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

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Introduction

One thing that can be said when speaking about politics: “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Television pundits 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 year ago, before television and social media, political news was enhanced by cartoons, caricatures, and posters. These images, which ranged from humorous 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 ego-maniacal 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 searing 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 Steven 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 further their own anti-corruption agenda. Like newspapers and journals today, these older publications endorsed certain candidates or causes. If they wished to alert the public, cartoons would be the preferred method of communication.

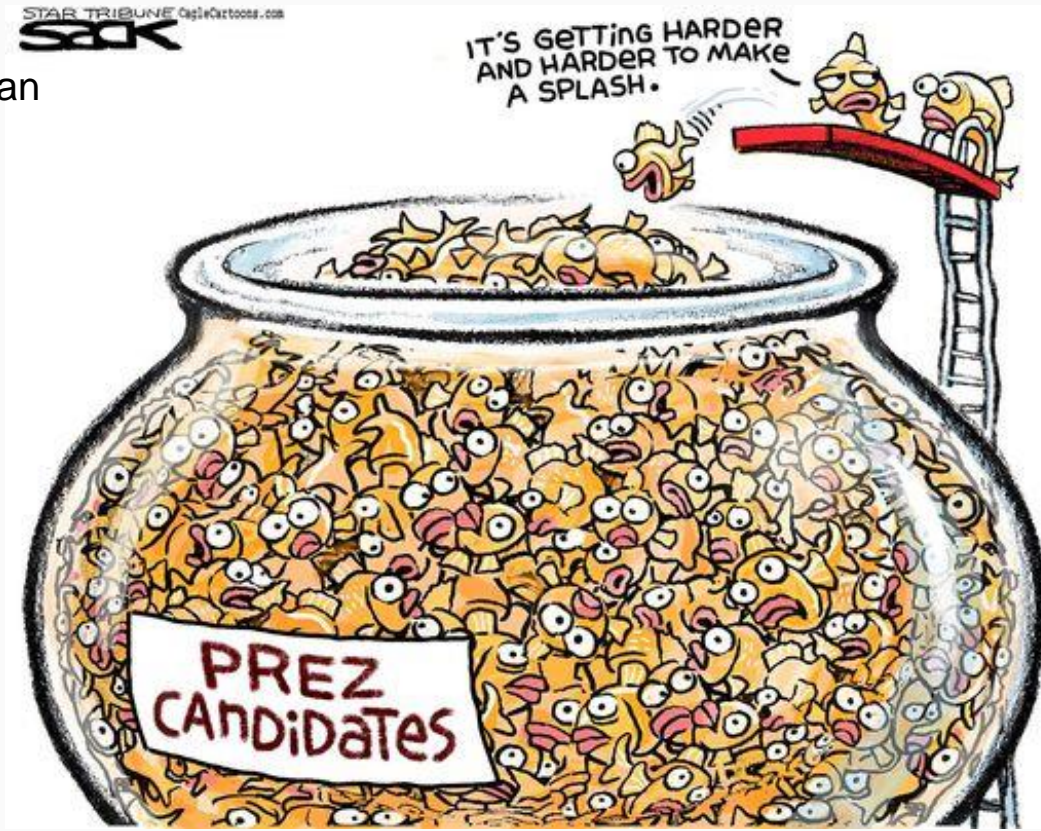
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Steven Sacks, 2016 Republican candidates



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 Neoclassic 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.

Fighting the Status Quo

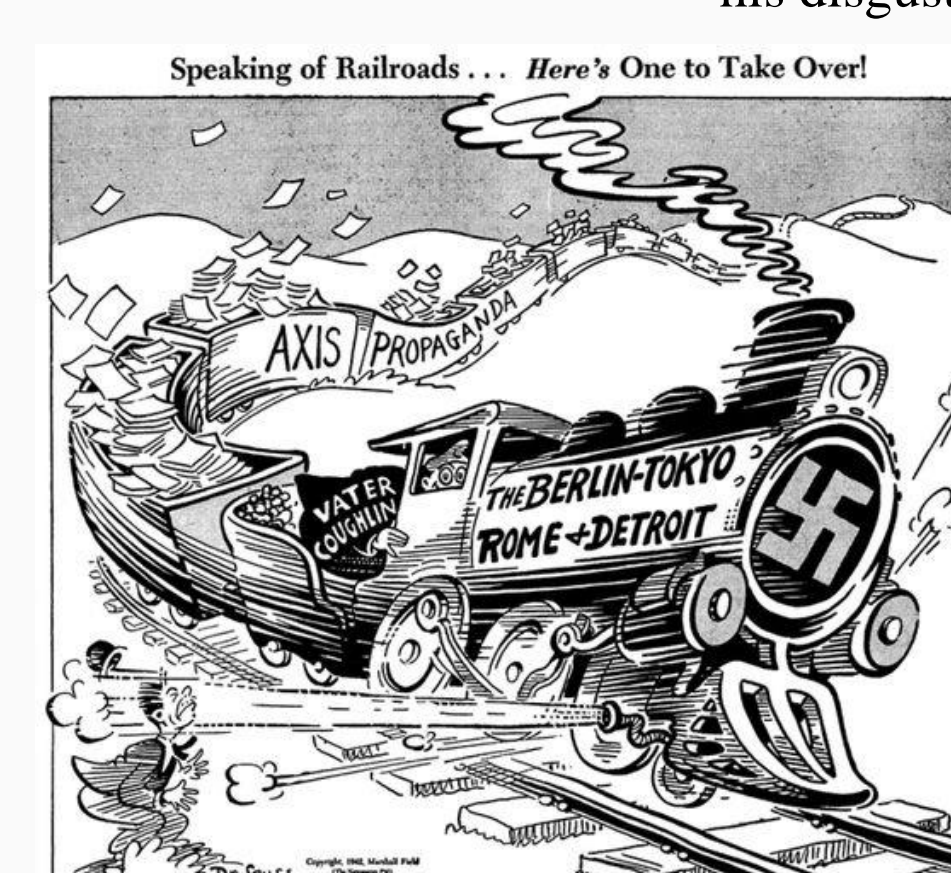
The two World Wars provided graphic artists a blank canvas in which to depict the horrors not presented in print. World War I was truly the domino that shattered the status quo of ruthless monarchies. The use of deadly gas to destroy the enemy caused devastating casualties. America, which had wanted 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 toothless. The discontent and aching poverty led to the rise of Adolf Hitler, a despot who was gassed 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.

