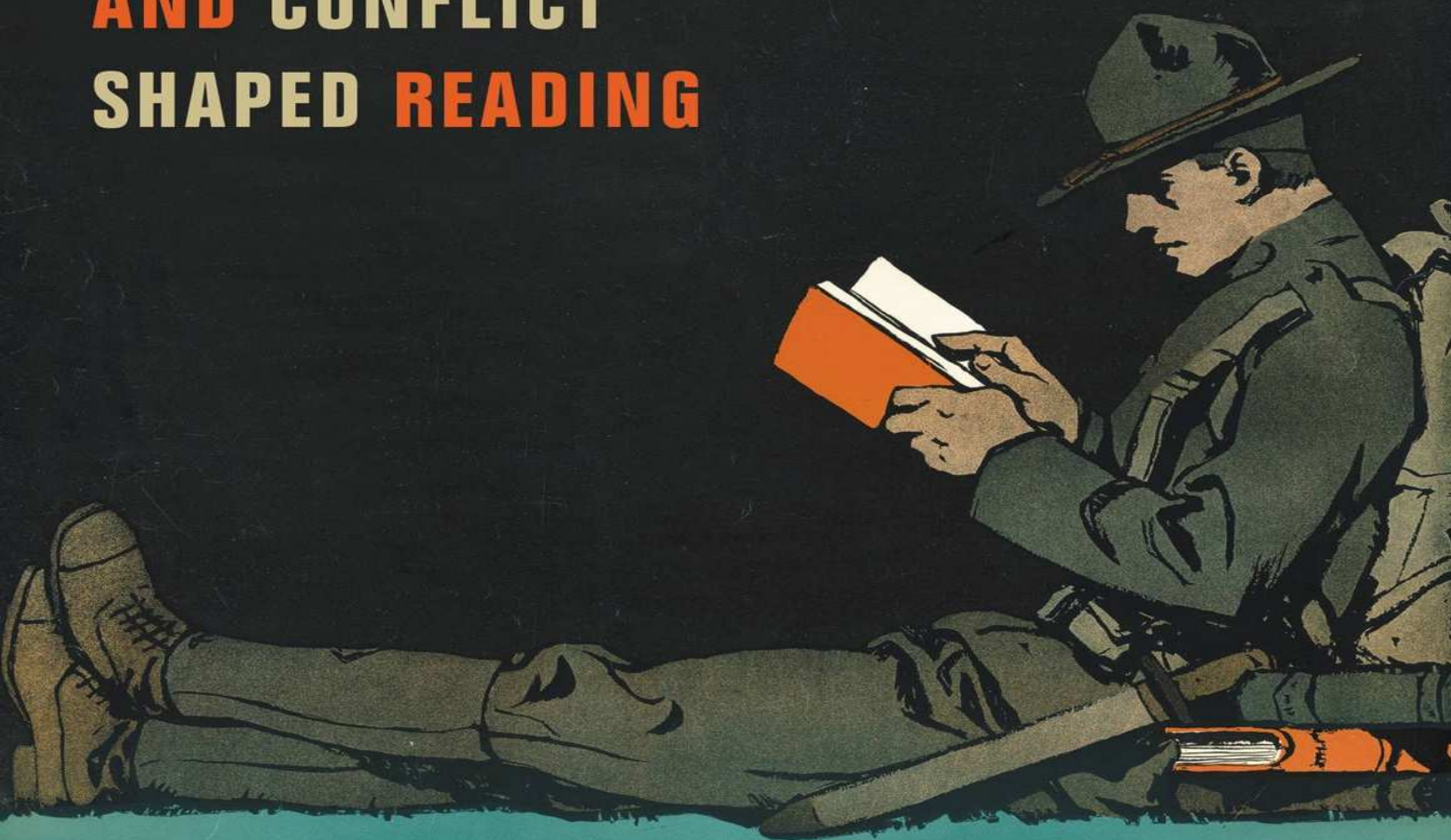


HOW **READING**  
SHAPED CONFLICT  
**AND** CONFLICT  
SHAPED **READING**



# THE BOOK

# AT WAR

ANDREW  
PETTEGREE



# **THE BOOK AT WAR**

**HOW READING SHAPED CONFLICT  
AND CONFLICT SHAPED READING**

**ANDREW  
PETTEGREE**

**BASIC BOOKS**

New York

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# BASIC BOOKS

## INTRODUCTION

### BOOKS AS WEAPONS IN THE WAR OF IDEAS

The seed of the idea that became this book was planted, appropriately enough, during a visit to the Imperial War Museum in London in 2017. I had dropped by to see an exhibition on the preservation of art, including the museum's own collection, at the beginning of the Second World War, when it was moved out of reach of the anticipated bombing. As a historian of media and communication, this set me thinking: what happened to their books? In the seventy-five years since the war, there has been a lot more attention given to the preservation, looting and restoration of art than to books.<sup>1</sup> There are good reasons for this: while works of art are individual, recognisable and often extremely valuable, the book collections displaced by the war contained much that was mundane, often copies of works published in many thousands of copies. Even where the owner can be identified, by a bookplate, signature or library stamp, books often have little more than sentimental value.

Yet, in the twentieth century, the book stock of Europe and many Asian countries went through a period of turbulence unlike anything previously experienced in world history. Libraries were destroyed, along with tens of thousands of private collections, and even where stock survived it was often appropriated by the victors. Much has never been returned. Berlin, Warsaw, Minsk, Munich, Kassel: the libraries in these cities, with their unique surviving copies of early printed books, musical scores and manuscripts, will never be the same again. This is the story of libraries at war that has often been told: wanton destruction, ameliorated by plucky attempts to keep the show on the road. Famously, libraries were set up in London Underground stations for those sheltering; everywhere, brave librarians worked tirelessly to save their collections from bombing or the depredations of the occupying power.

