



From Passive Symbols to Constrained Workers: the Shifting
Representation of Women in WWI and WWII American
Propaganda

BA dissertation

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Abstract:

When the United States entered the First and Second World Wars, the American government faced the urgent task of mobilizing the entire nation to meet wartime demands. Propaganda became the primary instrument the government relied on to do so. Yet different conflicts demanded different forms of mobilization, and with them came different reconfigurations of social roles. Among the most significant was the changing position of women. With men's departure from the workforce, the state started to mobilize women into the industrial workforce through the widespread production of propaganda. A propaganda that depicted them as capable and productive workers, a big contrast to the passive symbols they embodied 20 years earlier.

This dissertation examines the changing representation of women in American wartime propaganda, analyzing how they were portrayed, to whom the visuals addressed, and for what ideological purpose. Drawing on primary visuals and secondary historiographic sources, the analysis reveals that although a visual transformation took place, the ideological foundations governing female representation remained the same throughout both conflicts. Despite the visual distance from the helpless victim of WWI, the active working woman of WWII remained constrained in her feminine and domestic demarcations, reassuring male audiences that women's expanding roles would not disrupt gender norms. Thus, this dissertation argues that the visual shift in American propaganda did not reflect a liberation of women, but rather their instrumentalization to achieve the state's immediate goal.

Keywords: American propaganda, Gender studies, World War I, World War II, Women's roles

0. Introduction

In 1943, during the Second World War, the American artist J. Howard Miller produced what would become one of the most famous female images of the twentieth century. The woman in factory overalls, flexing her arm under the slogan “We Can Do It!” commonly known as *Rosie the Riveter* (see figure 1), was originally designed as wartime industrial propaganda, but with time, became an iconic symbol of feminism and female autonomy. Her image stands in comparison to how women were portrayed two decades before, during the First World War. Posters like Alfred Everitt Orr’s 1918 *For Home and Country. Victory Liberty Loan* (see figure 2) offers a striking counterpart. A domestic scene in which a vulnerable mother and child hug an American soldier under the slogan “For Home and Country”. This visual shift, from passive to agent, was not merely aesthetic but rather reflected the reconfiguration of roles and necessities that took place in the span of 20 years.

The First (1914-1918) and Second (1939-1945) World Wars marked a pivotal point in modern-day history, not only affecting politics, the economy and military competences, but also reconfiguring social roles. Among some of the most significant shifts was the changing position of women, whose labor became crucial during wartime. As a large part of the male population was deployed to the frontlines, female labor became vital to sustain the wartime effort. A key tool to promote this female mobilization was propaganda. Propaganda during the First and Second World Wars became a potent weapon to manage public opinion, sustain war efforts, and maintain morale. “Essential to any war effort in order to lift up the spirits of the home country and dispirit the enemy” (Casey, 2017, as cited in Haynes, 2018, p.3). The American government relied extensively on it to mobilize the civilian population either for military services at the front or manual labor in the industrial workforce. Nonetheless, although it was extensively used throughout both conflicts, its purpose and the way in which women

were represented in it changed drastically from 1914 to 1939. WWI¹ propaganda depicted women largely as passive agents: mothers, nurses, and caretakers whose roles were those of supporters and encouragers of male fighting in the front. The use of female figures became crucial in recruitment campaigns, either to shame men into enlisting or portraying them as vulnerable and in need of protection. In contrast, WWII² propaganda distanced itself from the vulnerable, and reimagined women as active agents, workers and patriots whose labor was nonetheless rooted in femininity.

0.1 Methodology

This dissertation aims to provide a clear understanding of the visual shift regarding the representation of women in wartime propaganda across WWI and WWII in the United States. It seeks to shine a light onto how women were represented in propaganda during WWI and during WWII, to whom propaganda directed their messages to, and what changes in representation and audience can be observed between the two conflicts. Despite the existing literature, comparative studies that address continuity and change across both conflicts remain limited. This dissertation aims to fill this gap by connecting the two conflicts. Exploring this continuity allows for a clear comparison of the changes and the continuance of female representation during the First and Second World War propaganda.

The methodology is based on an analysis of qualitative visuals from each period, drawing on posters, advertisements and visual aids, alongside with secondary historiographical studies on gender and American wartime culture. The dissertation unfolds in a clear chronological order that aims to trace the development of women's representation across both conflicts: first analyzing gendered propaganda in WWI and its audience and then turning on the representation of women in WWII propaganda and to whom their ideological message was

¹ Initialism for World War I.

² Initialism for World War II.

directed to. The dissertation comes to an end in a comparative discussion of change and continuity that aims to highlight the polarity and similarities of gendered wartime propaganda across both conflicts. In addition, the dissertation will be accompanied by an appendix compiling the propaganda referenced throughout the text, thus facilitating a deeper contextualization and allowing for a more precise comparative analysis.

1. Historical Context

Despite being separated by two decades, the American entry into the First and Second World Wars shared one thing in common. In both cases, the American government decided to join conflicts that were already underway. This pattern of late entry, and consequently, of rapid mass mobilizations, shaped the character of wartime culture in America. In both cases, propaganda rapidly became a central and an aggressive tool of government policy that aimed to ensure the participation of the civilian population. Understanding the political and military circumstances of each period is essential to understanding the ideological propaganda that was deployed within the two conflicts and how it functioned in American society.

1.1 The First World War (1914-1918)

In 1917, two and a half years after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo by a Serb independentist, the United States of America entered the Great War³, joining the Allies⁴ against the Central Powers⁵. Their decision to break neutrality and enter a conflict that was already underway marked a decisive turning point in the war's outcome. However, the critical situation the United States was facing regarding racial injustice, gender inequality and political corruption created diverse opinions regarding their involvement in a European

³ Before the outbreak of the WWII in 1939, the conflict from 1914-1918 was referred to as the Great War. In 1914 *Maclean's* referred to the conflict as a "Great War." (MacLean's, n.d.)

⁴ Known as the "Triple Entente" a military coalition formed by France, Great Britain and Russia.

⁵ Military coalition formed by Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria.

conflict, many relying on President Woodrow Wilson's⁶ policy on impartial neutrality (Keene, 2021). "The United States must be neutral in fact as well as in name during these days that are to try men's souls." (Woodrow Wilson, 1917). Nonetheless, after Wilson's 1917 reelection under the slogan "He Kept us Out of War", a series of escalating provocations gradually deteriorated this position. The German submarine warfare in the Atlantic and the sinking of the RMS Lusitania⁷ in 1915 stoked public outrage, and positions of neutrality started to shift away. The publication of the Zimmermann telegram⁸ in 1917 proved to be decisive in shifting both political and public sentiment. On April 4th, 1917, the U.S. Senate voted to declare war against Germany, and on April 6th, 1917, the House of Representatives of the United States of America passed the resolution, formally declaring war on Germany (The National WWI Museum and Memorial, n.d.). Within days, the American government faced the difficult task of changing public opinion and transforming the divided civilian population into a unified wartime nation.

1.2 The Second World War (1939-1945)

The Second World War began on September 1st, 1939, when Nazi Germany⁹ invaded Poland, making France and Britain declare war on Germany. The conflict extended across Europe, Africa and the Pacific, drawing the involvement of over 70 nations, with two main military coalitions: the Allied¹⁰ forces and the Axis powers.¹¹ Once again, the United States initially maintained neutrality, while a strong isolationist sentiment prevailed across the population.

⁶ 28th president of the U.S. (1913-1921)

⁷ British Ocean Liner carrying war supplies from New York to Britain. 128 American casualties. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026)

⁸ Secret German Telegram to Mexico intercepted by British intelligence, urging an alliance against the United States in exchange to reclaiming the lost territories of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. (National WWI Museum and Memorial, n.d.)

