Propaganda and World War II

In this activity, you compare World War II propaganda posters from the United States, Great Britain, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union. Then you choose one of several creative or analytical writing assignments to demonstrate what you’ve learned.

Objectives

1. You will understand how waging a "total war" altered the nature of American society.
2. You will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.
3. You will understand the effects of World War II at home.

Instructions

1. **Step 1: Poster Analysis**
   
   Divide into small groups of 3-4 students. Each group will be assigned to one of the four nations -- please locate your group’s posters. Each student should choose one poster from the packet to analyze, using the Poster Analysis Worksheet.
   
   After individually analyzing posters, the groups should reconvene. Each group member should present their poster to their group members. After presentations, group members should discuss how they feel the posters work together: Is there a common theme? Are there common images? What aspects of the posters make them propaganda?

2. **Step 2: Essay Writing**
   
   After the group discussion, you should individually write an essay about the posters. You may choose from among the options below:

   A. Compare and contrast two or more posters
   B. Compare and contrast two or more posters -- i.e. pick one from outside your assigned nation.
   C. Visual essay: pull together different images to tell a story; text should bridge the posters together
   D. Responsive essay: elaborate on the emotions (anger, sadness, pride, etc.) that the poster(s) evoke
   E. Historical writing: Historically contextualize the poster: Is there a particular event or person the poster refers to? What makes this a World War II poster? *(Requires additional research)*
   F. Point of view writing: Pretend you are a person in the poster; what story do you want to convey?
   G. Fiction writing: Make up a narrative describing the events leading up to or following the scene depicted in the poster

Historical Context

Propaganda was one of many weapons used by many countries during World War II, and the United States was no exception. From posters to films and cartoons, the federal government used propaganda not only to buoy the spirit and patriotism of the home front, but also to promote enlistment in the military and labor force. Several government agencies were responsible for producing propaganda, with the largest being the Office of War Information (OWI), created in 1942. The OWI created posters, worked with Hollywood in producing pro-war films, wrote scripts for radio shows, and took thousands of photographs that documented the war effort. Worried by the increase in government sponsored propaganda, academics and journalists established the Institute for Propaganda Analysis. The Institute identified seven basic propaganda devices: Name-Calling, Glittering Generality, Transfer, Testimonial, Plain Folks, Card Stacking, and Band Wagon. [For more on the IPA and the seven devices, please see http://www.propagandacritic.com/] All of these devices were used during the war. In this activity, students will analyze World War II posters, examining the different techniques and themes used by the OWI and other branches of government.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you see? Be as concrete as possible.</th>
<th>What symbols (if any) are used in the poster?</th>
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<tr>
<td>If a symbol is used, is it clear (easy to interpret)? Why do you think this symbol is used?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is the relationship between the text and the visual image?</td>
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<td>Who do you think is the intended audience for the poster?</td>
<td>What does the Government hope the audience will do?</td>
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<td>What is the Government selling?</td>
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<td>For further discussion:</td>
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<td>What social constructions (race, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc.) are used in the poster? Why are these constructions used?</td>
<td>What would you envision the impact of these images would be on future historical events?</td>
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"I'm Proud... My Husband Wants Me To Do My Part"

During World War II, the U.S. government produced a number of propaganda posters aimed at mobilizing women workers to contribute to the war effort, offering images that challenged traditional ideas about the role of women and the nature of their work while still maintaining traditional gender hierarchies.

CREATOR | John Newton Howitt/War Manpower Commission  
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
"We Can Do It!"

Among the most famous images from the World War II era, the "We Can Do It!" poster of a determined working woman (colloquially dubbed "Rosie the Riveter") has been reproduced thousands of times since its original appearance in 1942. During the war, thousands of American women entered the job market for the first time, many in munitions factories or other industries directly related to the war effort. Many women found their wartime roles in jobs previously reserved for men to be a source of increased independence and pride, and for many their experiences formed the foundations for later struggles for equal pay and an expanded role for women in the workplace. Thus "Rosie the Riveter" has become a feminist icon to many in the years since her original incarnation.

CREATOR | J. Howard Miller/War Production Co-Ordinating Committee
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
Joe Louis, the famous heavyweight boxing champion, served in the Army from 1940 to 1942, appearing in exhibition matches as well as this recruitment poster. A few years earlier, Louis had defeated German heavyweight Max Schmeling, a symbol of the supposed "Aryan superiority" touted by the Nazi regime. Of his decision to join a segregated U.S. Army, Louis explained, "Lots of things wrong with America, but Hitler ain’t going to fix them."

"Pvt. Joe Louis Says - We're Going to do our part"

CREATOR | Office of Emergency Management/Office of War Information
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
"United We Win"

This 1943 government poster offers an image of racial solidarity among wartime workers under the slogan "United We Win." Although African-Americans did find enhanced opportunities thanks to the high demand for workers and the Roosevelt Administration’s creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee, many black workers continued to encounter discrimination in the workplace during the war years.

