

Exploring How Propaganda Constructs the Enemy

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IN July of 2022, the National World War II Museum hosted teachers from across the United States for its annual Summer Teacher Seminars, which are immersive professional development experiences for secondary educators held in New Orleans at the Museum. The first seminar, entitled, “Voices from the Pacific War: Teaching the Untold Stories of World War II,” focused on how to use eyewitness testimony to teach topics related to World War II in the Pacific theater. The second seminar, titled, “The Power of Propaganda: Teaching Media Literacy Through World War II,” examined the connections between contemporary and historic propaganda. Teachers learned to use media literacy instructional strategies that could help students analyze both historic and contemporary propaganda. During World War II, many different forms of propaganda were created to persuade people in Germany, Japan, the United States, and around the world to support the war. This propaganda shaped and deepened the beliefs of many Americans in both beneficial and harmful ways.

In both seminars, teachers from each cohort raised similar questions and concerns related to teaching hard history and addressing in the classroom difficult issues such as war, racism, violence, and genocide. As part of the “Voices from the Pacific” seminar, teachers heard from a guest speaker, who was a child during World War II and who had dedicated his adult life to sharing the stories of veterans. His talk gave participants the invaluable experience of hearing firsthand what it was like to grow up during this time period and the significant ways the war shaped the rest of his life. Throughout his session, the speaker stressed the ways that World War II united our nation behind a common cause: winning the war.

His inspiring story spoke to the American spirit of banding together despite differences. However,

at several key moments during his talk, the speaker, unwittingly, touched on the role of racism in uniting our nation behind the war effort. When referencing the Axis Powers, he referred to the Germans as “Krauts” and the Japanese as “Japs.” He emphasized that Germany and Japan, now our allies, at the time were our enemies. Although a small part of his lengthy talk, the atmosphere in the room immediately changed when the speaker used these terms. For the rest of the week, informal discussions sprung up on how (or even if) teachers should incorporate eyewitness testimony in their classrooms that included racist terminology. Even more than 50 years after the war’s end, this presenter’s language perpetuated ethnic and racial stereotypes common of the war period.

Instead of avoiding these sources altogether, when incorporating eyewitness testimony in learning experiences, educators need to carefully consider how to properly contextualize the language and perspectives offered. When viewed alongside examples of historic World War II propaganda used to persuade Americans about the war, the guest speaker’s choice of words appeared to reflect the influence of media prevalent during his childhood. After all, long before children are old enough to critically evaluate media messages, they absorb many ideas about who are the “good guys” and “bad guys.”¹ The guest speaker unknowingly revealed how exposure to media and propaganda, along with other World War II life experiences, may have a lasting impact on one’s attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews.

When Americans hear the word “propaganda,” they generally think of Nazis and World War II. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum created a special exhibition called “The State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda,” which presents



Teachers analyze historic propaganda in “The Power of Propaganda” seminar at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, July 2022.

a timeline of how the Nazi Party’s advanced propaganda techniques influenced Germans to vote for them during elections, then justified the destruction of democracy to institute a repressive dictatorship, and finally mobilized the population for war and mass murder.²

Propaganda is a well-established tool of warfare, and the efforts undertaken by the United States and Allied powers were also formidable: they used radio broadcasts, newspapers, posters, photographs, films and other forms of media to increase public support for the war. For American children and young people growing up in World War II, there were also books, toys, games, and even commercial propaganda including hair ribbons, badges, calendars, and more.

In the United States, the government censored movies in order to inscribe social norms about our society’s heroes, villains, and victims. Even before

Pearl Harbor, Hollywood movies were thought to “drug the reason of the American people, set aflame their emotions, turn their hatred into a blaze, fill them with fear that Hitler will come over here and capture them.”³ After Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Office of War Information had a unit dedicated exclusively to Hollywood. Between 1942 and 1945, it reviewed thousands of scripts, revising or discarding anything that portrayed the United States unfavorably. It also produced numerous cartoons that featured Japanese, Italian, and German leaders as squealing pigs, vultures, or other animals.

