

“On My World, It Means Hope:” Superman as Symbolic Propaganda to Cultural Icon, 1939-1945

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Truth, justice, and the American way. This iconic phrase is instantly familiar to anyone who has interacted with popular culture in the past seventy-five years, and immediately recalls an image of the paragon of American comic book heroes: Superman. Superman’s idealistic motto has endured throughout American culture almost as long as Superman himself. These well known words can be first attributed to a 1942 *Superman* radio serial, and were originally conceived as encouragement for home-front audiences struggling to come to terms with a war not yet going in the Allies’ favor. Once American forces began to experience success during World War Two, the phrase was largely forgotten until the Cold War, when it became popular to contrast American values with those of the Soviet Union.¹ With the removal of such a direct reminder of these patriotic values, how did Superman become such a cultural icon, connected so strongly with American ideals? Why did his character endure as a symbol of American virtue and hope beyond World War Two, while other more explicitly patriotic comic book characters faded out of the limelight once victory was secured?

The answer is likely to be found in Superman’s unusual position as a wartime propaganda figure who was deliberately kept out of fighting the war in his comic book appearances. The American comic book was the perfect vehicle for

propaganda due to the wide audience it attracted and the relative speed by which the medium could react to the events of the war. Superman comic books served this propaganda end, and the character quickly built up a mythos of hope that provided a coping mechanism for both younger and older readers during the war.

This mythos of hope sustained Superman’s relevance beyond 1945, in a way that might not have occurred if writers had permitted him to take a more active role in fighting the war throughout the pages of his comic books.

Such an integral spirit of hope carried on through the publication of Superman, and also into other media depictions of the character, such as in the film *Man of Steel*, from which this paper’s title quote “on my world, it means hope,” derives. Superman delivers this line in response to a question about what the “S” on his costume stands for, which he reveals is actually his family crest that translates to “hope” in his native language. While this was not part of his character’s history at the time of World War Two, it displays how necessary the concept of hope has continued to be for Superman. For terms of clarity, Superman’s “mythos of hope” can be defined as an optimistic spirit that has been integral to Superman’s character throughout his eighty-year history. Additionally, a mythos of hope can be viewed in how this character trait functions towards Superman acting as a symbol of hope in American popular culture. This development can be examined through the ways in which Superman’s creators, as well as American citizens, thought about the character in terms of what it meant for him to be used for propaganda purposes. Superman’s interactions with the events of the war, and how his stories line up with those events, further the assertion that he was used as a symbol

¹ Erik Lundegaard, “Truth, Justice and (Fill in the Blank),” *New York Times*, June 30, 2006, accessed

February 1, 2018.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/30/opinion/truth-justice-and-fill-in-the-blank.html>.

of wartime hope. This was a vital morale-boosting function that eventually came to define his character and extend his cultural usefulness beyond World War Two. Such a timeline is especially noteworthy when considering how the character was written to amplify morale following Allied victories, as this thesis will explore. Taking all of these factors into account, this thesis seeks to consider how Superman was built up into a symbol of hope while being used as a propaganda figure in World War Two, and how this symbolic nature and wartime role enabled the character to transcend propaganda purposes to become a cultural icon following the war.

Literature Review

The use of comic books in academic study is a relatively recent phenomenon. Much of the work that has been done in relation to comic books can be seen as biographical or encyclopedic, depicting the change of a particular character over years of publication.² More recently, however, scholars have been turning to comic books as a popular culture lens to look at specific moments in time.³ That said, only a small handful of historians have examined the uses of superhero comics as propaganda during World War Two. Most of the work done relating to comics as propaganda examines the negative aspects of this phenomenon, such as racial and ethnic stereotyping of villains, rather than considering the positive impacts of comics on national morale. Furthermore, Superman has not appeared in any academic work as a focal point for

this area of study. In general, the existing literature presents an incomplete picture by failing to analyze Superman as a propaganda symbol during World War Two. Additionally, none of the existing literature in this vein takes time to consider how comic book characters were able to move beyond their propaganda purposes in World War Two to take on additional cultural significance following the war. This transition from patriotic tool to cultural icon is a point on which this thesis seeks to elaborate.

