

NEWSREEL REPORT

Mass-Observation File Report 22

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CONTENT OF NEWSREELS

Subject matter

Naturally as soon as the war broke out the whole emphasis of newsreels became centred on war news; in the first six months, less than 15% of their news has had no connection with war (see Appendix A) either in this country or in Finland. But the lack of activity after the collapse of Poland forced the newsreels to look beyond Europe for their shots. They could not indefinitely show sequences of the BEF on manoeuvres or in their trenches, and by the middle of December the British Army in France began to fade from the newsreels; between the beginning of November and the middle of December seventeen observed newsreels contained shots of the BEF. Since that date there has been one.

At sea more was happening, but the difficulty here was to get action pictures; with the *City of Flint*, for example, the newsreels could do no more than take pictures of the stationary ship when she docked at Bergen, while when the *Rawalpindi* was sunk by the *Deutschland*, the newsreels showed shots of each ship firing their guns and cut them with one another. The same difficulty occurred with the work of the RAF. In both cases some attempt was made to enliven the sequences by the introduction of faked shots of submarines sinking or of air battles with the remark 'this is what it would have looked like'. On one occasion the audience laughed at an RAF fight and it seems that these reconstructions have been given up. But a dangerous precedent has been created in false news.

No shots of action on the Western Front were released until the 11th of December and it was another ten days before action at sea was obtained. Neither of these sequences were more than a muddled picture of bombs dropping and shells firing — and the one of the navy was taken by an officer of the ship — the audiences were not impressed. But when, just before Christmas, the *Graf Spee* was scuttled, cameramen were on the spot and on the 2nd January newsreels contained a long sequence of the sinking battleship. At the end of it the audience at the Cameo, Charing Cross Road, as a rule most unresponsive, clapped loudly and even a fortnight later a suburban audience applauded.

But an event such as the scuttling of the *Graf Spee* was too rare for the newsreels to depend upon it for interest. When the Polish resistance was finally crushed and no activities on the Western Front were forthcoming, the newsreels turned elsewhere for shots of fighting. One long sequence dealt with the war in China and caused more comment than anything else in observed newsreels. For some time manoeuvres in America were the mainstay; these were staged on a large scale with tanks being blown up, aeroplanes bombing ground troops, and above all a night attack with tracer bullets which the Gaumont British commentator admitted to be 'America's gift to the cinema, to make up for the war in Europe'.

Then on November 30th 1939, Russian troops invaded Finland, and there were immediate air raids. Since that date eighteen newsreels have been observed, and in

thirteen of them shots of the war in Finland have been included with an average length of over two minutes. Six of these thirteen newsreels have caused comment, once the Finns have been applauded. This exceptionally high degree of response seems to indicate that the newsreels have been right in emphasising this element, but the number of people who in answer to the questionnaire said that they objected to war in newsreels, together with the 'God's and 'horrible's of the comments, tends to indicate that they are not effective propaganda.

Here again, however, there is evidence to suggest that the newsreels have been 'reconstructing' events. Some of the shots, it is said, bear a marked resemblance to those of bombed Spanish towns; women supposed to be rushing to shelter in an air raid were laughing; of a picture of a burning village, the Pathe commentary said that it had been fired by the retreating Red army, while Paramount argued that the Finns had burnt it after them themselves.

Before the war, even in the last weeks of August, the only response to shots of soldiers was laughter. On not one occasion since the war has any soldier been laughed at with the exception of two French soldiers riding a tandem, a sequence that was intended to be funny. The Women's army has, however, created some amusement due in part at any rate to facetious remarks in the commentary; Universal, for instance, with shots of Land Army girls on a turkey farm produced remarks about 'nice birds'. On other occasions bad marching has produced titters.

Though there has been no laughter, there has been a good deal of clapping at the sight of soldiers and sailors. At the beginning of the war the sight of a sailor leaning out of a window was on one occasion sufficient provocation for general applause, while on another French troops marching were clapped. About 10 per cent of the appearances of allied forces have been greeted by clapping; otherwise they have been watched in silence.

