

World War II Propaganda and Total War

Focus Question: Compare propaganda posters from the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and Russia to better understand how waging a "total war" altered the nature of wartime societies and effected the home front.

Combatant nations intensified the conflict in World War I and II by committing all their resources to the war effort. This strategy, known as total war, meant that a nation's domestic population, in addition to its military, was committed to winning the war. Thus, millions of civilians, including women, worked in factories producing war materials. Entire economies were centered on winning the war. Governments set up planning boards that set production quotas, price and wage controls, and the rationing of food and other supplies. They censored media and imprisoned many who spoke out against the war effort.

Propaganda was another component of total war. Propaganda is communication meant to influence the attitudes, opinions, and actions of a community around a particular subject by spreading inaccurate or slanted information. Governments invested heavily in army and navy recruitment campaigns. Posters and articles in newspapers and magazines often depicted the enemy crudely or misrepresented the facts of the war completely. The use of highly emotional and often misleading information fomented hatred and bitterness across borders, among civilians as well as soldiers.

STEP 1: With your group sort through the propaganda posters from the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and Russia. Discuss similarities and differences between the posters to answer the following:

- *What attitudes, opinions, and actions are the posters trying to influence? What do the posters want to the audience to think or do?*
- *How is the poster appealing to its intended audience? Connect the imagery, symbols, and captions used in the poster to its overall meaning.*

STEP 2: Individually select a poster that interests you and complete the following analysis worksheet.

What do you see? What action is taking place? Be as descriptive and concrete as possible.	What symbols, labels, or unique imagery is used?
Why do you think the symbols, labels, or imagery is used?	

What is the relationship between the text and the visual image?	
Who do you think is the intended audience for the poster?	What does the government hope the audience will do?
What is the government selling?	
For Further Discussion: Note ideas from your own poster and from discussion with classmates	
What social constructions (race, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc.) are used in the poster? Why are these constructions used?	What would you envision the impact of these images would be on future historical events?

"I'm Proud... My Husband Wants Me To Do My Part"

During World War II, the U.S. government produced a number of propaganda posters aimed at mobilizing women workers to contribute to the war effort, offering images that challenged traditional ideas about the role of women and the nature of their work while still maintaining traditional gender hierarchies.



"We Can Do It!"

Among the most famous images from the World War II era, the "We Can Do It!" poster of a determined working woman (colloquially dubbed "Rosie the Riveter") has been reproduced thousands of times since its original appearance in 1942. During the war, thousands of American women entered the job market for the first time, many in munitions factories or other industries directly related to the war effort. Many women found their wartime roles in jobs previously reserved for men to be a source of increased independence and pride, and for many their experiences formed the foundations for later struggles for equal pay and an expanded role for women in the workplace. Thus "Rosie the Riveter" has become a feminist icon to many in the years since her original incarnation.



