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The Great War: Powerfully Pushed and Quietly Questioned

(All referenced images are attached at the end)

Exclamation points in bold color, wordless charcoal sketches in black and white. Grandiose, confronting posters that plastered the city, magazine covers that didn't want to be found. These are the criteria by which an onlooker could quickly differentiate between pro- and anti-WWI ads. The former aggressively sold its shining plastic idea, throwing in a patriotic action at no extra cost; the latter convinced those without money not to buy it. Such a characterization is grounded in the objects on display in the exhibit, "Posters and Patriotism: Selling WWI in New York". Housed within the Museum of the City of New York, this exhibit provides historically potent WWI posters and drawings from a multitude of viewpoints. Although both the exhibit's pro- and anti-war images showcase dark and artistically complex themes, pro-war imagery targeted the general American public, calling on them to actively support the war, while leftist anti-war imagery appealed to specific populations of Americans, passively reflecting on the war's ramifications. These divergent political aims were symbolized through contrasting colors, language, artistic styles, and poster placement.

The first comparison can be drawn between Henry Glintenkamp's anti war image, "Physically Fit", and Fred Spear's pro war image "Enlist", both published in 1917. These two works of art deal with the same problem of recruiting men for the war. In each image, the artist

pulls on the value of human life to make their perspective relevant. For example,"Enlist" invokes the typical male's protective nature over women and children by portraying a dream-like woman clutching her child as she drowns. "Physically Fit" also bases its effect in the intrinsic value of a human life, specifically, the life of a soldier. The image of a skeleton measuring a man for his coffin points out the high volume of men dying in the conflict, which causes empathetic sentiment in a viewer.

But despite similarity in the methods of tapping into American emotion, "Enlist" and "Physically Fit" lead their viewers to entirely different conclusions. This becomes apparent with deeper analysis of each image. "Physically Fit," is consumed by sharp, shadowy imagery, wherein a skeleton measures a man for his coffin. This young man in the foreground, presumably an enlistee or a draftee, is being sent off to die, to join the ranks of the fuzzy black coffins that compose the background. The scenario shows the dire state of the war condition, rather than its glorification. To be "physically fit" for war, this drawing says, the only requirement is that you fit into a coffin. This statement also snubs the idea of a soldier as muscular and powerful, by portraying the doomed man with an ideally athletic body, implying that even the most physically prepared soldiers sign a death warrant when they enlist.

Important to note as well, is the lack of clear national identities depicted in the antiwar sketch. No countries are represented, and the conflict is shown without any patriotic or nationalistic layers. In relinquishing nationalistic themes, "Physically Fit" takes a rather passive standpoint. An observer is the third person, watching the event, not the body being directly spoken to. There is no clever catch phrase pulling audiences in, because the drawing is not meant to convince you of anything specific. To understand this stylistic difference, imagine if this

anti-war image was presented in the style of a pro-war image. In this case, the artist would likely have made the skeleton a German, and the soldier an American. Perhaps there would even be a mother somewhere, clinging onto her teenage son. In much brighter colors, it would have some caption appealing to American values, such as, "60,000 boys die per day overseas. Don't let your boy die in the trenches! Oppose the War Now!" The aim would be clear; to stop people from enlisting. By recognizing that this is not at all the case, one can see that this anti-war image is entirely detached from any national agenda. It is much more so a somber reflection of what has already occurred, as it accepts the inevitability of the situation, but still feels compelled to oppose it.

This lack of agency suggests that the art was not aimed at persuasion, an effect likely resulting from its intended audience. "Physically Fit" was designed to appear in an issue of "The Masses", a radical socialist publication, which was read by radical socialists. If an artist knows their contentious image will almost exclusively be shown to people who already agree with it, and if this artist is trying to *expose*, rather than *compel*, then the need for cheap agency falters.

With unique color and style, "Enlist" has an entirely different goal. Instead of trying to *show* viewers something, it aims to move them to *do* something. This wispy blue impressionistic poster looks nothing like "Physically Fit." It renders a beautiful, angelic, innocent, woman and her infant as they sink into the ocean's depth. To counter the soft blue lines and pale color of the woman are the bold, red, block letters in the lower right corner, that read "Enlist," in all caps. A call for mass action that is unequivocally the takeaway message. "Enlist", one imagines, was painted with the definitive goal of mobilizing the United States for war. In its story, the poster

suggests the observer could save this helpless woman by enlisting. Thereby, associating virtue with the act of entering the war.

