

# H-Diplo

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**Pablo León-Aguinaga. "The Trouble with Propaganda: The Second World War, Franco's Spain, and the Origins of US Post-War Public Diplomacy." *The International History Review* (2014) 1-24. DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2013.879916. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2013.879916>**

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In his article on U.S. propaganda broadcast from New York City to Spain during the Second World War, Pablo León-Aguinaga takes a fresh look at what it meant to construct a political line, and then articulate it through propaganda, toward a neutral country. Spain did not fight in World War II, and therefore the attention of most American historians has focused on the United States and the Spanish Civil War and not the United States and Spain in World War II, and not on the problem of forming a policy toward a 'neutral' nation. León-Aguinaga asks what propaganda means when it is targeted at a 'neutral' audience, or at least to listeners living in a deeply divided country that was officially neutral?

León-Aguinaga states that by 1942 and the inauguration of the U.S. government's radio broadcasting station, the Voice of America (VOA), American propaganda conflicted with the State Department's policy toward Spain. The propagandists did not feel it was necessary to tow State Department guidelines; their mission was to reform and transform American policy. The author faults what he calls "the idealist" propagandists for their independence. He praises their successors, whom he calls the "realists," (19) for insisting that any policy priorities be set from the top. In order to articulate and portray this conflict, León-Aguinaga examines the conflict through the stories of the U.S. Ambassador to Spain, Carleton H. J. Hayes, and a leader of the Office of War Information (OWI), James Warburg.

León-Aguinaga is quite right that at the beginning of World War II the men who led the Overseas Branch of the OWI, and managed the VOA, were left-leaning progressives. It is also true that over the course of World War II the OWI and the VOA shifted their goals from 'agit-prop' support for the popular front democratic

liberalism and abhorrence for the Axis nations, to informational broadcasting grounded in the assurance that the Allies were winning the war. That change took place over the course of 1943. The VOA of 1942 differed from that of 1944 and 1945. Where León-Aguinaga disagrees with previous interpretations is in his attitude toward that shift. By and large, American historians have identified with the left-leaning New Deal warriors whose opposition to Ambassador Hayes could have been predicted.<sup>1</sup> Hayes, whom President Franklin Roosevelt appointed in March of 1942, was a choice necessitated by Spanish politics. The Franco regime would not have tolerated either a non-Catholic or a liberal. Hayes was an active Catholic who believed that Franco's government should not be ideologically grouped with the Axis countries.<sup>2</sup> Put more bluntly, Hayes believed that Francisco Franco was less repressive and totalitarian than either Adolf Hitler or Benito Mussolini, and that Franco could be converted into an American ally.

Behind this discussion of American foreign policy toward Spain from 1941 to 1945 lies the Spanish Civil War, a war that not only defined Spain for half a century, but also exerted a magnetic force on U.S. domestic politics, further polarizing the American left and the American right. The men and women who worked at the OWI and the VOA were staunch supporters of the Spanish republicans. They believed as an article of faith that Franco was an unredeemable and despicable fascist, the leader of a brutal fight against a legitimate government. Thus they could not work with Ambassador Hayes; the divide was too deep and too wide.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, it is especially interesting that while León-Aguinaga personifies the fight between the State Department and the OWI through Hayes and Warburg, he does not identify any single person he thinks exemplifies the realists. He might have chosen Louis G. Cowan, who was my father.

Cowan became head of the VOA and Director of the Overseas Branch of the OWI in 1944, after the fight between the progressives in the OWI and the policy makers in the State Department had concluded; after Warburg and his closest colleagues had left. He thus became the leader of what León-Aguinaga calls the 'realist' approach. In part,

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<sup>1</sup> See not only Holly Cowan Shulman, *The Voice of America: Propaganda and Democracy, 1941-1945* (Madison, WI, 1990) but also Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945* (New Haven, CT, 1978); Clayton D. Laurie, *The Propaganda Warriors: America's Crusade against Nazi Germany* (Lawrence, KS, 1996); David F. Krugler, *The Voice of America and the Domestic Propaganda Battles, 1945-1954* (Columbia, MO, 2000); Justin Hart, *Empire of Ideas: The Origins of Public Diplomacy and the Transformation of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, NY, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Halstead, "Historians in Politics: Carlton J.H. Hayes as American Ambassador to Spain," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (July, 1975), 386.

