

Every Citizen a Soldier: The World War II Propaganda Poster



When You Ride Alone You Ride With Hitler!" it was all part of the propaganda poster in shaping the thinking of the American homefront during World War II. While guns, tanks, and bombs were the principal weapons of WWII, there were other more subtle forms of warfare as well.

Words, posters and films waged a constant battle for the hearts and minds of the American citizenry just as surely as military weapons engaged the enemy. Persuading the American public became a wartime industry, almost as important as the manufacturing of bullets and planes. The government launched an aggressive propaganda campaign to galvanize public support, and some of the nation's foremost intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers became warriors on that front.

The posters during this time period were abundant. One type of poster motivated the viewer by instilling patriotism, confidence, and a positive outlook. Patriotic colors of red, white, and blue predominate. Pictures of fists, muscles, tools, and artillery convey American strength appealing to the patriotic bravado in "every citizen."

Other posters were angled at the dark side of the war—the human cost of war—confronting the viewer with corpses, bloodshed, and gravestones, striking up fear and even hate.

Inexpensive, accessible, and ever-present, the poster was an ideal agent for making war aims the personal mission of every citizen. Government agencies, businesses, and private organizations issued an array of poster images linking the military front with the home front, calling upon every American to boost production at work and at home.

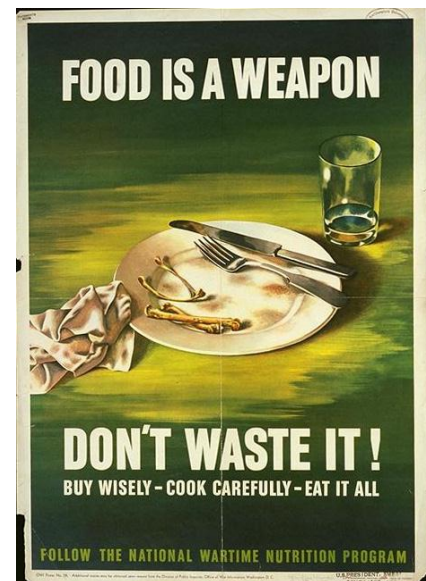
Deriving their appearance from the fine and commercial arts, posters conveyed more than simple slogans. Posters expressed the needs and goals of the people who created them.

Addressing every citizen as a key player in supporting the war effort, wartime posters united the power of art with the power of advertising to sell the idea that the factory and the home were also arenas of war. Poster campaigns aimed not only to increase productivity in factories, but also to enlarge people's views of their responsibilities in a time of total war. Wartime posters were conceived as a visual call to arms. According to poster designers, posters should be to the eye what a shouted command is to the ear.

During the First World War, posters were the primary form of public communication, but by 1940, posters had been supplanted by radio, movies, and billboards. Why then did government and private industry turn to posters to rally the public in WWII?

First, people would encounter posters in places that other media couldn't reach such as schools, factories, offices, store windows, and other places outside the scope of paid advertising. Second, posters had democratic appeal—they could be made by anyone and could be seen by all. Both medium and message spoke of democracy which made posters ideal for expressing American war aims such as why we fight and what we fight for.

To tap the creative energies of American artists, the Museum of Modern Art organized a National Defense Poster Competition in 1941. The Army Air Corps and the Treasury Department launched a contest with the Museum of Modern Art for poster creation.





Preceding WWII there was a turbulent labor movement in America. Now the war emergency demanded a change in American industry. The American manufacturing base had changed from a focus on consumer goods to materials for the war. The attitude of labor uproar was quelled and replaced by one of "everybody does their part."

Personal sacrifices would be required to win the war. Soon individual businesses as well as the labor unions would follow this track. With the new thinking of American workers a flurry of new posters was everywhere, except many were not government produced, but produced privately. These posters reflected the hearts and minds of the American worker.

Europe was hit hard and was greatly deprived of common consumables and commodities for everyday living. Although the United States did not experience the same level of deprivation, there were wartime shortages. Gasoline, rubber, sugar, butter, and meat

were among the many items that were rationed if they were available at all. It was often found in the messages of these posters that any sacrifices made either through rationing or abstention, meant more resources for our troops in the trenches.

The government realized the valuable role that posters could play, enough so that they offered tips and pointers for factories and businesses to place enough posters for all to see. Of course it was in the best interest of the companies to create their own posters and insure that they were prominently posted as they prompted efficient working patterns and a greater output. The government was only the catalyst to get the campaign going and companies soon took off with luring artists and designers to come up with their own creations.

The government created the U.S. Office of War Information (OWI) in June 1942. It was the intent of this agency to control the content and message that the posters were delivering. There was some conflict between the advertising professionals who wanted to use their advertising abilities and messages, and the government who wanted to focus on the art of war and the nationalism and patriotism that heroic slogans and illustrations created. Eventually, advertising agents gained the upper hand at OWI and the look of government posters changed decidedly.



By James R. Romeo
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