With these images emblazoned on the memory, many would sympathise with an account that presents the destruction of libraries as a human and cultural tragedy. Anyone reading these words already values books; we are bookish people. We tend to assume books and literary culture have a positive impact on the world, informing, enlightening, assisting the cause of progress. The burning of the Jewish libraries in Poland by the Nazis was an attempt to



obliterate their entire cultural heritage and indeed carried off many irreplaceable works. For those who care about literary culture, this deliberate humiliation by the Germans, themselves a people who revered books, was a dagger to the heart. This book acknowledges and revisits these atrocities. But it also asks, was the bombing of libraries, the destruction of books, always a tragedy?

In 1931, the decision was taken to build a new library for Oxford University to provide storage for its growing collection. When war broke out in 1939, it was almost complete, but not yet filled with books. The New Bodleian was immediately made available for a variety of war work. It housed the Admiralty's photographic library, which liaised with the headquarters of the Inter-Services Topographical Division, intended to coordinate cartographical activities between the services and housed in the School of Geography. The New Bodleian took in the Royal Observer Corps and the Educational Books Section of the Red Cross, with its essential service providing books for Allied Prisoners of War (POWs). Many college libraries and collections outside Oxford made use of its deep vaults to house their greatest treasures, but then so did the Blood Transfusion Service, stockpiling plasma for the Normandy landings. It is hard not to concede that with this array of war work, the New Bodleian was a legitimate war target. The same could be said of the peerless map collection of the Royal Geographical Society in London, or the scientific collections of the Berlin Technical University in Charlottenburg, crucial resources in the battle of science. Its 250,000 volumes would indeed all be lost to bombing in 1943. And while we continue to mourn the attack in Coventry that destroyed much of the city, it also carried off the public library's important collection of technical literature, a critical resource for war industries in the West Midlands.



A legitimate war target? Between 1939 and 1945 the New Bodleian (now the Weston Library) housed both vulnerable treasures from other collections and important war departments. Oxford colleges were also given over to vital war work. Why Hitler never bombed Oxford, also home to the Cowley automobile works, is much debated.