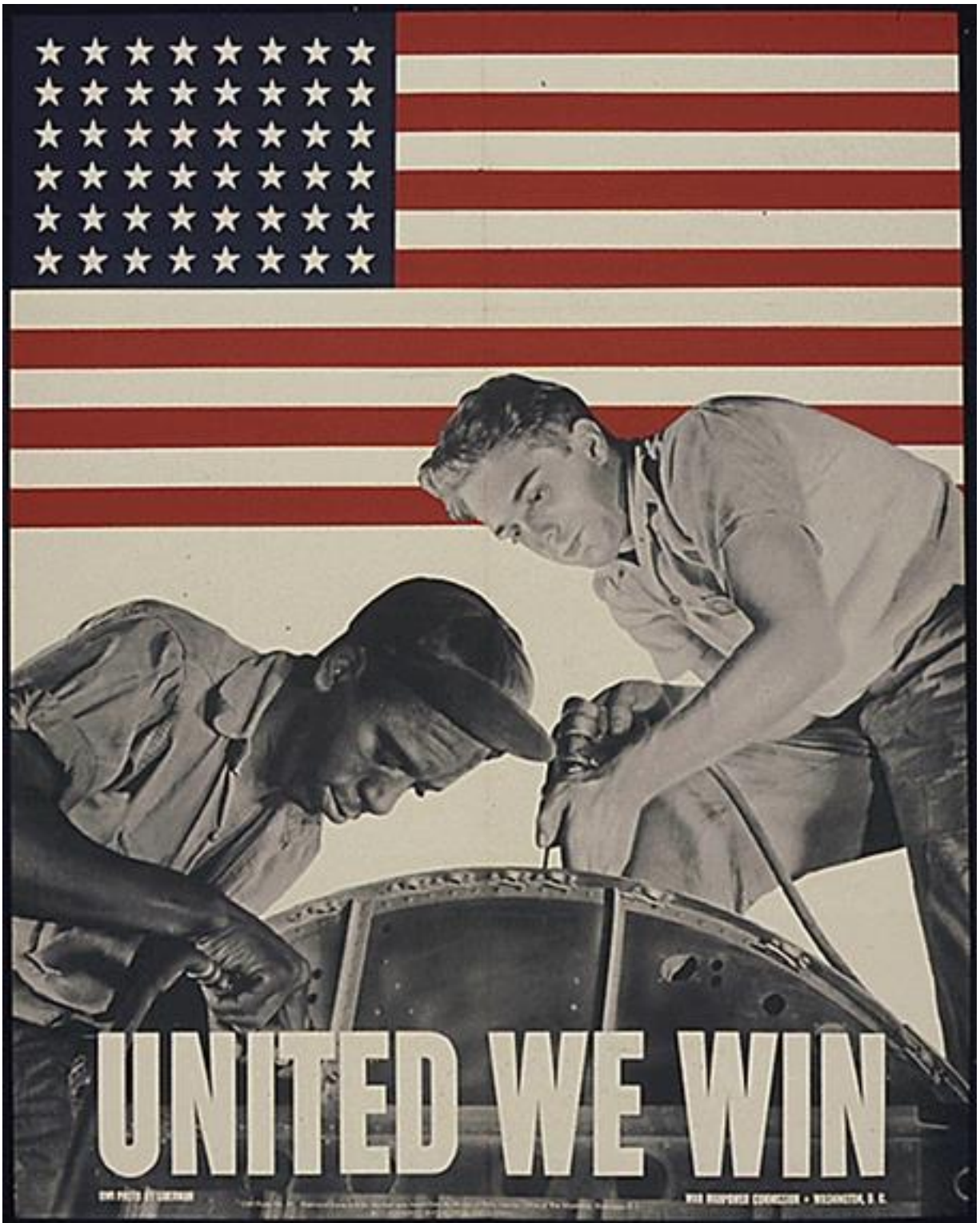
"Pvt. Joe Louis Says - We're Going to do our part"

Joe Louis, the famous heavyweight boxing champion, served in the Army from 1940 to 1942, appearing in exhibition matches as well as this recruitment poster. A few years earlier, Louis had defeated German heavyweight Max Schmeling, a symbol of the supposed "Aryan superiority" touted by the Nazi regime. Of his decision to join a segregated U.S. Army, Louis explained, "Lots of things wrong with America, but Hitler ain't going to fix them."



"United We Win"

This 1943 government poster offers an image of racial solidarity among wartime workers under the slogan "United We Win." Although African-Americans did find enhanced opportunities thanks to the high demand for workers and the Roosevelt Administration's creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee, many black workers continued to encounter discrimination in the workplace during the war years.



"Someone Talked"

One of the most famous posters of World War II, "Someone Talked" urges Americans to prevent sensitive information from falling into enemy hands. Closely associated with the "Loose Lips Sink Ships" series communicating the same idea, the image of a drowning sailor dramatically illustrates the consequences of careless talk about military activities.



"Warning! Our Homes Are in Danger Now!"

This World War II propaganda poster employs not-so-subtle depictions of Adolph Hitler and a bloodthirsty Japanese soldier menacing the American homeland. Produced by the General Motors Corporation, the poster emphasizes the danger posed to American homes and families, and, typically, employs a Japanese stereotype with exaggerated racial characteristics (the figure may have been intended to represent Japanese Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, although he was usually portrayed wearing glasses). The circular graphic with the "Keep 'em firing" logo in the bottom left, meanwhile, emphasizes the central role of American industry to the war effort.



