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German Propaganda in the Balkans during the First World War

Abstract: Immediately after the outbreak of the First World War Germany mobilized human resources from all fields and put up all the necessary funds to counter British and French propaganda. In a very short period of time, it was in a position to organize its own propaganda networks abroad, to a large extent, by using the respective commercial networks and the pre-war enterprises operating in various countries. It was the neutral countries around the world that were among the primary targets of German propaganda. In the Balkans particular effort was made to create a favourable climate for the Central Powers and prevail over the adverse British and French influence. With the assistance of commercial circles and the appropriation of large sums of money, newspapers, journalists and publishing groups were bought off, information offices set up, agents recruited, political parties and politicians bribed, and pro-German parties founded. The aim was to influence public opinion, promote the German version of war developments, and manipulate political leaders to give up their stance of neutrality and make the decision for their country to take part in the war on the side of Germany. However, even though Berlin focused its attention on the Balkans where the major propaganda networks were organized, the propaganda campaigns proved to be essentially ineffective. Following Bulgaria's entry into the war on the side of the Central Powers and the destruction of Serbia, first Romania and then Greece joined the Entente, finding themselves on the winning side at the war's end.

Keywords: German propaganda, German Foreign Ministry, neutrality, Greece, Rumania, Bulgaria, newspapers, Freiherrn Garl Schenck von Schweinsberg, Ludwig Roselius, Agenzia Romana-Germana de Informatii, public opinion

It was immediately after the outbreak of the war, and because of the vilifying way the British Consulate in Constantinople had portrayed the German naval defeat, that Berlin realized, uneasily, the enemy had already formed the organizational basis for its propaganda presentation of the war to European public opinion and, in particular, to the neutral countries. It was, therefore, imperative that Germany use the same means, as soon as possible, in order to counteract the campaign of "false information" and "slander" which the British had launched.¹

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¹ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts [hereafter PA AA], R 20936: Wangenheim(:) an Reichskanzler Freiherrn von Bethmann-Hollweg, Berlin, 18 August 1914.

Commercial circles stressed the need to radically alter the prevailing view that German diplomacy was unable to refute British claims of atrocity.²

For a coordinated German propaganda campaign that would literally have worldwide effect, it was necessary to establish a unified operational centre based in Berlin but with the Middle East as its focal point. This was not only for the sake of the battle for the “soul of the Middle East” but also, and more importantly, for conducting the war, and for defending vital economic interests in the Ottoman Empire. It was a golden opportunity for the Germans to strike a blow to the British Empire. In this way, they would be able to force it to agree to peace talks in order to relieve pressure that it would be facing from the uprisings of its Muslim subjects in India and Egypt.³

Of course, Germany and its ally, the Sultan, would help instigate the rebellion. However, for this to happen, certain conditions were necessary: organization, the mobilization of all available means and resources, realistic military plans, and operational propaganda which would present Germany to these populations as a defender against the enemy, as a crusader of honour and truth and as a supporter of self-determination. The support of the Turkish government at all costs and the preservation of their common goals had, thus, become fundamental to fulfilling German political and military plans in the East.⁴

It was a given fact that the German press would be used to publish and distribute military commentary and news reports to all European countries, which would then be translated for press outlets in Africa and the Middle East. The publication of German press releases in the newspapers of the region, the bribing of journalists and publishers, in fact the buying off of entire publishing houses, also meant the involvement of the local embassy and consular authorities, the recruitment of suitable agents, as well as the allocation of the necessary funds. An entire body comprising translators, teachers (both German and natives) from the seminar for the East in Berlin and from the Institute for the Colonies in Hamburg would staff these places.⁵

People from every position, field and profession were called to contribute to the success of the German international propaganda campaign: bankers and representatives of large merchant houses abroad, Baghdad railway staff, German schools and Christian missionaries, members of the Jewish communities,

² PA AA, R 20936: Verband Deutscher Handlungsgehilfen zu Leipzig an das Ministerium des Auswärtigen Amtes (Berlin), Mannheim, 19 August 1914.

³ PA AA, R 20936: Wangenheim (;) an Reichskanzler Freiherrn von Bethmann-Hollweg, Berlin, 18 August 1914.

⁴ PA AA, R 20936: Wangenheim (;) an Reichskanzler Freiherrn von Bethmann-Hollweg, Berlin, 18 August 1914.

