Diplomatic propaganda in the Dutch Republic and France, 1609-1674

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Summary

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Over the past decades, historians of early modern Europe have come to agree that public print formed a crucial and transformative aspect of early modern politics. After a paradigmatic research program that stressed the radical and revolutionary potential of print and its role in shaping public debate and liberal-democratic values, historians are increasingly becoming concerned with studying the other side of this medallion: the ways in which the infrastructure of the early modern information economy was developed in tandem with state building practices, and how early modern states and elite actors employed the technology of print as a tool for communication and governance. In this debate, the perennial question of whether such practices can be characterized as propaganda becomes increasingly relevant. Yet while the term propaganda is often invoked in early modern studies, it has been surprisingly rarely explored in depth.

Historians have generally been cautious to make claims about the nature of early modern propaganda. The two major reasons for this are both related the problem of attributing intentionality. First, archival evidence for coordinated influence campaigns is rare, in no small part due to the often secret nature of such activities. Hence, while historians of print have often analyzed the contents of printed pamphlets, it remains exceedingly difficult to prove the origins and aims of many such pamphlets. Second, many historians have agreed with the basic assumption that early modern actors had no adequate psychological framework through which to understand the effects of propaganda. There are virtually no theoretical treatments of the subject of political propaganda from this period, and as a result historians have remained skeptical whether political actors in the seventeenth century consciously saw print as a means of manipulation and exercising power.

This dissertation addresses these two points of contention within the historiography of early modern propaganda. It investigates how diplomats evaluated the political impact of popular

print, as well as the organization and the psychological underpinnings of early modern propaganda. It employs evidence from diplomatic archives in France and The Netherlands (as well as complementary sources from English and Habsburg diplomatic archives) to reconstruct the involvement of diplomats in the monitoring, production and dissemination of transnational propaganda. It also examines how diplomats employed ideas from political theory and various medical and philosophical discourses to think about the malleability of human minds and behavior, and how they translated these ideas into practice. Finally, it examines how these ideas were transmitted between diplomats and archived, in order to study how the practices of earlier diplomats were turned into quasi-codified knowledge for their successors. As such it provides a first attempt to study the connection between ideas and practices of early modern propaganda. It shows that diplomatic uses of propaganda were far from simple or intuitive, and were shaped by a diverse range of intellectual discussions and organizational practices.

Chapter One investigates why diplomats were concerned with printed propaganda in the seventeenth century. It examines one of the largest political and diplomatic crises in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic: the Truce Troubles. It argues that the diplomatic conflict that arose between France and the Dutch Republic over the role of pamphleteering during this period of political upheaval can only be explained by examining the fundamentally different views of French and Dutch diplomats on the international impact of such pamphlets, on the nature of public opinion and on the responsibility of the state to regulate it. Whereas Dutch negotiators stressed the power of pamphlets to strategically influence the political processes of the Dutch Republic itself, French diplomats emphasized the capacity of print to undermine the reputation of their sovereign on the international stage and framed pamphleteering in the Dutch Republic as a threat to the domestic security and stability of France. The arguments between these diplomats highlight the transnational dimensions of the Truce Troubles and demonstrate how diverging ideas on the workings of propaganda influenced political and diplomatic outcomes.

Chapter two examines the different publication strategies of French and Spanish diplomats in the Dutch Republic during the negotiations for the peace of Munster (1646-1648). It shows that whereas French diplomats adapted their message to different audiences in the various provinces and towns of the Dutch Republic, the Spanish campaign was a successful instance of ‘framing’ a

debate. Pamphlets distributed by Spanish diplomats largely rejected the traditional centrality of reputation and honor in diplomatic pamphleteering, and instead promoted a radically new discourse on the 'interest of states'. The chapter argues that the outcome of the propaganda war over Dutch public opinion was determined largely by the propagandists' ability to evaluate the strategies and intellectual framework of their opponents.

After considering how diplomats evaluated the political impact of pamphleteering, the next two chapters turn to the organization of diplomatic propaganda campaigns in the seventeenth century. **Chapter three** argues that the effectiveness of diplomatic propaganda depended in no small part on the decentralized archival practices and local expertise of embassy secretaries. It examines the case of the French embassy secretary Henri Brasset, who worked in The Hague from 1628 until 1654 and kept a series of letter books containing much of the incoming and outgoing correspondence of the embassy. His letter books reveal that the secretary was responsible for managing a wide information network that included diplomatic newsletters, news for the Gazette de France as well as smaller news services to a wide range of correspondents. The information management practices that the embassy secretary employed to keep track of these various currents of information, as well as his significant local expertise and connections, allowed early modern diplomats to coordinate publications and to respond swiftly and adequately to the latest political developments. In addition, these secretaries and types of diplomatic documents were crucial for the development and transmission of ideas on effective propaganda.

Chapter four examines the unique diary of the Dutch embassy secretary Christiaan Constantijn Rumpf, which details his activities in Paris during the tense first years of the Franco-Dutch war (1672-1679). While Rumpf's options for publicizing the Dutch cause were especially limited as a secretary in an enemy city in war time, his diary reveals how he employed his extensive network of contacts in the city (including among literary and publishing circles) to sow doubt about the desirability and honorability of the ongoing war. The chapter suggests that Dutch diplomats may have exerted considerably more influence over French (and specifically Parisian) public opinion than can be traced in their regular diplomatic dispatches. It also reveals how the relatively neutral practices used by diplomats and embassy secretaries to foster good relations with core audiences abroad could be leveraged for propagandistic purposes in times of crisis.

Using the materials presented in the earlier chapters, **Chapter five** investigates how diplomats employed medical, philosophical, religious and rhetorical discourses to grapple with the effects of printed propaganda. It shows that especially the language of animal spirits, which played an essential role as mediators between soul and body in early modern psychological systems, provided a crucial framework for understanding how influence and persuasion worked in both individuals and groups. This general framework of the animal spirits reveals a conception of propaganda that associated persuasion and deception with the physical manipulation of bodies and their environment. These findings open up the possibility for a broader intellectual history of propaganda practices by studying the impact of changing medical and philosophical conceptions of the mind on political practice.

Besides the relation between early modern politics and print culture, this dissertation also contributes to the field of propaganda studies. In particular, it suggests an alternative genealogy of the practice and theory of propaganda. While scholars of propaganda have generally not paid much attention to pre-twentieth-century forms and theories of propaganda, this study suggests that early modern actors had more nuanced, complex and oftentimes surprising insights into the nature of propaganda than has been assumed so far. While their ideas on propaganda as a manifestation of power as well as means of persuasion, and the far greater role assigned to the human body and the physical environment in shaping ideas, behavior and identity may have resonated little with dominant propaganda paradigms since the 1920s, they provide a fertile ground for scholars who study the changing practices of propaganda in the twenty-first century, and seek to question those very twentieth-century paradigms.

The conclusion therefore engages with some of these ongoing debates in propaganda studies, specifically the study of propaganda as product or process, the primacy of persuasion as a goal for propaganda, the role of political economy and the role of subjectification. It calls on historians to take serious the impact of political theory and psychology on pre- and early modern practices of propaganda, and to construct longer-term histories of this phenomenon.