

Images of Propaganda: World War I and World War II Posters

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America's entry into World War I on April 6, 1917 created an immediate need for a large-scale, nationwide publicity campaign such as this country had never before mounted. Posters played an important role in this endeavor and gained widespread use as instruments of propaganda. In the days before the development of electronic media, governments of fighting nations used this eye-catching, visually appealing medium to inform as well as influence the viewer. Inexpensive to produce in multiple copies and intended for public display, posters relied on pictorial imagery to arouse citizens' emotions and to unify support for the war.

During the First World War nearly 3000 posters were designed in the United States by artists who volunteered their services to government and civilian agencies. Printings of 100,000 or more were not uncommon, and millions of posters were distributed for the war fund

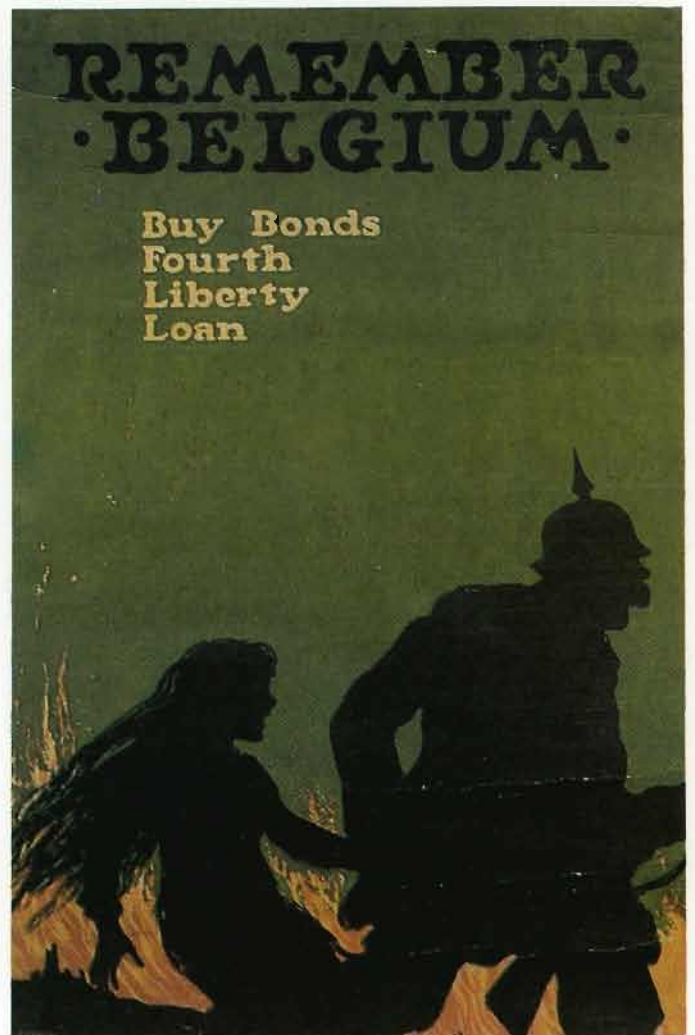
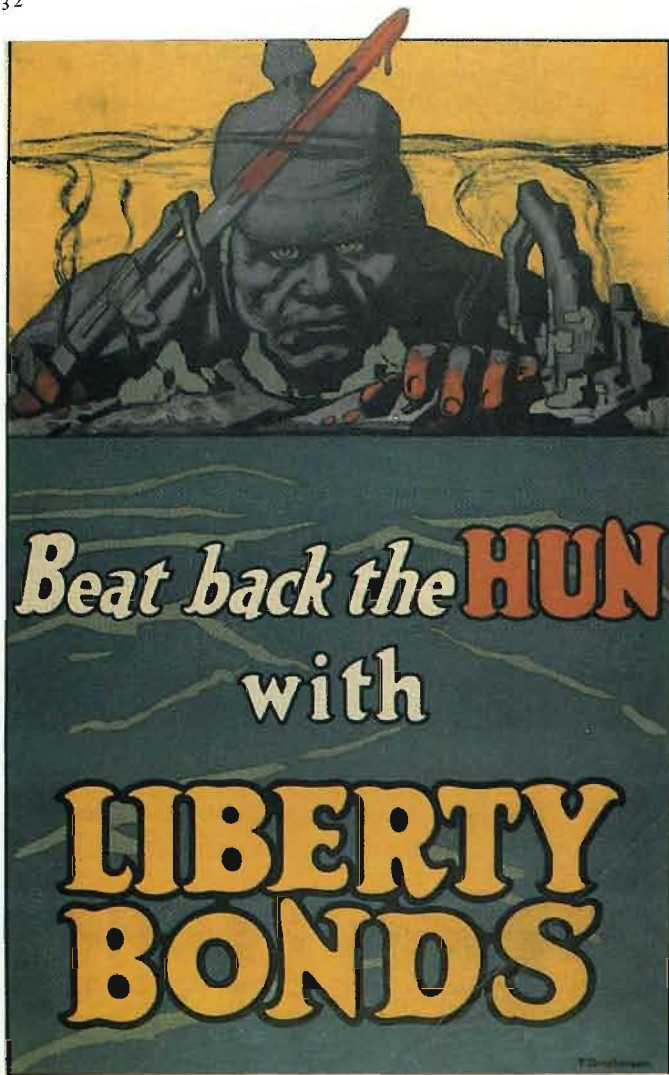
drives alone. Although as many, if not more, posters were produced during World War II, technological advances subordinated their impact as a propaganda tool. Domestic and shortwave radios, newsreels, airborne leaflets, and widely-circulated newspapers and magazines reduced dependence on posters for mass communication.¹

