



## *Advertising and Propaganda in World War II: Cultural Identity and the Blitz Spirit* by David Clampin.

New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014. Pp. xix, 269. ISBN 978-1-78076-434-4.

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The Second World War more directly affected British citizens than American citizens in one significant way—massive, indiscriminate bombing by Nazi aerial forces. Between August 1940 and May 1941, the “Big Blitz” killed some forty-three thousand civilians in London, Liverpool, Birkenhead, and elsewhere, while subsequent air raids took another seventeen thousand lives during the war. Millions of houses and other buildings were damaged or destroyed. “The Blitz really brought the war to the people” (5). The US home front suffered no such devastation.

Historian David Clampin (Univ. of Liverpool) questions the notion that an idealistic “Blitz Spirit” emerged from the sky-wrought terror. He argues that the British felt no waves of enthusiasm for the war. Instead, he suggests that they clung to the routines of “normal” life as tightly and as long as they could. If there was a Blitz Spirit, he believes, it was manifested in the desire of everyday people simply to get through the war rather than actively embrace it. To prove his point, Clampin draws on the evidence of commercial advertising throughout the war.

The author contends that advertising provided critical “points of reference” and “realistic situations with which people could identify, highlighting that they were not alone in their fears and anxieties [and] demonstrating how they might prevail, even if that depended on the consumption of the advertised goods” (13, 15). Besides promoting their clients’ products and preserving awareness of their brands, advertisers taught consumers how to use those products specifically in a wartime setting. Advertising copy of the time, while it accurately represented the war, also depicted it as a manageable inconvenience or interruption of consumers’ peacetime lives.

The tone of commercial advertising contrasted with the propaganda disseminated by the British government’s Ministry of Information (MoI), which was designed to cultivate and exploit a supposed pro-war spirit borne of the Blitz. Like the American Committee on Public Information during the First World War and the Office of War Information during the Second, the MoI wanted to arouse public excitement about the war. But, Clampin writes, it failed to achieve, or at least sustain, a “sense of active, enthusiastic and direct engagement through their propaganda.” By contrast, commercial advertising’s greater “utility, meaning, and resonance” helped “guide people to carry on with their normal lives” (21).

Clampin crisply and convincingly argues his thesis in six chapters, drawing chiefly on three collections—the History of Advertising Trust, the Mass-Observation Archive, and the 1939–45 editions of *Picture Post*. In chapter 1, he notes that the British government initially favored the continuation of advertising to create a sense that normal life had not ended. In this regard, advertisers performed a valuable wartime service. Taking this official position did not come easily, given the fear, anxiety, and, before long, danger, scarcity, and privation caused by the war. It required that advertisers exhibit self-restraint and circumspection while proving they were indeed providing a positive public good. By keeping products and brands before consumers’ eyes, they also informed them about the war and how

they might get through it; they did this without any odor of a centralized, official propaganda campaign.

Acting as industry advocates, organizations like the Advertising Association and the Institute of Incorporated Practitioners in Advertising policed their constituent agencies to ensure they did not act unscrupulously and incur governmental and public ire. Advertisers, of course, stressed their valuable wartime function, but to say that was their sole purpose would have been disingenuous; after all, they too were seeking to survive the war.

In chapter 2, the author juxtaposes MoI propaganda with commercial advertising early in the war. The government had misread the public mood in trying to persuade people to commit fully to the war effort. Britons during the Phoney War (1939–40) were bored, complacent, and reluctant to get involved. In this environment, advertisers presented “a daunting new world with multiple concerns and worries... [and] stepped into the breach to show people how a normal life could indeed be lived in spite of the war” (74, 79). They touted products like meat extracts, sauces, soups, cereals, and condiments as enabling people to live as comfortably as possible despite the specter of war. They claimed cure-all health care solutions could relieve anxieties, injuries, and ailments: malt drink mixes and alcoholic beverages, for example, were sold as treatments for restlessness, insomnia, and “war nerves.” In sum, they promised that “war could be absorbed into the ordinary” (94).

The disaster at Dunkirk (May–June 1940), the subsequent Blitz, and the all too credible prospect of Nazi invasion brought the war home for British citizens. The MoI promoted heightened awareness and vigilance on the part of civilians. Advertisers became decidedly less heavy-handed, even drawing the humor out of serious wartime issues and mocking governmental propaganda in their copy. When people could no longer escape the realities of the war, advertisers performed a real service by providing them with information, instruction, and direction.

