

The Miners' Strike and a Warmongering Media

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The role played by the media in the 1984-85 Miners' Strike remains a controversial issue today. Several books have now been published which point to the biased and deliberately provocative nature of national press coverage of the strike which Granville Williams argues amounted to a "propaganda assault on the miners".¹ There were several disputes between newspaper houses and print workers who objected to the copy they were being asked to run. As one particularly controversial example, in May 1984, *The Sun* planned on publishing a front page with a picture taken of Arthur Scargill at a rally in Mansfield with his arm outstretched in a pose reminiscent of Adolf Hitler (see Figure 1). The picture was to be accompanied by the headline 'Mine Fuhrer'. *The Sun*'s printers, however, refused to put this copy into production and on 15th May the paper appeared instead with the picture and headline replaced by the following statement on plain background: "Members of all The Sun production chapels refused to handle the Arthur Scargill picture and major headline on our lead story. The Sun has decided, reluctantly, to print the paper without either". The picture and the planned headline together draw analogies between the Miners' Strike and World War II characterising Scargill in particular as a power-crazed military dictator. This example stands out and is remembered as a particular low-point in the media's handling of the strike. However, this example was in fact just part of a systematic and sustained effort to demonise striking miners while simultaneously defending Government policy and aggressive police tactics by drawing on narratives associated with war and World War I and World War II in particular.



Figure 1. Planned front page of *The Sun*, 15 May 1984

Waging War with Words

From the very beginning of the strike, the national media referred to the strike as a 'war'. The front cover of *The Sun* on 13 March 1984, for example, carried the headline: "PIT WAR: Violence erupts on the picket line as miner fights miner" (see Figure 2). In the days that followed, further references to the strike as a war appeared in headlines such as "Crushed to death in Scargill's picket war" in the *Daily Express* and "8,000 cops on alert to foil pits war" in *The Sun*. In the lead paragraphs that followed such headlines, police and striking miners were described as soldiers on opposite sides of the 'war'. Reporting violence at Ollerton colliery, for example, *The Sun* described "an army of 8,000 police at battle stations in the bloody pit war". Flying pickets were described as "rampaging armies" by *The Express* and as "invaders" by *The Sun*. Events on the picket line thus became known as "battles", most notoriously in the so-called 'Battle of Orgreave' where *The Sun* described Arthur Scargill as "an army general surveying his warring troops". Events at Orgreave were generally described in language that recall news footage of war zones. The *Times*, for example, described police as "re-grouping to advance under a hail of stones, bottles and bricks until the demonstrators retreated behind a barricade of burning cars, lamp posts and stones from a wall they had demolished".



Figure 2. Front cover of *The Sun* at the beginning of the strike
(*The Sun*, 13.03.1984)

What is important to remember is that while there was very real violence on the picket line, the miners' strike was not a real war in the literal, military sense. Police and striking miners were not actual soldiers and Scargill was not an army general. Rather, the language of war was being used figuratively to present the strike in simple, familiar and emotionally charged terms. Analogies with war were not only a feature of media language but were also drawn, more subtly, through press photographs which, in conjunction with their captions, made allusions to major historical wars. The

Guardian even described its photographers in terms associated with embedded war reporting: “Guardian photographer Don McPhee was in the front line of yesterday’s picket at Orgreave coking plant”.

Photos from the ‘front line’

Photographs published across the national press were replete with subtle references to the First World War and other famous historical wars. Of course, unlike language where the words chosen may not necessarily be fair or accurate in the way they describe a given situation, photographs capture a real moment in time. This doesn’t mean, however, that photographs paint a whole, undistorted picture or that they do not evoke other iconic moments in history and conjure the national sentiments attached to them. This is especially the case when aided by language which frames the image in a particular way. Depicting the ‘Battle of Orgreave’, for example, the image in Figure 3 brings to mind the barbed wire barricades used in World War I and associated in particular with German defences in the Battle of the Somme. This image appeared in several newspapers including the *Times* where the caption that accompanied the image reinforced the war analogy: “Battle lines drawn: Orgreave resembles a medieval battleground with angled stakes set up by pickets against the police horses”. Evoking the Battle of the Somme, the image attributes to the striking miners the status of brutal enemy held for German soldiers in World War I and, by the same token, casts the police in the role of ‘ally’. The image therefore taps in to feelings of both national pride and prejudice directed at the police versus miners respectively. Moreover, where the Battle of the Somme is often taken to epitomise the senseless loss of life suffered in World War I, the comparison undermined the strike by suggesting it was equally senseless – a motif which the media liked to adhere.