Nevertheless, posters, through their use of visual imagery and bold text, continued to achieve a strong psychological effect. As examples of good graphic design and illustration juxtaposed with a complementary choice of captions, some were obviously more successful. A large number of World War I and World War II posters may be viewed interchangeably; in fact, images used in the first war often reappeared in the Second World War. Posters served similar purposes in both wars and artists relied on many of the same images and ideas to capture the viewer's attention. Recurring themes and subjects peculiar to the posters of each war reflected differences in the two wars' basic issues and attitudes.

Faced with the need in World War I to mobilize manpower and financial support quickly, the United States government established the Committee on Public Information under the leadership of the publicist George Creel to "sell" the war to the American people. The Committee's work involved organizing canvassers for recruiting and loan subscriptions and arranging for brief, patriotic speeches made by citizens who came to be known as the Four Minute Men. Poster distributions were regarded as instrumental, "in building morale, arousing the spiritual forces of the Nation, and stimulating the war will of the people."² On April 17, 1917, the Division of Pictorial Publicity was organized under the chairmanship of Charles Dana Gibson to supply federal and private agencies with pictorial forms of publicity. Upon receiving a request for a poster, this volunteer committee of artists solicited designs and reviewed all drawings submitted. The group met once a week throughout the war at Keene's Chop House in New York City to discuss organizations' requests.³ In all, a total of 1438 designs were produced by professional artists working through the Division.⁴ A similar group of artists worked for the United States Navy and Marines. Many art school students contributed poster designs as well.⁵

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Strobridge Lithographing Company of Cincinnati produced John Norton's "Keep These Off the U.S.A."



Posters were used to recruit, raise money, increase labor productivity, conserve food supplies, and build morale in both wars.

Over eighteen million posters were distributed for the third and fourth "Liberty Loans."

Poster production in the Second World War came under even closer governmental supervision. The number of voluntary relief organizations and charities producing posters declined, with many agencies combined under the Office of War Information. The Office for Emergency Management and the War Manpower Commission also produced a number of posters. Stricter official control led to increased recognition for individual artists' works and more awards were given for poster design.⁶

World War I and World War II agencies used posters for recruitment, to raise money through bond sales for equipment, and provide aid overseas for the troops and refugees. On the homefront, posters called for increased production and the mobilization of labor "to man" the factories where for the first time in World War I women filled the positions. As acute shortages of food, medical supplies, and basic goods such as coal, oil, and soap developed along the front, posters underscored the need for food rationing and the conservation of resources at home. To create psychological support for the war, they espoused its moral cause in terms of right versus wrong and presented graphically the atrocities of the enemy.

