POPULAR CULTURE IN ART:

A Look at World War II Art Propaganda

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A young couple wanders along a city street in early 1940s America; the war has hit home and the posters on the building walls reflect that. Bright and colorful, they push the couple to "do their part" to help support war efforts. One poster touts the benefits of growing a garden at home; not only does it help to provide the family with fresh produce, but it reduces the burden put upon farmers to supply both the public and the military. Another poster pushes for eligible young men to enlist in the military to help protect Americans, freedom, and a way of life. A third reminds viewers of the danger of sharing information carelessly, and what the cost could be. The final poster reminds women that, they too, can be a part of the war effort by helping to fill the empty jobs left by the men going off to war. These are but a few of the iconic propaganda of the time that still impact how people think about World War II.

The celebration photo of a young sailor kissing a random nurse in Times Square[1] is considered an iconic photograph of the World War II era and like many images from that time period, it became a form of propaganda. In the case of the photograph, it was promoting the joy and happiness felt by Americans, and the world, at the victorious conclusion of the war. The image was also a reminder to many of why they had joined the war and what they had fought for.

Another iconic image is that of a young woman flexing her muscles and telling the audience that they too "can do it". The propaganda poster, "We Can Do It"[2], was created by J. Howard Miller for the War Production Board to illustrate "…the American can-do spirit and…the notion of woman working in previously male-dominated manufacturing jobs…"[3]. The iconic image is often referred to as "Rosie the Riveter" after a Norman Rockwell illustration of the same time period, but at the time it was simply one of many such posters used for different

[1] See Image 1 – *Sailor Kissing Nurse*
[2] See Image 2 – *We Can Do It*
[3] Rosie: By Any Other Name – The Riveting True Story of the Labor Icon

types of war propaganda during World War II. Like many images of the time, it was meant to create a connection with the audience and make them want to do what they could to support the war effort. While posters were one of the most common forms of media used to spread support or opinions regarding the war, they were not the only form of artistic propaganda used by the War Department. Although art can take many forms, this paper focuses on two-dimensional art such as cartoons, posters, paintings, and pictures to look at how popular culture affected the ways in which propaganda art of World War II was presented. It will also look at how the war propaganda art of World War II an important part of popular culture, and thus history, but first it is important to understand why just art became a necessary part of history.

December 8, 1941, people across the country awoke to headlines proclaiming "America At War With Japan"[4]; Pearl Harbor had been attack by the Japanese. Overnight the world had dramatically changed for the American people who were once again involved in world war, but this time the war had come to American shores. The way in which America was attacked directly came as a surprise, especially since at the time of the attack "(t)he United States was at peace with that nation (Japan) and…was still in conversation with its government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific"[5]. American soldiers being attacked was sadly nothing new, but to be attacked on American soil and in American waters brought home just how vulnerable people were. Although World War I had ended over two decades ago, there were still plenty of people who felt that "…the shadow of death…hung over the children of the war generation, children…now of the age of their parents in 1914-18, in a far more terrible…world"[6]. They had been "(d)isillusioned by the consequences of World War I…"[7] and

[4] "America At War With Japan" *Lawrence Daily Journal-World* 1941, 1
[5] "America At War With Japan" 1941, 1
[6] Winfar *The World War and the Arts* 1940, 230
[7] Sargent *Propaganda and Morale* 1942, 170

did not feel that war was worth the cost to the American people. Even with the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States government had to find a way to, if not change these views completely, then at least override them enough to gain support for a war that had already taken a toll on the nation. The fastest way to gain the support of the nation was through the use of different types of propaganda campaigns.

Propaganda uses "The perceived power of persuasive messages – and the responsibility of the messenger…"[8] to convince others that the messages or images being given are something they wish to agree with. One of the more common uses of propaganda is in the form of advertising where a company attempts to persuade the viewer that they need the product or service portrayed. While the word "propaganda" has become associated with negative connotations but in reality, it is the way in which we view it; people often refer to "…promotional efforts they favor as "education" or perhaps "publicity", reserving the term "propaganda" for causes with which they do not sympathize"[9]. It is not uncommon for people to feel that propaganda pushes false or partial information to make the person, product, or service look better than it is. Because of views like this, combined with the less than enthusiastic views of many regarding war, the United States government had to come up with new ideas on how to push its propaganda campaign to the American people.