Figure 3. Wooden barrier at ‘Battle of Orgreave’

Pictures of police on horseback were a frequent feature of news photography throughout the strike. Such images are reminiscent of cavalry warfare during World War I. Where cavalry warfare is considered more ‘brave’ and ‘noble’ than modern forms of warfare, images of mounted police characterise the police as valiant and gallant. Following the ‘Battle of Orgreave’, mounted police were described as ‘swinging into action’ by the *Times*. The front cover of *The Sun* (Figure 4) carried the simple headline “CHARGE” and showed mounted police leading “an amazing cavalry charge on picketing miners”. Other similar images were published with captions or headlines “Charge of the

blue brigade" (*Telegraph*, 31.05.1984), "Charge of the coke brigade" (*Express* 30.05.1984) and "Charge of the riot brigade" (*Daily Mirror*, 30.05.1984). The phrase 'Charge of the X Brigade' makes reference to the (1854) poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade* written by Lord Alfred Tennyson's in celebration of the courage shown by the cavalry during the Crimean War.



Figure 4. *The Sun* front cover (30.05.1984)

Following the mass mobilisation of police forces in March 1984, the police were shown in military-style configurations as in Figure 5. Strengthening the war analogy, the image in Figure 5 appeared in several newspapers with captions referring to "massed ranks of police" (*Times*) and "war weary men in blue" (*The Express*). The caption in the *Guardian* read "BATTLE FORMATION: The massed ranks of police at Orgreave".

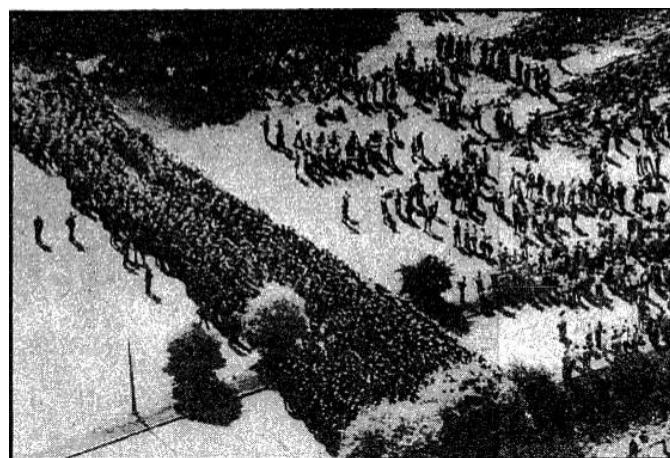


Figure 5. Mobilisation of police

The analogy with war was so persistent that even peaceful moments that were captured on camera were brought into the war narrative. As one notable example, the *Guardian* published the photograph in Figure 6 showing a football match played at Bilsthorpe colliery in Nottinghamshire between police and striking miners. The caption that accompanied the image described the match as being played on “no-mans land”. Together with the caption, the image recalls the celebrated Christmas Day football match played between German and allied forces in 1914.



Figure 6. Football match played between police and miners at Bilsthorpe colliery

Comparisons with war and World War I in particular continued until the very end of the strike. When miners returned to work on 13th March 1985, it was described as an act of “surrender” by *The Sun* while the *Daily Mail* ran the headline “Traitors! The cry from a defeated army”. The front cover of *The Sun* showed a bloodied police officer and carried the headline “Lest we Forget” (Figure 7). This evocative phrase comes originally from the poem *Recessional* written by Rudyard Kipling in 1897 and refers to the sacrifice of Christ. However, it is reused in the Ode of Remembrance where it is added as a final line to the fourth stanza of Laurence Binyon’s poem *For the Fallen*, written in 1914 in honour of British soldiers who had already lost their lives in World War I. Together, the image and the headline work to compare the efforts of police officers in the strike with the sacrifices of British soldiers in World War I.