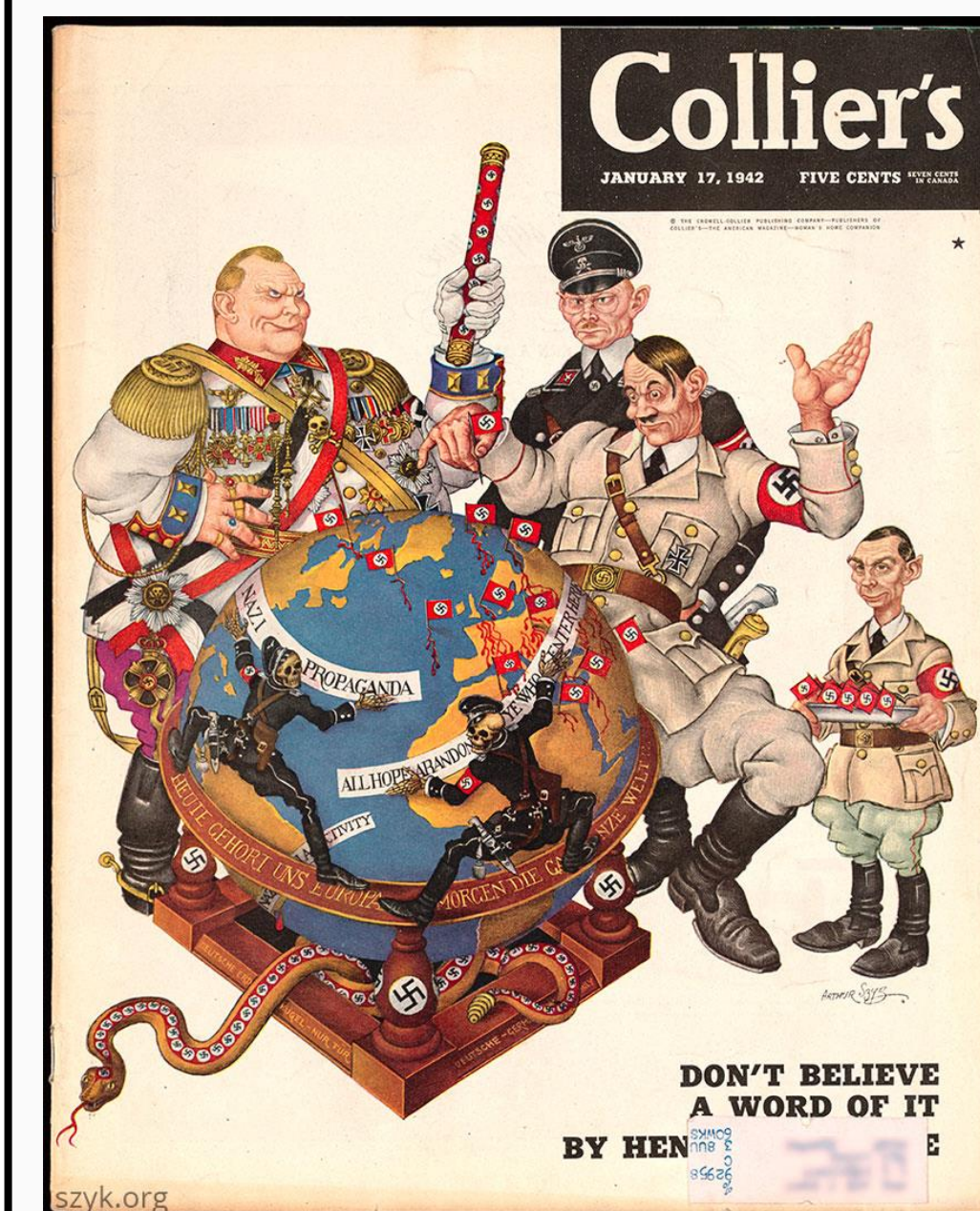
A group of socially astute artists applied to their pens and brushes to paper to alert the public of Hitler’s maniacal dangers. The fear was that if he could take Europe that he would extend his reach to us in America. Amongst these artist were Jewish artist, Artur Szyk and German-American, Dr. Seuss.



World War I poster for U.S. Government Bonds



Before Theodor Geisel became famous for writing and illustrating children’s books as **Dr. Seuss**, he drew editorial cartoons for newspapers and journals. The focus of these images were the leaders of the Evil Axis: Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito. Hitler was rendered as a despotic buffoon riding creatures reminiscent from *Horton hears a Who*.



For Polish-Jewish American artist, **Arthur Szyk**, the rise of Hitler and the destruction of Europe’s Jews was a personal matter. His mother and brother were killed after the liquidation of the Łódź Ghetto. Szyk’s style could not be called painterly. His subjects are injected with hyperbolic hatred and disdain, which in turn leaves his viewers sharing his disgust and rage at the situation.

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 soldiers 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.



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

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