

Archives Unbound: Psychological Warfare and Propaganda in World War II: Air Dropped and Shelled Leaflets and Periodicals



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Following World War I, many Americans believed that the U.S. was pressured into WWI by false, manipulative propaganda laced with lies from both the British and the Germans. However, as J.A.C. Brown, noted psychiatrist, articulated, “...*propaganda is successful only when directed at those who are willing to listen, absorb the information, and if possible act on it, and this happens only when the other side is in a condition of lowered morale and is already losing the campaign*”. Therefore, the use of airborne leaflets was a way for World War II enemies to psychologically attack one another in a different way than in previous wars. Distribution of Airborne leaflet propaganda was used by both allied and Axis forces in the Second World War.



Airborne leaflets printed during WWII were “factual, in the main truthful, and served to create a reputation for reliability both in supplying information and refuting German accounts which we said to be untruthful”. Also, these leaflets were distributed in many ways. “Secret agents actually within the enemy countries were called upon to help by distributing leaflets (often purporting to come from within Germany itself or from a neutral country), by writing slogans or attaching posters or slips of revolutionary nature to buildings, and by spreading those demoralising rumours, to which people are much more susceptible when frustrated, perplexed, or kept in ignorance of what is actually going on”, in addition to being released from planes, shells, and balloons. However, frequently the leaflets did not reach their intended targets because they were dropped over lakes and rural areas from a high altitude.

Approx. 6,000 million leaflets were distributed over the European continent by aircraft or shelling during leaflet operations, which began when the Royal Air Force dropped leaflets over Kiel on September 3-4, 1939, and continued on an increasing scale until the unconditional surrender of Germany in May 1945. Despite the pitfalls to airdropping surrender leaflets, enemies used this tactic “to cause the men to begin talking to each other about their poor military position, their desire to stay alive for their families’ sakes, and the reasonableness of honorable surrender”, which often led men to desert their troops. During this time, the objectives and methods of this leaflet distribution underwent considerable changes in order to keep pace with the developments of war.

This publication collection consists of 1,000 air dropped and shelled leaflets and periodicals created and disseminated during the Second World War. The majority of items in this collection were printed by the Allies then air or container dropped, or fired by artillery shell over German occupied territory. Many leaflets and periodicals have original publication codes and were printed in over 10 languages. Only shelled leaflets, Germans to Allies (115 items), are in English.

Archives Unbound :

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