English B
Extended Essay
Category 2 (b)

Title: Comic Books in World War 2

Research Question: To what extend the US Government's use of comics as a propaganda tool during World War 2 affected the public?

<div align="right">Word Count: 3720</div>

Contents

Introduction

Shortly after World War I, in 1939 World War II broke out. Between 1939 and 1945, almost every major nation in the world took part in WWII. Millions of individuals lost their lives making this the most destructive war in recorded history. The Axis forces (Germany, Japan, and Italy) and the Allies (Britain, the US, and the Soviet Union among others) battled one another. After the First World War, no government was ready to fight another war in terms of both money and army. Therefore, many governments used propaganda, meaning using a chosen medium to influence people's opinion by not giving all the facts or by secretly emphasizing only one way of looking at the facts. Propaganda was used during the war to gain financial support for the production of weapons, to inspire people about joining the army, and to motivate soldiers.

Comics were one of the most fitting mediums for propaganda, seeing that they were available for a large community from soldiers in the military to kids, thus it was easy to reach out to as many people as possible. Even though comics were used as a propaganda tool by many different countries, the United States Government was objectively the most successful one. Comics have been a part of American popular culture since they were first started being published in the 1930s and 1940s. American societal ideals have been heavily influenced by comics. Characters such as Superman and Captain America led the American public against the Nazis and the Japanese during the World War Two and motivated the American public to support the war effort. Regardless of the war, those characters still attract the attention of millions. Which leads to the question: "To what extend the US Government's use of comics as a propaganda tool during World War 2 affected the public?"

In this essay, this question will be analyzed by first focusing on the contribution of comics to the government's propaganda, then examining their benefits for the military and the public as well as considering their negative properties such as only representing one side of the war or creating stereotypes. Lastly, conclude with a comparison between during-war and post-war comics with the change and development of the characters and the comics industry to specifically analyze the effect of war on comic's storylines and arrangements made to ensure that the characters conveyed the desired messages.

1. Comic Books for Propaganda

1.1 Contribute to the Government's War Efforts

After the war started in 1939 United States at the time was doing everything, it could to remain isolationist. Since World War I had been very expensive for the nation, the U.S. then tried to avoid getting involved in any kind of foreign affairs. While that was the policy of the government, it didn't mean every U.S. citizen agreed with it. One of the early wartime comics as "Captain America" featured the hero punching Hitler on its cover and the character's storyline was getting involved with the war against Nazi Germany almost a year before the US actually joined the war. The main reason for this case was that the creators of "Captain America" Joe Simon and Jack Kirby were both famous Jewish artists and both had strong connections to what was happening to Jewish people in Europe. On the other side of the coin, Nazi Germany had supporters from the US as well. For example, an organization called "the German-American Bund" was advocating Nazis in the US. This organization even protested in the lobby of Timely Comics (which will become Marvel Comics in the future) because of Captain America comics.

When Japan attacked the United States' Military at Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt discarded their isolationist policy and joined the war against axis forces. Soon after US troops and navy were deployed to both the Atlantic and Pacific fronts of the war. Being able to support this attack requires a lot of money, that's why the U.S. treasury launched a campaign to fund the effort by offering debt securities known as war bonds to help raise money for manufacturing and other war effort needs. "The government launched an aggressive propaganda campaign with clearly articulated goals and strategies to galvanize public support, and it recruited some of the nation's foremost intellectuals, artists, and filmmakers." (National Archives) Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Henry Morgenthau Jr., Secretary of the Treasury, approved a strategy to enlist civilian writers to aid in the war effort. A month later, the Writers' War Board (WWB) was formed. While the government itself legally avoided propaganda, WWB was organized to promote government policies and gather public support for the war effort. Although the WWB was a private organization, it received government funding and functioned as "an arm of the government". The activities of the WWB were so extensive that it has been called the "greatest propaganda machine in history." (Howell,796) The government used WWB as a tool to control the propaganda material without directly getting involved with it.

Following the U.S.' official involvement and organization of WWB almost all published comic books were about war. Timely Comics showcased its heroes battling axis powers on their covers but hardly any of their covers promoted war bonds specifically. National Comics Publications, which will eventually become DC Comics, was the main promoter of war bonds. A wide range of covers for Superman or World's Finest Comics were promoting war bonds as well as war stamps. War stamps were specifically aimed at kids. A bond would cost at least ten dollars and most children didn't have that amount of money, but they could buy stamps that would

eventually add up to ten dollars and allow them to exchange it for a war bond. On many covers of Superman, the hero can be seen as he was advertising war bonds to people.