⁵ PA AA, R 20936: Wangenheim (;) an Reichskanzler Freiherrn von Bethmann-Hollweg, Berlin, 18 August 1914.

exiles and foreign communities in Europe, in the East and in America. Members of independence movements, inter alia, constituted the manpower behind the counterpropaganda, as well as being responsible for active propaganda, which – wherever needed – rerouted public opinion and strengthened pro-German sentiments in order to gain new supporters.⁶

The incitement and the steady feeding of the pan-Islamist movement with ideas, weapons, men and money as a way to force England into a peace agreement; the instigation of an insurrection in Russia by its Muslim and Jewish populations; the exploitation of independence movements such as the Irish, were all actions which represented one element of the German counterattack against the allegations made by its enemies. The other element consisted of comprising the need to fortify the military camp of the Central Powers by brow-beating the neutral countries into the war, or to quote: “In every neutral country, we must have our agents, who will have won the trust of the country and its people, so that a favourable stance towards us is formed. This too is a service to the fatherland.”⁷

The main objective was for all to contribute to the fatherland in order to deal swiftly with the enemy who had the upper hand in the propaganda game. In this, the role of the German entrepreneurs and business giants was decisive for providing the capital and the networks abroad. Persil, Henkel, Odol, Maggi, among others, with an advertising turnover of about 30 to 50 million marks a year, received a proposition from the Foreign Ministry to participate on a committee to help national propaganda that would establish and fund propaganda networks in the form of war offices of information.⁸

For anyone who might have had doubts about the connection between advertising and propaganda,⁹ the Foreign Ministry had plenty of suggestions from prominent entrepreneurs about the organization of propaganda on business bases. Here, the key was to understand the psychology of the masses and

⁶ PA AA, R 20936: Wangenheim (:) an Reichskanzler Freicherrn von Bethmann-Hollweg, Berlin, 18 August 1914.

⁷ PA AA, R 20936: Verband Deutscher Handlungsgehilfen zu Leipzig an das Ministerium des Auswärtigen Amtes (Berlin), Mannheim, 19 August 1914.

⁸ PA AA, R 20937: Ludwig Roselius an Unterstaatssekretär Zimmermann, Berlin, 5 January 1915. The instigator of the proposal, a merchant himself and owner of the firm Kaffee-Handels-Aktiengesellschaft, with its headquarters in Bremen, was the mastermind behind German propaganda in the Balkans, organizing a wide-ranging network based in Bucharest.

⁹ Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda*, trans. Dimitris Tannis (Athens: Nefeli Publishing, 2015). Bernays, a member of the Wilson government's Committee on Public Information during the First World War, realized early on that the mechanisms of control and manipulation of public opinion could likewise be implemented during peacetime. Adapting his knowledge of advertising, he was the initiator of the women's smoking campaign: cigarettes as beacons of freedom were directly associated with women's emancipation.

the mechanisms of persuasion, which created the belief in the masses that they were not forced into anything but that whatever they adopted corresponded fully to their beliefs and was in their best interest. By adopting the practices of advertising, marketers and entrepreneurs had the tools to point out rule number one to the politicians, which was none other than the total identification of politics and business interests with propaganda. And for anyone who was concerned about the principles of promoting propaganda, the businessmen had a ready answer was simple and to the point: "The foundations of propaganda are lies, defamation and immorality."¹⁰

The main propagandist of German interests in Greece did indeed come from the business world. Freiherrn Carl Schenck von Schweinsberg, better known as Baron Schenck, had already been living in Athens as the representative of Krupp when the war broke out. This event forced him to stop negotiations with the Greek government for the purchase of four submarines, a battleship and ammunition, and for Krupp to terminate its cooperation with him abroad.¹¹ Although the company expected him to return to head office, it received a notice from the Foreign Ministry that the Krupp employee would now be engaged by the Embassy in Athens, responsible for Press matters and other intelligence issues.¹²

Without a doubt, of decisive importance was his association with the Greek royal couple, while he was already doing an excellent job on propaganda in the Greek press. Soon Baron Schenck's room at the Hotel Grande Bretagne was transformed into an informal press office and propaganda centre, which he staffed with Greek agents in collaboration with the secret police. Proof that German money intended for propaganda purposes, handled by the then ambassador through bank transfers from Berlin to accounts with the Greek National Bank, had been put to good use was the sudden pro-German turnaround of certain newspapers in the Greek capital, which indicated their having been bought off.¹³

¹⁰ PA AA, R 20937: Ludwig Roselius, "Ein Kapitel über Organisation", Bremen [Ludwig Roselius an Baron Langwerth von Simmern, Berlin, 6 January 1915].

