# FILM PROPAGANDA IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR - HANDOUT

Most nations were new to cinema and its capability to spread and influence mass sentiment at the start of World War I. The early years were experimental in regard to using films as a propaganda tool, but eventually became a central instrument the "nationalization of the masses" as nations learned to manipulate emotions.

The War played a significant role in the evolution of film as a medium for reporting and for the manipulation of public opinion to support the war effort - and of course created the stars of the “Silent Screen”

## PICTURE 2 – The famous scene from the trenches at the Battle of the Somme.

British efforts in pre-war film production took time to find its stride as, unlike Germany, it did not realize film potential as a means of projecting the nation’s official viewpoint.

The British recognized early in the war they needed to target neutral audiences, specifically America, to get them to join or support the war effort in Britain.

## PICTURE 3 – Charles Urban

The leading figure in taking British war films to the U.S. was Charles Urban, the best known film producer in England. He brought *The Battle of the Somme* to the States in 1916 and was a pioneer of documentary, educational and scientific films and was involved with British propaganda film-making.

In November 1916, we created the War Office Cinematograph Committee, which became the Department of Information early in 1917.

America entered the war in April 1917, achieving Wellington House's primary objective. Wellington House is the more common name for Britain's War Propaganda Bureau, operating from Wellington House in London. They increased production, but did not know what would play most effectively in the U.S., leading to every war film being sent to the State’s including *The Tanks in Action at the Battle of the Ancre* and *The Retreat of the Germans at the Battle of Arras.*

The Department of Information found it better to constantly release films and shorts of varying lengths, including newsreels, to increase saturation. Newsreels became increasingly popular and part of war propaganda. America developed its own organization. Days after the declaration of war it created the Division of Films to handle and Charles Urban’s Kineto Company of America edited, processed, and printed the films.

Charlie Chaplin produced and starred in pro-US propaganda films. One film, *Zepped*, which contains the only known scenes of a Zeppelin bombing raid over London, was designed to be a morale mission to defuse the terror inspired by the frequent Zeppelin raids. In 1918, Chaplin made, at his own expense, *The Bond*, and produced short clips in which he beat up Kaiser Wilhelm with a hammer bearing the inscription "War Bonds".

## PICTURE 4 – Charlie Chaplin.

Charlie Chaplin began performing, touring music halls and later working as a stage actor and comedian. He was signed to the prestigious Fred Karno company, and began appearing in films during 1914 for Keystone Studios.

He developed the Tramp persona and formed a large fan base. He directed his own films, and continued to hone his craft. By 1918, he was one of the world’s best known figures.

Germany was the first nation to effectively mobilize the film industry to national causes. Their industry expanded largely due to the isolation that resulted from their government's 1916 ban on foreign films. General Ludendorff saw film as an effective war weapon and used the industry better known as Ufa, to create pro-German films. In order to maintain U.S. neutrality and spread pro-German sentiments, German officials set up The American Correspondent Film Company. As a front man, photographer Albert K. Dawson was attached to the German and Austrian armies.

In France, finances were redirected to support fighting, leading to a decline in French film production. The French often depicted the disputed FRANCO GERMAN territory, Alsace-Lorraine, a major victim of the earlier Weimar hostilities.

## PICTURE 5 - British Cameramen.

Britain had 5,000 permanent cinemas by 1914, with another 5,000 being developed to a total of over 10,000 offering a total seating capacity of over 4 million.

On the eve of war in Russia, there were 200 movie theatres in the two major cities of St Petersburg and Moscow and a further 1,200 in the country beyond.

Nicholas II, wrote in 1913 "I consider that the cinema is an empty, totally useless, and even harmful form of entertainment. Only an abnormal person could place this farcical business on a par with art."

## PICTURE 6 – D.W. Griffith (Film-maker) filming "The Battle of the Somme"

The progress of the war was a powerful force in bringing into cinemas people who might previously have avoided them as the hope of better understanding of what was going on.

King George V, said of the film *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), "The public should see these pictures that they may have some idea of what the army is doing and what it means."

