

# WHEN WALLS TALK!

**POSTERS • PROMOTION,  
PROPAGANDA AND PROTEST**

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**WHEN WALLS TALK!**

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**EDITED BY PERIKLES CHRISTODOULOU & ALEXANDRE MITCHELL**



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# Ideological struggles and armed conflict

Perikles Christodoulou &  
Alexandre Mitchell

After the end of the First World War and the dramatic changes that followed the Russian revolution, Europe saw the gradual rise of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Dynamic, martial and aggressive posters with strong colours reflected the ideologies and the menacing atmosphere of that period. They depict the alliances that were being formed and anticipate the eventual confrontation and destruction of the Second World War.

A 1918 German poster (fig. 1) presents Bolshevism as a wild thoughtless primate holding a bomb in its right hand and a knife in the left. This imagery echoes the racist theories and especially the 'scientific racism' of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, which eventually led to the atrocities of the Second World War. The same poster appeared in two versions with the same image, but different lettering. Its counterpart targeted anarchism with the words *Elend und Untergang folgen der Anarchie* ('Misery and destruction follow anarchy'). The poster's client was the right-wing *Vereinigung zur Bekämpfung des Bolschewismus* ('Association for Combating Bolshevism'), which was formed in Berlin during the upheaval of the 1918 Russian Revolution, in opposition to the marxist *Spartakusbund* ('Spartacus League'). The Association was trying to stir up fears about the spread of the Revolution and imminent civil war.



## 1. Bolschewismus bringt Krieg, Arbeitslosigkeit und Hungersnot

*'Bolshevism brings war, unemployment and famine'*  
Julius Ussy Engelhard (1883–1964)  
Germany, 1918

## FASCIST ITALY

In 1922, Benito Mussolini's National Fascist Party came to power in Italy. Mussolini's regime became the model for fascist movements elsewhere and the ideology spread across Europe, entrenching itself in some countries more than others.

This poster (fig. 2) presents Mussolini as a strong figure, supported by the approving masses. It celebrates the result of the Italian 1934 political elections, the twelfth year of the so-called Fascist Era. The Fascist calendar counted the years starting from 1922, the year of the March on Rome when Mussolini came to power. In these elections, voters could only cast 'Yes' or 'No' votes for the Fascist Party list. Even though the right to vote was limited to a small part of the male population, of which 99.85% voted 'Yes', there was a truly popular engouement for the fascist regime across most of the population, including minorities, before the Fascist Racial Laws of 1938 and consequent discrimination of Italian Jews. The poster was designed by Xanti Schawinsky, a multi-talented Swiss artist of Polish-Jewish origins, who trained at the Bauhaus. In 1933, Schawinsky left Germany for Italy, because of the menacing atmosphere against Jews under the National Socialists. Three years later, he emigrated from Italy to the United States.

### 2. 1934 XII – Sì

'1934 XII – Yes'

Xanti Schawinsky (1904–1979)

Italy, 1934





## SPANISH CIVIL WAR

The Spanish Civil War began in 1936 and ended in 1939 with the establishment of Franco's dictatorship. His coup d'état against the Second Spanish Republic is illustrative of the Interwar period's confrontations.

As Western democracies tried to remain neutral, volunteers from around the world sided with the Republicans. The Soviets supported the Spanish Republic, while Franco received military aid from Germany and Italy. The Spanish Civil War became an arena in which Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany assessed each other's strength and their own forces, and displayed their expansionist capabilities.

Issued by the Ministry of Propaganda of the Republican Government during the Spanish Civil War, this poster (fig. 3) is a call to arms. Produced in English it tries to move an international public for its cause, enjoining the British public to join the fight against fascism. The disturbing photomontage shows the corpse of a little girl with morgue identification tags<sup>1</sup> superimposed on the picture of military airplanes flying in formation. In November 1936, with the support of German and Italian air forces, General Franco bombarded Madrid, destroying a large part of the capital. Air raids against civilian populations was a bitter novelty of the 1930s, which would expand in scope and destructive force during the Second World War. In this respect, the poster seems almost prophetic. It warns that if the international community tolerates 'the "military" practice' of air raids, their 'children will be next'.

<sup>1</sup> On this poster and on the use of the child's photograph in a previous Republican poster, see BLOOMFIELD (2018) 11–12.



#### 4. Le Socialisme contre le Bolchevisme pour une Europe libre

*'Socialism against Bolshevism for a free Europe'*  
France, 1942

A heroic shirtless worker fights against a caricatured Stalin in uniform, painted totally in red. The initials C.E.A. under the second part of the slogan, indicate that the poster's publisher was the Centre d'études antibolcheviques ('Centre for Anti-Bolshevik Studies'), a French collaborationist organisation.



