

# THE BOOK AT WAR

ALSO BY ANDREW PETTEGREE

*The Library* (with Arthur der Weduwen)

# THE BOOK AT WAR

LIBRARIES AND READERS IN A  
TIME OF CONFLICT

ANDREW PETTEGREE

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## 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 co-ordinate 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



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.

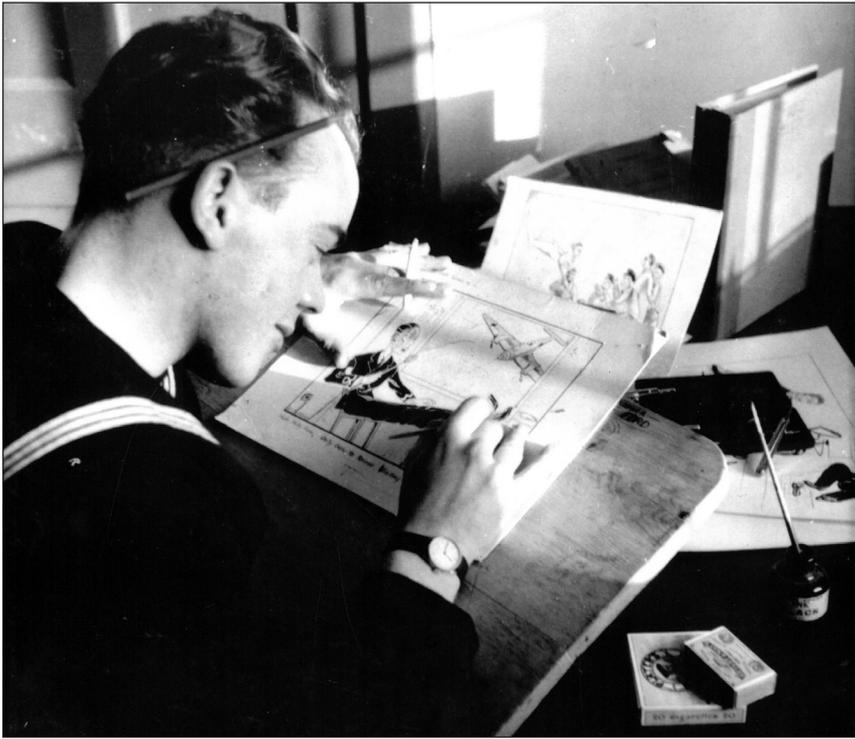
bombing in 1943. And while we continue to mourn the attack in Coventry that destroyed much of the city, it also carried off the public library's important collection of technical literature, a critical resource for war industries in the West Midlands.

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



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 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:

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

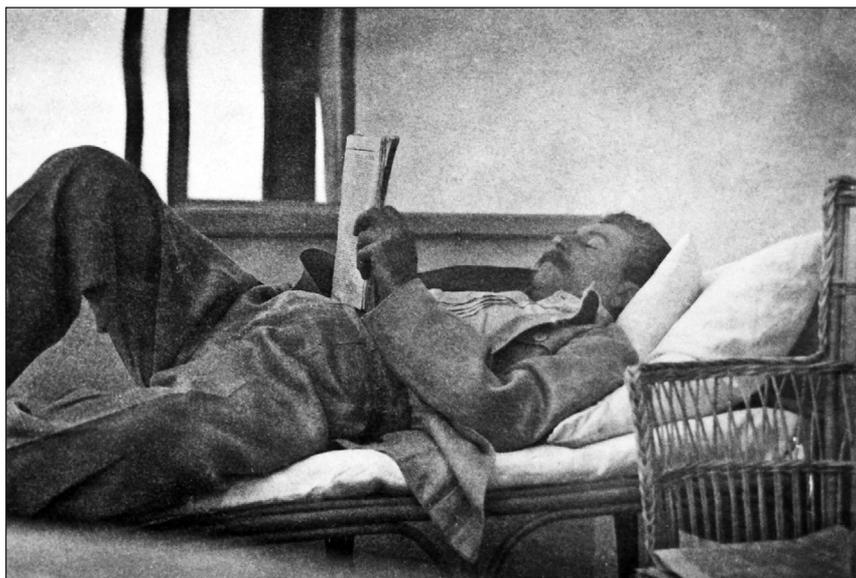
literacy in the new Soviet Union that transformed Russian society. War also radically altered both the terms of the international book trade and the workings of the publishing industry. Former friends and partners could no longer work with each other, as imports from enemy nations were banned. For the 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,



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.

