

Gods, Men, and Monsters: The Three Faces of Nazi and Soviet Posters

John Sokolowski

During World War II, propaganda served as a prime instrument for the control and mobilization of the masses by world governments and was used by all sides during the war. After the war, propagandists would be charged in war crimes courts for the first time in history.¹ Wartime propaganda in Nazi Germany would prove to be so successful that, even after the war, Germans would not believe or trust information from the Allies, their former enemies.² Posters were a great tool for propagandists; they were cheap, transportable, and easily understood by their intended audiences. The posters used by the governments in both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union are remarkably similar; they are often only different in the language of the text and whether the primary figures are donning a black swastika or a red star. The infamous uses of World War II-era visual propaganda illuminated the ideologies held and sought to be spread by those in power during this dreadful era of total war. First, both parties depicted their own leaders as superhuman. Second, propaganda posters represented their citizens and allied people as humans with great value to their country. Third, both sides portrayed their enemies as inhuman monsters. The imagery in posters used by both the Nazis and Soviets elaborated the likenesses of both parties and their ability to affect the minds of their people in order to strengthen the war machine in their own territories.

The propaganda posters of both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union present their leaders as superhuman, and glorify them to a point that brushes the level of deity worship, aiming to

¹ Steven Luckert and Susan Bachrach, *State of Deception: The Power of Nazi Propaganda* (Washington DC: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; New York: Distributed by W. W. Norton, 2009), 141.

² Ibid, 144.

further trust in these leaders and inspire the masses to get behind them. Both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union are well known for the personality cults of their primary leaders, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. The Soviet Union would frequently depict Vladimir Lenin, Stalin's predecessor, in posters as well. However, Hitler, Stalin, and Lenin were rarely depicted amongst typical people, with the odd exception of young children, and would instead be portrayed as standing in front of a crowd of people or as a giant towering over them. This figurative presentation suggested that the three men were 'above' their people, literally portraying the sense that they were the utmost leaders to their people.

Hitler was commonly depicted on propaganda posters before World War II began, first in campaigning posters and afterwards as a savior to Germany. Hitler would often be depicted in posters as a lone subject standing tall and looking either off into the distance or staring directly towards the viewer. In later cases, Hitler would be illustrated standing in front of a massive crowd of loyal and proud Germans, usually saluting him. Hitler was almost always depicted in a military tunic, which presented him as a soldier and furthermore as a man of the people.³ Captions tended to be simple slogans, including "Führer we follow you! All say Yes!"⁴, "One People, one Reich, one Führer!"⁵, and the simplest and most glorifying, "Adolf Hitler is Victory!"⁶ Each of these simple slogans emphasized Hitler's importance to the German people and his supreme leadership as Führer. Slogans on propaganda posters in general would be brief and express the point clearly; different posters would often present the same idea but

³ Ibid, 111.

⁴ Olive-Drab, "Nazi/German Propaganda Poster," http://olive-drab.com/gallery/npp_description.php?top_photo=gp0016.jpg (accessed May 2, 2012).

⁵ Oracle ThinkQuest Education Foundation, "Nazi Propaganda," <http://library.thinkquest.org/C0111500/ww2/german/naziprop.htm> (accessed May 2, 2012).

⁶ Randall Bytwerk, "Nazi Posters: 1933-1945," German Propaganda Archive, <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/posters2.htm> (accessed May 2, 2012).

differentiate the manner in which it was written. Hitler is commonly shown to be adored by the public, especially by young children. In several posters, Christian imagery was used that suggested Hitler was a messiah to the German people and that he was the embodiment of all that is good in the Third Reich. In one particular poster, with a caption reading “Long live Germany!”, a celestial light is shining past a flying dove and down onto Hitler, who is waving the Reich’s flag in front of a crowd of more German flag bearers.⁷ This would suggest that the war was some sort of holy quest or crusade, inspiring Germans to work harder for their nation and instill a deeper sense of pride.⁸ The crowds that surrounded Hitler in posters further established his supreme power as the Führer and demonstrated the German people’s unconditional support for his glory. Spatially, Hitler would often take up the majority of the poster or he would be portrayed as something of a giant, which suggested his paramount importance and power.

