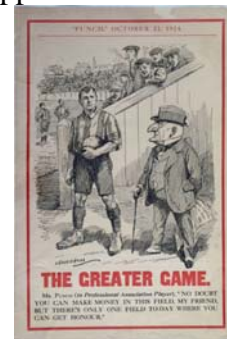
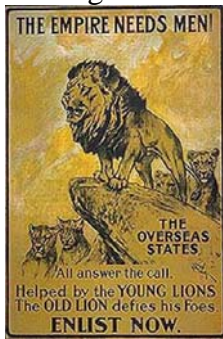


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Visual Images of National Identity: Propaganda Posters of the Great War

While rhetoric has traditionally been thought of as being confined to the realm of language, the art takes other forms as well. As the exhibit of World War I propaganda posters currently on display at the University of South Carolina's McKissick Museum demonstrate, rhetoric happens not just through speech and written word, but may also work through visuals, or through a combination of images and words that persuade. The dramatic propaganda posters of the Great War seek to evoke emotional and financial civilian support for the War through a variety of rhetorical strategies. As I will show, each Allied nation employs a distinctive style in appealing to its citizens; the posters of Great Britain, France, and the United States were all crafted with the same goals, but use different strategies of persuasion.

First and foremost the posters of the Allied nations reflect the ethos, or preexisting identity, that each nation brought to the table in the process of making its appeals to its citizens. The histories and values of British, French, and American societies and governments played a large role in shaping the styles of that nation's propaganda posters. British posters, for example, tend to rely on traditional British concepts of honor and the empire to instill nationalism and promote military enlistment. One British poster shows a male lion, an image traditionally associated with patriarchal royalty, standing on a rock above his pride, his mane flowing, his chest swollen with pride. The poster alludes to Britain as the Old Lion who defies his foes with the help of the young lions, presumably the United States and France. Drawing on the sentiments raised by words and images of the empire, United Kingdom posters often rely on a feeling of honor-bound obligation, one might say feelings of guilt in some cases, for their rhetorical power. One British poster, for example, features a portrait of nobleman Lord Kitchener, and the following quote: does the call of duty find no response in you until reinforced - let us rather say superseded - by the call of compulsion? In a third poster from the U. K. which emphasizes the appeal of honor within Britain's imperial culture a professional soccer player is told you can make money in this field, my friend, but there's only one field today where you can get honour. While it's never explicitly stated, one gets the feeling looking at British posters that civilians are being asked to support the war for the Crown.



("The Empire Needs Men," British (1919); "Lord Kitchener Says," British (1915); "The Greater Game," British (1914))

The French posters in this exhibit, on the other hand, tend to rely less on concepts of honor or the empire and instead on the traditional values expressed in the Republic's motto: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. More dramatically symbolic than British posters, French posters tend to evoke a sense of camaraderie between the allies, often depicting soldiers representing France, Britain, and the U.S. collectively defeating a symbolic representation of German forces, usually the black eagle. In one poster mounted soldiers displaying the flags and uniforms of France, the United States, and Britain watch Germany's black eagle retreat towards the horizon. In another, allied troops in the uniforms of their nations scale a mountain spire, on top of which the black eagle is perched, its claws red with blood. The few French posters that deviate from this theme still maintain the others, usually depicting victory over German forces.



"allies triumphing together" romanticized style of the images symbolic of French

("Un Dernier Effort," French (1917); "Pour Le Supreme Effort," French (1918))

Not only the traditional French values of equality and fraternity are represented on the posters, but liberty plays a large role in the propaganda posters as well. Since Liberty has been personified in French culture since the Revolution, it is unsurprising that her image was frequently used for its persuasive power on French propaganda posters. Images of Liberty, resembling a Greek goddess, complete with laurels, abound on posters with and without representations of the other allied nations. Liberty is often depicted posing, huge and specter-like, above a group of soldiers. Depictions of Liberty are a link between French and American posters, perhaps due to France's gift of the Statue of Liberty to the United States in 1886, although France's version of Liberty differs from her American counterpart in several minor details of appearance (e.g., the French Liberty often has wings, the American Liberty does not).



("Emprunt de la Liberation," French (1918))

Unsurprisingly, since freedom is a major part of the American ethos, Liberty appears on several posters from the United States as well. One American poster is a dramatic painting of men firing a giant naval gun; as in the French posters, Liberty looms enormously over the soldiers. Unlike the French Liberty, the American representation of the figure has as her backdrop a giant, billowing, American flag, the New World alternative to the wings that French artists give the figure. Similarly, the distinctively American icon Uncle Sam makes a poster appearance as well, bedecked in his usual stars and stripes.