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.

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**

## 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



On *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass (1938), the Nazis looted and burned Jewish shops and destroyed 1,400 synagogues. Their holy books were a natural target, as they would be again in the conquered territories, beginning with Poland, after the beginning of the Second World War.

repository of Tamil literary culture. Both the victims and the perpetrators knew just how much cultural meaning was bound up in these collections.

From the Roman general Sulla, parading through Rome with the looted library of Aristotle, to the author Stendhal's tour of German libraries searching out books for the new National Library of France on behalf of the all-conquering Napoleon, victorious generals have always seen books, like works of art, as legitimate plunder. For the Swedish armies of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), such cultural appropriation served a double purpose: to stock the libraries of their universities and towns, while at the same time depriving their religious opponents of the texts vital to building the Catholic faith. The Swedish ransacking of the libraries of central Europe was organised with all the precision of a military campaign. On accepting the surrender of a town, the Swedes would seek out local dignitaries who could lead them to the principal archives and libraries. The contents would be carefully guarded until they could be packed and shipped back to Sweden, before distribution to the royal library, the university of Uppsala or grammar schools. Some were lost in a disastrous fire at the royal library, but the rest are still

in Sweden; surprisingly, there has never been the same clamour for the return of looted books as misappropriated art.<sup>1</sup>

So, the historical roots of themes pursued in this book, the birth of military strategy, the war of intelligence or the importance of accurate mapmaking, are deep. Yet for all that, there is also clear evidence of a quantum shift in warfare, and its implications for the library world, in the last two centuries: that is, from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. This transformation of war-making had three main elements: the professionalisation of the military, especially of the officer class; the industrialisation of weaponry; and the mobilisation of the civilian population, eliding the distinction between combatant and non-combatant. This had enormous impact on the role of the book in wartime, and the impact of warfare on library stock.

This era was also a time of transformational change in the Western world, to this point the main incubator of the library movement. Between 1800 and 1914, the population of Europe increased from 180 to 460 million. In the United States, growth was even more spectacular, from 5 to 106 million. Much of this population growth went to provide a workforce for the new industrial economy. Integrating these new citizens into the social fabric required, above all, a vast increase in educational provision. This fuelled a concerted drive towards compulsory education in both Europe and America. By the early twentieth century, Western societies were approaching universal literacy in both the female and male populations. This permitted a parallel impetus towards a network of public libraries, free to all, catering to the reading needs of the broad mass of the population. The wars of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, therefore, are the first in which the majority of both combatants and civilians were able to consume and respond first-hand to the literature of the time, from newspapers to information leaflets to cheap thrillers and serious works of fiction. This is why, although I refer to earlier historical eras, this book will focus on the period that begins with the American Civil War and continues through the end of the Cold War, in which books played an important role as both persuaders

and provocation. The CIA flying balloons over the Iron Curtain with Bibles attached was not likely to achieve much, but it made a point.

The century after 1850 was the historical era when nations discovered both the power of books to shape conflicts, and the deficiencies in their own collections. Archibald MacLeish was one of the most influential librarians of the twentieth century: as the Librarian of Congress in 1939, he would play a major role in shaping American policy during the Second World War. MacLeish was quick to realise that if the United States were to prevail in the great global struggle, all the resources of the nation would need to be mobilised for the fight – and that included books and libraries. In 1945, he would reflect that

War, modern war at least, cannot be fought without the most complete library resources. No library resources can ever be too complete for the necessities of a great industrial state engaged in a war which involves all its facilities, all its manpower, and all its knowledge. We know now, whatever we may have thought we knew before, that no island in any ocean on earth is too remote or too small or too inconspicuous to be of vital concern to the planning and operating staffs in a war fought with modern air power and modern sea power, to say nothing of modern power on the land. The Library of Congress knows to its cost what its failure to collect over the last century and a half every scrap of printed and manuscript material on the islands of the Pacific has meant to its service to the government of the United States.<sup>2</sup>

MacLeish was right: when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, America found itself fighting a war in a part of the world about which it knew very little. The character of the enemy, the conditions its troops would face, even the names of the islands and atolls that would inscribe themselves on the American psyche in the next three years: all these were a mystery. When, in February 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sat down for his weekly

radio address, he suggested to his listeners that it would help if they had a map or globe to hand as he spoke. The next day, bookshop shelves were swept bare of maps and atlases as Americans hastened to follow his advice.