Artists used familiar images and ideas in posters to elicit an immediate, emotive response on the part of the viewer. They employed a variety of psychological techniques, many of which were repeated in the Second World War, to communicate their message. Images of national leaders like Woodrow Wilson or Franklin D. Roosevelt or quotations from those leaders lent authority to the war effort. Flags and patriotic symbols such as the American eagle and Statue of Liberty aroused feelings of national pride. Slogans like "Beat Back the Hun" became ingrained in the national consciousness through their use on war posters. Familiar folk tales, historical events such as Valley Forge, and idealized personifications like Columbia drew parallels to the present situation. Ideas were often reinforced by gesture and stance, facial expression, costume or appropriate action. By reversing the techniques used to promote patriotism, artists were able to vilify the enemy.⁷ They frequently relied on caricature to illustrate the enemy's barbarism. The German "Hun" was often portrayed as a hideous, ape-like monster although the actual bloodshed and horrors of war were rarely depicted.

The American war posters in the collection of the Cincinnati Historical Society represent important examples of poster art used for propaganda purposes and reflect the changing issues and concerns of each war. Well-known illustrators represented by World War I posters in the collection include James Montgomery Flagg, Howard Chandler

Christy, Joseph Christian Leyendecker, Joseph Pennell, Adolph Treidler, and Henry Patrick Raleigh. Some of these artists, such as Flagg, designed posters again in the Second World War. Other artists whose works in the collection date from World War II are Ben Shahn, Jean Carlu, Bernard Perlin, and Anton Otto Fischer.



Of the several hundred posters in the Society's collection, most are from the First World War. By and large, these have greater dramatic content in their use of startling and powerful imagery. World War I propaganda played on people's feelings of guilt to insure that all contributed their fair share to the war effort. Stark images of suffering and homeless refugees, usually women and children, evoked sympathy for their plight. Aimed at the individual, the posters' appeal links the defense of personal life and property with the defense of the nation.⁸ Henry Patrick Raleigh's poster, "Hun or Home" illustrates the war's emotionalism, contrasting the victims' innocence with the villainous behavior of the enemy. Early war posters often portrayed traditional family relationships. As the war progressed and labor became scarce, women were shown increasingly in their new role as factory workers.

In World War I the five "Liberty Loan" campaigns raised much needed funds for financing the war.

With a few notable exceptions, the World War II posters in the Society's collection are not as visually or emotionally compelling. Disillusionment after the heavy losses and devastation of the first war engendered a more reserved attitude toward the Second World War and created a suspicion of government-sponsored propaganda.⁹ Newly or more readily available forms of mass communication like the radio, film reels, and cheaply-printed newspapers and magazines led to the inevitable decline of the posters' propaganda role. World War II posters are, for the most part, informative and matter-of-fact, reflecting a tendency toward greater realism, particularly in the use of photographs. A unique feature of propaganda in the Second World War, as improved communications heightened fears of espionage and sabotage, is illustrated by posters to stop careless talk.¹⁰ The haunting image of the drowning man in Siebel's poster, "Someone Talked!" makes the message plain.

Among the earliest poster campaigns mounted in World War I were appeals for men to join the military forces. After the authorization of conscription on May 18, 1917, recruiting posters became less numerous. Even so, the Navy and Marine Corps remained all-volunteer services and continued to recruit actively through posters.¹¹ In the Society's collection is the most famous poster of both wars, James Montgomery Flagg's finger-pointing Uncle Sam of 1917, "I Want *You*" which was used again in the Second World War with approximately 5,000,000 copies printed. Originally drawn as a watercolor sketch for the cover of *Leslie's Weekly*, Flagg maintained that he had posed in front of a mirror dressed as Uncle Sam for the drawing.¹² An even more dynamic version of Uncle Sam rolling up his shirt-sleeves was used by Flagg in a 1945 poster announcing, "Jap...You're next! Buy Extra Bonds."