⁹ German state led by Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party 1920-1945 that became a totalitarian dictatorship also known as the "German Reich".

¹⁰ Known as the "Big Four" military coalition formed by the United States, the Soviet Union, China and the United Kingdom with its respective colonies.

¹¹ Military coalition formed by German Reich, Italy and the Empire of Japan.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt¹² faced strong opposition to American involvement. However, the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, in which the Imperial Japanese Navy bombed the American naval base in Hawaii causing over 2,000 American casualties, completely shifted popular opinion. Fear, anger and patriotism sparked among the American population, and for the first time in decades, the sentiment of isolationism became overpowered by the growing sentiment of national unity, “For the first time in the decades leading up to the attack, Americans threw down their isolationist ideas and banded together against a threatening foreign enemy. Many citizens found solace in national unity and chose to help defend their country in both big and small ways” (Pearl Harbour Official Webpage, 2024). The next day, on December 8, 1941, the U.S. Congress officially voted to declare war on Japan and the Axis powers. And just like in 1917, the United States government had to mobilize an entire civilian population for a global conflict, but this time, the scale, urgency, and sentiment of patriotism were significantly greater.

2. Propaganda Theory

Few tools in modern political and cultural history have been as useful and as consequential as propaganda. Nonetheless, the definition of what propaganda is considered has shifted across time. One of the earliest contemporary definitions was offered by Harold Lasswell in his 1971 study *Propaganda Technique in World War I*, where he defined it as, “The technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representation. These representations may take spoken, written, pictorial or musical form” (Lasswell, 1971, as cited in Jackall, 1995, p.13).

The term “propaganda” derives from the religious Latin term “Congregatio de Propaganda Fide.” The term was established by Pope Gregory in 1622, which represented the

¹² 32nd president of the U.S. (1933-1945)

propagation of Faith and Christian doctrine across colonized territories (Wollney & Sternadori, 2019). However, with the rise in modern economic society and new social and political institutions, the Church gradually declined in its central role in society. As literacy rose across Europe, public spaces, reading societies, coffeehouses and lending libraries began to perform a parallel function to propaganda, circulating ideas and helping shape public opinion. As Robert Jackall mentions, “these helped lay the foundation for the emergence of public opinion, through which the emerging middle classes articulated their worldviews” (1995, p.2). Public opinion, in this sense, did not emerge spontaneously, but was rather shaped by those who controlled the channels of communication. As governments in the 19th and 20th centuries faced the challenge of governing large and literate populations, the deliberate management of public opinion became essential. The development of mass media gave states complete intrusion into the daily lives of citizens, transforming propaganda from a tool of religious control to one of political mobilization. However, not everything inculcated to the public can be deemed as propaganda. While general values transmitted to the population was called education, the propagation of controversial, subversive and new attitudes can be referred to as propaganda (Jackall, 1995). In this sense, Jackall defines propaganda as: “product of intellectual work that is itself highly organized; it aims at persuading large masses of people about the virtues of some organization, cause or person. And its success or failure depends on how well it captures, expresses and then rechannels specific existing sentiments” (1995, p.2).

2.1 Wartime Propaganda

While propaganda in all its forms has existed throughout human history, the First World War marked a turning point in its use in modern nation-states (Ellul, 1965). With the unprecedented demands placed on civilians by the mass conflict, governments couldn't rely just on patriotic sentiments or military authority. Public opinion, therefore, had to be actively constructed and

sustained by governments, who for the first time, combined publicity and psychological methods to obtain political responses (Ellul, 1965). According to Sarah Price, during the two years of American involvement in WWI, more than 2,500 recruitment and front-fundraising posters were designed, and 20 million copies of them were displayed in public places across the United States (Price, 2018), while in WWII, “almost 200,000 different designs were printed, more than any other country fighting in the conflict” (Oklahoma State University Press, n.p.). As Skylar Smith argued: “These posters served as an effective rhetorical device due to their presentation of a message through both image and text, creating one unified message that inherently ties it to its historical moment and implies a manipulative action to its audience” (2015, p. 9).

Propaganda’s goal, thus, was to ensure participation both on the home front and on the battle front, and it did by psychologically targeting the population through its visual media. Jacques Ellul, the French sociologist, distinguished propaganda into two. In his 1965 study *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, Ellul categorized propaganda into either “propaganda of agitation” or “propaganda of integration”. He claimed that propaganda could either evoke immediate action and emotional response or slowly align individuals to its intended value. As Ellul states, “Propaganda of agitation generally attracts all the attention... It is led by a party seeking to destroy the government or established order. It seeks rebellion or war. All popular wars have been nourished by such propaganda of agitation” (1965, n.p.). He further mentions:

This subversive propaganda of agitation is obviously the flashiest: it attracts attention because of its explosive and revolutionary character. It is also the easiest to make; in order to succeed, it needs only be addressed to the most simple and violent sentiments through the most elementary means. Hate is generally its most profitable resource. It is extremely easy to launch a revolutionary movement based on hatred of a particular enemy. (Ellul, n.p.)

Jackall further reinforces this idea by mentioning, “Hatred propaganda is always necessary in wartime to arouse and intensify animosity against military and diplomatic rivals and to attract

neutral support” (1995, p.15). This idea is further reinforced by Smith’s belief that propaganda that aimed to justify the joining of the war appealed to emotional rather than intellectual reasons, and thus, it was essential that the image chosen over the text made the public react emotionally (Smith, 2015).

In contrast, Ellul proposes another type of propaganda, “propaganda of integration”. He suggests that propaganda of integration is propaganda that aims to slowly influence its consumer into the role that the producer desires. As he notes, “Propaganda of integration aims at making the individual participate in society in every way. It is a long-term propaganda, a self-reproducing propaganda that seeks to obtain stable behavior, to adapt the individual to his everyday life, to reshape his thoughts and behavior in terms of the permanent social setting” (1965, n.p).

As we will examine further on, integration and agitation can be clearly observed in American wartime propaganda. Recruitment posters reflect agitation, while posters emphasizing patriotic and self-sacrificing citizens reflect integration. Thus, through this framework, the American government could, as Smith recalls, “shape the American masses into a more unified mindset, while also prodding the entire populace to supply the extra labor needs associated with sustaining war effort” (2015, p.10).

3. World War I Propaganda

In 1917, eight days after Congress passed the Declaration of War, President Woodrow Wilson created the Committee of Public Information (CPI) to produce and regulate the nation’s propaganda (Haynes, 2018). This committee represented the first attempt by a federal government to manage public opinion on a national scale. Led by George Creel, the CPI employed artists, filmmakers and academics with the goal of constructing a national, wartime identity and “selling the war to the American public” (Smith, 2015, p.16). The Pictorial

Publicity Department (DPP) was the poster subdivision of the CPI led by Dana Gibson, the artist responsible for the creation of the Gibson Girl¹³. In just over a year, the DPP became one of the maximum producers of American propaganda, and by the end of the war, they had produced over “700 poster designs, 287 cartoons and 122 bus and trolley cars” (Vogt, 2001, as cited in Haynes, 2018, p.11).

The American government made a tremendous effort to promote the war and gain the support of their population (Smith, 2015). As Chloe Maxwell states: “Creel had the daunting task of uniting the nation behind a war they were not completely sure they were ready to support” (2015, p. 73-74). Through the “Four Minute Men”¹⁴ and the DPP’s posters, the CPI ensured that their propaganda of integration and agitation reached all American citizens. As mentioned by Maxwell: “The artists in the DPP played off the fears felt by the average American. Though some, it can be argued, were extremely dramatic, they were effectively nonetheless.” (2015, p.78). Thus, the CPI became successful in unifying the majority of the country in support of the war (Maxwell, 2015).