Posters from the Soviet Union glorified Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Lenin as supreme and all powerful icons as well. Although Hitler was commonly portrayed as both a superhuman leader and a deity in posters, Stalin and Lenin would split the roles. Stalin would be depicted as a powerful and masterful leader, and Lenin would be portrayed as something of an immortal god. Lenin died in 1924, more than a decade before World War II began, and his presence alone in propaganda posters would suggest his immortal spirit. The two Soviet icons would be portrayed as supermen of great power and intellect. Lenin would never be portrayed smiling and, thus, was presented as a stern taskmaster pushing the Russian people to win the war.⁹ Lenin was

⁷ Olive-Drab, “Nazi/German Propaganda Poster,” http://olive-drab.com/gallery/npp_description.php?top_photo=gp0136.jpg (accessed May 5, 2012).

⁸ Oracle ThinkQuest Education Foundation.

⁹ Essortment, “Soviet Propaganda Posters,” <http://www.essortment.com/soviet-propaganda-posters-37362.html> (accessed May 1, 2012).

frequently depicted as a face on a flag or with strong resemblance to a statue, making his presence much more symbolic than Stalin's more human-like depictions. Stalin, on the other hand, would be shown smiling and, similar to Hitler, amongst children, sometimes even embracing them.¹⁰ On most occasions he would be signaling a military attack with one hand and in the other he would be holding a pair of binoculars or parchment of some sort. This implied that Stalin was an intelligent military strategist who oversaw everything and a functional military commander of the Soviet armed forces. Stalin's typically commanding hand seemed to signal the military beneath him to press forward into battle. Soviet posters would contain slogans glorifying the two men as well. For instance, the caption reading, "Stalin is a greatness of our time! Stalin is a banner of our victories!", suggested that Stalin was the embodiment of Soviet victory, similar to the previously mentioned German poster with the caption "Adolf Hitler is Victory!".¹¹



During World War II, both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were autocratic regimes. The imagery used by both parties in propaganda posters depicted the leaders of the two countries as superhumans or gods, which strongly reflected their autocratic status by constantly stressing the leaders' supreme power and superiority over the people. The images used in posters would ideally reiterate this relationship between the leader and the citizens of the respective country.

¹⁰ Essortment.

¹¹ All World Wars, "Russian WWII Propaganda Posters," "Stalin is a greatness of our time! Stalin is a banner of our victories!" <http://www.allworldwars.com/Russian%20WWII%20Propaganda%20Posters.html> (accessed May 2, 2012).

Posters also aimed to instill trust in leaders, as well as make them symbols of hope. Leaders became symbols of patriotism and would hopefully inspire such in whoever viewed these posters. The trust in leaders and furthered patriotism would be a major asset to the governments of Germany and the U.S.S.R., both of which needed recruits to fight in the war, and the public's backing and trust to achieve victory. The propagandists of World War II would simultaneously remind the people of their own importance and their leaders' reliance on them to win the conflict.

Propaganda posters used by the Nazis and Soviets depicted their own citizens as capable and valuable human individuals in order to empower and inspire their people to take part in the war. Posters containing soldiers or citizens usually pictured one person or emphasized one greatly amongst the others pictured. Often, a single soldier would be shown accomplishing a great task. In the Soviet poster captioned, "Glory to the heroes, partisans destroying fascist's rear" a lone fighter is shown cutting power lines by a burning landscape.¹² This poster portrayed the devastation caused by what is implied to be a single individual. The people featured in posters were illustrated as humans; though it may sound insignificant that people were portrayed *as people*, this stood in deep contrast to how all-important leaders and outsiders were represented in posters. By depicting average, but strong-looking people, posters would create a more identifiable image to their audiences. Citizens and soldiers were not only shown to be valuable and capable, but they were also individually glorified as heroes.

The posters used by the Nazis and Soviets depicting citizens and soldiers shared so much in common that it seems the poster artists could have used the same template. Soldiers were

¹² SovietPosters.com, "Soviet Propaganda Posters," <http://sovietposters.com/showposter.php?poster=41> (accessed May 3, 2012).