It was not just the gaining of support that the government need to push for, but also boosts to the American morale, be it military or civilian. Low morale meant that people cared less about what was going on and were less likely to support any efforts to support the government or war. History has shown that "…propaganda has been used, is being used, and will

[8] Ryan, Kathleen M. "'Don't Miss Your Great Opportunity': Patriotism and Propaganda in Second World War Recruitment." 2012, 249

[9] Sargent 1942, 166

continue to be used in boosting American morale… [in the hopes of making] …victory possible"[10]. The right kind of propaganda was needed though, which meant changing the style and tactics of what the United States government had used for World War I; this is where the Office of War Information, or OWI, was important.

The Office of War Information was created in 1942[11] to help disseminate information to the public that not only informed them of what was going on with the war and war efforts but also boosted the morale of the American people. While the American people wanted more truthful reporting than they had received during World War I there were still concerns about what was appropriate to release. Information and visuals that gave an "…overly idealized images of war…"[12] could lead the American people felt they were being lied too, but if information and visuals were too detailed or graphic it could "…incite the public to demand an early end to the war"[13]. The Office of War Information was responsible for finding that balance in the official government propaganda images that were released to the public.

Propaganda, both from the government and other sources, came in many forms. Across the media during World War II the war was what was on everyone's minds; "…from books to newspapers to newsreels to radio programs to advertisements to books, the war was front and centre"[14]. It did not matter what form of media was used so long as the correct results were achieved, which meant that careful attention had to be paid to how the messages were put out. As stated earlier, people felt that they were being lied to if the message was too chipper or idealized. It also diminished the efforts they put into supporting the war if it seemed like there was no real

[10] Sargent 1942, 167
[11] Gilbert *View Magazine and the Mass Visual Culture of World War II* 2020, 2
[12] Gilbert 2020, 2
[13] Gilbert 2020, 2
[14] Ryan 2012

need for a war. Too graphic or violent and people felt that their efforts had no impact upon the war and so the United States should just pull out anyway. Regardless of what messages they wished to portray, the Office of War Information and subsequent government offices had to be careful how they played the propaganda game.

Other forms of propaganda could be found through art created via programs of the War Department Art Advisory Committee which hired artists, both civilian and military, to draw their experiences during the war "…that sympathetically portrayed the events of war from an American perspective"[15]. *LIFE* magazine had started a similar program before America officially joined the war geared at having artists "…present their nation preparing for war"[16]. Artists like Floyd Davis[17] painted images that helped the people at home get a frontline view of what the war was like. Propaganda art of this type helped to make the war more real by giving the public individual glimpses into the lives of real people. This in turn benefited the government since people had a better idea of who was fighting for them and encouraged people to do more to help out the war effort. It also gave them a glimpse of the hardship soldiers faced, which could encourage people to do more to help lessen the burden of the soldiers, but also metered it with happier images of the troops to help show that it was worth the sacrifices of the people. George Biddle was another artist important to the visual media war efforts.

Biddle was an integral part in getting the Army Art Unit, part of the Corps of Engineers, created; it would go on to be "…the most dramatic, politically controversial, and – ultimately – successful and popular government-funded art initiative of the war"[18]. Artists braved their own

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[15] Brandon *Art and War* 2006, 70
[16] Brandon 2006, 70
[17] See Image 3 – *Bob Hope Entertaining the Troops*
[18] Hanson, Christopher. "Drawing Flak: George Biddle and the Army's World War II Art Unit." *Archives of American Art Journal* 47, no. 3/4 (2008), 52

hardship beside soldiers to show the American people what was going on with the military and war. Biddle wanted to avoid the standard propaganda images that downplayed the harshness and realities of war or images that only played up the heroic image of the military and government leaders because he believed that it "…subverted autonomous insight"[19]. That said, artists were free to choose what they decided to focus on as long as they painted what they saw and not merely the propaganda hoped for by the United States government and military offices. It was still up to the Army Public Relations office as to what works would actually be published though[20].