(“Clear the Way,” US (1918); “Boys and Girls!” US (1918))

Posters from the United States also demonstrate the value that America, as a nation of immigrants, has traditionally placed on diversity. An American poster commissioned by the Jewish Welfare Board features a large Star of David and the message: “Civilians, when we go through this we need all the help and comfort you can give”, calling for unity among Americans of various backgrounds. One poster which emphasizes both freedom and diversity features a woman, apparently representing Liberty, lifting laurels above an Honor Roll of conspicuously ethnically diverse surnames, including Smith, Gonzales, and Kowalski. The text at the top of the poster reads, in all capitals, AMERICANS ALL! The bottom of the poster, of course, calls for civilians to buy Liberty Bonds.



(“Americans All!” US (1919))

Taking advantage of the values, or identity, shared by the citizens of a nation is one form of emotional, or pathetic appeal, but certainly not the only one that designers considered when crafting these propaganda posters. Poster designers sought to appeal to the public's emotions in a variety of ways, sometimes altering their tactics depending on the particular target audience or time of year. One American poster targeting children,

for example, bears the heading: “BOYS and GIRLS! You can help your Uncle Sam Win the War” (see above). The poster depicts Uncle Sam holding a young girl in one arm while a boy looks reverently up at the white-haired figure. Another American poster has a Christmas theme: a nurse reaches out towards the viewer in a gesture of pleading, the text reads Have you answered the Red Cross Christmas Roll Call? Some posters seem to be intended to appeal to very basic human values, as in the case of one American poster on which a young soldier lovingly wraps his arms around his wife and young son. The poster bears the title “For Home and Country,” along with “Victory Liberty Loan.”



(“Have You Answered the Red Cross Christmas Roll Call?” US (1919); “For Home and Country,” US (1918))

Another important persuasive tool of the propaganda posters is style. Poster designers realized that aesthetically pleasing (if not always pleasant), cohesive-looking posters would be more effective because they would be more attractive to the eye. Concepts of exactly what is aesthetically pleasing varied from nation to nation; and for that reason, French, British, and American posters are each distinguished by the country’s particular style of presentation.

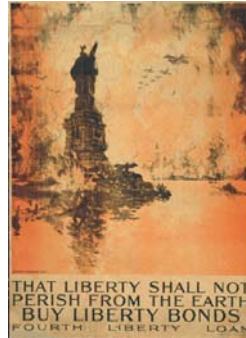
French posters from World War I present the most romantic images of combat to be found on allied posters. Although the style of illustration used by French artists for the posters is realistic, the images and situations they depict are usually romanticized and highly symbolic representations of victory and not attempts at realistically portraying warfare. Soldiers on French posters often look as if they’ve just reached the moment of victory; their arms are thrown up, they hold their hats in the air. When battle is portrayed on French posters, the imagery is purely symbolic, usually consisting of allied soldiers defeating Germany’s black eagle. “Pour le Supreme Effort” (see image above), for instance, features a stout-looking soldier in the blue uniform of France choking the great black eagle of Germany with his bear hands, the spiked helmet associated with German forces lying empty behind him. In addition to their fondness for symbolism, French artists also paid close attention to the affect of color on their posters; French posters are colored with bright yellows, light blues, and vivid whites that bring sunny days to mind. The style of the text on French posters is also interesting for its tendency to alternate between the very large comic book style of text that American poster designers were so fond of (see “l’Humanite,” below) and smaller, ornate lettering, like that in “Journee de l’Orphelinal des Armees.”



(“l’Humanité,” French (1916); “Journée de l-Orphelinat des Armees,” French (1915))

In contrast to France’s romantic imagery, British posters tend to feature a style of illustration that fits the nation’s reputation for reservedness and prudence. The United Kingdom’s posters are by far the duller of the Great War. The figures on the posters, for the most part, are illustrated in a straightforward, realistic style. And nothing much seems to be happening in British posters; most depict scenes of discussion rather than scenes of battle. The color scheme of a typical British propaganda poster is very drab, roughly the same color scheme that would be expected of a khaki uniform. The text style is as sparsely ornamented as the color schemes: plain, blocky letters in all caps make up practically all the text. Stylistically speaking, propaganda posters from the U. K. are interesting only because of how sharply they contrast with the flashy, romantic posters of France and the United States. “The Greater Good” (see image above) is typical of the British posters’ style.

