

First Call: American Posters of the World War I

Lesson Plan from the **MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History**

To be used in conjunction with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program's "After the Great War: The American Legion and Its Impact on Arkansas Veterans and Communities" program

Cultural Impact of War Propaganda

Grade levels: 7 -12

Essential Question: Can the government's use of propaganda persuade and influence a person's sense of community and patriotism, perception of other cultures, and role in society?

Applicable Arkansas Curriculum Frameworks:

1. **H.7.AH.7-8.6** Investigate social, economic, and political effects of World War I . . . on various segments of the population in Arkansas
2. **Era7.1.USH.2** Evaluate social, economic, and political . . . impact of the involvement of the United States in World War I using multiple primary and secondary sources.
3. **Era7.1.USH.2** Investigate social, economic, and technological effects of World War I on American society.
4. **Era4.4.AH.9-12.3** Evaluate effects of World War I on Arkansans using a variety of primary and secondary sources.
5. **PR.3.G.3** Analyze the impact of cultural and social factors on individuals' varying perceptions of *places* and *regions* created by physical characteristics and human influences

Lesson objectives: To examine and evaluate the relationship between wartime propaganda poster art and its influence on a citizen's sense of community and patriotism, perceptions of different cultures and places, and role in society. Additionally, to analyze how WWI propaganda posters reflect the time period's economic and political climate.

Materials & Pre-Lesson Prep:

1. Overview Reading: "First Call: American Posters of World War I"
2. For images of WWI posters, access the MacArthur Museum's "First Call" gallery webpage <http://littlerock.org/parksrecreation/arkmilitaryheritage/learn/educationalprograms/>
3. Access to the Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture's entry for "World War I." <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=2401>
4. Access to the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies' "Arkansas and the Great War" collection <http://www.butlercenter.org/arkansas-and-the-great-war/>
5. Access to YouTube (if not available, skip): World War I in 6 Minutes <http://youtu.be/-3Uj5kxiLI>

Student Preparation

1. First, have students watch the YouTube video, "World War I in 6 Minutes." (if not available, skip)
2. Afterwards, have students read the Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture's entry for World War I in Arkansas.
3. Third, have students read "First Call: American Posters of WWI" overview reading (located on last page of lesson plan).

Exercise: Analyzing Propaganda Posters as Primary Sources

Part 1. How Posters Were Used: If possible, project one of the WWI propaganda posters from the online “First Call” gallery on a screen or whiteboard. If this isn’t available to you, print a color copy of the poster. Conduct a classroom discussion of the poster by using the below prompts.

- *Do we see anything similar to these posters today? They are similar to advertisements. How? Why?*
- *What is this poster(s) advertising, or perhaps a better question, what does the United States need for a world war? War posters were used not only to justify U.S. involvement in a war it had been avoiding, and also to get the unprecedented amount of men, money, and resources needed for the war. **Have students consider a current conflict and discuss what a propaganda poster would promote or solicit today.***
- *Consider the types of posters produced during World War I.*
 - a. Recruitment posters, Red Cross posters, Food Conservation posters, Liberty Bond or Liberty Loan

Part 2. Imagery in Posters: Project the second provided poster for students to view. If possible, present posters either side by side or have the first poster readily available for further discussion.

- *Do you think all of these posters are unique, or do they have some similarities? Many of these posters have identifiable themes aimed to make people feel certain ways or think certain things.*
- Posters used *patriotic symbols* like the American flag, Uncle Sam, Statue of Liberty, etc. These images made people feel proud of their country and believe it was patriotic to support the war effort.
- Other posters made *people feel scared*. Some posters implied that villainous German “Huns” would invade the United States if citizens didn’t completely support the war.
- Many posters *exaggerated the masculinity and physical strength* of U.S. soldiers. However, about one-third of the 2.5 million American men ages 21-30 who registered for the draft in 1917 were rejected because of poor health.
- *Based on these two examples, do you think war posters like this always depicted World War I like it was really happening and how it was really affecting people? Unfortunately, not always.*

Part 3. Peer Poster Analysis Worksheet

- Break the class into pairs, next
- Have students select a poster from the *First Call: American Posters of World War I* gallery available on the MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History’s website:
<http://littlerock.org/parksrecreation/arkmilitaryheritage/learn/educationalprograms/>
- After selecting a poster, ask each pair to analyze their poster, using the provided Poster Analysis Worksheet (next page of lesson plan).
- Upon completing the worksheets, have each pair share their analysis with the class, encouraging the other students to provide feedback.

