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The Kaiser's Facade: Unmasking Germany's 1914-1915

Self - Image in Greek Press

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Abstract

The outbreak of the First World War reshaped Germany's national identity, as reflected in its self-image and its projected image abroad, especially in neutral states such as Greece. This research explores Germany's self-perception in 1914-1915, focusing on the Greek newspaper EMPROS. Through the analysis of secondary and primary sources, the research clarifies internal propaganda and external perception. It delves into how the portrayal of Germany's economic power and military superiority fostered a sense of national pride and superiority. This self-perception played a key role in shaping the course of the war and influenced international perceptions. The analysis concludes that during the period under review, Germany projected an image of economic resilience and military success, fostering national pride and self-confidence at home and aiming to influence international opinion. However, it summarizes the discrepancy between propaganda and reality, which would later cause changes in Germany's self-perception as the war progressed.

Keywords: Self-Perception, EMPROS Newspaper, First World War, Germany

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Introduction

The outbreak of World War I marked a pivotal turning point in the history of the German Empire, significantly reshaping its national identity, which had been forged during the era of Otto von Bismarck.¹ From this starting point, this research note discusses the following questions: What was Germany's self-image in the period 1914-1915? And how was the German image projected in the neutral states? This working paper will attempt to address these issues focusing on the Greek perspective. In particular, it will embark on a detailed analysis of articles published in the Greek press, with a specific focus on the influential newspaper EMBROS.

In order to unveil the multifaceted self-perception of Germany during this period, it is imperative to situate our inquiry within the broader historical, cultural, and political context of the time. This contextual exploration will enable us to understand how the Imperial government and German society constructed and projected their national identity. During the initial stages of World War I, Germany projected an amalgamation of characteristics that interacted with its self-image, including a sense of superiority, militarism, fervent patriotism, and a quest for national unity.

Integral to the formation of this national identity was the pervasive influence of internal propaganda within Germany.² It is important to acknowledge that the utilization of propaganda was not a phenomenon exclusive to the German Empire during this era; all belligerent parties employed similar tactics to bolster their respective causes.³ However, our primary focus remains on Germany, and thus, the scope of this paper does not permit a comprehensive analysis of propaganda efforts beyond the borders of the German Empire.

¹ Verheyen, Dirk (1999). *The German question: A Cultural, Historical, and Geopolitical Exploration*. Westview Press. pp. 8-25

² Roshwald, A., & Stites, R. (Eds.). (2002). *European Culture in the Great War: The Arts, Entertainment and Propaganda, 1914-1918* (Vol. 6). Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare. Cambridge University Press. pp. 32-58

³ Paddock, T. R. E. (2014). *World War I and Propaganda*. Brill Boston. pp. 21-42

This paper delves into the intricacies of Germany's self-image during the critical juncture of 1914-1915, examining how it evolved against the backdrop of World War I and the broader socio-political milieu. Through a meticulous examination of the scholarship and the contribution of articles published in the Greek press, the research note aims to elucidate the main narratives of German propaganda revolving around the economic and military dynamics that contributed to the strengthening of militaristic zeal and national unity during this turbulent period seeking to explore if and to what extent these trends spread into the foreign - in our case Greek - press.

Methodological Remarks

As far as research is concerned, the analysis will use secondary sources such as books and academic journals. Also, following a qualitative analysis, primary sources such as newspapers, testimonies and reports of the time will be used. Moreover, the author will be able to use its extensive knowledge of the Greek language to his advantage, by analysing the articles of the EMPROS newspaper in their original language. As a result, will be able to explore the events with information from the “horse’s mouth” and get a better understanding of the topic at hand. However, the research faced the difficulties of lost or limited number of articles from the EMPROS newspaper because of the extensive propaganda of the era. Furthermore, this research exhibits a notable limitation in its reliance on a limited array of Greek press sources. The constraints imposed by the length limitations of this work preclude us from exhaustively referencing all pertinent newspaper articles. Therefore, preference will be given to recording and analysing the most important of them.

Mirroring the Nation: Self-Perception and National Image

To understand how the German Empire and its citizens perceived themselves during the early years of World War I, it is crucial to consider the historical context leading up to the conflict. Germany, under the rule of Kaiser Wilhelm II, had aggressively pursued imperial ambitions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, resulting in tensions with other European

powers.⁴ The outbreak of the war in 1914 was not only a culmination of these tensions but also an opportunity for the German Empire to assert its dominance on the world stage. Nationalism was another key factor in shaping German identity⁵ before the war. The German Empire had only been unified in 1871 under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck,⁶ and a sense of national pride and unity was still developing. The notion of a strong and unified Germany was promoted through cultural movements, educational reforms, and celebrations of historical achievements. These efforts contributed to a growing sense of national identity and self-confidence.