Since the time of the ancient Greek rhetoricians, human beings have understood that the most powerful form of persuasion is a form of storytelling that ties together emotions and ideas.⁴ Words, pictures, and other types of symbols are used to evoke an enemy by activating strong



Teachers analyze contemporary propaganda and plan how to introduce the study of propaganda to their own high school students.

feelings, simplifying information, and repeating specific words and slogans. Propaganda can unite one group of people by activating a spirit of us-vs-them. Consider the many news and opinion stories you have encountered about an “other,” whether it be immigrants, liberals, gun owners, terrorists, Republicans, Democrats, or even countries like Russia and China. An enemy constructed through propaganda not only impels people to stick together; it also becomes the scapegoat for difficulties that societies are undergoing.

When teaching about propaganda, teachers can help students connect past to present, examining how the strategy of attacking opponents has been used to promote an either-or way of thinking that bypasses critical thinking. To interpret persuasive genres, learners must be attentive to the emotional dimensions of messages as they make inferences about audience interpretation and authorial intent. They must imagine the potential impact and consequences of a message upon different viewers, readers, or listeners. By

identifying rhetorical appeals used to construct a message, learners can appreciate how propaganda engages the active participation of audiences, whose hopes, fears, and dreams may be addressed through symbolic expression.⁵

How Stereotypes Cultivate Hatred

Propaganda can inspire patriotism or stoke racial hatred. It can induce people to vote, to donate money, or take a specific action. It can also cultivate fear of a perceived enemy and even provoke the desire for revenge. A National World War II Museum lesson plan, *Race and War in the Pacific: A Propaganda Gallery Walk* (www.ww2classroom.org/system/files/wip031_0.pdf), invites students to examine several examples of Japanese and American propaganda from the Second World War.⁶ Some of the propaganda in the lesson contains racist language or imagery that are considered unacceptable today. These examples reveal how racial pride, prejudice, and anger were exploited during the war. In order to fully understand this propaganda, students learn



Figure 1.

about racial views in the United States and Japan before and during World War II.

The framework of this lesson is that students will be helping to create an exhibit on the role of race in Japanese and American World War II propaganda. While the exhibit already has historic artifacts with explanatory text, it lacks an introductory panel summarizing the role that race played in the Pacific War. After students examine, analyze, and discuss the propaganda examples using a guided note-taking sheet, they write the text for this missing introductory panel. The lesson helps students evaluate the role of race and racism in World War II through evidence gathered from wartime propaganda.

Teachers can extend this lesson to build connections between the past and the present. One way to do this is to assemble a comparative gallery of contemporary propaganda, asking students to select twenty-first century examples from the Mind Over Media Gallery (<https://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com>) that are aligned with examples from the World War II historical gallery.⁷

For example, Figure 1 presents an example of historic and contemporary propaganda placed side-by-side to invite comparison. The 1942 Jap Hunting License was created after the Pearl Harbor attacks, when much anti-Japanese propaganda was created in the United States. It was a faux-official document that purported to authorize “open season” on “hunting” the Japanese, even though more than 250,000

Americans at that time were of Japanese origin. By characterizing Japanese people as sub-human, this propaganda depicts Japanese as animals.

The contemporary meme features a cartoon-like image of a young teen boy, arms crossed, posing with two guns. The meme includes the phrase, “Might need to go to Ukraine and handle this myself.” Students can apply contextual knowledge from their lived experience in their interpretation of the contemporary example. The hero figure is presented in a stereotypical pose associated with thugs and gangsters, and the enemy (Russia) is implied but not stated in the meme. Students will recognize the colors of the image as cartoon-like, and when pressed, they will easily name current movies that feature male protagonists who are motivated by a desire for revenge, the use of violence, and an interest in acting outside the parameters of sanctioned, lawful procedures. Many students will also recognize that the smiling face with horns emoji 🤩 means mischief. Paired with the image of the Ukraine flag, this meme may suggest the author has a playful interest in using his love of vigilante justice to become a mercenary fighter.

In identifying similarities and differences between these historic and contemporary artifacts, it is evident that both these forms of pro-war propaganda are designed to appeal to a target audience of young men. Humor is used in both examples as a tool to attract and hold attention. Both artifacts connect war to an interest in guns and hunting—and respond to the

appeal of vigilante justice. These different forms of propaganda may appeal to young men who are eager to demonstrate their masculinity through displays of power.

Conclusion

Teachers seeking to present students with opportunities to connect the dots between historic and contemporary propaganda are generally motivated by their own awareness of propaganda as a powerful cultural force. One participant in the World War II Museum's summer

program, Kimberle Moore, a history teacher from Middle Township High School in New Jersey, wants her students to confront historic examples of harmful propaganda so that they might recognize similar images, language, or ideas in current-day propaganda.