Focus Questions

How would each person in the poster respond to the title of the poster?

What problems in American society during this time are represented by the poster?


CREATOR | Alexander Liberman/War Manpower Commission

ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
"Someone Talked"

One of the most famous posters of World War II, "Someone Talked" urges Americans to prevent sensitive information from falling into enemy hands. Closely associated with the “Loose Lips Sink Ships” series communicating the same idea, the image of a drowning sailor dramatically illustrates the consequences of careless talk about military activities.

CREATOR | Office of War Information
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
"Warning! Our Homes Are in Danger Now!"

This World War II propaganda poster employs not-so-subtle depictions of Adolph Hitler and a bloodthirsty Japanese soldier menacing the American homeland. Produced by the General Motors Corporation, the poster emphasizes the danger posed to American homes and families, and, typically, employs a Japanese stereotype with exaggerated racial characteristics (the figure may have been intended to represent Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, although he was usually portrayed wearing glasses). The circular graphic with the "Keep 'em firing" logo in the bottom left, meanwhile, emphasizes the central role of American industry to the war effort.
A Black Candidate Runs on Civil Rights in 1940s New York

The Japanese distributed leaflets over the South Pacific that asked, "If Americans are fighting for the freedom and equality of all people, why aren’t Negro Americans allowed to play big league baseball?" Ben Davis, an African-American candidate for New York City Council in 1945, adopted this question in his campaign: "The Japanese propaganda leaflet told the truth! No Negro can play big league baseball!"

SOURCE | "Good enough to DIE... but not good enough to PITCH!", pamphlet cover, from the National Negro Congress Records at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.
CREATOR | Unknown
RIGHTS | National Negro Congress Records; Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library; Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
ITEM TYPE | Pamphlet/Petition
Up Housewives and At 'Em!

Similar to American efforts of the time, this World War II poster urges British housewives to contribute to the war effort by recycling household materials. With its smaller population and more direct experience of the war (close to 68,000 British civilians were killed during German bombing raids on the British homeland), the United Kingdom required the participation of all segments of society in the war effort. As in America, the contributions of women in Britain during the war would have a lasting effect on their post-war status.

SOURCE | Yates-Wilson, "Up Housewives and At 'Em!", 1940, gouache on board, from "The Art of War," The National Archives (UK), http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/theartofwar/prop/production_salvage/INF3_0219.htm.
CREATOR | Yates-Wilson
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
This World War II-era poster urges Britons to "Dig for Plenty" by growing their own vegetables in home gardens. Part of the larger "Dig for Victory" campaign that ran in Britain throughout the war, the poster stresses the benefits of growing one's own food, thus preventing scarcity and keeping food prices down. Individuals and families without backyards or private gardens were encouraged to get "allotments," small parcels of land leased for a nominal rent on which they could grow vegetables and other foodstuffs.

SOURCE | LeBon, "Dig for Plenty!" 1944, gouache on board; from "The Art of War," The National Archives (UK), http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/theartofwar/prop/production_salvage/INF3_0098.htm.

CREATOR | LeBon

ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
Keep Mum, She's Not So Dumb!

This World War II poster urges British officers and other servicemen to "keep mum" (quiet), lest military secrets and other sensitive information fall into the hands of the enemy as a result of careless talk, in this case overheard by a beautiful female spy. However unlikely such a scenario may seem outside the realm of spy movies, in June 1941 the British government announced that such exchanges were a "major problem." While its effectiveness in preventing information leaks cannot be known, the poster's casual sexism succeeded in raising the ire of Dr. Edith Summerskill, a Labour Member of Parliament.

SOURCE | Gerald Lacoste, "Keep Mum, She's Not So Dumb!" 1942, charcoal, gouache, ink and pastel on board; from "The Art of War," The National Archives (UK), http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/theartofwar/prop/home_front/INF3_0229.htm.
CREATOR | Gerald Lacoste
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
They Can't Get on Without Us

A WWII poster urges British women to join the ATS, or Auxiliary Territorial Service, a "woman's army" formed in September 1938 to free as many men as possible for service on the front. The scene in the background suggests one of the Service's primary roles, that of acting as "spotters" for anti-aircraft guns. While the depiction of women in wartime offered by this poster differs greatly from that of the "Keep Mum" series, the imagery conceals one aspect of service in the ATS: the women received only two-thirds of the pay rate for male soldiers in the British Army.

SOURCE | "Dugdale" (Thomas Cantrell), "They can't get on without us," date unknown, pastel and gouache on paper, from "The Art of War," The National Archives (UK), http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/theartofwar/prop/home_front/INF3_0117.htm.
CREATOR | Dugdale (Thomas Cantrell)
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
"We will ruthlessly defeat and destroy the enemy!"