The acceptance of film as a source of information and understanding, were released from the start as *Official Pictures of the British Army in France.*

## PICTURE 7 – Films from the Front.

From its very beginnings, film had appealed to its audiences by showing them portrayals of real events as well as imagined stories.

As King George had invited them to do – audiences welcomed the opportunity to share the experiences of the fighting soldier through films hailed as "the real thing at last". Such reasoning led, to an early decision in 1915 by Kitchener, Britain's Secretary of State for War, to place a complete ban on photography and film at the front which lasted for almost a year.

Perception was that Britain was losing the propaganda campaign for sympathy among neutral countries as well as failing to cater adequately to interest people at home that led to the relaxation. *The Battle of the Somme* was also used extensively in British propaganda aimed at neutral and allied opinion. Together with *Britain Prepared* (1915), the film played a major part in efforts to influence opinion in the neutral United States. It was also one of the films taken on tour in Russia by a British mission sent to persuade the Tsar's armies that their allies in the west were doing their part to defeat the Kaiser.

Battlefield filming had been brought about by the perception that Germany was winning the propaganda war, it is ironic that the huge success of *Battle of the Somme* globally, prompted fears the advantage was going the other way. In Germany, a new propaganda organisation – the Photographic and Film Office (*Bild- und Filmamt*), or Bufa, whose role was to co-ordinate the wartime activities of the German film industry was established.

## PICTURE 8 – Bufa.

A problem facing cameramen who did attempt to film on the battlefield was the impossibility of recording images that captured the actuality of combat in ways that would engage the audience.

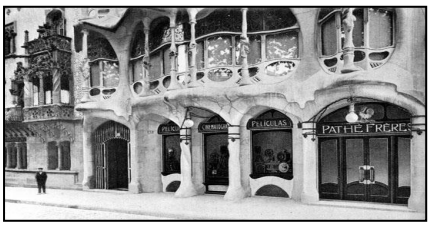
Using the available technology of cameras, lenses and film stock, the empty battlefield of modern warfare and the tactical preference for attacks at dawn or dusk yielded few pictures to match the way civilians imagined the fighting.

## PICTURE 9 – The "Fake" Over the Top scene.

The amount of outright "faking" which film-makers attempted to pass off as genuine remained rare, because it was realised that the use of fake sequences, should it be detected, could undermine the propaganda campaign.

Filming genuine battle footage included the use of troops on exercise or training, and extensive use of scenes shot "behind the front" showing soldiers on the march or in camp. Also, on those aspects of the fighting – the build-up of supplies, the work of artillery, the operations of an airfield, or medical services were taken some distance behind the front.

## PICTURE 10 – The start of "Pathe" News.




The year 1908 saw the format that would come to be known as newsreels – Pathé Frères established the model with *Pathé-Journal* in France, and then went on to develop newsreels in most of the countries where they operated.

Similarly, in the USA Pathé started production of a newsreel in 1911, to be joined by Universal in 1912 and Hearst in 1914.

## PICTURE 11 – The riot at the "Brotherhood Church"

Dissent, was portrayed in a negative way, as when news of a 1917 anti-war meeting was covered in Britain's *War Office Official Topical Budget* as a story with the title "PACIFISTS ROUTED AT BROTHERHOOD CHURCH.

Film offers terrifying evidence of hatred towards pacifists during the War. A large mob smashes windows and kicks in doors of a church, before hurling objects at those sheltering inside.

Relying on conscription to fill the ranks of their armed services, newsreels were not needed to encourage recruitment, they portrayed enthusiasm with which men rallied to the colours. Stirred up by Special Branch, the Daily Express, the Anti-German League, and Hackney MP and leading nationalist tub-thumper Horatio Bottomley, besieged 250 delegates to a meeting of a Convention of Workers and Soldiers Councils. Delegates were beaten up, and the Church (a radical meeting point) was smashed up.

