COMIC BOOKS AS AMERICAN PROPAGANDA DURING WORLD WAR II

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David Dellecese

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DATE

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Kathryn Stam
Thesis Advisor

_____

Ryan Lizardi
Second Reader

_____

Russell Kahn
Instructor

ABSTRACT

American comic books were a relatively, but quite popular form of media during the years of World War II. Amid a limited media landscape that otherwise consisted of radio, film, newspaper, and magazines, comics served as a useful tool in engaging readers of all ages to get behind the war effort. The aims of this research was to examine a sampling of messages put forth by comic book publishers before and after American involvement in World War II in the form of fictional comic book stories. In this research, it is found that comic book storytelling/messaging reflected a theme of American isolation prior to U.S. involvement in the war, but changed its tone to become a strong proponent for American involvement post-the bombing of Pearl Harbor. This came in numerous forms, from vilification of America's enemies in the stories of super heroics, the use of scrap, rubber, paper, or bond drives back on the homefront to provide resources on the frontlines, to a general sense of patriotism. This research looks to the motivations behind such storytelling in the background of comic book writers and artists as well as involvement from government agencies such as the War Writer's Board. It's also important to note that while comics often vilified the enemies of America through the use of terrible stereotypes and caricature, within those same pages were messages promoting solidarity among religion, race, and background for the purpose of winning the war. These mixed messages often make for very contradictory presentations, especially when looked at retroactively and allow comic books from this time period to be looked at as media artifacts, providing insight into cultural and societal ways of thinking during this period, with appropriate historical context. I have created a website supplement to this thesis where many examples of the types of images discussed have been collected and organized for viewing: https://comicsgotowar.weebly.com/

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INTRODUCTION

I was probably around 5 or 6 years old and one day was out of school, sick. Both my parents working, I spent most of the day under a blanket at my grandmother's house. I remember it being very gray outside, the blanket of the clouds and lack of lights on in the house making it seem as gloomy inside as it was outside.

The day would have been pretty mundane and forgettable to the sands of time if it weren't for one particular moment when my grandmother reached into the closet and pulled out a stack of comic books and plopped them in my lap to read. There was a wide array in that pile that I would eventually make my way through – a Richie Rich whose cover had him riding in a giant roller skate, a copy of The Brave and the Bold featuring The Flash and Batman at the "Disco of Death," but it was that one on top of the pile that would open the door for me.

It was a copy of Uncle Scrooge #124 from December 1975 titled "North of the Yukon" and was a reprint of a Carl Barks classic long before I would know who Carl Barks was. *(For those of you wondering, he was a former artist for Disney animation, producing some of the most classic Donald Duck cartoons of the 40s, who later became a prolific Disney comic book artist and writer, and*

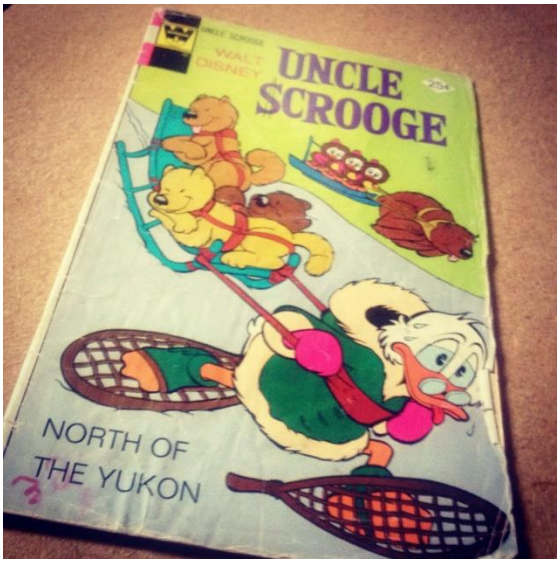

Figure 1 - Uncle Scrooge #124

created the character of Uncle Scrooge.)

Little did I know it at the time, but the story was the last that Barks would write of Scrooge's adventures in the Yukon. It involved sled dogs and was inspired by a real life article Barks had read about a dog named Balto, who participated in the 1925 Great Race of Mercy inn order to deliver an anti-toxin that could halt an epidemic of diphtheria.

From that one Uncle Scrooge book, I would dive into the vast world of Disney's Ducks, making my way over the years from Ducks to do-gooders, as Batman tangled with the Joker, Superman's Lex Luthor went from Mad Scientist to Bald Billionaire, and me loving every minute of it.

It was my gateway drug into a lifelong love for comic books, and before long, I was forcing my family to stop by magazine kiosks in the mall or any bookstore where I caught a glimpse of a spinning comic rack in the window.

At some point prior to high school *(whether I was in junior high or elementary school at the time remains fuzzy to my memory and the sands of time),* I found myself in a store in the mall devoted entirely to comic books and advertising a "half-off sale." Among these discounted treasures were several hardcover books that collected comics from a time long before my reading habits began, and long before those 1970s comics in the pile at my grandmother's had been amassed.

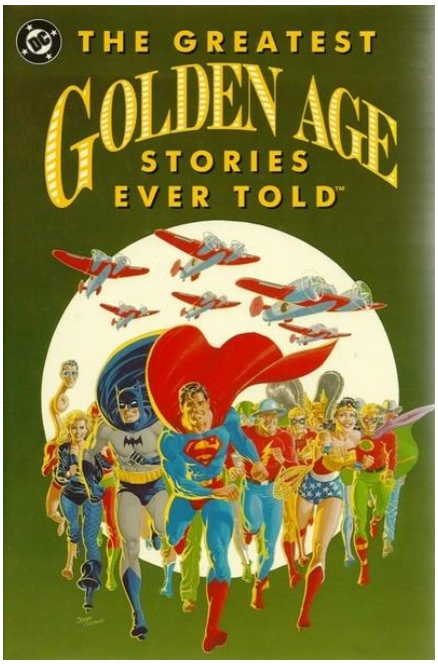

Figure 2 - Cover, The Greatest Golden Age Stories Ever Told. Painted cover by Jerry Ordway.

No, these were from back. Farther back. With yellow lettering across the top shouting "The Greatest Golden Age Stories Ever Told," elementally painted versions of various superheroes came bursting forth from the cover against a military-green background, fighter planes overhead. These were stories of a several generations before my time. These were comic book tales from World War II.

Using money from my paper route, I scooped up this comics time capsule and fell into its pages. From rainy days next to the window at home to rides in the backseat of the car with my family, I was engrossed in its depictions of heroes and villains, some familiar, some not so much, fighting one the frontlines and homefront of a war I had previously only read about for a chapter or two in school. Whether it was the ways of daily life for the civilians of 1940s Gotham City, or the schemes of the Axis powers to take over the world, a spark was lit which has remained burning within me for the decades followed, fascinated by the point where comic books and history intersected in a way unlike any before.