Opposition to the program, and bad publicity, led to the dismantling of the project less than a year after it was started, but thanks to the efforts of men like Forbes Watson, and *LIFE* magazine, the artwork of these artists was saved and many found employment with the magazine until the program could be reinstituted. Watson had to fight against the opposition's view that art could not provide anything of benefit to the war effort, and the artists were only trying to get out of doing their duties. In reality, the exhibit that Watson put together of the rescued artwork, entitled "… "Army at War" …would correct the naïve home-front impression, fostered by Hollywood, that combat was an exciting adventure rather than a living nightmare"[21]. While not the pro-war propaganda that the government had hoped for, it gave people a more realistic vision of war, the people fighting it, and the artists risking their lives to record it.

Unlike the War Department, *LIFE* magazine supported the artists of the frontline throughout the entire war[22], and did articles spotlighting different artists and the way in which

[19] Hanson 2008, 52
[20] Hanson 2008, 54
[21] Hanson 2008, 58
[22] Brandon 2006, 70

their art reflected the public opinion or sought to influence it. One such article, "Maudlin", discussed artist Bill Maudlin, a 23 year old Army sergeant who had created his own popular cartoon/comic entitled *Up Front* which looked at army life through the adventures of soldiers Joe and Willie. *Up Front* shows the war from the view of the foot soldier and "…articulates the things that the doughfoot feels and cannot describe"[23]. Much like the paintings of the Army Art Unit, Maudlin was trying to show the rest of the world what war was really like.

Articles and cartoons were not the only sources of propaganda found in popular magazines and newspapers; advertisements in different publications were their own form of propaganda. In the February 5, 1945 edition of *LIFE* magazine, there is an advertisement for *General Electric* or *GE* with the title "Helping the sick get well" and shows images of their products being used on the battlefield[24]. Other adverts promote different war efforts and the results of those efforts, such as the one for *North American Aviation* which shows a bomber and asks the question "WILL YOU help deliver the next squadron?"[25].

Print media was only one of the forms in which propaganda was put out to the public; motion picture studios played their own part in the dispensing of war propaganda. Facing losses due to low theater attendance, several "…studios began working for and with the government to provide alternative sources of income"[26]; this was not limited to the Hollywood movie studios either. Animation studios like Disney saw the loss of income because of limited moving going during World War II; like the Hollywood studios, Disney ended up doing government projects to

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[23] Lang, Will and Tom Durrance. "Maudlin: His Tough Realistic Drawings of GIs At Front Make Him Top Cartoonist Of War". *LIFE*, February 5, 1945, 49

[24] *LIFE*, February 5, 1945, 39

[25] *LIFE,* 1945, 47

[26] Harrington, Seán. "World War II and Propaganda." *The Disney Fetish*, Indiana University Press, 2015, 169

stay open. The beloved characters many knew would end up promoting the war effort in different ways, including a series of shorts with one Donald Duck[27]

Generally, when one thinks of Donald Duck, one sees him in his sailor suit and cap, but during World War II Donald Duck was actually in the Army in order to do his part in helping with the war effort[28]. It was not a sudden decision by Disney, but rather a combined result of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the military taking over an entire lot at the studios, and a pressing need for money to be able to stay open[29]. The end result was that the Disney gang became part of a series of propaganda and training films.

In addition to the cartoons about Donald's adventures in the United States Army[30], there were morale cards[31] made, and "…over 1,200 insignia for different military units…and…Disney-designed "nose art" …adorned aircraft fuselages"[32]. Many of Donald's military antics were meant make the Armed Forces seem less scary, and similar to the films of another animated character, Private Snafu, which were more of an example of the things people should not do rather than being truly instructional[33]. The main point of "[t]he propaganda film aims to regress its viewer to simplistic emotional responses to establish a threat and make it appear manifest"[34], but Disney's Donald Duck war cartoons were meant to make people laugh more than anything.

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[27] Harrington 2015
[28] Chase, Marilyn. "How Disney Propaganda Shaped Life on the Home Front During WWII". *Smithsonian Magazine* 2022.
[29] Chase 2022
[30] See Image 3 – Donald Duck
[31] See Image 4 - *Masquers Servicemen's Morale Corps*
[32] Chase 2022, 1
[33] Harrington 2015, 176
[34] Harrington 2015, 170

Donald's military career was meant to be "…light-hearted propaganda"[35] that could be enjoyed by the whole family. The antics of Donald Duck during the war provided a respite from the constant demands that asked for the American people to do their part, but also seemed to constantly be asking for more. Unlike much of printed media of magazines and newspapers, cartoons could be easy entertainment for everyone, regardless of age or reading ability, while pushing forward the intended propaganda without the seriousness that many other formats had.