Newspapers may not have spelled out that the battle was resulting in heavy casualties, but they published figures. Indeed, on at least one occasion a news story about the *Somme* film playing to packed houses appeared in a column immediately adjacent to the local casualty list. Similar unforeseen consequences arose for Germany following a number of films to demonstrate the effectiveness of commerce raiders and U-boats in countering the Royal Navy's blockade of Germany by sinking trading vessels carrying British supplies.

German diplomats reported, that these same films could have a negative effect where the sight of ships full of food being sent to the bottom of the ocean was not sympathetically received. In 1916 one British theatre owner was reported to have displayed a sign outside his premises reading "We are not showing The Battle of the Somme. This is a place of amusement, not a chamber of horrors."

Soldiers at the front were equally inclined to seek escapism: in a letter from Colonel Rowland Fielding, Commanding Officer of the 6th Connaught Rangers, wrote to his wife on 5 September 1916:

*To-night I have been with others to see the "Somme film," which was shown upon a screen, erected in a muddy field under the open sky. By way of contrast Charlie Chaplin was also to have appeared, and I confess it was chiefly him I went to see. However, I came too late, and saw only the more harrowing part of the entertainment.*

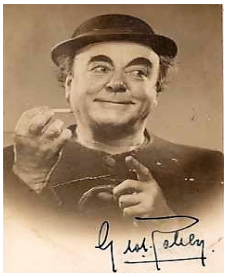
Meanwhile, the American film industry generated several patriotic calls to arms, from Cecil B. DeMille's (1881-1959) *The Little American* (1917) to *My Four Years in Germany* (1918) and *The Kaiser, The Beast of Berlin* (1918). Many of these films revisited the image of the German soldier as rampaging barbarian, founded on stories of real and alleged atrocities in Belgium at the start of the war and recalling such episodes as the execution of Edith Cavell and the sinking of the *Lusitania*.

## PART 2 (picture 12) - FILM STARS PROMOTING THE CAUSE.

Film stars lent their names to a variety of propaganda causes on and off screen.

## PICTURE 13 – Matheson Land and George Robey.

**Matheson Lang** (1879-1948) supported the newly created Ministry of Food by appearing in the official government film to encourage the nation during a period of food rationing to *Eat Less Bread* (1918), while **George Robey** (1869-1954) appeared in person and in cartoon form to sell War Bonds.



## PICTURE 14 – Ivy Lilian Close.

Popular stars such as Ivy Close (1890-1968) featured in '*Women's Land Army* (1917)', calling for volunteers while declaring: "weeds, like U-Boats, must be exterminated!" Stars also appeared in person. Douglas Fairbanks (1883-1939), Mary Pickford (1892-1979) and Charlie Chaplin visited the wounded and led rallies to sell bonds and promote other good causes.

The First World War brought about momentous changes in all aspects of everyday life, and none more so than the role that cinema had in both informing and entertaining. In 1913, the Tsar of Russia had spoken disparagingly of film as a "farcical business" but by 1922, Russia's new ruler Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924) was reported as saying that "of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important".

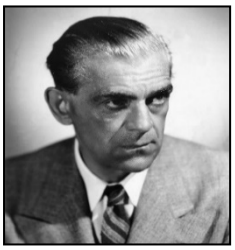
## PICTURE 15 – Buster Keaton.

**Joseph Frank "Buster" Keaton** was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1918. His unit trained in England and was shipped to France, but because of his Hollywood background, he spent most of his time entertaining the troops.

## PICTURE 16 – Bela Lugosi (or later and more popularly Count Dracula)

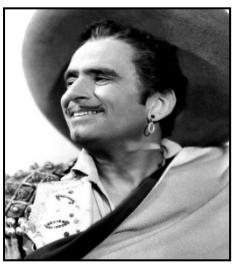
He had been playing small parts on the stage in his native Hungary before making his first film in 1917 and roles in several films in Weimar Germany before arriving in the United States as a seaman on a merchant ship. He appeared as Count Dracula in a Broadway adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel.

