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Halt! Who Goes There?

Throughout the Great War, propaganda posters became an ever-present ** in people's lives. Drawing on the influence of the advertisements that preceded them, these posters sought to manipulate the people who came across them both intellectually and emotionally. A wide variety of techniques were used to achieve this: playing on the romantic ideas of war held by many, guiltling people with images of suffering civilians and soldiers, and **. Some of these methods could be aimed at the entire population, and some were far more precise, narrowing in on a specific audience, rather than a nation in general. In particular, the posters directed at unenlisted military men tended to be brutally calculating, playing on both their perceived social obligations and expectations. The British recruitment poster, *Halt! Who Goes There?* is one of these.

Visually, it is a relatively standard poster for the time it was printed. The bright yellow, burnt umber, and olive shades would not have stood out on a wall covered in other posters, all demanding something different of their viewers. A lone soldier stands atop a rocky (but not barren) landscape, weapon grasped confidently. One leg is planted dynamically forward and the soldier stares into the distance, past the right borders of the poster. The background is plain, just a sky with ragged lines of smoke rising diagonally behind him.

The physical appearance of this poster-soldier is notably different from many others at the time. Rather than a smiling, rosy-cheeked man in his prime, full of patriotic vitality, the soldier is in silhouette, devoid of any meaningful or admirable character.

Beneath his feet is the ****** the main source of its emotional power. It reads: "Halt! Who goes there? If you are a friend join the British ranks and help the brave lads at the front." It seems like a standard call to arms, similar to the countless others that were used during the war years.

Throughout the war, able-bodied men were under constant pressure to enlist. They were expected to "do their part" for the war effort, and those who did not were subjected to countless attempts to make them join up. In the earlier parts of the war, posters used images of glory to attract men, but as the war wore on, the methods for recruitment evolved. These varied but often played on obligation: their country, king, or comrades needed them. Other movements, including the infamous white feather campaign, circulated throughout Britain to shame the men into joining, often by bringing their masculinity into question.

This poster takes a different route. Though it does mention "the brave lads" of the war effort, it does not use them as a primary source of persuasion. Rather, they serve as a counterpoint to the viewer himself. The poster does not play in any major way off of any emotion so complex as loyalty, responsibility, or pride. Rather, it employs fear. It is subtle, but the poster uses a veiled threat and an intimidating figure to create an ominous tone. The soldier in the image is in silhouette, enigmatic and devoid of the bright youthfulness that characterized most poster soldiers. He stands with his rifle tightly held, ready to aim and fire or to run his

enemy through. However, there is no other combatant in the scene, and the soldier does not seem to be in any immediate danger; the threat—the enemy—is the viewer himself.

The initial “HALT! Who goes there?” makes the viewer feel like a mistrusted stranger, even in the relative safety of his homeland. He is being challenged and threatened by the poster itself, not by an image of the distant and vague German foe. Further discomfort arises from the soldier’s defensive stance. The wording makes the man feel that, by not enlisting, he himself a de facto enemy of it. “If you are a friend”, you must join up; if you don’t, you must be an adversary.

As previously mentioned, men were pressured intensively to enlist. It is certain that they could expect disapproval from many of the people they came across, and even shunning, to a certain extent. However, it is unlikely that they often felt that their choice to avoid the war would actually put them at risk. But this image suggests, if only slightly, that the unenlisted man might expect confrontation of a dangerous sort. The soldier is the embodiment of looming social expectations, and his aggressive, intimidating attitude is intended to affect unenlisted men in a way that other appeals have not managed to.

Whether this poster’s goal of drawing men into the British military was fulfilled is impossible to know. It might be that the subtle message interwoven with the standard demand to “join the British ranks” was not clear enough—or given enough credence—to have any effect on its intended audience. However, it stands apart from many of its contemporaries, not in intent but in technique. Rather than using guilt to push men into the army, it attempts to use the possibility of ostracism and even enmity to convince its viewers.