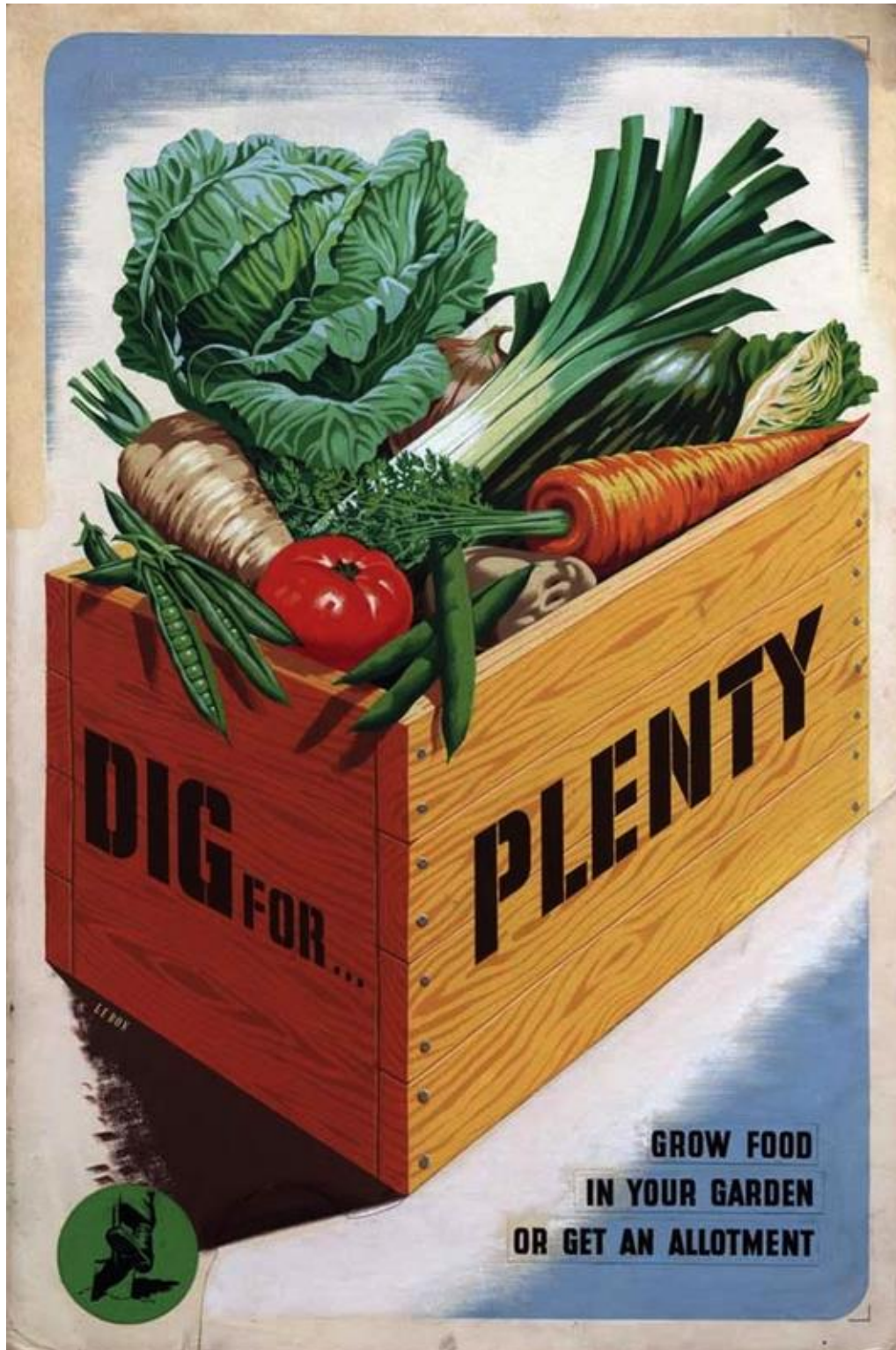
Up Housewives and At 'Em!

Similar to American efforts of the time, this World War II poster urges British housewives to contribute to the war effort by recycling household materials. With its smaller population and more direct experience of the war (close to 68,000 British civilians were killed during German bombing raids on the British homeland), the United Kingdom required the participation of all segments of society in the war effort. As in America, the contributions of women in Britain during the war would have a lasting effect on their post-war status.



Dig for...Plenty

This World War II-era poster urges Britons to "Dig for Plenty" by growing their own vegetables in home gardens. Part of the larger "Dig for Victory" campaign that ran in Britain throughout the war, the poster stresses the benefits of growing one's own food, thus preventing scarcity and keeping food prices down. Individuals and families without backyards or private gardens were encouraged to get "allotments," small parcels of land leased for a nominal rent on which they could grow vegetables and other foodstuffs.



Keep Mum, She's Not So Dumb!

This World War II poster urges British officers and other servicemen to "keep mum" (quiet), lest military secrets and other sensitive information fall into the hands of the enemy as a result of careless talk, in this case overheard by a beautiful female spy. However unlikely such a scenario may seem outside the realm of spy movies, in June 1941 the British government announced that such exchanges were a "major problem." While its effectiveness in preventing information leaks cannot be known, the poster's casual sexism succeeded in raising the ire of Dr. Edith Summerskill, a Labour Member of Parliament.



