producers’ mild protestations, in principle, the voluntary censorship was no great departure from the newsreel companies’ own policies in peacetime.¹⁵ As Rachael Low noted, the newsreel companies of the 1930s were already ‘confined within the limits set by a form of self-censorship yielding to

¹²The newsreels rarely came under government criticism, apart from the occasional misdemeanour. The usual perpetrator was the editor of *British Paramount News*, G T Cummins. See; ‘Shanghai’s War Filmed in All Its Horror’, *British Paramount News* Issue No. 683, 13 Sep 1937.

<http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/search/index.php/story/35432> Accessed 15 Oct 2020.

¹³The BBFC were responsible for conducting newsreel censorship on behalf of the MOI.

¹⁴TNA INF 1/195, Letter from Sir Kenneth Clark to Lord Stanhope, 22 January 1940.

¹⁵There were occasions when the voluntary nature of censorship was called into question: In January 1940, Lord Denham attempted to use criticism of *British Paramount News* Issue No. 924 to call for compulsory newsreel censorship. However, Films Officer at the time, Sir Kenneth Clark, stressed that censorship would be ‘bitterly resented and opposed by the Newsreel Companies’ and that ‘voluntary good behaviour is notoriously much more valuable than enforced good behaviour’. He believed that ‘it would be a thousand pities to lose the greater by seeking to impose the less’, and Denham’s appeals were thrown out; See TNA INF 1/195, Letter from Sir Kenneth Clark to Lord Stanhope, 22 January 1940.

official and unofficial pressures both actual and anticipated'.¹⁶ Self-regulation was already embedded in the newsreel companies' production policies, but the threat of compulsory government censorship gave producers further incentive to abide by the guidelines, and so the MOI censorship scheme remained voluntary throughout the course of the war.

In truth, much of the footage had already been subjected to military censorship by the time it reached the producers in the newsreel offices. It was, in fact, this security censorship, carried out under Defence Regulation Three, that was the most consequential for wartime newsreel content.¹⁷ The list of 'matters specifically covered by the prohibition' included 'any information about His Majesty's Naval, Military or Air Forces and their disposition, movement or condition, or about any operations or projected operations of the forces; information about measures taken for the defence or fortification of any place; information about prisoners of war; information about munitions'.¹⁸ The Services had the power to impound censored footage, indefinitely, until they considered it to be safe to release back to the company who owned it. Newsreel production relied on speed to exhibit footage whilst it was still newsworthy. Therefore, there was no guarantee that footage would not be rendered useless by the time it was returned to the companies for exhibition and, as such, much footage was never seen by contemporary audiences.¹⁹

Relations between the newsreel companies and the Services were distinctly hostile in the first year of the war. Finding themselves subjected to the above security measures which, in the opinion of newsreel employees, 'reached a level that approached hysterical', the newsreel companies resented the restraints of military control, especially as the prohibitions served to prevent the exhibition of subjects which wartime audiences most wanted to see. On 7 October 1940, Mass Observer Len England filed a report on the newsreels which stated that there had been a significant drop in popularity of the newsreels with audiences during 1940 and, when questioned on this point by Mass Observation, the newsreel companies 'put blame on the

¹⁶Rachael Low, *Films of Comment and Persuasion in the 1930s*, (London, 1979), p. 2.

¹⁷ *Defence Regulation Three* made it an offence to 'in any manner likely to prejudice the efficient prosecution of the war to obtain, possess, or publish information on military matters, the term "military" being used in its widest sense; See *Arrangements for the Application in War of "Security" Censorship of Films*. C V Usborne. TNA INF 1/178 Film Censorship Part Two. TNA.

¹⁸TNA INF 1/178, Film Censorship Part Two, *Arrangements for the Application in War of "Security" Censorship of Films*, Memorandum by C V Usborne.

¹⁹This is significant when considering popular post-war documentaries such as television documentary series, *The World At War* (ITV, 1973-1974), where footage used by producer, Jeremy Isaacs, was not necessarily seen on screens at the time.

