

Second World War Propaganda, Imperial Idealism and Anti-Colonial Nationalism in British West Africa

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ABSTRACT

Imperial propaganda during the Second World is often construed as discourse produced in the metropolises of Europe and extended to the colonies to shore up local support for the war. This suggests that the propaganda war in the colonies was simply an extension or replication of the propaganda war in Europe, to which colonized peoples made minimal input and over which they had no control. This paper argues that West Africans were not just receivers and replicators of colonial war propaganda. The colonies were also sites for the production of imperial war propaganda and Africans were central to colonial propaganda machinery. The role of Africans in the making of colonial war propaganda is particularly evident in the paradoxical effect that war propaganda had on the politics of decolonisation in British West Africa. War propaganda provided an opportunity for Britain to rally the support of her West African subjects against what was presented as a dreaded common enemy. However, the war also provided new opportunities for emergent West African elites to articulate their nationalist demands on a world stage drawing on the same discourses about freedom and self-determination that underlined imperial war propaganda.

We want to prove ourselves men, gentlemen, and loyal citizens of not only the empire that offers us protection but *citizens* of the World's Republic... *Civis Mundi Sum; Civis Mundi Sum!*

The Lagos Standard, 1917.¹

INTRODUCTION

The history of Second World War propaganda in colonial Africa is one of those historical themes that appears to have fallen through the cracks. On one hand, histories of African involvement in the Second World Wars have paid very little attention to the role of war propaganda in shaping political developments in the continent during and after the war.² On the other hand, studies in empire

¹ *Lagos Standard*, 2 November 1917 and 10 October 1917.

² For example, David Killingray and Richard Rathbone (eds.) *Africa and the Second World War* (New York, 1986); Wm. Roger Louis, 'India, Africa, and the Second World War', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 9, 3 (1986), 306–20; Jacques Marseille, 'Les images de l'Afrique en France', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 22, 1, (1988), 121–130; Ruth Ginio,

propaganda tend to be ephemeral in their treatment of Africa, focusing on the high politics of the production of war propaganda in the metropole to the relative neglect of what was happening in the colonies. The focus is often on the dissemination of imperial propaganda from the colonizer to the colonized; from the centre to the outposts of empire.³ Few have asked what the colonized themselves made of the propaganda efforts directed at them or how their responses and initiatives shaped imperial propaganda.⁴ For the most part, imperial war propaganda has been constructed as discourse produced in the metropolises of Europe and extended to the colonies to shore up local support for the war. This implies that the propaganda war in the colonies was simply an extension or replication of the propaganda war in Europe, to which colonized peoples made minimal input and over which they had no control. This approach clearly limits our understanding of the processes and outcomes of imperial war propaganda.⁵

This paper argues that West Africans were not just receivers and replicators of colonial war propaganda. The colonies were also sites for the production of imperial war propaganda and Africans were central to colonial propaganda machinery. The role of Africans in the making of colonial war propaganda is particularly evident in the paradoxical effect that war propaganda had on the politics of decolonisation in British West Africa. On one hand, war propaganda

‘Marshall Petain Spoke to Schoolchildren: Vichy Propaganda in French West Africa, 1940–1943’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33, 2, (2000), 291–312.

³ For example, John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion 1880–1960* (Manchester, 1984); Kate Morris, *British Techniques of Public Relations and Propaganda for Mobilizing East and Central Africa during World War II* (Lewiston, N.Y., 2000); Philip M. Taylor ed. *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War* (Basingstoke, 1988); James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State, and Propaganda, 1939–1945* (New York, 1998); Siân Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939–45* (Manchester, 1996); K. R. M Short, *Film and Radio Propaganda in World War II* (London, 1983); Michael Balfour, *Propaganda in War 1939–1945: Organisations, Policies and Publics in Britain and Germany* (London, 1979).

⁴ Notable among such studies are Peter B. Clarke, *West Africans at War 1914–1918, 1939–1945: Colonial Propaganda and its Cultural Aftermath* (London, 1986); Wendell P. Holbrook, ‘British Propaganda and the Mobilization of the Gold Coast War Effort, 1939–1945’, *Journal of African History*, 26, 4 (1985), 347–361; Rosaleen Smyth, ‘War propaganda during the Second World War: Northern Rhodesia’, *African Affairs*, 83, 332 (1984), 345–358; Fay Gadsden, ‘Wartime Propaganda in Kenya: The Kenya Information Office, 1939–1945’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 19, 3 (1986), 36–48. Peter Clarke’s study has however been criticized for being rather superficial and uncritical in its treatment of the subject. As one reviewer puts it, ‘He appears too trusting of the evidence of his informants... and seems to contradict the burden of his argument.’ See Michael Crowder, ‘Africa and the Second World War’, (Review article) *African Affairs* 86 (1987), 435–438.

⁵ For instance, Kate Morris focuses almost exclusively on the workings of British official mind in the production and dissemination of propaganda material during the Second World War. Her research is largely limited to the Colonial Office files at the British National Archives. There is no reference to, or evidence of similar archival research on Africa even though the study is about British propaganda in East and Central Africa. See Morris, *British Techniques of Public Relations and Propaganda*.

provided an opportunity for Britain to rally the support of her West African subjects against what was presented as a dreaded common enemy. War propaganda strengthened the African sense of belonging to the British Empire and fostered some form of imperial idealism at a time of growing local opposition to colonial rule. Fighting along side British forces, Africans sought to prove themselves loyal citizens of Empire. On the other hand, however, the war provided new opportunities for emergent West African elites to articulate their nationalist demands on a world stage drawing on the same discourses about freedom and self-determination that underlined imperial war propaganda. This unleashed a new sense of global citizenship. British war propaganda reinforced the notions that West African were citizens of Empire but it also strengthened an anti-colonial nationalist movement that envisioned Africans not merely as subjects of Empire but also as autonomous citizens of the world.