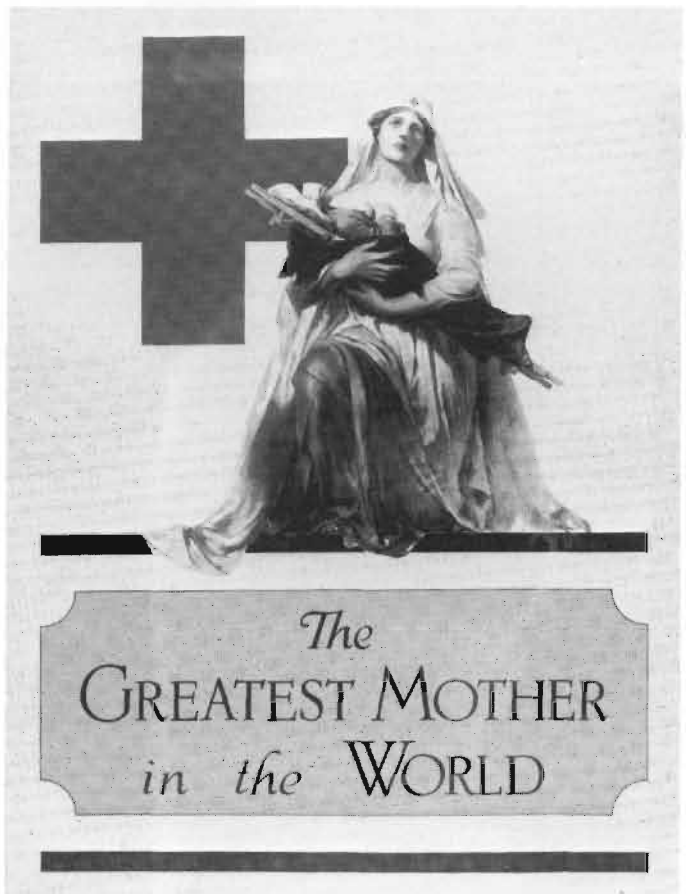
To fund the wars, the United States Treasury borrowed money through the sale of government bonds and savings stamps. Five "Liberty Loan" campaigns were launched during the First World War. Known as the "Victory Liberty Loan," the last sale did not commence until April 1919, five months after the Armistice.¹³ Two-thirds of the war funds used by the United States in World War I were obtained through the sale of bonds. The monies provided loans to the Allies, equipped and maintained the military forces and built ships for the emergency fleet.¹⁴

An astonishing number of posters were designed and printed for the Liberty Loan campaigns. Nine million posters were distributed for the Third Liberty Loan and ten million for the fourth.¹⁵ Americans pledged a total of twenty-one billion dollars and oversubscribed all five loans.¹⁶

"Over the top for you," proclaimed by the wholesome, flag-bearing, young soldier in Sidney H. Riesenberg's poster for the Third Liberty Loan refers to the quota of loan subscribers set in each community.

One of the most effective Liberty Loan posters was John Norton's powerful image of the enemy's red, bloodied boots. Printed by the Strobridge Lithographing Company of Cincinnati, the message is clear, "Keep These Off the U.S.A." Well-known nationally for its theater and circus posters, the Cincinnati firm also produced the graphic "Come On! Buy More Liberty Bonds" by the illustrator Walter Whitehead. Whitehead studied under Howard Pyle, worked for many leading magazines, and taught at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. The poster of the armed soldier standing over the body of the dead enemy is unusual for its realistic depiction of the grim aspects of combat.¹⁷

Howard Chandler Christy favored a lighter treatment of the war. Known for his fashionable illustrations, Christy was also a noted portrait and mural painter. He created the "Christy Girl" (counterpart to the "Gibson Girl") who appeared in most of his war posters. Done for the



Alonzo Earl Foringer drew the Red Cross mother cradling the wounded soldier on a stretcher which some said symbolized the Pieta.



Fourth Liberty Loan, "Clear-the-Way!!" is typical of his work. A very pretty Columbia is juxtaposed with a naval gunnery crew, copied from an actual photograph. Although popular, Christy's poster illustrations received criticism for their poor design and lack of dignity.¹⁸

First sold in January 1918, War Savings Stamps (W.S.S.) were intended to attract low-income investors including children who could not afford Liberty Bonds.¹⁹ A benign Uncle Sam appealed to children in Flagg's poster, "Boys and Girls! You Can Help Your Uncle Sam Win the War. Save Your Quarters. Buy War Savings Stamps!"