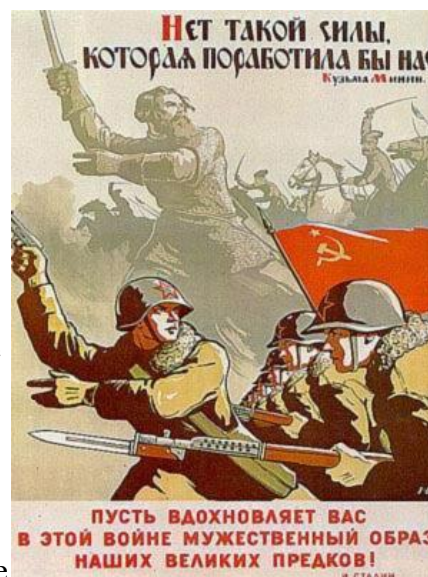
depicted taking up the majority of the poster with their faces always visible; the background may contain military vehicles or other soldiers moving forward, but there was always heavy emphasis on the individual in the foreground. The individual portrayed in a poster was much more identifiable than images of military masses standing below a giant leader. Although the posters of leaders served their own purpose of showing the leader's importance, these posters of nameless individuals aimed to show the importance of the people. Whether the individuals in posters were factory workers, farmers, or soldiers, they would all be glorified as heroes to the country. Individuals would be depicted standing strong and tall, representing preparedness for whatever lies ahead. People shown to be moving were usually leaning forward, as if in a charge, showing their relentlessness and courage. Soldiers were shown to be well armed, well supplied, cleanly shaved, neatly dressed, and having the skills for the job. Soldiers were rarely depicted as being wounded or, for that matter, even having dirty or battered clothes. Instead, the uniforms of illustrated soldiers seemed to always look brand new. This created a very positive image of friendly soldiers as respectable people, and that they were living in conditions not as harsh as those one would normally associate with war. Soldiers would almost always be depicted with their mouths closed and would never be depicted screaming or showing signs of fear. This presented the notion that soldiers should and would be courageous and conserved, even in the heat of combat.

Ancestral imagery used with modern people was another common occurrence in Nazi and Soviet propaganda posters. Hitler believed that the forgotten epochs of history could be salvaged and successfully made useful in the present, and this would be proven in ancestry-related posters.¹³ In these posters soldiers would be moving into action in the foreground, and in the

¹³ Luckert and Bachrach, 13.

background the men would be paralleled by images of soldiers from a conflict of that region years ago. The use of ancestry also built off the idea that the spirits of the dead are passed down bloodlines into modern generations. Ancestors tended to be depicted in black and white or faded colors, suggesting spirits even further. The posture of the soldiers in the present mimicking the heroes of the past hinted at reincarnation, but, more importantly, that World War II soldiers were the modern equivalents to the glorious heroes of the past. A

Soviet wartime propaganda poster featured a soldier leading troops into a charge, and in the background Kuzma Minin, a Russian war hero from the 17th century, in the same posture leading a charge¹⁴. The text above Minin quoted him in saying, “There will be no force which can enslave us.”¹⁵ The text below the World War II Soviet soldier featured a quote from Stalin saying, “Let courageous image of our great ancestors inspire you.”¹⁶ Stalin’s quote explains the objective of using ancestry in propaganda posters. By associating soldiers with the glorified heroes of the past, current soldiers



There will be no force which can enslave us.
(Minin, 17th century). Let courageous image of
our great ancestors inspire you. (Stalin) *All
World Wars*. Source:
<http://www.allworldwars.com/image/011/Poster003.jpg>

would be thought of as heroes and would be inspired to follow the paths of their ancestors.

Russians that were familiar with Minin might have already held him as a personal hero, and therefore many would consider it an opportunity to follow his model by joining in the current conflict.

¹⁴ All World Wars, “Russian WWII Propaganda Posters,” “There will be no force which can enslave us. (Minin, 17th century). Let courageous image of our great ancestors inspire you. (Stalin)”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Another common aspect in posters was that individuals would be staring off into the distance, in the same manner that Hitler was often portrayed. This gaze gave a sense that the



"You are the front" German Propaganda Archive.

