

Psychology to win the war and make a better peace

Ben Harris on a 1943 book that sold 400,000 copies

Psychologists are a pretty independent lot. For most of the 20th century, both clinicians and laboratory researchers have charted their own paths as they pursue scholarship and social service. In times of war, however, collaboration has flourished, as the behavioural sciences have joined engineering and the physical sciences to better wage war and organise national defence.

One by-product of psychologists' war work was the most widely read textbook in the first half of the 20th century. Titled *Psychology for the Fighting Man*, it was a 'Fighting Forces Penguin Special' published in the US by the Anglo-American company, Penguin Books. This series was created in Britain, where it educated the troops, circumvented paper rationing, and made money for the publisher. Although *Psychology for the Fighting Man* is absent from histories of psychology, it deserves better. It greatly influenced its readers and editors – who were key to psychology's expansion in the postwar era.

The plan for a wartime textbook was the creation of a committee of psychologists within the quasi-governmental National Research Council (NRC). It was first proposed by Yale University's Robert Yerkes, who had coordinated psychologists' work in the First World War. The NRC was a product of the Great War, founded in 1916 to prepare scientists for possible entry into the war. Although psychology was in its

infancy compared to the physical and biological sciences, when the US declared war in 1917 a Psychology Committee had been added to the NRC's organisational chart. Its inclusion was engineered by Yerkes, the ambitious, 40-year-old president of the American Psychological Association (APA).

Yerkes had dabbled in the new technology of mental testing and convinced the Army that an intelligence test was the most efficient method for finding 200,000 officers and sorting 3.5 million recruits by mental ability. By war's end, 1.7 million men had taken one of two multiple-choice intelligence tests, administered to large groups of recruits simultaneously. Although the test lacked validity and proved to be of little use to the Army, they suggested that the average recruit had a mental age of 13, sparking a national debate over the nation's mental fitness. Drawing authority from the size of the testing program, psychologists convinced schools and businesses in the 1920s that they too needed psychological tests to become modern and efficient.

While Yerkes was coordinating WWI intelligence testing, the Army asked him to create a psychology curriculum for the Students' Army Training Corps. He formed a committee to produce three textbooks that would teach junior officers the applied psychology that would make them better at their jobs. The committee wrote eight chapters of the first book, but the Armistice cut the project short. Working with Yerkes during the war was

E.G. Boring, a young psychologist who would co-edit the WWII text and chair the committee overseeing its production. In WWI Boring was a recent PhD and a Captain in the Medical Department, who helped train the mass of psychological testers needed by the Army. After the war he assisted Yerkes in Washington preparing the massive report on the testing program. Thus it was natural for Yerkes to turn to Boring to head the WWII effort to teach psychology to soldiers.

Even more than in WWI, psychologists believed, their knowledge was crucial to military success against the Axis. As Boring (now a Harvard professor) wrote in 1943, 'in this most mechanized of all wars, no machine exists in such great numbers, nor requires such expert servicing, as the human machine. None is so precious. And for no other is functioning at peak efficiency so vital for the winning of the war.' Initially, the intended audience for a psychology text was the same as in WWI: officer candidates, who needed to better understand themselves, their subordinates and the psychology of warfare.

Boring was a logical choice for editor because of his service in WWI and his having edited a popular, collaborative introductory text. Key to the project's success was the participation of Colonel Joseph Greene, editor of the *Infantry Journal*, which had a sideline of publishing inexpensive paperbacks. Its 25¢ Fighting Forces Penguin Specials continued a series launched in Britain by Penguin Books, which formed a US subsidiary to capture the North American market. Greene was a savvy editor who convinced Boring to aim the book at general readers rather than 'college men'. As the inside cover explained, 'the corporal in the next bunk can get as much out of the book as his colonel can'.

The book began with the story of the British Eighth Army pursuing the retreating Axis forces in North Africa. To their surprise, the Brits found masses of perfectly good equipment, abandoned by

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the enemy. The lesson was that while ‘men cannot fight without weapons, it is just as true that weapons cannot fight without men’. And men by themselves are useless, because ‘men need morale. They need courage, confidence... and belief in ultimate victory’.

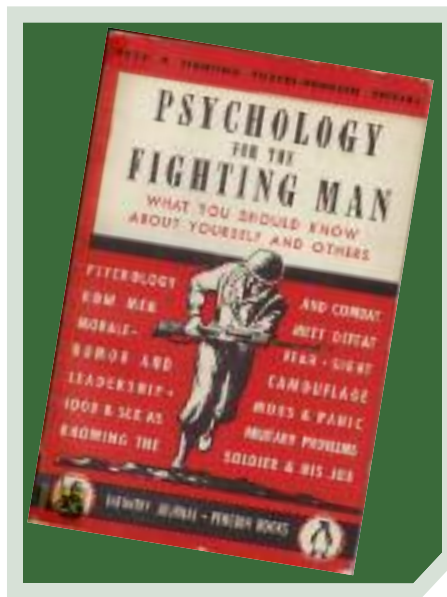
Continuing the list of psychological qualities needed for war, the authors added leadership and skills for specialised jobs from cook to truck driver and airplane pilot. Also needed were the abilities required for victory: health, strength, alertness, persistence in the face of hardship and fatigue. Unlike boots, ammunition and rations, these traits could not be supplied by the Quartermaster’s Office. ‘In other words,’ the authors explain, ‘the Army has a perpetual problem of psychological logistics, a problem of the supply of motives and emotions, of aptitudes and abilities, of habits and wisdom, of trained eyes and educated ears. How does it get this mental *matériel* to the right places at the right time? That is what this book is about.’