Contrary to “Physically Fit”, “Enlist” is grounded in specific historical events that almost any American would quickly recognize. Drowning civilians refers overtly to the sinking of the Lusitania by a german U-boat, an event that nearly all American men in 1917 would have known about. Grounding an ad in a political event that was a famous motivation behind the United States’ entrance to the war appropriates huge amounts of pre-existing emotional data to rally men for battle. This specific call for action is selling, we can map out what it’s pushing, and how it's doing so, which unashamedly says something about the explicit agency of pro-war ads, a facet entirely lacking from the lurking passivity of an antiwar sketch.

Another striking comparison can be made between the “Mother Earth” cover of September 1914, and the poster reading “They Give Their Lives, Do You Give Your Savings?” These two images both explore the idea of martyrdom, but use the concept to create entirely diverse results.

Man Ray’s Mother Earth cover is another black and white antiwar image. It’s dark, it’s dreary, ridden with anguished faces and subtle suggestions. When analyzed closely, it becomes apparent that the two imprisoned men make up the striped part of the American flag. Where the stars would typically be, this artist instead inserts a murderous war scene. All together, there is an eerie image of silenced men forming the fabric of the flag. A religious image also makes up the flagpole, literally supporting this oppression with a cross. On the cross lies the famous image of Jesus being crucified; a telling choice, not only because most of the warring nations embraced some form of Christianity, but also because Jesus famously symbolizes martyrdom himself. Man

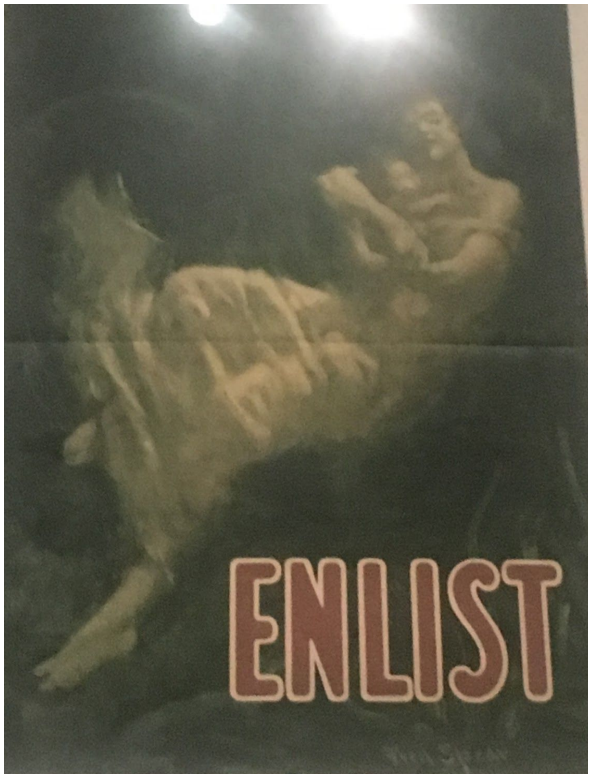
Ray is criticizing the unpatriotic jailing of political despondents, and so the symbol of a well-known martyr is fitting.

Despite such anti-war claims about America being much darker, their at-glance presentation is more subtle. This image wouldn't pop out at you as you walked into the grocery store in the way that the pro-war ads would. Like "Physically Fit," Ray's cover design seemingly appeals to its specifically established readership, in this case, anti-war anarchists. In fact all of the leftist anti-war images on display in "Posters and Patriotism," were originally published in specialized magazines, while the pro-war were mass produced by the million.