Source:

<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/posters/fro-nt1.jpg>

individual was optimistically looking into the future. This expression is comparable to other famous images that promoted hope and optimism, including the iconic image of Che Guevara and the more recent "Hope" campaign poster of President Barack Obama. This optimistic and bold gaze towards the future was used in World War II as a means to incite hope and optimism in the masses, assisting the country in moving forward into further conflict.

Many Nazi and Soviet propaganda posters focused on

factory workers as well. Posters of factory workers frequently portrayed a union between soldiers and workers, often marking them as equals.¹⁷ This equality would be developed by portraying soldiers and factory workers as mirror images of each other. Soldiers and workers were often depicted as having identical faces and being the same height. The only major difference between the two figures would be the clothes they were wearing. This would give the idea that workers were just as important as soldiers and additionally that workers were just as capable and vital to the war effort. In a German propaganda poster, captioned with the slogan, "You are the front," a shirtless and muscular blacksmith is depicted with the black and white image of a German soldier looking optimistically into the distance behind him. The slogan of this poster elaborates the importance of the home-front worker and the soldier's reliance on him. Posters like this one tended to display muscular men at work because the

¹⁷ Oracle ThinkQuest Education Foundation.

depiction of masculine strength was believed to inspire further confidence.¹⁸ Other posters depicted workers handing supplies to soldiers or soldiers thanking workers for their efforts. These images presented the military's reliance on workers by illustrating a nonexistent physical interaction between workers and soldiers. The posters would remind workers of their significance in the war effort, offering the thanks of the military that workers probably never received.

The posters used by the Nazis and Soviets depicting their people served as a major means of inspiration. Soldiers and workers alike were glorified as heroes in the propagandists' illustrations. The emphasis on individuals furthered the point that everyone served a purpose and that one person could accomplish a lot towards the war effort. The soldiers and workers depicted in posters created role models for the public.¹⁹ The glorious illustrated heroes of posters would ideally inspire recruitment, greater effort, cause to fight and work harder, and even encourage personal sacrifice from individuals. The glorification of the people in general and as individuals would express their necessity and capability in the war effort. The governments of the Nazi and Soviet regimes would rely on the support and commitment of their people in the war effort, so propagandists would need to empower the people in order to achieve the governments' goals in the war. Posters would show how all efforts were important, even if they were just the actions of a single human being. These images would glorify military actions, but posters would still need to create an image of the enemy to remind viewers why they were fighting.

Nazi and Soviet posters both depicted their primary enemies, most often each other, as inhuman monsters capable of great terror and destruction. All of the participating governments

¹⁸ Oracle ThinkQuest Education Foundation.

¹⁹ SovietPosters.com.

in World War II realized that effectiveness in the war required their people to accept the enemy as vile and barbaric.²⁰ The enemy subject of Soviet wartime propaganda was primarily the Germans, but on some rare occasions the allies of Nazi Germany would be pictured as well. The Nazi party had a larger variety of enemies and depicted them all, including the Americans and the British, but depictions of Jews and Bolsheviks were the most hateful.

Hitler actually admired the effectiveness of Allied propaganda campaigns during World War I, especially for representing the Germans as bloodthirsty and barbaric.²¹ These representations increased Allied rage and hatred towards the Germans and simultaneously prepared their own soldiers for the horrors of war.²² Using images of the enemy as brutal barbarians evoked the necessity to defend a country against said enemy and implied that fighting in the war and killing the enemy was morally justifiable.²³

The two most represented enemies in Nazi posters were Jews and Soviets. Jews were depicted as an alien race that leached off Germany while destroying the country from the inside.²⁴ Jews were given devilish looks that suggested treachery and conspiracy, and they were frequently compared with rats and other longstanding negative stereotypes.²⁵ The depictions of Soviets would be despicable stereotypes or personifications of an insane hatred towards mankind.²⁶ These horrendous representations would sometimes come together to present the supposed Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy across Europe described in other Nazi propaganda. Soviet propaganda, too, would regularly and ruthlessly target their enemy, the Nazis. Soviet

²⁰ Luckert and Bachrach, 2.

²¹ Ibid, 14.

²² Ibid, 14.

²³ Ibid, 14.

²⁴ Ibid, 86.

²⁵ Oracle ThinkQuest Education Foundation.