3.1 Representation of Women in World War I American Propaganda

During the year that the United States was involved in the war, the DPP and the CPI produced over 700 posters and over 1,500 graphic designs. As Price mentions, “These images represented what was culturally acceptable and expected within American society during 1917-1918, and therefore the figures within the posters became emblematic of what was expected from men, women, and children of the era” (2018, p.1). Prior to the war, women were beginning to assert themselves in public spaces, entering the workforce, occupying positions in male-dominated spaces, and slowly detaching themselves from their domestic duties. However, the

¹³ The Gibson Girl was the epitome of the feminine ideal of physical and intellectual beauty during wartime. (Haynes, 2018)

¹⁴ Volunteer army of 75,000 speakers authorized by CPI (Maxwell, 2015)

“New Woman”¹⁵ movement, was met with resistance from the patriarchal society (Price, 2018). With the outbreak of the war, propaganda became a tool that served for dual purposes: it encouraged the essential female mobilization to meet wartime needs, while simultaneously redefining and reasserting feminine standards that were starting to shift. “In the World War I posters, the combatant governments attempted to expand the feminine role to meet the wartime needs of public policy. At the same time, governments attempted to preserve the traditional passive feminine role” (Shover, 1975, as cited in Price, 2018, p.2). Therefore, WWI propaganda pushed women into participating in the war effort, however they could only do it in “cultural accepted ways that did not threaten their feminine identity” (Monger, 2014, as cited in Haynes, 2018, p.9). This feminine identity had a specific name, the “Gibson Girl.” Created by Charles Dana Gibson, the Gibson Girl represented American femininity in the early 20th century. Tall, intelligent, elegant, and beautiful, she embodied a carefully contained version of female independence. Never threatening, never politically ambitious, the Gibson Girl portrayed female independence within the social boundaries that were considered appropriate for women (Price, 2018). In the context of WWI propaganda, the Gibson Girl served a double function. On the one hand, she represented what soldiers were fighting to protect; on the other, she served as a counterweight to the figure of the New Woman. As Price mentions: “The Gibson Girl fought against the suffragette image of the New Woman as an unattractive and masculine figure” (2018, p. 4). It is for this reason, that she became a powerful tool employed by the CPI in American wartime propaganda.

¹⁵ Feminist ideal that emerged in late 19th century that represents women as educated and independent who rejected traditional domestic and maternal roles (Brady, 2019)

3.1.1 Propaganda targeting Men: Women as Vulnerable Symbols

Among the many imagery and symbols that American propaganda deployed during the years of involvement in the Great War, the propaganda depicting women stands above all. And although women were the primary content in these posters, they weren't always the intended audience. The CPI produced visuals that primarily targeted men using women. These female symbols usually appeared in propaganda of agitation, representing everything that the male soldier was called upon to defend and prove worthy of. As Haynes suggests in her own words, "The most successful propaganda campaigns utilized feminine and maternal images when targeting men to enlist in military service. These images include the vulnerable young woman who needs protection or the older mother who insists on her son's service" (2018, p.5). As Stacy Reed further analyzes:

Many propaganda posters were aimed at men, but used women either as symbols of what needed to be protected, or as images evoking shame for the men who had not enlisted. These posters were not aimed at women, but the women in society would have seen them and internalized the representations. (2014, p.81)

One of the most explicit expressions of this idea can be found in H.R Hopp's 1917 poster *Destroy This Mad Brute. Enlist U.S. Army* (see figure 3). Produced for military recruitment, the poster depicts a monstrous gorilla wearing a pickelhaube helmet¹⁶ and a club labeled "Kultur" while carrying an unconscious half-dressed woman on American shores. This agitating message would read clearly to any men of the period: the big monstrous German ape will invade us and attack our women. Thus, this type of propaganda of agitation aims to encourage enlistment by suggesting that it is a man's duty to protect their women from the common enemy. In enlistment propaganda, women's role was often limited to serving as emotional symbols or victims whom violence was inflicted upon, to provoke outrage among

¹⁶ Leather helmet used by German soldiers early in WWI. (1914-1916)

the male population. This depiction of sexual violence against women's bodies was a common strategy used to mobilize the public and sell the political agenda (Banet-Wiser, 2025).

This appeal of protectiveness didn't solely rely on images of threats upon physical women but also on the threat upon allegorical figures. Propaganda used the figures of Columbia¹⁷, Lady Liberty¹⁸ and religious characters to give a symbolic and deeper meaning to war that went beyond politics. Within this framework, women were usually depicted as pure, innocent and white, frequently functioning as symbolic embodiments of the nation. As a result, the violation of a woman's physical body was not only seen as personal harm, but as the profanation of the nation itself (Banet-Weiser, 2025). As Elizabeth Prelinger & Barton C.

Hacker note:

Most nations (...) were commonly represented by female figures, ideas depicted in allegorical form. These single figures economically bore the weight of an entire national culture and aroused in their citizens the visceral impact of immediate recognition and identification. They also carried out their responsibility of rallying forces, encouraging those on the home front, and raising funds for war loans. Well before America's decision to enter the war, her illustrators were calling on symbolic women to motivate the population. (2012, p.459)

These figures represented what was at stake in the conflict, without implicating themselves in the violence. A clear example is the 1916 poster *Columbia Calls* (see figure 4) by Vincent Aderente. The poster depicts Columbia holding the American flag, as a slogan reads, "Columbia Calls. Enlist Now for the U.S. Army." In this sense, as Price suggested, the general imagery of Columbia can be framed in two ways. As the weak America that needs the protection of American soldiers, but also "as an inspiration for strength and direction as she sounds the war-cry and calls upon American soldiers to join her on the battlefield" (2018, p.10).

¹⁷ Female national personification of the United States.

¹⁸ Female personification of Freedom and Hope. Usually embodied through the Statue of Liberty.

3.1.2 Propaganda targeting Men and Women: Sexuality and Moral Enforcers

If a dominant strand of WWI American propaganda used female representation as passive symbols to encourage male soldiers to join the fight, a secondary but equally significant is the propaganda that was at first glance intended for women. For the most part, these showcased a more active ideological role, but equally constrained. In this sense, women were no longer the object that men had to protect, but rather the ones that judged male honor. This propaganda did not speak to women with the objective of recruiting them into the workforce or military service, but rather to recruit them into the project of recruiting men. Their role and their influence over men was vital for recruitment, whether that was through encouragement or through shaming (Reed, 2014). They were the perfect vessels to conduct shame upon the male population and perpetuate a clear message: a man who had not enlisted was not only failing the country but also the women in his life.

As Krisztina Roberts claims: “One such method was using the parades of uniformed women to shame the men into enlisting” (2013, p.337). This idea is clearly seen in many of Howard Chandler Christy’s posters. His 1917 poster, *Gee! I wish I were a Man* (see figure 5) portrays a young woman, dressed in navy uniform giving a smirk to the audience in a clear posture and expression that suggests confidence and authority in a male-dominated space. The poster’s slogan reads, “Gee! I wish I were a Man” and “Be a Man and Do It: United States Navy Recruiting Station.” By claiming that she would enlist if she were allowed, the message aims to embarrass those men who have not yet enlisted. The woman portrayed does not claim military capacity, but rather expresses the envy of the men who possess it. It downplays their masculinity by suggesting that they are less courageous and patriotic than women who wished they could serve. As Smith claims, “She issues an implied challenge. Are you as much of a man as this young woman who would take on the challenge of defending the country?” (2015, p.59). Moreover, the poster invites men to enlist through her sex appeal by presenting her as

flirtatious, with a seductive smirk and dressed in a deep V-neckline that highlights her curves. The use of a male uniform suggests that enlistment will require taking the girl's uniform from her, leaving her naked body exposed (Smith, 2015). Smith further claims: "When taken as a whole, the image-text declares any male must join the Navy in order to prove his masculinity and his status as a good American citizen (...) his reward will be the woman who now lacks the uniform the man takes from her" (2015, p. 59). Thus, the poster's message is employed through the interplay between female sexuality and military appeal, appealing firmly towards men for enlistment rather than female participation. Through this imagery, propaganda aimed to encourage women into shaming men, ultimately speaking to both audiences.

