Art in the Service of Propaganda: The Poster War in France during World War II

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Art in the service of propaganda has a long history. Since the invention of printing, billboards and walls have marked the vicissitudes of history. In France the first use of political posters dates to 1539. Posters of the French Revolution were of small format, with the image prominent. The power of the image was acknowledged in an 1835 law that, while allowing Frenchmen to circulate their opinions in published form, held that complete liberty was not possible with “drawings,” for they could “incite to action” (Wilkins 425) The nineteenth century with its many technical innovations inaugurated the poster of today. During recent wars, posters have played an important political role in efforts to secure a hold over the population.

All observers agree: from 1940 to 1945 there was a campaign of competing propaganda in France without precedent. One can read part of the history of the Dark Years of the German occupation of France from the posters put up on French walls. In a study of French propaganda from 1940 to 1944 Dominique Rossignol maintains that “war with images extends war with arms” (Rossignol 63). Posters conveyed visual messages at a time when television did not exist and newsreels were censored (as was the press). Their importance was such that those who took down posters risked heavy sanctions; tearing or defacing posters of the occupation authority were considered acts of sabotage (as, ironically, posters proclaimed).

From the nineteenth century on, Paris walls were covered with commercial publicity, but now these promotions largely gave way to duly approved propaganda posters. In addition to exercising censorship, the Germans allocated paper, ink, printers and workshops, and distribution. The exceptional number of propaganda posters produced (for example, over three million to mark Labor Day, May 1, 1941) during a period of acute shortages – especially paper – testifies to the importance accorded them.

In this massive poster propaganda campaign during the Occupation, religious themes were exploited. For example, both the Germans and the Vichy government of Marshal Pétain linked anti-British (and later anti-
American) themes to Joan of Arc; scenes of churches destroyed in the deadly Allied bombings were frequently depicted. Graphic anti-Semitic art linked Jews (depicted as international capitalists or terrorists) to both the Allies and the Communists. Vichy privileged Pétain’s image as the Savior of France, restoring the country’s virtues and leading a crusade to save it from anti-Christian elements: Freemasons, Communists and Jews.

Religious themes in posters put up in France during the Second World War need to be set in the larger context of the poster war between different groups seeking to gain the population’s loyalty. Before defeat, Third Republic posters urged the French to support their forces and subscribe to victory loans; later, with the Liberation, the provisional government sought help in the reconstruction of their country. With the armistice and occupation, the occupying forces put up their propaganda posters, as did the Vichy regime and more politically extremist groups. The French Resistance, the provisional government of Charles de Gaulle, and even the Allies participated to some extent in the poster campaign.

We know little about the genesis of a poster – the specific instructions given to the artist, the effect sought or the restrictions imposed (Gervereau 13). Frequently the artist is unknown. Like all the French of this period, poster artists made a choice. While some went to the United States, others either worked little, or not at all. Apparently there was scant pressure on them to work if they chose not to. There were also those like Michel Jacquot who designed inflammatory posters for both Vichy and the Germans. Before their departure the German authorities destroyed most documentation, including that pertaining to the Vichy government that it had come to control. Consequently there are few documents detailing the production of posters in France during World War II.

Throughout these years there were many official announcements: notices, decrees, appeals or warnings posted in public places with text only. In the period known as the “Phoney War,” prior to the armistice of July 1940, the French War Ministry undertook a massive Passive Defense campaign that featured over 50 posters. After the defeat and the installation of Marshal Pétain’s government (France was the only country to set up a new government under German occupation), the text of Pétain’s frequent radio addresses were among the many posters the Vichy regime issued. The German occupation forces put up bilingual notices, with hours for curfew, closing of public places, the métro and other institutions, as well as notices of the penalties for offenses against the Germans. Lists of executions soon followed.

Taken together, these poster texts provide graphic examples of the