Aid for the troops and refugees overseas was provided by the Red Cross and other relief organizations such as the Salvation Army, the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A. In World War I, these organizations relied heavily on posters for fund and membership drives. Seven agencies cooperated in sponsoring the United War Work Campaign, one of the last public appeals of the war that involved the circulation of

several million posters from November 11-24, 1918. Organizations such as the American Library Association used posters to request books for the soldiers overseas.²⁰

One of the most unusual World War I posters in the collection is "The Greatest Mother in the World" done for the Red Cross by Alonzo Earl Foringer. Dual symbolic meaning has been ascribed to the sentimental image of the large Red Cross "mother" cradling the greatly-reduced figure of a wounded soldier on a stretcher. Reminiscent of the Virgin and Child, the two figures in the front of the cross also recall the Pieta. According to Foringer, Agnes Tait, the artist who served as the model, possessed, "a kind of natural languid grace that seemed to fit exactly my conception of the Madonna type."²¹ The poster was widely copied and reappeared in the Second World War.

Posters called for increased labor productivity to fuel the war effort. In World War I, special appeals were made to women who joined the labor force in large numbers for the first time. The caption on a Y.W.C.A poster of a female factory worker upholding the products of her labor, an artillery shell and a bi-plane, declares, "For Every Fighter, a Woman Worker." Symbolic of women's new role, the image is effective and the message clear. Many posters reflected the new fascination with machinery, especially the airplane and submarine, which were used extensively for the first time in World War I.²²

Portrayed as thinner and more businesslike than their predecessors, women were featured prominently once again in posters of the Second World War. The importance of their contributions to the labor force and the war effort is explicit in posters like, "Women in the War. We Can't Win Without Them."

The paired images of machinist and the fighter in "Give 'em Both Barrels" by the French artist Jean Carlu clearly linked increased production at home with winning the war abroad. Carlu was a prominent graphic designer in France during the 1920's and 1930's. Appointed artistic adviser to the French Information Service, he organized a display at the New York World's Fair on the theme of "France at War." He was later named artistic adviser to the United States Office of War Information for which the poster was executed.²³

The conservation of food and essential resources was urged in posters, many of which were issued in World War I by the United States Food and Fuel Administrations and the National War Garden Commission. The amusing message on one such poster by J. Paul Verrees asked, "What Are You Doing? The Kaiser is Canned-Can

Posters used patriotic symbols as well as slogans to arouse feelings of national pride.

Women in W.W.II posters appeared thinner and more business-like than they had in those produced in W.W.I.

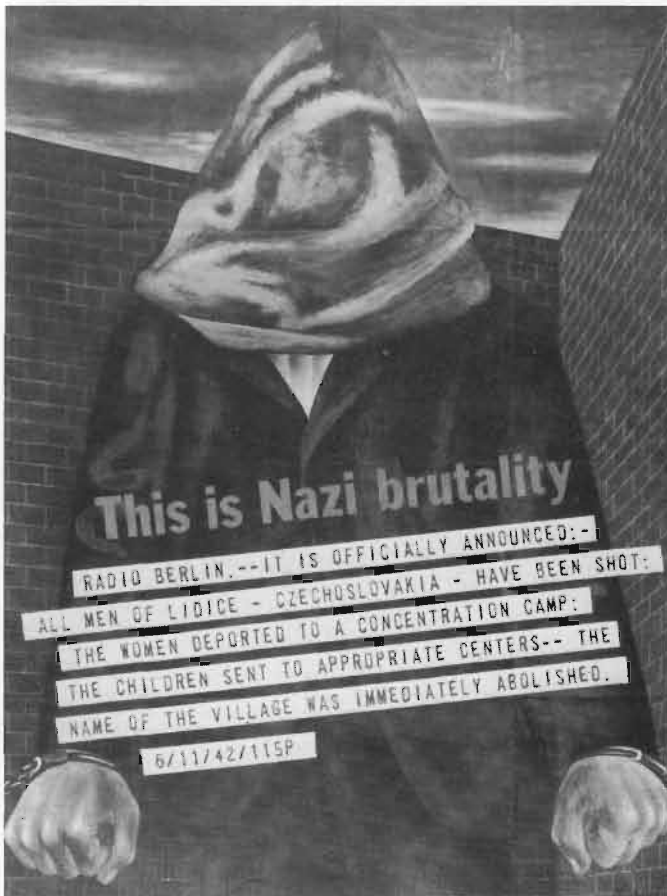
Food, Can Vegetables, Fruit and the Kaiser Too..." Victory gardens flourished under the happy inspiration of posters like Flagg's "Sow the Seeds of Victory!..." In contrast, "Blood or Bread..." is the sober proclamation on a poster by Henry Patrick Raleigh. "...Others are giving their blood. You will shorten the war-save life if you eat only what you need, and waste nothing."