The Golden Age of Comics may historically have been in the 1930s and 40s, but my own personal Golden Age of comics began with these two key books of my childhood, lighting the way for interests that would carry on for years to come.

Little did I know in those halcyon days that many of those stories, shaping my own young perceptions of life in the era of World War II, were designed with that very task in mind – to entertain, to shape, to sway. Over the course of my research I have discovered not just the

incredible scope of American messaging, some intentional, some not, in comic books during the years of WWII, but just how this young media provided writers, artists, publishers, and at times, the government a method to get across messages that might have been deemed too overt or blatant propaganda in any other form such as radio or film.

Varieties of examples from comic books of the era provide a glimpse into an industry and country on edge as to what was happening in Europe and how long it would make its way to the shores of America. As threats loomed larger and larger, so too, did the presence of those threats in comic books. I've worked to collect many of these examples online, to further illustrate the state of the industry and culture at the time, on a website for easy viewing: comicsgotowar.weebly.com/

And while we can't physically hop into a time bubble or fly through the timestream like the heroes of the comic book world, the comics themselves allow us to take a step into the past, to travel through time, and with the proper context, gain a greater understanding not just of the entertainment of the day that comic books provided, but the thinking, the hopes, and in some cases, the intended results behind it.

So grab a warm coat, set the time dials to the early 20th Century, and leap into the Golden Age of Comic Books.

BIRTH OF AN INDUSTRY

The Avengers. The Justice League. The Fantastic Four. The X-Men.

In today's 21st Century, the idea of superheroes has not only become a mainstream accepted piece of our pop culture, but so has the idea of superhero teams - groups of individuals with unique, superhuman abilities, banded together for a common cause, to defeat a common enemy and save the world and its people as we know it. Making the leap to feature film screens to bombastic financial success, the idea of the superhero team has no longer been relegated to that of the comic book page. Such success in a mainstream medium like films and television has also provided the concept of superhero groups with a wider acceptance of its base material in comic books.

But it wasn't always that way. While today this idea of superhuman teams battling evil has become widely accepted, it was once relegated to the four-color pages of newsprint periodicals on newsstands, with heroic characters leaping from the pages one minute and disappearing to obscurity the next, as publishers and creators threw anything they could think of to the wall like the proverbial spaghetti to see what would stick *(and make money)*. The characters that populated the comics and pulp magazines in early 20th Century America were a reflection of a continuing fascination with hero figures by Americans. The frontiers were closing and the imagery of the cowboy had become a less relatable figure compared to the everyday life in urban cities. New heroes were rising to fill the adventure fantasies, heroes that would reflect more of the new, industrialized, urban world. (Chambliss and Svitavsky, 6) It would come to be known

as *The Golden Age* of American comic books, beginning from the late 1930s and would last until the mid-1950s when most superheroes would find their popularity with audiences fading in a post-war world. That Golden Age, however, would become synonymous with the rise of the superhero genre and the real-life villains that in the 1940s would begin to populate its pages, a reflection of the changing world facing creators and their readers alike. (Streb, 29)

Before this Golden Age, before the second world war, however, there was just the dawn of a pamphlet that would be known as a "comic book."

Figure 3 - Cover to Famous Funnies

Max Gaines' entrance, or one might say invention of the comic book industry, came in 1933, when he found that folding a standard newsprint sheet three times with a staple in the middle created a booklet form that could be used as a new, re-sellable format for weekly comic strips. After securing the rights to use such comic strips, Gaines used Eastman Color Printing to create the very first comic book - *Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics*. This booklet was nothing more than reprints that had been repackaged and resold, but proved to be highly successful with audiences at the newsstands. (Scott, 35) As the idea of this "comic book" expanded, publishers soon sought not only new material but new genres, including that which would become known as the superhero comic.

Leading the way was National Allied Publications, with its breakout stars Superman debuting in 1938 and Batman one year later in 1939. From these two templates exploded a cornucopia of superheroes and publishers for every taste.

One such publisher was All American Publications.

Started in 1938 by Gaines, with funding from National Allied Publications and Detective Comics (DC) CEO Harry Donenfeld, the company would go on to publish characters that themselves would eventually reach mainstream and cross-media success, even if never on the same level as Detective Comics breakout franchises of Superman and Batman. But under Gaines, All-American Publications created characters who many in today's mainstream audience may recall in name, if not in full image thanks to a wide history and library of comic book characters for television and films to pull from.

It should come as no surprise that the idea of super-heroes would captivate readers in a world that had suffered the post-traumatic stress of the World War I. Those who lived through the horror of this era were creating characters that could surpass, or overcome the increasing technologies that were led to large-scale death on the battlefields of WWI. Characters like Superman, within his very first appearance in Action Comics #1 in 1938 was said to be so powerful that *"no less than a bursting shell could break his skin,"* a not coincidental reference to the death-dealing machinery of the war. (Kerr, 24) A war that, as is important in the years that follow, many Americans were not eager to repeat. The rise of the superhero in American popular culture ran parallel with the events happening across the globe as hostilities in Europe grew,

hostilities that would eventually lead the U.S. into a second world conflict. For the time being, however, Americans were content to live in a bubble far away from the atrocities of Europe. The influence of such, events, though, would soon begin to permeate the lives of these four-color American heroes and bring about a clash of reality to the fantasy of this new genre of super-hero.

Bright splashes of color across the covers of comic books on the newsstand hoped to grab the attention of potential customers long enough to take a peek inside. These eye-catching covers provided minimal barriers, progressive lures, and minimal barriers to the breezy adventures within its pages. This clear entry point gave potential readers of varying ages all the intrigue and information they needed to 'judge a book by its cover' and spend ten cents (at a time when the average weekly income was $38) for the settings both familiar and exotic, clearly defined characters of good and evil, that made up the storytelling inside. (Lidwell, Butler, & Holden, 80, 230)

The first image audiences would see of this new genre of fictional hero on the newsstands was with Action Comics #1 in 1938 and the first appearance of Superman. In a time long before internet, comic book stores, or the numerous superhero movies that have filled movie theatres in recent years, these cheaply produced books of words and images had to jump out at readers, to pull them in, which is why the image of Action Comics #1 remains so iconic even outside the world and industry of comic books to this day. Clad in a blue costume with a red flowing cape and yellow crest on his chest, the figure of Superman holds an automobile above his head, smashing it to pieces in a display of incredible strength against a yellow background. The red, yellow, and blue dominant in both costume and cover itself are triad complementary colors,

found opposite of each other on a color wheel. This combination is no doubt intentional, creating a maximum contrast through the use of primary colors that not only grabbed the attention of those perusing the newsstand, but would have a particular appeal to youths with a dime to spend, as youth tend to like bright, saturated colors.