Mention has already been made of the inclusion of faked news in newsreels. Yet another way in which the companies have tried to make up for the lack of any interesting information is by the introduction of items which are topical but have no direct news value. At the beginning of the war, for instance, the Crazy Gang became an admirable substitute for news. On one occasion Bud Flanagan portrayed a soldier in a dug-out dreaming of French girls and Blighty; on another, in an item called THE WORST WRESTLING MATCH, the Crazy Gang did a fight in slow motion. On this occasion no attempt at all was made to connect it to any item of news and the audience was at first mystified; a week earlier the Crazy Gang had been seen wrestling, but this time it was for the troops and soldiers were seen in the shots. Cartoons were used in short epilogues; in the same news as THE WORST WRESTLING MATCH a cartoon addressed to Hitler pointed out that 'we've got the money, we've got the guns, so what are you going to do?' The next week Pathe included an illustrated poem on the value of 'Keep it Dark.' The inauguration of the keep-fit classes on the wireless prompted Universal to depict a fat woman trying to touch her toes, while Pathe has now instituted a whole series of 'Nasti News'. One was seen by an observer:

Lord Haw-Haw enters with large moustache and monocle. By his side is a 'lie-making machine' (laughs 1)

Remarks about Goering and his medals (laughs 2)

'Next Tuesday a British ship was sunk at Tiddleywinks on Spee' (laughs 2)

A man who has been painting a wall at the back turns round; it is Hitler (laughs 2)

He awards Haw-Haw with an Iron Cross (laughs 2)

'To facilitate scuttling, German ships are being made without bottoms' (laughs 3)

Fade-out with Hitler saluting (laughs 3)

It will be seen that there is a high degree of audience response to this comedy. At the 'Keep it Dark' sequence there was even some applause. And while this is not a post-war development — it was used quite extensively by Movietone before the war — nevertheless in newsreels observed since the war, nearly 30 per cent contain a comedy.

Personalities

There follows a comparative table of the appearances of famous figures in pre-war and post-war newsreels.

	Pre-war (12 newsreels)		Wartime (38 newsreels)	
	No. of appearances	No. of times applauded	No. of appearances	No. of times applauded
British politicians				
Anderson	3	0	0	0
Baldwin	5	3	0	0
Cecil	4	0	0	0
Chamberlain	10	1	4	2
Churchill	0	0	5	3
Eden	0	0	2	0
Lloyd George	5	(2 laughs)	0	0
Halifax	11	1	0	0
Henderson	8	1	0	0
Hore Belisha	3	0	6	3
Hoare	0	0	1	0
Simon	0	0	4	2
Runciman	1	0	0	0
Kingsley Wood	4	0	0	0
Total	54	8	22	10
Royal family				
The King	8	0	11	2
The Queen	5	0	11	3
Queen Mary	3	0	1	1
Duke of Kent	2	0	0	0
Duke of Gloucester	0	0	4	1
Duke of Windsor	0	0	8	6
Duchess of Kent	1	(1 laugh)	0	0
Duchess of Windsor	0	0	1	0
Total	19	1	36	13
Other figures				
Daladier	5	0	3	0
Hitler	0	0	1	0
Roosevelt	4	2	1	0
Stalin	0	0	2	0

It will be seen immediately that the emphasis in wartime news has shifted from personalities to events. The numbers of well-known people in thirty-eight newsreels observed since the war are hardly greater than the number in twelve pre-war newsreels.

It has also shifted from politicians to royalty and within those groups from one figure to another. Finally, the audience now responds to different figures.

Before the war, the appearances of the King and Queen were less frequent than those of either Chamberlain or Halifax; since the war both of them have appeared more than twice as often as anyone outside the royal family, and whereas on no occasion formerly were they applauded, now they have been clapped on 20 per cent of their appearances. The Duke of Windsor was not seen at all before the war, since he has appeared eight times and been applauded on six of them, or on 75 per cent of appearances. The Duke of Gloucester has not been seen at all since the war, though one of his four appearances since has been clapped.