Neither are all books good books. Should we lament the loss of the 9 million copies of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* circulating in Germany by 1945, or the 100 million copies of Mao's Little Red Book destroyed when his cult receded? What of Clausewitz, whose clear-eyed pursuit of crushing victory banished the last vestiges of chivalrous respect for the enemy, and opened the way to warfare that made little distinction between combatants and civilians? The very qualities that are often celebrated in literature – its universality, accessibility, the ability to touch multiple lives with an idea or an inspiring narrative – also allowed for the spread of hateful ideologies, as books were twisted for propaganda or exploited to cause harm to enormous swathes of an opponent's population. As well as destroying the Jewish libraries, the Nazis also ascribed great value to them, creating new, vast collections in order to understand their enemies. This bizarre project is indeed the reason why so many Jewish books eventually survived.<sup>2</sup>

When writing this book, I drew on three main sources: books about war, the books generated by war, and archival material consisting of contemporary

letters, memoranda and diaries relevant to the experience of reading in wartime, the administration of wartime publishing and the displacement of libraries. This encompasses many hundreds of historical studies and other sorts of contemporary print. For I should make clear that when we talk about books in this text, we range far beyond hardback books and the new paperbacks that transformed wartime reading from the 1930s. The warring nations employed the whole panoply of print: books, pamphlets, scientific periodicals, magazines, newspapers, leaflets and broadsheet notices. The attempt to undermine the morale of enemy troops by firing shells filled with leaflets urging them to surrender may seem hapless and comical, but leaflet dropping was an important part of aerial warfare. Leaflets warning French and German citizens of an impending bombing or artillery barrage allowed some to flee and save their lives. Without print, hierarchies dissolved. When, in April 1945, citizens living in the ruins of Berlin were confronted with two cardboard placards, neatly penned by hand and signed 'Hitler' and 'Goebbels', the dire penalties threatened were brushed aside. Without the authority of print, the handwriting looked pathetic and inconsequential. One onlooker summed up the general disdain: 'Well, just look what those two have come to.'<sup>3</sup>

All of these various print media are explored in this book, not least because they were so interconnected. Many books first appeared as a serial in a literary magazine (John Buchan's *Thirty-Nine Steps* is an excellent example from 1915). The book world and journalism were also closely interwoven. Authors wrote for the newspapers, and newspapers in return promoted the authors' books. Published writers were also in high demand for writing propaganda during times of conflict. This sort of war work was often welcomed by authors, as pressure on paper supplies led to the closure of the magazines and journals that had provided so much of their income. It is also the case that readers often made no distinction between books and the magazines from which they received much of their news and entertainment. Phyllis Walther was a graduate of London University who in 1939 returned to the family home in Dorset with her young son, leaving her husband to his war work in London. Here Phyllis is responding to a survey circulated to the diarists of Mass Observation about her reading habits:



War is cruel and tragic, but it also allows unexpected talents to blossom. Here a young naval rating takes time off from his duties to sketch a cartoon for a forces newspaper on Orkney.

The only books I read regularly are *Picture Post*, which I send to my sister in Australia for her birthday and Christmas presents, the *New Statesman*, which she gives me for my present, and *Reader's Digest*, which my father takes in.<sup>4</sup>

None of these three titles named were books in our sense of the word, though *Life* and *Picture Post* were, thanks to their extraordinary front-line photography, some of the important publications of the war.

I have read (and bought) many hundreds of books, pamphlets and printed ephemera in the course of researching this text, but if I had to nominate one favourite war book it would be the diary of Nella Last.<sup>5</sup> In 1939, Nella was a housewife in Barrow-in-Furness, a shipbuilding port on the Cumbrian coast.

Nella was not formally educated, but she was a natural diarist. Her shrewd, astringent and sometimes ungenerous observations make for a classic account of life under siege from the new horror of war, bombing.