To this end, this literature review will focus on the work of two historians who have written about comics as propaganda during World War Two, Cord A. Scott and Paul Hirsch. Also included are comprehensive works on propaganda and the American World War Two home front, as well as a biography about Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman's creators. These respective works survey the fields of World War Two propaganda, as well as Superman's cultural usefulness to the American home front.

Cord A. Scott's most relevant work on comics as World War Two propaganda is his 2011 dissertation published by Loyola University Chicago, "Comics and Conflict: War and Patriotically Themed Comics in American Cultural History From World War II through the Iraq War."⁴ Scott's dissertation is a broad overview of how American comics of all sorts evolved to address various American military conflicts over time. Naturally, this leads to Scott covering a wide array of methods and outcomes related to comics being used as propaganda. In the sections discussing

² Such resources include *The DC Comics Encyclopedia* (London: DK, 2016) by Matthew K. Manning and Alex Irvine, and *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Superhero* (New York: Random House, 2013) by Larry Tye.

³ Most recently, these efforts can be seen in Jill Lepore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015) which relates Wonder Woman and her creator, William Moulton Marston, to the feminist movement.

⁴ Cord A. Scott, "Comics and Conflict: War and Patriotically Themed Comics in American Cultural History From World War II Through the Iraq War," *Dissertations*, Paper 74 (2011). Accessed December 1, 2017. http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/74. Also of note is Scott's full-length book, *Comics and Conflict: Patriotism and Propaganda From WWII Through Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2014).

World War Two, Scott mainly draws examples from comic books and characters that did not continue to exist long after the war, as well as Superman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman. This dissertation provides analysis regarding the usefulness of comics as propaganda during World War Two and beyond, but lacks the level of specificity required to tackle the time period, or any singular character, with sufficient depth.

In contrast, Paul Hirsch's work presents a more focused and thematic treatment than Scott's survey of 1945 through 2001.⁵ "This is Our Enemy" has a title that accurately and concisely describes the overall message of Hirsch's article, being that the government-funded Writers' War Board (WWB) actively promoted certain racist depictions of American enemies in comics during World War Two. Hirsch discusses the various ways that German and Japanese portrayals in comic books changed due to WWB interference. At the same time, depictions of non-white Americans and Allies improved for the sake of unity while still remaining problematic.

The only issue with Hirsch's work is its similarity to that of Scott's. Both present an overly broad assessment of a multitude of comic books and characters, rather than a focus on one key figure. Hirsch's work has a tighter focus on one time period, however, and elaborates much further about the WWB than Scott, who mentions the organization only briefly. Although neither Scott nor Hirsch discuss Superman at any length, their respective works are still relevant to the overall study of comic books' relationship to propaganda.

When looking at comics as World War Two propaganda, it is also necessary to back up and look at more general works on opinion-shaping and the American home front during that era.⁶ An excellent source for understanding the various uses and methods of propaganda is *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, published in 2013, which contains a series of historiographical essays, an overview of various institutions that effectively used propaganda, and a set of discussions about propaganda theory.⁷ Altogether, the *Handbook* provides a sufficient comparative study of different methods of propaganda used in World War Two, but fails to include comics in the discussion.

A similarly broad overview of the home front can be found in Allan M. Winkler's *Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II*.⁸ Winkler divides the U.S. home-front experience into four components: the "Arsenal of Democracy" facilitated by war production and rationing, an assessment of general American society, an examination of attitudes towards different ethnic groups within United States at the time, and a brief discussion of the political climate during World War Two. In the "American society" section, Winkler briefly acknowledges the importance of comic books in wartime popular culture:

Comic book sales rose from 12 million copies a month in 1942 to over 60 million a month in 1946. Eighty percent of the population aged 6 to 17 read comic books during the war; one third of people aged 18 to 30 years did the same...Publishers catered to both a children's and a servicemen's

⁵ Paul Hirsch, "This Is Our Enemy: The Writers' War Board and Representations of Race in Comic Books, 1942-1945," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (2014): 448-486. Accessed December 1, 2017. <http://phr.ucpress.edu.libproxy.temple.edu/content/83/3/448>.

⁶ Not reviewed here but also of relevance is *Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion in World War II*,

Volume 1 (Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishing, 1983) by Anthony Rhodes.