As promised, *Psychology for the Fighting Man* devoted separate chapters to the psychology of job selection, training, education, and leadership. Motivation was taught in the chapters ‘Morale’, ‘Food and sex as military problems’, and ‘Mobs and panic’. Other chapters covered subjects that college students normally learned under the rubric of ‘Sensation and Perception’. Here they were retooled and made relevant to war: ‘Sight as a weapon’, ‘Seeing in the dark’, ‘Color and camouflage’, ‘Hearing as a tool in warfare’, and ‘Smell – A sentry’. One of the more interesting chapters was ‘Differences among races and peoples’, which taught the cross-cultural psychology that soldiers might need when they encountered foreign populations. It also addressed racial prejudice. While the work of psychologists in WWI had been marred by their eugenic beliefs and ethnocentric biases, in WWII racism was presented as a threat to effective soldiering.

Although the book’s design and content radiated masculinity, the person who most shaped its text was a woman: Marjorie Van de Water, a journalist who had spent decades covering psychology for Science Service. As Boring’s co-editor, she re-wrote the chapters submitted by the panel of academic experts. At first, Boring wanted her to appear under a male pseudonym out of deference to the Army. An experienced handler of professors (mostly male), she vetoed this plan as effectively as she corrected the academic prose of Boring and his colleagues.

Soon, she and Boring were good

friends, exchanging confidences and compliments. While editing a chapter on personal adjustment, he wrote ‘I am delighted that we are making our own personal adjustments to each other.’ Later, she compared working with him as ‘like a ride with a large supply of nickels on a roller-coaster... never any dead level’. Although Van de Water was responsible for every word in the final manuscript, her salary was paid by her regular



employer and she received none of the book’s royalties.

Psychology for the Fighting Man was a great success, selling almost 400,000 copies. This meant that probably a million GIs, their friends and relations read copies. Its impact was even broader, because chapters were widely reprinted, from *Life* and military magazines to a pamphlet on leadership that Chrysler Corporation gave to its white collar workers and foremen.

After *Psychology for the Fighting Man*, Boring and his committee produced another paperback, *Psychology for the Returning Serviceman*, and a college-level textbook, *Psychology for the Armed Services*. By the end of his work on the two Penguin texts, Boring had become a strong advocate of psychological popularisation. Before, he was something of a purist, championing experimental psychology and denigrating the newer research areas that covered social and clinical phenomena – key to success in wartime.

In 1945 Boring wrote a lecture that announced his embrace of popularisation and anticipated developments that took

decades to appear. Although he never gave the lecture, he spent the rest of his career showing his colleagues how to deliver what its title promised: *Psychology for the Common Man* (by which he meant man and woman).

‘Psychology,’ Boring noted, is ‘diffusing into the culture of America more rapidly than ever before, Should this process of diffusion be left to chance or should... psychologists attempt to control it and perhaps accelerate it?’ His answer was that if scientists didn’t become popularisers, they would cede the field to unscrupulous peddlers of superstition and pseudoscience. He also explained that psychology could help build a better society:

Psychology is expanding [and we should try] to accelerate that process, try to get sound psychological principles into the American culture. Success in this endeavor will increase personal maturity, help social tolerance and progress, and enlarge the democratic communal base of thinking.

In Boring’s vision, all possible media could be used to teach a psychological world view – not just piles of facts. This should be the goal of the introductory course in college, high school courses, a popular magazine that the APA could publish, and programs on radio and television. If done well, these media would add psychology to the general knowledge of all educated people. When confronted by social problems, citizens would look to social engineering – informed by psychology – rather than accept the status quo. Ideas like ‘ignorance is mutable’ would become part of everyone’s common sense.

Although it took decades, what Boring advocated as psychological outreach eventually appeared: high school psychology courses, the APA’s purchase of *Psychology Today*, and introductory psychology taught on public television. Boring pioneered the last of these himself, hosting a TV lecture series in Boston in 1956. As historian Ellen Herman has shown, Boring anticipated the many post-WWII programs for social change that used psychological expertise as their guiding ideology. Although Boring’s goal of a public that could think scientifically has proven elusive, the psychologically aware masses that he anticipated are here to stay.

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