

A Teaching Guide for
Selections from the Tetlie Collection of World War II Propaganda Posters
Object Study Room, Flaten Art Museum
February 18–April 8, 2022

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CONTENT NOTICE: THIS EXHIBITION CONTAINS SYMBOLS OF HATE,
ANTISEMITIC IMAGERY, AND RACIST TROPES.

1. Introduction

This teaching guide complements [*Selections from the Tetlie Collection of World War II Propaganda Posters*](#), on view in Flaten Art Museum’s Object Study Room from February 18 through April 8, 2022, by providing opportunities for classroom reflection. The guide can also be used to study other posters in the [*Tetlie Collection of World War II Propaganda Posters*](#), which is currently in the custody of the Flaten Art Museum and will be permanently housed with Rolvaag Special Collections.

Unlike most collections of World War II posters related to Nazi Germany, the Tetlie posters focus on Nazi-occupied Europe rather than the Third Reich. They include over a hundred examples from France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Soviet Union, and the Channel Islands, gathered immediately after the end of World War II. These posters direct attention to the intersection of Nazi policy and the [*realities of daily life under occupation*](#). The seven posters in the current exhibition target occupied France, and they highlight Nazi efforts to radicalize racial ideology, foster distrust of the Allies, and rally occupied populations to the Nazi war effort.

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2. Historical Background

The Nazi invasion of Poland that began World War II in 1939 was followed by a brief period of comparably minor hostilities known derisively as the “Phony War.” German invasion of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg in May 1940 resumed full-scale fighting in a campaign known as the *Blitzkrieg*—literally, the “Lightning War.”

In just six weeks, France and its continental allies were defeated, leaving Great Britain to stand alone against a sustained Nazi bombing campaign on London (the “Battle for Britain”). The *Blitzkrieg*’s success meant that by 1941 Nazi Germany had overrun most of Western and Central Europe, an area known as “Fortress Europe,” that was seemingly impenetrable by Allied forces. “Operation Barbarossa,” which launched the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, extended the German army’s reach farther eastward until its defeat in the battle of Stalingrad (August 1942–February 1943).

Fortress Europe was an undeniable military advantage for the Nazis, but it was also a significant administrative challenge. Occupation authorities worked to control millions of people and acres of territory while fighting a war that continued to expand and devour more and more resources.

At the same time, Nazis were carrying out the genocide of two-thirds of Europe’s Jewish population through mass shootings, gas chambers, torture, violent riots, slave labor, and ghettoization and resulting disease and starvation to end the so-called “Jewish problem.” From the Nazi perspective, all these exploits competed for administrative, military, and technical resources. Getting popular buy-in from occupied countries, through propaganda and other means, was essential for making the Holocaust possible.

3. Ideas for Guided Looking using Visual Thinking Strategies

A teaching method called Visual Thinking Strategies ([VTS](#)) provides a first step for encountering the posters. This student-centered facilitation method fosters inclusive discussions and encourages viewers to identify what is visibly present on the surface before going deeper, to be aware of what is known—and unknown—about the poster, and to establish a basis for analysis and interpretation.

For use in your own classes, start by posing the three primary questions below. As a student answers, point to the elements the student is identifying to bring others along, then re-cap the student’s observations for the class.

- **What’s going on in this picture?**
- **What do you see that makes you say that?**

- **What more can we find?**

Here's how VTS might launch consideration of the featured poster called *Avec tes Camarades Européens Sous Le Signe ⚡ Tu Vaincras!*:

Facilitator: What's going on in this picture?

Student: A group of soldiers is marching toward some destination.

Facilitator: What do you see that makes you say they are soldiers?

Student: The men are all young and healthy, with clean-cut faces. They're all wearing the same thing. They have determined expressions. They're marching in step, as a unit.

Facilitator: Good, you're noticing that the figures appear to be young men in uniform. They're in an orderly formation, and they appear to be marching together in the same direction.

Facilitator: What more can we find?

Student: The soldiers are German.

Facilitator: What do you see that makes you say that?

Student: I recognize the SS insignia and the helmets as German.

Facilitator: Great, you're familiar with some of the symbols in this poster. Those symbols are visual clues that the artist is using to quickly communicate the identity of the figures. The artist is drawing on the stereotypical appearance of a "perfect Aryan," and symbols recognizable to the poster's contemporary audience, to quickly communicate the identity of the figures: a disciplined unit of the German army.