3.1.3 Propaganda targeting Women: Nurses and Financial Duty

Although the dominant visual of American propaganda consisted of the previously mentioned themes of passivity and morality, it was not the entirety. Alongside these models existed a third category of female imagery that spoke directly to women. The beginning of the war was marked with propaganda of integration that encouraged women to make the sacrifice of sending their sons to the front. The poster *Here He is Sir. We Need Him and You too!* (see figure 6) published in 1917 by Charles Gibson for Navy recruitment, portrays the most common message that was sent to women at early stages of the war. At the center of the visual, stands a woman dropping off her son to Uncle Sam¹⁹, with the slogan "We need him and you too!" The message, undoubtedly, calls mothers to comply with their national and intrinsic duty and deliver their sons to war.

However, as war progressed, women began to appear not as symbols, instruments or content aimed at men, but rather as active participants in their own rights (Price, 2018). As Price further mentions:

¹⁹ Personification of the United States federal government. Popular U.S. symbol.

Many of the ideologies behind the images of the WWI propaganda posters began with an attempt at reasserting femininity as a fragility in need of protecting, calling men to enlist and be *manly men*, strong and battle-worthy, yet as the campaign went on, women were called upon as saviors and protectors of men, entering the very same battles as nurses and leaders... (2018, p. 6)

This shift in wartime requirements called for a change in propaganda. The new propaganda stemmed from two state necessities. First and foremost, the necessity of implicating women in the war effort through labor and service, and secondly, the call to contribute financially through the purchase of Liberty bonds.²⁰ As Evan M. Caris mentions, “Shover proposed two categories for women in propaganda: service roles and symbolic roles. Service role propaganda sought to enlist women to buy war bonds or to work as nurses” (2015, p. 12). The symbolic roles, as previously mentioned, spun around the idea of women as figures worth defending. However, the new “service propaganda” spun around patriotism and national duty, however it constructed this idea within the social spaces that women were permitted to occupy. These new roles never escaped the traditional pull towards femininity as they remained carefully constrained. As Smith argues, posters attempted to promote women to join the war efforts, but in a way that it would “prevent these new roles from being perceived as threatening to traditional gender demarcations” (2015, p.11).

The figure that most clearly embodies this idea is the Red Cross nurse. The nurse in WWI propaganda occupied an ambiguous position. She was an active participant, directly involved in the action, but still defined through her feminine role of care and sacrifice. She represented the expansion of female roles within acceptable parameters, and because of that, she became one of the most useful figures to the CPI for addressing female audiences (Haynes, 2018). Price further suggests that the Red Cross nurse became the symbol of feminine wartime identity, defining women as the mother of all soldiers (Price, 2018). This idea is clearly

²⁰ War bonds issued by U.S. Department of Treasury in 1917 to finance American participation in World War I. (Kang & Rockoff, 2015)

observed in Alonzo Earl Forigner's 1918 Red Cross poster *The Greatest Mother in the World* (see figure 7). The poster depicts a monumental nurse, draped in white clothes and a gentle gaze, as she cradles a small wounded soldier. The slogan "The Greatest Mother in the World!" rests on the bottom of the poster. The composition immediately invokes Christian pietà²¹ fusing maternal and religious imagery into a single interpretation of female sacrifice (Smith, 2015). The woman is not recognized as a nurse, but rather as a mother. As Haynes further mentions, "This distinction shows how nursing was seen as an extension of the maternal duty as caretaker. In order to be the greatest mother, a woman must drop everything and volunteer as a nurse. This would be one of the ultimate sacrifices to make" (2018, p.13).

Howard Christy's 1918 poster *The Spirit of America* (see figure 8) further represents the epitome of female nurses during the war. The central figure, an attractive "Christy girl"²² dressed in a sheer white nurse gown with a deep pronounced V-neckline, embodies the contemporary ideals of wartime femininity, while the American flag that flies behind her reinforces themes of patriotism, national duty and female sacrifice. She is an active participant, fulfilling her national duty, but remains deeply rooted in the social standards dictated upon women. She must comply in her role, without aiming to renegotiate her social position. Together, these two posters illustrate how the CPI blended beauty and national loyalty into a carefully constructed propaganda of integration aimed at the female audience.

Another way in which the American government addressed women was through the Liberty Bond campaign. For the campaign, the CPI hired some of the nation's best-known artists to promote the selling of bonds under "an aggressive policy of capitalizing patriotism" (Kang & Rockoff, 2015). This propaganda emphasized women's role as patriotic consumers,

²¹ Art depicting the Virgin Mary as cradling the dead body of Jesus Christ after his crucifixion. (Smith, 2015)

²² The Christy Girl, created by Howard Christy in 1918, was the personification of the feminine ideal of physical and intellectual beauty before and during wartime. Similar to the Gibson Girl, she represents what soldiers are fighting for. (Smith, 2015)

household managers, and agents with economic responsibilities. As Megan Brady suggests, “Women had a job and a duty, and due to the lack of presence of men they had a sense of control and autonomy” (2019, p.52). However, women were encouraged to buy bonds not as investors, but as the responsibility of mothers and wives, a new responsibility that was seen as temporary and exceptional rather than a permanent decision (Wolley & Sternadori, 2019). Liberty bond propaganda worked through the use of symbolical figures and feminine allegories. As Prelinger & Hacker previously mentioned: “These figures (...) also carried out their responsibility of rallying forces, encouraging those on the home front, and raising funds for war loans” (2012, p.459). Figures like Columbia and Lady Liberty were central, alongside wives, mothers and children in domestic spaces. Thus, this strand of propaganda worked in two ways: it portrayed femininity as the maximum representative of the nation and real women as the maximum responsible for helping these symbols. As Prelinger & Hacker mention:

To launch and sustain an enterprise of the scale and import of the Great War, governments pursued two principal, and parallel, visual strategies in posters. The first was the deployment of images of allegorical female figures, which represented the high ideals purportedly motivating the combatant countries (...) The second visual strategy emphasized the depiction of ordinary women. (...) As we shall see, artists also rendered these “ordinary” women as symbolic “Everywomen,” who could inspire others to emulate their example. (2012, p.458-459)

The 1918 poster by Z.P Nikolaki *Hello! This is Liberty Speaking, Billions of Dollars are Needed and Needed Now!* (see figure 9) depicts this idea precisely. The poster portrays the allegorical figure of Liberty dressed in her characteristic golden crown and gown, speaking into a telephone and demanding the viewer, in this case women, to purchase Liberty bonds. The main figure, Liberty, is seen as an active agent with responsibilities and duties. However, the imagery is still rooted in femininity and domesticity, with the portrayal of a telephone, her makeup and her soft features. Thus, the poster represents a constrained symbolic figure talking to a temporal domestic manager. In this sense, the poster presents the ideological framework

of propaganda targeting women. It shows women as vital contributors to the war effort as well as it reassures they remain restrained to the traditional notions of womanhood.