As the government rationed various food items, advertisers “repositioned” and highlighted other products, such as egg substitutes and meals that required no eggs (like Creamola pudding). They assured customers that, despite dietary limitations, chocolate was also food and that Cadbury’s could “feed you on your feet” or that Mars offered a “man-sized ... meal in every bar!” Such advertising tactics were applied to the products of many other industries hit by the war. Military imagery now became more prevalent in advertising. Clampin cites three reasons for this: to promote products guaranteed to make fighting men “fit to serve”; to identify certain goods as the “product of warriors”; and simply to get the attention of readers. Advertisers believed displaying military uniforms in their copy would make their messages more authoritative and reassuring.

The use of military images was, however, surprisingly less common than the depiction of war workers on the home front. Advertisers told customers that they, too, were “in the front line now” (122) and that their health and well-being would be ensured by their products. Far from downplaying or idealizing the war, they provided relatively honest views of the hardships it caused, offering guidance to customers concerned about the fate of their families, their nation, and themselves.

In his fourth chapter, Clampin analyzes advertisers’ promotion of brand loyalty and frugality by encouraging buyers, principally housewives, to make careful purchasing choices. They avoided spurring too much demand for products in short supply (this often conflicted with efforts to uphold brand awareness). Advertisers highlighted their clients’ change of packaging to conserve needed materials; Gibbs Dentifrice, for instance, dispensed with metal toothpaste tubes. By and large, the British government allowed commercial advertising a free rein, regulating or intervening only when necessary, such as when ads seemed to contradict official messages or divulge sensitive information, for instance, when ads for Bourjois perfumes indicated that enemy bombing had limited supplies needed to make

and distribute its products. Since such cases were rare, “the advertising industry was able to enjoy a degree of autonomy and liberty that ensured its survival” (169).

The author examines wartime gender roles and identities in chapter 5. Put simply, both official messages and commercial advertising buttressed traditional gender roles, telling women “their ultimate ambitions and objectives ought to remain in the domestic sphere” (172). Before all else, they were wives and mothers. Even when labor shortages required women to enter the workforce, they were expected to retain their beauty and femininity. Ads for cosmetics and hygiene products informed them how to remain feminine despite their often unfeminine wartime jobs. Being physically attractive was at once a national duty and a “reward” for soldiers returning from the front. Nor, despite taking on more masculine roles, were women to abrogate their domestic responsibilities. Products like Mrs. Peek’s Puddings showed women how to “combine being a good wife with the war” (185).

Men, too, were encouraged by advertising to keep up attractive, professional appearances. When men appeared in military uniform, it was usually in nonmilitary or domestic settings. The seemingly jocular, happy-go-lucky British soldier stood in stark contrast to his cold, over-disciplined, emotionless Axis counterparts. British military men’s “natural masculine inclinations were shown to be tempered and conditional” (190). Neither adventurous empire-builders as of yore, nor proponents of rigid, militaristic ideologies, they were gentle, caring family men eager to solve problems at hand as quickly as possible in order to return to their normal lives back home.

Clampin also looks at advertisers in the postwar world, identifying two general types. One adopted the idealistic view that the war would bring a better Britain and a better world. Ads for Pears Toilet Soap promised “better health, better homes, a better standard of living and a happier life for all” (212). After five years of hardship, Britons could look forward to a peaceful world with a new, higher standard of living based on self-gratification. Conversely, other advertisers emphasized a return to the good old prewar days. In all cases, advertisers encouraged greater consumption than had been possible during the war.

*Advertising and Propaganda in World War II* makes a persuasive case that British commercial advertising, besides pursuing profits, “made a significant contribution to the culture of everyday life in wartime. Given that the main preoccupation of most people was to live as normal a life as possible through the war, commercial advertising provided a key point of reference” (225). Historian Roland Marchand once stated that advertising is “no mere commercial tool, but a great moral and educative force.”<sup>1</sup> David Clampin has certainly clarified the educational dimension of British wartime advertising (if not its potential moral aspects). Even if he does not definitively show that “advertising did indeed help to win the war,” he has established beyond any doubt that it instructed, directed, and sustained Great Britain’s population during one of the darkest periods in its history.

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1. *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Los Angeles: U Cal Pr, 1985) 8.