Propaganda and Revolutionary Parties: The American Propaganda War in Europe

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Public support and legitimacy with the population are essential elements of any successful revolution. In 1989, the failure of the Contra movement in Nicaragua and the successes of FMLN forces in El Salvador clearly demonstrate the importance of popularity and legitimacy of revolutionary organizations among local populations.

Throughout the twentieth century, a long series of Marxist, Maoist and other revolutions have been carried out by revolutionary organizations. Most organizations have been popularly supported. The theories of Lenin, Mao and other revolutionary organizers imply that the general population must be educated by the revolutionary party about the benefits the revolution will bring. Propaganda is a major tool in the education of local populations.
DEFINITION OF PROPAGANDA

As the battle lines of the Cold War solidified in the 1950s, propaganda acquired a decidedly negative connotation: any news, books, or broadcasts harmful to the reigning state regime. However, Philip Davidson provides a better definition of propaganda:

Propaganda is simply an attempt to control the actions of people indirectly by controlling their attitudes,...its primary purpose is to obtain public support for a particular idea or course of action (Davidson 1941, Intro. 13).

In this sense, propaganda is any information, publication or broadcast used by a group, government-sponsored or otherwise, to promote its own cause or point of view. This definition of propaganda better serves the purpose of examining the relationship between the use of propaganda by a revolutionary party and that party's successful attainment of its goal.
The revolutionary organization is generally a small, conspiratorial group working subversively at first and becoming more open as support increases. The organization uses propaganda to define ideology and party objectives for its members, and subsequently it presents that ideology to the population. Propaganda is a means to increase sympathy for the movement while at the same time foster discontent and dissatisfaction with the established governmental structure among local populations.

The effectiveness of revolutionary propaganda is directly related to its degree of organization. Of primary importance is a network to disseminate rumors, ideology and information to the target population. The party can set up a network among its own supporters first, and as the party becomes more prominent, a ready-made network of information dispersal is available.

A network provides for "the propagation of any revolutionary symbolism which takes the form of what Lenin called 'propaganda' in the narrow sense, which is the inculcation of central catchwords and their supporting justifications" (Lasswell 1977, 244).
Lenin implies in his writings that conflicts which occur during social turmoil can be used to bring the party gradually into the open if the energy of the conflicts is turned to support the revolutionary cause. Harold Lasswell makes this comment about Lenin's ideas:

The propagation of any revolutionary symbolism must take the form of what Lenin called..."agitation", or the use of passing events for the turning of protest in revolutionary directions (Lasswell, 244).

The tool to direct the energy of conflict is propaganda. Once the revolutionary party is established, the party educates the public through propaganda. The network is the instrument used to disperse the views of the party to the target population. By redirecting the actions of the population, revolutionaries can turn opinion in favor of the revolutionary cause.

PROPAGANDA AND PARTY POPULARITY

The party uses the network to distribute rumors, ideology, and revolutionary publications, but it is
also used as a feedback mechanism from the population. Waltruad Q. Morales, in her critique of various theories of revolution, refers to Ted Gurr regarding the importance of communication with the population:

As Gurr would argue, the propaganda must have some legitimacy "to the extent that [the propaganda] makes sense to the discontented people in terms of their specific deprivations and their past experiences" (Morales 1973, 25-6).

Once the party begins to propagate the ideology, mobilize the public, redirect discontent and otherwise "educate the public" through propaganda, it must be aware of the response the propaganda is getting. At that point, the party must decide which segments of society are most receptive to their cause, "select the most suitable appeals, those most likely to influence the groups in mind, and present them as effectively as possible" (Davidson, 103).

The party must keep informed about the effectiveness of various
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propaganda methods used. Lasswell comments that,

The problem of the revolutionist is to propagate his alternative symbol and his revolutionary way of life in competition with every other conceivable symbol and practice (Lasswell, 239).

If the party is not aware of public opinion or of competing propaganda groups, including the government, party propaganda will probably fail to generate support. The network must be used for dual purposes: as a means of information dissemination and as an information retrieval source. Future propaganda material can also be found in feedback coming from the population.

If the party is sufficiently organized and receptive to the situation of competing groups, the use of propaganda will effectively destabilize the society. Again Morales refers to Gurr:

The greater the discontent of members of a society, the greater is their susceptibility "to new ideologies, and less complex beliefs, that assert the righteousness and usefulness of political violence" (Morales, 25).

