

# STUDENT PROJECT

## Jonathan Butler, "Visual Images of National Identity: Propaganda Posters of the Great War"

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### Visual Images of National Identity: Propaganda Posters of the Great War

Although rhetoric has traditionally been thought of as being confined to the realm of language, the art takes other forms as well. As the exhibit of World War I propaganda posters currently on display at the University of South Carolina's McKissick Museum demonstrates, rhetoric happens not just through speech and the written word, but may also work through visuals, or through a combination of words and images that persuade. The dramatic propaganda posters of the Great War seek to evoke emotional and financial civilian support for the war through a variety of persuasive strategies. The posters created in each of the Allied nations were all crafted with the same basic goals; however, each nation employs a distinct style in appealing to its citizens. These different styles in large part reflect the ethos, or preexisting identity, that each nation brought to the table. As the following examples from British and French posters show, each nation's histories and values played a large role in shaping its propaganda.

British posters usually rely on traditional British concepts of honor and the empire to instill nationalism and promote military enlistment. One poster, for instance, shows a male lion, an image traditionally associated with patriarchal royalty, standing on a rock above his pride, his mane flowing, his chest swollen with pride (see fig. 1). The poster associates Britain with the Old Lion who defies his foes with the help of the young lions, presumably the United States and France. Drawing on the sentiments raised by words and images of the empire, United Kingdom posters often also rely on a feeling of honor-bound obligation--one might even say feelings of guilt--for their rhetorical power. Another typical poster features a portrait of field marshal Lord Kitchener, and the

The opening ¶ outlines the general claim and tells readers that an analysis of the posters' visual rhetoric will follow.

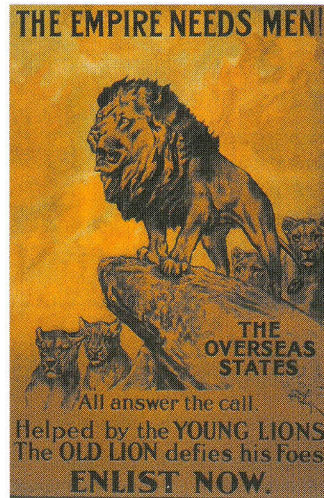


Fig. 1. Arthur Wardle, The Empire Needs Men, 1919 ("Posters").



Fig. 2. Lord Kitchener Says: Enlist To-Day, 1915 ("Posters").

Body ¶s draw attention to specific features in each poster and explain how these illustrate cultural differences.

following quote, which scolds young men who do not volunteer for military service: "Does the call of duty find no response in you until reinforced--let us rather say superseded--by the call of compulsion?" (see fig. 2). While it's never explicitly stated, one gets the feeling looking at British posters that civilians are being asked to support the war for the Crown, to preserve the history and values of their empire.

The French posters in this exhibit, on the other hand, rely instead on their traditional values expressed in France's motto: "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." More dramatically symbolic than British posters, French posters create a sense of camaraderie between the Allies, often depicting soldiers representing France, Britain, and the United States collectively defeating a symbolic representation of German forces, usually the black eagle. In one poster, Allied troops in the uniforms of their nations scale a mountain, on top of which the black eagle is perched, its claws red with blood. The inscription reads, "One final effort and we'll have it" (see fig. 3). Even the few French posters that deviate from this "Allies triumphing together" theme still maintain the romanticized style of the

others, usually depicting images symbolic of French victory over German forces. Not only are the traditional French values of equality and fraternity represented on the posters, but liberty plays a large role as well. Since Liberty has been personified in French culture since the Revolution, it is not surprising that her image was frequently used on French posters. Images of Liberty, resembling a Greek goddess, complete with laurels, abound on posters with and without representations of the other Allied nations. Liberty is often shown posing, huge and specterlike, above a group of soldiers, as in this exhortation to buy liberty bonds (see fig. 4).

While the styles of each nation's posters differ as a result of each country's individual ethos and the stylistic choices of the nation's artists, the posters all have the rhetorical use of imagery and text in common. While French poster illustrators use very dramatic imagery to catch the eyes and stir the emotions of their audiences, for example, British

British and French posters are treated in separate ¶s, to emphasize similarities among each nation's propaganda.



Fig. 3. Un Dernier effort et on l'aura, 1917 ("Posters").



Fig. 4. Lucien Jonas, Emprunt de la Celebration, 1918 ("Posters").

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**The conclusion sums up key differences discussed in the body of the paper before wrapping up the central argument.**

posters tend towards a more realistic, reserved style that reflects their traditional notions of duty and honor. By examining these posters and the various rhetorical strategies their creators employed to reach their audience, we can gain a better understanding of the ways in which both image and text can be manipulated for persuasion--as well as some notion of how a society's cultural features shape the development of its texts.

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#### Work Cited

"Posters of the Great War." Exhibit of posters from the Joseph Bruccoli Collection. McKissick Museum, University of South Carolina, Columbia. Fall 2003. 2 December 2008 <<http://www.sc.edu/library/spcoll/hist/gwposters/posterintro.html>>.