⁷ Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo, *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁸ Allan M. Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2004).

market; a special edition of *Superman* went overseas.⁹

While the inclusion of comics in a discussion of home front life is refreshing to see, Winkler does not connect these statistics to the use of comics as a propaganda vehicle at all. This lack of analysis suggests an absence of connection between comics and propaganda during the World War Two era, which should be addressed.

An important addition to Superman history is *Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the Creators of Superman* by Brad Ricca. This biography, published in 2013, primarily frames Siegel and Shuster's lives within the context of the business end of Superman. Some liberties are likely taken to make the biography read as more of a story, given Ricca's English studies background.¹⁰ Otherwise, the work presents a thorough, well documented account of Siegel and Shuster's lives. Surprisingly, Ricca does not give the World War Two years much attention, which is strange, considering how formative those years were to Superman's development as a character and a symbol.

Ultimately, there is not much literature that substantially covers the subject of Superman as a conduit for World War Two propaganda. Although there are authoritative works covering the separate topics of propaganda, World War Two, and Superman, few texts provide any kind of intersection for these three subjects. Any intersection that does exist is minimal at best. The work of Cord Scott and Paul Hirsch comes the closest to filling this void, but not in terms of using a specific character such as Superman as a lens to look at comics as propaganda. Therefore, this thesis will benefit historians who share a growing interest in the social utility of comic books, as well as those

who seek a more focused analysis of one superhero's place in World War Two propaganda.

Superman and Propaganda

From the outset of World War Two, it became obvious that the comic book industry as a whole would adopt a largely interventionist stance towards the conflict. The industry's talent, composed predominantly of young Jewish men, quickly began to consider their comic book characters' places in the war, even before it became popular to support U.S. intervention.¹¹ The "Golden Age" of comic books, which began with the creation of Superman in 1938 and lasted until 1950, often presented heroes and villains in exceedingly clear terms, with few gray areas regarding who was "good" and who was "evil." This stark divide allowed creators to incorporate a realworld conflict pitting the virtuous Allies against the vicious Axis powers into their stories with relative ease.

For Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the creators of Superman, this shift in focus was slightly more complicated. During the short period Superman existed before World War Two, the character's main aim was to protect those with little power from domestic crime. His foes were generally thugs, crooked businessmen, and other con artists, who preyed upon weaker individuals. By assuming the alter ego of reporter Clark Kent, Superman could expose this corruption in print, and then handle it physically (but benevolently) in his red-caped superhero identity. This was, and still is, the charm of Superman, someone who had the alien strength and smarts to destroy the human world, but actively chose to embody the best of humanity instead. This sort of characterization, particularly

Cultural History From World War Ii Through the Iraq War," *Dissertations*, Paper 74 (2011): 45-46. Accessed December 1, 2017. http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/74.

⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁰ Brad Ricca, *Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, the Creators of Superman* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013).

¹¹ Cord A. Scott, "Comics and Conflict: War and Patriotically Themed Comics in American

Superman's extreme level of strength, was exactly what made it challenging for Siegel and Shuster to involve Superman in the war.

Even though Superman did not possess the same range of powers during World War Two as he does today (many of which were developed as a product of the Cold War), it was still widely recognized that the original superhero had abilities far beyond that of the ordinary GI going off to war. Considering this, Siegel and Shuster quickly came to understand that they could not place Superman directly into the war and still have a good story on their hands. If they introduced him to combat, they would either have had to severely limit Superman's powers so that fighting ordinary men was a challenge, or let their hero immediately win the war for the Allies. Additionally, Siegel and Shuster could have created a super-powered Nazi, but this still would have forced Superman into direct combat, harkening back to the original concern of Superman needing to win in order to maintain high reader morale and comic book sales. Cord Scott expressed this general problem facing all comic book writers during World War Two: "If a character was too successful at a time when the war was going against the United States, people became demoralized and sales dropped. If the superhero only fought imaginary or relatively nonthreatening foes (such as domestic criminals), he appeared to be shirking his wartime duty."¹² Thus a balance had to be struck to maintain readership while also maintaining morale.