4. Women in the Interwar Period (1918-1939)

The armistice on November 11, 1918, brought the Great War to an end. With more than 100,000 American casualties, the United States quickly retreated from the internationalism that the war had required and returned to isolationism. As Kenneth Weisbrode mentions: “The interwar years, as they later came to be known, have been characterized as the age of isolationism. Americans turned their backs on the world—especially Europe. According to them, entering the last war had been a mistake and European power politics had been responsible” (2013, p.101).

Although the country tried to withdraw from the world stage, it could not withdraw from the severe transformations that the war had set in motion (Weisbrode, 2013). Upon all the transformations, the clearest was the changing position of women. The “Roaring twenties”²³ introduced profound cultural changes to American society, beginning with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment which granted women the right to vote. A new representation of the New Woman arose. The “Flapper”²⁴ became a movement that represented a new sense of female identity, one that demanded equal rights and opposed the traditional norms that defined women as docile and pure (Brady, 2019). Brady notes:

“The autonomous women of the war were also now generating their own money, and as a result of their recent taste of individuality they used their earnings on whatever they liked and whatever would make them feel good. This freedom in consumerism and expression would give way for the “flapper” image to be born.” (2019, p.52-53)

²³ Known as the Roaring Twenties, the 1920 were characterized by intense economic prosperity, innovation, societal optimism and cultural shifts after WWI. (Weisbrode, 2013)

²⁴ Representation of female liberation that defied the traditional Victorian norms. (Brady, 2019)

Brady further suggests that “the 19th amendment gave women political power and freedom, while the flapper movement and liberation of the 1920s gave them cultural and societal power” (2019, p.53).

However, the Great Depression²⁵ of the 1930s had a large regressive effect on women’s rights and economic independence. “The Great Depression likely reinforced traditional gender roles” (Wolley & Sternadori, 2019, p.10). Although 85% of urban young women had jobs in 1929 (Yesil, 2004), the shift in economic stability and the rapid rates of male unemployment made society turn to women, blaming them for occupying the jobs that belonged to men. As a consequence, the New Woman in the 1920s gave way to a reassertion of domesticity as the natural and proper place of women (Rupp, 2015).

5. World War II Propaganda

26 hours after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the formal declaration of war against Japan, and only four days later, the U.S. declared war on Germany and Italy. Six months later, on June 13, 1942, Roosevelt established the Office of War Information (OWI), which became the overt central coordinating body of American propaganda. It created more than 200,000 poster designs, “more than any other country fighting in World War II” (Oklahoma State University Press, n.p.) and distributed more than 6 billion leaflets over enemy territories (Yellin, 2004). As Wollney & Sternadori claim: “The number of WWII images was higher due to the development of the advertising industry by that point and the period’s greater recency” (2019, p.6). The OWI worked through two branches: the Domestic Branch and the Overseas Operation Branch. Domestically, the OWI oversaw and distributed propaganda to the American population that emphasized the ideal patriotic citizen, with the goal to unify the population ideologically. “It was an organization designed not only

²⁵ Initiated by the Crack of 29, the Great Depression was an economic downturn from 1929 to 1939, characterized by extreme unemployment and poverty. (Weisbrode, 2013).

to disseminate information and to clarify issues, but also to arouse support for particular symbols and ideas” (Koppes & Black, 1977, p.88). Overseas, the OWI promoted a campaign that aimed to manage America’s international image while spreading propaganda to foreign countries. “The OWI Overseas Operation (...) sent messages into enemy territories designed to inform Axis soldiers and citizens of the Allied side of the war” (Yellin, 2004, p.227). In contrast to the CPI’s limited landscape, the OWI expanded vastly across landscapes, employing journalists, national scientists, anthropologists and artists (Yellin, 2004). Through films, advertisements, radio broadcasts, and magazines, the OWI guaranteed that the message came across to both the battlefield and the home front.

Parallel to the OWI, the American government also created what was known as the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)²⁶ which specialized in covert espionage and operations to sabotage enemy morale. And although both the OWI and the OSS distributed propaganda overseas, they used different tactics and operated through different mechanisms to accomplish their different goals. Propagandistic communication can be classified into two main sectors: “white propaganda” and “black propaganda.” The OSS operated through “black propaganda”, often “based on falsehoods or half-truths that would damage enemy spirits. The rumors, lies, or innuendos were usually cleverly disguised to appear as if they had come from people or media sources inside enemy countries” (Yellin, 2004, p.236). In contrast, the OWI, both in the Domestic and Overseas branch relied on “white propaganda”, which involved telling more truthful information, with a source accurately identified, and for the purpose of maintaining national and international morale (Yellin, 2004).

²⁶ Centralized intelligence agency that mainly worked overseas. Coordinated espionage, gathered information to help the Allies, aided resistance groups and sent propaganda to unsettle and sabotage enemy morale. (Yellin, 2004, p.227)

5.1 Representation of Women in World War II American Propaganda

Prior to the war, women's position in American society had been very unstable. The Roaring Twenties brought significant advances in women's autonomy and independence, however many of these gains were reversed by the Great Depression, causing women's status to retreat again to traditional roles. As Rudd observes: "In spite of the excitement over the New Woman who embodied a revolution in manners and morals in the decade of prosperity, and despite the fear of unemployment that accompanied the Depression, the literature relentlessly propagated an image of the American woman as wife and mother" (2015, p.51-52). Nonetheless, with the war's outbreak, women's public image changed drastically. "As labour shortages reached critical points, the federal government started distributing propaganda and engaging in massive recruitment drives to assimilate women into the workforce and to manipulate society's view of women's role in the war effort" (Yesil, 2004, p.103). Women were now necessary for war efforts, and thus new demands meant that they had to take on new responsibilities (Rupp, 2015). However, these new responsibilities were accepted as long as they did not challenge traditional gender roles, especially the idea that a woman's main duty was that of being a mother (Rupp, 2015). Thus, propaganda was once again deployed to serve dual purposes; mobilize women into the industrial workforce under the idea of a patriotic citizen, while simultaneously reassuring that this departure was temporary (Honey, 1981). As Maureen Honey further states, "two conflicting images of women existed during the war: the strong dependable patriot who could run the nation and the innocent vulnerable homemaker who depended upon soldiers to protect her way of life" (1981, p.53).

This dichotomy can be observed by comparing the different strands of propaganda employed during WWII. On the one hand, the War Manpower Commission's (WMC)²⁷ 1942

²⁷ Commission created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1942 to balance labor needs of the U.S. during WWII. (Rupp, 2015)

“Womanpower” campaign sought to recruit women into employment in industrial plants. Through women’s home magazines and domestic advertisements, the Magazine Bureau, alongside the WMC, targeted women’s recruitment by “glamorizing war work and stressing women’s capacity for jobs that were traditionally ascribed to men” (Yesil, 2004, p.107). On the other hand, the OWI still constructed propaganda that aimed to reinforce traditionality and domesticity, making sure that gender order remained as intact as it could be.