When teaching about the history of racism in the United States, Moore focuses on helping students understand and analyze Jim Crow propaganda, which generally used racist stereotypes to portray Black Americans. She has found that teaching students to recognize and

Concepts and Activities for Exploring Propaganda

These activities introduce four important themes that help students recognize, understand, and analyze historic and contemporary propaganda in its many forms.

1. Propaganda Takes Many Forms and Genres

Activity: Review a list of 10 types of propaganda in contemporary life and discuss: Which forms reach your younger siblings? Your parents and family members? Which of these forms do you encounter most often?

1. news and journalism
2. opinions and advocacy
3. corporate public relations
4. public service advertising (PSAs)
5. partisan news
6. disinformation
7. misinformation
8. clickbait
9. sponsored content
10. algorithmic bias

2. Propaganda is in the Eye of the Beholder

Activity: War is depicted in ways that may function as propaganda. Learn about how the U.S. military subsidizes war movies by providing access to equipment locations and military personnel by watching the short video, "The Subtle (and Not So Subtle) Military Propaganda in Movies" (<https://youtu.be/ZS3j1bWIIId8>). After viewing it, discuss how pro-war and anti-war themes have been depicted in different types of media throughout history. Then compare and contrast two short film trailers based on Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22*, one directed by George Clooney (2019), <https://youtu.be/JARn16yojbQ>; and the other directed by Mike Nichols (1970), <https://youtu.be/DiQSNT8VvV0>. After viewing the trailers, discuss:

- How might these movies affect your understanding of military air power in World War II?
- How might these two films be interpreted differently by a military veteran, a defense worker, or a pacifist?

- How does your situated position in time affect your interpretation of the time period depicted in these films?
- Are these movies a form of anti-war propaganda? Why or why not?

3. We Are All Propagandists Now

Activity: Visit Mind Over Media Propaganda Gallery (<https://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com>) and select two examples of contemporary propaganda. Select one you would consider sharing with your social media network because you see it as beneficial and one that you would never share because of its potential harm. Explain your reasoning and discuss your choices with a partner or in a small group. How does propaganda reinforce your existing values?

4. Propaganda Can have Beneficial and Harmful Effects

Activity: Find an example of a meme about the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Work individually or with a partner to write an essay or compose a two-minute video that describes and analyzes it. Gather information to explore these questions:

- What is the message?
- What is the purpose?
- Who is the target audience?
- How does it attract and hold attention?
- What social values are being espoused?
- How might different people interpret this propaganda?
- Who is benefiting from the propaganda and who is harmed by it?
- What information is left out?



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examine historic examples of harmful propaganda helps them understand the problem and danger of modern stereotypes. By inspiring their activism in opposing such stereotypes and prejudices, Moore hopes students will develop empathy for the people affected by prejudice, hate, and violence. “Students who are able to analyze historic propaganda are quick to view modern propaganda more critically and oppose it where it has deleterious side effects,” she said.

Exposure to propaganda can lead to biased attitudes that change the way people speak and act, sometimes without their conscious awareness. Propaganda has historically contributed to systemic discrimination, bias-motivated violence, and even genocide. By comparing historic and contemporary propaganda, students come to understand how people’s values can be hijacked through persuasive appeals that activate strong emotions, use oversimplified information, and attack opponents. Teaching students how to identify propaganda is an essential life skill in combating dehumanizing language, ideas, and actions in all its forms. ▀

Notes

1. Bridgett Orgain, “(Re)presentations of the Bad Guy: Lesson Plans,” Frank W. Baker, www.frankwbaker.com/Villains.pdf.
2. U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda,” <https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/propaganda>.
3. Steven Mintz and Sara McNeil, “Wartime Hollywood,” *Digital History* (2018), www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/topic_display.cfm?tcid=126
4. Renee Hobbs, *Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age* (W.W. Norton, 2020).
5. Renee Hobbs, “A Most Mischievous Word: Neil Postman’s Approach to Propaganda Education,” *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* (April 22, 2021), <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/a-most-mischievous-word-neil-postmans-approach-to-propaganda-education>.
6. World War II Museum. Race and War in the Pacific. Lesson plans, www.ww2classroom.org/system/files/wip031_0.pdf.
7. Media Education Lab, Mind Over Media Propaganda Gallery, <https://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com>.



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