

What is propaganda?

Times of war in the Pacific and Vietnam

Two very informed speakers gave a new dimension to the term 'propaganda' at a talk organised by the Asia-Pacific Special Interest Group (APSIG) of ALIA at the Australian War Memorial on 25 June. An audience of more than forty attended, a tribute to the interest in the topic.

Emma Jones from the Research Library at the Australian War Memorial spoke about the work of the Far Eastern Liaison Office (FELO) in the Pacific theatre in World War II which was followed by a contrasting talk by Rob Hurle, a Master of Philosophy student at the Australian National University, on nation building by the Viet Minh forces fighting against the French from the early 1940s to 1954.

The Australian War Memorial has an outstanding collection of FELO publications thanks to one dedicated FELO staff member who saved many documents and passed them on for preservation.

During the period 1942 to 1945, a staggering sixty-nine million items were printed by FELO. These were distributed through air-drops or by shell canisters, primarily over the Japanese Army or villages of native peoples. FELO employed a large number of language interpreters, particularly for Japanese, but also in the languages of Southeast Asia, so that the documents could be read by their intended audiences. Japanese prisoners-of-war were also co-opted for this purpose

if they passed security checks.

The content varied according to the circumstances of the war. FELO had a policy of not lying, but Emma reported that some exaggerations crept in; for example, in telling the soldiers still in the jungles of Southeast Asia and the Pacific of the power and devastation of the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945, the leaflets stated that there were 'hundreds' ready for use — a slight exaggeration. However, in times of war, what army will admit to a limit on its ammunition?

FELO found difficulties in devising its approach to the cultural mindset of the Japanese soldier. The Allied forces were convinced that the Japanese had been indoctrinated to be a fighting machine, yet propaganda is aimed at the individual and their anxieties and concerns. In the final stages of the war, FELO was perhaps more successful as its air-drops told the Japanese soldiers where and how to surrender, and many followed these directions.

Native peoples were another FELO target as it was vital to keep their support for Allied forces. Pamphlets were dropped telling them to keep clear of certain areas where there might be danger, for example.

Emma had some outstanding images of FELO's operations and publications which the audience appreciated. She has found that there is so much interesting material that she hopes to prepare an article for the Memorial's journal on this topic.

As a bonus, Emma showed us images of a number of very rare Japanese leaflets aimed at the Aussie soldier. Completely different in approach and production, they used colour and pictures to create anxiety in the minds of the men who had been away from home, sometimes for three or four years, by depicting the American servicemen enjoying the pleasures of the Australian women. Some of these images created gasps from the audience by their provocative sexual imagery.

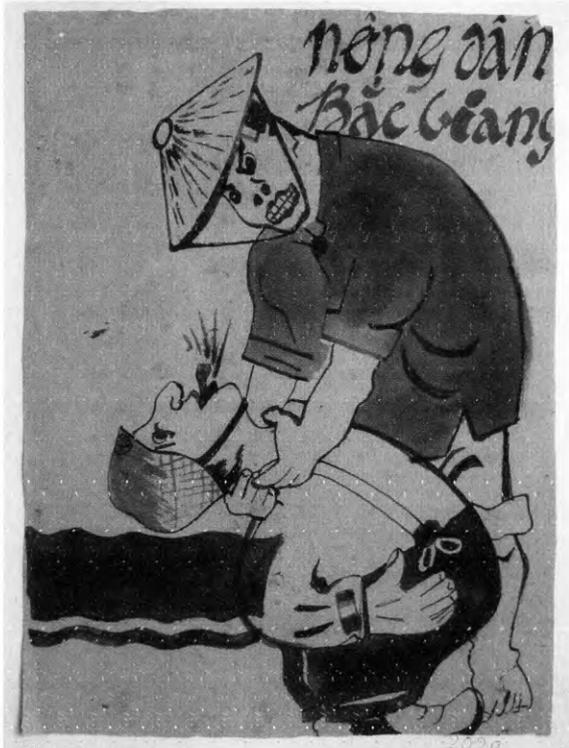


A postcard produced by the Japanese propaganda unit and dropped on allied troops in the South West Pacific area.

Rob Hurle spoke of a completely different situation. The Viet Minh, the broad alliance of anti-French forces formed in Vietnam to fight the French in 1941, had few resources. They were forced to make their own paper, sometimes from cardboard, and to prepare their leaflets, books, posters and newspapers in the jungles. Their aim was to increase the rural Vietnamese's awareness of their own history: Vietnam was a nation that had resisted invading forces before. Distributed along the paths and trails of the country, those who could read (as the French had not encouraged literacy) would hold public readings of the newspapers and telling how the fight was going, or read from Ho Chi Minh's 'The history of our country'. This pamphlet was reprinted many times from 1941. Rob questioned whether this fits the usual definition of propaganda or does it mean that propaganda is, in effect, a broader term to cover political activity.

Rob recently spent six months in Vietnam and spent considerable time combing the National Library of Vietnam and the Museum of the Revolution in Hanoi searching for publications of the Viet Minh from the early 1940s to 1954, many of which appear to have been lost. The countless bombing raids during the Vietnam War took their toll. Rob is now photographing examples of what remains as many publications are now very fragile.

Marie Sexton



How to see the signs that a French soldier wants to surrender