Is it a bird? A plane? No, it’s Superman ... carrying Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin to Geneva, Switzerland?

In a comic book spread published in Look magazine in 1940, Superman defeated Hitler and Stalin by taking them to Geneva to be tried for their crimes.

Dr. Smith, a comics studies scholar and the recently elected Dean of the College of Humanities and Behavioral Sciences, presented on How Superman Would End the War: Propaganda in American Comic Books during the Radford University hosted event World War II 75th Anniversary Series: Experience and Legacy.

Dr. Smith explained that comics, “as a medium of mass communication,” influenced the “formation and the struggle of World War II, at least on the home front but also beyond.”

“Everyone sort of thinks of propaganda as something the other guys do during the war,” said Dr. Smith, “The reality is both sides of the war had propaganda.”

He defined propaganda as “institutionally sponsored persuasion aimed at the masses.”

In the United States, propaganda took the form of things like images encouraging women to join the workforce and support the war effort.

“Propaganda is a neutral term,” said Dr. Smith, “Good people do propaganda, and so do bad people, it’s still propaganda.”

Even the comic book industry took part in propaganda.

In 1940, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman, were commissioned by Look magazine to create a comic about how Superman would end the war.

“Here you have two very young comics creators ... really fantasizing about how do you undo this great threat to the world,” said Dr. Smith.
Siegel and Shuster wrote a two-page spread that showed Superman defeating enemy forces and taking Hitler and Stalin to Geneva.

“In fact, they weren’t the only comics creators thinking about the war and its impact both on the global stage but also on what it meant to people home in America,” said Dr. Smith.

Many comic books of the time dealt with war-related issues from encouraging men to sign up for the military to getting people to contribute to the paper shortage.

The way that comics impacted the war is so important because they were a true mass medium at the time.

“Many publications are putting out a million copies a month with pass-through rates of eight to 12 times that,” said Dr. Smith.

Comic books began supporting the war very early on. This was partly because of the biases of the creators and partly because of the marketplace.

“Comics as a mass medium were responding to something that was popular and thus meant sales,” said Dr. Smith, “And so, driven by those sales, driven by a sense of political leanings and, of course, driven by the times, comics responded to the war.”

Many comic book creators were of immigrant and Jewish stock, including Siegel and Shuster.

“As varied and diverse a crowd as possible” were in the business of comic books, said Dr. Smith.

Comic books were not only read by children on the home front, but they were also read by soldiers, sailors, and other military personnel.

“You had a generation of Americans who were regularly consuming these messages, and they were very powerful messages indeed,” said Dr. Smith.

Dr. Smith described the cover of Captain America Comics number one from March 1941, which portrayed Captain America punching Adolf Hitler in the face, as the “the most famous propagandist comic book cover of all time.”

Comic books that dealt with the war ranged from humorous to racist and vicious, but they were all using the idea that patriotism was something that people responded to. “They were
selling patriotism for 10 cents,” said Dr. Smith.

Dr. Smith is the First Vice President of the International Comics Studies Society, and it is said that he will soon take over as President.

The WWII anniversary series will run through April 29 with events every Wednesday at 4:00 p.m. in Andrew W. Ross gallery inside McConnel Library.

If you enjoyed this article, check out Covington Center Features Artwork by Len Davis on The Tartan.

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