The Flash, Green Lantern, The Atom, and Wonder Woman are but a handful of the characters that came to life on the comic page under the All-American title in the early 1940s. Many of these heroes, for all their derring-do and calls for social justice within their stories, however, were operating as individuals outside that of law enforcement. Legal procedure was thrown out the window, along with the individual rights of criminals from low level thugs to Lex Luthor and the Joker in the pursuit of "the greater good." (Bainbridge, 746-747) This notion of fairness and justice became a trademark of many comic book superheroes, acting for their readers as a beacon of justice in a world that often seemed brimming with chaos and uncertainty coming out of The Great Depression.

In 1940, All-American published an anthology comic book series, a norm for the time, called All-Star Comics, which combined the adventures of its various stable of characters under one cover, albeit in solo character outings.

With the third issue of All-Star Comics Offering readers got more bang for their buck, or more derring-do for their dime *(the cover price of a standard comic of the time),* when writer Gardner Fox and a stable of artists inadvertently created what would become a comic book, and eventually pop culture norm - the superhero team. Calling themselves The Justice Society of

America, the team was made up of All-American Publications characters like The Flash, Green Lantern, Hawkman, and others. Their original published outing was somewhat less impressive than a modern audience may find when these fictional, garishly dressed heroes gathered together...and ate dinner.

Within the context of the story, the Justice Society, portrayed more like a social club for heroes than a crime fighting organization, got together and exchanged stories with each other of their adventures over a meal, allowing various artists to draw short, solo installments for each hero, within the framework of the larger story. The book, a hit with fans, quickly led into a brand new adventure by the next issue, following a familiar format for the next seven years - the team would gather in the initial chapter, learn their mission/case, and head out for action. Each succeeding chapter would feature a solo member of the team investigating their part of a case without interaction of their colleagues. It then would all culminate in the book's final chapter with the team gathering once more to solve the case and bring the perpetrators to justice. With more than 70+ pages of adventure for but a dime *(the equivalent of roughly $2.47 in 2015),* readers made All-Star Comics and the Justice Society of America a hit for roughly the next decade. And as readers continued to thrill to these adventures between the pages, the real world was beginning to see a rising tide of action itself. Following the events of World War I, many Americans felt it not the country's place to interfere in international affairs, and a sense of American isolationism took hold under the administration of the anti-imperialist President Herbert Hoover.

THE WAR OUTSIDE THE PANELS

Nazi Germany would invade Poland in September 1939, but it would take two more years, and an attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan to jolt America out of its isolation and join Great Britain and Russia against what became known as the Axis powers of Germany, Italy and Japan.

Prior to the war, the enemies of the battlefield were far from the minds of many and the depictions of comic book antagonists reflected this, with the threat of crime often within America's own borders. Heroes like Superman stood up to corrupt politicians, greedy industrialists who put their workers at risk for the benefit of filling their own coffers, slumlords, or robbers and murderers that were the stuff of urbanization nightmares in an increasingly centralized population. Anyone who mistreated or took advantage of the working class and poor of the early 20th century were prime targets for the fledgling superhero class, forcing upon them lessons of moral and social justice. (Scott, 29, 39) One early Superman tale had the man of steel kidnap a manufacturer of munitions, carrying him to the frontlines of a war that the manufacturer had instigated. (Chambliss and Svitavsky, 28) In this early 20th century society of sprawling urbanism, the themes of a hero disguised under a persona of meekness such as Clark Kent and Superman resonated with many who were adjusting to modern life as a face in the city crowds, and had felt "soft" city life diminished the parts of their masculinity of rural generations on the frontier that had come before. (Chambliss and Svitavsky, 19)

Figure 4 - Superman takes on an abusive husband in his first appearance, Action Comics #1 (1938)

These stories and heroes reflected the insulated nature of the American mindset of the time, far away from the dangers as Japan occupied China in the late '30s. (Scott, 40) The world was changing and heroes, from the cowboy of yesteryear to the dawning of the superhero age, provided readers with fantasies and vehicles to cope with, understand, and accept the changes of the world around them. This came through the actions and moral standards of their fictional heroes, reworked into new narrative formulas and formats, but providing readers the outlet they needed for their fears and hopes of what was to come, what could be. (Chambliss and Svitacsky, 24)

However, as the war continued to spread in Europe, comics began to reflect a concern for the threats looming over other countries, if not yet the world, even if the war had not yet found its way to America's doorstep.

Numerous comic book stories began to turn the focus of their heroes away from the regular onslaught of robbers, murderers, corrupt businessman, and social causes and instead began to see an influx of spies, saboteurs or war profiteers. While America was not involved in the war, and many still held opposition to such a move, heroes like Superman, Green Lantern, the Flash and their cohorts in the Justice Society of America were dealing with the followers and supporters of ideas marching through Europe. Themes of chaos, unrest, and savagery perpetrated the four-color world, but with the notion that these were things that could ultimately be overcome, working to suppress any of the quiet reservations readers may have had about putting American feet onto the battlefield once again. (Scott 39)

All-Star Comics #7 was dated Fall 1941, which meant that it was on newsstands some time prior, as the cover date has historically been at least two months prior to when the comic actually hit stands. Titled *"$1,000,000 for Orphans,"* it found the Justice Society of America and its members decide to raise money for Europe's war orphans. Superhero Green Lantern tells his comrades that *"...I think we should consider the fate of the world's war children! Homeless orphans! Starving little tots...things are bad over there…"*

Figure 5 - From All-Star Comics #7 (1941)

While comic books since their creation had made reference to real world event or concerns, the political events occurring overseas blended the world of fanciful, colorful heroics with a dose of reality. The Justice Society, in their very first mission received their assignment from none other than J. Edgar Hoover, so even as a form of escape, it should be of little surprise that the rise of Adolf Hitler or the war orphans of Europe would find their way into comic panels. (Scott, 38)

"I think it was the writers looking for new situations to put the characters in," says longtime DC Comics Editor, Writer, and head of Production Bob Rozakis, who worked with several of the comic industry's pioneers toward the later parts of their career. "Spies and saboteurs had to be in the news at the time and would be logical foes for the heroes to battle."

Figure 6 - From All-Star Comics #7 (1941)

At the time of All-Star Comics #7's publication, the U.S. had joined Great Britain in signing the Atlantic Charter, officially declaring its opposition to Facism. However, it made no difference in

the U.S. decision to try and stay in a position of neutrality as the war continued to brew in Europe. It's clear through the plot of this story alone that despite the isolationism permeating through the U.S. at the time, the writers of comic books, many of whom were from families of Jewish immigrants, were well aware of what was happening far outside America's borders. And while it would be a few more months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor ushered the U.S. into the war, it becomes obvious that writers and artists, through their creations, were becoming increasingly concerned about the looming danger presented by the Axis powers.

