CHAPTER ONE

TRANSCENDING THE NATION: DOMESTIC PROPAGANDA AND SUPRANATIONAL PATRIOTISM IN BRITAIN, 1917–18*

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Introduction

In July 1917, a small committee of MPs was formed to organize propaganda in Britain to maintain civilian morale and resolve. Germany’s reintroduction of unrestricted submarine warfare, the February revolution in Russia, and a wave of strikes in Britain in April and May convinced the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, that more systematic work was needed than that done by the press and voluntary organizations.¹ The National War Aims Committee (NWAC) was thus formed with representatives of Lloyd George and Asquith’s factions of the Liberal party, the Conservatives and Labour. From November 1917 it received Treasury funding for its operations.² Over fifteen months to November 1918, it arranged thousands of meetings in local communities, and distributed more than one hundred million publications.³ It is commonly assumed that pre-war patriotism was invalidated by the massive casualties suffered by the New Armies at Loos

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³ TNA:PRO T102/13, letter, unsigned (probably Thomas Cox) to W.H. Smith & Sons, 14 November 1918.
and the Somme. However, the NWAC’s late-war propaganda used many familiar patriotic themes. It was in no sense a new “language of patriotism”, but rather adapted the patriotism of pre-war Britain to address the experiences of a war-weary civilian population. Moreover, its attempted cultivation of Britishness did not rely upon a narrow interpretation of the nation. Instead it recognized both that Britain was a collection of smaller communities, and that it was one component of a larger community of “civilized” powers. Historians often recognize the importance of local or supranational identities, but less regularly are their interconnections with national identity considered. This chapter examines some aspects of the NWAC’s work and propaganda. It demonstrates that the Committee’s local organizational structure was essential to its operations, enabling both a sense of local agency and participation, and more responsive and appropriate propaganda. Further, the propaganda produced by the Committee contained an underlying narrative of patriotism, which rendered British national identity as a product of both local experience and supranational environment.

Localized Propaganda

In *Private Lives, Public Spirit*, Jose Harris contends that in the years before the war Britain had experienced “a subterranean shift in the balance of social life away from the locality to the metropolis and the nation.” While local ties remained important, the nation was now “the centre of gravity”. However, it would be wrong to imagine that locality had ceased to matter at either an organizational level or as a locus of identity. The NWAC’s organizational structure reflects the continuing primacy of locality. The

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4 See, e.g., W.J. Reader, *'At Duty's Call': A Study in Obsolete Patriotism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
6 One approach which addresses similar issues in different ways to my own is Pierre Purseigle, “Beyond and Below the Nations: Towards a Comparative History of Local Communities at War” in *Uncovered Fields: Perspectives in First World War Studies*, ed. Jenny Macleod and Pierre Purseigle (Leiden: Brill, 2004).