I

Although no soldiers from British West Africa fought on the European front during the Second World War, considerable numbers participated in military campaigns in East Africa and in Burma. British West African colonies supplied over 240,000 soldiers and thousands of labourers, drivers and carriers, the vast majority coming from Nigeria and the Gold Coast. In the Burma campaign, they supported Allied campaigns against the Japanese. They also fought in major campaigns for Kamerun and Togo, which involved considerable loss of life, and played a key role in the liberation of Ethiopia from Italian forces.⁶ West Africa provided staging bases for British, American and other Allied soldiers and equipment en route to the Middle and Far East. The threat to the Suez Canal route by the German-Italian alliance coupled with Japan's entry into the war and the fall of Singapore in February 1942 neutralized the strategic and material importance of Britain's former Far Eastern colonies. To compensate, the Allies used West African air and seaports in Freetown in Sierra Leone, Lagos in Nigeria and Accra in the Gold Coast both as staging posts for the Middle and Far East and for controlling the South Atlantic.⁷ Apart from the strategic and manpower assistance provided to Britain during the war, West Africans made significant contributions of raw materials and funds to the war effort. The Gambia stepped up its production of palm oil and groundnuts used for tinsplating and margarine respectively. From Sierra Leone came iron and industrial diamonds. Ghana supplied industrial diamonds, cocoa and manganese for the

⁶ S.K.B. Asante, 'The Italo-Ethiopian Conflict: A Case Study in British West African Response to Crisis Diplomacy in the 1930s', *The Journal of African History*, 15, 2 (1974), 291–302.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of West African manpower contributions during the Second World War, see David Killingray, 'Military and Labour Recruitment in the Gold Coast During the Second World War', *The Journal of African History*, 23, 1 (1982), 83–95.

manufacture of weapons. From Nigeria came wood, palm oil, groundnuts, rubber, tin and other raw materials. The tin was mainly used for bearings.⁸

But West African manpower and material support for the war was not always assured and could not be taken for granted by British colonial authorities. At the beginning of the war, colonial officials were confronted with the task of combating widespread apathy among Africans towards the war.⁹ In the lead up to war these officials realized that they had to actively court the support of Africans for the war. They had learnt the lessons of the First World War when the ambivalence of colonial officials seriously undermined local support for the war in the colonies. Although Britain pioneered modern government propaganda techniques during the First World War, colonial officials did not target West Africa in its propaganda war against the Central Powers. In 1914, West Africa, unlike Ottoman North Africa, did not hold much strategic significance to British war efforts. Yet, propaganda materials from North Africa and elsewhere in the Muslim world, particularly the fatwas of Ottoman Sultan Mehmet V, greatly influenced local perceptions about the First World War in West Africa.¹⁰ British officials were determined to prevent a repeat of this experience.

Apart from the importance of West African material and manpower contributions to British war efforts and the lessons of the First World War, British colonial authorities in West Africa had other compelling reasons to court public support during the war. The 1940s was an era of growing anti-colonial nationalism and colonial regimes across Africa were under intense pressure from organized nationalist movements for independence led by an emergent and articulate class of educated African elites. These elites who relentlessly criticized colonial racial, political and economic policies could not always be counted on to support British war efforts. In fact, as we shall see later, some of them saw the war primarily as an opportunity to put pressure on Britain, preoccupied with the war in Europe, to grant the colonies independence.

British authorities in West Africa also had to contend with complaints and opposition from disgruntled African merchants whose businesses were affected by a battery of interventionist controls introduced by colonial governments and the shortage of shipping following the outbreak of hostilities in Europe. These conditions risked alienating African traders and merchants who constituted a powerful constituency within the colonial political economy. Many African merchants felt shortchanged by British wartime prohibition policies especially since German companies in West Africa had gained a reputation for offering

⁸ Clarke, *West Africans at War*, 83.

⁹ Holbrook, 'British Propaganda and the Mobilization', 349.

¹⁰ Many Muslims in West Africa were influenced in their attitude towards the First World War by the fatwas of Ottoman Sultan, Mehmet V in 1914. These fatwas, which were addressed to all Muslim and translated into local languages, stated that the war declared against France, Britain and Russia was a just and legal war according to Islamic sacred law, the Sharia, and that a holy war or Jihad of the Sword was, in the circumstance, an obligation of all Muslims.

favourable prices for West African goods such as cocoa, cotton and rubber. This sometimes vocal group of African merchants led their own protest campaigns against Britain wartime policies in the colonies.¹¹

Even among African chiefs who were crucial partners in the British indirect system of colonial administration, there was initial antipathy towards British cause in the war. The dominant perception was that the war was Britain's war and not the colonies'. In 1940, the leader of the Gar people in the Gold Coast informed his people that the British and the Germans were related and that the war was 'their fight' not 'our fight.'¹² This notion that the war was a 'white man's war' was not uncommon and it seriously threatened to undermine local support for British war efforts. There was also the ever-present fear that the Germans might attempt to weaken British authority in West Africa by waging their own propaganda war just as they had done with some success in East Africa through Nazi radio propaganda campaigns.

Under these circumstances, British colonial governments in West Africa were faced with the challenge of countering initial apathy towards the war. They realized early enough that the battle for hearts and minds had to be fought vigorously in the colonies at a time of growing political awareness. In order to effectively 'sell' the war to a sceptical African public and politicised elite, Britain's propaganda war in the colonies also had to be sharply focused and appropriate to local conditions. The need to mobilize support for the war effort led colonial governments in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria and the Gold Coast, to pay more attention to African public opinion than they had done before the war. Thus, the war stimulated a new phase of dialogue between West Africans leaders seeking political concessions and colonial governments seeking African input in the production and dissemination of war propaganda.¹³

II

Propaganda was central to sustaining European colonialism in Africa. Notions of the 'civilizing mission' and 'the white man burden' which underscored nineteenth-century European colonialism in Africa were effective tools for influencing and manipulating public opinion both at home and in the colonies. Even as colonial regimes uprooted African political and social orders and suppressed resistance, the argument of extending European civilization and liberal traditions to Africans remained a powerful rationale for empire. West Africans were exposed to this kind of British propaganda aimed at legitimising empire from the earliest period of colonial rule. One study suggests that the

¹¹ For instance, a group of Egba merchants complained about their diminishing business fortunes as a result of the government's wartime policies. *West African Pilot*, 14 March 1941.

¹² Holbrook, 'British Propaganda and the Mobilization', 353.

¹³ This was also true of British colonies in East Africa. See Smyth, 'War propaganda during the Second World War: Northern Rhodesia.'

system of indirect rule, which was the centrepiece of British colonial administrative policy, was instituted in the early phase of colonial rule by means of a well-organized propaganda machinery.¹⁴

However, pro-imperial arguments did not only come from colonial governments. Africans were also part of the propaganda making process from the beginning. From as early as 1880s, a vigorous and articulate class of educated West Africans had established local newspaper presses that provided them with outlets of self expression. These elites wielded considerable influence over public opinion in the colonies particularly in the growing urban and commercial centres such as Lagos, Calabar, Accra, Freetown and Banjul.¹⁵ By the 1930s, this group of educated Africans, mostly teachers and civil servants had their ranks swelled by traders, skilled artisans and other products of the missionary schools that proliferated across West Africa. Although these elites used local newspapers mainly as platforms for expressing dissent, the newspapers also sometimes served as instruments for promoting imperial agendas in ways that complemented colonial propaganda.