Germany's self-perception at the outset of World War I was heavily influenced by nationalism and patriotism. The German population, driven by a strong sense of national identity, believed in the righteousness of their cause. The government portrayed the war as a defensive struggle against encircling enemies who sought to suppress Germany's rise.⁷ This narrative of self-defense and protection of the fatherland fueled nationalistic fervor. Propaganda and media also played an important role. The "Spirit of 1914" was a powerful slogan used by the German government to rally the population behind the war effort.⁸ It depicted a united and enthusiastic Germany, ready to face any challenges. The image of a resilient and determined nation served to boost morale and reinforce the idea of German superiority.⁹ Another important aspect was the concept of sacrifice. The concept of sacrifice was central to Germany's self-perception during the war. Propaganda emphasized the importance of individual sacrifice for the collective good. Families were encouraged to

⁴ Fischer, F. (1967). *Germany's Aims in the First World War*. W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 7 – 20

⁵ Schubert, Michael (2011). "The 'German nation' and the 'black Other': social Darwinism and the cultural mission in German colonial discourse". *Patterns of Prejudice*. **45** (5): 399–416

⁶ Williamson, D. (2013). *Bismarck and Germany: 1862-1890*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis. pp.54-58

⁷ Welch, David. (2014). "Depicting the Enemy." *British Library*. Retrieved 3 October, 2023, from <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/depicting-the-enemy>.

⁸ Verhey, J. (2000). *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany* (Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1 – 11, doi:10.1017/CBO9780511497155

⁹ Smith, H. L. (2008). *Germany: A Nation in Its Time: Before, During, and After Nationalism, 1500-2000* (p. 75). W. W. Norton & Company. pp. 108

support loved ones serving at the front, and the image of the soldier as a selfless hero was perpetuated.¹⁰

All the above, made a dangerous mix of superiority and enthusiasm for the war effort. Germany perceived itself and the war as the saviors of the Europe and the messenger of the good cause against the evil forces of France, England and Russia. The German nation was encircled and only the courageous Germans could liberate it. However, was this the way Germany was perceived by others? For instance, segments of Greek society, especially its conservative and royalist factions, would have expressed a favourable stance. That image of the courageous and superior German is reflected in the "EMPROS" newspaper. In 30.1.1914 an article made its appearance with the title "The German Soldier". The article describes the fact that Germany is bragging that has the tallest soldiers in the world. In the eyes of the Germans physicality is seen as a factor that wins the wars. Nonetheless, the author has a different opinion. As the article quotes "*Although height contributes nothing to the bravery of a military unit and its combat worthiness (we saw this with the Japanese in Manchuria)*".¹¹

As the war became bloodier and more soldiers failed to return, the propaganda war intensified. Those orchestrating the war effort had to justify the thousands of dead. Germany's self-image in 1915 war propaganda was growing more prestigious than ever. German propaganda employed various tactics to achieve this. Firstly, the focus centered on Germany's economic "miracle" and its remarkable resilience in the face of war, distinguishing it from other Great Powers grappling with the conflict. This narrative not only served as a testament to Germany's strength but also captured the imagination of a global audience, including readers in Greece. Secondly, the propaganda highlighted Germany's triumphs on the battlefield during 1915. Victories were portrayed as not only military successes but also as a source of national pride, elevating the collective ego and self-image of the German people.

¹⁰ Schlenker, B. R., Weigold, M. F., & Schlenker, K. A. (2008). What makes a hero? The impact of integrity on admiration and interpersonal judgment. *Journal of Personality*, 76(2), pp. 323-355

¹¹ EMPROS, 30.1.1914

German propaganda during World War I skillfully projected an image of economic resilience, weaving a narrative that served both domestic and international purposes.¹² This portrayal of economic strength was a cornerstone of the propaganda machine, strategically designed to shape perceptions on multiple fronts. One of the primary functions of this narrative was to bolster morale on the home front. Germany, like other belligerent nations, faced the economic strains of a prolonged conflict.¹³ Shortages because of the blockade,¹⁴ unemployment¹⁵ and inflation¹⁶ became a bleak reality for the average citizen. To counter any potential disillusionment, the government portrayed Germany as an economic powerhouse capable of withstanding the rigors of war production, thus providing a sense of assurance and purpose for its citizens.¹⁷

Furthermore, German authorities knew that they had to ask even more from the German people as the war continued. The dream of the war ending by Christmas of 1914 was long-forgotten. Moreover, the narrative of the hardships endured was not in vain but essential contributions to a greater national cause. This sense of shared sacrifice was vital in maintaining support for the war effort and to “*stand, in resolute fidelity, by our ally which is battling for its reputation as a great power*”.¹⁸ The narrative of the strong economy extended to the international stage. By projecting that the German economy was at the top among the fighting nations, it aimed to convey to other nations, including potential allies and neutrals, that Germany was a formidable opponent with the economic might to sustain a protracted conflict. This perception proved instrumental in diplomatic initiatives and future negotiations, molding Germany's reputation both domestically and on the global stage. The

¹² Cassel, G. (2009). *Germany's Economic Power Of Resistance (1916)*. USA: Kessinger Publishing.

