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WWI

"He kept us out of war" the advertisements proclaimed during Woodrow Wilson's hotly contested re-election campaign against Charles Hughes in 1916. It was true that the incumbent Democrat had avoided hostilities with America's European neighbors during the first two years of the Great war; instead, Wilson had pushed progressive trade reforms and social and civil issues relating to worker's and state's rights (Beschloss and Sidey). Nevertheless, Wilson's non-interventionist stance faded when cabes intercepted by the British government revealed that Germany's Foreign Minister, Artur Zimmerman, had attempted a plot against the United States with the nation of Mexico. Wilson released the cables to the American people, and as he asked Congress to declare war on Germany (Howard 79-80), outraged Americans volunteered for military service. However, war would require substantially more resources and support, and thus came into print posters with sharp contrast to Wilson's ads of 1914. Numerous propaganda campaigns commenced to involve all Americans in the fight to make the world "safe for democracy" (Beschloss and Sidey).

In order for the United States to enlist the necessary recruits to effectuate victory, it was imperative that the American citizenry see the war as an inherently American undertaking. This goal required creative marketing, seeing as that the United States had refrained from entering the war until the spring of 1917. Regardless, the public space was soon flooded by a myriad of colorful posters to encourage the proper transmission of war-think. These posters assumed a

number of illustrations, sizes, and messages, all pandering to well-defined demographics of the American people. Scholar Pearl James notes that "[p]osters nationalized, mobilized, and modernized civilian populations." The effectiveness of the posters can not be overemphasized; in a sense, they brought the war to the American people by presenting continual visual representations as well as clear objectives for the population (James 2).

One such poster, released by the Military Training Camp Association, encouraged young men to enlist in the war with the simple phrase "The Minute Men of To-day are going to Plattsburg." In the foreground is an image of two individuals: one is a man who is dressed in Revolutionary War regalia, leaning back slightly with his arms resting on the barrel of his musket; the other figure is to the viewer's right and is dressed in a WWI uniform, standing at attention. He holds his firearm firmly and deliberately, as though ready to fight at any moment. Hence, the Military Training Camp Association creates what James would call a "Janus-faced" image--a juxtaposition of figures with one representing America's historical brand of heroism, while the other embodies the contemporary manifestation of that heritage.

There are several tropes present in the "Minute Man" poster. Among them is the obvious "pictorial rhetoric of...national identit[y]" (James 3). The poster's artist draws a definitive connection between the legendary patriots of the Revolutionary War and the recruits of WWI. The implication that war enlistment directly correlated with one's civil responsibility would have elicited a motivation for young men to protect their traditions and tribes. This point is highlighted by the posturing of the characters in the poster. The soldiers appear as a blockade between the viewing public and the ambiguous, empty space depicted behind them. This positioning illustrates the soldier's protection of American citizens from the unknown (or,

international) space, which threatened to transform the pleasant livelihoods of the American public.

Surprisingly, though not without cause, this poster makes little use of the rich colors generally associated with other posters created during the same era. According to Meg Albrinck, writers of the essay entitled “Humanitarians and He-Men,” the significance of these types of posters was placed on the physical text. The message was more nuanced than was immediately apparent. For instance, the “Minute Man” poster may draw its viewers to the bold typeface in order to make a statement relating to the role of sex in the war. With this in mind, the thesis of the poster “point[s] to a gendering of location: men are there, in ‘the ranks,’ or (by inference) in the trenches, whereas women are here, in the crowd, or at home” (Albrinck 326).

Investigation into the military training camps in Plattsburg, New York shows that the WWI campaigns targeted an accomplished class of volunteers. Most attendees were “men of wealth and position, graduates of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, lawyers, bankers, doctors and socialites.” Also among those trained at Plattsburg were prominent politicians and two of Theodore Roosevelt’s own sons (Clifford 171). The camp was home to the elite of the American military, but was sometimes criticized as being “too exclusive to be democratic” (172). Despite the criticisms, one may see why the “Minute Man” propaganda poster adequately marketed a scion of American volunteers who were concerned with excellence, tradition, and high achievement.

WWI propaganda was fundamentally advertised through visual media campaigns, not unlike the methods used by advertisers today. Although technology has shifted away from poster art as the primary medium through which visual media is displayed, posters were an incredibly modern form of communication during the years of the Great War. Through them

governments and private organizations shared information with citizens and created dialogues that would last long after the war's end. The "Minute Man" poster is an example from this unique era that instructs historians about the mood, concerns, and strategies of the war. Through the democratization of visual media, the United States fought to make the country "safe for democracy."

Works Cited

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