

Lesson Title: Propaganda & Power: Civic Messaging in Wartime and Today

Author: The National Museum of Military Vehicles



Mission:

This Lesson Plan has been developed by the National Museum of Military Vehicles (NMMV) to facilitate scholastic visits to our institution. This Lesson Plan provides instructors with the framework to develop a detailed lesson plan for a field trip to the NMMV, by providing references to Wyoming State educational standards. This Lesson Plan is intended to serve as a starting point, recognizing that every School District has different standards and formats for their Lesson Plans.

Description:

During World War II, propaganda was used to convey a variety of messages to the American Homefront including a scarcity of goods and materials, recruit military and civilian workers, vilify the enemy, preserve morale and promote Patriotism. In this lesson, students will compare and contrast a variety of different examples of American and foreign propaganda. Students will also explore the morality of messaging and discuss a government's obligation to the truth and the consequences of negative propaganda.

Grade Level: 9–12

Theme: Historical and contemporary propaganda as tools of influence, identity, and civic action

Wyoming Social Studies Standards Alignment (Grades 9–12)

Standard Code	Description
SS2.1.1	Evaluate the role of government and citizens in a democracy.
SS2.4.1	Analyze how media and communication influence public opinion and civic behavior.
SS2.5.2	Use visual tools and primary sources to interpret historical and contemporary events.
SS3.1.4	Examine causes and effects of conflict and cooperation among groups and nations.
SS5.1.3	Analyze how people, events, and ideas shape national identity and civic values.

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Critically analyze WWII propaganda for message, technique, and impact
 - Evaluate ethical implications of persuasive messaging in democratic societies
 - Compare historical propaganda to modern civic media
 - Design and present a persuasive civic campaign using historical techniques
 - Reflect on the responsibilities of citizens and governments in shaping public discourse
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Key Concepts & Vocabulary

- Propaganda
- Civic Responsibility
- Media Literacy
- Symbolism
- Bias
- Patriotism
- Scarcity
- Bandwagon
- Fear Appeal
- Ethical Messaging

Interactive Lesson Flow

1. Launch Activity: Then vs. Now

- Display a WWII propaganda poster (can be found at the end of the lesson plan or <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers-of-persuasion>) next to a modern political meme or PSA.
- Students respond to prompts:
 - What emotions are triggered?
 - What's the intended action?
 - Who benefits from this message?

2. Gallery Walk & Source Analysis

- Students rotate through stations featuring curated WWII posters (American and foreign).
- At each station, they complete a source analysis sheet:
 - Intended message
 - Target audience
 - Persuasive technique
 - Ethical concerns
 - Historical context

3. Mini-Seminar: Ethics of Influence

- Students engage in a Socratic seminar exploring:
 - Should governments use propaganda in wartime?
 - What's the line between persuasion and manipulation?
 - How do citizens hold media accountable?

4. Civic Media Lab: Campaign Challenge

- Students form teams and choose a modern civic issue (e.g., voting rights, climate action, mental health, digital safety).
- Each team creates:
 - A persuasive poster using historical techniques
 - A short PSA script (video or audio)
 - A written reflection on ethical choices and civic impact

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5. Gallery Showcase & Peer Review

- Teams present their campaigns in a classroom “Civic Media Gallery.”
- Students use peer feedback forms to evaluate clarity, technique, and ethical responsibility.

Assessment Components

- Source Analysis Worksheets
 - Seminar Participation
 - Civic Media Lab Project (poster, PSA script, reflection)
 - Peer Feedback Form
 - Final Self-Assessment
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Rubric: Civic Media Lab Project

Criteria	4 – Advanced	3 – Proficient	2 – Basic	1 – Emerging
Message Clarity	Clear, compelling, and civic-minded	Mostly clear and relevant	Somewhat unclear or off-topic	Unclear or missing
Persuasive Technique Use	Sophisticated use of historical techniques	Good use of persuasive elements	Limited or inconsistent use	No clear strategy
Ethical Reflection	Deep analysis of impact and responsibility	Some ethical consideration	Minimal reflection	No reflection provided
Poster Design	Visually powerful and well-organized	Clear and relevant visuals	Basic visuals, limited impact	Unclear or missing visuals
PSA Script	Creative, persuasive, and well-paced	Clear and relevant	Basic or incomplete	Missing or unclear
Collaboration	All members contributed meaningfully	Most members participated	Uneven participation	Minimal collaboration

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Socratic Seminar Prompts to guide ethical and civic discourse

Source Analysis Sheets for WWII propaganda posters

These are designed to foster critical thinking, historical empathy, and media literacy—all aligned to Wyoming 9–12 Social Studies standards.