¹¹ PA AA, R 7465: Various documents. For the last attempts made by German industry for market share gain over its competitors of the Greek arms market before war broke out and the role of Schenck as Krupp's representative in Athens see Kostas Loulos, *The German policy in Greece, 1896–1914*, trans. Katerina Liaptsi (Athens: Cultural Institute of Agricultural Bank of Greece, 1990), 200–212.

¹² PA AA, R 19891 (Weltkrieg vom 20 August 1914): K. Gesandte (Quadt) an Auswärtiges Amt, no. 345, Athens, 20 August 1914 and R 7465: Friedrich Krupp, Aktiengesellschaft, an das Auswärtige Amt, no. 1776, Essen/Ruhr, 26 August 1914.

¹³ Stratos Dordanas, "This traitor should not have survived the attempt of June 21st: Antivenizelism and German Propaganda in Greece of the National Schism", in *1915–2015: 100 years since the National Schism*, Conference, Municipality of Argos/Mycenae-Philologists Association of Argolis, Cultural Centre of the Municipality of Argos/Mycenae, Argos, 7–8

The German Embassy in Athens became the centre for propaganda, where an entire operation funded by Berlin was set up. The main objective of the propaganda mechanism was to buy off Greek newspapers and journalists, and use them to promote German interests by influencing public opinion. There were newspapers, which after being bought off by the embassy, changed their political line completely; from being pro-Entente, they overnight became pro-German. Likewise, there were journalists who were paid to publish the German General Staff's communiqués. In the propaganda war in neutral Greece, competition between the Entente and the Central Powers was fierce. Both rival alliances sought to win the country over to their side and steer public opinion by disseminating what was often censored information about the war. In particular, the large amounts of money spent by Germany for this purpose revealed the importance attached to this tactic. German propaganda very quickly made up the top news in Greece, raising a major political and ethical issue in the spheres of journalism and politics.¹⁴

However, Greece was not at the centre of German designs because the country had already been won over when the Greek king, from the outbreak of the war, showed a commitment to benevolent neutrality. The only assurance that he needed was not to be left entirely without help should difficulties arise. If, in the same period, one looks just a little further north, more exactly at Bucharest, one can see millions of German marks being made available for specific purposes, including the purchase of the Romanian grain production, and the buying off of newspapers and leading political figures, all this in order to overturn the country's neutrality from the outset of the war.

Recruited from the very beginning of the war, Ludwig Roselius, a renowned merchant from Bremen, zealously set up the propaganda machine in Bucharest, which extended all the way to Sofia, and which was continually supplied with millions of German marks, a part of which was financed from the respective government coffers in Vienna. To be able to do this implies that the political contacts needed to prepare the ground had already been made. Having received German assurance that after the end of the war Romania would get Bessarabia, King Carol informed Roselius that in the event of Bulgaria attacking Serbia, Romania would not intervene. In response, the German propagandist

November 2015 (in press). By the same author: "In the German Embassy: diplomatic agents and invisible key players of German Politics and Propaganda", in *Aspects of the First World War in the Balkan Peninsula*, Workshop, Hellenic National Defence General Staff/Hellenic Committee on Military History, Thessaloniki, 7 October 2017.

¹⁴ On this issue see Despina Papadimitriou, "The Press and the Schism, 1914–1917" (PhD thesis, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 1990); also (Sir) Basil Thomson, *The Allied Secret Service in Greece* (in Greek) (Athens: Logothetis Publishing) (English original, London: Hutchinson, 1931).

explained that his mission was not directed against the dynasty or the state, but rather at winning the very best of the Romanian people for the German cause. What exactly was the German cause? With the participation of Northern Europe and the Balkans, except Serbia, Germany continued to fight for the creation of the United States of Europe as a shield against Russian and English aggression. In this union, all peoples would have equal rights regarding education, religion and ethnicity; furthermore, the inviolability of the dynasties would be assured.¹⁵

On receiving the king's indirect approval, Roselius put to use the people at his disposal who had sound knowledge of Romanian reality, and wasted no time in taking control of certain newspapers; he not only acquired entire publishing groups but also bought off top politicians. The attainment of these objectives was actually based on a very simple but effective reasoning: by paying more for the grain than its real value, access was automatically granted to Romanian markets, and to the political offices as well.¹⁶

