

# The Poster

Professor David Welch, University of Kent, considers an often overlooked source

**HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS** are not confined to written sources. Visual documents are also an important source of evidence for the historian; they range from posters, cartoons, films, photographs, monuments, etc. The following example is an analysis of one of the most famous British posters of the First World War.

Industrialisation during the nineteenth century had utilised posters for mass persuasion and it had proved extremely effective. With the outbreak of war in 1914, the poster came of age. In a world without radio, television, and where newspapers were still the preserve of a literate minority, the poster was an important instrument of mass communication. Posters contained numerous advantages; they were relatively cheap to produce, they had been tried and tested, and they were a medium accepted and understood by the masses. For governments of all the belligerent nations, it was an obvious means of communication.

The themes disseminated were very much dictated by the course of the war. Governments exploited posters for recruitment, requests for war loans, to make national policies acceptable, to encourage industrial effort, and to channel emotions such as courage and hatred. This particular poster designed by Alfred Leete and issued in September 1914, uses the image of Lord Kitchener to persuade recruits to join the Army. Britain, unlike continental Europe, had not embraced the principle of compulsory military service. At the beginning of the war the Government and the military had largely distrusted advertising. However, just before the war they had used advertising for recruitment into the professional army with the poster 'Your Country Needs You' beneath the royal coat-of-arms. This became the inspiration behind Leete's famous recruitment poster which he designed initially for the cover of the weekly journal *London Opinion*. The Parliamentary Recruiting Committee which had been set up to mobilise and disseminate propaganda decided to use the version here with the revised text, 'God Save the King' which was inserted at Kitchener's insistence. The original poster was a photo-lithograph and letterpress that measured 74.9x50.5 and would have been displayed outside all recruiting stations. The single dominant image (in this case, Kitchener) was a feature of commercial posters before the war. The typography is very simple; the figurehead of Kitchener and 'Wants You' are in black and white and are juxtaposed against the letterpress which is in red. Its stark simplicity makes it all the more effective and it inspired countless imitations. However, in the context of Britain in 1914, no great pictorial skills were required to persuade Britons to the call to arms. Later on the Government moved from the honour of Kitchener's appeal to 'mobilisation by shame' when they employed the emotional blackmail of children (compare to the poster of a little boy sitting on his father's knee under the heading 'Daddy. What Did You Do in the War?').



*Alfred Leete's poster, 1914*

It is impossible to measure the effectiveness of war posters. The popular success of a poster can really only be measured by its wide use and frequency of printing together with the number of imitations. Leete's Lord Kitchener is one of the best known war posters and has inspired numerous imitations. Probably the best known is J.M. Flagg's 'I want YOU for the US Army'. By the time conscription was introduced in Britain in 1916, posters like 'Britons - Wants You' had helped to recruit over 1 million men.

One of the most significant lessons to be learned from the experience of the First World War was that public opinion could no longer be ignored as a determining factor in the formulation of government policies. Unlike previous wars, the Great War was the first 'Total War' in which whole nations, and not just professional armies were locked in mortal combat. The war served to increase the level of popular interest and participation in the affairs of state. The gap between the soldiers at the front and the civilian at home was narrowed substantially in that the entire resources of the State, military, economic, and psychological, had to be mobilised. In 'Total War', which required civilians to participate in the war effort, morale came to be recognised as a significant military factor and propaganda began to emerge as the principal instrument of control over public opinion and an essential weapon in the national arsenal.