CHAPTER TWELVE

“THE SPIRIT OF WOMAN-POWER”: REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN WORLD WAR I POSTERS

Elizabeth Prelinger with Barton C. Hacker

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    Historical documents, sheet upon sheet,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.

Wallace Irwin, “Thoughts inspired by a war-time billboard,” 1919
(as quoted in Rawls 1988, 168)

The most cursory glance at the visual culture of World War I reveals the abundance and omnipresence of images of women. Although all nations frankly conflated enlistment and combat with masculinity, identifying “virility with war” (Paret, Lewis, and Paret 1992, 50), women’s indispensable contribution to the war effort was nevertheless immediately and generally appreciated; every contemporary artistic medium recorded their involvement in an extensive range of war-related activities. The coteries of predominantly male artists and illustrators in all combatant countries astutely grasped the propaganda value of female participation, and, as a complement to their portrayals of men, highlighted women’s essential role in promoting, sustaining, mourning, and commemorating the war. Poster artists in particular not only depicted actual tasks carried out by female participants, but embedded in their images commentary on such provocative issues as society’s deep-seated ambivalence toward women’s pursuit of greater social and political equality under the new conditions posed by the war. This essay explores a small representative selection of thousands of wartime propaganda posters featuring women from a variety of combatant nations, and examines some of the complex meanings concealed within their simple and direct designs.
Derived from turn-of-the-century advertising, poster images served two principal functions: to convey information and to influence behavior. As the war began, the genre of the poster was already well entrenched; governments and war-related organizations of all nations understood its power to reach and sway large audiences. The deployment of commercial art in the cause of war (Vogt 2000–2001) was predicated on the newly understood value of propaganda, which itself emerged from the expanded role of the general population in the war, that is, “total war.” David Welch (2000, 1) argued that:

One of the most significant lessons to be learnt from the experience of the First World War was that public opinion could no longer be ignored as a determining factor in the formulation of government policies. ... The gap between the soldiers at the front and the civilians at home was narrowed substantially in that the entire resources of the state—military, economic and psychological—had to be mobilized. In “total war,” which requires civilians to participate in the war effort, morale came to be recognized as a significant military factor, and propaganda began to emerge as the principal instrument of control over public opinion and an essential weapon in the national arsenal.

Posters became integral to the rich material culture that was evolving in response to events. They joined the spectrum of visual media—magazine illustrations, product advertisements, photographs, sheet music covers, postcards, toys, caricatures, cinema, camouflage, including “baffle” or “dazzle” painting for marine warfare, decoration medals, target practice images, uniforms, and store window displays (Gallatin 1919; Carmichael 1989; Watkins 2003; Booth 1996; Gosling 2008; Paris 1999; Behrens 1999; Cornelius 1918)—as promotional objects that affirmed and celebrated war aims (Vogt 2000–2001). In the United States, President Wilson created the Committee on Public Information (CPI) in April 1917. Directed by George Creel, the committee would strengthen the case for war aims by a proven visual method, the poster. “I had the conviction,” Creel (as quoted in Van Schaack 2006, 33) affirmed, “that the poster must play a great role in the fight for public opinion. The printed word might not be read; people might choose not to attend meetings or to watch motion pictures, but the billboard was something that caught even the most indifferent eye.”

If the propaganda role of the poster was not in dispute, nevertheless its artistic quality was at issue. American critic and aesthetician Albert Eugene