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PWR 3-02
Visual Rhetoric and the Power of Persuasion
Research Proposal
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The Rhetoric of War:

Investigating the Persuasive Power of World War II Propaganda

Over the course of World War II, the definitive military conflict of modern history, a great deal of propaganda was created in nations around the world. In fact, propaganda was so prevalent that many academics consider the war to have been fought on two fronts – one military and the other propagandistic. In the battles fought on the latter, metaphorical front, nations around the world competed against one another with their “half-truthful” wartime advertisements. In particular, major powers like Germany, Japan and the United States used propaganda extensively to portray false images of themselves and their enemies. Due to their dissimilar roles and intended audiences, these major powers employed different rhetorical approaches in their respective works of propaganda art. The topic I wish to pursue will revolve around comparing and contrasting the different rhetorical strategies used by Germany, Japan and the United States in their wartime posters. Particularly, I have conjectured that German propaganda made use of the *ethos* appeal of its fascist leader Adolf Hitler; that Japanese propaganda utilized the *logos* appeal by continually portraying images of a victorious Japanese army; and that American propaganda had for the most part employed the *pathos* appeal, by evoking nationalistic feelings and associating war with glory and patriotism (see Figure 1). These conjectures coalesce into my argument that the government of each nation is able to bring its political messages across effectively by employing the appropriate rhetorical appeal in its propaganda posters.



Figure 1. Uncle Sam: the symbol of American nationalism.

Presently, my knowledge about World War II propaganda is limited, as I am still in the preliminary stages of the research process. However, even though I have yet to conduct formal academic research in the vast domain of world history, I have read many books about the events of World War II. I am aware of the economic and political causes of the war, the major battles that occurred, as well as the sides that different nations took in this global military conflict. For instance, I understand that Hitler's Germany was the instigator of the war. Due to the failure of the peace efforts after World War I, Germany had become a fascist state under the rule of Adolf Hitler. German aggression spread throughout Europe, as Hitler began annexing and invading the neighboring states. A full-blown global warfare erupted shortly after, and the ensuing series of battles lasted for roughly six years. The war's resolution came about when the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Of course, this is

merely a brief outline of the war, and is by no means an exhaustive representation of my knowledge about World War II. My familiarity with the second world war will be helpful when I go about analyzing the propaganda posters that emerged in that time period. However, as I've mentioned already, my knowledge about World War II propaganda posters is limited and, as a result, I will have to conduct a great deal of additional research.

Many crucial research questions have arisen in my mind as a result of my limited academic experience with World War II propaganda posters. How did the Germans portray their political leader on paper? What patriotic and nationalistic symbols were used in American propaganda posters? How did the Japanese depict their soldiers in order to stage a sense of triumph? Who were the artists involved in the creation of the posters? More importantly, how did the people of each country respond to these propagandistic messages, and what images did they find to be the most rhetorically effective?

The investigation of these questions entails an extensive research process. First of all, the relevant propagandistic visual texts must be obtained. I will accomplish this by visiting the Hoover archives as well as various online resources (for example, the University of Washington Libraries Digital Collections and the National Archives). In fact, I have already gotten hold of several propaganda posters off the Internet. The next step involves analyzing these posters for their rhetorical significances. In the analysis process, I will turn to the work of several other academics who have already done research in this field, such as Holly Cowan, the author of Voice of America: Propaganda and Democracy, and Kenneth W. Rendell, the author of With Weapons and Wits:

Propaganda and Psychological Warfare in World War II. In addition, I plan to contact the History Department at Stanford, which will provide me with an excellent on-campus resource for doing research on World War II. Last but not least, as several other students have also expressed concern in doing research on the same topic, I will try to arrange meetings with them during which we will discuss the history of World War II and analyze the propaganda posters collaboratively.

In order to carry out the research process in an structured manner, I have proposed a timeline that I will adhere to this month. By February 10th, I will have collected all the relevant propaganda posters that I will use as my primary sources. Then, by February 14th, I will have gathered all the secondary sources, including books about World War II and research papers about the wartime propaganda. The draft Works Cited list will also be completed by this day. If possible, by February 17th, I will have arranged a meeting with the other students who are working on the same research topic. In addition, I will have contacted and visited Stanford's Department of History by this date; a personal or written interview will be conducted with one of the history professors, if possible. A visual annotated bibliography will be completed by February 19th, the day on which all the relevant research will have been conducted. The writing process will begin on February 20th, with a partial draft ready by February 24th and a full draft read by February 26th. After peer review sessions, which will take place between February 26th and March 1st, the final draft will be completed by March 3rd. At this time, I will also have thought about how to present my findings to the class in an informative and engaging manner.

The goal of my research project is to develop the link between the concept of visual rhetoric and World War II propaganda art. By applying the tools of rhetorical

analysis to the wartime propaganda posters, I will distill the relationships between the wartime role of a nation and the nature of its propaganda. As the citizens of Germany, Japan and the United States held significantly different views during the second world war, an analysis of the propaganda posters of their respective nations will also illuminate the correlations between propaganda art and the viewpoints of the general public. The results of this research project will be significant not only to those engaged in historical studies; quite conversely, my findings will be of interest to anyone who wishes to learn about the rhetorical strategies that appear in political propaganda. In short, the ultimate purpose of my research project is to elicit the rhetorical appeals that governments manipulate in order to effectively communicate their political messages.

Bio:

Tommy Sze Ngai Tsai is currently enrolled at Stanford University as an undergraduate student pursuing a Management Science & Engineering B.S. degree. He is also a prospective History, Physics or Computer Science minor. His academic works at Stanford include a rhetorical analysis and a feature article based on the persuasive power of political cartoons. Presently, he is working on an extensive research project concerning the rhetoric of World War II propaganda art. Schooled in Hong Kong for most of his life, he has won numerous awards in mathematics, engineering, public speaking, creative writing, digital art and website design competitions. Before coming to Stanford, his academic and extracurricular achievements have earned him nominations for “Hong Kong Student of the Year” and “South China Morning Post Student of the Year”.