Although keeping Superman out of the war seemed like the popular option at the time, Siegel and Shuster would not have been without support if they had chosen to bring him into the European conflict. A letter to the editor published in the *Washington Post* on February 26, 1940, revealed reader Delbert Clark's desire to see Superman enact a peaceful end to the war. Clark suggested Superman simply "seize

all the weapons, and hurl them into opposite camps," where he suspected that soldiers would not have the proper ammunition to fit the weapons.¹³ Even if this clever idea appealed to Siegel and Shuster, they still would not have been able to use it without creating dissonance between Superman's world, and the real world where a war was still raging on. Similar concerns existed with the pacifist nature of this solution. Although it would have been wonderful for the war to just end, it would have been even better for Superman to be seen exacting due justice to the Nazis. Such a turn of events could have caused morale and faith in Superman to skyrocket, but this kind of event would still be at odds with reality. Even though Superman was nowhere close to being real, the impact he could have on morale was substantial enough to keep his actions aligned with the events of the real world.

The general isolationism that prevailed among Americans was yet another obstacle hindering Superman's foray into the war effort. Although support was growing for intervention following the fall of France and through aid programs to the Allies, Superman was still shown supporting the war from within the confines of the United States up until the Pearl Harbor attack. He frequently battled forms of business corruption that impacted assistance to the Allies, or broke up spy rings that sought to threaten American security and democratic ideals. The Superman comic books during this period often presented several shorter stories within a single issue. In addition to a syndicated comic strip that first appeared in newspapers in 1939, two different monthly comic book titles featured included Superman, *Action Comics* and *Superman*. Both of these titles were published by DC Comics, which had purchased rights to Superman from Siegel and Shuster, under the condition that the creative partners would still provide stories and artwork for the character. Prior to U.S. intervention, these stories followed

¹² Ibid., 51.

¹³ Delbert Clark, "Superman For Peace," *The Washington Post*, (1923-1954), February 26, 1940.

Accessed March 22, 2018. https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/cv_701361/docview/151264639/107E445D06C43BDPQ/23?accountid=14270.

Superman's adventures through a variety of situations, with one or two tales per issue containing anything that could be perceived as interventionist propaganda.

One significant example of prewar propagandistic imagery can be found in "Superman #8," the 1941 January-February issue. In that issue, Superman engaged with a fifth-column spy organization conducted by a character named Eric Reibel, an obvious German-sounding name.¹⁴ In a clear example of propaganda, Reibel is depicted as an almost near-perfect Hitler look-alike. When Superman stows away underneath a spy plane flying to the organization's headquarters, he discovers a sizable military base hidden within U.S. territory that is covered in short cross symbols similar to those found on German military aircraft and ground vehicles. Superman quickly sets to work destroying the entire base, tearing apart a line of bombers while insisting "these planes will never bomb American cities!"¹⁵

It is evident that Siegel and Shuster were trying to link the fifth-column group with the Nazis, but they do so without actually mentioning "Germany" or naming Hitler's Nazi Party. Even so, they successfully place Superman in a war-time setting without explicitly involving him in the war. The isolated spy headquarters is a more believable target for Superman to eliminate rather than all of Nazi Germany itself, and the threat of espionage was a real concern to American readers. By placing Superman within a smaller sphere of action, Siegel and Shuster allowed him to succeed against American enemies without igniting much controversy, while still addressing an issue Americans may have been concerned about at the time. More importantly, the creators established the idea that Superman was effectively able to protect

the home front, where he could still diligently serve his country later on.

This focus on Superman protecting America from within the country's borders constituted a significant step towards his transformation into a symbol of hope. Confining Superman to the home front grounded his patriotic activity in situations Americans might have imagined themselves encountering, such as fifth-column conspiracy. Although most Americans would not be able to dismantle an entire spy ring singlehandedly, they could still alert authorities to potential threats, and hope to make an impact in a similar manner to Superman. This thread of realism within fiction made Superman more relatable, while also exhibiting that Superman was able to be a positive force for good without using his powers to win the war outright.