What was true of America was true of belligerent powers throughout the twentieth century. When war broke out in Europe in 1914 and again in 1939, the resources which had been taken for granted, well-stocked libraries and archives, proved to be sadly wanting. Sometimes the gaps were almost comically extreme: when in 1940 Winston Churchill was planning the pre-emptive attack on Norway intended to deprive the rampant German army of Norway's harbours and coastline, the best resource to hand was an old copy of the Baedeker guide to Scandinavia. Yet this was a war of science, strategy and intelligence, of new weapons to be developed and brought into service: all of this required access to the best scientific literature as well as research and analysis. It was just as important to prevent this same information falling into the hands of the enemy. Never were books and periodicals more urgently required, more essential to national survival.

Books played an equally important role on the home front. Deprived of other entertainments, bereft of husbands and wives, sons and daughters, many of those left behind, or shivering in uncomfortable digs far from home, turned to books. Public libraries, to this point rather underappreciated, came into their own, and publishers, despite constraints on the supply of paper, enjoyed a golden age. All the belligerents put enormous efforts into supplying books to their troops, stimulating some of the most innovative publishing initiatives of the century. Nowhere were books more appreciated than in prisoner-of-war camps.

Books also played a role in inculcating the ideologies that led formerly friendly nations to turn on each other with such savagery. Books were the seedbeds of ideology, nurturing hatreds, justifying aggression, mobilising public opinion. When we ask why ordinary men were inspired to fight for a cause, we must not forget the role of literature in bringing this about, and when war came, librarians, like any other public officials, threw themselves into the struggle, eager to play their part in a patriotic cause.

When war broke out, the entire physical, industrial and intellectual capital of a nation had to be mobilised for the war effort, and libraries were critical strategic assets. Few resources were more precious than the extended runs of scientific periodicals stored in university libraries; conserving and protecting what had to this point been knowledge shared around the worldwide scientific community became a critical war aim. University and national libraries also became crucial resources in the war of intelligence, which grew from a limited attempt to round up enemy spies and infiltrate governments abroad into an enormous apparatus of information gathering and analysis, occupying many of the nation's best minds. Once warfare turned from defence to attack, having accurate maps was the difference between a well-planned operation and chaos: libraries as well as geographers would play a critical role in the development of war cartography.

Public libraries also had their role in the national cause: as offices for the numerous new bureaucracies of wartime, selling war bonds, handing out ration books. Their book stock was transformed by the deluge of government printing informing shopkeepers and householders of the numerous new regulations they were obliged to follow, as well as books making the case for war and charting its progress. Libraries also became a critical element of the infrastructure of support for troops and civilians far from home and deprived of their usual home comforts. Some opened up their newsrooms to military personnel at the weekend. Public libraries played a major role in supplying the military installations in their vicinity, and coordinating donations for the new camp libraries. Books were also collected to send to troops abroad, and, given the chronic shortage of paper, for pulping and reuse: indeed, although when we think of books destroyed in wartime our minds might turn to the dome of St Paul's illuminated by the blazes consuming the publishing houses of London, or the battered shell of the Berlin State Library in 1945, in Britain the donation of books for pulping accounted for as many books destroyed in the Second World War as bombing.

This huge network of libraries had been a long time in the making. In the United States, the densely settled New England states led

the way. In Britain, the critical moment was the passage in 1850 of the Public Libraries Act, empowering local authorities to establish libraries in their town or borough. By 1914, there were more than 5,000 library authorities established in Britain under the terms of the 1850 Act, collectively circulating between 30 and 40 million volumes a year. By 1903, the United States boasted at least 4,500 public libraries, with a total book stock of some 55 million volumes. This growth would continue: by 1933, Germany had more than 9,000 public libraries, while the collective book stock of American libraries now exceeded 140 million books.

The potentialities of this new library system were not lost on governments bent on ideological renewal, or waging war. Hitler and Lenin were both great friends of the library. As dawn broke after the storming of the Winter Palace in 1917, Lenin impressed on the newly appointed Commissar for Education that libraries would be a key weapon in the fight for hearts and minds:

Try to pay attention to libraries in the first instance. We must borrow from progressive bourgeois countries all those methods they have developed for making library books widely available. We must make books accessible to the masses as soon as possible. We must try to make our books available all over Russia, in as large a quantity as possible.