## PICTURE 17: Boris Karloff.



Due to the years of difficult labour endured to make ends meet whilst he was trying to establish his acting career, left him with back problems from which he suffered for the rest of his life. Because of his health, he did not fight in the War.

## PICTURE 18 - Douglas Fairbanks and Rudolph Valentino.



Fairbanks was a founding member of United Artists. Married to Mary Pickford in 1920, the couple became Hollywood royalty and Fairbanks was referred to as "The King of Hollywood", a nickname later passed on to actor Clark Gable.

In 1907, He firstly married Anna Beth Sully, the daughter of wealthy industrialist Daniel J. Sully, in Watch Hill, Rhode Island. They had one son, Douglas Elton Fairbanks, who later became known as actor "Douglas Fairbanks Jr."

**Rudolph Valentino** starred in several well-known silent films including *The Four Horsemen of the*

*Apocalypse, The Sheik, Blood and Sand, The Eagle,* and *The Son of the Sheik.* A sex symbol of the 1920s he was known as the "Latin lover" or simply as "Valentino".

He applied for American citizenship shortly before his death which caused mass hysteria among his female fans and further propelling him into iconic status. At one point after the US joined the War, Valentino tried to get into the Canadian Air Force.

## PICTURE 19 - Mack Sennett

Mack Sennett's slapstick comedies were noted for their wild car chases and custard pie warfare especially in the Keystone Cops series. His name became synonymous with screen comedy which were called "flickers" at the time. In 1915, Keystone Studios joined forces with D. W. Griffith and Thomas Ince, both powerful figures in the film industry.

## PICTURE 20 – Ben Turpin.

Turpin's famous eyes, crossed after an accident. He was convinced that the crossed eyes were essential to his comic career. In the 1909 film *Mr. Flip*, Turpin receives what is believed to have been the first pie-in-the-face. By 1912 he was an established star.

In 1917 he joined the Mack Sennett studio. Turpin's aptitude for crude slapstick suited the Sennett style perfectly, and Sennett's writers often cast the ridiculous-looking Turpin against type (a rugged Yukon miner; a suave, worldly lover; a stalwart cowboy; a fearless stuntman, etc.) for maximum comic effect.

## PART 3 (picture 21) - The final part of the lecture gives a short portrait of the stars of the screen who served in the First World War.

## PICTURE 22 – Victor McLaglen.

He left home at 14 to join the British Army with the intention of fighting in the Second Boer War. However, he was stationed at Windsor Castle in the Life Guards and left the army when his true age was discovered. Four years later, he moved to Canada, where he earned a living as a wrestler and boxer. One of his most famous fights was against heavyweight champion Jack Johnson in a six-round exhibition bout.

This was Johnson's first bout since winning the heavyweight title from Tommy Burns. He also briefly served as a constable in the Winnipeg Police Force. He returned to Britain in 1913 and during the First World War served as a captain (acting) with the 10th Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, part of the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment (Queen's and Royal Hampshire's). Later, he served for a time as military Assistant Provost Marshal for the city of Baghdad. He also continued boxing, and was named heavyweight champion of the British Army in 1918.

## PICTURE 23 - Maurice Chevalier

When World War I broke out, Chevalier was in the middle of his national service, already in the front line, where he was wounded by shrapnel in the back in the first weeks of combat and was taken as a prisoner of war in Germany for two years.

In 1916, he was released through the secret intervention of an admirer, King Alfonso XIII of Spain, the only king of a neutral country who was related to both the British and German royal families.

## PICTURE 24 – Arnold Ridley.

He volunteered for British Army service in August 1914 and rejected due to a toe injury, but in 1915 was able to enlist as a private in the Somerset Light Infantry. He saw active service, sustaining several serious injuries: his left hand was left virtually useless by injuries sustained on the Somme; his legs were riddled with shrapnel; he was bayonetted in the groin; and a blow to the head by a German soldier's rifle butt

left him prone to blackouts. He was medically discharged from the army with the rank of captain.