They Can't Get on Without Us

A WWII poster urges British women to join the ATS, or Auxiliary Territorial Service, a "woman's army" formed in September 1938 to free as many men as possible for service on the front. The scene in the background suggests one of the Service's primary roles, that of acting as "spotters" for anti-aircraft guns. While the depiction of women in wartime offered by this poster differs greatly from that of the "Keep Mum" series, the imagery conceals one aspect of service in the ATS: the women received only two-thirds of the pay rate for male soldiers in the British Army.



"Altpapiersammlung (Paper Drive)"

A 1943 poster announces a Nazi paper drive. As in the Allied countries, German civilians were expected to contribute to the war effort by recycling materials, rationing food, and buying war bonds. In Nazi Germany, however, such participation was seldom optional. Boys of the age shown in this poster, for example, would have been required to join the Hitler Youth, the Nazi Party's paramilitary organization for young people, and in the closing days of the war, would likely have been conscripted into service on the front.



"Nicht spenden, Opfern (Don't give, Sacrifice)"

This 1930s-era Nazi poster translates as "Don't give, Sacrifice," to the Winterhilfswerk (Winter Aid), a Nazi party charity. The dire economic circumstances in Germany during the 1930s both facilitated the Nazis' rise to power and served as a focal point for expressions of German national unity, including the making of such personal "sacrifices" which were not always voluntary. Graphically, the poster retains some of the avant-garde style of Weimar-period art movements like Bauhaus. In subsequent years, such innovations were increasingly suppressed by the Nazi regime as "degenerate," and the more modernist styles of the 1930s were replaced by the "realism" of World War II-era Nazi propaganda.



"Du Bist Front (You Are the Front)"

Like many Allied propaganda images from the same period, this Nazi World War II poster focuses on the importance of the role played by civilians in the war effort. Workers in munitions factories and other war-production-related industries were viewed as particularly important. The point made by the juxtaposition of the toiling factory worker with the heroic soldier in the background is driven home further by the text, which translates to "You are the front."



"Der Jude (The Jew)"

This poster, issued in 1943 or 1944, was intended to perpetuate the Nazi myth of "the Jew" as "inciter of war, prolonger of war." As German fortunes in the war begin to decline, myths of a "Jewish conspiracy" made a convenient scapegoat for failing military policies in a war started by Hitler's desire to create a racially "pure" German empire. In the artist's rather crude rendering, a corpulent Jewish stereotype gazes disdainfully down on a crowd of raised fists, a scene of wartime destruction in the background. Anti-Semitic imagery and ideology had been part of the Nazi program from the earliest origins of the party, finding their ultimate expression in the systematic murder of approximately six million Jews.



"We will ruthlessly defeat and destroy the enemy!"

A Soviet poster shows a Red Army soldier dispatching a gnome-like Hitler. The torn document and discarded mask represent the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the treaty of non-aggression signed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union and violated when the Nazis invaded Russia on June 22, 1941. This poster was the creation of the Kukryniksy, a collective of three artists who became famous before and during the war for their caricatures of Hitler, Mussolini, and other Nazi and Fascist leaders.



"Death to the Fascist Reptile!"

Another Soviet poster from shortly after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 is this work by A. Kokorekina, in which a Red Army soldier pierces a serpent cleverly coiled into the shape of a swastika. The caption, which translates as "Death to the Fascist Reptile!," is as arresting as the image. The poster's simple color scheme was the likely the result of the need to produce images quickly and cheaply in the aftermath of the invasion, but nonetheless results in a bold and striking example of visual propaganda.



**СМЕРТЬ
ФАШИСТСКОЙ
ГАДИНЕ!**

"Red Army man, come to the rescue!"

A Soviet poster from 1942 shows a Russian family threatened by a Nazi bayonet. Such fears were not unwarranted: between 1941 and 1944, some 20 million Soviet civilians were killed by the Nazis. The image employs an almost cinematic approach, juxtaposing the dramatically-shaded, monochromatic mother and child with blood-red splashes of color. The text reads, "Red Army man, come to the rescue!"



"On the Joyous Day of Liberation from under the Yoke of the German Invaders"

This poster by Viktor Koretskii celebrates the victory of Red Army forces in turning the tide on the Eastern Front after German forces were turned back in a number of brutal and costly battles, including Stalingrad and Kursk. As in Nazi Germany, the more avant-garde experimentations of early Soviet propaganda gave way during the war to the "realist" style that predominated under Stalin. The image of the archetypal Russian peasant family smiling under the portrait of Stalin, with the caption "On the Joyous Day of Liberation from under the Yoke of the German Invaders," was no doubt meant to reassure a traumatized Russian population. At least 20 million Soviet civilians perished during the conflict.

