Compare and contrast instances of propaganda and/or design activism.

Subtitle: Comparing the use of poster advertising designs in World War 2 propaganda

Lynette Finch defines propaganda as “the management of opinions and attitudes by the direct manipulation of social suggestion,” (Finch, 2004). One of the greatest examples of widespread propaganda use was during World War II, where it was used by all countries to perpetuate government ideologies and attitudes such as racism in Nazi Germany and patriotism on all sides. Propaganda through various media has been used throughout history, but governments at war adopted it as a powerful tool to create an unfounded fear of the enemy throughout the general public by focusing on differences like race and stereotypes.

When people think of war, images of principal weapons such as bombs, guns, tanks and gas spring to mind. However, there were more subtle forms of warfare. Poster advertising demonstrated how design was used to form public opinion, encouraging recruits to the front line and women to take up positions in the workforce.

Posters featured prominently throughout the war, with countries taking several different approaches to manipulate the public's perception. The governments and army used these tools to play on the human emotion, fighting for the hearts and minds of the public. It became as important as the manufacture of artillery, with intellectuals, artists, and creative minds were recruited to galvanise public support on the front line. Countries used contrasting methods to change ideologies and views of the public, using visual communication to convey their message.

The creation of propaganda in the US was encouraged when the government established the Office of War Information. The organization produced a wide array of propaganda articles, from posters, movies, radio shows and newsreels. The agenda of the Office of War Information was to sway the American citizens to join and fight the war on the home front.

An example of propaganda being used to influence perception which led to the creation and alteration of social stereotypes is the “This is the Enemy” poster (Figure 1.) The American government used racial stereotyping to perpetuate fear amongst the public by exploiting the misconception at the time that race is directly related to certain behaviors and characteristics. This ‘fear the enemy’ tactic created
unity with in the US, encouraging patriotism and allegiance to their country.

This poster ultimately altered the perception of the Japanese in America. One strategy deployed was racially stereotyping the Japanese. The yellow hue of the ‘enemy’ complexion is the color is stereotypically associated with people of Asian descent, alienating them from the pink/peach colour used for the scared female. There is further racial stereotyping evident with slanted eyes, however this is coupled bared teeth and clawed hands that resemble those of a monkey, beastialising the Japanese as unpredictable animalistic monsters.

Aside from racism, undertones of fear were also used to sway the American public against the Japanese. The designer has used dark tones and large strokes to give a threatening and sinister feel to the artwork. The Japanese figure looming over 75% of the poster area adds to the ‘beast’s’ intimidation, whilst the female’s position makes her seem helpless and vulnerable. The contrasting white used to highlight expressions of fear and anger draws the audience’s attention directly to fear.

With Nazi Germany on a mission to ‘cleanse’ the nation of Jewish and disabled people during the war, German propaganda focused on these anti – Semitic views through visual representation. The portrayal of Jews in German propaganda was as “seedy, degenerate, ugly masses associated with vermin…as fat or greedy” (Crites, 2017).

This method was extremely effective as the majority of the public were conditioned to be repulsed by the Jewish population with no foundation to their beliefs (Narayanaswami, 2017).

The Nazis chose these attributes to illustrate the Jewish as ‘different’ from the rest of the population, which played on the fact that humans are predisposed to seeing the differences in others. Conversely, the “Aryan” German stereotype was hailed as pure and aided the perpetuation of a superiority bias nationally. Evidence of the persecution can be seen in figure 2.

The Jewish figure can be identified by the “Star of David” symbol on the large dominant figure. He appears to be overweight, implying he is greedy and selfish. He has an aggressive stance and facial expression and looks to be whipping the poor majority laboring hard to make a living. “Bicz Ludzkosci” or “Scourge of Humanity” anchors the visual. It defines a Jew as ugly, and a menace to the rest of the world. The German government’s ambition was to change the social perception of Jews to
evoke fear amongst the public and every failure in society would be blamed on the Jews to encourage hatred to the minority and “cleanse” the population.

In contrast to how the Jews were portrayed, images of Hitler holding a dominant stance were often used to glorify his appearance. As Figure 3 shows, the image of Hitler is patriarchal and exalted, the designer using the ‘halo effect’ (Thorndike, 1920) to influence the viewer’s thoughts and feelings about this figure as godlike and powerful. A similar bias can be seen in Figures 4 and 5. An Aryan mother and child look adoringly at the figure of Hitler and have been given lighter shading and tone so that their purity is highlighted, while Hitler and the party symbol remain the main focus of the piece. The use of red behind the image of Hitler has connotations of power and strength, while the combination of red and yellow is also a subtle sign of communism, as both colours feature prominently in the communist flag.

While the haloing effect and assertive stances were used to portray Hitler as a leader, the Americans used a similar bold stance to when producing the infamous poster of “Uncle Sam” (Figure 6). Probably one of the most iconic posters produced during the war was the “I Want You” poster designed by James Montgomery Flagg. The iconic image represents a manifestation of patriotism amongst the American public. The original Uncle Sam was a businessman from New York, who supplied barrels of beef to the US army during the war of 1812. The American government heralded Uncle Sam as a working class patriotic man, which is reflected in the star spangled hat, a red cravat and red, white and blue colour scheme.