Nella was a devoted reader in her youth, but seems to have read very little during the war. Queuing for food, her voluntary war work and her diary and market garden left her little time for more than a brief glance at the evening paper. This was not at all unusual. Some barely opened a book in wartime, while others experienced the opposite, relying on books as a healing balm in troubled times, with husbands, sons or daughters away from home, and bombers overhead. Many discovered books for the first time, either manning a lonely post away from the front line, or in the forced isolation of a prisoner-of-war camp. So, despite the fact that books and printed matter all too often functioned as vectors of the poisonous ideologies which brought soldiers to commit terrible deeds beyond the imagination of their previous civilian selves, we will also look at books as sources of comfort and solace in turbulent times.

It cannot be a coincidence that the major wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were fought between the world's most bookish nations (which arrived at this position on a tide of mass literacy from the nineteenth century onwards). Germany was the first to adopt wholeheartedly the science of war, with the United States its most adept pupil. The Great War of 1914–18 locked in combat the old world's most respected literary culture, France, and its two greatest publishing giants, England and Germany. This war also gave new energy to the publishing industry in the United States, while the revolution of 1917 initiated a drive towards universal literacy in the new Soviet Union that transformed Russian society. War also radically altered both the terms of the international book trade and the workings of the publishing industry. Former friends and partners could no longer work with each other, as imports from enemy nations were banned. For the defeated, there was the humiliation of having your publishing industry put to use by the conqueror, if not dismantled altogether. Bombing destroyed millions of books, in libraries and private homes, but also in the warehouses of publishers and wholesalers. Publishers could see their entire backlist go up in flames as the result of a single bomb. For all combatant nations there were inevitably new regulations, most obviously paper rationing and censorship.

Censorship plays a more subtle role in this story than one might expect.



Nazi Germany made its intentions clear from the first with a total ban on the works of Jewish and ‘decadent’ authors. Yet it was not clear who fell into the latter category, and it was left largely to librarians to determine what should become of the purged books, if they even recognised them. In Soviet Russia fear of the Gulag was normally enough to effect compliance among authors. In the democracies censorship was more subtle, though German books were withdrawn from libraries in the United States in 1917 (and sometimes burned) and the Cold War cull of books in American libraries impacted many widely read authors, not least Dashiell Hammett and Howard Fast. Ten years previously, the US Army and Navy had been distributing Fast’s books to the troops in their Armed Services Editions. In Britain, paper shortages had the most profound impact, making it difficult for literary authors to get a hearing, while the public was crying out for first-hand accounts of the war. Censorship here relied mostly on publishers’ discretion, sometimes reinforced by a quiet official word in the ear. This almost cost us one of the great works of the twentieth century, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, rejected by a string of publishers on the intervention of the intelligence services, reluctant to see its implied criticism of a vital wartime ally, the Soviet Union, reach the public – though ironically the Ministry of Information official whose whispered advice caused publishers to steer clear was later revealed as a Soviet agent.<sup>6</sup>

Despite backstairs lobbying of this character, there was a real difference between the publishing culture in the democracies and the totalitarian states. While public libraries in Germany filled their shelves with copies of books by members of the Nazi elite, in Britain the Moberly Committee, charged with the allocation of extra paper to titles of national importance, rather magnificently refused to grant an allocation for a new edition of a life of the Duke of Marlborough, written by his descendant, the prime minister and hero of the hour, Winston Churchill. And while Churchill’s books were firmly banned from prisoner-of-war camps in Germany, *Mein Kampf* was available in British public libraries and a recommended text for the libraries supplied to each army camp. Presumably, the authorities believed that exposure to Hitler’s raging could only stiffen their resolve to fight on.