This poster economically conveys an impression of strength, power, and solidarity. Strategic placement of multiple rifles suggests a sizable unit without the need to show masses of people. Homogeneity of physical features and stern expressions communicate a sense of discipline and common purpose while the centrally located figure signals an opportunity for leadership. The result: a glorification of the crusade against Bolshevism and an invitation to participate in a triumphant collective enterprise.

Further visual analysis questions could include:

- What strikes you visually? What seems to be the point/message?
- What are the main elements in the image? How would you describe the composition of these elements? What is the balance between image and text? What impact does color, scale, and/or composition have on the way you read the image?
- What do you see on the poster that you don't understand? Are there markings that seem extraneous to the point of the poster? What questions arise from your encounter(s) with the poster?

4. Classroom Discussion Prompts

a. Antisemitic Iconography, Past and Present

Iconography refers to the visual images and symbols used in a particular poster (or painting, cartoon, etc.). The term also refers to the study of images and symbols typically associated with a specific subject. [Antisemitism](#) has a well-developed iconography that predates Nazi Germany by hundreds of years.

When Jews and Christians were first depicted in art, there were no notable differences between the renderings of each religious group. Then around 1000 CE, recognizable symbols started to emerge, such as the pointed “Jewish hat” and beard, even though these were not actually common among Jews of the time. It should be noted that these were artificial artistic inventions created to differentiate Jews from Christians without particular judgment. Around 1150 CE, however, Christian art started to depict Jews as “the enemy” in order to reinforce a distinction between the two religions that some Christians felt was too blurry and potentially confusing. The pointed hat and beard, as well other symbols, came to be used to communicate overtly negative antisemitic messages. While the use of the pointed hat and beard faded over time, a number of iconic and lasting antisemitic stereotypes emerged, such as hooked noses, red and yellow colors, coins and bags of money, ravens or crows, frogs, dark or beast-like features, and placement in hell or dark spaces.

By the end of the Middle Ages, this traditional antisemitism was the basis of justification for Jews’ second-class citizenship: absence of civic rights, exclusion from occupations and roles deemed key to society, and restrictions on where Jews could live. By the late 1800s, in an increasingly secular Europe, a modern version of antisemitism emerged. Modern antisemitism drew on anti-modernism and “racial science” rather than religion, blending with and amplifying traditional antisemitic iconography. Those who feared the impact of the modern world’s secular, democratic, industrial, and cosmopolitan trends associated these “negative” developments with Jews. They regarded Jewry as an [international conspiracy](#) that sought world power by “infiltrating” national institutions. “Racial science,” based on an inaccurate and skewed understanding of genetics, introduced seductive biomedical metaphors that reinforced existing beliefs about the insidiousness of “Jewish infection” and the “pollution” of “pure-blood” Europeans.

1. Where in the present (e.g., film, television, social media, campaign flyers, t-shirts...) can you recognize the visual vocabulary of antisemitism illustrated in the exhibition?
2. How would you describe the core elements of modern antisemitism? Identify an antisemitic visual in your world and deconstruct the way that visual works to convey its message. Going further, think of a visual example that borrows from antisemitic iconography either to subvert antisemitic intent or to redirect moral outrage to another issue. Explain how that strategy works (or not). A historical example of subversion: A distinctive French means of subverting Nazi efforts to appropriate the “V” for “victory” was to insert a double-barred cross (†) inside

the V. This is the Cross of Lorraine, the symbol of the Free French and subsequently that of the French Resistance unified under Charles De Gaulle. An example of efforts to redirect moral outrage: [PETA's 2004 HOYP poster](#), juxtaposing images of suffering animals with images from the Holocaust.

3. Compare and contrast the representations of Jewish figures with Christian figures in the posters on display. For example, how does the depiction of the Jewish figure outside the Bourse differ from the man protecting his wife and child? How do these contrasts help construct “the Jew” or “the Jewish problem”?
4. Antisemitism has a long history. What of its future? Certain posters in this exhibition blend traditional and modern antisemitic elements, suggesting that antisemitism is “steadfast and changing” (the phrase belongs to political scientist Stanley Hoffmann, who applied it to France in a different context). Periodic renewal of the antisemitic tradition sustains it; various crises mobilize it. Can you find evidence in today’s world of memes that threaten to sustain antisemitism in the future?

b. “Inherent Vice”: The Posters’ Power as Ephemeral Objects

“Inherent vice” is a technical term used by conservators who work with archives, museums, and other collections. It refers to the tendency of a material object to deteriorate on its own because of some intrinsic property or component. For example, pages in a book printed on acidic paper will eventually deteriorate because of acid’s effect on both print and paper. A less technical way of understanding the meaning of inherent vice is to think of a material object as having within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Efforts to preserve a material object can only limit, not stop, deterioration caused by inherent vice.