Despite the devastation of the old tsarist libraries in the civil war that followed, Lenin's objectives were largely realised, accompanied by a huge increase in literacy across the Russian population. Lenin's passionate commitment to libraries was very personal. In the long years of exile, he seems to have planned out his travels around Europe to have access to the world's great libraries, and settled in London, Munich, Kraków and finally Zurich. In the years before his return to Russia he kept office hours in the Zurich Public Library, nine till twelve in the morning, one till six in the afternoon. Library records confirm that he read or consulted 148 books and 232 articles in English, French and German.<sup>3</sup> By January 1916, he had drafted *Imperialism: The Highest State of Capitalism* sitting in his favourite seat in the Zurich library. Having been

created by a published book, *The Communist Manifesto*, Bolshevism was an inherently bookish movement, and along with Lenin, who assembled his own library only when finally settled in Russia, the major Russian revolutionary figures, Kamenev, Zinoviev and Bukharin, all collected books. Vyacheslav Molotov had 10,000 books and Marshal Georgy Zhukov, the hero of the campaigns against Hitler's army, assembled a collection of 20,000.<sup>4</sup>

This book explores this weaponisation of book culture under six main headings: building a fighting nation; libraries as munitions of war; books on the home front; providing books for troops; book plunder and destruction in wartime; reconstruction of book stocks and the war for ideological supremacy in the Cold War. This brings us to the cusp of the digital age and cyber warfare. It ends with a reflection on what will be the continuing role of libraries in an age where print is increasingly challenged by other means of communication, but societies still make massive provision for war. Meanwhile, the Global South is embracing the library at the same time as Western nations look elsewhere for sources of information and entertainment: the library is far from dead, and its contents will continue to be a subject of profound social and political importance.

There are also three themes that flow through the whole book rather than being addressed in their own chapters: patriotism, poetry and propaganda. Though not so obvious as the technical advances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, patriotism was an essential element in modern warfare. In medieval times, soldiers fought for their lord, with or against the king dependent on the loyalties of their local magnate. Town-dwellers identified with their local community more than their nominal prince, who, thanks to the complexities of dynastic succession, might be a foreign ruler who did not speak the language and sometimes never even set foot in his more far-flung territories. The coalescence of nation states into discrete blocks of territory following relatively clear geographical boundaries began first with the emergence of England (then Britain), France and Spain, but Italy and Germany, core centres of European trade, culture and technical innovation, only became nation states in the nineteenth century.

Thus, it was only in wars of the twentieth century that patriotism could be systematically deployed in the battery of ideological weaponry. Soviet troops were urged forward to the defence of Mother Russia; German conscripts fought for the defence of the Fatherland. But the focus of this patriotic energy was by no means clear if you were a resident of Ukraine, Alsace, Latvia or French Canada. In the First World War, peoples of many nationalities – Poles, Ruthenians, Finns, Czechs, Irish and Bosnians – were compelled to fight for countries to which they felt little national allegiance. In the case of Poland, divided between its larger neighbours in the eighteenth century, Poles fought in the armies of three great powers, Russia, Germany and Austro-Hungary, many against family and friends, separated by unhappy accidents of geography: for Poles, the First World War was a civil war.<sup>5</sup> Because claims to nationhood were based on the existence of ethnic language communities, vernacular poetry and literature were essential vectors of both national historical grievances and the courageous claim to autonomy. These were memories and aspirations that would never die, as the tragic fratricidal conflicts for the splintered segments of Yugoslavia would demonstrate in the last decades of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

It was easy to envy Britain or Spain for the geographical clarity that defined the nation state: in the heartlands of Central Europe there was no such luxury. For much of European history it was more accurate to talk of borderlands than frontiers. Between France and the Low Countries or within the complex tapestry of the Holy Roman Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was easy to undertake a journey without realising where you had passed from one jurisdiction to another. By the nineteenth century, advances in surveying and cartography had effected a radical change in both the concept of frontiers and the capacity for conflict. It was no coincidence that it was in Germany that geography first became a university discipline, and its professors were among the most virulently nationalist proponents of a greater Germany. Hitler was by no means the first to trumpet the concept of *Lebensraum*.