¹³ Grebler, L., & Winkler, W. (1940). *The cost of the world war to Germany and to Austria-Hungary*. New Haven: London: Yale University Press; H. Milford, Oxford University Pres. pp. 108 - 110

¹⁴ Kramer A. Blockade and economic warfare. In: Winter J, ed. *The Cambridge History of the First World War*. Vol 2. The Cambridge History of the First World War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2014:460-490.

¹⁵ Bry, G. (1960). Wages during War, Inflation, and Dictatorship. In *Wages in Germany, 1871-1945*. Princeton University Press. pp.192. <https://www.nber.org/system/files/chapters/c2509/c2509.pdf>

¹⁶ Balderston, T. “War Finance and Inflation in Britain and Germany, 1914-1918.” *The Economic History Review*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1989, pp. 222–44. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2596203>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2023.

¹⁷ Gross, S. (2009). Confidence and Gold: German War Finance 1914-1918. *Central European History*, 42(2), pp. 223–252. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40600594>

¹⁸ Gay, P. (1993). *The Cultivation of Hatred (Bourgeois Experience)*. W.W. Norton & Co. Inc. pp. 515

imperative for Germany to carefully craft its image was accentuated by its dependence on war funding, primarily sourced from substantial debt rather than adhering to the gold standard or relying on taxation.¹⁹

The need to promote this image was of vital importance for Germany. This perspective was also evident in the statement of the German Minister of Finance regarding the issuance of a 10-billion-dollar loan, which was accepted. The Minister went on making a lengthy comparison of resource mobilization among the major powers, emphasizing that "*our superiority is now recognized in the way capital is raised*". Furthermore, he cited the *New York Times* to demonstrate that "*the British Government exerted considerable pressure on the banks to even ostensibly secure the loan.*" In contrast, he emphasizes that "German loans never fell below the issuance of bonds."²⁰

Essentially, through this comparison, it manages to highlight that the German economy not only is not shrinking but also exhibits stability and reliability compared to its competitors. The dissemination of this carefully crafted narrative appears to have resonated and gained acceptance, not only among potential allies but also potential adversaries. Notably, the same speech has found a platform in the August 30, 1915, issue of "EMPROS,"²¹ further amplifying the reach and impact of Germany's propaganda efforts.

However, it's important to recognize that the propaganda's portrayal of economic resilience often diverged from the complex economic realities of wartime Germany. The country faced significant challenges, including resource shortages and mounting debt. The propaganda machine served, in part, as a tool to project confidence and mask these difficulties, preventing panic or disillusionment among the population.

German propaganda in 1915 masterfully harnessed the nation's military successes to shape its self-perception. As the German army achieved victories, particularly on the Eastern Front against Russia and early advances on the Western Front, the propaganda machine seized

¹⁹ Hew Strachan (2001). *The First World War, Volume I: To Arms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 909, pp. 923

²⁰ Helfferich, K. (1915). *The Third German War Loan Speech Made ... in the Reichstag on August 20th*.

²¹ EMPROS, 30.8.1914

upon these triumphs to instil a profound sense of national pride and confidence.²² Germans were repeatedly exposed to narratives highlighting their military prowess and efficiency. These portrayals created the perception that Germany was not merely engaged in a defensive struggle but was asserting itself as a dominant force on the European stage. This narrative was instrumental in fostering a collective belief that Germany was an exceptional nation destined for victory.

Another major factor on the Germany's battlefield successes as portrayed in propaganda had implications beyond its borders. These victories contributed to the international perception of Germany as a formidable military power could end the war through a military solution and especially in the Eastern Front.²³ Neutral nations and potential allies observed Germany's achievements and considered its role in the war. The propaganda machine, operating through mediums such as songs like “*A song of Lusitania*”²⁴, posters²⁵, articles and myths like “*The spirit of 1914*”²⁶, sought to shape international and domestic opinion. The primary objectives underlying the aforementioned propaganda campaign were the prospective attraction of allies and the preservation of ongoing neutrality among other nations.²⁷ Meanwhile, these narratives generated a sense of optimism and high expectations for the future within Germany itself. The population believed victory was attainable, further reinforcing the notion that their nation was exceptional. More specifically, after the Tannenberg victory a notion that Germans were more superior to the “*Eastern Barbarians*” came to life.²⁸

²² DUBESKI, N. (2001). VICTORY MYTHS AND THE BATTLE OF TANNENBERG. *Journal of Political & Military Sociology*, 29(2), 282–292

²³ Keegan, John. (2000). *The First World War*, Toronto: Vintage Canada, Random House. pp.149

²⁴ KUHN, RUDOLF. “*The Destruction of the Lusitania.*” *The New York Times Current History of the European War*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1915, pp. 154–154. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45322681>. Accessed 11 Dec. 2023.