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Services'.²⁰ In contrast, for serving military personnel and veterans fulfilling civilian or advisory roles, the decision whether to release footage relied on the balance between 'the value of informing the public as fully as possible vs. fear of passing something valuable to the enemy', with the balance often tipping towards the latter.²¹ Although as the war progressed the relationship between the newsreel companies and the military improved, and 'secrets were imparted to the principals of the news-reel companies in a way which would have horrified the early guardians of national security', the newsreel producers continued to find military interference burdensome, as they did the MOI-imposed rota system.²²

The rota system operated on the principle that each company was assigned to film for a government department or armed service. Any footage filmed on rota was then pooled to all five newsreel companies for use in their issues. Audience consumption of visual news of the war was dependent on the cinema that they attended, so the sharing of footage equally amongst the companies was vital to ensure that valuable propaganda was exhibited on every screen nationwide. The primary appeal of the newsreel medium for the government was its potential to reach mass audiences, and the rota system was a fundamental factor in ensuring widespread distribution that satisfied the government. The newsreel companies, on the other hand, remained unconvinced by the benefits of the rota system. It was a 'situation that they resented', as the newsreel industry had previously thrived on competition.²³ However, the pleas by the newsreel producers to abandon the rota system on account of the similarity of each companies' reels were thrown out by the MOI's Honorary Trade Adviser, Colonel A C Bromhead, and this too continued for the duration of the war.²⁴

²⁰Mass Observation was a social research organisation active during the war: Mass Observation Archive, File Report 444, 'Newsreel Report 3', 7 October 1940, Len England.

²¹Clive Coultass, *Images for Battle: British Films and the Second World War, 1939-1945*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989), p. 41.

²²Gerald Sanger, 'We Lived in the Presence of History: The Story of British Movietone News in the War Years', in McKernan (ed.), *Yesterday's News* (London: BUFVC, 2002), pp. 163-170 (p. 166).

²³Coultass, *Images for Battle*, p. 41.

²⁴It would have been unusual for a cinemagoer to have seen the output of all five of these newsreel companies' output. As such, the consumption of newsreels by contemporary audiences was dependent on the cinema which an individual attended. Though the rota system resulted in the inevitable similarity of content, there were still differences between how the five newsreel companies presented wartime events on the screen. A Mass-Observation report on a Gaumont-British newsreel, for example, cannot be analysed without an understanding of the nuances of newsreel production specific to the company, Gaumont-British News.

Newsreel content was deliberately shaped by the newsreel companies under implicit and explicit control from the government and the Services to present a carefully constructed narrative, and the function of wartime newsreels was to mould a predominantly working-class audience's perception of wartime events to boost morale. At a time when no other visual news media challenged the newsreel format, the ability to influence national feeling was unprecedented. Consequently, the biases and decisions made by those responsible for newsreel production directly influenced how wartime audiences viewed the events of the Second World War.

Newsreels have had an interminable effect on the way that many British people today continue to perceive the role of Britain in the Second World War. A clear example of this being how, throughout 2020, the messages created by the contemporary propagandists of the war have been regularly utilised by British politicians during the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁵ Evaluating the conditions under which wartime newsreels were made has never been more crucial, as the freely available digitised newsreels now have the potential to reach a larger mass audience than ever before.²⁶ Understanding the impact that newsreels had in the dissemination of wartime news and propaganda can improve scholars' understanding, not only of how events were presented to audiences during World War II but also of the development of the production and consumption of visual news culture over the last 80 years. Thus, bridging the gap between print and online multimedia news communication.

²⁵Many Covid-19 communications in 2020 from Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, emphasised the same motifs as those exhibited in wartime newsreels. For one such example regarding the 'spirit' of the British people see; Letter from The Prime Minister to British Public, 'Letter to Nation on Coronavirus', March 2020; 'It is with that great British spirit that we will beat coronavirus and we will beat it together.'; Similar tropes feature in newsreel commentaries where attention is continually drawn to the 'spirit' of the British people under aerial bombardment: See Commentary, 'London Carries On', Pathe Gazette Issue No. 40/79, 30 Sep 1940.

http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/search/index.php/document/98288_commentary
Accessed 19 Oct 2020.

²⁶British Pathé and British Movietone News have uploaded thousands of newsreel films to their YouTube channels; 'British Pathé', <https://www.youtube.com/user/britishpathe> Accessed 12 October 2020; 'British Movietone', https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHq777_waKMJw6SZdABmyaA Accessed 12 October 2020. In October 2020, the total number of subscribers to the two channels combined amounted to over 2 million. In addition, the viewings of each YouTube video can be multiplied via the various online sharing platforms.