American posters are easily the most visually striking allied posters in this World War I exhibit. U.S. posters tend to be more dramatic in style than their European counterparts, and are much darker in tone than French and British posters as a whole. American posters are also different from European posters in their level of realism. While French and British posters usually portray somewhat-realistic looking scenes and figures, American posters tend to feature highly stylized, highly dramatic figures that look as if they might have been pulled from the pages of a war-oriented comic book. The artist’s tendency towards the dramatic extends to subject matter as well; American posters frequently portray the potential consequences of war without civilian support through the highly-stylized imagery that distinguishes posters of American origin. One American poster shows a pair of viciously-pointed boots, marked with the German symbol of the black eagle, covered in blood. Another portrays the Statue of Liberty in ruins; Liberty’s decapitated head looks up towards the statue’s mangled frame from the water. In the poster’s background, New York’s skyline is obscured by fire and smoke, and warplanes in V formation fly towards the damaged city. On another, a dark group of soldiers moving in front of a red sky serve as the backdrop for big, yellow, capital letters reading “To make the world a decent place to live in do your part-buy U. S. Government Bonds.”

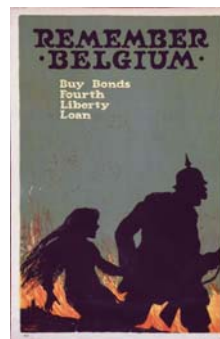


("Keep These off the USA," US (1917?); "That Liberty Shall Not Perish," US (1918?); "To Make the World a Decent Place to Live In," US (1918))



American posters also tend to demonize the enemy more than French or British posters. Whereas French posters usually symbolically depict German forces as a black eagle, on American posters the opposition is usually illustrated as a human with a monstrous, hulking build and blood-covered hands (or boots). American posters also favor using the word "Hun" to refer to any and all Germanic forces (presumably because of the word's threatening connotations), as in the case of a poster depicting a giant figure wearing a spiked helmet peering over England's battered shore and holding a bloody bayonet ("Beat Back the Hun," US (1918)). The demonization of the enemy goes hand in hand with another theme of American propaganda posters: the imminent danger to women and children presented by insufficient patriotism and financial support of the war.

In an appeal to masculine concepts of chivalry, American posters frequently depict what might be called "damsel in distress" scenarios. For example, an American poster depicts a woman turned away from the observer, holding a small child in one arm while another pulls at her dress. On a particularly dramatic poster bearing the headline *Halt the Hun!*, a broad-chested marine holding a sword in one hand uses his other arm to push a figure wearing the iron cross and spiked helmet of Germany away from a kneeling woman clutching a child. A hulking silhouette wearing a spiked German helmet drags the silhouette of a small girl by the arm against a background of flames and darkness in another poster. *Remember Belgium* is printed at the top of the poster, along with the usually call to buy liberty bonds.



("Halt the Hun!" US (1918); "Must Children Die and Mothers Plead in Vain?" US (1918); "Remember Belgium," US (1918))

These kind of posters demonstrate a logical appeal found in American posters but absent from British or French propaganda: the if - then statement. Although it is not usually explicitly stated, many American posters are suggestive of an if - then relationship between buying war bonds and victory for the allies. The typical example of the if - then statement as used in an American poster is: if you don't buy Liberty Bonds, enemy forces will attack America. While this is never explicitly stated, many posters suggest just this, the poster featuring New York being destroyed, for example, or the poster featuring a pair of black, bloody boots and reading "Keep these off the U. S. A. Buy more Liberty Bonds." The fact that the if - then method of rhetorical appeal nearly always presents a negative scenario rather than a positive one suggests that propaganda threatening consequences has been more effective than propaganda promising rewards--at least in the United States.

While the styles of each nation's posters differ as a result of the country's individual ethos and the stylistic choices of the nation's artists, the posters all have the rhetorical use of imagery and text in common. The artists from each nation attempted to persuade the country's citizens using text and images, and the artists' approach varies greatly from nation to nation. While French and American poster illustrators used very dramatic imagery to catch the eyes and stir the emotions of their audiences, for example, British posters tend towards a more realistic, reserved style. By examining these posters and the various rhetorical strategies their creators employed to reach their audience, we can gain a better understanding of the ways in which both image and text can be manipulated for persuasion, as well as some notion of how a society's preexisting cultural features shape the development of new rhetoric within the culture.

Work Cited

“Posters of the Great War.” Exhibit of posters from the Joseph Brucoli Collection.

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<<http://www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/hist/gwposters/posterintro.html>>.