²⁶ Luckert and Bachrach, 124.

propaganda in general aimed to constantly denunciate the enemy and, furthermore, attempted to expose their every mistake, injustice, and weakness and wind these into a central theme.²⁷

Soviet posters “demonized Hitler and dehumanized Germans in general.”²⁸

Both parties tended to depict one another’s soldiers in either of two general manners. In many instances enemy soldiers would be depicted as monsters. Their faces were often distorted and pictured with an open-mouth grimace, and locked in a menacing and rather mindless stare. In a Soviet poster captioned, “Kill the fascist monster!”, the German enemy is depicted as a strange creature with pointed ears and whiskers wearing a monocle and Nazi officer’s hat.²⁹ In another poster captioned, “For the honor of your wife, for the life of your kids, for the happiness of the Motherland, kill the invader!”, a German soldier is seen walking away from a lifeless woman, who is possibly pregnant, with a child clinging to her still body.³⁰ The German soldier is depicted as a creature that is half-man and half-ape, shown with an under bite, hunched back, and hairy arms.³¹ When using inhuman imagery, Nazi posters stuck to the image of Bolsheviks as poorly dressed, ruthless, and stupid savages; although, in a few cases the Bolsheviks were depicted as devils as well. Their faces were usually heavily deformed and missing teeth while they dressed in heavily worn clothes and held an outdated pistol. Both parties often depicted their enemy carrying a torch, a major symbol of sabotage and destruction as both parties partook in the scorched earth retreating policy. The torch would often be combined with apocalyptic or burning landscapes, painting the enemy as a harbinger of devastation. If the enemy was not portrayed as an inhuman monster, they were still largely devoid of prominent human

²⁷ Jean-Marie Domenach, “Leninist Propaganda,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 15:2 (Summer 1951) 267-270.

²⁸ Essortment.

²⁹ All World Wars, “Russian WWII Propaganda Posters,” “Kill the fascist monster!”

³⁰ All World Wars, “Russian WWII Propaganda Posters,” “For the honor of your wife, for the life of your kids, for the happiness of the Motherland, kill the invader!”

³¹ Ibid.

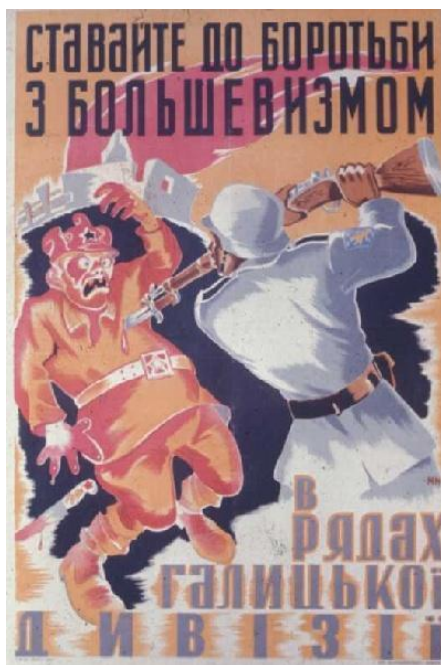
characteristics and would remain largely faceless. Faces of the enemy would be mostly obscured or the only exposed part of their face, usually the eyes, would be strongly expressing frustration, implying hatred. At other times the enemy would be plainly depicted as a dead body laying face down. The Soviet poster captioned, “Cut the bastards!”, illustrates a Russian soldier on horseback about to cut down a German soldier with his sword³². The Russian and his horse take up most of the poster, and only the German’s nose is visible from underneath his helmet. Even the caption in this poster seeks to conceal as much of the German’s human identity as possible, referring to him only as one of the common “bastards”.



"Cut the bastards!" All World Wars.
Source: <http://www.allworldwars.com/image/011/Poster005.jpg>

³² All World Wars, “Russian WWII Propaganda Posters,” “Cut the bastards!”

The leaders of the opposition to either side would not be spared, the depictions of the enemy's supreme leader tended to be the opposite of how the enemy portrayed their own leader. Stalin, depicted by his people as an intelligent military commander, was illustrated by the Nazis as a caveman-like brute with a protruding forehead and mindless gaze. Hitler, depicted in Germany as an all powerful and courageous deity, was portrayed by the Soviets as small, feeble, and cowardly. Both sides frequently portrayed their opposition's leader to be covered in blood or, at least, with bloodstained hands. These depictions challenged what may have been presented by the international media in the past. The posters of opposing leaders were more of a satire than a means to spread fear and seemed not to have been taken as seriously as the depictions of enemy combatants.



