

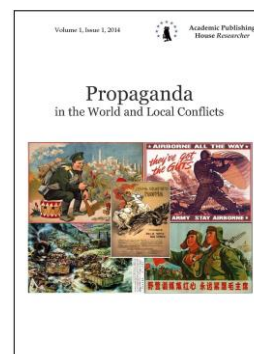
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## Weapons of Propagandists

### Messenger Pigeons as a Propagandist's Weapon (the Case of World War I)

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#### Abstract

This paper addresses the use of messenger pigeons for intelligence and propaganda purposes during World War I. The author describes the mechanism underlying the use of messenger pigeons by France and England on the Western Front against Germany.

In putting this work together, the author drew upon various sources of private origin, including the reminiscences of Chief of the Intelligence Service of the German High Command Colonel Walter Nicolai. The author also made use of some narrowly specialized literature on the subject, including regulations dealing with the use of messenger pigeons in the army. The following methods were employed: (1) the chronological method (to examine the issue in the chronological order it developed in); (2) the comparative method (to compare the efforts of the participating nations in terms of the use of pigeon stations and pigeon post services); (3) the generalization method (to identify the common and distinctive features of the use of messenger pigeons during World War I for intelligence and propaganda purposes).

The author's conclusion is that by the start of World War I the opposing sides had amassed extensive experience in the use of pigeons for war purposes. During the military confrontation, the participating nations continued to explore pigeons' potential as messengers with a view to employing them further not only for prompt delivery of information but for intelligence and propaganda purposes as well. With that said, these practices were reported to be quite efficient at certain stages of the war.

**Keywords:** messenger pigeons, World War I, propaganda, intelligence, England, France, Russian Empire.

#### 1. Introduction

By the start of World War I, pigeon post was already a tried-and-true source of communication for the army's needs. It is known to have been employed as far back as the fourth century BC by the army of Alexander the Great. Messenger pigeons were used by Roman Decimus Brutus during Mark Antony's siege of Mutina in 43 BC. Roman general Julius Caesar, too, employed messenger pigeons for the delivery of messages to Rome (Tseitlin, 1932).

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## 2. Materials and methods

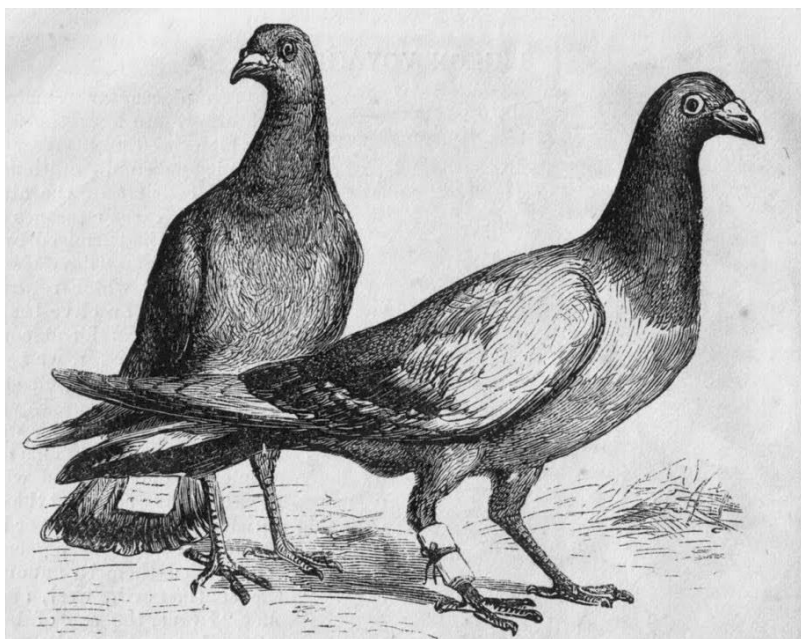
In putting this work together, the author drew upon various sources of private origin, including the reminiscences of Chief of the Intelligence Service of the German High Command Colonel Walter Nicolai (Nicolai, 1923; Nicolai, 2005). The author also made use of some narrowly specialized literature on the subject, including regulations dealing with the use of messenger pigeons in the army (Pochtovoe golubevodstvo, 1901).

The following methods were employed: (1) the chronological method (to examine the issue in the chronological order it developed in); (2) the comparative method (to compare the efforts of the participating nations in terms of the use of pigeon stations and pigeon post services); (3) the generalization method (to identify the common and distinctive features of the use of messenger pigeons during World War I for intelligence and propaganda purposes).

## 3. Results

A key role in relation to the use of messenger pigeons (Figure 1) for military purposes was played by the events of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. During the war, the French army lacked an organized use of the field telegraph, whilst the Prussian army already had in place mobile field telegraph units. With that in mind, the use at the time by the French of a completely new means of communication to connect besieged Paris with the province and the rest of the world would generate great interest across Western Europe (Rekhnevskii, 1872: 258).