Throughout the history of warfare, poetry had served as a means of articulating sentiments and emotions often dangerous to

express in prose. In the first era of print, pamphleteers would be out on the streets with their narratives of their king's latest triumphs in the field; it was left to the poets to digest more discreetly the pain of defeat. Poetry took on an equally potent role in the globalised conflicts of the modern age, as a rallying cry for national unity, stiffening resistance in times of adversity, or as an ideological teaching tool. The outbreak of war in 1914 was greeted by an outpouring of verse throughout the continent. According to one authority, in Germany alone, 50,000 poems a day were being written in the first month of the war, and Germany's hymns of praise to martial values were echoed around the continent. The sense that war provided a means to escape an age of decadence and vapid consumerism was common to many of the belligerent nations. As early as 1910, the German Georg Heym was confiding to his diary: 'If only someone would start a war, even if there's no good reason. This peace is greasy and grimy as wax on old furniture.' With hostilities begun, poets welcomed war as a force of renewal: according to the Italian Gabriele D'Annunzio, 'It is only through war that those people who have degenerated can stop their decline, for war unfailingly gives them either glory or death.' His compatriot Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the son of a professor of literature, concurred: 'We will glorify war – the world's only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for.'<sup>7</sup>

This willingness to shed the blood of the nation's young may be distasteful, but it offers an important corrective to our common perception that poetry was an inherently anti-war medium. In Britain, the poems of war are best known to us as a post-traumatic literature of bitterness and regret. The archetype of the British war poet is a young officer who turned from patriotic enthusiasm (Rupert Brooke) to disillusionment (Wilfred Owen). But in fact most British war poets were civilians and a quarter were women. Through long service as the literary epitome of the pity of war, the poems of the British public-school officers have achieved far greater resonance than was the case on their first publication. In their own day they were easily drowned out by the self-confident sense of mission of the imperialist verse so successfully disseminated by

Rudyard Kipling and his heirs, poems that articulated the patriotic pride of a generation, and helped motivate the rush to the recruiting offices in 1914.

It bears emphasis that at the beginning of the twentieth century poetry had a far greater social presence than in our own era. Poetry was central to the education system, and many newspapers routinely printed readers' poems. In the emerging powers to the east, the role of poetry was if anything even more important. Mao's poems set out his approach to war and ideological struggle. Stalin, like Mao a passionate devotee of the medium, first published poetry in a Georgian journal at the age of seventeen, romantic verses that were of sufficient quality to find a place in highly respected anthologies.<sup>8</sup> Poetry was particularly important because, despite the drive towards greater literacy, the peasant oral tradition of these societies was still very strong. The ease with which poetry could be learned and regurgitated amplified its impact far beyond reading. This insight helped ensure the success of the collection of aphorisms that became Mao's Little Red Book, one of the greatest publishing phenomena of all times, and a major propaganda tool both within China and throughout the world. In the battle of competing ideologies, poets could insert their ideas where soldiers and weapons could not reach. Those who succeeded were feted and rewarded, as when the Soviet leader Nikolai Bukharin rhapsodised on the work of Vladimir Mayakovsky: 'The poetry of Maykovsky is poetry in action . . . It is a hailstorm of sharp arrows shot against the enemy. It is devastating, fire-belching lava. It is a trumpet call that summons to battle.'<sup>9</sup>

The ambiguity of poetic expression also set challenges that the ubiquitous censors were not always able to meet, whether this was in communist Eastern Europe or occupied France. In 1942, the poet Max-Pol Fouchet persuaded the censor that Paul Éluard's 'Une seule pensée' was a love poem, rather than a passionate cry for freedom. It was widely distributed, not least in the miniaturised magazines dropped on France by the RAF.<sup>10</sup> In the post-war period of communist rule, the East German security service, the Stasi, went so far as to establish its own poetry circle. This was placed under the custodianship of a well-published comrade who

would report back to his superiors on the ideological reliability of the work shared.<sup>11</sup>