In fact, Superman's role as a means for readers to engage with the war in an emotionally safe way is something that Siegel himself understood. In a 1943 interview with the *Washington Post*, Siegel related that Superman would never be directly involved in the war unless the writers received "advanced information when the war will end." Siegel realized that Superman's induction into the U.S. Army "might prove disastrous to child morale," given the confidence that young readers placed in the character.¹⁶ By the middle of U.S. involvement in World War Two, Superman's use as a symbol of hope had manifested itself to Siegel and Shuster, and they kept him out of major combat. To maintain Superman's American patriotism, however, the creators wrote in an excuse for him to not be enlisted. In February 1942, three "Superman" comic strips ran that showed Clark Kent going to his eye test in the Metropolis recruiting office. He quickly becomes

¹⁴ Jerry Siegel, "Superman #8," *Superman: The Golden Age Omnibus Vol. 2* (New York: DC Comics, 2016), 40-52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁶ "Superman's Creator Now Pvt. Siegel," *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*, August 14, 1943. Accessed February 10, 2018. <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/151649698?accountid=14270>.

distracted while thinking about foiling American enemies. Due to this lack of concentration, the character accidentally uses his x-ray vision to view the eye chart in the next room over, consequently failing his eye test and being designated 4-F.¹⁷

These comic strips served as a response to any potential criticism about what Superman's role was supposed to be during the war. Five days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, fourteen-year-old Earl Blondheim wrote to the *Washington Post*, asking where Superman was "when all the bombing took place."¹⁸ While it is doubtful that a teenager truly believed that Superman was real, Blondheim's short note still serves as an example of what the relatively new fictional character could represent to readers, and how deeply his absence from the war effort could be felt.

This is not to say, however, that Superman failed to contribute to the war effort. Given the declaration of war following Pearl Harbor, Siegel and Shuster were free to create Axis enemies for Superman, and did so immediately for the January 1942, issue of *Action Comics*. The cover shows Superman bending the barrel of a Nazi cannon, impervious to the bullets fired at him by a surrounding ring of Nazi soldiers. A swastika appears predominantly on the artillery pieces, clearly revealing the Nazis as enemies of Superman for the first time in comic books. The accompanying story has nothing to do with Nazis or the war, but the cover art presented readers with exactly the kind of patriotic imagery they wanted to see following official U.S. entry into World War Two.

Within the Superman comic books released throughout World War Two, this appears to be a common theme. A cover might depict Superman

directly involved with the war, triumphantly punching a Japanese plane out of the sky or carrying off a belligerent Hitler, but the stories inside often ignored the war itself. These plot lines, as previously mentioned, frequently showed Superman attempting to stop con-men or other common criminals that plagued ordinary individuals. Some issues also began to depict Superman tangling with larger but more fantastical enemies, like robots, an undersea empire, and his new arch-nemesis, Lex Luthor. This kind of approach, with a propagandistic cover and "fluffier" content, allowed Superman comic books to distract readers from the complications of war, while also utilizing patriotic imagery that left no doubt about the hero's moral alignment and ability. Thanks to writers keeping Superman at home and successful against realistic fictional enemies, hope could be derived from his success, and readers could justifiably project that hope onto the war due to the patriotic cover art that accompanied each issue.

As the war continued, a number of stories appeared that seemed to be trying to impart some kind of war-related moral lesson to Superman readers. Such an example is "The Emperor of America," a story found in "Action Comics #52," published in September 1942. The first panel of the comic contemplates how "this is a tale that could occur only after the war ... many years hence! It's up to all of us to see it doesn't!"¹⁹ What follows is a story that depicts a "fiend" who easily seizes power from a president who looks suspiciously like FDR (an odd decision, if writers were seeking to bolster faith in American leadership). To meet his aims, the villain uses a ray gun that weakens people's ability to resist persuasion. Superman is able to defy the power of the ray by sheer force of will, and defeats the dogmatic and undemocratic emperor.

¹⁷ Brian Cronin, "Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed #49!" last modified May 4, 2006. <https://www.cbr.com/comic-book-urban-legends-revealed-49/>.

¹⁸ Earl Blondheim, "Paging Superman," *The Washington Post* (1923-1954), December 20, 1941. Accessed September 17, 2017. <https://search-proquest->

com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/151427349?accountid=14270.

¹⁹ Jerry Siegel, "Action Comics #52," *Superman: The Golden Age Omnibus Vol. 3* (New York: DC Comics, 2016), 186-200.