While this fragility can be considered a weakness, it also serves to grant the posters power, precisely because they are so ephemeral. This materiality of the posters offers another dimension that humans can interact with and exploit for personal gain.

1. Apply the concept of inherent vice to these posters in a more abstract way. If St. Olaf doesn’t act to preserve these posters, they’ll eventually crumble away. But consider: In addition to the posters themselves as material objects, what else is being conserved/preserved by maintaining these posters? Does preserving these posters somehow normalize the Nazi past? Does their preservation act to inoculate society against a similar future? Would letting the posters deteriorate into oblivion be a more fitting way to address the ugliness of their messages?
2. Consider the material hardships of the war and occupation, including occupation authorities’ control over scarce resources, rationing, and illegal but flourishing black-market activity—all of which affected the supply of paper and ink. What impact would such an environment have on the creation and production of these posters?
3. This is not the first exhibition of posters that are now in the Tetlie Collection. In spring 1945 the Pentagon hosted an exhibition for personnel who had served in the Office of Strategic

Services, the CIA's wartime predecessor. In late fall 1945 they were on public display at the Museum of Science and Industry in New York City to raise money for European recovery from the war. One officer dismissed the propaganda as "genuine Nazi baloney," while a *Washington Post* writer opined that Nazi propaganda "was not stupid" in its "stimulation of the violent emotions of hatred and revenge." For the *New York Times*, the posters were propaganda "through which the Germans hoped to break the spirit of the people of France, Belgium, and other occupied countries...." The article notes that beside the Nazi posters, "offsetting" them "in colors even more brilliant and daring, are the posters of the patriotic underground and resistance workers of the lands, testifying to a spirit unbroken in the midst of the Nazi occupation."

Identify and compare the perspectives and objectives of the creators of the 1945 exhibitions with those informing the current exhibition. What impact does this brief history of exhibiting these posters have on their meaning as material objects?

4. Consider the journey of these posters as material objects making their way from their countries of origin to St. Olaf College. You already know that they're part of a collection donated to the College by an alumnus, and were originally gathered from liberated Europe shortly after D-Day by order of General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander and Military Governor of the US Occupation Zone in Germany. What power relationships can be inferred from these circumstances? What does this say about the power that the posters held?

c. How Does Propaganda Work?

No "one-size-fits-all" definition of propaganda exists. But there is consensus among experts regarding certain identifying characteristics. Propaganda is the broad and intentional dissemination of information and ideas through words and/or word substitutes created to influence the public in order to gain advantage in a manner that inhibits critical reflection and response.

1. How do the graphic elements you identified through the guided looking exercise (VTS) serve the propagandistic objective of the poster?
2. Posters convey propaganda efficiently and economically. The selection of *both* image *and* text is deliberate. Text communicates a poster's message through words, but it also has a graphic dimension (e.g., size, font). How do the typographical qualities of these posters contribute to their message?
3. Propaganda sometimes uses a technique that highlights "same vs. different." Differentness is portrayed using stereotypes, inciting fear or hatred. Sameness is represented, paradoxically enough, through individuality. Can you find aspects of sameness and/or differentness highlighted in the posters? Can you find sameness/differentness highlighted in contemporary visual images?
4. The definition of propaganda above suggests that propaganda posters provide more evidence about the propagandist than about the audience. These posters provide no

evidence about their *reception* or their impact on public opinion and behavior. The absence of any voice of the occupied is a [gap, an archival silence](#) within the poster collection. Identify and describe the gaps, silences, or contradictions in a single poster or in the exhibition as a whole. What are some possible reasons for them? What visual or rhetorical evidence is there of the power relationship between occupiers and occupied? How do gaps and archival silences in the poster you selected affect your encounter with the poster?

5. Another way in which propaganda works is through normalization—of stereotyped images, radical messages, ugly ideas. How is a normalizing strategy deployed in these posters?