Figure 7. Front cover of *The Sun* at the end of the strike

While photographs such as those analysed above capture real moments in time and, it may therefore be argued, accurately document the strike, these images were in fact a form of propaganda selected for their symbolic and emotional appeal when framed in a particular way. Faced with such systematic references to war in the language that surrounded these images, it is hard to see certain sections of the media as engaged in anything other than a sustained and deliberate effort to demonise the miners - just as they would go on to do with football fans at Hillsborough – while at the same time rousing support for the police and Government policy by reporting the strike in terms of a war. If there can be any doubt as to the media's agenda, we can look to another form of news commentary whose propagandistic purposes are undisputed: the political cartoon.

Heil Scargill!

Analogy is a common rhetorical feature of political cartoons.ⁱⁱ While photographs of the miners' strike made subtle allusions to World War I and other historical wars, political cartoons published during the strike drew more flagrant comparisons with the Second World War. The cartoon in Figure 8 was published in the *The Sun* on 17th March 1984. It shows Arthur Scargill dressed in the uniform of a Nazi General in World War II. Scargill is the focal point of the cartoon but with Scargill depicted as a Nazi General, the rest of the scene is likened to iconic images of the Second World War. The winding tower of the mine on which Scargill stands takes on a resemblance to the watch tower in a Nazi concentration camp. The train tracks and the chimneys in the background are further reminiscent of iconic images of Auschwitz.

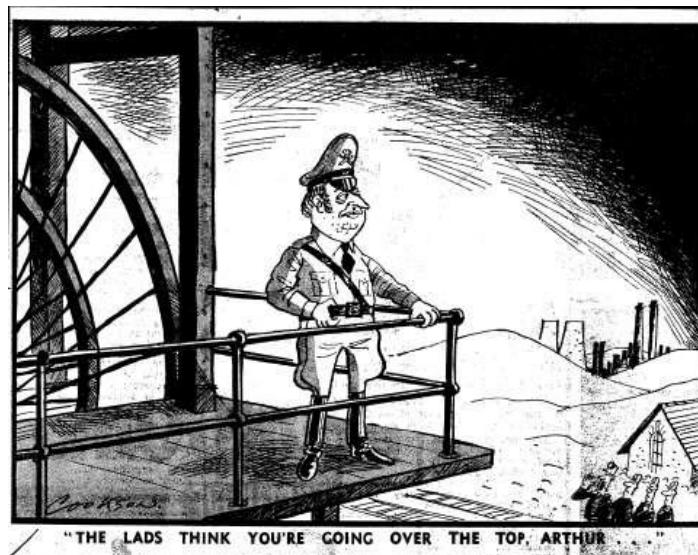


Figure 8. Arthur Scargill as Nazi General
(© News UK. *The Sun*, 17 March 1984)



Figure 9. Margaret Thatcher as Winston Churchill
(© News UK. *The Times*, 6 June 1984)

The cartoon in Figure 8 draws analogies with World War II by comparing Scargill to a Nazi General. The cartoon in Figure 9 draws similar analogies by comparing Margaret Thatcher to Winston Churchill. The comparison relies on iconic images of Churchill smoking a cigar as well as the myth of Churchill as a bulldog. The cartoon is in fact based on a famous patriotic cartoon depicting Churchill as a bulldog produced by Sydney Strube and published in *The Daily Express* on 8th June 1940 (see Figure 10). The analogy with World War II is reinforced by the phrase 'go to it' written on the soldier's helmet. The phrase appeared in the same way in Strube's original cartoon and later came to feature on campaign posters produced by the Ministry of Information as a message to 'civilian soldiers' working on the 'home front'.



Figure 10. Winston Churchill as British Bulldog
(Sidney Strube, *Daily Express*, 8 June 1940)

Narratives of the Second World War are frequently employed by the media in coverage of contemporary events.ⁱⁱⁱ World War II narratives are especially powerful in evoking feelings of national pride, courage and unity. In popular memory, Churchill is revered as a national hero and has come to stand as a symbol of defiance and resilience in the face of adversity. By comparing her to Churchill, the cartoon in Figure 9 attributes similar qualities to Thatcher and asks the reader to rally behind her in the fight against the miners. By contrast, the cartoon in Figure 8 bestows Scargill with character traits associated with a Nazi General, the most infamous of them being Adolf Hitler.