It is particularly timely that this story came out following a summer of considerable Allied success in the Pacific theater. A heavy-handed lesson about the will of democracy and justice prevailing over would-be dictators would have suited the mood of American citizens nicely at this time. Although the story had a happy ending, the warning of how such a trial could still occur in America's future reminded readers that the war was not yet won. The idea that Superman beat the potential despot with force of will rather than physical strength again plays into Superman becoming a symbol of hope. If Superman could resist evil through force of will alone, any American could do so, without any superpowers required.

It is questionable if this patriotic imagery originated from Siegel and Shuster's sense of civic duty, or due to some level of governmental influence on their writing. An agency called the Writers' War Board, affiliated with the Office of War Information, made a handful of separate efforts to suggest war-related content to various comic book publishers. As early as February 1942, the chairman of the WWB, Rex Stout, wrote to popular radio personality Clifton Fadiman. This correspondence resulted in Stout sending along a list of pop culture characters whose writers could address "some aspect of the war."²⁰ The list included Superman. In reply, Fadiman sent Stout a sample letter that he intended to distribute to a handful of figures in the entertainment industry, including Joe Shuster, the original artist for Superman. Although the WWB did not disclose Shuster's reply, Superman began appearing in more war-related stories beginning in September 1942. Almost all of these, however, still kept Superman in the United States, maintaining his place as a protector of the home front and the ordinary

American citizen. Regardless of the absence of a confirmed response from Shuster, it is obvious that a government organization found enough value in Superman as a potential propaganda vehicle by reaching out to Shuster in the first place.

In addition to this initial mailing list, the WWB began organizing a "Comics Committee" sometime in the summer of 1943 in order to capitalize on ways propaganda could be applied to the medium. This is evinced by a series of correspondence between Frederica Barach, the WWB executive secretary, and various comic book publishers and editors.²¹ There is no record of Siegel, Shuster, or a DC Comics representative sitting on this committee. A May 30, 1944, memo, however, contains a "comics report" detailing the status of various WWB projects within the comic industry. This document includes two separate accounts of "Superman" comic strips adhering to some kind of WWB suggested material, which involved encouraging anti-inflation, and promoting cooperation across the multiple branches of the military.²² In light of this evidence, it appears that Superman's writers adhered to the WWB's propaganda requests, as Superman's mentions of the war effort also become more frequent following this point. In another instance of the United States government recognizing Superman's propaganda value, a November 1943 *Chicago Daily Tribune* interview with Melville Minton, president of the G.P. Putnam's Sons publishing firm, reveals that comic book titles containing "Superman" stories were comparatively safe from paper rationing. Referencing a potential paper shortage for the coming year, Minton quipped that Superman "had been declared essential to the war program before the Bible by Washington officials."²³ A revelation such as this exhibits how vital the government

²⁰ Rex Stout to Fadiman, February 26, 1942, box 6, Papers of the Writers' War Board, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter WWB Papers).

²¹ Charles Wessell to Barach, July 24, 1943, box 11, WWB Papers.

²² "Comics Report," May 30, 1944, box 11, WWB Papers.

²³ "Book Burocraats Put 'Superman' Ahead of Bible," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963), Nov 07, 1943. Accessed February 10, 2017. <https://search-proquest->

deemed this form of entertainment to the war effort. Superman comic books would have been more available to potential readers due to this lack of printing restrictions, which could also explain the longevity of the character following the war.

Superman and Morale

Aside from the benefits of being prized by the U.S. government, Superman also won the begrudging respect of child psychologists and educators in the latter stages of the war, along with comic books in general. A December 1944 *New York Times* article examined a study conducted by psychologists and sociologists in relation to the benefits of comics upon early education and mental well-being. The professionals praised the role of comic books as a mediator for reality in children's lives, stating that "children's fantasies are a constructive approach to reality, not an escape."²⁴ This observation validated the concerns Jerry Siegel expressed regarding the impact of Superman's wartime exploits on child morale, suggesting that comics were a source of comfort to children at this time.²⁵ A July 1946 *Coronet* article published after the war again described the consciousness that Superman's creators applied to their writing, saying "they have assumed an obligation to instill faith, whenever possible, in the physical reality of Superman." The article goes on to compare the maintenance of Superman's spirit of hopefulness to that of the idea of Santa Claus.²⁶ This is an idea that

comes across in the comics given Superman's engagement with fictional villains that he can defeat without readers comparing his successes to those of the U.S. military.