While there were many forms of propaganda media used during World War II, the propaganda poster was still one of the most common media formats. It could be posted almost anywhere, it was not limited to a subscription or viewing screen and could be easily mass produced. Multiple designs covering different themes could be created, with images being reused for different messages as the war progressed. One of the more iconic designs from the war era is that of Uncle Sam declaring "I Want You"[36] from a 1940 recruitment poster.

This image was created James Montgomery Flagg in 1940 and used in other posters designed to not only promote war effort propaganda via both military and civilian recruitment, but to give a feeling of patriotism to doing one's part for the war. People were not just doing their part to support the war but doing their part as Americans. Posters like the Uncle Sam recruitment propaganda worked because they played upon people's emotions and need to be a part of something. This is important since "[a] propaganda message, no matter how persuasive, could have limited effects because it did not ring true for the audience"[37].

[35] Harrington 2015, 176
[36] See Image 5 – *I Want You*
[37] Ryan 2012, 249

The American people had felt that they had been misled, if not lied to, by the propaganda employed during World War I; glorifying and minimizing the reality of this new war would cause the American people to view the propaganda suspiciously. Instead, the government, through entities like the Office of War Information, sought to create propaganda that drew the people together and showed what their efforts could or did bring about[38]. It was not just about recruiting people, although there were several posters aimed specifically at finding people to fill various jobs or become soldiers and nurses. There were several posters that were focused on the unity of the people or the things that people could do at home to help support those on the frontlines.

One such "unity" poster[39] is created from a photograph by Howard Liberman in 1943; the image is of two men working on an aircraft with the American flag as a backdrop and the words "United We Win" across the bottom. The usage of the more commonly seen white American male working side by side with an African American male is meant to remind people that the war affected all Americans and only by working together did they have a chance at winning it. Rather than trying to create images of a perfect future or hyping up how life was before the war, images like this strove to "…stress the diverse origin of our peoples, our democratic traditions, our common aspirations"[40]. The idea was to promote the differences between the United States and its variety of cultures living together in perceived harmony, versus how many Europeans now had to worry about being killed for the way they looked or for what they believed in over in Germany.

Propaganda pushing the American people to join the different military branches, nursing corps, or other jobs that benefited both the frontlines and home fronts were some of the more

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[38] Sargent 1942
[39] See Image 6 – *United We Win*
[40] Sargent 1942, 172

common types of posters, but they were not the only forms of posters out there. Another popular type of poster told civilians the things that they could do at home to help the war effort, donating cooking grease to be used in manufacturing, to growing their own food to help reduce the drain on the American food supply. One of version of this kind of poster[41] shows a mother with her young daughter; the young girl asks her mother "We will have lots to eat this winter, won't we Mother?" as she helps can vegetables. The poster reminds the audience to "Grow Your Own, Can Your Own" and was designed by Alfred Parker in 1943 as part of the Office of War Information's propaganda program.

Images that showed Americans what efforts they could easily make at home to help allowed for more people to feel like they were making a difference. These images were generally aimed at women, especially the housewife figure, and were a balance of "…self-sacrifice and empowerment…"[42] that stressed saving or donating various resources and at the same time reminded women that it was also their fight. Women who could not be nurses or in one of the few female military groups had a way to contribute and feel important doing so.

As World War II progressed, it was not just those on the home front that needed the reminders of why they were fighting. Paintings like Norman Rockwell's *Four Freedoms* series reminded both civilians and soldiers of the peace and family they were fighting for[43]. One of the paintings[44] shows a Thanksgiving or Sunday dinner style scene with a large family gathered around the dining room table as "Grandma" set the turkey down for "Grandpa" to carve. It is an

[41] See Image 7 – *Grow Your Own, Can Your Own*
[42] Ryan 2012, 250
[43] *WWII Propaganda Posters: A Look at Life on the American Home Front.* San Jacinto Museum
[44] See Image 8 – *American Home Front*

idealized image of the perfect family dinner during peace time; a dream that everyone wanted to achieve and were willing to work and fight for.

