

Encouraging Empire: The Press and British Domestic Public Opinion During The South African War

I propose a paper examining the attempted manipulation of British public opinion via the media during the South African War. This study illuminates the attempts made by British newspapers to “educate” the populace about wartime events and thus increase pro-war sentiments in an effort to solidify imperial support in the rapidly-changing European political and economic landscape at the turn of the twentieth century. The South African War represented a critical juncture in Victorian society, and it was a struggle the British believed they had to win at all costs to maintain their colonial integrity. Thus, coercing domestic public support for the war became a key endeavor of both the government and the press in Britain. Newspapers served as vehicles of knowledge transfer as editors vigilantly selected and controlled the information they printed to foster an environment beneficial to broader imperial war goals. Traditional scholarship has focused on the nationalistic outbursts of the “jingo crowd” to elucidate that the majority of Britons stood behind their conservative leadership and took pride in imperial victories abroad. However, a more careful examination of pro-war newspapers reveals a clever treatment of facts carefully orchestrated to downplay anti-war displays and feelings, which may have been more pronounced than previously postulated. This essay evaluates the papers’ attempts to garner public wartime backing and hypothesizes about their failures in creating a cohesive imperial support base.