#### NAZI GERMANY

Propaganda in Nazi Germany was an incredibly well-oiled and effective machine of war. It was State-directed communication to promote German nationalism; clear messages that were tailored to a vast range of different audiences within Germany and Nazi-occupied territories where its propaganda was relayed locally by collaborationist powers, for example Philippe Henriot in France under the Vichy government, Mohammad Amin al-Husayni in Arab countries, Ward Hermans in Belgium.

The Nazis worked on two main fronts, power and fear. When bolstering a message of power, they raised Hitler's profile and the nation's grandeur: the 1936 Olympics promoted German national strength and pride globally with striking visual imagery in posters<sup>2</sup> and films.<sup>3</sup>

However, when exploiting the general population's fears of uncertainty and insecurity, they skilfully directed adapted messages to different audiences or cross-sections of the population. They aimed their communication at the working class,<sup>4</sup> families and especially the indoctrination of children, and of course attacked their main contenders, the communists, both at home and abroad (fig. 4) at every turn. Finally, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler Minister of propaganda used every traditional and modern means, films, radio, newspapers and posters to brainwash the public on a scale unseen before against the scapegoat to all their failings, the Jews, and to justify the all-out war.

<sup>2</sup> See below, p. 164 fig. 2.

<sup>3</sup> See MACKENZIE (2003); MORK (2003).

<sup>4</sup> E.g. the *Arbeit und Brot* ('Bread and Work') poster campaigns. On the concept, see MORSCH (1993).



### 5. Deutschlands Sieg, Europas Freiheit

*'Germany's victory, Europe's freedom'*

Germany, 1941

This striking poster shows a Wehrmacht soldier hitting with two lightning bolts shaped like a 'V' for Victoria, the agonising red dragon of Bolshevism—notice the red star on its forehead—and reveals Germany's intentions against its former ally. The lightning bolt is a reminder of the ubiquitous double *Sieg* ('victory') rune that was adapted into the emblem of the SS in 1933 by Walter Heck: two *Sieg* runes drawn side by side like lightning bolts. The way the soldier holds the grenade is another reference to Norse culture and mythology, which the Nazis were very keen to appropriate in their own ideology. It recalls Thor, the god of thunder, wielding his hammer to strike the World Serpent Jörmungandr. The poster shows Nazism as Europe's only saviour from the dragon of communism. The innocent European farmer working his horse-drawn plough with a church in the background is saved by Germany's victory over communism. Yet, far from being a champion of freedom, a victorious Nazi regime would only dictate its own will over the rest of Europe.



Germany's ambitions for territorial expansion and the domination of Europe plunged the continent into war on 1 September 1939. A week earlier, Hitler and Stalin had agreed on a non-aggression treaty, including a secret provision that divided Central and Eastern Europe into Nazi and Soviet spheres of interest. This agreement ended in June 1941 when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, proclaiming itself the saviour of Europe against the 'evils of Communism' and the 'Jewish world conspiracy' (fig. 5).

In the years that preceded the Second World War, the Nuremberg Laws removed Jews from public life, but these laws, which eventually led to the Shoah, were prepared and accompanied by constant propaganda. For the anti-Semitic poster propaganda, the State employed very effective and popular artists like Hans Schweitzer who went by the name Mjöltnir. One of his most vile posters, created during the war heat of 1943, simply blames Jews for the war (fig. 6). Schweitzer's choice of pen name was heavy in symbolism: *Mjöltnir* is the name of Thor's magical hammer.<sup>5</sup> The Norse God of thunder would yield it to summon lightning and smite his enemies.

**6. Der ist schuld am Kriege!**

*'He is guilty for the war!'*

*Hans Schweitzer (1901–1980)*

*Germany, 1943*

*Bundesarchiv Koblenz*



<sup>5</sup> PARET (1992).

## POSTSCRIPT

‘Politics, too, is an art ... and we who shape modern German policy feel ourselves in this to be artists ... to form, to give shape, to remove the diseased and create freedom for the healthy.’<sup>6</sup> This could serve as a definition of the vast propaganda machine heralded by the dictatorships that scarred the face of Europe between the 1920s and the 1940s. Their skilful campaigns combined self-delusion and shameless lies to manipulate the masses on an unprecedented scale.

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<sup>6</sup> From an answer of Joseph Goebbels to a letter by Wilhelm Furtwängler, Conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, April 1933; English translation in NOAKES and PRIDHAM (2000) 215.



The illustrated poster was born in Europe in the late 19th century, reflecting an increasingly commercialised world and later conflicting political ideologies. Posters are ephemeral, produced for a specific moment, yet many elements are recycled and resonate in cultural memory today. From the propaganda of the World Wars and the Cold War to the explosion of cultural exchange, tourism and the emergence of multi-voiced social movements after the Second World War, complex layers of European division and unity are revealed through a selection of posters from the collection of the House of European History. They reflect the development and transformation of the public sphere in European cities.