In the early colonial period, West African newspapers such as the *Observer* and the *Lagos Weekly Record* in Nigeria, the *West African Times* and the *Gold Coast Independent* in the Gold Coast and the *Sierra Leone Weekly News* sometimes advocated the expansion of British influence even as they demanded greater roles for Africans in colonial administration. Contrasting British administration in Nigeria with the ‘tyranny’ of the French in Porto Novo and the ‘oppression’ of the Germans in East Africa, the *Lagos Weekly Record* editorialised: ‘The English are acknowledged to be the best colonizers and the secret of their success lies in the great consideration invariably shown by them to the people, whom they undertake to govern, affording them at the onset the full liberties and privileges of British subjects.’¹⁶ Such pre-war pro-imperial propaganda orchestrated by both colonial governments and supportive Africans were subtle and had long-term objectives. Its purpose was to legitimise the colonial order, influence the African sense of identity and belonging to the British Empire, and shape their worldviews over time.

Nowhere was this form of imperial propaganda more evident than in the early colonial attempts to downplay Britain’s role in the Atlantic slave trade while emphasizing her role in its abolition. Colonial authorities presented Britain’s role in the abolition of the slave trade as evidence of the inherent good

¹⁴ Anthony I. Nwabughuogu, ‘The Role of Propaganda in the Development of Indirect Rule in Nigeria, 1890–1929’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 14, 1 (1981), 65–92.

¹⁵ In 1855, William Drape, a West Indian, founded the *New Era*, a weekly newspaper in Sierra Leone which marked a new and significant chapter in the history of the West African press. Fred I. A. Omu, ‘The Dilemma of Press Freedom in Colonial Africa: The West African Example’, *The Journal of African History*, 9, 2, (1968), 282.

¹⁶ *Lagos Weekly Record*, 12 September 1891. Other newspapers shared these views. *The Standard* of Nigeria remarked in 1899: ‘As British subjects we have found British rule the least irksome compared to other colonies.’ *The Standard* 5 January 1899.

of her liberal traditions and her concern for the welfare of 'native' peoples. They deliberately sought to legitimise colonial rule in terms of Britain's later abolitionist role rather than her active role in slave trading. The address by the Governor Hugh Clifford of Nigeria to mark Empire Day in 1920 typifies the subtlety of pre-war imperial propaganda.

Just as Britain had been the first of the European nations to realize and to recognize the rights of the native populations of the non-European world to equitable treatment and to claim due respect for their actions and susceptibilities... so now she resolved that no consideration of material gain or advantage, no dread of financial ruin, no fear of the powerful interests she was assailing should induce her to consent to the perpetuation of systems of which her national conscience disapproved. Had she willed otherwise, there was no force in existence that could have compelled her to take the course she now voluntarily adopted. Her position as the greatest maritime power in the world was impregnable; without the aid of her navy, the [slave] trade would never have been effectively suppressed, and the general opinion in Europe was by no means strongly in favour of suppression. MIGHT was hers, and she was free to make of it what she would. She elected to employ it in the course of RIGHT – to use it, in fact, in the only manner wherein MIGHT can find its justification.¹⁷

While the rhetoric here was clearly aimed at putting a positive spin on the role of Britain in the slave trade, the tone is not overtly propagandist. By contrast, war propaganda made no pretensions to subtleties. It was more focused and had specific short term goals. Its objective was primarily to mobilize Africans to support British war efforts. The task was to sell the war not simply as Britain's war but as a war involving the entire British Empire in which the Africans also had important stakes.¹⁸ This required different propaganda strategies than used to rationalize and legitimise empire. It required more centralized management of the production and dissemination of information about the war.

Much of the war news and propaganda to which West Africans were exposed was part of a centrally coordinated campaign directed from the war propaganda headquarters of the British Ministry of Information.¹⁹ Within this ministry was the Colonial Section of the Empire Publicity Division, which dealt specifically with propaganda in the colonies. The ministry had the responsibility of initiating propaganda policies as well as producing and disseminating

¹⁷ Hugh Clifford, *Address to the School Children of Lagos in Empire Day, 24 May 1920*, Lagos, 1920, 6.

¹⁸ Smyth, 'War propaganda during the Second World War: Northern Rhodesia', 347.

¹⁹ The decision to establish a separate Ministry of Information was taken in 1935 even before Britain's active engagement in the war. For a detailed study of the establishment and early operation of the Ministry of Information see Temple Wilcox, 'Projection or Publicity? Rival Concepts in the Pre-war planning of the British Ministry of Information', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19, (1983). 90–102.

propaganda materials to the colonies. In undertaking these functions, the Ministry worked with Colonial Information Officers who were appointed by the Colonial Office and posted to the colonies at the beginning of the war. Each colony in West Africa had at least one Information Officer working at the level of the central government who liaised with the Colonial Office in coordinating local war propaganda.

The decision to move away from subtle forms of imperial propaganda towards a 'hard sell' war propaganda project in the colonies was not without controversy. There were disagreements between the various arms of governments as they struggled to construct an effective propaganda mechanism for the colonies.²⁰ There was some apprehension in the Colonial Office about the idea of creating a propaganda machinery specifically for the colonies. It was thought that such approach could create disparities between information available to subjects in the colonies and British citizens at home. That in turn could undermine the goal of securing unified support for the war throughout the empire. Some officials also looked down on the notion of propaganda with contempt arguing that it smacked of unseemly boasting or chicanery.²¹ They argued that the Colonial Office should focus more on a comprehensive public relations program rather than the narrow objective of selling the war. As one official put it, 'War propaganda will never provide a basis on which to reconstruct the world of the future. It may win the war but it will not win the peace.'²² However, faced with the threat of German propaganda warfare in Africa, the Colonial Office established a public relations section in 1939 with an explicit mandate to coordinating news and information about the war in the colonies.

Several themes converged in British colonial war propaganda - imperial idealism, the idea of British political and moral exemplarity, and the notion of partnership and development. First and most importantly was the need to sell the war as a 'just war' with Britain and her allies as forces of freedom and democracy arrayed against the forces of tyranny and oppression. Against Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, destroyers of small and weak nations stood strong and democratic Britain, the protector of the weak and powerless.²³ Just as citizens in Britain had to be mobilized with patriotic fervour to support British cause, so too was it necessary to rally the support of subjects in the colonies for the British and Allied cause. In this sense, the war provided Britain with an almost ideal context within which she could strengthen her own authority and legitimise her presence in the colonies at a time of growing anti-colonial sentiments.


²⁰ Morris, *British Techniques of Public Relations and Propaganda*, 35–37.

²¹ Smyth, 'War propaganda During the Second World War: Northern Rhodesia', 347.

²² National Archives of the United Kingdom, CO875/11/1, 'Colonial Propaganda: Aims and Policy', memorandum by Edmett, 6 August 1941.

²³ Nigerian National Archives Ibadan (hereinafter NNAI), Commissioner for Colonies Papers, Comcol 601/59, 'British War Aims, 1943'.