Much like America's acknowledgement but lack of action, so too do the heroes of the Justice Society stop short of using their fantastic abilities to go overseas and attempt to stop the atrocities they describe to their fictional counterparts and their readers. No explanation is given for their lack of involvement at this point. Instead the focus is on how they, on the homefront, much like their readers, can do their part to help, raising money for various charitable organizations that can provide necessities like food and shelter. Like a poster promoting community involvement, Green Lantern relays the benefits of such charities to colleague Hawkman in one panel of All-Star #7, *"I understand that only $20 will keep a little Chinese boy or girl alive for a whole year! The Justice Society should exert its efforts to help provide those dollars!"* - a veritable battle cry to their readers to join in an honorable cause.

Figure 7 - From All-Star Comics #7 (1941)

As fears of U.S. involvement in the war grew, the threat of urban crime and the greedy industrialists that plagued society and villains in the early issues of comic books gave way to more and more stories that involved Nazis menacing other countries, bullying the weak, and doing whatever they could to subvert the ideals of American democracy. (Scott, 41) With the increase of villainy within comic pages being perpetrated by those who stood against the ways of American life, so too did comics see a rise in superheroes draped in over the top patriotism. At a time of national crisis, these characters looked to create support on the home front among readers, generating a sense of patriotism as they took on threats like spies and saboteurs. (Scott, 56) Superheroes during wartime not only became figures of dominant culture ideals, but were, in fact, pushing for a change in culture, looking for America to push aside its isolationism and take part in the war. (Bainbridge, 752)

This messaging certainly was not isolated to one company. There were hundreds of comics vying for space on newsstands and among them was Captain America comics from a publisher called Timely, which would later go on to become the multimedia juggernaut known as Marvel. Created by a pair of creators with Jewish immigrant roots *(Joe Simon and Jack Kirby),* Captain America was tailor-made as a poster child for America's involvement in World War II.

"I would suspect that what was going on in Europe was a topic of conversation among most, if not all, of the guys in the business, regardless of religious background," Rozakis says. "Keep in mind that almost all of them were only a generation or two removed from living in Europe, so there would be familial concerns about what going on in 'the old country'."

Kirby and Simon were two of many comic book creators of Jewish backgrounds who were especially concerned and offended by Hitler's actions in Europe. With the atrocities in Europe a lively topic of conversation at home and among friends, many comic creators wanted America to intervene with the war and began including more information on the ongoing conflict or using the war as a backdrop to their stories. Interestingly enough, another form of media, the film industry, and the Jewish moguls that ran it, were hesitant to push for American entry into the war. But for the creators of comic books who were immigrants or from immigrant families, being pro-war meant fighting for their assimilation, for tolerance, and acceptance. These were the ideals they saw as American, and saw as the right thing that their superhero creations were fighting for as well. (Scott, 55-56)

The character of Captain America and his alter ego, Steve Rogers, is born to immigrants on the fourth of July, attempts to enlist to fight against the Third Reich but is denied due to his size. Subjecting himself to government experiments in an attempt to become a super soldier, Captain America, dressed in the colors of red, white, and blue, takes on the Axis powers both in the stories and covers of his own series, going on to become Timely's most popular character in wartime. The enemies Captain America would fight against through his decades of popularity often reflected the state of America at the time of publication, from Nazis in WWII, communists in the 1950s, to terrorists in the early 2000s. (Becker) Propaganda was not just about recruiting troops, but instilling a spirit of America's cause and the first issue of Captain America did this with no subtlety, featuring the titular hero punching Hitler across the Jaw. (Noonan) Likewise, at All American Publications, Wonder Woman, in her stars and stripes, a symbol of America's individualism and independence prized by many Americans (Scott, 49, 53), found herself battling real life enemies like Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, Axis spies, and Nazis, as well as the fictional God of War.

Whether it was Wonder Woman rescuing prisoners from concentration camps, or the Justice Society providing food to starving camp prisoners (Streb, 36), the war had become more real for many Americans and in turn, for its fictional heroes, continuing to distill the complexities of what was happening in the real world to basic good/evil dynamics that were easy for comic readers at any level to understand and motivate to desire change.

THE JUSTICE SOCIETY GOES TO WAR

Figure 8 - From All-Star Comics #11 (1942)

On December 7, 1941, any idea of isolationism and hope for the U.S. to remain outside of the battles waging in Europe were shattered when a naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii was attacked and bombed by the Imperial Japanese Navy Air Service.

The United States went to war and so, too, did American comic books. All around support, on the front lines as well as on the home front, was seen as essential to an Allied victory in the war. To drum up support, government agencies looked to posters, radio, film, and various other forms of media in order to shape perceptions in favor of U.S. involvement in the war. It's important not to underestimate the social impact of propaganda absorbed by youth. After all, these children grow up to become voters, soldiers, and officials in society. It was not just America agencies that understood this. Germany certainly did as well. For example, a 1934 image in Germany featuring young boys running a foot race with the Nazi flag behind them accompanied a popular children's poem whose message is that *"only those who keep going 'til the end are the winners."* (Noonan) The imagery and text, recited by children the way Hickory, Dickory, Dock or Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star might be recited, instills a sense of never giving up; a motivation in those boys who become German men, who serve, and fight for the Third Reich.

Enter the Writer's War Board (WWB), a government agency which among various forms of media, had its eye on the popular and young industry of comic books to help shape its message of the war and its enemies. Comics, unlike other media, had no censorship, which meant there was no need to blur flat-out opinions under allegory. (Hirsch, 451) Propagandists with the WWB could work with comic writers and artists to freely and overtly portray the country's enemies *(and in some cases, cultures as a whole),* as inhuman monsters, seeking nothing more than chaos and the pursuit of evil. Comic books flew under the radar, making them a perfect tool for the WWB to use to reach both civilians and service men wary of blatant, government-produced propaganda. The Board, in Spring 1943, contacted comic book publishers asking for cooperation from their staffs in creating stories based on proposals by the WWB as well as to seek the input and suggestions of the board in its stories when it came to race or wartime topics. (Hirsch, 455-456) The WWB's goals of comic book propaganda were multifold - unity for the war, vigilance against enemy spies, fighting back against Axis propaganda, portrayal of the enemy as inhuman and evil, and assurance that America and their allies were on the side of right. (Scott, 57) As S.M. Gruenberg notes in a piece from the American Sociological Association, there are few subjects that don't lend themselves to presentation in comic form. *"[Examples] show the use of the comics technique for...educational or social purposes. Other experiments with the medium attempt to convey the social implications by using the familiar characters and adventure forms without starting special series obviously calculated to teach a lesson or point a moral."* (Gruenberg, 211-213)