<sup>3</sup> Shulman, *The Voice of America*.

this is correct. Under Cowan, the OWI and the VOA became increasingly informational and less overtly ideological (which is not to say that this informational style was without ideology). There were many reasons for this change, as I detail at length in my book, *The Voice of America, Propaganda and Democracy, 1941-1945*, not the least of which was that the war itself became the Allies' best salesman. Whatever the shift, Cowan and his peers deeply differed from Carleton Hayes in his political viewpoint. Cowan was a moderate devoted to wiping out Hitler and all he stood for. He was a Jew who believed that World War II was fought to defend the Jews. He not only lived in a world where Franco was the enemy, but he married a woman who deeply regretted that she had lacked the courage to go to Spain as a nurse in support of the republicans. If the Spanish Civil War divided Americans, then Hayes stood on one side of this chasm and Cowan on the other.

Cowan did, in fact, differ from those whom León-Aguinaga labels 'idealists': James Warburg, Joseph Barnes, Edd Johnson, Percy Winner, and others. Some of these progressives were fellow travelers (or had been before the purges), more sympathized with the United States' wartime ally, the Soviet Union. Cowan never had any illusions about Russian Communism. He was, by nature, a centrist and a compromiser who wanted to bring sides together and make things work. Despite his friendship with departing OWI leadership, Cowan decided to stay and lead a new Overseas Branch of the OWI and VOA, and along with Wallace Carroll and Edward Barrett, who had taken over the jobs of James Warburg and Robert Sherwood, to smooth the OWI's relationship with the State Department. Cowan and the other new leaders saw their role as expressing, rather than creating, foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the major turnover in leadership, Cowan remained friends with many of those who resigned, men such as Joseph Barnes who had been the Deputy Director of the Overseas Branch of the OWI in charge of Atlantic Operations. After the war, when Barnes had gone into publishing and Cowan into radio and television production, Barnes published William Shirer's book, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. In 1960 it was a hard book to publish, but in doing so Barnes – through Shirer -- helped the American public understand the murderous nature of Hitler's Germany, whether or not the reader accepted the thesis that this was a German tragedy that started with Martin Luther and ended with – but was not caused by -- Adolph Hitler.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Richard H. S. Crossman, "Psychological Warfare, Part I," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 97 (August 1952), 320.

<sup>5</sup> Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, "The Reception of William L. Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* in the United States and West Germany, 1960-1962," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 29, (London, 1994); Shirer's thesis that it all began with Luther was not new. Readers might, for example, remember W. H. Auden's poem, *September 1, 1939*, where he wrote: "Accurate scholarship can/ Unearth the whole offence/ From Luther until now/ That has driven a culture mad". For a discussion of his trials of getting his book published see William L. Shirer, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Journey, A Native's Return, 1945-1988* (Boston, 1990), 209-213.

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To return to León-Aguinaga's essay, he has written an interesting and admirable essay that is accurate, but only up to a point. He fails to articulate what the Spanish Civil War, Hitler, and fascism meant to liberal and moderate Americans of all sorts, from a Jimmy Warburg or Joe Barnes on one side, to a Lou Cowan on the other. Thus, when the author asserts that the 'realist' approach to propaganda prevailed in 1943, he is only partly right. The men who ran the VOA and OWI in 1944 differed in their fundamental view of politics and global security from Carlton Hayes and his colleagues in the State Department. The new leaders of the VOA accepted the job of carrying on the war, even when it meant changing their broadcasts and their propaganda content. My father and his post-1943 OWI cohorts, men like Carroll and Barrett, never accepted the legitimacy of Franco. They did understand that propagandists could not dictate foreign policy, not even from the margins.

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Not discussed in these pages is the question of whether or not the fact that Shirer had been black-listed had any impact on his difficulties in finding a publisher.