Socratic Seminar Prompts

Theme: Ethics of Influence in Wartime and Democracy

Framing Questions (Opening Round)

- What is propaganda, and how does it differ from education or advertising?
- Why do governments use propaganda during wartime?
- Can propaganda ever be morally justified?

Analytical Prompts (Core Discussion)

- How did WWII propaganda shape public opinion and civic behavior in the U.S.?
- What persuasive techniques were most effective—and why?
- How do these techniques compare to those used in today’s political media or social campaigns?
- What responsibilities do citizens have when consuming persuasive media?
- Should democratic governments be allowed to use emotionally charged messaging to influence behavior?

Ethical Reflection Prompts (Closing Round)

- Where is the line between persuasion and manipulation?
- How can we teach media literacy without promoting cynicism?
- What role should schools, museums, and civic institutions play in helping people analyze propaganda?

Tip: Encourage students to use evidence from poster analysis and modern examples. You might also assign roles (e.g., historian, ethicist, journalist, veteran) to deepen perspective.

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Source Analysis Sheet: WWII Propaganda Poster

Poster Title or Description: _____

Country of Origin: _____

Date (if known): _____

Visual Elements

- What symbols, colors, or imagery are used?
- What emotions does the poster evoke?
- Is there a slogan or text? What does it say?

Intended Message

- What behavior or belief is the poster trying to promote?
- Who is the target audience?
- What persuasive techniques are used? (Check all that apply)
 - ☐ Fear appeal
 - ☐ Patriotism
 - ☐ Bandwagon
 - ☐ Demonization of enemy
 - ☐ Emotional appeal
 - ☐ Repetition
 - ☐ Humor
 - ☐ Other: _____

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Historical Context

- What was happening in the country at the time this poster was made?
 - How might this poster reflect national priorities or anxieties?
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Ethical Reflection

- Is the message truthful or misleading?
 - Could this poster cause harm or reinforce stereotypes?
 - Would this kind of messaging be acceptable today? Why or why not?
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Personal Response

- What stood out to you most about this poster?
 - Do you think it was effective? Why or why not?
 - How does it compare to modern civic messaging?
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American Posters

1. **“We Can Do It!” (Rosie the Riveter)**
 - Iconic image promoting women’s labor participation
 - [Smithsonian Collection](#)
 2. **“Americans Will Always Fight for Liberty”**
 - Links Revolutionary War to WWII patriotism
 - [Available via eBay](#)
 3. **“Defend American Freedom”**
 - Urges enlistment and war bond support
 - [Amazon listing](#)
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Axis Posters (Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Imperial Japan)

1. **“1945 Nazi Propaganda Poster”**
 - Anti-Semitic messaging and racial ideology
 - [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#)
 2. **“Germany Is Your Friend” (Italian Fascist Poster)**
 - Promotes alliance with Nazi Germany
 - [Wikimedia Commons](#)
 3. **Japanese Samurai Poster (1942)**
 - Depicts Japan sinking Allied fleets
 - [Reddit archive](#)
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Allied Posters (UK, USSR, Canada, etc.)

1. **“Together Allies United” (British Poster)**
 - Celebrates Allied unity
 - [Amazon listing](#)

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2. “Women of the Allies: Fight for Freedom”

- Highlights female contributions across Allied nations
- [The Great Republic](#)

3. “Together We Shall Strangle Hitlerism”

- USSR and UK flags strangling Nazi ideology
 - [Alamy image](#)
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Homefront Posters (U.S. Domestic Messaging)

1. “Keep the Home Front Pledge” (1943)

- Encourages inflation control and civic duty
- [Ross Art Group](#)

2. “Grow Your Own Vegetables”

- Promotes Victory Gardens and food conservation
- [eBay listing](#)

3. “Get a War Job!”

- Mobilizes civilian workforce
 - [AbeBooks listing](#)
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NMMV Reflection: Incorporated within a Tour of WWII Gallery for Students

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