

Anti-British Propaganda Film: *The Polyp* (1917)

Abstract

This anti-British propaganda film from 1917 uses animation, which was still a new filmmaking technique at the time, to mock Britain for its imperialist ambitions. The drawings are by Robert L. Leonard, a graphic artist who became known especially for his film posters (such as the poster for *Rausch* in 1919). The verse was written by Hans Brennert, a prolific writer for stage and screen. The film was commissioned by the Bild- und Filmamt (BUFA), which had been founded in January 1917 by the Supreme Army command to coordinate the production of propaganda film and newsreels as well as censorship for all visual media. *Das Saugetier* (the title credit uses wordplay to change the word *Säugetier* [mammal] to *Saugetier* [polyp]) depicts Great Britain as the figure of John Bull, who lays claim to the diamonds of the Boers in South Africa, the Suez Canal in Egypt, tea in India, and rum in Jamaica and eventually morphs into a greedy polyp whose tentacles reach for the entire globe. Attacked by German U-boats, biplanes, and zeppelins dropping bombs, the polyp's tentacles are cut off one by one until he is defeated. The film was released to German movie theaters after the German navy had resumed its strategy of unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917. Worrying about its own ability to feed its population after a failed potato harvest while the war dragged on, the German Supreme Command hoped to cripple British food supply through submarine attacks on British and Allied merchant ships and thus force Britain to surrender. While the German navy succeeded at sinking 12 million tons of shipping (almost 5,000 merchant ships), unrestricted submarine warfare did not lead to British surrender, nor did it even significantly impact British wartime production or consumption. The U-boat campaign did, however, lead to the United States' entry into the First World War in April 1917, and thereafter German defeat.

Source

Intertitles:

The Mammal [*Säugetier*]/ the Polyp [*Saugetier*]/
This is John Bull of England/
He holds a telescope in his hands,
which he uses to search distant lands,
to see if he can spy anything attractive./
In the distant southern lands of the Cape Province the Boers are shoveling./
"Ha!" John Bull exclaims, "Diamonds?" "Hand them over, Boer, they're all mine!"
He looks east and looks west - to see if there's anything else to discover!/
Michel and the Frenchman are building a little canal at Port Said! John Bull shouts:
"Why, a little canal at Suez?! I will claim it - once you've built it!"/
He looks east and looks west - to see if there's anything else to discover!/
On Ceylon the yellow Indian grows tea and coffee! - John Bull says: "Boys! Hand over the tea! You may leave now, I'll be able to find some teapots on my own!"/
He looks around, looks across the sea: "Where can I find rum to add to my tea?"/
"Jamaica? Not a bad idea! I may not have glory [*Ruhm*] but at least I'll have rum [*Rum*]./"
He turns his head, he turns his neck - /
He looks as greasy as goose fat -/
He was not much to look at as a human: now he is progressively turning into an animal!/

Soon he will reveal his true character - /
Suddenly he has turned into a polyp!/
He attaches himself to the remotest zones, the protector of small nations!/
Soon he will burst like an old bicycle tube, his belly is aching already!/
And suddenly the poor fellow is hit by bombs falling on his bloated head!/
U-boats are cutting off his tentacles - you can already hear the polyp scream!/
He is faring badly - right now he is still fighting - but he is dead in the water! John Bull - we're coming for you, too!/

Source: *Das Saugetier*, animation: Robert L. Leonard, text: Hans Brennert, Union-Film Berlin, 1917.
Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv. Filmwerk ID: 3554
<https://digitaler-lesesaal.bundesarchiv.de/video/3554/681368>

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Recommended Citation: Anti-British Propaganda Film: The Polyp (1917), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:video-5175>> [September 26, 2025].