Propaganda as a tool of war was alive and thriving from the invention of printing in the fifteenth century, given impetus by the tragic religious conflicts of the sixteenth century. In the era of the Reformation, when Europe was divided into warring Protestant and Catholic camps, books were perceived as instruments of evangelisation. Nowhere was this more forcefully demonstrated than in Paris in the second half of the sixteenth century. Paris was a resolutely Catholic city, deeply resentful of the insolence of Protestants parading through the streets, singing their psalms and defacing roadside shrines. This provoked a devastating print campaign of denigration, comparing Protestants with the heretics and despised groups of medieval society: when in 1572 the citizens of Paris got the chance to turn on their Protestant neighbours, they did so with a ferocity that left several thousand dead on the streets in the famous massacre of St Bartholomew's Day.<sup>12</sup> And it worked. In the years that followed many thousands who had joined the Huguenot churches would quietly abandon their faith and be reconciled with Catholicism. As the Paris printer Nicolas Chesneau would remark in a preface to one of these works: 'pamphlets were weapons in a spiritual war'. The pamphlet barrage had played a major role in saving France for Catholicism.<sup>13</sup>

The new technologies of the twentieth century not only transformed warfare, they also opened up new opportunities for propaganda. In the First World War, aeroplanes were used not only for aerial reconnaissance but also for dropping leaflets. The French leafleted Freiburg, as well as dropping a few bombs; on the Eastern Front German planes dropped leaflets explaining to the Russian soldiers that they were shivering in the trenches to advance the interests of British capitalism. Given the low rate of literacy among the Russian conscripts, it is unlikely these carefully crafted messages had much impact. In the Second World War, Britain devoted an extraordinary amount of resources to air propaganda despite acute shortages of paper, to the delight of French school pupils who by 1942 had apparently given up stamp collecting in favour

of tracts dropped by the RAF. In Germany, where possession of such material was punishable by death, they had little discernible impact.

If the leaflet war may look like a lavish expenditure of money for little perceptible gain, then the best sort of influencing often came from books that were not written as propaganda at all. One of the most unexpected publishing successes of the Second World War was a book with the catchy title *Social Insurance and Allied Services*.<sup>14</sup> This was the Beveridge Report on post-war social provision, and quickly sold a million copies, more when a summary version was published as a pamphlet priced at threepence. It was also translated into French and German, and dropped with other airborne literature to convince friends and enemies alike of Britain's good intent. At the end of the war a transcription of two German reports about the Beveridge Report was found in Hitler's bunker. They described Beveridge's plan as 'a plutocratic fraud on the English people' while simultaneously claiming that it was 'an especially obvious proof that our enemies are taking over national-socialistic ideas'.<sup>15</sup>

Authors suffered in wartime, often torn between their vocation and war service, while outlets for their work inevitably shrank as magazines were closed and publishers husbanded their paper ration. Writers seldom did their best work when writing for the government, a particularly daunting assignment in Moscow where comrade Stalin was an avid and critical reader. Of books conceived as propaganda, the most successful was probably John Steinbeck's portrait of life in occupied Europe, *The Moon Is Down* (1942), though this was criticised in America for making the occupying troops too human.<sup>16</sup> Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1940) certainly shook the faith in Soviet Russia of many on the political left, a task then pursued with peerless wit and imagination by George Orwell in *Animal Farm* and *1984*. Published after the cessation of European hostilities in 1945, *Animal Farm* became a worldwide bestseller, Orwell having kept it to 30,000 words to facilitate the sale of translation rights. More insidious was the Cold War popularity of James Bond, whose adventures infiltrated

the Iron Curtain with the insouciant glamour of the novels' hero. Worried Russian officials commissioned a damning putdown in a leading Soviet publication: 'Who is Mr Ian Fleming, the creator of this – to put it mildly – rubbish?'<sup>17</sup> Attempts to create a more ideologically compatible alternative, such as East German television's Iron Feliks, did not have quite the same resonance.<sup>18</sup>

Books probably secured their most lasting success with the ideological formation of the nation's youth. The author John Le Carré, a schoolboy during the Second World War, was subjected to the full imperial menu: Henrietta Marshall's *Our Island Story* in the classroom, and for recreations, the adventure stories of Percy F. Westerman, Sapper and Henty, and the heroic deeds of Biggles, Bulldog Drummond and Domford Yates's *Berry*.<sup>19</sup> The unshakable sense of British superiority that seemed to survive any level of battlefield catastrophe and irritated their American allies was nurtured in this pre-teen and adolescent reading. But it was only Germany that attempted the complete militarisation of its youth, with a tragic level of success. Membership of the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls was compulsory from the age of ten. The emphasis on party discipline and physical activity did little for education, but suited many children, happy to be out of the classroom. Drafted into service at an increasingly young age, many remained convinced of victory right up to the last days of the war. It ended with Allied soldiers having to mow down soldiers as young as twelve as these children enthusiastically manned artillery positions which their elders had abandoned.