With Take Ionescu's son-in-law playing a key role in many of these trade agreements, it did not take long for the politician and his party, the Conservative Democrats, to join the ranks of neutrality, although at first he was strongly in favour of the Entente. Proud of its significant achievements in Romania, Berlin acknowledged that this practice brought the best results; to quote: "We gain the trust of those behind the ministers, who eventually succumb to the pressure of their own people. In order not to buy off Ionescu directly, even though he badly wants it, we use his people. [...] There are many incompetents who maintain relations with ministers and party leaders, to whom we daily give a few thousand leu, asking them for something in return. This is how we gain adherents on a daily basis."¹⁷

The press was the main instrument for influencing public opinion in Bucharest¹⁸ and Sofia (40 million was the amount spent for buying off the newspapers *Ziua*, *Minerva* and *Seara*), which were constantly fed with news reports

¹⁵ PA AA, R 21196: "Unterredung Roselius mit Seiner Majestät dem König", Bucharest, 6 September 1914 [Kaiserlich Deutsche Gesandtschaft in Rumänien an dem Reichskanzler Freicherrn von Bethmann-Hollweg, no. 267, Bucharest, 7 November 1914.]

¹⁶ PA AA, R 21196: Kaiserlich Deutsches Konsulat an das Auswärtige Amt, no. 1-8, Bucharest, 26 September 1914.

¹⁷ PA AA, R 21196: Kaiserlich Deutsches Konsulat an das Auswärtige Amt, no. 1-8, Bucharest, 26 September 1914.

¹⁸ Ibid. no. 9: "Reading a Romanian newspaper one gets the impression that the Germans and the Austrians are defeated daily, that in these countries there is starvation, that the Germans are destroying cultural monuments, that our Kaiser can be compared only with Attila and many other such things. One can talk with serious and educated people and realize their certainty that the Hindenburg army has achieved not even a small victory, that the German and Austrian army have not had a single victory in this war".

from the News Office, *Agentia Romana-Germana de Informatii*. Along with politicians willing to be bribed,¹⁹ this resulted in the establishment of a small Germanophile party that was also in need of financial assistance in order to win more supporters from the wider society.²⁰ In Romania, the Germans used agents from Jewish circles for the purposes of propaganda and espionage, being impressed by their honesty and credibility.²¹ After all, the recruitment of agents was one of the responsibilities of the News Office.²²

Furthermore, the German-Romanian News Office played a key coordinating role because, on the one hand, it controlled the newspapers that had been bought off, and, on the other, it promoted the publication of news on the war depicting events in a decidedly pro-German light. It also published brochures, maps and cards of Bessarabia, which had a sentimental effect on the Romanians. With the help of a telegraph network, information arrived from the war correspondents on the battlefields, which was then sent to the embassy and the consulates for processing in order to end up in the newspapers. The *Agentia Romana-Germana de Informatii* was so successful that besides the Bucharest office, there were plans to establish branches in Constantinople and Sofia.²³ Towards this end, contact was made with the Bulgarian Prime Minister, Radoslavov himself, as well as his influential circles. Bulgarian participation was agreed in the form of a joint Romanian-Bulgarian committee that for propaganda purposes would travel to Berlin, as well as to the battlefields; it would send press releases to Bucharest and Sofia, as well as distribute propaganda to other neutral countries.²⁴

¹⁹ The most important politicians in Romania were Ion I. C. Brătianu and Emil Costinescu (former director of Banca Generala Romana/Berliner Diskonto-Gesellschaft). Brătianu supported the king's political stance, which was completely pro-German, while Costinescu, who was a former newspaper editor and came from a poor background, became one of the richest people in Romania with the assistance of German capital and due to the support he provided for business deals between the two sides. It is well known that in Romania the cabinet ministers had invested their capital in industry, as did Costinescu, whose main investments were in the sugar industry, with which his entire family were involved. As finance minister and responsible for the economic policy-making of the state, his continued backing of German interests, with personal economic gain, was considered a foregone conclusion. That is why, despite his age and weak health, the Germans had decided to make use of him.

²⁰ PA AA, R 21196: Kaiserlich Deutsches Konsulat an das Auswärtige Amt, no. 5, Bucharest, 26 September 1914.

²¹ PA AA, R 21196: Kaiserlich Deutsches Konsulat an das Auswärtige Amt, no. 7, Bucharest, 26 September 1914.