There are a number of problems with these comparisons. Characterising Scargill as a Nazi is an example of what Leo Strauss called *reductio ad Hitlerum* – an attempt to invalidate someone's position on the basis of claimed similarities with Hitler. This is a fallacious argument, however, when the similarity to Hitler is fabricated or greatly exaggerated. The main problem with these cartoons, though, is that they reduced the miners' strike to a personal conflict between Thatcher and Scargill. As one miner commented: "I object to the way they [the media] have personalised the strike ... because that ignores all of us on strike and our views, along with the issues that we are striking for which are beginning to get lost".^{iv}

In reducing the strike to an opposition between Thatcher and Scargill, caricatured as Churchill and Hitler respectively, the cartoons retold a classic tale of 'Hero versus Villain'.^v In this archetypal story, the hero fights for the values and ideals of their society. He/she is intelligent, brave and benevolent. The villain is intelligent but irrational, driven by self-interest and intent on destruction. Crucially, however, the hero is always victorious in the end. These cartoons, thus, not only cast Thatcher and Scargill in the roles of 'hero' versus 'villain' respectively, but they also make it seem inevitable that the miners' will ultimately be defeated.

Metaphor Matters

Comparisons between the miners' strike and twentieth century wars were not just convenient tropes for journalists to exploit, they reflected a way of thinking about the strike with real consequences for how the strike unfolded. The relationship between the media, government and the public is complex and, as was noted by the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF), no one could realistically claim that the media played the decisive role in the outcome of the coal dispute.^{vi} However, there is no doubt that the media played a part in shaping both public opinion and Government policy. One of the ways they did this was through metaphorical invocations of war. With war providing the media narrative backdrop, the characters and institutions involved in the strike themselves came to talk, think and act as if they were involved in a war. Most notoriously, four months into the strike, in a speech to Conservative backbenchers, Thatcher is recorded as having said in reference to the miners, "We had to fight the enemy without in the Falklands but we must also remember to fight the enemy within." This war-like rhetoric was no accident. Cabinet papers recently released under the 30-year Rule reveal that Thatcher was encouraged by the head of her policy unit John Redwood to pursue "a war of attrition, where the perceived way of the strike ending is for miners to go back to work". In Charles Moore's biography of Thatcher, Moore notes that "when working for Mrs Thatcher during the miners' strike the comparison with a civil war was apposite". Moore quotes David Willets, another advisor in Thatcher's policy unit, as saying "you would be in a meeting with Mrs T on some other subject and messengers would come in with reports like 'Kent is solid ... Nottingham is with us ... Yorkshire is in rebellion.' It did feel like a scene from one of Shakespeare's history plays".^{vii} A war mentality was not solely the preserve of Government but was shared by officials on the other side too. Interviewed by the *Guardian* in 1985, Nell Myers, the press officer for the NUM, stated "the industrial correspondents, along with broadcasting technicians, are basically our enemies' front line troops".

When analogical reasoning enters into the political process, it becomes less figurative and has material consequences in reality.^{viii} The war metaphor pervading the miners' strike served to steer policy in certain directions while closing down other possible avenues. Through this metaphor, the miners were genuinely seen as an enemy who must be defeated at all costs. Compromise and resolution became impossible. The media's continued use of this metaphor further helped persuade the public that Thatcher's hard-line policy toward the miners as well as violent police tactics were justified in the national interest. Had the media have employed an alternative analogy, the strike may just have taken a different course and possibly lead to a different outcome.

ⁱ Williams, G. (2009b). The media and the miners. In G. Williams (ed.), *Shafted: The Media, the Miners' Strike & the Aftermath*. London: Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom. pp. 36-46.

ⁱⁱ Gombrich, E.H. (1971). The Cartoonist's Armoury. In E.H. Gombrich (ed.), *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art*, 2nd edn. London: Phaidon. pp. 127-142.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kelsey, D. (2015). *Media, Myth and Terrorism: A Discourse-Mythological Analysis of the 'Blitz Spirit' in British Newspaper Responses to the July 7th Bombings*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

^{iv} Coutler, J., S. Miller and M. Walker (1984). *A State of Siege. Politics and Policing of the Coalfields: Miners' Strike 1984*. London: Canary Press

^v Lule, J. (2001). *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism*. London: The Guilford Press.

^{vi} Jones, D., J. Petley, M. Power and L. Wood (1985). *Media Hits the Pits*. London: CPBF.

^{vii} Moore, C. (2015). Margret Thatcher: The Authorised Biography. Volume Two: Everything She Wants. London: Allen Lane.

^{viii} Musolff, A. (2004). *Metaphor and Political Discourse: Analogical Reasoning in Debates about Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.