World War II conservation posters covered a broader range of subjects, including travel. The caption on one such poster declared, "They've got more important places to go than you!... Save rubber. Check your tires now." Health concerns received greater attention. One reminded the viewer that, "Doctors are scarce, one out of three has gone to war. Be prepared for minor injury, for minor illness. Learn first aid and home nursing."

Nazi ideology was attacked in World War II posters, but in deference to the Russian allies, communism never received mention.²⁴ One of the most disturbing posters in the Society's collection, "This Is Nazi Brutality" was done by the Lithuanian-born artist Ben Shahn, well-known for his social commentary and hatred of injustice. Shahn was em-

ployed with the Office of War Information for which the poster was done. Set against a bleak, angular background, the hooded figure symbolizes the wanton destruction of the village of Lidice by the Nazis on June 10, 1942. Two towns named Lidice were later founded in America so that the name would not be forgotten.²⁵

Faced with the wartime need to recruit, raise money, increase labor productivity, conserve food and supplies, and build morale, posters promoted the national interest and disseminated information to a large, diverse audience. The Society's collection of American war posters represents an important sampling of poster art used for propaganda purposes. With their emphasis on visual imagery to communicate a message, posters achieve a strong, psychological impact and reflect a range of emotions, from the comic to the deeply tragic. Images and ideas used successfully by artists in both World War I and World War II illustrate a common artistic and social heritage. Historically significant as a visual testimony to the changing issues and anxieties of war, the posters document an era and serve as a reminder of our past.



1. Crawford, Anthony R., ed., *Posters of World War I and World War II in the George C. Marshall Foundation*, (Charlottesville, 1979), p. 3.
2. Coffey, John W., *American Posters of World War One*, (Williamstown, 1978), p. 2.
3. Meyer, Susan E., *James Montgomery Flagg*, (N.Y., 1974), p. 37.
4. Darracott, Joseph and Belinda Loftus, *First World War Posters*, (n.p., 1972), p. 7.
5. Rickards, Maurice, *Posters of the First World War*, (N.Y., 1968), pp. 20-21.
6. Darracott, Joseph and Belinda Loftus, *Second World War Posters*, (n.p., 1972), p. 8.
7. Crawford, *Posters*, pp. 7-8.
8. Gallo, Max, *The Poster in History*, trans. Alfred and Bruni Mayor, (Milan, Italy, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore: 1975) p. 135.
9. Crawford, *Posters*, pp. 9-10.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
11. Darracott, *First World War*, p. 6.
12. Meyer, *Flagg*, pp. 36-37.
13. Coffey, *American Posters*, p. 6.
14. St. Clair, Labert, *The Story of the Liberty Loans*, (Washington, D.C., 1919), p. 27.
15. Darracott, *First World War*, p. 5.
16. Coffey, *American Posters*, p. 7.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 7-8.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
22. Gallo, *Posters in History*, p. 146.
23. Darracott, *Second World War*, p. 22.
24. Crawford, *Posters*, p. 11.
25. Darracott, *Second World War*, p. 52.

Artists relied on caricature, facial expression, gesture and stance, and costume to vilify the enemy.