Since a third of all Americans aged eighteen to thirty also read comic books during World War Two, it can be reasonably assumed that the use of such reading material as a coping mechanism was not confined solely to children.²⁷ An April 13, 1942, *Time* article listed monthly readership for Superman's titles at twelve million people, not including the additional readership from the newspaper comic strip. The same article also predated Melville Minton's comments about Superman being saved from rationing, noting that Superman comic books earned a "high priority" rating and were deemed "essential supplies" in a shipment to Marines at Midway. According to the article, "for all U.S. Armed Forces, the Man of Steel is still super-favorite reading."²⁸ This view was substantiated by the aforementioned *Coronet* article, which also described the various public services Superman had provided during World War Two.²⁹ The article stated that the Air Forces Training Command enlisted Superman's help with maintaining the morale of airplane mechanics who were disappointed in their positions, compared to the "glamor" of being a pilot during the war. As a result, an issue of *Superman* published for the Training Command emphasized the importance of enlisted men who never got to see combat. Additionally, the article recounted a statement made by an infantry major on D-Day, whose concerns

com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/176883943?accountid=14270.

²⁴ Catherine Mackenzie, "'Superman,' 'Dick Tracy' Et Al Here to Stay, Educators Find in an Evaluation of Comics," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), December 15, 1944. Accessed September 17, 2017. <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/106931244?accountid=14270>.

²⁵ "Pvt. Seigel."

²⁶ Mort Weisinger, "Here Comes Superman!" *Coronet*, July 1946. Accessed February 22, 2018. <http://>

www.oldmagazinearticles.com/SUPERMAN_COMIC-BOOK_HISTORY_pdf.

²⁷ Winkler, 41.

²⁸ "Superman's Dilemma," *Time*, April 13, 1942. Accessed February 22, 2018. <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.libproxy.temple.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=6&sid=b17eea00-6eee-4d48-bc4bca62859f82d6%40sessionmgr103&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXR1#AN=54831238&db=a9h>.

²⁹ Weisinger.

about troop morale diminished when he saw one of his men reading a Superman comic book.³⁰ Given these examples, it is clear that Superman was capable of providing some sense of hope for success to the GIs directly experiencing the effects of war, let alone Americans on the home front who weren't immediately involved in the conflict.

Part of the appeal of Superman was the universal nature of most of the stories published in the character's regular issues, which dealt with problems and themes to which any American could relate, like corruption, robbery, and even romantic rejection. Superman's success at dealing with these smaller-scale problems served as a distraction to readers who were anxious about the larger issues of the war.³¹ Confidence in Superman's ability to handle any challenge translated well when he ended up engaging with war-related problems on the home front. Confining Superman's activities to the home front separated him from characters such as Marvel's Captain America, who thrived in a combat environment rather than in the familiar settings of home. Unlike Superman, Captain America's primary characteristic was his relationship to the war, with his exploits frequently taking place against Nazis on the European battlefields. Captain America possessed heightened abilities as compared to the average man, but not to the same extreme degree as Superman. This allowed his fighting with "normal" German soldiers to be more challenging. While there were certainly some elements of espionage within Captain America comics, it was far more common to see Captain America in open combat as opposed to what a reader would expect from Superman. Captain America also maintained a greater presence on the front than Superman did, a trait that benefited his war-driven storylines, but did

little to extend his relevance beyond the war. As a result, the Captain America title was cancelled in 1949 despite efforts to reinvent the character, a situation Superman's publishers never had to confront. As a creation of the war, Captain America did not have the prewar history to thrive in a postwar environment. There was a brief attempt to bring Captain America back into relevance during the Cold War, which failed, and even when the character was fully revived in 1964, he was still heavily associated with his World War Two exploits.³² Superman, with his prewar roots and home front story settings, was able to adapt immediately back to peacetime following the war and thus remained in the public eye.