Propaganda obviously had more chance of success when it bore some resemblance to observable reality. It was important to Allied credibility that their news services acknowledged setbacks: in this Churchill's frequent speeches to Parliament and the nation set a good example. It had been very different in the First World War, when the patriotic obfuscations of war correspondents had greatly angered the troops in the trenches. In Russia, the established policy of covering bad news in a blanket of silence meant that for much of 1941, most citizens had no idea which cities had fallen to the Germans. In Germany, propaganda was scarcely necessary in the first years of the war, as the home front basked in an uninterrupted

sequence of brilliant victories. But the retreat in the east from 1943 required the full repertoire of Nazi circumlocution. Action had been taken to 'straighten the front'; troops had withdrawn to prepared positions. Germans by this point had a good sense of eastern geography from the triumphant maps of Germany's new territories published in the newspapers or atlases. The scale of the casualties, impacting almost every home, also defeated any hope of concealment. Journalists would have known all this; the mixture of false optimism and stern admonition that filled the dwindling pages of the newspapers was designed more to protect journalists from retribution than persuade their readers.

One thing was clear: whether the literature drove young men forward to their deaths, or strengthened the spirit of a country under occupation, literature mattered. The urgent sense of the importance of books as tools of war, whether it be fiction, poetry, history, atlases or books of current political analysis, was shared by all combatant nations and insurgency movements, even those, as in the post-colonial conflicts of the second half of the twentieth century, who were deliberately starved of access to the printing press.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, many commentators, politicians and authors saw warfare as a means of cleansing societies that had become decadent and soft. Books, poems and public rhetoric did a great deal to spread this insidious doctrine, and young men yearned to establish their manhood through valorous deeds. There were brave voices raised against this cult of death, by religious dissenters, conscientious objectors and pacifists, but until recent times they have remained a small minority.<sup>20</sup> In Germany, the well of patriotism following the crushing Prussian victories of mid-century and the subsequent proclamation of the German Empire in 1871 overwhelmed even the Mennonites, whose tradition of non-violence reached back to the sixteenth century.<sup>21</sup> Those who could not accommodate the new militarism joined the wave of emigration to Russia or the United States.

With hundreds of thousands flocking to the recruitment centres, the First World War was a difficult time not to be in uniform. In Britain, after conscription was introduced in 1916,

pacifism faced a crossroads: only 16,000 would declare themselves conscientious objectors and most accepted some sort of civilian service. Literary London was well represented in this number, though the offhand performance of Lytton Strachey and Duncan Grant at their tribunal went down badly with other conscientious objectors, aware that these Bloomsbury luminaries could rely on their eminent connections to secure them a safe berth to live out the war. Much of Bloomsbury reconvened at the Garsington estate of Philip and Ottoline Morrell, where desultory labour in the garden and farm was generously interpreted as work of essential national importance.<sup>22</sup>

A far more tragic case was that of Stephen Hobhouse, son of a former MP, who refused to bend and was sentenced to imprisonment and hard labour. This provoked one of the most remarkable tracts of the war, published by Stanley Unwin, himself a conscientious objector, under the name of Stephen's mother.<sup>23</sup> Much of the book trade refused to stock *I Appeal unto Caesar*, but it eventually sold 18,000 copies, sparking a debate in Parliament about the unnecessary brutality of the treatment of conscientious objectors in prison. What Unwin did not mention, though he must have been aware, was that though the book was published as the work of Mrs Henry Hobhouse, its actual author was the pacifist philosopher Bertrand Russell.<sup>24</sup>

Between the wars, pacifism benefited from the revulsion against the waste of human life in the first war, especially evident in literature and memoirs published from 1928 onwards such as Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*. Isolationism in the United States, and in Britain the hope for international solutions to European tensions, gave peace campaigners important allies in the political mainstream. In the 1930s, literary figures of established reputation, including Beverley Nichols, Storm Jameson and A. A. Milne, wrote passionate and effective polemics. In the case of Milne, moving a long way from Pooh Bear, the earnest *Peace with Honour: An Inquiry into the War Convention* (1934) went through five editions in just over a year.<sup>25</sup> It is interesting that in these changed circumstances, none of these books struggled to find mainstream publishers. The Peace Pledge Union, committed

to the rejection of war in any circumstances, gathered more than 100,000 adherents.

