
Homogenizing A Pluralistic Nation: Propaganda During World War 1

During the World War 1, President Woodrow Wilson established the Committee on Public Information with an attempt to mobilize the opinion of a diverse American community in support of the nation's war effort. The Committee used many forms of media from posters to films to deliver messages, inspire, and persuade civilians. Shaping people's thoughts required a compelling use of persuasion methods. We will analyze three main themes of propaganda: army recruitment, buying war bonds, and uniting a multiethnic society; and the methods these propaganda utilize to call on civilians behind the war effort.

One of the large themes of the propaganda was recruitment and enlistment. The first and sixth propaganda energetically invited men to fulfill their duties and enlist in the military. Source 1 was the song "Over there" written by George M. Cohan which was one of the most famous songs during World War 1. The song motivated young men to volunteer for the armed services. In addition to the patriotic theme, the lines such as "make your daddy glad" and tell your sweetheart "to be proud her boy's in line" indicated participating in the military would bring honor and pride to the family and their sweethearts. With the rhythmic, fast-paced, flaming, bustling and exciting lyrics, the song created a sense of enthusiasm and eagerness. Beyond the song's intent to urge young men to join the service, the song refrained worrisome and negative feelings of loved ones and criticized those would block the way of these men to join the battle.

With the same recruitment theme, source 6 portrayed German as a raging beast, or gorilla-looking monster. The poster provoked a patriotic feeling in the viewers; it also created terror, fear and hate for the enemy. The image of the dangerous monster carried a woman on its arm evoked men to take up their traditional roles which was to protect the nation and the weak victims from German by enlisting in the army. This poster dehumanized German in order to sow seeds of hatred towards the enemy. As a result of creating a false image of German in people's minds, many Germans living in America were persecuted and lynched by the Vigilante groups. Additionally, it made Americans suspicious of one another; they lived in fear of being accused of spying or becoming victims of violence.

Besides the recruitment purpose, the propaganda asked those who did not enlist, like women, to do their part by purchasing war bonds. Both poster 8 and 9 aimed at women, but each poster asked them to spend money in different ways to aid the war. The 8th source "Women of America, Save Your Country" poster, issued by the United States Department of the Treasury, illustrated beautiful Joan of Arc in an armor raising her sword up high. Joan set an example of a

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popular patriot who led France fought against the English. Although in the armor and holding a sword, Joan looked beautiful and feminine. The sword represented a weapon to protect the country. In figurative language, women's consumerism was a kind of weapon to finance the war effort. The War Savings Stamps program did not require women to fight, but rather to buy saving stamps from home and keep them in the assigned gender roles. While poster 8 encouraged women to buy war stamps, poster 9 asked women to spend their Christmas shopping dollars creating sales taxes to support the war. "The Government asks you to do your Xmas Shopping Early" poster characterized a woman holding a sword in one hand and an American flag on the other hand. Unlike the passive, tender, and elegant image of women at that time, poster 8 and 9 illustrated woman in an active, heroic and powerful figure making them feel valuable and playing an important role in saving America. Both posters empowered women in 1917 that they were seen as a woman that saved America, but this also implied the traditional roles of women as homemakers and consumers. Standing from the viewpoint of American women today, they might think it's sexist to frame women in the role of consumers, and that the only way for women to contribute in this war is to be a good housewife, spend money, and buy war bonds. Aside from calling women to buy war bonds, a significant theme of propaganda that could not forget to mention was to unite a multiethnic, pluralistic society behind the war effort. This was also the government's fear and the reason why President Wilson formed the Committee on Public Information. Poster 11, 12 and 13 would be further examined to explore this theme. The slogan of poster 11: "Help us to help the boys" targeted at Catholics, telling them to donate to National Catholic Council to support the Catholic soldiers. Poster 12 revealed the Jewish symbol with a soldier standing in front of a pile of skeletons and calling out for help. Similar to poster 11, this also called Jewish to come together to assist Jewish soldiers in the U.S. military by donating to the Jewish Welfare Board.

Poster 13 depicted an African American soldier dressed in a nice uniform holding his sweetheart's hand. In the background, an army was marching with an American flag. It was designed to get African American to sign up for the armed services. In the bottom of the poster wrote: "colored man is no slacker". Enlisting in the army is considered to be a masculine activity as protectors of the home front. The poster was trying to get African American to think that joining the army would gain them some respect and prove that they deserve full civil rights. Poster 11 through 13 aimed specifically at Catholic, Jewish and African American because these groups were subjects of discrimination, violence and have been treated terribly in the 1880s. American citizens were very anti-immigrant; however, as they entered the war, they would need all the support they could get to win this battle. In order to make this happen, the government needed to include all American regardless of race and gender and made them feel equally important in the war effort. These posters were successful in creating a sense of nationalism, harmony, and solidarity among the diverse American population. However, at the same time, these posters created false hope for immigrants or American with foreign descents that they would be treated equally if they proved their loyalty to the nation and enlisted in the

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war. Little that they know, they would still be segregated and discriminated after the war ended.

The use of propaganda was very effective in arousing patriotism and inspiring all Americans to contribute to fighting the war. To persuade civilians behind the war effort, the government aimed at their heart and their brain, emotionally and logically, to manipulate them to see in certain perspectives. For these propagandas to be effective, there must be a sense of urgency, the enemy has to be dehumanized and civilians needed to feel important, be empowered and inspired to sign up for the military. President Wilson's intent of uniting a heterogeneous nation to prepare for the war with the help of the Committee on Public Information was a victory. However, along with the positive influences, negative consequences followed. The propaganda created a mass hysteria with horrible results. The extreme, inaccurate portrayal of the enemies endangered many Americans and led them to become subjects of abuse and violence. It spread fear and suspicion in people. If one criticized the war efforts, did not report suspicious behavior, or buy war bonds, they would be persecuted and put in prison. Using propagandas to mobilize civilians was necessary for fighting the war, but propagandas exploited stereotypes, dehumanized people, used lies and half-truths to convince the crowd. There's no denying that the Committee was successful in creating a wave of patriotism and uniting pluralistic public opinion of America behind the war effort, but perhaps the mobilization has been carried too far resulting in serious negative impacts.

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