At this point, the party can
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direct the discontent of the population towards the party objective--change in society and government.

THE AMERICAN PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN IN EUROPE

During the social upheavals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, revolutionary parties were out-of-favor with the government and operated underground. Nevertheless, many revolutionary groups--Robespierre, the Jacobins, and Napoleon in France; the trade unionists in Germany; the Whigs of England and America--were very effective in disseminating information and at instituting social and structural reforms. Among the many revolutionary parties of that period, the American founding fathers successfully gained control of the state and effected change in society. Considering this, the American use of propaganda to aid in achieving their goal should be examined.

PROPAGANDA AND AMERICAN NEEDS IN EUROPE

The American propaganda campaign
in Europe was waged by some of the most resourceful leaders of the American revolutionary movement. "The majority of [revolutionaries] came from that fairly well-to-do element in colonial society which...was in virtual control of the internal affairs of the colonies" (Davidson, 31).

In 1775 when the first shots of the American Revolution were fired, revolutionary propaganda efforts in the colonies were already well-organized and had been very effective in turning the population of the colonies against the English King. However, when the colonies turned to Europe for military and monetary aid, they met with difficulty; European governments were hesitant to become involved in a domestic conflict of the British Empire. Revolutionary leaders urged the Continental Congress to declare independence from Great Britain in order to more easily secure European aid.

After the Americans declared themselves separate from the British Empire, American propaganda revolutionaries found themselves in a climate relatively favorable to their task. They quickly began their campaign to weaken British credibility and secure aid from the rest of Europe.
Lenin and Mao realized that propaganda was an powerful method of communication among revolutionaries. They saw that with effective communication and propaganda among their various supporters, the revolutionaries could unify support. When the Americans arrived in Europe in 1775, they began to establish these types of subversive, underground networks. They sought out prominent, wealthy, liberal citizens of the country and presented the American case. Most of the time this led to a new friend in the nation who knew a printer or publisher willing to print American news stories and propaganda. These efforts enabled the Americans to set up the necessary information dispersal networks in Europe.

Benjamin Franklin and John Adams were especially effective in enlisting the aid of European nobility and professionals in the American cause. Early in 1777, Franklin persuaded the duc de La Rochefoucauld d'Enville of France, a wealthy, young aristocrat, to translate and publish the constitutions of the thirteen American states (Berger 1976, 167).

Through the aid of Charles Dumas, John Adams met Hendrik Calkoen, Baron
Jan Derck van der Capellen and several Dutch newspaper publishers in the Netherlands. The correspondence Adams had with both Calkoen and van der Capellen led to the printing of some of the most inflammatory, anti-British tracts that were published during the whole course of the war.

Adams' letters to Calkoen, a prominent Amsterdam judge, were later printed in the Netherlands as a series of pamphlets which detailed the American government, social and economic systems and denigrated British attempts to destroy the American system. Van der Capellen, a vehemently anti-British politician, at one point in 1781 covertly published a pamphlet entitled To the People of the Netherlands, which directly attacked the Dutch government "collaborators" as well as British authorities in Holland. The tract was so militant in tone that the Dutch government offered a reward of $2,500 for the arrest of the author. Van der Capellen was never exposed (Berger, 184).

These underground networks expanded rapidly and European populations were exposed to American propaganda. Dissatisfaction with the pro-British status quo began to germinate.
Many European nations were defeated by the British during the Seven-years war. Benjamin Franklin and the American propagandists constantly played upon feelings of revenge to agitate the European population against the British. The news reports of American victories at Saratoga and Trenton had tremendous impact in changing European public opinion about America. In a report to the Continental Congress in early 1778, the Americans noted that the news had "occasioned as much general joy in France as if it had been a victory of their own troops over their own enemies" (Berger 173). This tactic of attacking sore spots was especially effective in France. From the outset of the American Revolution, the French were anxious to aid the Americans in order to avenge the French defeat of a few years before and perhaps regain some of the territory they had conceded to the British. In Holland, the feelings of revenge were not as strong, but playing upon the anti-British sentiments of the Dutch merchants did succeed in providing a loan to the Americans later in the war (Berger 185).
Benjamin Franklin, like Lenin and Mao after him, realized the importance of attacking the enemy government on home territory. Before the outbreak of war, Franklin travelled to England and came into contact with David Williams, Thomas Bundle, John Hone Toke and many other anti-monarch intellectuals of England. These men organized subversive societies notably, The Society of 13 or Deistic Society of 1774, to actively destroy the influence and control of the English King.