The Writer's War Board, while a civilian organization subsidized by government funds, was volunteer driven, and quickly became aligned with the Office of War Information (OWI) which

focused on coordinating all media toward the war effort. The OWI wanted the details of the war to be portrayed accurately, so any previously made up details, settings, etc. as might have been used in the past were frowned upon. At the same time, the OWI restricted anything that might lower morale or discourage support for the war. (Scott, 62) The harsher notions and realities of war - the stress, the illnesses, madness, cowardice, and the idea of low morale were taboo subjects within wartime comics in favor of depictions of courage and nobility fighting for worthy causes. (Scott, 11) Through the prism of comics, it was often an idealized version of war - fighting for what was right, to make the world a better place. (Scott, 40)

The use of the comic book format allowed the WWB to take on topics otherwise considered controversial but do so with a mix of adventure and humor that helped to cloak the propaganda messages. The board felt that comics delivered education on subjects without getting in the way of the medium's entertainment value. There was no science behind this. The board did not conduct analysis of what messages readers absorbed from the books or how, but just assumed that a medium as popular as comics must have had influence over its readership (Hirsch, 459)

The U.S. had committed itself to war, and it was through comic books that the WWB looked to explain to readers why it was necessary for America to succeed. (Hirsch, 483) As World War II engulfed more countries into its fold, fictional superheroes began to interact with events and foes on a more regular basis, even if their portrayal was not always real-world accurate. Adolf Hitler, for example, was often treated in comic book stories as a foolish oaf with outlandish plots, staying away at times from some of the more horrific truths of the war and his actions. (Bainbridge, 751)

Figure 9 - Panel from All-Star Comics #13 (1942), in which Hitler tried to launch the Justice Society into space.

The support for the war that comics promoted came in different forms. It could be in a sense of general morale and acceptance of the idea that their survival depended on America's victory, or could be in the promotion of selling/buying war bonds, collecting items like rubber or paper, or volunteering for any of the numerous services seen as essential to the war (Gruenberg, 210) And although their formation came before the war, even the shift from individual heroes to a super-team such as The Justice Society held within it a certain subtext that cooperation and working together on all fronts was necessary for success in the war. (Kerr, 18) And because entertainment was rarely looked at as propaganda, the defenses of those taking it in are lowered and thus their engagement of the material enhanced. (Kerr, 25)

As is the case in many cases of advertising and marketing, the way people think about and feel about a message or product increases the more their exposed to it. Known as Exposure Effect, the more these types of stories appeared, the more readership were exposed to them, the more accepted they are likely to become. (Lidwell, Butler, & Holden, 86)

Figure 10 -Hitler in a tizzy as members of the Justice Society start feeding concentration camp prisoners in All-Star Comics #14 (1943)

VILIFYING THE ENEMY

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the previously limited use of the Axis in comics shifted into high gear, playing upon the desire of many Americans for revenge and rallying people to support the fight through any means they could - be it on the front lines or back at home. (Scott, 57) Many stories focused on the Axis powers wanting to rule the world, with a particular focus on the threat of Germany. Japanese forces certainly appeared but not as frequently as Germans, even after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. (Scott, 47, 52)

In 1944, U.S. losses were beginning to pile up and there was no sign of surrender in sight for Germany and Japan, causing the WWB to worry that the oafish portrayal in comics of Hitler and the Axis powers had treated America's enemies too softly. So, the WWB began encouraging creators to weave particular animosity based on ethnicity or race in an effort to increase support for the U.S. policy of complete war. Under this WWB plan, Germany and Japan were increasingly depicted by racial stereotypes and were irredeemable, lacking any humanity.

Many American writers lacked knowledge about the cultures they were writing and thus relied on such long-standing (*and inaccurate)* stereotypes. Germans were often drawn from World War I stereotypes held over the era of the Kaiser. German characters were often aristocratic *(wearing a monocle to signify their aristocracy)*, arrogant, and hated those not of their heritage. All Germans began to be depicted as Nazis, always hostile and could only be changed following a complete victory by the Allies. When people of African heritage appeared in comics, they were often speaking like simpletons, and drawn with oversized lips. The Japanese were often shown

with yellow tinted skin, pointed devil ears, long jaws, buck teeth, and sometimes even fangs, bent on destroying America. (Hirsch, 460, 462, 465, 469) Meanwhile, American men were portrayed as handsome, chiseled, with vast knowledge of science and technology, always doing what's right, while most American women appeared to be some form of the pin-up girl. (Scott, 60)

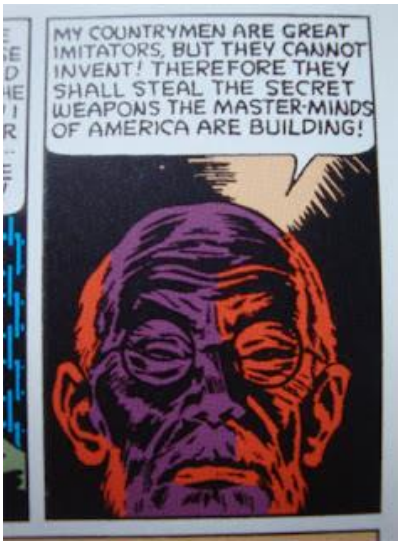

Figure 11 -Leader of the Black Dragon Society, the main villain of All-Star Comics #12 (1942)

Figure 12 - Superhero The Atom, going "undercover" in All-Star Comics #12 (1942)

Despite their varying origins *(Superman escaping the exploding planet Krypton, orphaned Bruce Wayne's desire for justice, Alan Scott finding a magic lantern bestowing upon him a glowing green power, or a lab accident giving Jay Garrick super-speed),* all these individual characters had one common notion - fighting for what's right, for the good of the people and always triumphing over the forces of evil. All this served the purpose of influencing comic readers that the war was a simple matter of good versus evil, that the perfect and heroic ideals of America were at odds with treacherous, evil forces intent on destroying the world and all they loved. There were no shades of gray, with clear messages that the villains were Nazis and Facists to be defeated by American superheroes and soldiers who stood for patriotism and support of America's war. (Svitavsky and Chambliss, 57)

One of the common themes found in comic stories after American involvement in the war began was that of the 'skeptical American,' a character who was either outwardly opposed to or had no feelings toward the war. The character over the course of a story would see the "error of their ways" and come to fully support the war by story's end, falling on the "side of right." (Scott, 52) A perfect example of this, and of the WWB at work with the publisher is found in All-Star Comics #24. Available to readers at drugstores, newsstands, and military bases across the globe, it was titled *"This is Our Enemy."* (Hirsch, 449) In the story, a friend of Carter Hall *(Hawkman)* named Dick Abner has been drafted into service. While Dick says he loves his country, he does not believe in U.S. involvement in the war. The Justice Society spends the entire issue taking Dick on a trip throughout time to experience life as a member of the German people at different points in history.