Second, colonial war propaganda was underscored by the notion that Britain and the colonies were equal partners within the British Empire and that the war would somehow strengthen the partnership and hasten the process of economic and social development in the colonies. Partnership was projected from the onset as a means to an end. It reflected the commercial relationship needed to support the war materially and the manpower support needed to fight the war. In the 1930s and 1940s, the British Empire was undergoing its transition from empire to Commonwealth and partnership also suggested the imperative of carrying through the movement to self-government and into a new and enlarged commonwealth. Posters issued by the government in Nigeria to encourage army recruitment read: 'Join the Army. Nigeria will have tradesmen after the War.' It held out the promise that Africans who enlisted in the army would acquire skills that would be relevant to both personal and national development after the war.



Corporal Gabriel Ekunwe enlisted in the Army on the 16/6/42 and is selected to serve in the Medical Corps. He is now a Full Corporal and a Class II Nursing Orderly. When victory is won, Corporal Ekunwe will have experience that will be of great value to him in Civilian life.

Nigeria will need tradesmen after the war.

Men are wanted for the following vacancies:—

	Qualification
Clerks	Middle II and over
Nursing Orderlies (i.e., Military Nurse)	Middle II
Literate recruits for Signals and Artillery Drivers	Middle II if possible, but lower standard can be accepted Must be able to speak simple English
Carpenters
Blacksmiths
Bricklayers
Painters
Mechanics
Fitters

also apprentices for all trades

Applicants will be interviewed at the Commissioner of the Colony's Office, every Monday at 8 a.m.
Please apply in person and not by letter. Bring your Certificate with you.

SPECIAL:
Experienced Stewards to be personal servants wanted.

JOIN *the* ARMY

Figure 1. Join the Army.

Such notions of partnership and development espoused by colonial officials were partly successful in putting a positive spin on the economic and political prospects that the war held for Africans.

Although the Colonial Office coordinated wartime propaganda in the colonies, the production and dissemination of propaganda materials was not simply a one-way street from Whitehall to the colonies. Propaganda materials went in both directions. Initiatives and responses from the colonies shaped wartime propaganda just as much as the materials and instructions dispatched from London. The influence of such initiatives sometimes went beyond the colonies to affect public opinion and the propaganda war in the metropole. This was particularly true of commercial propaganda campaign undertaken by the Colonial Empire Marketing Board (CEMB) during the war. Originally established in 1929 to promote the marketing in the United Kingdom of empire products, the CEMB adopted a pro-active public relations policy of educating the British public about empire during the war.

Like the Colonial Office, the CEMB often relied on ideas and other inputs from the colonies to sell the war in England and carry out its task of promoting the 'prosperity and happiness of Colonial empire.'²⁴ Such materials about British colonies promoted patriotism and national unity in Britain. For example, at the outbreak of the war in 1939, the CEMB commissioned a film titled *Men of Africa* to depict the 'life, industry and resourcefulness of the dependencies.' The film, which was widely distributed to schools, educational and commercial institutions across the United Kingdom, sought to tell the story of British rule in Africa from the perspective of the Africans themselves.²⁵ Newsreels were produced depicting British colonialism in Africa in positive light by emphasizing the notion of wartime partnership between Britain and the 'natives.' The *War Diary*, a government newsletter published in Nigeria and edited by a Nigerian civil servant was widely circulated among government institutions in Britain to provide an African perspective of the War.²⁶ The Colonial Office and the CEMB also undertook poster campaigns to educate Britons about the empire and the role colonies played in the nation's strength and war efforts. One such poster with the image of African soldier from the Royal West African Frontier Force read: 'The British Colonial Empire: Our Allies the Colonies.' Another poster depicting African farmers at work and fighting British soldiers read: 'Your Groundnuts help to feed Fighting Troops:

²⁴ This was one of the objectives of the Colonial Development Act introduced in 1929, which guided the operations of both the Colonial Office and the CEMB. See Stephen Constantine, *The Making of British Colonial Development Policy 1941–1940* (London, 1984), 258.

²⁵ Morris, *British Techniques of Public Relations and Propaganda*, 34.

²⁶ NNAI, Federal Information Service Files 1/ 753, Despatches from the Information Office Nigerian Secretariat 1941.

'Thank You Nigeria.' These campaigns had as much impact in England as they did in the colonies.²⁷



Figure 2. Our Allies the Colonies.

²⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the role of the CEMB in British war propaganda see John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion 1880–1960* (Manchester, 1984).

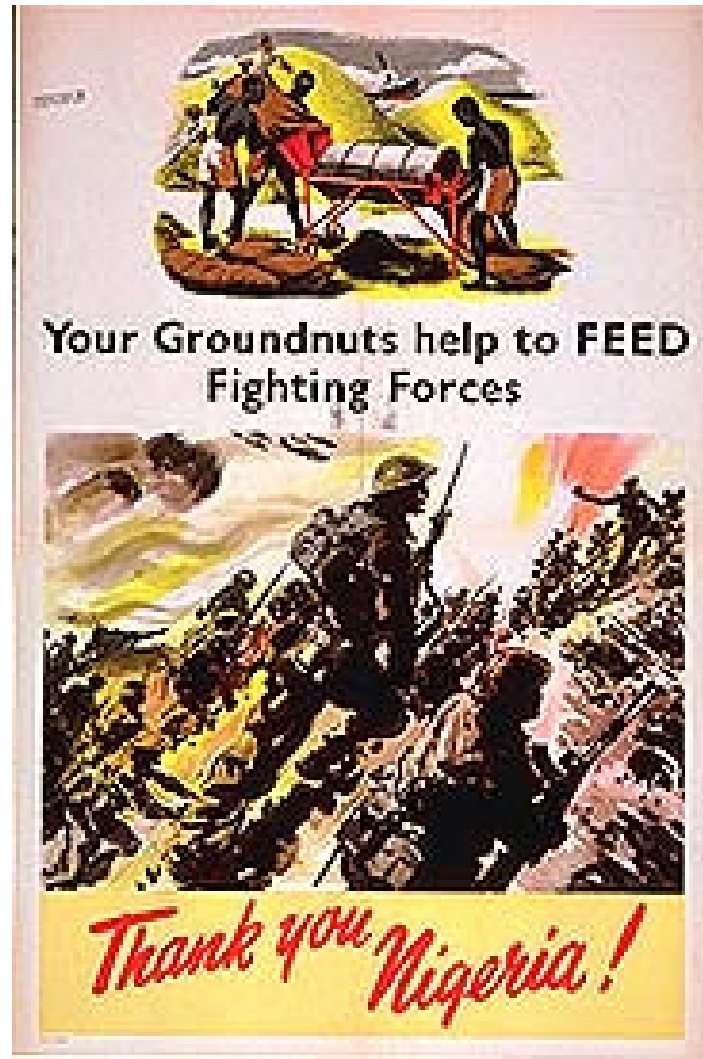


Figure 3. Thank You Nigeria.