Before the war, as has been mentioned, Lord Halifax and Mr Chamberlain were more frequently seen than any personality; since the war Lord Halifax has not been seen at all and Mr Chamberlain was not observed until three days before Christmas, while on his tour of the front. On this occasion he was not clapped, but after the resignation of Hore Belisha, when Mr Chamberlain was photographed making his Mansion House speech, he was applauded on two occasions though in both cases very feebly. Hore Belisha, on the other hand, has made six appearances since the war, four times before his resignation; on one occasion he was clapped. After his resignation he made two very brief appearances but each time he was immediately clapped. Mr Chamberlain, in brief, in two appearances of four minutes and three minutes, in which he made many remarks that caused clapping from his Mansion House audience, was applauded very feebly. Hore Belisha, in two appearances of half a minute, in which he did not speak a word, was clapped more vigorously.

Of other politicians the two that have made most appearances have been most clapped. Mr Churchill has made five appearances, including a five-minute reconstruction of a broadcast which constituted the entire news at the Gaumont, Haymarket, and on three occasions was clapped. Simon has made four appearances and was clapped twice; neither of these politicians appeared at all before the war.

On the other hand, there are many politicians as well as Halifax who have not appeared at all since the war. Sir John Anderson, Lord Baldwin (clapped on 60 per cent of his appearances pre-war), Viscount Cecil, Lord Chatfield, Lloyd George, Sir Neville Henderson, Lord Runciman, and Sir Kingsley Wood, none have appeared in observed newsreels since the war. Roosevelt who was clapped on two of his four pre-war appearances has been seen only once when the audience showed signs of boredom.

Military leaders have not been featured to any great extent. Lord Gort has made three appearances; on no occasion was he clapped and when he gave a Christmas message – 'the first time in newsreel history that a commander-in-Chief has spoken' as the *Pathe Gazette* announced – the only response noted by an observer was one woman who remarked 'silly, isn't it?' Gamelin has made one appearance and Colonel Lane in charge of the Army Mail made an appeal at Christmas. A brief shot of the General who signed the Anglo-Turkish agreement was greeted with immediate, loud applause.

A sequence of the burial of the victims of the Munich bomb explosion, obtained through neutral countries, included a long shot of Hitler – there was no response at all. At the beginning of the Russo-Finnish war sequences of Stalin were included; at the Cameo, Charing Cross Road, one man called out something fairly loudly and another muttered 'urcha'. At the Regal, Kennington, there was no response at all.

The appearances of the Crazy Gang have been mentioned before, but it is worthy of note that Gracie Fields has appeared as often. On none of her four appearances has she been clapped, but there has been general laughter at all her jokes. On each occasion she has appeared on the newsreel just after a broadcast, and every time she has been

photographed actually entertaining the troops, not specially engaged by a newsreel company.

Summary of content

The newsreels appear to have well judged public taste. Since the war the public figures who have appeared most in the newsreels are those that have been most applauded. The shifting of emphasis from politicians to the royal family may indicate that the public now prefers the uninterfering royalty to troublesome Members of Parliament, though the popularity of Sir John Simon, even after the announcement of his war budget, is surprising.

In subject matter the tendency is directly on war themes; though until Russia's invasion of Finland there were few 'action' shots. Shots of the BEF were frequent until all aspects of their life had been exhausted, and much the same applied to the navy. Nevertheless the newsreels are very far from succeeding in making all their contents vital as the number of criticisms in the questionnaire on the grounds to 'no news' or 'repetition' show.

Finally, a new tendency is appearing to produce in newsreels both faked news and reconstructions of events that could not be filmed, and also comic interludes that have no direct connection with any item of news. This must be a direct consequence of the absence of news, or the difficulty of getting it, and while they are well received, they must be regarded as a dangerous inclusion. In their true form newsreels can be regarded as a record more accurate than any other, but once reconstruction or faking appears, their whole value is lost.

Other general tendencies

As well as the general tendencies in newsreels that have been noted under 'Subject matter', there are one or two general points that must be observed. Before the war the newsreels portrayed the official view of events on most occasions though at the time of the Munich crisis one of the companies was asked to withdraw a speech by Wickham Steed which was considered to be out of keeping with the Government's plans. Later, however, at the time of the film tax, the newsreels argued that they provided the Government with excellent propaganda free of all charge.