Not all propaganda images promoted patriotism or heroic home front deeds; there were other posters that were meant to educate people about the dangers of the war, both imagined and real. Some focused on what not to do, while others preyed upon the fears of the American citizen in order to encourage certain actions or behaviors. Still others sought to created clear divisions between Allies and Axis countries, going so far as to make those whose origins were from Axis countries as monsters and dangerous to American freedoms. Those that sought to scare people into certain actions or to avoid often focused on the threat to family or what such actions would cost, but some posters took a more unique approach.

Victor Keppler's *Wanted! For Murder*[45] shows a smug looking young woman in an old fashion wanted poster frame; the word "WANTED" is above her picture in large, bold letters. Below her picture are the words "Her careless talk cost lives", informing people that she shared sensitive information and the results were deadly. Unlike some of the other images, which showed a child or pet mourning the loss of their service member[46], *Wanted! For Murder* makes it clear that passing along information, no matter how minor one thought it was, was a great an offense as murder. If they could not convince people to be careful about potentially giving "…information to unsuspected enemy agents"[47] by playing on more tender emotions, then the Office of War Information would scare them into carefulness.

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[45] See Image 9 – *Wanted! For Murder*

[46] *Powers of Persuasion.* National Archives

[47] Vallée, Cécile. "Monsters and Clowns Incorporated: The Representations of Adolf Hitler in British and American WWII Propaganda Posters." *LISA (Caen, France)*, no. Vol. X – n° 1 (2012), 2

Scaring people into following the war time rules of social engagement was not the onle way in which the Office of War Information and other groups used fear tactics to push the American people into responding specific ways. While Canadian, G.K. Odell's *Keep These Hands Off!*[48] was the inspiration for many American World War II propaganda posters. A mother clutches her baby as shadowy hands come at them from front and back; the hands feature the Nazi swastika, and "rising sun" emblem associated with Japan. Below the image are the words "Buy the New Victory Bonds", implying that by buying war bonds, one was helping to save the mother and her child from the dark and evil Axis forces. The intent was not to make viewers feel accomplished or a part of the war effort, but to drive home what could happen if America and the Allied forces lost the war.

Perhaps one the darkest aspects of World War II propaganda were the images intended to create clear lines between "them" and "us". The December 22, 1941, issue of *LIFE* magazine ran an article entitled "Speaking of Pictures" which looked at the art "…the cartoonists of the U.S. stabbed at their drawing boards in cold, bitter anger"[49] the day after the Pearl Harbor attack. The article is mostly made up of pictures depicting how the artists felt about Japan's betrayal and horrific attack. Many depict the personification of Japan attacking either Uncle Sam or an American citizen, often from behind; others show Japan as some form of animal, creating a view that they are less than human for attacking while discussing peace[50].

Creating caricatures, animalistic images, or "…showing Hitler [and other Axis leaders] as threatening, unpleasant, or ugly is part… of a propaganda strategy…"[51] meant dehumanize the

[48] See Image 10 – *Keep These Hands Off!*
[49] "Speaking of Pictures". *LIFE*, December 22, 1941
[50] *Lawerence Daily Journal – World 1941*
[51] Vallée 2022, 10

Axis leaders and make them on par with the Boogeyman. They became the monsters in the night that threatened American safety and security; a threat that both the government and businesses were willing to play up. General Motors Corporation, or GMC, created their own propaganda campaign in 1942 with their *Warning! Our Homes Are in Danger Now!* poster[52]. The poster shows a globe view of the United States with Hitler and Hirohito, both in military gear, staring down at American cities ominously. Hirohito holds a bloody knife while Hitler holds a pistol; in the corner is a circle showing a plane and a reminder from General Motors Corporation that it is "Our Job – Keep 'Em Running". While the image plays upon the American citizens' fear, it is not the only poster to do so, nor the darkest.

Ben Shahn created *This is Nazi Brutality*[53] for the Office of War Information in 1942. The poster shows the image of a chained man with a canvas bag over his head and lists what happened to the people of the town of Lidice. The village "…was obliterated by the Nazis in retaliation for the 1942 shooting of a Nazi official by two Czechs"[54]. In the course of 10 hours, the men were slaughtered and the women and children shipped off to one of the German concentration camps; according to the poster, Radio Berlin declared that "…the name of the village was immediately abolished"[55]. The image and information brings home the harsh reality of war and sheer brutality of the opposing forces. This was not meant to garner sympathy for the war effort, but to show what could happen if the Allied forces, and American citizens let the Nazis and their allies win – the loss of everything we know. It was also a reminder that Americans were not just fighting for their continued freedom, but for the freedom of the world.