III

The immediate and most palpable effect of the Second World War had in West Africa was that it strengthened the African's sense of belonging to the British Empire. The initial impetus for this sense of belonging appears to have developed quite independently of colonial propaganda efforts. In declaring war against Germany, Britain seemed to most West Africans not only to be fighting to ensure her own survival and the survival of the ideals they cherished, but also appeared to be fighting Africa's battles against a symbol of ruthless colonialism. Much of this derived from the unenviable record of German colonialism in Africa. A dominant assumption among Africans was that Germany had been dispossessed of her African colonies after the First World War partly because of

her brutal record of colonial rule.²⁸ Many educated West Africans were also familiar with virulent racism and intolerance of the Nazi regime which made their experience under British rule appear benign by comparison. Kofi Busia, a prominent Gold Coast intellectual who later became the Prime Minister of independent Ghana wrote in 1942:

There is not much doubt as to what would happen to the African under a German regime. Did Hitler himself not write of the Negro that 'It is an act of criminal insanity to train a being who was only born a semi-ape?' Hitler himself has thus raised the racial question which has contributed to the loyal support that the colonies have to Britain. It has made the war a racial war which is Africa's as well as Britain's.²⁹

A crucial question that scholars of this period must address is determining how much influence official propaganda had on the anti-German and pro-British posture of West African elites during the War. The evidence suggests that the lines between official propaganda and the pro-British assertions of the African intelligentsia were not always clear. Both strands of the anti-German war propaganda machinery were mutually reinforcing. Prevalent anti-German attitudes among West Africans were reinforced by official propaganda that depicted Britain as the 'great protector of small nations' standing up to the evil of Nazi domination and oppression.³⁰ Thus, colonial governments built on the groundswell of anti-German sentiments among Africans to advance their wartime propaganda agendas.

The rhetoric and imagery of wartime propaganda in the colonies were carefully crafted to reflect the socio-political concerns of Africans. An excerpt from the *War Diary*, a government sponsored newsletter published in Nigeria, illustrates how propaganda was tailored not only to legitimise Britain's role in Africa but also to address African concerns.

Hitler has made a speech, Mussolini has made a speech. Both of these Bad men are encouraging their foolish peoples to more attacks on small free peoples... A third leader has also spoken. He is an African and emperor of Abyssinia. Here are some of the things the Emperor said to the people of Abyssinia: 'Great Britain has given me all the help I need to free our country completely...with the help of Great Britain, we shall make great improvements in our country. A 'New Order' will be established. Let us show that we are worthy of the help Great Britain is

²⁸ One incident that reinforced these perceptions about German colonialism in Africa was the Herero uprising in South West Africa where thousands of Africans including women and children were killed by German troops in 1904. References to this incident were frequently made in the newspapers as proof of German brutality towards Africans even though comparable incidents occurred under both British and French colonialism in Africa. See for example, *Lagos Standard*, 7 August 1918.

²⁹ Kofi Busia, *West Africans and the Issues of War* (London, 1942), 11.

³⁰ *Gold Coast Times*, 13 March 1939.

giving us. Therefore wherever you meet British officers you must help them bravely because they are bringing our freedom.³¹

Like the language of 'freedom', the language and imagery of slavery was also very prominent in colonial war propaganda. Propaganda literature stressed that the consequence of German victory in the war would be the enslavement, or more appropriately, the re-enslavement of Africans. Images of half naked Africans bound in chains and flogged by menacing looking German soldiers were evocative of not so distant memories of slavery and the slave trade. Such graphic images were bound to have a profound impact even among the non-literate masses.



Figure 4. Slaves under Hitler.

³¹ *War Diary*, 21 February 1941. Quoted in Clarke, *West Africans at War*, 43–44.

As the war progressed, colonial regimes in West Africa undertook more sophisticated multimedia propaganda campaigns to rally and sustain enthusiasm for the war. Apart from newsletters and posters, propaganda materials also took the form of government issues pamphlets and newspaper articles and editorials. The message in war propaganda also took various forms: denunciations of the Axis powers, reminders of the perils that threaten the colonies if they fell under German control and appeals for contribution to the imperial war effort.³² West Africans were constantly warned that all that was necessary to archive the subjugation of their countries by the ruthless Germans was a successful German invasion of Britain. If Britain fell to Germany, then all Britain's colonial possessions would come under oppressive German rule. No opportunity was spared to point out the dire consequences for 'small' nations if the Allies were defeated.

In a nationwide radio broadcast in 1941, Governor Bernard Bourdillon warned Nigerians of the possibility of German attack from neighbouring Dahomey or Niger stressing that the security and liberty of Nigerians depended on British victory over Nazism. The British Empire was fighting, Bourdillon emphasized, for the 'right of the ordinary man in every part of the world to live out his own life in freedom and peace.' According to him, the war was a struggle against those who believed that 'the pinnacle of civilized man was the perfection of a military machine which would deprive individuals of all freedom of thought and action.'³³ There were similar reasons for war anxiety in the Gold Coast. Several telegrams from the Colonial Office to the Gold Coast Governor, Arnold Hodson, suggested a German plan to launch an invasion of Africa.³⁴ The Gold Coast was considered particularly vulnerable because the government of the colony was administering the British mandated section of the former German colony of Togoland, which, it was thought, Hitler might want to reacquire.³⁵

While official propaganda did not solely account for the widespread support for Britain and her allies in West Africa, it did have some impact in terms of raising public awareness about the war and strengthening support for it. Beyond imperial idealism, there was an element of self interest in African support for the war, particularly among the educated elite who were concerned about the implications of German victory for their own political aspirations. This group of elites took it upon themselves to mobilize support for British cause. Educated Africans in Nigeria, the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone inaugurated 'War

³² Holbrook, 'British Propaganda and the Mobilization', 349.

³³ Cited in G. O. Olusanya, *The Second World War and Politics in Nigeria* (Lagos, 1973), 49.

³⁴ Holbrook, 'British Propaganda and the Mobilization', 348.

³⁵ Some colonial official however quietly expressed concern over the excessive vilification of Germany and the Germans in British war propaganda. One official at the Colonial Office feared that after the war, Africans 'having been encouraged to hate one branch of the white race may extend their feelings to others.' Quoted in Morris, *British Techniques of Public Relations and Propaganda*, 50.