Subsequent to the Franco-Prussian War, the Russian General Staff initiated the setting up in the Russian Empire, in 1874, of a special organization that would be concerned with the raising and keeping of messenger pigeons (later on, a network of pigeon post stations would be organized across the country). However, the Russian pioneers of the use of messenger pigeons for military purposes were faced with substantial difficulties in their activity, as there was a shortage of special academic and instructional literature on pigeon breeding. That being said, there was a shortage of this kind of literature outside of Russia as well.



**Fig. 1.** Messenger pigeons

Russia's Military Department paid keen attention to the development of the nation's military pigeon post service. Note that up until World War I pigeons were viewed as a strategic means of communication over long distance. From stationary stations messenger pigeons covered an average distance of 300–500 km, and from mobile ones – 50–150 km. The other impressive tactical-technical capabilities of messenger pigeons included their ability to fly at an average height of 300 m and an average speed of 60–70 km/hr. It normally took two to three years to train a pigeon, subsequent to which it could be of reliable service to the owner for at least five years (Tovpeka, 2010: 79).

The subsequent development of the nation's military pigeon post service found reflection in 'Instructions for Military Pigeon Stations', ratified by Minister of War A.N. Kuropatkin on March 14, 1901.

Pigeonries were divided into permanent pigeon stations (base stations) and field (demountable) ones, i.e. stationary and mobile stations, respectively (Figure 2). A base military pigeonry was sited in a spot where it could be visible to the bird from its eye view, one where the pigeonry ideally would be safe from being hit by enemy artillery fire. Permanent pigeon stations would normally be built for 125 couples of pigeons, while, for ease of catching, a pigeonry's internal height would reach six to seven feet (1.8–2.1 m) (Pochtovoe golubevodstvo, 1901: 48-54).



**Fig. 2.** Mobile pigeon station

During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, they successfully ran at Port Arthur a military pigeon station that numbered 45 pigeons trained to travel to Liaoyang and 31 pigeons trained to travel over a bay to Zhifu. On February 22, 1904, the pigeons were taken from Port Arthur to the destination points for training, while those that arrived in Liaoyang were taken to the pigeonry of the Trans-Amur Frontier Guard (Tseitlin, 1926: 124).

During World War I, the opposing sides made active use of messenger pigeons for prompt delivery of information. However, during the war's final period, they were also employed by the English and the French for intelligence and propaganda purposes. Of interest in this context are the reminiscences of Chief of the Intelligence Service of the German High Command Colonel Walter Nicolai (Figure 3).



**Fig. 3.** Colonel W. Nicolai (1873–1947)

In 1917, the English and the French launched large numbers of messenger pigeons and hot-air balloons for intelligence purposes in the rear of the German front. Messenger pigeons were placed in couples in little baskets and were released from airplanes in small silk parachutes. The baskets contained some food, a set of detailed instructions on how to handle the pigeons, a questionnaire, a model message, some French money, and an appeal of the following kind:

“The Germans’ resistance is weakening under pressure from the Allies, who have already liberated a part of French territory. To be able to continue their advancement, the Allies need to be informed as fully as possible about the enemy’s whereabouts and its intentions. It is incumbent on you, good patriots who are currently amidst the enemy army, to help in this. Here are some means for this.

And if you feel you will have to risk your life in doing so, think of all those soldiers of the Allies who so chivalrously sacrificed their lives for the sake of liberating you. By delivering the information, you will do your country an invaluable favor, helping expedite the end of the war.

Upon reaching peace, we will be able to reward you for your actions, and you will always be proud of having acted as a good patriot” (Nicolai, 2005: 156-157).

In certain uninhabited areas in the rear of the German front, numerous baskets with dead messenger pigeons in them were found (63 baskets in December of 1917, 41 – in January of the war’s last year, and 45 – in late May of the same year, with just one army in operation at the time) (Nicolai, 2005: 157). These figures represent just a small portion of all messenger pigeon baskets dropped during the war. Without question, most of them were not detected, and were used by the people. Flying messenger pigeons were spotted on a regular basis. As much as it is hard to hit a flying pigeon, eleven of them ended up being shot down. All of them had been carrying a military message under their wings. This useful system was enhanced by the opponent in 1918. The dropping was done not only from airplanes, as this was too noticeable, but also from a nifty dropping contraption on small hot-air balloons (five meters in diameter). These balloons had a wooden cross on them, with baskets with messenger pigeons attached on all four of its sides. In the middle of the cross, there was an alarm clock that was to automatically disconnect, after the passage of a certain amount of time, a set of small parachutes with messenger pigeon baskets attached, causing the emptying of the balloon. To avoid potential treachery problems associated with the balloon’s envelope, each had the following inscription on it: “This is a German balloon, so it can be destroyed”. Afterwards, the alarm clock was replaced with a burning fuse that was to cause the timely falling of the messenger pigeon baskets and then set the actual balloon on fire.