A Soviet poster shows a Red Army soldier dispatching a gnome-like Hitler. The torn document and discarded mask represent the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the treaty of non-aggression signed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union and violated when the Nazis invaded Russia on June 22, 1941. This poster was the creation of the Kukryniksy, a collective of three artists who became famous before and during the war for their caricatures of Hitler, Mussolini, and other Nazi and Fascist leaders.

SOURCE | Kukryniksy, "We will ruthlessly defeat and destroy the enemy!" 1941, poster, from GraphicWitness.org, www.graphicwitness.org/undone/rp.htm.
CREATOR | Kukryniksy
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
"Altpapiersammlung (Paper Drive)"

A 1943 poster announces a Nazi paper drive. As in the Allied countries, German civilians were expected to contribute to the war effort by recycling materials, rationing food, and buying war bonds. In Nazi Germany, however, such participation was seldom optional. Boys of the age shown in this poster, for example, would have been required to join the Hitler Youth, the Nazi Party’s paramilitary organization for young people, and in the closing days of the war, would likely have been conscripted into service on the front.

CREATOR | Unknown
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
"Nicht spenden, Opfern (Don't give, Sacrifice)"

This 1930s-era Nazi poster translates as "Don't give, Sacrifice," to the Winterhilfswerk (Winter Aid), a Nazi party charity. The dire economic circumstances in Germany during the 1930s both facilitated the Nazis' rise to power and served as a focal point for expressions of German national unity, including the making of such personal "sacrifices" which were not always voluntary. Graphically, the poster retains some of the avant-garde style of Weimar-period art movements like Bauhaus. In subsequent years, such innovations were increasingly suppressed by the Nazi regime as "degenerate," and the more modernist styles of the 1930s were replaced by the "realism" of World War II-era Nazi propaganda.

SOURCE | "Nicht spenden, Opfern," 1930s, poster; from Calvin College online collection "Nazi Posters 1933-1945," http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/posters2.htm.
CREATOR | Unknown
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
"Du Bilt Front (You Are the Front)"

Like many Allied propaganda images from the same period, this Nazi World War II poster focuses on the importance of the role played by civilians in the war effort. Workers in munitions factories and other war-production-related industries were viewed as particularly important. The point made by the juxtaposition of the toiling factory worker with the heroic soldier in the background is driven home further by the text, which translates to "You are the front."

CREATOR | Unknown
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
"Der Jude (The Jew)"

This poster, issued in 1943 or 1944, was intended to perpetuate the Nazi myth of "the Jew" as "inciter of war, prolonger of war." As German fortunes in the war begin to decline, myths of a "Jewish conspiracy" made a convenient scapegoat for failing military policies in a war started by Hitler's desire to create a racially "pure" German empire. In the artist's rather crude rendering, a corpulent Jewish stereotype gazes disdainfully down on a crowd of raised fists, a scene of wartime destruction in the background. Anti-Semitic imagery and ideology had been part of the Nazi program from the earliest origins of the party, finding their ultimate expression in the systematic murder of approximately six million Jews.

CREATOR | Unknown
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
Another Soviet poster from shortly after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 is this work by A. Kokorekina, in which a Red Army soldier pierces a serpent cleverly coiled into the shape of a swastika. The caption, which translates as "Death to the Fascist Reptile!," is as arresting as the image. The poster's simple color scheme was the likely the result of the need to produce images quickly and cheaply in the aftermath of the invasion, but nonetheless results in a bold and striking example of visual propaganda.

CREATOR | A. Kokorekina
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
"Red Army man, come to the rescue!"

A Soviet poster from 1942 shows a Russian family threatened by a Nazi bayonet. Such fears were not unwarranted: between 1941 and 1944, some 20 million Soviet civilians were killed by the Nazis. The image employs an almost cinematic approach, juxtaposing the dramatically-shaded, monochromatic mother and child with blood-red splashes of color. The text reads, "Red Army man, come to the rescue!"

CREATOR | Viktor Koretskii
ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
"On the Joyous Day of Liberation from under the Yoke of the German Invaders"

This poster by Viktor Koretskii celebrates the victory of Red Army forces in turning the tide on the Eastern Front after German forces were turned back in a number of brutal and costly battles, including Stalingrad and Kursk. As in Nazi Germany, the more avant-garde experimentations of early Soviet propaganda gave way during the war to the "realist" style that predominated under Stalin. The image of the archetypal Russian peasant family smiling under the portrait of Stalin, with the caption "On the Joyous Day of Liberation from under the Yoke of the German Invaders," was no doubt meant to reassure a traumatized Russian population. At least 20 million Soviet civilians perished during the conflict.


CREATOR | Viktor Koretskii

ITEM TYPE | Poster/Print
Before the lesson begins, the teacher should prepare packets of posters for each nation: United States, Great Britain, Nazi Germany, and Soviet Union.