

## **ENLISTING A NATION: American Visual Propaganda of World War I**

The summer of 2014 commemorates the centennial of the start of World War I, “The Great War.” With changes in military strategy and advancements in technology—trench warfare, poison gas, tanks, machine guns, and grenades, as well as advancements in air and naval warfare—the world witnessed death and destruction of such magnitude that President Woodrow Wilson would eventually dub WWI as “The War to End All Wars.”

Although more than twenty-five countries were ultimately embroiled in the war, the battles fell mostly in Europe and in the Middle East. Despite the fact that the sinking of the *RMS Lusitania* in 1915 (which counted 128 American citizens among its dead) by German U-boats enraged Americans and heightened tensions, the United States continued to see the conflict as a war “over there.” General sentiment remained firmly committed against any involvement by re-electing President Woodrow Wilson, on November 7<sup>th</sup> 1916, whose campaign motto was *He Kept Us Out of War*. Yet in less than six months, the American public had switched gears and rejected the stance of neutrality. On April 2, 1917, Wilson asked Congress to declare war and four days later this request was approved. Almost immediately, American citizens representing a broad range of age and ethnic background offered support for American engagement in battle. It should be noted, however, that a substantial anti-war movement continued throughout the war, and a number of notable Americans were jailed for their vocal opposition to American involvement.

What caused this change of heart among the American people? Why was there such incredible backing, patriotic fervor and enthusiasm to enter into a bloody conflict that had already claimed so many lives – especially after an election that promised non-intervention? Some of the techniques that were used to convince the public of the necessity for American engagement included a well-organized campaign of visual propaganda, using emotional themes of compassion, nationalism, motherhood, and an appeal to one’s sense of conscience and obligation to country. Almost overnight, the government sponsored programs promoting messages that linked the war with morality and ethics, urging Americans to consider “right over wrong.” Artists, writers, movie stars and public speakers were encouraged to lend their talents to the government-sponsored effort to win favor for the war.

When conflict ended in 1918, it is estimated that the war had left more than 37 million casualties: eight and a half million had died, more than twenty-one million had been wounded and nearly eight million more had become “missing in action” – a phrase which then encompassed soldiers who were taken prisoner, went missing, were killed or deserted. To this day, questions still linger about whether or not the United States should have been involved at all.

## Significance of Poster Art in World War I

The poster as an art form developed in the late 1800's in France during the Art Nouveau movement when three or four color pictures were combined with text for the purpose of advertising. Over the next two decades, the use of poster art flourished throughout Europe and North America.

However, the use of posters evolved from advertising to become a tool of propaganda during World War I. *Propaganda* is defined as the deliberate spreading of ideas in order to gain favor for a particular viewpoint and/or discredit an opposing cause. Although many nations created propaganda posters to stir human emotions during WWI, it is believed that the United States created the greatest quantity of images, despite a very late entry into the conflict.

By the time President Wilson declared war in April 1917, Europe had been fully engaged in battle for more than two and half years. Within a few short days, the Committee on Public Information's Division of Pictorial Publicity—a government agency created by Wilson—was charged with recruiting America's best commercial artists to contribute their talents to the cause. Because the radio would not become part of the American way of life until the 1920s, it was essential to find a way to disseminate information quickly across the nation. Mass-produced, starkly illustrated posters were considered the primary source of communication and the best way to provide widespread information.

Well-known illustrators of the time were engaged to create pictures that would be displayed across the nation urging recruitment, purchase of war bonds or saving food to help in the war effort. These beautiful, yet idealized, visions of what America was supposed to represent, successfully manipulated the thoughts and emotions of the American public between April 1917 and November 1918, with thousands of designs that would be emblazoned on walls, streetcars and in window displays. Messages on the placards implied patriotism for country and rallied support from the populace. Backing for the war was quickly expressed by most within the general population

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Please visit all 29 posters on display in the Kellogg Library gallery and these adjacent locations: 3<sup>rd</sup> floor elevator lobby, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor Research Help Desk, and 4<sup>th</sup> floor elevator lobby.

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The Context Library Series is a grant funded, co-curricular program supporting student learning and research through art installations. For more information, contact Outreach Librarian Melanie Chu at [context@csusm.edu](mailto:context@csusm.edu), 760.750.4378 or visit [biblio.csusm.edu/context](http://biblio.csusm.edu/context)