²² PA AA, R 21196: Ludwig Roselius, "Deutsche Propaganda-Rumänien".

²³ PA AA, R 21196: Ludwig Roselius, "Deutsche Propaganda-Rumänien".

²⁴ PA AA, R 21196: Kaiserlich Deutsches Konsulat an das Auswärtige Amt, no. 12, Bucharest, 26 September 1914.

To make sure that the propaganda machine in Romania and Bulgaria would continue to operate even under the most adverse conditions Roselius bought large quantities of paper in the event that the overseas supply was suspended. Under his orders, agents were ready to sabotage the publication of printed matter that was hostile to the Central Powers, and organize trade union protests and peasant demonstrations in support of “peace” and the king.²⁵

Two Bulgarians that had been bought off had the task of sending pro-German accounts to the Bulgarian press. One was a priest, who received funding for his church, and the other was a correspondent who received a healthy check.²⁶ In turn, the Chief of Police of Ruse in Bulgaria banned the circulation of all non-Germanophile newspapers.²⁷ His agreement with the Chief of Police in Sofia was to arrest anyone involved in actions against the government’s stance of neutrality. Having previously received the money agreed on, some newspaper editors of the Bulgarian press were willing to publish news items given to them directly by the German and Austrian consulates.²⁸

What did the Germans think about Romanian society and the reading public? And how did they present the buying off of newspapers to promote their propaganda? According to Roselius and his superiors in Berlin: “In times of peace, a newspaper can simply serve the economic and commercial interests of Germany. But in these crucial moments that we are living in, a newspaper under German control and serving German interests, can, under the right conditions, produce the same effects as our army, with substantially fewer losses.”²⁹ The Romanian newspapers that had been bought off had, therefore, to adapt their contents according to the instructions of their new employers, as well as the needs of their readers.

German comments regarding the readers were not very flattering: “The Romanian reading public likes sentimentality and lies; they do not want to learn the truth of the events, but in the spirit of battle and the rattling of the machine guns, they want to see blood flow. This is not only the case in Romania but in every place where newspapers are sold on the street like, for example, in Paris, Copenhagen, et cetera. This type of press depends on the nation and on state lobby groups. At this late moment, for the Reich to be able to compete with Russia and France, it is necessary to make money available – in no case does it need to be the high amounts that the enemy is spending – but it needs to offer money

²⁵ PA AA, R 21196: Kaiserlich Deutsches Konsulat an das Auswärtige Amt, no. 14, Bucharest, 26 September 1914.

²⁶ PA AA, R 21196: “Bericht”, 17/30 September 1914.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ PA AA, R 21196: (Ludwig Roselius;) Bericht no. 6, “Angelegenheit Universul”, Bucharest, 9 October 1914.

that ends up in the pockets of journalists [*journalistischer Strauchdiebe*] so as to prevent further sacrifices in German blood and materials.”³⁰

Ultimately, just how this huge amount of money and the well-organized structure connecting Berlin to Bucharest and Sofia, including Athens, contributed to fulfilling German pursuits, was clearly demonstrated by the subsequent political and military developments in the Balkans. Bulgaria, after having secured promises of territorial concessions against Serbian and Greek Macedonia, and the granting of a loan, took part in the Central Powers’ autumn attack against Serbia,³¹ whereas Romania entered the war in August 1916 on the side of the Entente.³² At around the same time, in Greece, the conflict between King Constantine and the Anglo-French supported by the former Prime Minister Venizelos, split the country in two and soon led to open warfare, taking on the character of a civil war.³³

To conclude, in any event, German propaganda against the neutral countries in the Great War was based on the words of Otto von Bismarck, and that meant using every available means to get across the German version of the “truth” on the war. This “truth” must, of course, be read as “lies” which is told by hunters and politicians especially during elections, and – as in our case – by propagandists during war.

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³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ For Bulgaria during the First World War see Richard C. Hall, *Bulgaria's Road to the First World War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

³² For Romania after the defeat from the Central Powers see Lisa Mayerhofer, *Zwischen Freund und Feind. Deutsche Besatzung in Rumänien, 1916–1918* (Munich: Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2010).

³³ For Greece during the First World War see George B. Leon, *Greece in First World War, 1917–1918* (Athens: Cultural Institute of National Bank, 2000) and, by the same author, *Greece and the Great Powers 1914–1917* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1974).

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