5.1.1 Propaganda targeting Men: Sexuality and Desire

While WWII propaganda shifted greatly from those themes analyzed in previous sections, some characteristics endured throughout the two conflicts. Like the CPI, the OWI also promoted propaganda that targeted male audiences through visual imagery of women in distress. During WWII, the easiest way to make men emotionally engage in war efforts was through propaganda of agitation that portrayed female figures. As Honey states, “In order to dramatize the struggle against the Axis powers, advertising made homemakers into the living embodiment of every value Americans safeguarded; they thus became symbolic of the besieged nation” (1981, p.53). Following the same line as Hopp’s *Destroy this Mad Brute*, G.V Lewis’s 1942 *This is the Enemy* (see figure 10) portrays a vulnerable, threatened woman at the hands of the enemy. The image of an unconscious, naked woman being carried by a Japanese soldier, was both terrifying and graphic to the American population. To them, this act would transform the enemy from human to a moral monster. However, the difference in approach between the two conflicts was the explicitness of the nature of the threat. WWII posters portrayed atrocities directly, without the use of allegorical figures, becoming what is known as “atrocities propaganda.”²⁸

²⁸ Atrocities propaganda depicted women as victims of violent acts committed by a barbaric enemy. (Reed, 2014).

On the other hand, WWII propaganda also relied considerably on the romantic and the erotic. This shift can be mostly found in the popularization of the phenomenon of the “pin-up.”²⁹ As McEuen observes, “The ubiquitous pin-up image, passed around and posted in windows, workrooms, bedrooms, barracks, and foot lockers, allowed the featured woman to be studied and consumed over and over again.” (2011, p.3). Although pin-ups were not distributed by the OWI, they were tactically endorsed by the military as a tool to bust up morale (Westbrook, 1990). McEuen further argues, “If keeping morale high seemed the ultimate priority on the American home front, then women’s bodies would be put into service of the goal” (McEuen, 2011, p. 57). Pin-ups were more than surrogates of sexual desires for soldiers, they were also private icons for whom the soldiers were fighting and even “representative women standing in for the wives and sweethearts on the home front” (Westbrook, 1990, p.595). Thus, illustrations like Alberto Varga’s 1944 *Varga Girl* (see figure 11) coexisted with OWI’s official propaganda, both reinforcing the construction of American women as emotional and erotic symbols.

5.1.2 Propaganda targeting Men and Women: Women Ordnance Workers

Out of all the categories of posters that this dissertation has examined so far, WWII posters that appealed to a dual audience are the most complex to categorize. Unlike male-targeted imagery that used women as objects of desire in a clear-cut way, dual-audience propaganda renegotiated American gender politics by representing working women while speaking directly to men.

At the center of this idea is the WMC’s 1945 poster *Women in War; We Can’t Win Without Them* (see figure 12). This poster is one of the most ideologically transparent examples of dual-audience propaganda, as it addresses female viewers as capable of working industrial jobs while justifying to male viewers the necessity of women in the working field. The central figure

²⁹ From the concept “to pin up on a wall,” the pin-up was the term used to describe imagery, drawings, and photographs of semi-nude, burlesque, sensual women. (McEuen, 2011)

is a young, photographed woman in work uniform, using industrial tools while working on a military aircraft. The use of a photograph presents female workers not as a fictitious concept, but as an existing reality. Nonetheless, despite her being focused and concentrated on her job, she is still shown as young, attractive and feminine, reassuring men that her new industrial role has not made her be less of a woman. The slogan, “Women in War, We Can’t Win Without Them” addresses female viewers in terms of necessity but not as equals to men. The term “we” portrays men as the primary contributors to military victory and presents female participation as a strategic need rather than an equal contributor. Women were not seen as equally entitled for male jobs, but rather as essential helpmates (Honey, 1981). Thus, the poster does not ask men to view women as entitled, but rather to accept them as necessary for their victory.

The poster *She’s a WOW*³⁰ (see figure 13) produced by Adolph Treider in 1943, further reinforces this perspective. The poster depicts an attractive female factory worker as she gazes towards the male soldiers, her appearance carefully idealized, with a slogan underneath that appeals directly to male audiences, “The girl he left behind is still behind him. She is a WOW”. This slogan frames her primarily in terms of male approval, as her contribution to the war is based on the necessity to help men on the battlefield. Her duty, just as in the previous poster, is secondary but essential. Moreover, the clever word duality in “WOW”, further reinforces the patriarchal logic that women must be attractive and feminine figures capable of “wowing” the male viewers, even when working in industrial jobs.

These posters work through a layer of messages invisible at first glance. By using feminine markers, propaganda aimed at dual audiences allowed women to feel empowered, while assuring male viewers that this temporal change will not alter gender roles. As Yesil’s further concludes:

³⁰ Acronym for “Woman Ordnance Worker”. WOW were civilian women who built munition and heavy weaponry for the US Army, famously identified with their red and white bandana. (The Official Website of the U.S Army, 2016)

Although they seemed to challenge traditional gender roles and disrupt social definitions of woman's proper roles, these images successfully contained any potential emancipation women would elicit from their participation in the workforce. Propaganda and advertising messages urged women to demonstrate their physical strength and mechanical competence while they told them to be feminine, attractive and dependent on men. (2004, p.108).

Thus, these posters represent the clearest ways in which propaganda would expand women's roles while simultaneously confining them to a male gaze that reinforced traditional gender norms.

5.1.3 Propaganda targeting Women: The Womanpower and the Conservative

WWII propaganda, as previously mentioned, played with the double standards of empowering and constraining female roles, and propaganda that spoke exclusively to women was no exception. Although this strand of propaganda of integration aimed to recruit women for industrial labor, auxiliary aid, and military service, it remained deeply impregnated with the conservative ideals that framed women's participation as temporary and rooted in femininity. Through the mass circulation of magazines, the OWI could enter the domestic space and appeal to both men and women, ensuring that the propaganda that needed to shape gender opinion reached its target audience. As Yesil suggests:

In 1942, the Magazine Bureau prepared an information booklet for magazine editors, titled *War Jobs for Women*, which distributed the usual female recruitment themes by glamorizing war work and stressing women's capacities for jobs that were traditionally ascribed to men. Yet *War Jobs for Women* also maintained women's traditional roles as mothers, wives and sweethearts. (...) The Magazine Bureau wanted the magazines to make clear that women would leave their jobs soon after the war ended. (2004, p.107)

As Yesil suggests, despite the new visual representations, a dominant strand of propaganda continued to operate within traditional and domestic frameworks, challenging the new working woman, and reassuring that the traditional imagery of the homemaker was not lost.

A clear way in which the OWI coordinated efforts to recruit women was the WMC's Womanpower campaign. Launched in 1942 in response to the acute labor shortages, the Womanpower campaign spoke directly to female viewers, with the aim of encouraging them

to join both the industrial efforts and the armed forces to fill in the places of the displaced men. One strand of the Womanpower campaign addressed women as potential recruits for military and auxiliary service in the WAC³¹ and the Navy WAVES³². Their goal was to free secondary military roles so male soldiers could be reassigned to the front. At the time, only 2% of military personnel were women, and out of this 2%, the visual representation they had was even more limited (Agnew, 2001). The small visibility they had was characterized and governed by traditional ideas on femininity. WAC and WAVES recruitment posters depicted women in carefully constrained uniforms that appealed to both discipline and attractiveness. They were portrayed as beautiful, always graceful individuals, rather than capable workers. As Agnew notes, “For example, in a photo spread titled 'Girl Pilots', women were mainly depicted in poses or recreational situations. The accompanying text emphasized femininity over capability” (2001, p.91). The poster *Are you a girl with a Star-Spangled heart?* (see figure 14) by Brad Crandell encapsulates this logic. It presents a beautiful female worker, with lashes, lipstick and rosy cheeks, just like McEuen suggests “an embodiment of the U.S. government’s promise to allow women to use cosmetics in uniform” (2011, p.38). The slogan with the American flag flying behind her, binds her identity to the nation, and her feminine features, to her traditional domestic roles. This woman became the face of WAC (McEuen, 2011), and thus, represented the ideal patriotic role that all women should follow during wartime.