²⁵ Linder, A. P. (2016). *World War I in 40 Posters*. USA: Stackpole Books. pp.5 – 41.

²⁶ Verhey, J. (2000). *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth, and Mobilization in Germany*. USA: Cambridge University Press. pp.134-146

²⁷ Giannakopoulos, G., & Lialiouti, Z. (2023). Legacies of Neutrality. In E. Corse & M. García Cabrera (Eds.), *Propaganda and Neutrality: Global case studies in the 20th century*. Bloomsbury. pp. 63-80

²⁸ Showalter, Dennis. (1991). *Tannenberg: Clash of Empires*, Archon Books. pp. 352

However, a fundamental question persists: To what extent can the success of this propaganda campaign be substantiated? Guided by the perceptions and articles that are presented in the Greek newspaper "EMPROS" of the period the affirmative response to the question is posited. In August 3, 1915, the "Song of Lusitania" is republished in the Greek newspaper. This song praises the German submarine warfare.²⁹ Moreover, a few days later, on August 5, 1915, a new article was reprinted from the "Peace Society of Germany", which "asks the enemies of the country to recognize the military superiority of Germany and seek peace." Furthermore, it "advises Germany not to abuse its superiority in the discussion of peace terms." On November 15, 1915, an article titled "Censorship is Logical" appeared.³⁰ The article, based on German newspapers, argued that the reaction to German and French censorship and the lack of freedom of speech did not apply in the case of Germany. The main argument was that French censorship benefited by concealing what was happening on the front lines. In contrast, Germany, which was emerging victorious, did not benefit from it. It also added that through censorship, more articles about the victorious progress of the front appeared. Specifically, it stated that: "The government has no reason to hide the successes of the German army's military operations". Finally, the belief in military superiority and assured victory was reflected in an article titled "With the 42s," on December 22, 1915. This article argued that "even before the war ended, many German composers wrote the hymn of triumph of German weapons". Special mention was made of the triumphal march called "Kermitz." As it was stressed: "The special characteristic of the triumphal march is that in many places, the sound of the large drum will be replaced by the explosion of the 42-centimeter howitzer."³¹

Nonetheless, it's essential to acknowledge that the optimistic image of Germany's battlefield successes in propaganda was not always aligned with the complex realities of the war. As the conflict progressed, Germany would face significant challenges, eventual setbacks, and changing circumstances. The dissonance between the propagandistic narratives and the

²⁹ EMPROS, 3.8.1915

³⁰ *ibid*, 15.11.1915

³¹ EMPROS, 22.12.1915

actual experiences of the war would eventually lead to shifts in Germany's self-perception as the conflict unfolded. More specifically, the troops were fighting out of hope of finally being able to come back home to their families after the last battle.³² Despite that, the portrayal of military victories in 1915 played a pivotal role in shaping Germany's self-perception during the early years of World War I, fostering national pride, reinforcing the justification for war, and influencing international perceptions and expectations.

Concluding Remarks

German national self-image during the early years of World War I was deeply influenced by a potent mix of nationalism and propaganda involving a sense of superiority. At the outset of the conflict, Germany perceived itself as a nation on the rise, driven by a strong sense of national identity and a belief in the righteousness of its cause. This perception was carefully cultivated by the government through propaganda that portrayed Germany as an economic powerhouse capable of withstanding the rigors of war and a military juggernaut achieving victories on the battlefield.

The narrative of economic resilience served to bolster morale on the home front and project an image of stability to the international community. Meanwhile, the portrayal of military successes, particularly on the Eastern Front against Russia, instilled a profound sense of national pride and confidence among the German population. These narratives not only reinforced the notion of German superiority but also aimed to influence international opinion and attract potential allies.

However, it's crucial to recognize that the propagandistic image of Germany's strength did not always align with the complex realities of the war. As the conflict progressed, Germany faced significant challenges and eventual setbacks. The dissonance between propaganda and reality would lead to shifts in Germany's self-perception as the war unfolded. In essence,

³² Bruendel, Steffen. (2014). "Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Germany)." In *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*. Retrieved October 3, 2023, from: https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/between_acceptance_and_refusal_-_soldiers_attitudes_towards_war_germany

during the early years of World War I Germany projected an image of itself as a dominant and exceptional nation, driven by a sense of national pride and a strong belief in its own superiority. This self-perception played a pivotal role in shaping the course of the war and influenced international perceptions, but it would also undergo transformation in the face of the war's evolving challenges and outcomes.

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