Figure 13 - A skeptic of the war is the subject of lectures and lessons from the Justice Society in these panels from All-Star Comics #24 (1945)

In the context of the story, the point, of all of this is to ‘prove' to this young man that the Germans have always been a war-hungry and monstrous people and that is why he should be in favor of going to war.

Figure 14 - Germans portrayed as a historically war-mongering people in these panels from All-Star Comics #24 (1945)

In addition to patriotic stories, advertisements and public service announcements were often found in the pages of comic books, sometimes overtly, and other times presented in a comic format that made it blend seamlessly into the rest of the book's material. In a time before television and the internet, the government had few channels to utilize for their messages, messages that were necessary to turn a country that had not wanted to be involved in overseas affairs post-World War I to a "we're all in this together" mass of support. Billboards, posters, radio, and magazines would be the tools, promoting imagery of powerful American heroes fighting the enemy, instilling a sense of patriotism and courage *(as well as fear if the war were to be lost)* while encouraging readers to help from home through recycling or sacrifice when it comes to items like rubber, gasoline, or paper - items needed toward the war effort. What better way to encourage this behavior than by seeing favorite four-color heroes engaging in the same

habits. (Scott 2007) Taking part in these drives also aimed to make children feel that they were doing their part for the war, despite their age. (Scott, 16, 63)

Figure 15 - A public service announcement on saving paper featuring Green Lantern. (All-Star Comics #20, 1944)

Some of this non-story messaging promoted organizations from the comic companies themselves and served no more purpose other than promotion for the comic itself while simultaneously providing the same sense of patriotism as within the stories - like The Junior Justice Society of

America, a fan club for the superhero team whose membership came with items like a badge, a decoder, and a membership certificate which post 1942 was amended to have an ending line *"...To Help Defeat Axis Propaganda Which Seeks To Cause Us To Fight Among Ourselves Instead Of Successfully Fighting Our Enemies."* (Pasko, 49) In another instance of non-story propaganda, All-Star Comics #21 had at the bottom of each page a one line rhyme, disconnected from the story itself, but providing plenty of subtle persuasive messaging for the reader, with each message oriented around the war, such as *"Tin Cans in the Garbage Pile are Just a way of Saying "Heil!"* or *"If you have an extra quarter, buy a stamp to make war shorter!"* (Thomas, Foreward)

INCLUSIVENESS AT ODDS WITH ITS OWN HATE

At the same time that the WWB was helping to generate comic book stories that vilified the wartime enemies of America, they were also helping to create stories that promoted international cooperation and racial harmony. It wasn't true equality they were promoting, but racial tolerance *(an important distinction to make)* that was seen as crucial to victory, while also portraying the United States as an inclusive society in contrast to its fascist enemies. The racist, vilifying images of other cultures, intent on fueling hatred against America's wartime enemies, were at times sharing space with messages and stories of inclusiveness and working together as various races and ethnicities "for the good of the war." This was confusing when put together with messages of hate and when measured against the legacy of racist images in American pop culture in general. (Hirsch, 452, 485)

Figure 16 - 1940s sexism and racism all rolled into one panel. From All-Star Comics #11 (1942)

Researcher Paul Hirsch describes a time in 1944 when Publisher Max Gaines told the WWB that his staff was ready to start working on a story about Japan in a similar vein as their "This is Our Enemy," the aforementioned Justice Society story portraying German culture as bloodthirsty, warmongering people throughout history. To avoid an increase in racial tensions, Gaines and editor Sheldon Mayer wanted to create a more even-handed portrayal of Japanese people. Their story proposal, about a fictional, anti-fascist underground movement in Japan was flat-out rejected by the WWB, telling the publisher that such a story was encouraging 'a soft peace' with Japan and that the thought of some Japanese people actually disliking fascism was against the WWB's standards for portraying Japanese in comics. (Hirsch, 469-470)

Figure 17 - Various panels from All-Star Comics #16 (1943), promoting racial and religious tolerance for the good of the war.

Because of the lack of guidance from the WWB when it came to presenting more positive images of non-white allies like China, India, or the Philippines, very few positive images of non-white heroes were generated by comic book publishers at the time. (Hirsch, 471) Thus, while some efforts *(for the purpose of the war)* were made by the WWB and in some cases by comic book writers themselves to tell stories that could foster better race relations, a lack of support or possible true interest in the matter by the WWB, along with years of racist stereotypes and images in American culture hampered many of the better intentions of comic books. (Hirsch, 483-485)

It wasn't just foreign enemies and other cultures that found themselves with conflicting depictions and messages within the pages of comic books. The character of Wonder Woman often found her empowering persona at odds with the social limitations put onto her by male writers of the time. During World War II, women throughout America were being encouraged to join in the war effort, and the character of Wonder Woman reinforced a message of inspiration that women could burst through their (social) bonds, and as declared in one of her book, *"We are strong – we can fight! Follow Wonder Woman."*

Figure 18 -From All-Star Comics #11 (1942)

However, for all her might and breaking of the paper ceiling in the comic book industry, she, as Sharon Zechowski and Caryn E. Neumann point out in their essay The Mother of All Superheroes, "Wonder Woman possessed characteristics that were regressive and stereotypical. For example, she falls in love with the first man she ever sees, Steve Trevor, and leaves her home to be with him. Once in America, she easily slides into subordinate positions. As her alter ego Diana Prince, Wonder Woman serves as a nurse during World War II…took orders from men, as she would do throughout the rest of her career, although her job changes." (Batcher, Jones, and Bajac, 134)

Zechowksi and Neumann attribute much of this on those who were in control of the characters fictional journey, which during the 1940s was a writing, art, and editorial staff made up of men.

"Those who control the production of a text imbue it with their individual and cultural values, determining to a large extent what it will mean to consumers," they state.

Thus it should come as no surprise that when the Amazon warrior with a strength on par with the Man of Steel joined the Justice Society of America in All-Star Comics #11, she was relegated to being their secretary. Amazingly, her fellow, all-male Justice Society colleagues had gotten along just fine for their eight previous adventures without the need of a secretary, but once Wonder Woman joined, seemed unable to get along without one, keeping her to the sidelines and out of the main adventures of the 'boys club' until much later in the series. By the time she became un par with her male counterparts, All-Star Comics was not long for the publishing

world and shortly after ceased publication and transitioned into the title All-Star Western, grabbing into the increasing interest in tales of the Old West.