This uneven exchange brings us to one other notable feature of this conflict. It is seldom remarked that the Second World War pitted in opposition war leaders who were also bestselling authors. For Winston Churchill, writing was in his blood, from his first essays in journalism in India and the Boer War, adventures distilled into his first autobiography, *My*

*Early Life* (1930). In the wilderness years before the second war, writing and journalism helped keep him ahead of his mounting debts. In 1953, he would win the Nobel Prize for Literature, for his oratory and historical writing. His adversary, Adolf Hitler, achieved no such recognition, but he did produce the most notorious text of the twentieth century, *Mein Kampf*, in which he laid out in remarkable detail his programme for Germany and the fate that would await its enemies. Published in two volumes in 1925 and 1926, it received a tepid reaction, and sales only took off as his National Socialist party came closer to government. Hitler was also a discerning reader and collector, particularly of architectural and history books, as can be confirmed from the books in his private library at Berchtesgaden, appropriated by American soldiers in 1945 and now in the Library of Congress.<sup>7</sup>

Belying his reputation as crude and uneducated, Joseph Stalin was a deeply literate and thoughtful reader and lover of books. School in a small Georgian town on the fringe of the Russian empire provided a welcome refuge from a dysfunctional family, and Stalin's intelligence was recognised early. At the local Jesuit college, he courted disapprobation by accessing forbidden literature from a local circulating library. Revolutionary politics would disrupt his ambition to go to university and become a professor, but he continued to read, assembling in his apartment at the Kremlin and his dachas a carefully curated library of 15,000 books.<sup>8</sup> This was not a show collection: a good proportion of the books that have survived are covered in his detailed and sometimes caustic annotations. Stalin would carry this editorial flair into a deep involvement with some of the major writing projects of the Soviet state, including the *Short Course History of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union* and school history texts. Stalin wrote far more than he is given credit for: his *The Foundations of Leninism, Marxism and the National and Colonial Question, Problems of Leninism* and *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* circulated in millions of copies during his lifetime. The war of ideas would be fought by men who had staked their career on the power of words.



Stalin rose to capture the heights of Soviet power largely through allowing himself to be underestimated. Even today, the image of the bestial mass murderer disguises another side to one of the best-read political leaders of the twentieth century.

It is also worth recalling that Charles de Gaulle, during the war the lonely symbol of French defiance, first came to prominence as an author of a widely admired text on armoured warfare, *Vers l'Armée de métier* (*Towards a Professional Army*). The audience for such a book crossed national boundaries: within a year, it had been translated into both German and Russian.<sup>9</sup> A lifelong and discerning reader, as president de Gaulle would take a deep interest in the affairs of the Académie Française. During the war, he certainly played the weakest hand to great effect, ensuring that France emerged as one of the victorious combatant nations despite the humiliation of 1940 and the shame of the Vichy Republic.

All of these warrior authors would eventually be outpaced by Chairman Mao Zedong, founding leader of the People's Republic of China. A billion copies were printed of the *Quotations of Chairman Mao*, universally known as the Little Red Book, and it was translated into more than fifty languages. Mao also has the rare distinction of having served as a librarian. As a penniless boy from the provinces with no connections, he was lucky to be found a position as an assistant in the Beijing University library, but this



mundane work only increased his sense of alienation:

My office was so low that people avoided me. One of my tasks was to register the names of people who came to read newspapers, but to most of them I didn't exist as a human being... I tried to begin conversations with them on political and cultural subjects, but they were very busy men. They had no time to listen to an assistant librarian speaking southern dialect.<sup>10</sup>

His attempts to take what scraps he could from the university led only to humiliation. When he tried after a lecture to initiate conversation with the well-known leftist intellectual Hu Shih, then completing his seminal *Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy*, and a man only two years older than Mao, Hu brushed him aside when he discovered he was not a student but an assistant librarian.

For all this, Mao was a persistent and devoted reader: he arrived in Beijing having already read in translation Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois* and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, which he found in the provincial library at home. Yet he never forgot these early slights. Having carefully nurtured connections with the professional classes when the Communist Party first seized power, the memory of youthful rebuffs came home to roost in the brutal treatment of intellectuals in the Cultural Revolution.