Each time they dropped a messenger pigeon basket, it was done for propaganda purposes as well. An appeal of this kind released in June of 1918 concluded with the following words: “The Germans are unable to overcome the might of the Allies. They cannot prevent us from beating them and destroying their vile nation, this enemy of humanity, once and for all” (Nicolai, 2005: 158).

This is how the German command learnt about the multiple outbursts of animosity toward the Germans and the resolve to fight all the way up to complete destruction of Germany.

It is clear that it had, therefore, to take a different approach from the one taken by German politicians back in their protected homeland, who believed in the possibility of reaching an agreement and treated this kind of proofs of the enemy’s real disposition as exaggerations on the part of the military authorities.

Messenger pigeons were quite sensitive creatures, with most facing the threat of death should they not be found straightaway. With this in mind, one would additionally drop special hot-air balloons with messages in them. A balloon of this kind was 60 cm in diameter, and was made of special silk pale blue paper suitable for aerial use. It could be filled using any gas pipe. Most of the packages contained one to three folded balloons of the same kind and a detailed description of how to use them. Sometimes, one also enclosed special chemicals that could be used to prepare right on the spot some gas to fill a balloon. Compared with the messenger pigeon, the balloon had the downside that it could be used only when the wind was fair.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that one also supplied the population with wireless telegraph units, by dropping them in the rear of the German front. These were the latest transmitters manufactured by Marconi. Each had four accumulators, a four-volt dry battery, and a 30 m-long antenna, which could be used to send messages over a distance of 50 km. In addition to the regular contents, the packages also contained ciphering instructions. German field radio stations reported more than once that there had possibly been in operation some small stations sending messages

through the air. That being said, while dropped units had been found more than once, a working one had never been detected.

Despite the great danger facing the civilian residents of France's occupied areas, their own command urged them to engage in espionage activity by way of appeals of the following kind:

"Your attention, please!

Are you a real patriot of your land? You are willing to help the Allies drive the enemy out, aren't you?

If you are, then take this package, sneak it to your place, open it at night when you're alone, and just follow the instructions provided therein.

If you are being watched, do not pick it up. Memorize the spot, and pick it up at night. Destroy the parachute as soon as possible, as it will be of no use to you anymore.

If you do everything as directed, you will be acting as a good patriot, doing the Allies an invaluable favor, and helping bring victory closer.

Patience and courage!

All hail France! All hail Belgium! All hail the Allies!

Pro patria! To help expedite the absolute liberation of the fatherland, please take the time to fill out the questionnaire provided. Ask your faithful companions for help if something on the questionnaire is unclear to you. To establish your identity, please provide the name and address of two persons in unoccupied France. This will help find you after it is all over and reward you.

The heart of each and every French and Belgian soldier is with you. Provide them with your support in their efforts and show them once more that the oppressed are no less courageous than they are. All hail the Allies!" (Nicolai, 2005: 159).

Starting in late December of 1917, the opponent dared to drop messenger pigeon baskets and hot-air balloons both in Alsace and in German Lorraine, with the following appeals in French provided:

"To all Lotharingian patriots!

Through communicating the information provided below, you will be doing everyone an invaluable favor by expediting the end of the war. France will reward you after the war is over, and you will be proud of having acted as a good patriot" (Nicolai, 2005: 160).

The enemy organized not only air espionage but air propaganda as well. Up to 1916, the spreading of newspapers and leaflets in French and German, designed to stir the pulses and quicken the blood of the people in occupied areas and depress the morale of the enemy, was done by aviators exclusively. Since the high command viewed these actions as something that was not part of military operations and dealt accordingly with captured aviators who were guilty of dropping propaganda literature, special hot-air balloons were put in place in lieu of aviators. They were built similar to balloons designed for dropping intelligence-related packages. Balloons could cover greater distances, the figure reaching 600 km by the end of the war. Consequently, a balloon of this kind could reach as far as Germany, and normally ended up in its northeastern industrial part. Each balloon carried up to 400 newspapers. The dropping process involved releasing small packages via a burning fuse that was to burn out the supporting thread. For the populations of Belgium and France they mainly dropped new French newspapers, falsified issues of *The Gazette of the Ardennes*, as well as special aerial newspapers, like *La Voix du Pays* and *Courrier de l'Air*. The aerial newspapers intended for the German troops contained calls for defection, strikes, and a revolution. The falsified issues of German newspapers portrayed the situation back home in an exciting light. The use of falsified letters by German prisoners of war in both France and England, as well as the portraying of the treatment of German prisoners of war in both countries as good, was all done to induce German soldiers to desert, with illustrations of the good treatment of German prisoners intended to corrupt the German troops (Nicolai, 2005: 161).

#### 4. Conclusion

By the start of World War I, the opposing sides had amassed extensive experience in the use of pigeons for war purposes. During the military confrontation, the participating nations continued to explore pigeons' potential as messengers with a view to employing them further not only for prompt delivery of information but for intelligence and propaganda purposes as well. With that said, these practices were reported to be quite efficient at certain stages of the war.

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