Committees' that sought to educate the public about the war. Local newspapers threw themselves into the effort to 'conquer and vanquish' Germany, presenting a picture of a progressive British Empire united against a common foe.³⁶ The *West African Pilot* emphasized the loyalty of Africans to the British Empire and their willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice in the defence of Empire. In one editorial, the paper pointed out that the youths of Britain and France were 'shedding their blood in order that the ideals of liberty, democracy and peace might strive in the world.'³⁷ Such was the groundswell of support for British war efforts that Governor Hodson could say with confidence in 1939 that the people of the Gold Coast were 'absolutely united in the approving the decision to go to war.'³⁸ Although some discordant voices questioned support for the war, most of the West African intelligentsia remained solidly behind British war efforts. The position they took was remarkably different from that of the Indian National Congress under Mahatma Gandhi which refused to support Britain in the war even though it opposed Nazism and fascism.³⁹ Unlike their Indian counterparts, West African nationalists did not see contradictions between their wartime support for Britain and their anti-colonial nationalist struggles which they sustained even during the war.

Support for British war efforts was not limited to a small group of educated elites. It extended to the grassroots. Throughout West Africa, chiefs, religious leaders and even school children were co-opted into the propaganda war. Chiefs and village heads, already central to British indirect rule system, were appointed to local war fund committees and given the task of spreading anti-German propaganda in order to encourage enlistment in the army and increase the production of materials required for the war. Many of these chiefs urged young men to do their towns and villages proud by joining the West African Frontier Force and the King's African Rifles. Others still, offered traditional ritual sacrifices before their local shrines and deities, praying for British victory in the war. Leaders of the indigenous Cherubim and Seraphim Church in Nigeria urged their congregations to fast and pray throughout the war for the defeat of Hitler.⁴⁰ Added to these were the more tangible financial contributions to Empire War Funds campaigns across West Africa totalling about one million pounds.⁴¹ Contributions to the 'War Fund' in Nigeria and the Gold Coast came from diverse sources – civil servants, school children, local chiefs and even nationalist politicians normally opposed to the colonial government. The people of Ondo Province contributed money to help the children of London made homeless by German bombing raids and the people of Nsukka, Kano and Ijebu

³⁶ Fred Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria* (London, 1978), 212.

³⁷ *West African Pilot*, 4 September 1939, 3.

³⁸ Quoted in Holbrook, 'British Propaganda and the Mobilization', 348.

³⁹ Rupert Emerson, *From Empire to Nation: The Rise of Self-Assertion of Asian and African Peoples* (Boston, 1970), 67.

⁴⁰ Clarke, *West Africans at War*, 55.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 21.

Ode contributed towards the purchase of a Spitfire fighter aircrafts for the Royal Air force.⁴² Photographs of these aircrafts with the names of the sponsoring towns boldly inscribed on them were published in local newspapers as a way of generating further support for the war.⁴³

Wartime propaganda also spurred local interests in news about the war and to meet growing local demands for news schoolchildren were co-opted into the propaganda machinery. They were provided with copies of the propaganda literature at school and sent into the villages to spread ‘news and information’ about the war.⁴⁴ The purpose was not only to ‘inform’ but also to encourage Africans to increase food production and other materials required for the war. Newsletters and war photos showing the victories of British and Allied forces were widely distributed to libraries, schools, bookshops, government offices, hospitals, army barracks, police stations, churches and mosques. Such information about the war was in great demand not only in the large urban centres but also in the countryside.

Apart from the demand for literature, which appealed mainly to the educated elites, there was also great interest in films, newsreels and radio broadcasts about the war produced both by local broadcasters such as Radio Accra and the British Broadcasting Service. Films and radio broadcasts particularly appealed to the non-literate masses. Mobile cinemas toured towns and villages showing newsreels of British and Allied troops in combat. Films such as *The Guns of the Desert* about the war in North Africa proved to be popular with local audiences in West Africa who could identify with the sceneries in the film.⁴⁵ Although few Africans owned radio receivers during the war, the governments in Nigeria and the Gold Coast introduced redistribution services where residents without private receivers could have radio programs transmitted to public spaces through speakers connected to central receivers. These public loud speakers were particularly effective in brining the war to the masses.

The role of Africans was crucial to the success of cinema and radio in mobilizing awareness and support for the war. Colonial officials realized quite early that film and radio propaganda would be effective only where they were endorsed and presented by Africans themselves. Effective radio propaganda required careful local adaptations of materials dispatched from the Ministry of

⁴² *Daily Service*, June 21, 1945.

⁴³ One such photograph of a British pilot standing beside a Royal Air Force fighter aircraft bearing the inscription ‘Nigeria: Ijebu Province’ appeared in the *Daily Service* of June 21, 1945. The caption read: ‘Fighter aircraft each bearing the name of ‘Nigeria’ followed by the name of one of the Provinces of the Protectorate which subscribed for it, have taken part in a number of successful sorties and sweeps over enemy occupied territories.’

⁴⁴ NNAI, Ijebu Prof. 1/2562. Memorandum on Instructions and Directives on War Information.

⁴⁵ For a detailed discussion on the use of films and cinema in imperial war propaganda in Africa see Rosaleen Smyth, ‘The Post-War Career of the Colonial Film Unit in Africa: 1946–1955’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 12, 2, (1992), 163–177.

Information in London and the Colonial Office Film Unit.⁴⁶ Broadcasts by African announcers in major local languages such as Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo in Nigeria and Fante, Ewe and Ga in the Gold Coast, used a combination of humour and the oral story telling traditions with which most Africans were familiar, to inform and mobilize. Many Africans, who were encountering radio and cinema for the first time, were as captivated by the novelty of these media as by the message they conveyed. The net result was that colonial war propaganda proved quite successful in making West Africans more aware of the war and getting them fully engaged in support of the British cause.

IV

It has been argued that British war effort and the accompanying anti-German propaganda concentrated the minds of West Africans not to liberation and independence but on 'the immediate and very real issue of preserving Africa and the world from Nazism.'⁴⁷ The evidence suggests that this was not quite the case. War propaganda concentrated the minds of West Africans as much on liberation and independence as it did on defeating Nazism. If the war promoted a stronger sense of commitment to Empire among the West African intelligentsia, it also provided new grounds for questioning and challenging Empire. The war news and propaganda to which African populations were suddenly exposed strengthened longstanding nationalist demands and hastened the emergence of African political voices in several ways. West African nationalists continued with their fight for democratic reforms during the war even as they declared loyalty to the British cause.⁴⁸ They highlighted the inherent contradictions between Allied propaganda that war against Nazi Germany was being fought for the sake of freedom and the denial of these same freedoms to those under British colonial rule. Prior to the war, the Colonial Office had anticipated this would be a likely fallout of war propaganda. Officials feared that grand declarations about world freedom and propaganda rhetoric about the right to self-determination might ultimately compromise the Colonial Office's policymaking power.⁴⁹ This fear proved to be well founded.