It is therefore no wonder that belief in the power of the written word to shape the destiny of nations became so widespread in the twentieth century. As Stalin told a writer's congress in 1934: 'We need engineers of the human soul, writer-engineers building the human spirit.'<sup>11</sup> In the words of the German communist intellectual Friedrich Wolf, literature was already thoroughly weaponised: 'The material of our age lies in front of us, hard as iron. Poets are working to forge it into a weapon. The worker has to pick up this weapon.'<sup>12</sup> In the post-war communist bloc, belief in the power of the word was unshakable. Even the dour and austere East German leader Walter Ulbricht would exhort his writers 'pick up the quill, comrade', while simultaneously instituting a system of censorship and control that would survive through to 1989.

The Western democracies were less overt in their appropriation of libraries for political purpose, but the underlying ideologies of imperialism and national destiny were well represented on their shelves. In all nations, once war broke out, writers and libraries were expected to play a full role in

forging victory. Once that victory was achieved, after the Second World War the Allies would face the problems of how to sanitise, or exploit, the collections of the defeated. Self-interest played its part in these decisions, as did the continuing importance of libraries as ideological bastions in the front line of post-war ideological conflict, now fought out on a global scale.

Let us leave the last word to the most prominent of the major war leaders who cannot be credited as a major author, Franklin D. Roosevelt. President Roosevelt certainly appreciated the value of books, though more as a collector: already in 1938, he was able to give to the nation a library of 15,000 books, pamphlets and maps, along with a lovingly assembled collection of historical naval charts. And he easily recognised that the wave of horror that swept the United States at the German book burnings could be put to good use. In 1942, he declared:

We all know that books burn, yet we have the greater knowledge that books cannot be killed by fire. People die, but books never die. No man and no force can put thought in a concentration camp forever. No man and no force can take from the world the books that embody man's eternal fight against tyranny of every kind.<sup>13</sup>

This became a famous poster, with a monumental book behind miniature storm troopers throwing books into the fire, and the tagline 'Books are weapons in the war of ideas'. Roosevelt was an accomplished rhetorician, and like most great orators, he used words carefully. When he and other political leaders identified books and authors, poets and publishers as key resources in the business of war, we must take them seriously. This book shows how this came to be.

PART I

**BUILDING THE FIGHTING NATION**

# 1

## A CALL TO ARMS

In the Introduction to this book, I hope I have challenged the assumption that literature is inherently peaceful, either a non-combatant or a tragic victim of conflict. Indeed, books and publishing have deep roots in the history of warfare: wars set people against people, nation against nation, and tested the power of competing ideologies. Libraries, as the seeding grounds of these ideologies, were often deliberately targeted for destruction. For libraries, from the time of ancient Greece and Rome to the public library movement of the nineteenth century, had never simply been collections of books. They were also a public demonstration of a society's values, occupying prestige space in the city centre, often the gift of a community's leading citizens. Destroying these institutions was a thrust at the heart of an enemy society.

Libraries would also be destroyed as part of the symbolic humiliation of the defeated. The obliteration of your most precious objects, of the stored cultural heritage of a civilisation, was a means of putting the contest of competing ideologies beyond repair. For the Aztec and Mayan empires, the destruction of their books by Spanish conquistadores was not just a demonstration of power: it was also ritual denigration of their system of beliefs, a sign that their gods could not protect them. The Nazi troops who in conquered Poland burned the sacred books of Jewish communities orchestrated a similar ritual, insisting that the local Jewish population were forced to witness the defiling of their most sacred texts. In the brutal battle for Sarajevo in 1992, Serbian troops deliberately aimed their artillery at the National and University Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the same way that in 1981, a Sinhalese mob had laid waste the library of Jaffna, the central repository of Tamil literary culture. Both the victims and the perpetrators knew just how much cultural meaning was bound up in these collections.