The biggest and most recognizable strand of the Womanpower campaign placed efforts on mobilizing women into joining the defense industry. At the center of Womanpower propaganda stands J. Howard Miller’s 1943 poster *We Can Do It!* (see figure 1), also known as *Rosie the*

³¹ The Women’s Army Corps was the women’s branch of the U.S Army established in 1942 with over 150,000 women serving. (Guepet, 2024)

³² The Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service was U.S. Navy’s women’s reserve during World War II. Established 1941, it enlisted over 100,000 women. (Guepet, 2024)

*Riveter*³³. This globally famous poster was originally produced and distributed among factories, not for a public campaign. And although it has now become an influential part of U.S. culture and a global phenomenon for embodying the feminist movement, the poster was mainly unknown during the war (Kimble & Olson, 2006). Rosie, the central figure, is dressed in the typical clothing of WOW workers and stands with her arm flexed, her fixed gaze, and her confident expression. Above, a slogan reads “We Can Do It!”. As James Kimble & Lester Olson mention, “With her left hand, she rolls up her sleeve, flexing her right biceps, suggesting that she is setting about to work, while her other arm makes an upward muscle and her hand forms a clenched fist, conveying strength and confident determination to do her job” (2006, p.539). Such imagery addresses, at first glance, the female viewer, reassuring her as a capable, present woman who fits into the industrial role she occupies. However, the image’s careful consideration of her feminine indicators simultaneously addresses male viewers, reassuring them that her position has not stopped her from being a woman. The mascara, eyebrows, painted fingernails, and lipstick reaffirm her femininity (Kimble & Olson, 2006).

A counterpart to Miller’s Rosie is Norman Rockwell’s 1943 *Rosie the Riveter* (see figure 15), published on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. This image adopts a comic-book style, presenting Rosie in a confident and relaxed pose as she eats a sandwich while holding a rivet gun. Her foot resting on a copy of *Mein Kampf*³⁴ while the American flag blowing behind her. Yet, despite being more masculine and physically stronger, Rockwell’s representation is just as constrained as her counterpart. As Kimble and Olson argue, “Along with the lunch box with “ROSIE” scrawled in white lettering, these stereotypically masculine attributes are offset by relatively minor details affirming her femininity: lipstick, and a dainty kerchief in her right

³³ Named after the “riveters”, skilled workers who fastened metal pieces together by using rivets or metal pins. (Dictionary, n.d.)

³⁴ Autobiographical manifesto by Adolf Hitler. (1925)

pocket” (2006, p.541). She has a pretty face, a feminine gaze and a lunchbox that brings domestic touch into the industrial setting.

Propaganda alluded to the temporality of women’s war work through domestic and female imagery. As Honey declares, “... many advertisements imply that female defense workers had not abandoned home responsibilities (...) Women in factory overalls were frequently portrayed in the home doing laundry or cooking meals” (1981, p.50). By blending the domestic and feminine with the industrial, propaganda reassured gender demarcations and the temporality of women’s work, while directly encouraging women to partake in their national duty (Honey, 1981). As Honey further notes, “To help insure (sic) that war work would not be perceived as destroying the fabric of American society through removing women from their place as caretakers of the family, advertisements feature women workers in scenes of domestic bliss” (1981, p.52). A clear example of this claim is Arthur Sarnoff’s 1943 poster *Lunch Break* (see figure 16) which portrays an attractive “pin-up style” working woman in factory overalls during her lunch break, as she toasts up her sandwich with a welding torch. Following the same idea as Rockwell’s Rosie, this poster presents a WOW during her lunch break, not while she is working. This idea precisely reassures the viewer that war work has not removed women from their traditional domestic roles (Honey, 1981). The domestication of the industrial space makes it feel like it is an extension of the home and thus, it justifies the presence of the woman in it.

To contrast the working woman, a large strand of OWI propaganda aimed to reinforce and strengthen traditional values. One of the most significant ideological achievements of the era was the reimagining of women’s domestic space as the home front. By strategically reframing women’s domestic contributions as a form of military service, the OWI ensured that the traditional role of the homemakers did not disappear during the call for female mobilization (Honey, 1981). As Mei-ling Yan notes, “Although obscured by Rosie the Riveter in contemporary recollection of World War II, the kitchen patriot nonetheless played an important

role in articulating gender norms embedded in the civic culture of total mobilization” (2013, p.57). By merging the front and the home, the OWI reinforced women’s domestic contributions as equally vital war efforts. “Indeed, one of the primary functions of all women according to wartime propaganda was to protect and defend the family on the home front while men fought for it overseas” (Honey, 1981, p. 53). Thus, a big part of WWII propaganda operated in traditional feminine registers. These represented women as household managers, guardians and patriotic contributors to war efforts, encouraging them to participate in victory gardens³⁵, buying of bonds and food rationing. “Government propaganda and media rhetoric defined the kitchen as the battlefield, and thus translated otherwise ordinary acts of cooking and shopping into patriotic acts” (Bentley, 1998, as cited in Yesil, 2004, p110). Dick William’s 1944 poster *Of course I can! I’m as Patriotic as Can Be!* (see figure 17) is one of the many posters the OWI and the War Food Administration produced that represents women as managers of the home, capable of helping from their respective social demarcations. The poster depicts a cheerful, attractive young woman dressed in an apron as she stands proud while holding home-canned jars. The slogan “Of Course I Can! I’m as Patriotic as Can Be – and Ration Points Won’t Worry Me” frames domestic food preservation as an act of patriotism. Her appearance does not suggest the physical labor of factory work, rather recalls femininity, implying that patriotic duty is compatible with the feminine ideal.

Following the same line, Alfred Parker’s 1942 poster *Even a Little Can Help a Lot – Now!* (see figure 18) represents another clear illustration of propaganda of integration. Designed for the buying of War Bonds, the poster portrays two central figures, a young mother and her daughter, dressed in red, white and blue. Their physical appearance conforms McEuen’s observation of wartime imagery, “Such circumscription put forth ideal female bodies marked

³⁵ Vegetable gardens planted by citizens in private residences to supplement food rations, a practice actively promoted by U.S. government. (U.S. National Park Service, n.d.)

by heterosexuality, whiteness, youth or innocence, and middle- class values” (2011, p.57). These figures become the embodiment of the American domestic ideal, the kind of home front worth defending. Moreover, the military cap next to them suggests male absence without depicting him, anchoring their financial activity to a specific soldier they are contributing for. Thus, their financial contribution is framed as an act of loyalty rather than agency. As Yesil further suggests, “Recruitment messages relied on male approval as a big selling point, and constructed women as working not for themselves but for their men, and not by personal choice but by public duty” (Yesil, 2004, p. 101).

