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Soldiers of the Pen: The Writers' War Board in World War II by Thomas Howell (review)

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Reviews

***Soldiers of the Pen: The Writers' War Board in World War II.* By Thomas Howell. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019. 324 pp.**

“Books are weapons in the war of ideas,” proclaimed a well-known 1942 Office of War Information (OWI) poster, in a campaign evoking the 1933 Nazi book burnings. Depicting Nazism as a force that sought to destroy “freedom of thought” through propaganda and violence, OWI implicitly—and at times explicitly—defined America as the place in which books, words, and ideas “embody man’s eternal fight against tyranny” and for freedom.

But in wartime, all sides engage in propaganda. Even the most liberal society deploys state institutions in wartime to explain the reasons for, and the necessity of, the fight. So how does a state that prides itself on intellectual non-coerciveness do this?

By subcontracting! During World War II, the US government spread its propaganda efforts across a number of bodies. The US Army’s psychological warfare division and the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) handled propaganda aimed at foreign populations. To reach the domestic audience, in 1941 President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Office of Facts and Figures, later folded into OWI. (Congressional Republicans resisted this agency, claiming that it mostly spread pro-Roosevelt information.)

Private agencies rounded out the effort. Books, those weapons in the war of ideas, were the purview of the Council on Books in Wartime, a private organization of publishers, booksellers, and librarians that created Armed Services Editions, which eventually produced almost 125 million books.

So, propagandists, bureaucrats, publishers, and librarians were involved, but where were the writers? While a few, such as poet Charles Olson and journalist Jane Jacobs, worked for OWI, the real action was in the Writers' War Board (WWB), as Thomas Howell details in *Soldiers of the Pen*. WWB, in the most innocuous formulation, "helped federal agencies and the military generate propaganda in WWII with partial funding from the government" (p. 1). But in reality, it was a sophisticated, contentious, and aggressive group aimed at committing Americans to support total war against a depraved enemy.

WWB recruited writers across the country to create content along assigned themes and then get those messages out. By the end of the war, WWB had over five thousand writers of all types willing to help (p. 26). Money came directly from the Treasury Department, which initially had been looking for writers to help sell defense savings bonds. It got a lot for an annual disbursement of approximately \$3,000.

Celebrity authors Rex Stout and Clifton Fadiman were the driving forces behind the board. The obstreperous Stout—a prominent leftist and founder of the *New Masses* magazine—found great wealth and popularity through his best-selling Nero Wolfe detective novels. Fadiman, on the other hand, was a paragon of the respectable middlebrow, moving between Simon and Schuster, the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the *New Yorker* (where he was in charge of the book review section from 1933 to 1943). He also hosted radio's most popular quiz show, *Information, Please!* Oscar Hammerstein II, the Broadway lyricist, and Nobel Prize-winner Pearl S. Buck joined Stout and Fadiman on the founding board. With the exception of William Shirer, who published *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* after the war ended, few of the other core members of WWB are familiar to readers today, though they were well-known novelists and journalists in their time.

The extent of WWB's impact is awe-inspiring. Requested by the War Department in 1942 to bolster enlistment in the US Army Air Forces, WWB associates served up newspaper articles, short stories, radio programs, photo features, a book for boys, and the hit-parade smash "I Wanna Marry a Bombardier." Edna St. Vincent Millay

wrote a poem to order for the board, and Humphrey Bogart blurbed its titles. Comics, because “they reached a large male audience including soldiers and teenaged boys about to be drafted,” were a particular emphasis, and the strip *Joe Palooka* featured numerous WWB-planted story lines (p. 43). The board even tried to disseminate suggested sermon topics for churches. Elsewhere, it promoted the Women’s Auxiliary Corps, prepared GIs for their foreign encounters, even touted racial tolerance. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the nation’s leading Black newspapers, praised WWB as “one of the greatest champions of racial and religious minorities” (p. 129).

This championing of diversity did not extend to the Germans and Japanese, though, and a faction of the board strove to cultivate hate against the enemy. “To say that they are human like ourselves,” an internal document stated, “is to send a bullet whistling through the body of some American. . . . [Their] presence on earth must stink in our nostrils like carrion” (p. 173). “We Shall Hate, or We Shall Fail,” Stout wrote in 1943. This was a step too far for many board members and for outside groups including the Federal Council of Churches. Still, others were eager to sign on, including the producers of the Justice League of America comics. But when Wonder Woman, Hawkeye, and other superheroes “blamed the Nazi leadership alone for Germany’s actions,” Stout and others demanded revisions: the German people, all of them, had to be faulted (p. 181).

Howell’s comprehensive book gives a well-rounded view of the board, its myriad activities, and the internal debates about its campaigns. Howell is one of the first scholars to use the board’s archive, and it is hard to imagine any book on WWB adding much to his portrait. In its thoroughness and detail, however, it does tend to bury many of the questions and arguments that it raises, such as how WWB altered the domestic-propaganda model of the World War I-era Committee on Public Information, or how its strategies prefigure some of the media-savvy influencing, or just plain co-opting, that the CIA took up when the Cold War started.

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