From the moment that the first issue of her self-titled comic book was published, Wonder Woman quickly gained popularity as a character. She additionally promoted war bonds and war stamps. In the epilogue of Wonder Woman #1, she emphasizes that buying war stamps is an indication of patriotism. Following that, the editors volunteered to dedicate the full back cover of the same publication to the US Treasury Department and to include a letter from Henry Morgenthau: "Boys and Girls of America; Here's a way for every one of you to help your country. Every time you buy a Savings Stamp you are helping Uncle Sam to pay for a part of a gun, plane, or ship which your fathers, brothers, or uncles are using for the defense of our country."(Wonder Woman, 001) In this letter, the secretary directly calls out for children with a tender tone aiming to touch upon their emotions by mentioning their family members and implying that it is their duty to help their country. Including children in the war is a quite controversial topic since it is not their duty to serve the country, but instead during this period of propaganda children are one of the most important target audiences.

1.2 Influence on the Public

Comics have been an important source of entertainment and interest for children, often providing them with role models and inspiring them to be better people. However, comics, and especially wartime comics weren't only aimed at children. Early to mid-forties seventy million readers was reading comic books. Comics were found to be the most popular newspaper section to read in 1942, according to the Advertising Research Foundation. Later research by the Market Research Company of America found that roughly half of Americans read comics. The reason why comic publishers would voluntarily spare valuable advertising space at the back of their covers to

promote the war effort where they could normally place paid ads was that everybody at the time was swept up with political eagerness. The propaganda by the U.S. government was proved to be very effective by making sure that everybody felt the need to play their part.

The comics industry in the United States experienced an increase in popularity during World War II, as the books provided a form of escapism for readers who were dealing with the stress and uncertainty of the war. In the Marvel Studios' movie "Captain America" (2011) after the Captain America comics began to be published, children who ran to get them and read them with great excitement and happiness were featured. Although the movie was a fiction, there were scenes inspired by reality such as this one. Another example is on the cover of the eighth volume of "World's Finest Comics" Superman, Batman, and Robin sell war stamps to kids in a place similar to an ice cream stand with smiles on their faces. People looked up to superheroes and seeing them smile put them at ease.

Comics had features that were specifically targeted at women as well. They were explaining how to take part in the war effort without directly fighting in the war. Women and children were asked to fulfill the responsibilities and jobs left behind by men who went to war. On the cover of the eleventh volume of World's Finest Comics Superman, Batman, and Robin were working on a community victory garden. Civilians were asked to grow their vegetables in community gardens so the food could be rationed, limited to be sold in a fixed amount. Additionally, women were required in the defense industries, the civil service, and even in the armed forces due to labor shortages brought on by most of the male population serving in the military. Promotional programs were aimed at women who had never worked before alongside the continuing movement in the 20th century for women to enter the workforce. Advertisements suggested that a woman's femininity should not be sacrificed in order to work. Media, films, and

comic books celebrated and glorified the roles of working women. Whilst carrying out their responsibilities at home, in the workplace, in the military, or elsewhere, women were portrayed as attractive, confident, and determined to contribute to the victory of the war. Wonder Woman is the best example of this which further led to the creation of characters such as Miss America, Captain Marvel, and Miss Furry. After being oppressed and pushed out of the male-dominated workforce for centuries finally being needed was a significant development in the place of women in society.

1.3 Enthusiasm for Comic Books in the Military

Another reason for the cooperation between publishers and the government is that comic books were highly in demand in the army. At the time when the war started there were 15 million comics published every single month, two years into the war this number grew to as much as 25 million copies every month and the biggest customer was the US Army. They bought millions of comic books to entertain their troops. Comic books allowed a lot of service members to get hooked on the characters and their storylines. This meant that propaganda supporting the war effort was being directed toward the right audience. The government sent copies of Captain America comic books to soldiers fighting overseas to boost morale. Comic books served to glorify what these men were doing and led many of them to take pride in their duties. For the war effort, comics were also utilized to recruit workers and soldiers. Comic books, which portrayed the military as a heroic and honorable organization, were frequently included in recruiting materials.

The military preferred using comic books to educate their soldiers as well as aiming to battle illiteracy within the military. At the time illiteracy was a genuine obstacle and comic books were selected as a potential way to start engaging people in enjoyable reading activities. With the help of diagrams and illustrations in comics, which could explain things visually, propaganda efforts during World War II could rely less on written words.

2. Depiction of War in Comic Books

Governments on both sides of the battle used propaganda throughout World War II to influence public opinion and build support for the war effort. "Persuading the American public became a wartime industry, almost as important as the manufacturing of bullets and planes." (National Archives) The US government strongly encouraged war bonds and war stamps during the propaganda process, spreading the patriotic notion that it was everyone's responsibility to make a contribution to the war effort. This includes the media's promotion of nationalistic and patriotic sentiments as well as the demonization of the enemy.

