Graphic Editorials Fighting the Status Quo: Artists and Social Critics During the World Wars

Rhoda Terry-Seidenberg
*Touro College*, rhoda.terry-seidenberg@touro.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://touroscholar.touro.edu/lcas_pubs](https://touroscholar.touro.edu/lcas_pubs)

Part of the [Art and Design Commons](https://touroscholar.touro.edu/lcas_pubs), and the [Political Science Commons](https://touroscholar.touro.edu/lcas_pubs)

**Recommended Citation**

Introduction
One thing that can be said when speaking about politics: “the more things change, the
together. A television pundit and social media color our imaginations
with breaking news and commentaries, some of them true, but dry; other
commentaries are more colorful and sometimes less truthful, but play upon the fears
of the public. Over 100 years ago, before television and social media, political news
was enhanced by cartoons, caricatures, and posters. These images, which ranged from
humerous to down-right viscous were the graphic editorials that were often
remembered after the text of the newspaper was forgotten. War posters tended to be
used as propaganda to stir up emotions. The most exciting and inciting images were
drawn to express disdain of the Two World Wars. World War I would devastate the
status quo of Europe. Artists, both European and American depicted the horrors of
war that was not being written in the general press. The German loss during World
War I led to the rise of the eco-masculine Adolf Hitler and the rise of the Nazi party.
Here the artist drew the unspeakable inhumane actions of one country against the
world. There are also the often neglected study of black soldiers in political images
and their reception not only in Europe, but also in America. This study will look at
the works of political posters, caricatures, and cartoons and how the artists used their
craft to make graphic editorials against the status quo during the two World Wars.

"Stop Them Damn Pictures"
These are the words that corrupt politician Boss Tweed screamed to his cohorts in
response to Thomas Nast’s scathing images of his administration. He went on to say
that even though his constituents couldn’t read words, they could see and
understand political cartoons which were featured in newspapers. Tweed fully
understood the power of images and its effect on the viewer.

Starting with the broken snake above the words “Join or Die” which was featured in
Benjamin Franklin’s Philadelphia Gazette (May 9, 1754) to Stephen Sack’s visual
commentary of the overcrowded Republican candidates for the 2016 presidential
election, see middle right image from the Star Tribune, political cartoons have been
the mainstay in American politics. More often than not, these parodies explained the
complexity of government and politicians in sardonic, witty, and humorous ways.
The public would recognize the characters involved and make their deductions of
guilt or innocence based on the images.

Who commissioned these cartoons? The news media often enlisted artist to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
who commissioned these cartoons? The news media often enlisted artist to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
who commissioned these cartoons? The news media often enlisted artist to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
who commissioned these cartoons? The news media often enlisted artist to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
who commissioned these cartoons? The news media often enlisted artist to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
who commissioned these cartoons? The news media often enlisted artist to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
who commissioned these cartoons? The news media often enlisted artist to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
who commissioned these cartoons? The news media often enlisted artist to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
who commissioned these cartoons? The news media often enlisted artist to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to
illustrate their publications. Magazines like Puck frequently featured political art to

Not Just Cartoons: War Posters
Visual political sentiment was not limited to caricatures in cartoons. Posters rendered in a painterly style were also used in the war of
public opinion. Following in the tradition of the large Neo-classic paintings of Jacques-Louis David and others 19th century painters,
war posters used vivid colors like red and blues to call the viewers attention to the plights of war. Often these posters pandered for
purchasing war bonds or shaming America to join the war effort with images of rag-tag children or skeletal remains.

Hateful Drawings in “Black and White”
Fascism wasn’t the only cause of war during the early 20th century. Racism also played an ugly role. Black solders were drafted into the
cause, but were relegated to menial work such as latrine duty. They could fight along with their white comrades and were not given a heroes
welcome. This cartoon appeared in Chicago’s The Defender, a Black publication. The cartoon shows America rushing off to
save Europe, while injustices against blacks were left unchecked.

Fighting the Status Quo
The two World Wars provided graphic artists a blank canvas in which to depict the horrors not presented in print. World War I
was truly the dummy that sharpened the status quo of ruthless monarchies. The use of deadly gas to destroy the enemy
caused devastating casualties. America, which had wanted to stay neutral reluctantly joined the war effort. It is possible that
scathing posters and cartoons hinting at cowardice prompted America to enter the war.

After this war, Europe, in particular, Germany was left impoverished, almost featureless. The discontent and aching
poverty led to the rise of Adolf Hitler, a despot who was passed during World War I. He cited in his infamous tome, Mein Kampf!
that the struggles of Germany resulted in part to Europe’s Jews. Under the guise of seizing Eastern Europe then
Western Europe, he quietly started extinguishing Jews. This was done by creating the Nuremberg Laws, making it illegal
to for Germans to marry Jews, then the taking possession of Jewish owned property, then finally deportation to
concentration camps and death.

A group of socially astute artists applied to their pens and brushes to paper to alert the public of Hitler’s maniacal
dangers. The fear was that if he could take Europe that he would extend his reach to us in America. Amongst these artist
were Jewish artist, Arthur Szyk and German-American, Dr. Seuss.

Literature cited
Editors of Foreign Policy Association. 1987. A Cartoon History of
United States Foreign Policy since World War I. Random House.
NY.
Westport, CT.
Hess, Stephen and Sandy Northrop. 1996. Drawn and Quartered: The
History American Political Cartoons. Elliot and Clark Pub.
Montgomery, AL.
Mincik, Richard H. 1999. Dr. Seuss Goes to War: The World War II
Editorial Cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel. The New Press. NY.
Navasky, Victor S. 2013. The Art of Controversy: Political Cartoons
and their Enduring Power. Alfred A. Knopf. NY.
Museum, Chicago, IL.
Yee, Craig (ed.) 2009. The Great Anti-War Cartoons. Fantagraphics
Books. Seattle, WA.

Conclusions: Effectiveness of
Political Cartoons
Using art as an expression of political propaganda existed since antiquity. The advent of broadsides
and newspapers saw black and white cartoons as the main
tool for this kind of art. Instead of proclaiming the
greatness of rulers, these graphic editorials attacked
corruption, fascism, even race prejudice. Caricature
rendered in stark black and white on a white
background, made the subjects ridiculous but
identifiable to the public. Colorful posters were
created to arouse compassion and definitely raise
money to support the war cause. Both the cartoons
and posters had the desired effect. People were
honored to give their sons to the armed forces and
give their money to buy war bonds.

Boss Tweed was correct about the power of images. Even if most people won’t take the time to read, they
will read images and form their impressions from them.

Further information
© Copyright Rhoda Terry-Seidenberg
CuratorialAffairs@gmail.com