Ridley rejoined the army in 1939, following the outbreak of the Second World War. He was commissioned into the General List on 7 October 1939 as a second lieutenant. He served with the British Expeditionary Force in France during the "Phoney War", employed as a "Conducting Officer" tasked with supervising journalists who were visiting the front line. In May 1940, Ridley returned to England on the grossly overcrowded destroyer HMS *Vimera*, which was the last British ship to escape from the harbour during the Battle of Boulogne. Shortly afterwards, he was discharged on health grounds. He relinquished his commission as a captain on 1 June 1940. He subsequently joined the Home Guard in his home town of Caterham, and ENSA with which he toured the country.

## PICTURE 25 – Basil Rathbone MC.

In 1915, Rathbone was called into the British Army as a private with the London Scottish Regiment, joining a regiment that also counted in its ranks his future acting contemporaries Claude Rains, Herbert Marshall and Ronald Colman at different times. His most famous role, however, that of Sherlock Holmes in fourteen Hollywood films and in a radio series. His later career included roles on Broadway, as well as television work.

After basic training with the London Scottish in early 1916 he received a commission as a lieutenant in the 2/10th Battalion of the King's Liverpool Regiment (Liverpool Scottish), where he served as an intelligence officer and eventually attained the rank of captain. Rathbone's younger brother John was killed in action on 4 June 1918. It was after this that Rathbone convinced his superiors to allow him to scout enemy positions during daylight rather than at night, as was the usual practice to minimize the chance of detection. Rathbone describes it thus in his autobiography "Camouflage suits had been made for us to resemble trees. On our heads were wreaths of freshly plucked foliage, our faces and hands were blackened with burnt cork." As a result of these highly dangerous daylight reconnaissance patrols in September 1918, he was awarded the Military Cross for "conspicuous daring and resource on patrol".

## PICTURE 26 – Charles Laughton.

He played a wide range of classical and modern parts, making an impact in Shakespeare at the Old Vic. His film career took him to Broadway and then Hollywood, but he also collaborated with Alexander Korda on notable British films of the era.

Among Laughton's biggest film hits were *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, *Ruggles of Red Gap*, *Jamaica Inn*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *The Big Clock*. In his later career, he took up stage directing. His mother was a devout Roman Catholic of Irish ancestry, and she sent him to briefly attend a local boys' school, Scarborough College, before sending him to Stonyhurst College, the pre-eminent English Jesuit school.

Laughton served in World War I, during which he was gassed, serving first with the 2/1st Battalion of the Huntingdonshire Cyclist Battalion, and then with the 7th Battalion of the Northamptonshire Regiment.

## PICTURE 27 - Ronald Coleman And Claude Rains.

Ronald Coleman was born in Richmond, Surrey. He was educated at boarding school in Littlehampton, where he discovered that he enjoyed acting, despite his shyness. He intended to study engineering at Cambridge, but his father's sudden death from pneumonia in 1907 made it financially impossible.

While in London, he joined the London Scottish Regiment in 1909 as a Territorial Army soldier, and on being mobilised on the outbreak of the War, crossed the English Channel to France in September 1914 to take part in the fighting. On 31 October 1914, at the Battle of Messines, Colman was seriously wounded by shrapnel in his ankle, which gave him a limp that he would attempt to hide throughout the rest of his acting career. As a consequence, he was invalided out of the British Army in 1915.

## Claude Rains

Rains was born in Camberwell. According to his daughter, he grew up with "a very serious Cockney accent and a speech impediment". His acting talents were recognised by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the founder of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Tree paid for the elocution lessons that Rains needed. Later, Rains taught at RADA, where his students included John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier.

Rains served in the War in the London Scottish Regiment, alongside actors Basil Rathbone, Ronald

Colman and Herbert Marshall. Once, he was involved in a gas attack that left him nearly blind in one eye for the rest of his life. By the end of the war, he had risen from the rank of Private to that of Captain.