“Uncle Sam” is illustrated in the centre of the poster. This is significant as again, it has connotations of American patriotism. The audience is instantly engaged with the poster, as “Uncle Sam” points and stares from whatever angle the viewer will be.
seeing the poster. It gives a powerful message, saying “I need you for the US army”. The audience are almost guilt tripped into enlisting for the army, as they will be doing a disservice to their country.

The poster “Defend American Freedom It’s Everybody’s Job” demonstrates how design aided the government’s efforts to get the whole country involved and invested in the war. Uncle Sam is shown to be romanticised with his arms above his head as he adjusts his cap. His skin is tanned and clear and muscle-bound, demonstrating America’s strength as founders of the free world as they labour towards victory. He looks to be getting stuck in with the war effort, which is evident by his rolled up sleeves and work clothing, while his jacket is slung over his shoulder and his star-spangled top hat is cast aside in favour of a workman’s cap.

In comparison, the German government used a different approach in their propaganda techniques to recruit men to the front line and women to labour roles. Unlike the American propaganda, the Nazis used strength and power to recruit men to fight on the front line. Figure 9 shows a much more structured and military approach, with a stencil army stencil like design. The image shows tanks, planes, and heavy armory, encouraging the idea of a strong country. Furthermore, the main focal image positioned in the centre of the poster, shows a military figure from a low perspective. This perspective fuels the ideology of idolism, where the German public should aspire to be in the army and fight for the cause.

Enlisting the public and utilising the help of the skilled American people was high priority for the American government. The posters were designed to show heroism in the people that were engaging with the war effort, which instilled a sense of pride across the nation but also fuelled a united hatred for the enemy (Navarro, A).

While men went off to fight on the front line, women were left at home, meaning production of war armoury wouldn’t be possible due to the void of workers in the work place. At the time, equality was non-existent. Males were favoured for their strength and endurance, however when the war began, there was a need to recruit women to drive the country to victory.
Arguably one of the most prominent images used to promote and recruit women in the Second World War is the famous “Rosie The Riveter” designed by K. Howard Miller. “Rosie The Riveter became a cultural icon of the US, representing the working class women who were needed in the factories to drive the country forward in their war efforts. This is evident from her uniform, and how she seen to be rolling up her sleeves and getting stuck in to the war effort. Her fist is clenched, which has connotations of strength and embodies how females are equally as strong as men.

A recruitment poster produced by the Women Accepted for Volunteer Service (WAVES), the Women’s branch of the United States Naval Reserve illustrates the unity and national pride. In uncertain times where family members were fighting in the war, many men and women felt drawn to these groups to regain a sense of identity using uniforms, colours and flags (Zeman, 1982). The women in the focal image appear to be happy and smiling, whilst their smart uniform shows they take care and pride in their appearance, whilst also displaying a sense of belonging.

The women are tightly squeezed into the frame, which depicts how tightly knit the “sisterhood” is. The government targeted women with low self-esteem with these posters to evoke the human emotional need to be accepted as a member of a group, and become an important part of something greater than themselves. Connor Foley said, “One way to gain support for an effort is to instil confidence in people. When people believe that they have the tools necessary to succeed, they are more likely to engage in a task.” (Foley, 2017). The governments needed women to step up and gather support for the war effort, and by giving them a human social need, they could engage and succeed in their tasks.

Fundamentally, propaganda changed mass perception, and swayed the public’s ideologies of those in power. The agenda of the government was to generate support, whilst instilling hatred for the enemy to ultimately win the war. The depiction of the enemy as ‘animalistic monsters’ was purposefully devised to lodge fear in the minds of the masses, which in turn encouraged unity and uprising within the country.
Whilst prejudice existed against the enemy, there were also biased national representations of each country. Using patriotic symbols such as ‘Uncle Sam’ and colour schemes, governments created a sense of idolism, where they generated a glamourised image of a hard working American citizen. Red, white and blue featured on almost all the American propaganda, which has connotations of freedom, and links with the American flag. Similarly, the Nazi’s glamourised Hitler as their ultimate ruler, creating a ‘halo effect’, where by he was compared to a holy figure, however, they used strength and power to overrule the inferior and ultimately ‘cleanse’ the world of those who don’t comply with their ideologies. Religious persecution, specifically directed at the Jews, featured prominently in the Nazi German propaganda, stemming from Hitler’s extreme views and ideologies which were passed on to the country’s people through various mediums of propaganda. Ultimately, this media was produced to sway public perception, encouraging them to fight and lead their country to victory.
References


Figures


Figure 5: Gebt mir 4 Jahre Zeit, Joseph Goebbels (1937)

Figure 6: I Want You, James Montgomery Flagg, (1917),

Figure 7: Defend American Freedom, It’s Everybody’s Job, Barclay McClelland (1942),
https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc611/#who Accessed March 23, 2017

Figure 8: The battle of Stalingrad. The military needs you to defend the homeland (1942)

Figure 9: We Can Do It, J. Howard Miller (1943),
http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_538122 Accessed March 25, 2017

Figure 10: Office of War Information (1941-1945)