5.2 Post War Representation

After the Allied victory in 1945, American propaganda underwent a quick and revealing ideological change. The OWI, that had spent 4 years celebrating capable patriotic women, quickly dismantled this image. As Honey notes, “As it became apparent that the Allies would win the war, war industries began converting to production of consumer goods and reinstituting prewar hiring patterns” (1981, p. 54). Advertisements followed the government’s initiative to remove women out of well-paying industrial positions and back into domestic roles or into “pink-collar jobs”, to make room for returning veterans to reclaim their spaces (Honey, 1981). Thus, Rosie the Riveter did not leave, she was pushed out by the same media that had constructed her. In her place appeared images of housewives and homemakers. As Yesil observes:

As the war was coming to a close, from early 1945, the image of the war worker woman began to disappear from the ads and was already being replaced by the mythical homemaker. (...) By 1946, Rosie the Riveter had completely disappeared, and was substituted with popular images that ranged from ‘young marrieds’ who were sharing ‘dear familiar things’ such as a milk shake to happy housewives who enjoyed a wide variety of home appliances. (Yesil, 2004, p.113)

Rather than confronting or downplaying women’s wartime contributions, postwar propaganda remained voiceless about it. It instead silently redirected attention away from the workplace

into the home. Honey suggests that visuals advertised home appliances and domestic utensils to indirectly re-align women towards their traditional roles (Honey, 1981). This idea can be further emphasized by Agnew:

As the war started to wind down, advertisements began to reflect the government's view that women's participation in the workforce was temporary. Advertisements started to indicate that it was time for women to leave their jobs. Such indications were of two types - appeals to women's desire to care for their children, who had been neglected by war work (...) and appeals for women to relinquish their jobs to the veterans who had once worked in them. (2001, p.94)

Thus, the images of strong, capable women that had saturated American wartime propaganda for four years disappeared from magazines, advertisements and posters. This swift change exposes the message that the visuals had foreshadowed during the war. Women's new roles were temporary, exceptional and dependent on male presence. When the emergency ceased and veterans returned home, the independence that women experience was put to an end.

6. Change and Continuity in American Wartime Propaganda: WWI and WWII

A comparative analysis of female representation in WWI and WWII American propaganda reveals an underlying pattern that is covered by its visuals. The distance between the passive allegorical figures of 1917 and the industrial workers of 1945 is historically significant, however, beneath this progressive shift lay the same ideological structures that governed female representation across both conflicts.

The most consistent pattern in gendered propaganda across both wars was the method through which male and female audiences were addressed. This method is rooted in Ellul's theoretical framework of propaganda of agitation and integration. In both conflicts, propaganda targeting men operated through agitation. Deploying female figures as victims of violence, this propaganda aimed to cause immediate emotional provocation, which would drive men towards a specific response. The vulnerable women in *This is the Enemy*, the shaming sweetheart in

Gee, I Wish I Were a Man, or the idealized *Varga Girl* were all female figures that aimed to provoke certain emotions within men, hoping to translate those emotions into enlistment, bond purchase or compliance. Female targeted propaganda, in contrast, operated through integration. This slow-working propaganda aimed to align women towards the dominant values and norms of the state's wartime needs. The nurse in *The Greatest Mother on Earth* or the traditional wife in *I'm as Patriotic as Can Be* aimed to shape and fit women into the carefully tailored ideal feminine figure during the war. These women in propaganda were the emotional vehicles for agitation propaganda, while also being the target of integration propaganda. This method of approach remained constant across both wars, regardless of how much the aesthetic or the style of the visual content differed.

The most visible change between the two conflicts is the shift in the visual representation of women, a transformation that was instrumental rather than ideological. WWI propaganda depicted women as passive and symbolic figures whose agency was carefully constrained within the feminine demarcations. In contrast, WWII's acute labor shortages and the OWI's mass media expanded and distributed the figure of the working woman in unprecedented ways. Women were shown operating industrial machinery and wearing uniforms. And although this visual transformation was genuine, it was deeply controlled, stemming from a necessity rather than a progressive change in ideologies.

This control is the biggest and deepest continuity between both conflicts. It didn't manifest itself in visual content but rather on the ideological messages beneath it. Across both wars, women's roles were framed as feminine and domestic, and their agency was defined through male approval. The female ideals anchored in each conflict embody this idea. The Gibson Girl and Rosie the Riveter could not be more visually different, yet they are both constructions of the same ideological machine. They were instruments through which the government could shape what women should do, how she should look, and to what extent she

should contribute, while simultaneously speaking to a male audience. *The Spirit of America* during WWI and *Are you a Girl with a Star-Spangled Heart* in WWII are the perfect visual counterparts to observe this claim. Both active participants, one depicts a woman in a traditional feminine wartime space, the other in a previous male-dominated one. Yet, despite their visual differences, both remain rooted to the same feminine ideology, constructed through the same feminine indicators, and designed to reassure men that their new duties will not break the gender order. Both encourage women to partake in their national duty without challenging female assumptions or reclaiming their own spaces, and both were dismantled with equal efficiency when the emergency passed.

Thus, it can be observed that although WWI propaganda was more visually constraining, and WWII propaganda was more visually expansive, both operated within the same boundaries. These boundaries were drawn not by women themselves, but by the requirements of the state and society's approval.

7. Conclusions

Through an in-depth analysis of female representation in American propaganda during WWI and WWII, this dissertation has examined how women were depicted, to whom these images were addressed, and what changes and continuities can be observed across both conflicts. What the analysis reveals is a wartime propaganda that was more conservative than what its imagery suggests. Although its visual change across conflicts portrays progression, upon further observation, the visual change expanded just as far as necessary. Propaganda represented visually independent women but ideologically bounded.

The change in visual imagery, from passive to active contributors, reflects not a change in ideology, but a change in necessity. The unprecedented scale of WWII and the acute labor shortages demanded a different relationship between women and propaganda, one where

women were depicted as capable of filling men's previous spaces. Thus, the distance between the grieving mother of 1917 and the industrial worker of 1945 measures a change in necessities, rather than a change in social attitudes. Beneath this visual transformation lay the untouched, unchanged, ideological foundation that persisted from WWI into WWII. Across both conflicts, propaganda operated through the same methodology. It agitated men through female imagery, while integrating women into dominant values and norms of femininity. This female ideal was always temporary, always domestic at its core, and always dependent on male approval. The postwar era makes this continuity undeniable, as the visual erasure of strong independent women confirmed what propaganda always implied. Women's roles were temporary and conditional to the necessity of the time.

This dissertation concludes that American wartime propaganda did not liberate women, but rather instrumentalized them. Propaganda redefined femininity according to the state's needs and requirements, and when these requirements ceased, the same apparatus that had constructed them, restored the gender order it had temporarily suspended. Thus, analyzing female representation in American WWI and WWII propaganda allows for a clear observation of how states have the power to construct, influence and constrain the social possibilities of citizens. Women, of whom so much was demanded during the conflict, ultimately ended with as few possibilities as they began with.

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- Figure 2: Orr, Alfred Everitt. *For Home and Country – Victory Liberty Loan*. 1919. *American Lithographic Co*.
- Figure 3: Hopps, Harry R. *Destroy This Mad Brute Enlist – U.S. Army*. 1918. Posters of World War I, *Library of Congress*. www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2010652057/.
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Appendix: Propaganda Posters



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Figure 2: Orr, Alfred Everitt. *For Home and Country. Victory Liberty Loan.* 1919. American Lithographic Co.

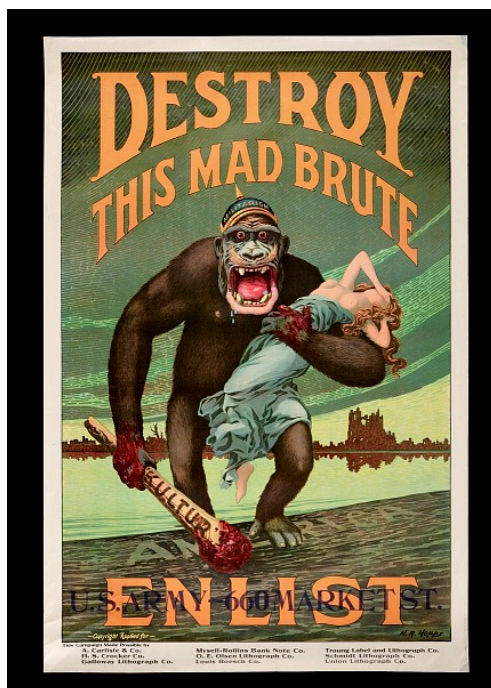


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