In these years, Gandhi's creed of non-violence was attracting increasing attention, not least in the United States, though his particular interpretation of Hindu teaching did not go unchallenged. In a shrewd move, in 1939 the British authorities in India sponsored the publication of *The Bhagavad-Gita Philosophy of War*. The Bhagavad Gita was one of the most revered of Hindu texts, and surprisingly warlike. Robert Oppenheimer, witnessing the first detonation of the atomic bomb his genius had done so much to create, was quoting the Bhagavad Gita when he reflected 'Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.' The British purpose in stiffening Indian support for the war was hardly disguised: *The Bhagavad-Gita Philosophy of War* was a special publication of the *Civil and Military Gazette* of Lahore (the newspaper in which between 1883 and 1889 the young Rudyard Kipling cut his journalistic teeth).

As hope of avoiding war faded, pacifists faced a difficult choice. The Peace Pledge Union was forced almost to a comical extent to downplay the thuggery and violence of the Hitler regime, inviting readers of *Peace News* not to be too 'unctuous' in their condemnation of the violent attacks on Jewish shops in the *Kristallnacht*. Arguing that 'totalitarianism has come to stay', *Peace News* suggested that we should take from it 'what is necessary and good', after the conquest of France musing that Nazism was the 'defined instrument' of European unification.<sup>26</sup> Despite or perhaps because of these pronouncements, by the time of Dunkirk, many writers had abandoned their pacifism, including Nichols, Jameson and Milne, Rose Macaulay and, most surprisingly, Bertrand Russell. It took Jameson three months to write *The End of this War*, the pamphlet that explained this change of mind.<sup>27</sup> Those who held out included Frances Partridge, an associate of Leonard and Virginia Woolf in the Hogarth Press, and her husband Ralph. Their house in Wiltshire became a far less dissolute version of Garsington, a place of respite from the Blitz for their literary friends.<sup>28</sup>

In the Second World War, the government also played a canny hand, widening access to alternative service and avoiding sending even the most determined conscientious objectors to prison. Even

with best Compliments  
To Mrs R. Wilson  
25/1/44 63, The Mall  
Peshawar

## The Bhagavad-Gita

### PHILOSOPHY OF WAR

Being a commentary on the first six discourses of  
Bhagavad-Gita, reprinted from the "Song of the Soul,"  
or the "Sacred Science of Self"

by

**Rai Bahadur Diwan Chand Obhrai**

Senior Advocate, Federal Court of India.  
Advocate, High Court of Judicature, Lahore, and  
Judicial Commissioner's Court, N. W. F. P.,  
Peshawar.

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**Rs. 2/-**

*The Bhagavad-Gita Philosophy of War* (1939) was a perhaps belated attempt to woo Indians away from the pacifism of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi would continue to be a thorn in the side of the British administration throughout the Second World War, though without following some other leading Indian politicians into open support of Japan.

the lifelong pacifist and Labour Party leader George Lansbury would acknowledge that 'we possess rights and privileges such as no other nation allows pacifists in wartime'.<sup>29</sup> By the end of the war, only two of every thousand conscripts sought exemptions, and many of those who accepted non-combatant roles, such as the diarist Denis Argent, later asked to be transferred to active service, in his case bomb disposal.<sup>30</sup> For many conscientious objectors it was important to demonstrate that their religious or political objections to war did not emanate from cowardice.

All of these arguments would be played out again after the Second World War, though in a very different political and strategic context. The horrors of potential nuclear annihilation, along with graphic television coverage of brutal, unwinnable conflicts in the Global South, tested to the limit the popular consensus that had underpinned the two world wars, for better or worse. The Ban the Bomb demonstrations of the nuclear age, and the 'peace dividend' that followed the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989, gave pacifism a new salience, challenging the assumptions that underpinned great power military doctrine. Until then, the literature of wartime would reflect the attitudes of the time: sometimes questioning and critical, but just as frequently valorising, enabling or otherwise active in the process of waging war.