Propaganda in Comics by Cord Scott

Comic books are the art of fantasy, exaggeration and power. So it was not surprising that soon after the creation of the comic book medium in the United States in the mid 1930s an element of propaganda began to blend into the artwork.

The idea of comic book characters being utilized in propaganda was illustrated through the comic book character Superman. The creation of two Jewish teens from Cleveland, Superman fought for the essence of American culture and societal justice, starting in 1938. In a specially created two page comic story and accompanying article for Look Magazine in February 1940, Superman flew to Berlin then to Moscow to gather up their respective dictators, Hitler and Stalin, and flew them to Geneva, Switzerland and placed them on trial for crimes against humanity at the League of Nations headquarters. Given that the US was not in the war yet, this was a bold action. Hitler’s chief propagandist Josef Goebbels even responded to the article in Das Schwarzte Korps where he noted the creators’ origins and how decadent American ideals were the reason why the West could never defeat the Nazi ideology.

For other comic book illustrators, the war allowed them to incorporate propaganda into storylines. As Hitler was dominating Europe at the time, his brownshirts were often incorporated into themes of Nazis undermining American values. It was ironic to note that the SA was a mere shadow of its former self by the early 1940s when the war raged. The German villains in comics from this era fit the stereotype first established in World War I: the officers were often stiff in actions, cold in their observations and actions (belying a Prussian background) and often had a monocle, dueling scar or both.

The Japanese, however, were given far harsher treatment in terms of propaganda. While Germans were depicted as Nazis, a distinction was made for enlisted men or civilians who opposed Hitler, the Japanese though were seen as entirely sadistic and brutal. While German villains were calculating in their plans for domination of America, the Japanese often wished to torture their enemies. Finally, while Germans had some realistic features, most Japanese were drawn with coke-bottle glasses, fangs and rat-like features. This gave the reader the perception that the Japanese were vermin and therefore easier to eradicate, unlike the act of killing a fellow human being.

The American comic book characters that rallied to the Allied cause while real Americans remained neutral often carried propagandistic characteristics. After the SHIELD, and the more popular Captain America entered the lexicon of American comics, scores of patriotically themed characters followed. Included in this group were Mr. Liberty (later Major Liberty), the Patriot, USA Patriot, Uncle Sam, and even an early Wonder Woman. Many of the characters were short lived but they symbolized, particularly in their costumes, the red white and blue of patriotism. Many ironically also looked not like the cross section of America, or of their creators, but had the appearance of the Aryan model with which Hitler aspired to populate in the new Germania. Steve Rogers, Captain America’s real identity, was blonde haired, blue eyed, and after the experiments of the super soldier serum, over six feet in height. He was to be the model for an American army to counter the Nazis. Given the experiments on Rogers, and the fact that Joe Simon and Jack Kirby were both Jewish, this seems contradictory.

Captain America also became a rallying point for readers as well. Young readers were encouraged by Captain America and his teen sidekick Bucky to save or gather materials such as newsprint for the war effort or buy war stamps. Uncle Sam was utilized in a comic book entitled How Boys and Girls can Help with the War, produced by Parents Magazine publishing. In the comic, children were given a basic definition of what Nazism was, who the enemies of America were, how to administer first aid, and what war stamps and bonds would provide for soldiers in the field. Other comics such as True Aviation Stories published charts on how to identify various types of aircraft, both Allied and Axis.

Some comic book creators even tried to incorporate children into the story lines. While the concept of children serving in combat is an abhorrent one, the comic book creators realized that by using characters in their adolescence, they would allow the reader of the same age bracket to fantasize about fighting the Axis, while at the same time show that the enemy was in fact not as clever as Americans. Again Simon and Kirby were the creators of a mixed nationality unit of child warriors. The Boy Commandos were led by an American officer but were made up of boys in their early teens. Other kid sidekicks were created to give an outlet to readers, like...
Bucky for Captain America, Toro for the Human Torch, or Kid Patriot for the Patriot. A danger of using story lines like this was that readers often couldn’t distinguish between what the comic book heroes could do versus the reality of death on the battlefield.

This fear even had comic book creators try to limit the use of Superman, as referenced by Bradford Wright in Comic Book Nation (p. 43) and Michael Uslan’s compilation of DC war comics, entitled America at War. The pk device was written into a 1943 storyline that Clark Kent tried to enlist but in his excitement to pass, read the eye-chart in the next room. This marked him as 4F, physically unfit to serve in American forces. It also gave the creators an “out” to keep Superman at home. Even Captain America often fought Axis spies, but not on the actual battlefield.

While many comic book creators tried to utilize fantasy in their stories, or used child characters to fight, other comic book companies such as Parents Magazine Institute and Dell published true stories of valor on the battlefield. True Comics, War Heroes, and True Life Comics used historical events from the past, or war stories culled from headlines to write stories to explain why we fight, and how the bravery of armed forces members were a symbol of all nations united against tyranny.

By and large, the sensitivities of comic book creators towards race were not evident. National or racial stereotypes were the norm, and characters often reflected that attitude. As WWII ended and the Cold War began, villains often became interchangeable. Japanese villains of WWII became Chinese villains by the early 1950s. Germans slowly morphed into Soviet agents, with minor variations to reflect the new linguistic or political issues – often “comrade” was heavily used along with the phrase “capitalist dogs” as was noted in such comics of the 1950s as Atom-Age Combat, Heroic Comics or Foxhole. As the Vietnam War developed, the stereotypes still existed, but were somewhat less common, with creators tending to portray the enemy as a malevolent person rather than little more than an animal. Vietnamese soldiers were portrayed as variations of the Japanese stereotypes. The World War II style comics also went back towards the stereotypes, but while derogatory terms such as “Jap” were still used well into the 1980s, other terms were not as prevalent by that time.

After the attacks on September 11th, characters like Captain America were brought back towards their original, propagandistic roots. In these new stories, the aspects of racial propaganda were on the whole more subtle or at least tried to separate the acts of specific groups like Al Qaeda from Muslims as a whole. This was similar to how Germans were depicted in WWII era comics: distinguish the Nazis from “regular” Germans. While some depictions of Arabs are base stereotypes, akin to the WWII depictions of the Japanese as a race of underhanded people, many writers try to be more discriminating. Propaganda may have altered over the years with more forms of media, but the message of demonizing the enemy is often still there.

Bibliography


Cord Scott has a Doctorate in American History from Loyola University, Chicago. He has written for several encyclopedias and academic journals including “Written in Red, White and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and 9/11” in the Journal of Popular Culture. His academic interests center on military themes in comics as well as cartoons in military publications. He has also written an article for Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero, edited by Robert Weiner. In addition to academic research, he was a consultant for the Pritzker Military Library in Chicago for the exhibition “Don’t Be a Dope: Training Comics in World War II and the Korean War.” His additional work is on the use of cartoons in military outlets such as YANK, Stars and Stripes and Maple Leaf. He teaches at several institutions in the Chicago area.

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Comics and Conflict: Patriotism and Propaganda from World War II through Operation Iraqi Freedom is a book created by American academic Cord A. Scott and published by the Naval Institute Press in 2014. Scott has stated that the book's basis lay in a 2011 dissertation he wrote for college, as well as his own early interest in comics. He also noted that the book and dissertation was also influenced by a comment made by a comic book store owner after the events of the September 11 attacks, when the owner by Cord A. Scott.

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