Since the war the newsreels have continued to contain much propaganda, a little too much, judging from the questionnaire. Shots of Dominion troops are almost invariably an excuse for the expression of patriotic sentiments, while even the arrival of Indian troops in France provoked the remark that India stands behind Britain as one man. Among the political figures on the screen, no Opposition speakers have been seen and no opportunity has been missed to pour invective on Germany or on Russia. The feature 'Keep it Dark', mentioned elsewhere, was an even more obvious case of propaganda.

But for all this the newsreels appear to have found a little more initiative in the war. At the resignation of Hore Belisha, Paramount came out openly on the side of the departing Minister, and in so doing reflected public opinion; 'so leaves one of our ablest men' ran the commentary. On this matter a question was asked in the House.

The same company, a few weeks previously, had provoked another Parliamentary question over their item on the return to this country of Miss Unity Mitford:-

Lord Denman described as a fake that part of the film showing battleships manoeuvring, troops on parade, a strong force of police, a royal guard of honour, and aeroplanes flying in formation.

To magnify Miss Mitford's return into a matter of national importance as this film seemed to do was really absurd. Far more objectionable than the pictures was

the running commentary. The commentator proceeded to make rather cheap jokes at the expense of Lord Redesdale and his daughter.

In peace time no newsreel would have dared to express an unconstitutional opinion as strongly as this.

Another tendency that may be said to be due to the war is that which is producing 'horrific' shots. Before the war shots of the burning of the Graf Zeppelin were cut on the grounds that they were too horrible for the general public. Yet in one newsreel recently a whole series of shots showed dead Russians lying in the snow, and it was followed up almost immediately by a sequence on the Turkish earthquake which included a picture of a man pulling at a leg that was emerging from a shattered house. At both these shots there was considerable comment from the audience and at the second, a number of 'oh's, but there was no sign of any general revulsion, as there was at the first photos of the bombing of Helsinki, a sequence which little imagination was necessary to translate into an event which might happen to any member of the audience.

Questionnaire

Two hundred people, equally divided into class, age, and sex groups, were asked, among other questions, 'What do you think of the newsreels?' Their answers, in brief, can be classified as follows:

Like them very much	Like them	Doubtful	Dislike them	Dislike them very much	Don't know
24%	37_%	19%	12_%	2_%	4_%

This large majority who like the newsreels is fairly evenly distributed among all groups, as will be seen from the more detailed analysis that follows:

	Like them very much	Like them	Doubtful	Dislike them	Dislike them very much	Don't know
CLASS B						
Men over 30	36%	44%	4%	8%	4%	8%
Men under 30	4%	24%	20%	44%	4%	8%
Women over 30	36%	44%	16%	—	—	4%
Women under 30	32%	32%	24%	12%	—	—
CLASS D						
Men over 30	36%	20%	24%	12%	—	8%
Men under 30	4%	48%	16%	24%	8%	—
Women over 30	32%	36%	28%	—	—	4%
Women under 30	16%	52%	20%	4%	4%	4%

It will be seen that the only group that shows any strong objection to newsreels are the men under 30 of the middle classes; men under 30 of the lower classes have no greater number among them who like the newsreels greatly, but practically half their number showed no objection to them. Not a single woman over thirty had any criticism to make of newsreels. Of these two hundred people only sixty, or 30 per cent, gave any further comment. Nearly 10 per cent of these criticisms were on the grounds that the news was merely repetition:

They're pretty interesting except that the 'somewhere in France' descriptions of what is happening come over and over again (Man, 20, working class)

They're good when you have only seen them once but after two or three times ... (Man, 20, middle class)

They are the same thing over and over again; but I suppose that it's all right for some people (Man, 40, worker)

Even more complained that they contained much too much propaganda, men under 30 of the middle classes being particularly critical of this aspect:

I hate all propaganda of any kind (Man, 20, middle class)

Well, for instance, they will show you the navy and they say 'isn't it superb?' and its object is to defend freedom while the German navy wants to destroy everything. And that's that (Man, 20, middle class)

They are all right when they are not saturated with propaganda as they invariably are (Man, 25, middle class)

There's much too much glorious Britain, triumphant Britain about them (Man, 25, worker)

They are trying to boost the royal family (Man, 40, worker)

Many complained of the lack of news:

They are all right most of them. There's not much news in them, of course (Woman, 20, middle class)

I don't think they give very interesting news nowadays (Man, 20, middle class)

Let's have real news. Same trouble as that of the press (Man, 20, middle class)

Six per cent could not believe what they saw, even though a newsreel is supposed to consist entirely of photographic records of actual events:

I think the news reels are hooey, they tell you what is dished up every five minutes on the wireless, with the same Nazi planes crashing and our men not all coming back, but they don't tell you how many don't. I don't believe a thing, honestly (Woman, 20, working class)

They only show the light side of war and the enemy trying to be destructive (Man, 40, worker)

While one woman complained that there was not enough war pictures in the news, many others thought there was too much. This objection to shots of actual fighting is borne out by newsreel observations.

You get a lot of destruction in them and my lady doesn't like it (Man, 40, worker)

It doesn't give me personally much pleasure to see bombs dropping and houses falling down (Man, 50, middle class)

The bombing of Helsinki was a bit too realistic. It's all right showing war, I suppose, but that was a bit too much (Woman, 20, working class)

Many people, on the other hand, added most complimentary remarks:

They are the most important part of the show, I go there for that (Man, 50, worker)

They are interest number one for me (Man, 50, middle class)

They are best of all sometimes. I go sometimes to see them (Woman, 20, middle class)

I enjoy them, I wish they went a bit slower and were a bit longer (Woman, 50, working class)

Despite the fact that many of the newsreels sequences are common to all five companies, five people mentioned the name of one particular reel that they liked or disliked. One man chose Paramount, another Pathe and G.B., two more mentioned G.B.. One woman, on the other hand, said 'We always enjoy them, but I don't like the man with the too dramatic voice, you know the man I mean', presumably meaning Emmett of the Gaumont British.

In brief, over 60 per cent of the people questioned liked the newsreels, and, unlike those who said they liked THE LION HAS WINGS, many of them gave reasons or comments on their approval, one man going as far as to wish that the newsreels were a feature; that there is a genuine interest in them is borne out by the number who showed a preference for one newsreel in particular. Many of the criticisms, on the other hand, concern matters that are not the fault of the newsreels. The largest number of complaints was directed against the inclusion of too much war news; but a newsreel by its nature must be concerned with topicalities and therefore the war. Others argued that there was 'no news'; but this is due to the Censor not to the companies who would obviously be delighted if there was more news released to them.

Most of the remaining criticism was directed against the propaganda element in newsreels; this complaint appeared with equal regularity on THE LION HAS WINGS questionnaire where it was established that any propaganda to be successful must be concealed. The newsreels with their 'glorious Britain, triumphant Britain' are not masking their propaganda sufficiently to give it the most effect. It would be as well for the newsreels to remember in this connection that the only class of the public that shows any marked opposition is the men under thirty of the middle classes. Of these 48 per cent dislike the newsreels, half of them giving as their reason that 'there is too much propaganda'.

General conclusions

1. The newsreels are genuinely popular
2. The newsreels have to some extent earned this popularity by discovering public opinion and altering subject matter to taste
3. Emphasis has changed in wartime
 - (a) from people to things
 - (b) from politicians to royalty
 - (c) from one politician to another
4. Emphasis is now entirely on war matters

5. Newsreels still contain much propaganda
6. But this propaganda is a little too obvious
7. The newsreels are developing character of their own
8. General tendencies in newsreels are
 - (a) the inclusion of faked news
 - (b) the inclusion of 'comedies'
 - (c) the inclusion of 'horrific'
9. Audience now applauds royal family more than politicians
10. No longer thinks that soldiers are funny

APPENDIX A

Content of newsreels (divided into subject matter)

	Pre-war	Wartime
Soldiers	7% of shots	71%
War (except soldiers)	21%	14%
Non-war	62%	15%

The emphasis has shifted naturally from non-war subjects to war subjects but there is also a shifting from the effect of the war on the private citizen to its effect on the soldier as soon as war is declared. The very small percentage of shots of soldiers pre-war may be due to the laughter caused by their presence.