Figure 19 - Images from All-Star Comics #13 (October 1942)

THE SUPER DILEMMA

With all these American heroes waging war against real-world enemies in the pages of comics, there was a constant tightrope to walk by comic creators who sought to promote the agenda of the WWB as America's war, but at the same time had to keep their fictional heroes from solving problems still being fought by American forces. It would be not only ridiculous but bad for morale and support to see Superman and the Justice Society fly to Europe and end the war in the pages of comics only to have readers put down their reading material and find the war still going on. At the same time, if heroes fought only imaginary foes on the home front, the perception was that the characters *(and publishers)* weren't doing their part for the war. (Scott, 60)

One way writers walked this line was to take the war effort seriously, portraying characters like Clark Kent as desperate to serve following Pearl Harbor. To avoid the "super dilemma" of a character getting directly involved in the conflict with superpowers that could solve it single handedly, a Superman comic strip had Clark fail his induction physical, his x-ray vision accidentally reading the eye chart in the next room. Considering Clark to be blind as a bat, the military doctor gives him a 4-F designation, unfit to serve. So instead, Clark, as Superman, concentrates his efforts to the war effort at home in the United States. Superman and his heroic colleagues instead embraced their ability to be role models and examples of what each civilian could do to support the war effort, often showing the importance of jobs each person contributed in their small way - from maintenance personnel, munitions makers, to anyone who was just "doing their part." (Scott, 75-76; Goodnow & Kimble)

"It would have been ludicrous to have the superheroes wrap up the war in an issue or two when it was still raging…and was not going to be resolved by Superman or Green Lantern," Rozakis points out. "To that end, the most the writers could do was to have the heroes involved in fictional situations at home or minor fictional battles."

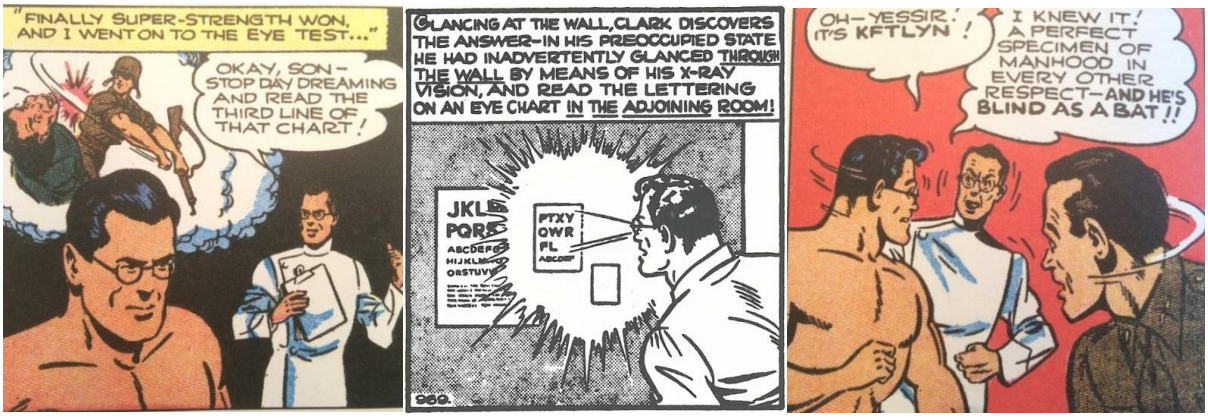

Figure 20 - Select panels from the Superman Comic Strip (1943)

While the topic was handled head-on with the character of the almighty Superman, some other superheroes, like members of the Justice Society, found themselves enlisting in various military branches in one issue, doing damage to Japan's war resources. Another issue had the team smashing Japanese spy rings, and yet another being blasted into space by Adolf Hitler! But in the real world, the war went on and these other heroes, even quietly, began focusing more on the war at the home front than overseas. Historian Roy Thomas notes that *"…the JSA and their fellow super-heroes gave American's hope – even if it was hope laced with a brand of cockeyed optimism that was quickly dashed by the fall of the Philippines, continued British reverses, and the beginning of devastating U-boat attacks on U.S. merchant ships."* (Thomas, forward)

A WIDE REACH

But just who were these stories being told to?

Comic book superheroes acted as a beacon of hope, of all that was good within human nature, a gateway to a better future for all amid a time of economic recession. (Ruzicka, 46) In a world whose future seemed uncertain with each passing day, superheroes were a reliable source of assurance that things were going to be all right, that justice would prevail, that wrongs would be righted. (Bainbridge, 747) But who was jumping into this world of fantasy that walked halfway in the real-world? To answer that helps understand why comic books would come to find themselves as a useful tool of American war propaganda that flew under the radar in ways that radio and film could not. And that answer is - a broader audience than many would think. Children, certainly, were reading comics. In fact, later estimates post-war, in 1946 would show that 9 out of every 10 children between the ages of 8-15 read comic books. (Bainbridge, 748) The bright colors, quick dialogue and adventure made comic books an immediate hit with children as a source of cheap entertainment. (Hirsch, 454)

Figure 21 - Cover of All-Star Comics #4 (April, 1941)

But they were not alone. Comic books found themselves in the waiting hands of adult audiences, both civilian and by members of the armed forces, helping publishers sell millions of copies of comic book titles on the newsstands in the early 1940s. In 1941, Superman comics sold roughly 10 million copies that year. Captain America sold a million copies per month. The popularity of comic books with so broad an audience meant that publishers, amid paper rationing, had to begin slashing the number of pages in their books - the only way to keep up with the demand for their product. (Hirsch, 456) In 1941, DC Comics Press Agent Alan Ducovny claimed Superman, had a reach of 35 million people across the country. Between appearances as a balloon in the 1940 Macy's Parade, a radio series that began in 1940, and appearing in animated shorts as early as 1941, Superman crossed media platforms and bringing in many adult readers to the already popular comic book character. It's also been argued that the mere presence of child sidekicks that

proliferated among comic books in the early 1940s were a way to draw in more young readers to a medium that was already comfortable with a sizeable adult audience. (Chambliss and Svitavsky, 30, 33-35)

The reach of comics only increased during America's involvement in WWII, with comics now being sold on military bases, and many civilians back home sending their used copies of comic books to servicemen. Comics were regularly consumed by almost half of all soldiers and sailors, with the Navy at one point classifying them as "essential supplies." With their simple but effective use of pictures and text to tell stories, it was a format that was comprehensible almost regardless of education, class, or status. (Hirsch, 457)

It would make the comic book a media format perfectly suited to boil down all the complex details and politics of war into something that could be read and understood by the widest audience possible. (Hirsch, 458; Scott, 18) It allowed its youngest readers to take in adult topics, yet also maintain a separation between its fantasies and the real world, serving as a tool that could educate, while still maintaining its quasi-escapism. Scholars in Canada have argued that the potential for comics in teaching allows students to read and understand complicated lessons about the past, mixing print and visuals to create material that is read in a more meaningful way than if the two were separated. (Carleton, 159). It's this type of potential that increased the appeal of comics as a mechanism for propaganda by the WWB and the publishers it worked with.

