As the United States entered into the ugly fray of a European war, propaganda artists attempted to personalize the increasingly impersonal nature of modern warfare. While the stereotype of the brutal German soldier was common in World War I propaganda, the figures in this gallery focused more upon who Americans were and who they wanted to be.

**POWER OF THE POSTER**

After the war, a high government official said: “The Division of Pictorial Publicity did work of immense value in helping to win the war. Their services were of more value to the Government in forming public opinion than all other agencies put together. No other group, no other profession, did as much.”

The great financial and physical demands of World War I necessitated the involvement of all Americans. The war opened opportunities for women in the workplace that caused a major, though temporary, shift in the social structure. These American World War I posters embody complex gender and familial roles at this moment of conflict and change.
Upon entering the war in April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (CPI) and its offshoot, the Division of Pictorial Publicity (DPP) to promote the “absolute justice of America’s cause.” Essentially propaganda machines to foster patriotism and discourage dissent, the CPI and DPP produced posters, major motion pictures, pamphlets, buttons, and other media. This propaganda infiltrated all areas of Americans’ private lives with the wartime endeavors of creating armed forces through conscription and enlistment, raising money with war bonds, and encouraging patriotic participation through food conservation and support of the Red Cross. Before removal by collectors of the time, these posters hung in public places like libraries, post offices, recruiting stations, and factories.

George Creel, Director of the CPI, said, “Even in the rush of the first days… I had the conviction that the poster must play a great part in the fight for public opinion. The printed word might not be read, people might not choose to attend meetings or to watch motion pictures, but the billboard was something that caught even the most indifferent eye.”

Propaganda is the manipulation of public opinion through significant symbols. These posters were tools used by the government to create public support for the war.

The artists working for the Division of Pictorial Publicity provided their services for free as a part of their patriotic duty. The artists’ belief in the work they did was genuine. The following is an excerpt from a poem by DPP artist, George Wallace, written after the war ended.

**Thoughts Inspired by a Wartime Billboard**

I stand by a fence on a peaceable street
And gaze on the posters in colors of flame,
Historical documents, sheet upon sheet,
Of our share in the war ere the armistice came.

And I think about Art as a Lady-at-Arms;
She’s a studio character most people say,
With a feminine trick of displaying her charms
In a manner to puzzle the ignorant lay.

But now as I study that row upon row
Of wind-blown engravings I feel satisfaction
Deep down in my star-spangled heart, for I know
How Art put on khaki and went into action.
Calling Every Man, Woman and Child!: American World War I Posters

Art with a purpose! The United Stated government called upon the power of the poster to mobilize the country for entry into the Great War. Playing on cultural roles of gender and family and utilizing the power of symbols and personification, the posters of the First World War are striking works of art and propaganda.

- How would you describe the point of view of these artists?
- Who are the people in the posters?
  - Are they representative of the America population?
  - Why do you think they have been chosen by the artists?
- Identify the various symbols of America used by the artists.
  - How are the artists using those symbols?
  - What values and/or issues are implied by the various symbols?
- What do you think each poster is actually asking people to do?
- To what specific audience is each poster speaking? How can you tell?
- Artists chose specific forms, colors, imagery and text to elicit feelings of patriotism, outrage and unity in the American people.
  - Compare the choices made by the different artists.
  - What images, colors, composition or text seem most effective and why?
- How is the current war effort being promoted by the American government today?
  - Are posters still being used?
  - What other media give us both images and appeals for our support?
  - What are the American people being asked to do today?
- Compare the images in the posters with those seen in these historical photographs from Picturing the Century, 100 Years of Photography from the National Archives.

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"Liberty Loan Choir sings on the steps of City Hall, New York City during third Liberty Loan campaign" By Paul Thompson, April 1918

"Women Rivet Heaters and Passers on" by unknown photographer, Puget Sound Navy Yard, Washington, May 29, 1919

"Some of the colored men of the 369th (15th N.Y.) Who won the Croix de Guerre for gallantry in action" by an unknown photographer, 1919

"Suffragette banner. One of the banners the women who picketed the White House carried" unknown photographer, Washington, DC, 1918

All images from the National Archives and Records Administration