"Stand up to fight Bolshevism in the ranks of the Galicia division." *German Propaganda Archive*. Source: <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/posters/russia.jpg>

Enemy soldiers depicted in the same poster as allied soldiers were either shown to be dead, dying, or about to be struck down. Enemy soldiers were never shown overpowering the friendly soldiers. In these cases, the friendly soldier would be facing the poster's viewer and the enemy soldier would almost always be falling with their back turned to the viewer. If their face was exposed, it would not be expressing fear of their certain death, but, instead, a frown or snarl. A Nazi poster--used in Ukraine--with the caption, "Stand up to fight Bolshevism in the ranks of the Galicia division", depicted a grotesque looking

Soviet soldier being stabbed by a German.³³ Ironically, the German is clean and the Soviet soldier is not bleeding all over him; however, the Soviet monster's hands are covered in blood and he is dropping an already bloody knife.³⁴ The bloodstained hands suggest the enemy's guilt in murdering others. It was important that depictions of the enemy soldier did not show his fear, as this would suggest that the enemies could be considered as victims. By continually showing the opposition as only expressing anger or hatred, even when the subjects were facing their own deaths, posters maintained the enemy soldiers' identity as monsters. In addition, the horrid identity of the enemy simultaneously made the friendly soldiers look even better. The enemy would be thought of as a monster that killed innocent people, but the allied soldier would be seen as a man that heroically killed monsters in defending innocent people.

The primary goal of the monstrous and inhuman depictions of the enemy was to dehumanize them. Once enemy soldiers had been ridden of their human identity, posters could turn them into diabolical monsters that deserved to die. This transformed the opposing forces into a threat that soldiers would be more willing to go toe-to-toe against than another human, like themselves. It is important to remember that battles fought in World War II, especially those between the Germans and Russians, were unforgiving and brutal. Soldiers could expect to engage in hand-to-hand combat and any hesitation in killing an enemy soldier would mean certain death. The horrific depictions of enemies found in propaganda posters aimed to prevent soldiers from having any hesitation from killing the enemy and, instead, would glorify their killing. The images of enemies found on propaganda posters would fuel the hate machines of both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The threat of a monstrous enemy would be the third

³³ Randall Bytwerk, "Nazi Posters: 1933-1945," German Propaganda Archive, <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/posters/russia.jpg> (accessed May 5, 2012).

³⁴ Ibid.

and final piece in propaganda posters necessary to mobilize the minds of both Germans and Russians and to prepare them for war.

The obvious similarities between the propaganda posters of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union allow us to consider the similarities of these two regimes that hated each other so intensely throughout the conflict. The damage done by the war went beyond the physical death and devastation of armed conflict. The effects of the worldwide use of mass propaganda also left imprints on the minds of the people of each nation. The propaganda posters of World War II are a look into the mentalities of this era, granting access to an imaginative representation of how people could have perceived themselves and the rest of their world, or more accurately what propagandists wanted the masses to perceive. The disgracefully glorious and unbelievably grotesque images featured in Nazi and Soviet posters show how vulnerable the mentality of humans can be, especially in such desperate warring times. It is hard to imagine, but at one time these posters literally filled and littered popular city streets. Average people were exposed to these posters on a daily basis, and whether they initially believed or disregarded these posters, it would surely leave some sort of an impression on them. Nazi and Soviet propaganda posters were primarily used to convince the public of the war's necessity and for everyone to 'do their part' in the effort. The numerous and specific uncanny similarities between Nazi and Soviet posters further demonstrated how the two governments shared the same simple goal: to mobilize a hate machine against the other as a means to overpower the enemy and survive the war.

The ultimate irony of Nazi and Soviet posters is that this paper, and all research regarding propaganda posters, are written testament that the propagandists failed. The designers of these posters attempted to paint their own deceiving history of World War II as it happened, but these

posters can now be used years later in an attempt to honestly generate a deeper understanding of the historic conflict and the ideologies behind it.