Allied propaganda that the war against Germany was being fought to preserve democracy and to ensure that peoples around the world lived in freedom and peace, provided a basis for nationalists to demand that these same ideals be extended to them. Writing under the editorial title 'Anti-Imperialism', the *West African Pilot* emphasized that since the citizens of Britain and Empire

⁴⁶ The Colonial Office Film Unit was set up in 1939 to produce films that would explain the war to audiences in the colonies.

⁴⁷ Clarke, *West Africans at War*, 54.

⁴⁸ John E. Flint, "'Managing Nationalism": The Colonial Office and Nnamdi Azikiwe', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 27, 2 (1999), 151.

⁴⁹ Smyth, 'War propaganda During the Second World War: Northern Rhodesia', 356.

were being called upon to fight, Britain must not deny Africans the democratic rights for which the war was being fought 'lest the enemy be given the opportunity to create propaganda from colonial repression.'⁵⁰ In another editorial, the paper stressed the need for Britain to specify her war aims not only with regard to the British people but also as they concerned the entire empire which was affected in one way or another by the war.⁵¹ Striking a similar note, the *Daily Service* in an editorial in 1940 stated that to secure victory against 'Hitlerism', [sic] democracy and liberty must be seen universal. It advocated the extension to Africans and other 'weaker peoples', the same ideals of freedom and liberty for which the war against Hitler was being waged.⁵² These views clearly represent an attempt by West African nationalists to link their political demands with wider issues associated with the war. They used war propaganda to press their political demands by articulating them in terms of universal rights rather than simply their entitlements as 'citizens of Empire.' Criticizing the colonial Legislative Council in 1942, the Nigerian Youth Movement described it as an 'anachronistic institution reminiscent of Nazi Germany which did not hold out any hope to the people of Nigeria.'⁵³

Perhaps the most striking evidence of the paradoxes that underlined colonial war propaganda in West Africa was the controversy generated by the Atlantic Charter, a common declaration of purpose concerning the Second World War issued by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill in 1941. The Charter declared that both leaders respected the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live and that they wished to 'see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.'⁵⁴ The Atlantic Charter reinforced a dominant theme in colonial war propaganda – that the war was not simply a fight for Britain and her allies but a struggle for the rights and freedoms of all peoples. Colonial propagandists repeatedly made reference to the Charter as evidence of the justification and altruism of British war aims.⁵⁵ The Charter also became the focus of global discussions and debates about the right to self-determination. In West Africa, as elsewhere in the continent, public discussion over the Charter centred on its famous third clause which affirmed 'the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live.' This statement excited the hopes of West African nationalists who saw it as an unequivocal affirmation of their right to self-determination. They cautiously welcomed the Charter fearing that its ideals could turn out to be no more than mere

⁵⁰ *West African Pilot* 19 January 1940, 2.

⁵¹ *West African Pilot*, 24 January 1940, 3.

⁵² *Daily Service*, 16 November 1940.

⁵³ *Daily Service*, 30 September 1942.

⁵⁴ See Clause 3 of the Atlantic Charter.

⁵⁵ National Archives of the United Kingdom, CO323/1660/15, *War Publicity Handbook*, undated.

platitudes.⁵⁶ There was hope in the promise of the Charter and yet scepticism about Britain's commitment to it. The *West African Pilot* feared that the Charter might turn out to be 'just one of those human instruments nobly conceived but poorly executed.'⁵⁷

These fears were confirmed in November 1942 when Churchill stated before the House of Commons that he and President Roosevelt had only European states in mind when they drew up the Charter and that the Charter was a guide rather than a rule.⁵⁸ He stated: 'At the Atlantic meeting, we had in mind, primarily the restoration of sovereignty, self-government and national life of the states and nations of Europe now under the Nazi yoke.'⁵⁹ Even more controversial was his widely quoted remark that he had not become Prime Minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire. 'Let there be no mistake in any quarter', he proclaimed, 'we intend to hold what we have. I have not become the King's First Minister to preside over the dismantling of the British Empire.'⁶⁰ To further complicate matters, a different and contrasting interpretation of the Charter soon came from President Roosevelt who maintained that the 'Atlantic Charter applies to all humanity.'⁶¹ Britain subsequently faced pressure from the United States to extend the provisions of the Charter to its colonies.⁶²

Roosevelt's liberal interpretation of the provisions of the Charter was more in tune with the expectations of the West African intelligentsia who responded to Churchill's statements with disappointment and outrage. In its editorial on 18 November 1941 titled 'Even Mr. Winston Churchill', the *West African Pilot* expressed disappointment that the Prime Minister could make such a statement during a war that had cost colonial peoples much of their material resources and manpower.⁶³ The newspaper subsequently sent a telegram to Churchill asking him to clarify Britain's position on the Atlantic Charter. Copies of the telegram were sent to international media organizations including *Times* of London, *Time* magazine and the Associated Negro Press.⁶⁴ Although Churchill subsequently

⁵⁶ Olusanya, *The Second World War and Politics in Nigeria*, 57.

⁵⁷ *West African Pilot*, 6 March 1943, 2.

⁵⁸ Quoted in the *West African Pilot*, 5 November 1941, 2.

⁵⁹ National Archives of the United Kingdom, CO 323/1848/7322/1942, extract from speech by Prime Minister Churchill to the House of Commons.

⁶⁰ Quoted in the *Times*, 11 November 1942. Also see John Flint, 'Planned Decolonisation and Its Failure in British Africa', *African Affairs*, 82, 328 (1983), 409.

⁶¹ Quoted in *West Africa Review*, February (1946), 167–168. For a more detailed discussion of this Anglo-American rift over the Atlantic Charter see William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire 1941–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). For a discussion on how African nationalists responded to this Charter, see Marika Sherwood, 'There Is No New Deal for the Blackman in San Francisco: African Attempts to Influence the Founding Conference of the United Nations, April–July, 1945', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 29, 1 (1996), 71–94.

⁶³ Olusanya, *The Second World War and Politics in Nigeria*, 57.