The representation of groups of people in propaganda was something the US government took very seriously during World War II. The WWB controlled this by shaping comic books' depiction of ethnic and racial groups. It was important to ensure that the public was emotionally involved with the war as well as to be able to provoke patriotism and assure that every citizen of the United States played their part to support the war effort. Accordingly, the representation of the war in comic books was targeted at people's emotions. The government aimed to evoke extreme feelings of anger and hatred towards their enemies by manipulating the representation of axis forces, especially German and Japanese people. This strategy can also be defined as jingoistic nationalism meaning an aggressive view of nationalism or a blind adherence to the righteousness or virtue of one's own nation, society, or group simply because it belongs to them since the member of WWB believed that The United States was superior to others. An exaggerated tone was present in many comic strips to ridicule German and Japanese people in various ways from their ethnicities, culture, and physical abilities to army power.

Nonetheless, this led to the public underestimating their enemies whilst the axis forces had the upper hand in the war. The Bureau of Intelligence and Research performed research for the Office of War Information to analyze how they could use comics to help the war effort and observed that these depictions were too simplistic and misleading and could lead to overconfidence (Hirsch,451).

As a result of the portrayal of opponents as powerless in the comics, the public was under the impression that this war was trivial and easy to win. Almost all stories were about how the superheroes, and the army were beating the opponents and readers were not aware of the reality and assumed that they were ahead in the war. However, in reality, it was the opposite case. With the bias coming from this state of overconfidence public started to withdraw from the war effort. "It was the comic's portrayal of the enemy during this time that was the most troubling. The OWI observed that mainstream comic strips were using exaggerated physical stereotypes depicting Nazis as Teutonic buffoons and the Japanese as blood-drooling torturers. While these characterizations provided an impetus for hatred and stirred strong emotional reactions, they were accompanied by portrayals of the enemy as lazy and posing a minor threat." (Graham,97) Although this didn't necessarily stop the OWI from using similar depictions in its own materials, instead they increased the brutality. For example, in the beginning, comic writers were separating Nazis from Germans though to eliminate this overconfidence they started to represent all Germans as vicious monsters. All were depicted as being obsessive, violent, and heartless. Japanese people were frequently portrayed as monsters and not as men. As opposed to being intelligent, human beings, the enemy was an animal, which made killing them easy. Comic book artists depicted all Japanese as having an evil appearance due to American writers' ignorance of Asian cultures and prejudices about the Japanese which were constructed by the sneak bombing of Pearl Harbor.

As also mentioned, comics had remarkable effects on the military. The storylines of the comic books were upbeat with the Americans always winning a glorious victory and serving as a source of motivation. In a sense, superheroes became a real presence fighting alongside the men of the Armed Forces. On the contrary, superheroes were not real presences, and the public, especially soldiers, should not be under the impression that they do not have to display war effort because a hero will come to save them. Consequently, comic writers had to come up with reasons why their heroes could not simply end the war themselves. For example, in Captain America Comics characters were given other fictional Nazi villains who prevented them from easily the war for the allies. In 1942 the Superman Comic Strip featured a story called "The Failure" in which he sees a recruiter. Clark Kent is so eager to pass the test he accidentally uses his x-ray vision and reads the eye chart in the next room and is disqualified to join the army. Following his storyline, Superman finds different methods to serve the United States. He flies mail to the troops or helps them with kitchen duties. Also, the patriotism in comics portrays the army as so powerful that they do not need Superman's help on the fronts.

3. Alteration of Comics and Characters

3.1 During the World War II

The Golden Age of Comics covers the period from the 1930s to the mid-1950s, when comics became favored in popular culture, the first examples of comic book heroes and "superheroes" were created in American comics. Golden-age comics had always been political. The stories being told in comics at the time usually had superheroes going up against corrupt businessmen and politicians that were taking advantage of the poor, powerless, and defenseless. On the other hand, looking at the war effort comics, it is noticed that characters were suddenly modified and had their traits adjusted to fit a particular storyline.

For instance, Batman originally was shown using guns only in his first year of existence because he was derived from pulp heroes. Nevertheless, batman rarely used guns against people, he only used them against actual people in Batman volume one. He became firmly anti-gun after said volume one came out. Editor Whitney Ellsworth spoke with batman creators and insisted that Batman should not use guns any more in an effort to grow the character beyond his pulp roots and establish his status as a superhero. In Batman volume four, he has a dialogue telling Robin explicitly to never use weapons to kill, so with that persona firmly developed over the following years, it looks entirely out of character to see him supplying a firearm to a service member on a cover shortly after the U.S. had formally joined the world war.