When Franklin returned to Europe in 1777, the members of the society willingly provided Franklin with numerous propaganda channels into English society. Regular correspondence between these men kept the latest American propaganda in several English papers and sometimes it even worked its way into Parliament (Berger 187).

When Franklin turned his efforts to publicizing the raids of John Paul Jones along the English coastline, his English friends were able to cause panic in the coastal towns of Scotland. Irish separatists were also stirred up. Irish dissent became so widespread that in 1779, King George III was forced to make
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numerous commercial and religious concessions to avert an additional conflict closer to home (Berger 175).

By fomenting domestic dissent through these efforts, the American propagandists began to turn European public opinion towards support for American interests.

GENERATING EUROPEAN INTEREST ABOUT AMERICA

As the American propagandists began to use French, Dutch and English dispersal networks, letters arrived from many areas of Europe requesting some sort of news or information about America and the American war. This information was published in many European newspapers and scholarly journals (Berger 168). These letters provided Franklin, Adams and the others with some idea of how far their information travelled, how the European populations received it, and also what effects British propaganda had on the Europeans.

Centrally located in France and Holland, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Charles William Dumas could now use the networks of old friends and new acquaintances in England, France, the Netherlands and Germany to more effectively
distribute news about the American war and provide focused information about the emerging nation to European populations. The correspondence from editors gave the American propagandists some idea of what types of information were producing the desired results. Factual reports of American military victories and anti-British "black" propaganda proved to be the most effective items for the Americans in changing the attitudes of neutral European populations.

RESULTS OF AMERICAN PROPAGANDA

The American propaganda campaign began to bear fruit as European countries joined in the conflict. Benjamin Franklin's propaganda efforts in England were successful in frightening the English and Scottish coastal populations. His letter to a Connecticut friend reflected on the success:

we have occasioned a good deal of terror and bustle in many of the coastal towns[, as they imagined our Commodore Jones had four thousand troops with him for descents (Berger 177).

From the outset of the war, the French had been generally pro-
American. They provided the Americans with an initial base of operations to wage propaganda campaigns. French acceptance of America also established credibility with the other nations of Europe. The combination of Benjamin Franklin's diplomatic and propaganda efforts ultimately produced the valuable Franco-American alliance which gave the American colonies badly needed monetary and military aid.

The results in Holland were probably the most successful. At the beginning of the Revolution, the Dutch wanted to avoid a war with England and assumed a pro-British policy. Through the efforts of Charles Dumas and John Adams, Dutch opinion was changed. Carl Berger believes that the 1780 Dutch decision to join the Armed Neutrality, led by Russia, was significantly influenced by the combination of British naval harassment and American propaganda (Berger, 185). However, the decision to join with Russia was aborted by an English declaration of war on The Hague.

John Adams seemed particularly pleased with the Dutch entrance into the war on the American side. In a 1782 letter to America, he quoted the compliments of the Spanish minister in The Hague which summarized the efforts of the Americans in Europe:
Sir, you have struck the greatest blow of all Europe. It is the greatest blow that has been struck in the American cause, and the most decisive. It is you who have filled this nation with enthusiasm; it is you who have turned all their heads (Berger, 185).

CONCLUSION

The key to successfully achieving a revolutionary change of society lies with the support of the population. Propaganda is the tool used to build the unity and popular support which are essential to achieving party goals. It is the means by which supporters of the party communicate. Like Lenin and Mao after them, Benjamin Franklin and the Americans understood this concept. The American revolutionaries set up information networks to spread propaganda to the populations of Europe.

The American propaganda campaign in Europe was a major factor in turning European public opinion in favor of the American cause. The information dispersal networks established by Franklin, Adams and others were effective tools for
informing Europeans and increasing support for America. The correspondence between the Americans and the European publishers and editors provided a gauge of popularity and effectiveness as well as a feedback source about rival groups and allowed the Americans to focus and tune continuing propaganda campaigns.

The effective use of propaganda networks and methods ultimately served to accomplish the American goal—to create support for the revolution.