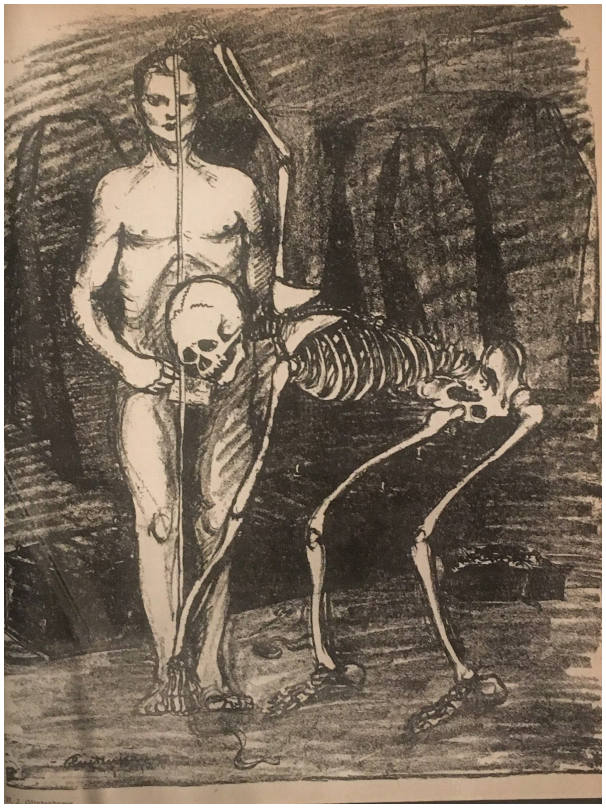
Finally, in examining H. Devitt Welsh's "They Give their Lives, Do You Lend Your Savings?" one sees a compelling example of martyred soldiers exploited for the war cause. The importance of this poster is entirely in its title and caption, written in giant letters across a graveyard. Without these words, the poster would simply illustrate some ominous tombstones. Rather than lament the number of men dying, the phrase pushes liberty bonds. Death is the mean, not the end. Images of death are a reminder that as civilians sit comfortably at home, soldiers are dying in battle. The least civilians can do, then, is lend their savings; *lending* their money, which is nothing compared to *giving* life. Such pathos relies on the guilty minds of those not fighting, mourning the memory of others who have died. To emphasize this point, give and lend are also visually juxtaposed by their change in color relative to the rest of the phrase. Ironically, though, the poster does not examine why anyone should either give or lend to the cause. It distracts in the contrast of the two ideas, and with the haunting imagery of tombstones.

There is an evident distinction between the target audience of pro and anti war imagery, as well as the motivation behind their creation. While both the pro and anti war images in "Posters and

Patriotisms: Selling WWI in New York" used similar ideas to express their views, the conclusions they propose are unique. "Enlist" and "They Give Their Lives to You Give Your Savings?" spoke to the general public, convincing them of two tangible actions, to enlist or buy bonds. "Physically Fit" and the September 1914 cover of "Mother Earth" spoke to socialist and anarchist groups, expressing dissent towards the war, without attempting to move readership to any direct end.

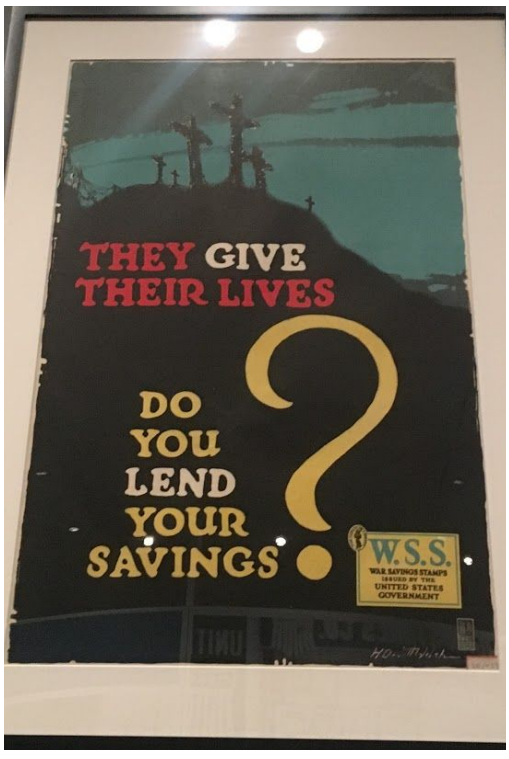


"Enlist"



"Physically Fit"

Mother Earth Cover



”They Give Their Lives, Do you Lend Your Savings?”

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