APPENDIX B

Statements and criticisms (made by 60 out of 200 interviewed on newsreels)

CRITICISMS	Class B				Class D				Total
	MO	MU	WO	WU	MO	MU	WO	WU	
No News		3	1	2	1			1	8 (12%)
Restricted news		2			1			1	4 (6%)
Propaganda element	1	4			1	2			8 (12%)
Disbelief		1			1	1		1	4 (6%)
Repetition		1			1	3		1	6 (9%)
Too much war	3	1		2	1		1	1	9 (14%)
Too little war								1	1 (1_%)
Too short							3		3 (5%)
Too slow					1				1 (1_%)
Uninteresting		1							1 (1_%)
COMMENTS									
Look forward to them most of all	1			1	1		1		4 (6%)
Lot of news							1		1 (1_%)
Should be a feature						1			1 (1_%)
Educational							1		1 (1_%)
Liked particular one:									
									Man over 30, B — Gaumont British
									Woman over 30, B — Pathe and Gaumont British
									Man under 30, D — Paramount
									Woman under 30, D — Gaumont British
Disliked particular one:									Woman over 30, B — 'Man with dramatic voice'

APPENDIX C

Observers, Cinemas, etc., of Newsreels Since the War

No	Observer	Date	Cinema	Time	News
1	LE	30.10.39	Leicester Square	12.30	G.B.
2	LE	1.11.39	Cameo, Charing X Road	2.00	G.B. & Paramount
3	LE	2.11.39	Granada, Tooting	3.30	G.B.
4	LE	8.11.39	Regal, Marble Arch	1.30	Pathe
5	LE	9.11.39	Gaumont, Streatham	3.00	G.B.
6	LE	11.11.39	Regal, West Norwood	3.00	B.M.N.
7	LE	13.11.39	Monseigneur, Trafalgar Sq	2.00	B.M.N.
8	LE	14.11.39	Regal, Streatham	3.00	Pathe
9	VD	15.11.39	Tatler, Charing X Road	—	—
10	BC	16.11.39	Empire, Leicester Square	—	—
11	BC	16.11.39	Academy, Oxford Street	—	—
12	LE	18.11.39	Gaumont, Haymarket	11.30	G.B.
13	MK	18.11.39	Queen's Hall, Rushey Green	5.30	—
14	LE	20.11.39	Eros, Piccadilly	2.00	B.M.N. & Paramount
15	LE	21.11.39	Paramount, Tottenham Court Road	3.00	Paramount
16	BC	24.11.39	Tatler, Charing X Road	—	—
17	BC	25.11.39	Regal, Marble Arch	Evening	—
18	WL	25.11.39	Grand, Hanwell	9.00	—
19	BC	26.11.39	Empire, Leicester Square	7.00	—
20	BC	27.11.39	Paramount, Tottenham Court Road	afternoon	—
21	LE	1.12.39	Astoria, Streatham	3.00	Paramount
22	WL	2.12.39	Grand, Hanwell	9.00	—
23	LE	5.12.39	Cameo, Charing X Road	7.30	G.B. & Paramount
24	LE	6.12.39	Regal, Kennington	5.30	B.M.N.
25	LE	9.12.39	Gaumont, Streatham	4.30	G.B.
26	BA	11.12.39	Tatler, Charing X Road	6.00	B.M.N.
27	LE	12.12.39	Astoria, Streatham	2.30	Paramount
28	LE	13.12.39	Academy, Oxford Street	3.00	G.B.
29	AH	16.12.39	Lido, Worktown	2.30	Universal
30	LE	20.12.39	Moulin Rouge	1.30	G.B.
31	LE	21.12.39	Regal, Streatham	3.00	Pathe
32	LE	22.12.39	Stoll, Kingsway	3.30	G.B., Par & B.M.N.
33	LE	2.1.40	Cameo, Charing X Road	6.30	G.B. & Paramount
34	WL	6.1.40	Tatler, Charing X Road	6.00	—
35	LE	11.1.40	Gaumont, Streatham	3.00	G.B.
36	LE	13.1.40	Astoria, Streatham	3.00	Paramount
37	LE	18.1.40	Gaumont, Streatham	3.00	G.B.
38	LE	27.1.40	Regal, Streatham	3.00	Pathe