First Call: American Posters of World War I Poster Analysis Activity

1. What aspect of the poster draws your attention first? Why?

2. Does the poster tell a story? Use your imagination and briefly detailed the story below.

3. Are there women and/or men depicted in the poster? How are the women and/or men presented? Do you think the poster gives a realistic representation of the women and/or men? Consider the time period and society roles of men and women at that time.

4. What kind of emotional response does the poster try to provoke? How? Why?

5. In your opinion, is this an effective propaganda poster? Why or why not?

First Call: American Posters of World War I (Overview Reading)

In 1914, European countries allied and waged war on a global scale. The United States declared war on Germany and entered the Great War in 1917, but lacked men, money, and material. It was vital that every American contribute by either enlisting into the armed forces to fight the enemy abroad, or support the war effort at home through food conservation, factory work, or buy war bonds to financially support the war.

For close to two and half years, President Woodrow Wilson reassured the American people that the United States would not enter the war. After declaring war on Germany in April 1917, President Wilson was faced with the dilemma of drumming-up support for the war effort. He assembled the Committee on Public Information (CPI), directed by George Creel. Creel formed two CPI divisions: Film Division and News Division. The CPI's sole mission was to gain popular support for America's entry into the war through the production of *propaganda*. This form of communication aims to influence the attitude of a community, a person or country toward a particular cause or position. Throughout U.S. history, the government has often used propaganda to encourage citizens to bond together. The use of posters, movies, speeches, pictures, and songs have been common tools used by the government to rally support for a specific cause or war.

As a way to reach Americans who did not read the newspaper or watch films, Creel created the CPI Division of Pictorial Publicity. For the next 18 months, well-known illustrators produced over 1,400 colorful and dramatic wartime posters, aimed to bolster patriotic support on the homefront while soldiers waged a war overseas. These posters were extremely effective because they were found everywhere. Millions viewed them on billboards across the United States, as well as in public and civic buildings.

Posters as a means of communication had more impact during World War I than at any other time in history. The ability of posters to inspire, inform, and persuade, combined with vibrant colors and designs in many of the participating countries, produced thousands of interesting visual works. These posters are valuable historical resources because they provide multiple points of view for understanding this global conflict. As artistic works, the posters range in style from graphically vibrant works by well-known designers to anonymous broadsides that were predominantly text. Posters were a major tool for broad dissemination of information during the war. Countries on both sides of the conflict distributed posters widely to garner support, urge action, and boost morale. Despite its late entry into the war, the United States produced more posters than any other country.

Many of these posters had identifiable themes aimed at evoking fervent patriotism or instilling fear in their audience so people would support the war effort. Some war posters used emotion-laden icons such as the American flag, Uncle Sam and the Statue of Liberty. These images

“First Call” Overview Reading cont.

called for patriotism and loyalty for a war effort that was depicted as a moral crusade. These posters often implied that unless total patriotic commitment and self-sacrifice were given to the war effort, villainous German “Huns” would invade American soil. Some historians have claimed that generating fear of a German invasion was one of the reasons the Fourth Liberty Loan campaign was successful.

The restored World War I American posters on exhibit at the MacArthur Museum of Arkansas Military History were collected by a 17 year old Little Rock, Arkansas resident. Just like across the United States, propaganda posters influenced the Arkansas homefront. Besides posters, patriotic-themed messages appeared as advertisements in the *Arkansas Gazette* from April 1917 through November 1918. Propaganda posters and newspaper ads encouraged Arkansans to conserve food by participating in “Wheatless Wednesdays” and “Meatless Mondays;” to purchase Liberty Bonds as a way to financially support the war effort, and to donate their time and resources to the Red Cross.¹ By the summer of 1917, Arkansans were inundated with war propaganda, generating positive patriotic feelings, as well as provoking cultural hostility. For example, several Arkansas schools banned teaching German, and Johnson County Catholic churches eliminated services in German.² Although the Great War’s impact on Arkansas wasn’t as dramatic as the Civil War or World War II, Arkansas’s young men, numbering 71,862, served in the war, many of them encouraged to enlist by patriotic-themed messages conveyed through propaganda posters.³

¹ Joseph Carruth, “World War I: Propaganda and Its Effects in Arkansas,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 388, 390-91.

² *Ibid.*, 392.

³ Steven Teske, “World War I,” *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*, last updated July 22, 2014, accessed on February 10, 2015, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=2401>