And Americans were not the only ones taking notice of comics during the war. Nazis had noticed the colorful American heroes and stories that flew through the newsprint pages. To them, these stories were ridiculous and populated the American psyche with unachievable goals of winning the war. It was seen by Nazi leaders as offensive that Americans would dare to represent themselves with such characters when to them, real Americans were crass and lazy. Hitler himself saw popular culture in America as far inferior to even the most uncultured of countries in Europe, and German propaganda minister Josef Goebbels noted in a speech that the American Superman was created by Jews and represented all that was wrong with American society. (Scott, 45)

THE POWERFUL LEGACY OF FEAR

Fear of losing the war made the stakes high for comic book heroes and their reader. Fear mongering was a standard with these stories, hoping to sway those who were opposed to U.S. involvement through the image that their country, their homes, and their lives were in immediate danger if action were not to be taken. (Noonan)

Scholar Jiri G. Ruzicka has posited that if these traditional superheroes of the Golden Age were to be put onto a political spectrum, they would lean right due to their desire to "protect the traditional societal values based on a capitalist model" (Ruzika, 46) Many comic creators, both of the Golden Age era and since, may beg to differ, looking to those same heroes as symbols of progressive ideals, taking on the aforementioned social issues of slumlords, industrialists, and corrupt officials in their early appearances before the war.

The more patriotic tones in comics became a win for all those involved in the production. By allowing their books and characters to promote government agendas, the publishers sold more copies, made more money, reached more readers than ever before and gave a legitimacy to their industry through a veneer of patriotism (Hirsch, 454)

Through comics, an under the radar, uncensored, but widely consumed media format, people came to believe that everywhere they went, the war touched their life and everyone had a role to play - overseas and at home. Whether this was true was not important. What was important was

that enough people believe it and did 'their part' for the war. It's by this perception and motivation that comic books in World War II succeeded as a form of American propaganda.

It was just shy of nine years after the end of World War II, just under a decade since heroes like Green Lantern, Superman, and Batman were encouraging children to salvage items like paper to do their part for the war effort that Dr. Frederic Wertham published Seduction of the Innocent and launched his now infamous campaign against comic books. Dr. Wertham alleged that comic books were not only a negative form of literature, but that the stories within contributed to juvenile crime. While he loved to use images from horror and crime comics in his presentations, superheroes found that for all their might, they were not immune to Wertham's criticism or finger wagging. According to Wertham and those that believed in his theories, Batman and Robin were gay, Wonder Woman was a lesbian, and Superman was un-American, and that reading this comic material was encouraging crime, violence, drugs, and sex within the country's youth. It would later come to light that many of the juveniles that Wertham used in his samplings were adolescents from New York City that already came from troubled backgrounds and had histories of behavioral disorders. Wertham's methods did not follow general standards of scientific research, often combining interviews with multiple individuals to appear as one person in order meet his own desired outcomes. (Tilley, 383-413) Whatever Wertham's own personal feelings toward the comic book industry may have been, only a decade earlier, that very same industry he criticizes as un-American and corrupting youth, and launching hearings by the U.S. Government into the matter, was being used by said government or on behalf of said government to fulfill a desire for support and involvement in any capacity toward war.

EPILOGUE

Reportedly the chief liaisons between the War Writers Board and comics creative teams, Max Gaines was long deceased and Sheldon Mayer long-retired when Bob Rozakis began working for DC Comics in the early 1970s. His 25 year career at DC Comics had him interacting with some of the comic industry's greatest, but the topic of the WWB never came up during his tenure.

"I think comics can have a tremendous influence on the audience," reflects Rozakis. "But the audience also has a tremendous influence on the comics. At the end of the day, the publishers were trying to make money and they did that by selling as many books as they could. It became clear fairly early that comics reflecting what was going on in the war sold well, so after Captain America punching Hitler sold well, more characters started fighting the enemies of America. One of my favorite covers shows Superman, in the periscope view, swimming towards the submarine."

Tom Peyer grew up reading many of the characters he would later go on to guide through their fictional lives as a writer and editor at DC and Marvel Comics beginning in the late 1980s. During his childhood reading comic books, the WWII era of storytelling seemed a completely different world, a world of the past, disconnected from the modern stories of the 1960s.

"Growing up well after the war, I was never into Nazis as villains. I guess I was one of those kids who didn't care about things that happened before I was born," Peyer says. "And Nazi villains were about as interesting as [Star Wars] stormtroopers. They're bad, you shoot them, they fall

down. Nazis are more interesting today, of course, now that they're trying to claw their way back."

While audiences of comics during WWII may have been seeking out material that threw them into the battlefields of the war and stirred up their emotions of patriotism, anger, or in some cases tolerance, Peyer points out that propaganda-style storytelling of that nature, especially by modern audiences, can often be seen for what it is.

"I'm pretty sure that if I go into a job with the idea of affecting the audience's perception of anything outside the story itself, I'll end up writing a terrible story. Look at all the advertising and educational propaganda comics that have been done; they usually feel like they were created by people who have faith in comics as an ideal way to talk down to people, which I find embarrassing," Peyer says. "On the other hand, let's say hypothetically that there's a powerful world leader who seems to be guided by narcissism. Rather than writing a comic about this leader, about whom nearly everyone has already made up their minds, it's better to consider narcissism itself as a springboard for a character. And that character might be more useful, and might apply to more real-world people and situations, than a caricature of this leader. And that story might not be as stale in 10 years."

And though not comparable to the magnitude of WWII, the influence of outside agencies occasionally playing a hand in storytelling aspects of comic books would rear its head in the subsequent decades that followed post-war America. Rather than politically-motivated messages

or direction, however, these forces sought to make the most of comic books for marketing purposes across various forms of media and consumerism.

"There were times when licensees' plans resulted in something happening in the comics," Rozakis remembers. "The introduction of Barbara Gordon / Batgirl [in comics] was the result of plans to introduce her into the Batman TV show in the 60s. Clark and Lois' wedding [in comics] was delayed two years *(resulting in the Death of Superman storyline, in fact)* because of plans on the Lois & Clark TV show. And I remember quite well sitting in Julie Schwartz's office one day when *(then-DC president)* Sol Harrison came in and said there needed to be a story in which Superman got a Supermobile because there were plans to introduce a toy."

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