⁶⁴ *West African Pilot*, 13 November 1941, 2.

explained that the Atlantic Charter was not incompatible with the progressive evolution of self-governing institutions in the British Empire, this clarification did not satisfy an already incensed intelligentsia. In its editorial of 3 March 1945 titled 'Churchill's Consistent Inconsistencies' the *Daily Service* stated:

Winston Churchill is a bundle of contradictions. He believes in 'liberty and freedom for all men.' He is at the same time a die-hard imperialist. Imperialism and liberty are by no means coterminous. Churchill believes in ruling irrespective of the will of those who are ruled and yet he decries dictatorship of the world by Great Powers.⁶⁵

In another editorial titled 'The Atlantic Chatter', the *West African Pilot* opined that people around the world had been deceived into believing in the promise of an 'Atlantic Charter' which did not exist at all. What existed according to the newspaper was an Atlantic Chatter rather than an Atlantic Charter. 'A charter is a document bestowing certain rights and privileges... chatter on the other hand, means to utter sounds rapidly or to talk idly or carelessly.'⁶⁶ The Atlantic Charter was idle talk among Western powers that held no promise of self determination for Africans and other colonized people. In line with this thinking, the prominent Nigerian nationalist and editor of the *West African Pilot*, Nnamdi Azikiwe, urged Africans to prepare their own charters of rights and freedoms rather than rely on those who were too busy preparing their own.⁶⁷

Like other West African nationalists, Azikiwe, who later became the President of Nigeria, effectively used the Atlantic Charter and the hypocrisy of its selective interpretation by Churchill to advance their demands for independence. In 1943, a group of West African leaders (including Azikiwe) submitted a memorandum to the Secretary of State for Colonies entitled, 'The Atlantic Charter and British West Africa.' The document made several proposals based on the Atlantic Charter that included demands for the 'immediate abrogation of the crown colony system of government; immediate Africanisation and full responsible government.'⁶⁸ Similarly, in its representation to the Fifth Pan African Congress held in Manchester in 1945, the Gold Coast Aborigines Rights Protection Society invoked the Atlantic Charter to demand 'immediate political emancipation' for Africa.⁶⁹ The Charter thus became the focal point of struggles for political reforms and eventual self-government.

Apart from their ability to adapt and deploy war propaganda for their own anti-colonial struggles, West African elites also drew on the organizational model of colonial war propaganda for their own nationalist campaigns. Colonial

⁶⁵ *Daily Service*, 3 March 1945, 2.

⁶⁶ *West African Pilot*, 22 December 1944, 2.

⁶⁷ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Political Blueprint of Nigeria* (Lagos, 1945), 72.

⁶⁸ Coleman, *Background to Nationalism*, 240.

⁶⁹ S. K. B. Asante, 'The Neglected Aspects of the Activities of the Gold Coast Aborigines Rights Protection Society' *Phylon*, 36, 1, (1975), 43.

war propaganda machinery produced a large pool of experienced African propagandists, who had worked in broadcasting and the newspaper presses. Their experiences in mass mobilization and information dissemination strengthened the ability of the nationalist groups to mobilize mass action.⁷⁰ Political parties such as Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party in the Gold Coast and Obafemi Awolowo's Action Group Party in Nigeria owed much of their success in rallying public support to the use of sophisticated mobilization techniques drawn from colonial war propaganda machinery.

Most scholars agree that the Second World War was either the end of the beginning or the beginning of the end of colonialism in Africa and that the global upheaval it caused had far-reaching effects on developments in the continent.⁷¹ However, there is still a need to look closely at the specific wartime experiences that brought about such momentous change.⁷² Imperial propaganda was one aspect of the war that directly affected the decolonisation process in West Africa. Although Britain was already moving in the direction of granting its African dependencies some level of political autonomy before the war, the ability of West African nationalists to take advantage of the contradictions in official propaganda greatly facilitated this process.

Drawing extensively on the language of the Atlantic Charter, nationalist leaders were able to bring greater international pressure on Britain to accelerate political reforms in the colonies. There were also dissensions about the pace of political reform within British officialdom. Faced with pressure to extend the principles of the Atlantic Charter to the colonies, the British Foreign Office urged the Colonial Office to consider producing a Colonial Charter, along the lines of the Atlantic Charter, outlining British post war intentions for the colonies.⁷³ All these forced local colonial administrators to make important political concessions to West African nationalists and undertake major political reforms. In Nigeria and the Gold Coast, the governments conceded to the long-standing demands for African representation in on the Executive Councils.⁷⁴ There was also more readiness on the part of colonial administrations to engage with educated Africans who had long been shut out of the British system of indirect rule in preference for local Chiefs. This marked the prelude to the independence of the Gold Coast in 1957, Nigeria in 1960 and Sierra Leone in 1961. The main effect of the Atlantic Charter and its use in wartime propaganda,

⁷⁰ Holbrook, 'British Propaganda and the Mobilization', 360.

⁷¹ Killingray and Rathbone (eds.) *Africa and the Second World War*; Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa*, University of Nebraska Press, 2006; R. T. Kerslake, *Time and the Hour: Nigeria, East Africa and the Second World War*, Radcliffe Press, 1997.

⁷² Nancy L. Clark, 'Gendering Production in Wartime South Africa', *The American Historical Review*, 16, 4 (2001), 1181.

⁷³ Morris, *British Techniques of Public Relations and Propaganda*, 202

⁷⁴ Melvin Goldberg, 'Decolonisation and Political Socialisation with Reference to West Africa', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 24, 4 (1986), 668.

therefore, was to force the British to re-examine and redefine their colonial policy not only in West Africa but elsewhere in the empire.

V

British authorities aimed to use propaganda not only to gain support for the Allied cause but also to preserve and bolster their own authority in the colonies, to strengthen the sense of belonging to empire among Africans and to weaken the appeal of African nationalism. But while colonial war propaganda was partly successful in rallying support for the war and perhaps enhancing colonial authority, it failed dismally in terms of the weakening African nationalism. In fact, the opposite turned out to be the case. Colonial war propaganda served the cause of West African nationalism just as much as it served the British cause. West African elites effectively turned anti-German propaganda about, and used it to favour nationalist struggles. They adopted the strategy of supporting the Allied cause against Nazism while at the same time attacking colonialism. In some cases, they turned the attack on Nazism into attack on colonialism. This was the paradox of colonial war propaganda -- that served to make West Africans strive towards being autonomous citizen of the world just as much as it served to make them loyal citizen of Empire.

One writer has described the process by which war propaganda quickened African expectations about their own political future as a 'boomerang effect.'⁷⁵ I would characterize it differently. This process was not just a boomerang; it was much more. Portraying it as a boomerang suggests that imperial war propaganda was a colonial initiative that simply backfired, resulting in consequences unintended by British authorities. This representation does not adequately reflect the important roles Africans played in the production and dissemination of war propaganda. It also does not adequately reflect the deliberate process by which West African elites supported imperial war efforts as a short-term objective while simultaneously using war rhetoric to promote their long-term goals of self-determination and independence. Rather than a boomerang, this was a complex paradoxical process by which African elites, having supported the British cause during the war, appropriated the discourse on freedom and self-determination deployed within war propaganda to promote their own nationalist agenda. In doing so, they were not simply replicating the language of Western politics; they were part of the production of that language. They were engaging the wartime language of universal rights, appropriating it, modifying it and deploying it to serve their own agendas.

⁷⁵ Smyth, 'War propaganda During the Second World War: Northern Rhodesia', 353.