

Visual Literacy Activity

World War II and the Holocaust

Analyzing Propaganda Posters

The term *propaganda* refers to messages that are crafted to influence an audience's perceptions of an idea, cause, or institution. During times of war, governments often create propaganda messages to rally their citizens' patriotic support. When you see propagandistic messages, try to determine their origin. Who is sending the message? What is the purpose and goal?

Directions: The World War II posters below, one from the United States and one from the Soviet Union, show the importance of women's participation in the war effort. Look closely at the two posters, analyze them, and answer the questions that follow.



This U.S. poster presents a confident and assertive image of the female industrial worker contributing to the war effort.



This 1944 Soviet World War II poster has a message similar to the American poster. In Russian, the complete slogan reads, "We will defend Leningrad! We will restore it!"

Background

As able-bodied men went off to fight in World War II, virtually every country involved in the war was forced to mobilize women to contribute to the war effort. In the United States, public service announcements were focused on persuading women who had never worked outside the home to take positions as Red Cross aids, factory workers, and even as noncombat members of the Armed Forces. Although women had been entering the workforce increasingly since the early twentieth century, they were still expected to be wives and mothers. An outside job seemed to go against these traditional values, particularly the grungy factory jobs for which women were so desperately needed. During the war, millions of American women donned trousers and work shirts, grabbed lunch pails, and went off to factory jobs in the railroad, aircraft, shipbuilding, and munitions industries. They riveted, hammered, and welded their way to a new sense of independence and achievement.

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War propagandists were challenged to portray working women in inviting, attractive terms, showing them as brave, confident, and powerful. The poster “We Can Do It!” was part of a series of war effort posters created in 1942 by artist J. Howard Miller for Westinghouse Company’s War Production Coordinating Committee. Although the image later came to be associated with the symbolic figure Rosie the Riveter, the woman pictured was an actual person, Michigan factory worker Geraldine Hoff Doyle.

Like their American counterparts, Soviet women were mobilized to take support roles in the war effort. Many dug antitank ditches and harvested crops. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, large numbers of women tried to enlist in the military after the German invasion in 1941 but were turned away. The most persistent figured out ways to join the fighting, often by enlisting as field medics. Some volunteered to join air regiments founded by famous female pilot Marina Raskova, who had persuaded Stalin to allow young women to be trained as bombers and fighter pilots. In the infantry, women made up almost 40 percent of field medical personnel, and these women frequently took up arms in the chaos of battle, saving the lives of male soldiers. Other Soviet women found service as tank drivers, snipers, spies, and saboteurs. Out of about 10 million Soviet soldiers who served in the war, almost 800,000 were women.

The 1944 Soviet poster shows a determined woman troweling a brick wall and vowing, “We will defend Leningrad! We will restore it!” During the Siege of Leningrad, from September 1941 until January 1944, German forces surrounded and blockaded the city of 3 million. The Soviets refused to surrender, and every capable citizen worked to build up the Leningrad’s borders with walls and other fortifications.

Practicing the Skill

- 1. Comparing** What is similar about the images and messages in these two posters from such different societies? Do the similarities surprise you? Why or why not?

- 2. Applying** Some of the basic tools of propaganda include (1) making people feel that they are part of something important; (2) presenting an image of authority or trustworthiness; and (3) using simple words, powerful images, and recognizable symbols. Which of these persuasive tools do you see at work in these posters?

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Go a Step Further

3. **Speculating** Do you think a propaganda campaign today could get all American citizens involved in a war effort? Why or why not?