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[52] See Image 11 – *Warning! Our Homes Are in Danger Now!*
[53] See Image 12 – *This is Nazi Brutality*
[54] *Power of Persuasion*
[55] Shahn, Ben. *This is Nazi Brutality*, 1942.

Images like these, both good and bad, are an important part of our history. We see what it was like for Americans living in World War II through the propaganda art of that time. The efforts put forth to inspire people to join in the Armed Forces or encouraged mothers to grow their own vegetables so their children had plenty to eat during the winter. Some images, like Miller's *We Can Do It!* poster and Flagg's Uncle Sam, *I Want You* recruitment poster have become iconic and are reused in more modern versions of the original propaganda. The images used by the Office of War Information and produced by the Army Art Unit show us the fears and reality of wartime, as well as the ways in which people tried to cope. With so few from that time period able to give us information today, the propaganda art of World War II is one of the few ways in which we can see history. It is a visual accompaniment to the written accounts, a more personable look at the war and the people who lived through it.

Popular culture is an important aspect of history and our culture, regardless of when in history we look at. The influence of popular culture on the propaganda art of World War II is also important and can be seen in the media formats used and the ways in which the propaganda was presented. Often, popular culture and propaganda worked side by side, such as in magazines like *LIFE* which used articles and advertisements to promote the war effort and inform the public of new information and changes to society. Cartoons of all varieties showed the war and soldiers in ways that people all over could relate to. Visual media, like the propaganda posters found on many walls, became a recognizable and vital part of the war effort. World War II propaganda artists took popular culture and used it to their advantage; in the end, they in turn shaped the popular culture of World War II era America.

(Image 1) *Sailor Kissing Nurse,* 1945.

(Image 2) Miller, *We Can Do It*, 1943.

(Image 3) Davis, *Bob Hope Entertains the Troops,* 1942

(Image 3) Disney, Donald Duck, 1942

(Image 4) Porter, *Masquers Servicemen's Morale Corps,* 1943

(Image 5) Flagg, *I Want You,* 1940

(Image 6) Liberman, *United We Win,* 1943

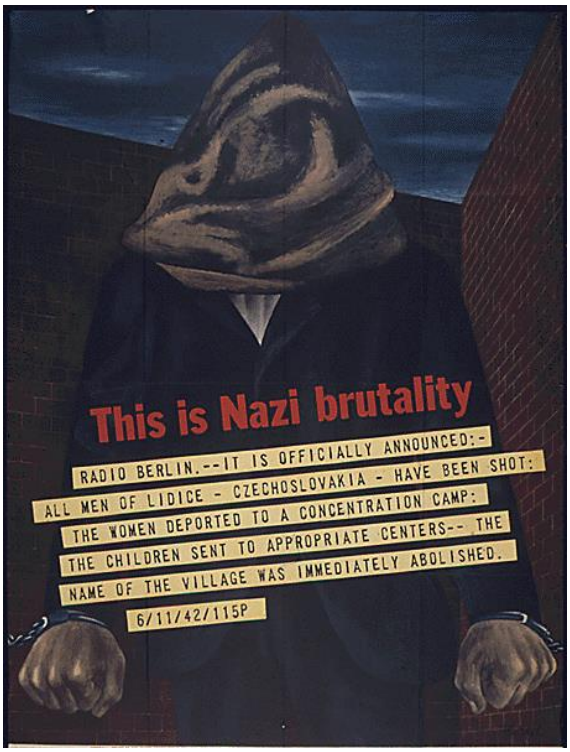
(Image 7) Parker, *Grow Your Own, Can Your Own,* 1943

(Image 8) Rockwell, *American Home Front,* 1943

(Image 9) Keppler – *Wanted! For Murder* 1944

(Image 10) Odell – *Keep These Hands Off!* ND

(Image 11) GMC – *WARNING! Our Homes Are in Danger Now!*



(Image 12) Shahn – *This is Nazi Brutality* 1942

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