3.2 After the World War II

Similar to how the characters were changed to fit the war propaganda after the war beliefs ideologies and storylines of the heroes were changed again. Most of today's most popular heroes were created during war propaganda. As they became highly acclaimed by the readers over time, the publishers made changes to the characters to keep their stories going. This change can be examined through Captain America's character. Compared to Batman, Captain America was more relevant to the war as he was an actual member of the military, and his origin story was directly involved with the World War and a solid symbol of patriotism. After the war, the personality and motives of heroin changed deeply. Even though he was known as the most patriotic hero his story starts after he crosses his general's orders and acts upon his own decisions in the middle of an attack. Much later United Nations wants him to sign an accord to be able to keep superheroes under control and monitor their activities. Captain America disagrees to sign this, and he is declared a criminal. Thus, he leaves the United States and starts living as a nomad in the middle east. From

this storyline, we can conclude the motive of Captain America shifts from serving his country to fighting for freedom.

In the process that the content of comics began to change, superheroes gradually lost their popularity and new genres began to emerge. Some, like Westerns, gave readers nostalgia for America before the industrial revolution. Science fiction comics tapped into readers' excitement towards technological growth and creations along with their concerns about where it might lead us in the future, while true crime and horror captivated readers with their scary tales. (Scott,123) Due to their focus on narrative and visual realism, romance comics set themselves apart from their superhero and science fiction rivals.

Conclusion

In this essay I examined the usage of comic books throughout the World War II to answer my research question which was "To what extend the US Government's use of comics as a propaganda tool during World War 2 affected the public?". The United States used propaganda for fundraising and bringing people together to contribute to war efforts. The most favored medium to carry out propaganda was comic books. Comics had traits that made them such an attractive propaganda tool for the federal government. They were cheap, easy to read, and available almost everywhere. The government was able to place them in schools, city squares, waiting rooms, stores, and most importantly, military bases.

The government used them to promote the sales of war bonds. It benefited the public by being a source of entertainment and relaxation in stressful periods and illustrated how every citizen of the country from children to women could partake in the war effort. Comics provided entertainment for troops as well and became a source of inspiration and motivation through war.

Not only that, but because comics were easy to read, they also contributed to the government's battle with illiteracy. To be able to evoke strong patriotic feelings in people many comics had an unrealistic reflection of the war, causing overconfidence in the military and misleading the public. To avoid this problem, publishers didn't change how they represented the US Army as being exceptionally powerful, but they changed how the enemies were represented. They were consisting of racial stereotypes and represented axis forces as violent monsters.

Comic books were versatile tools. They were a piece of fiction but had the power to spread a message across a nation. Comics were free spaces where each artist could advocate their own opinions as well as reflect their creativity or meet under a common idea to defend. Comics were also successful attention grabbers. This allowed them to easily become a source of income and the main promoter of propaganda.

References

"Propaganda." *Cambridge Dictionary*,
  https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/propaganda.

Leanza, Emilio. "How the U.S. Used Comics as Propaganda Abroad." *Progressive.org*, 12 July
  2021, https://progressive.org/latest/comics-as-propaganda-leanza-210712/.

Gershon, Livia. "The Propaganda of World War II Comic Books - JSTOR DAILY." *JSTOR*,
  2021, https://daily.jstor.org/the-propaganda-of-world-war-ii-comic-books/.

Hirsch, Paul. "This Is Our Enemy'': The Writers' War Board and Representations of Race
  ..." *JSTOR*, 2014,
  https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/phr.2014.83.3.448?ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_SYC-
  5187_SYC-5188%2Fcontrol.

"Wonder Woman 001 (Summer 1942) : Leonidas Fragias (Arts & Charts) : Free Download,
  Borrow, and Streaming." *Internet Archive*, 2 June 2017,
  https://archive.org/details/WonderWoman001/page/n67/mode/2up.

Lynch, Angela. "Captain America: A WWII Fighting Force." *National D-Day Memorial*, 27
  Sept. 2017, https://www.dday.org/2017/10/19/captain-america-a-wwii-fighting-force/.

Howell, Thomas. "The Writers' War Board: U.S. Domestic Propaganda in World War II." *The
  Historian*, vol. 59, no. 4, 1997, pp. 795–813., https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-
  6563.1997.tb01376.x.

"Powers of Persuasion." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and
  Records Administration, https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers-of-persuasion.

Graham, Richard. *Government Issue Comics for the People, 1940's 2000's*, Abrams ComicArts,
  New York, 2011.

"Jingoism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.,
  https://www.britannica.com/topic/jingoism.

Scott, Cord A. "Comics and Conflict: War and Patriotically Themed Comics in American
  Cultural History From World War II Through the Iraq War." Loyola University, 2011.