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ENGL 3373: World War I

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14 March 2013

Hun or Home?

The Demonization of Foreign Soldiers in WWI Propaganda Posters

During the First World War, propaganda posters became one of the most common and most effective methods of mass communication. Posters were literally everywhere in most of the countries involved in the war, promoting the nation and their fight in the war. Posters could be directed towards men, encouraging them to enlist, towards women, encouraging them to join the Red Cross, or towards anyone, encouraging them to buy war bonds. The possibilities for the subjects of these posters, as well as for the techniques they employed, were almost endless. The American propaganda poster “Hun or Home?” encourages the public to buy liberty bonds. This poster, as well as many others, uses the demonization of the enemy as an effective tactic in promoting the war effort. Although it might appear to be a simple design, this method would have carried with it several powerful messages.

“Hun or Home?” was created by J. Allen St. John for Manz Engraving Co., Chicago, somewhere between the years 1910-1920. The poster, which would have been quite striking to see in person because of the contrasting colors and frightening image, included only seven words. “Hun or Home?” is spelled out in large letters at the very top of the poster, with “Buy More Liberty Bonds” written slightly below. These are the only

words included anywhere on the poster, but the message, when combined with the image, is easy enough to determine. The image itself is much more striking than the rather simple text. The poster presents the image of a young woman carrying a child in her arms, fleeing from a dark and shadowy figure. Unlike the woman and the child, there is little about that third figure that is human. It is rather ape-like in shape, with a wide torso and large arms. The figure is drawn almost entirely in black, and there is no discernable face. The only other color seen on the figure is the red on his hands, an addition that only adds to the frightening quality. The young woman and child are much more human in appearance, with faces, hair, clothes, and other common and expected features. None of these are included on the dark shadow. They are presented with a much lighter appearance instead of the dark and heavy lines that make the Hun appear as a shadow. There is red seen on the cheeks of both the mother and child and the blanket around the baby is red. The use of this color, the color of blood and a common symbol for anger and violence, seems to suggest something dark and sinister when considered along side the red that is seen also on the hands of the Hun. It presents a connection or link between the three figures. It suggests the violence the Hun has inflicted on the woman and child, or perhaps the violence that he is intending to inflict. There is not much else to the poster, by way of image or text. There is a stark contrast between the background and the words and figures, which would have caught the attention of people passing by. The simple and brief nature of the poster would have made a more lasting impression than a more complicated image.

The dark and frightening figure in the poster is identified by the text as a “Hun.” During the First World War, German soldiers were often depicted as Huns, not only by

Americans but by other nations, such as Britain and Australia (James, 25). Citizens would have seen this depiction at some point or another. In this way, the poster “[draws] upon a complex of symbols, images, notions, and values already known to the viewer” (James, 21). The depiction of German soldiers as Huns would have already been familiar to the viewers of the posters at this time, and therefore there was no need for the poster to further identify the enemy. James, in his text, mentions that these “posters both reflect the views their audiences already hold and attempt to influence people” (James, 22). The poster obviously depicts the frightening image of the Hun, but it would have been up to the viewer to use their own knowledge and prejudice to allow that image to represent a German soldier.

The image does more than simply identify a German soldier as a Hun. It demonizes the soldier. As it has already been described, there is very little about the figure that is human. It is dark, shadowy, large, and frightening. Such an image would have had a powerful effect on audiences, and for this reason the demonization of the enemy proved to be an essential tactic in promoting the war effort. This particular poster is encouraging audiences to purchase liberty bonds. Liberty bonds were sold in the United States as a way to support the Allied cause during the war. This poster suggests that by purchasing more liberty bonds, a citizen was effectively choosing to support home, or the Allied cause, over that of the enemy. In this case, the enemy was the Germans, who were being depicted as demonic Huns. The poster suggests the opposite as well. By *not* purchasing more liberty bonds, a citizen was choosing those demonic Huns over their own women and children.

This poster, with its demonization of the foreign soldier, would have done more than just encourage Americans to purchase liberty bonds. It would have encouraged men to enlist so that they would be able to protect their women and children from the monsters that were the enemy. It also would have encouraged women to do their part in the war as well. They would have been encouraged to support the men and to do whatever possible to ensure that they did not suffer the same fate as the young woman shown in the poster. This poster, as well as most of its kind, would have encouraged a considerable amount of patriotism. A sense of national pride and pride in the allied cause would have been felt at seeing the horrible figure of the Hun. By picturing the enemy as a Hun, or as a demon, that made their own cause all the more important, justified, and urgent.

Propaganda posters were printed for just about every reason, using nearly every technique imaginable. This particular poster uses the tactic of demonizing of German soldiers to encourage Americans to purchase liberty bonds, by suggesting that choosing to buy a liberty bond is comparable to choosing between supporting the homeland or the enemy. This method is effective in accomplishing more than simply encouraging the sale of liberty bonds, though, because of the associations and opinions people would have already had about Huns and Germans. Seeing such an image would have created a desire to help with the war effort in whatever way possible, and it would have promoted patriotism. Although this was just one tactic among many and one poster among thousands, it would have been an effective means of mass communication, using the demonization of the enemy and a seemingly simple design to carry multiple powerful messages.