## PICTURE 28 - Stanley Holloway

Holloway enlisted in the Connaught Rangers. In December 1915 he was commissioned as a subaltern because of his previous training as a private in the London Rifle Brigade. He was stationed in Cork and initially fought against Sinn Féin during the Easter Rising of 1916. Later that year, he was sent to France, where he fought in the trenches alongside Michael O'Leary, who later won the Victoria Cross for gallantry. Holloway spent much of his time in the later part of the war organising shows to boost army morale in France. One such revue, *Wear That Ribbon*, was performed in honour of O'Leary's winning the VC.

## PICTURE 29 - Leslie Howard

He worked as a bank clerk before enlisting at the outbreak of the Great War. He served in the British Army as a subaltern in the Northamptonshire Yeomanry but suffered shell shock, which led to his relinquishing his commission in 1916. Like many others around the time of World War I, the family Anglicised its name in this case to "Stainer," although Howard's legal name remained Steiner as evidenced by his military records and the public notice of his name change in 1920.

Howard's Second World War activities included acting and filmmaking. He was active in anti-German propaganda and *rumoured* to have been involved with British Intelligence. This sparked conspiracy theories regarding his death in 1943 at the hands of the German Luftwaffe when the British airliner on which he was a passenger was shot down over the Bay of Biscay.

## PICTURE 30 - Jack Warner

His sisters Elsie and Doris Waters were well-known comediennes who usually performed as "Gert and Daisy".

He served as a driver in the Royal Flying Corps and was awarded the meritorious service medal in 1918. He returned to England and the motor trade in 1919, graduating from hearses to occasional car racing at Brooklands before becoming an entertainer.

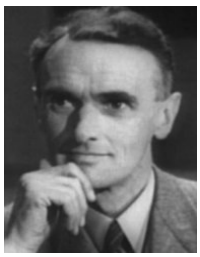
## PICTURE 31 - Nigel Bruce

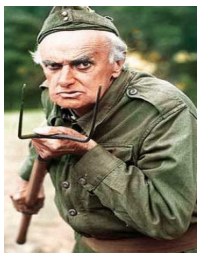
Bruce was the second son of Sir William Waller Bruce, 10th Baronet (1856–1912) and his wife Angelica Lady Bruce, daughter of General George Selby, Royal Artillery. Bruce was born in Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico, while his parents were on holiday there.

He served in France from 1914 as a lieutenant in the 10th Service Battalion Somerset Light Infantry and the Honourable Artillery Company, severely wounded at Cambrai the following year, with eleven bullets in his left leg, spent the remainder of the war in a wheelchair.

Bruce starred as Watson in all 14 films of the series and over 200 radio programs of *The New Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Although Watson often appears to be the older of the two main characters, Bruce was actually three years younger than his co-star Rathbone.

## John Laurie (Not presented in the version for Ventura)





He was a pupil at Dumfries Academy, then a Grammar School, but abandoned a career in architecture to serve in the First World War. He was left partially haunted by his experiences and later in his life, he once asked Jimmy Perry to stop showing a piece of film of the war (a part of a piece Perry was filming about First world War Veterans) saying “turn it off son” I can’t watch it. He served with the Honourable Artillery Company during the War. Laurie starred as Mad Peter in the Hammer film *The Reptile* (1966), and later appeared in *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971), the Disney

film *One of Our Dinosaurs is Missing* (1975), and *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1979).

**PICTURE 32 - George Calvert Ahern**

George Calvert Ahern was born on July 7, 1886. According to records, California was his enlistment state and Alameda County therein. Oakland listed as the city. He had enlisted for the Army in September 1917 in Santa Barbara. Served during World War I. Ahern had the rank of Sergeant. Attached to 91st Division, 364th Infantry Regiment, Company L.

He had been working with the Flying A and Mary Miles Minter Silent Film Company for two years. He had been in the theatrical business for ten years and was fairly famous for his character acting. Ahern was mortally wounded the first day of the opening of the battle of the Hindenburg line. He had been in France only two months. He posthumously received the World War One Victory Medal and Purple Heart.

**END - PICTURE 33 – ANY QUESTIONS?**