Engaging with the war effort within American borders also provided the added benefit of giving hope to readers that they too could enact positive change in the war without fulfilling a combat role. This is a sentiment echoed by Jerry Siegel himself, who struggled with how he could help the war effort before ultimately arriving at the idea that he could attempt to provide hope through Superman. Described as having a "near-paralyzing sense of fear" about the war, Siegel instead manifested his anxieties into a hope that "resonated with a broad spectrum of American readers," according to English scholar Lauren Karp.³³ This resulted in Superman being built upon a foundation of hope that readers could turn to throughout the war and beyond. Americans could look to Superman to boost their morale, something recognized early on by the Nazis who sought to tear down the credibility of such a powerful fictional character. The article, "Jerry Siegel Attacks!" in the April 1940 Nazi bulletin *Das Schwarze Korps*, mocked Superman and his Jewish creators for

view/sentinel-of-liberty-captain-america-on-the-home-front-in-wwii.

³³ Lauren Karp, "Truth, Justice, and the American Way: What Superman Teaches Us About the American Dream and Changing Values Within the United States," 2009, 21. Accessed March 20, 2018. https://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1957/..../Thesis_LKarp.pdf.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Mackenzie.

³² Carolyn McNamara, "Sentinel of Liberty: Captain America on the Home Front in WWII," *UT Research Showcase*, October 2, 2015. Accessed March 21, 2018. <https://research.utexas.edu/showcase/articles/>

Americanizing the Nazis' cherished idea of the *Übermensch*.³⁴ The unnamed author criticized the simplemindedness of Superman as a character and a concept, decrying how foolish the American people were for idolizing such a figure. Issue was also taken with Superman's defiance of all laws of physics and common sense, sprinkling in anti-Semitic remarks wherever possible. It is continually stated that *Superman* comics are hypocritical and lack virtue, while the article concludes with a lament for "American youth, who must live in such a poisoned atmosphere and don't even notice the poison they swallow daily."³⁵ These statements heavily relied on painting Superman as laughable due to his obviously unbelievable abilities, a fiction that American psychologists would soon find to be beneficial to children as they coped with the realities of war.³⁶ The article also assumes that Superman's readership consisted only of children, which would prove false, especially as comic books became frequent reading material for American soldiers. While the author of the article would likely see adult readership of comic books as yet another weakness of American culture, the U.S. military would, like child psychologists, come to view Superman as an extremely potent source of morale.

It is notable that this article appeared prior to American entry into the war, and even before the early 1941 comic in which Superman eradicates the Nazified fifth-column spy ring. At the point of the article's publication, there was no Superman propaganda that the Nazis would need to counter. Aside from the threat to Nazi ideals from the implications of a Jewish man creating an American *Übermensch* of his own, the American government was increasingly exacting more aggressive policies against Germany, such as FDR's shoot-on-sight order for German U-boats. By mocking Superman,

a Jewish creation depicting use of ultimate power for the cause of the greater good rather than ethnic superiority, the Nazis attempted to diminish the popular culture symbols of a hostile America. Clearly, Nazi propagandists saw enough of a potential for Superman to serve as a larger symbol for Americans even without the added propaganda value the character would later provide.

Whether the Nazis anticipated Superman being used for propaganda purposes or not, the character certainly served those ends. "Superman #23," released in July/August 1943, contained the story "America's Secret Weapon," which showed Superman attending a mock battle at a military training base.³⁷ Superman suggests that he be allowed to join one of the drill teams in order to boost morale, with Lois Lane accompanying the opposing team. For once, Superman is bested, but not for lack of trying, when the opposing team rallies together around "America's secret weapon—the courage of the common soldier," as one of the participating GIs pictured puts it. Superman and Lois marvel over the "magnificent" boys, and Superman proudly proclaims that "American soldiers cannot be defeated by Superman or anyone else."³⁸ A sweeping endorsement such as this served the purpose of bolstering confidence in the American military without minimizing Superman's own might in comparison. It also further justified Superman's lack of involvement in combat, as the story depicts American troops who are even more competent and resourceful than the Man of Steel himself.

Again, the appearance of this story coincided fairly well with major Allied victories. The Soviets reclaimed Stalingrad in February 1943, but even more relevant to American interests was

³⁴ "Jerry Siegel Attacks!" Calvin College, 1998, trans. Randall Bytwerk. Accessed February 6, 2018. <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/superman.htm>. Originally published in *Das Schwarze Korps*, April 25, 1940, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Mackenzie.

³⁷ Don Cameron, "Superman #23," *Superman: The Golden Age Omnibus Vol. 3*, 668-679.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

the joint British-American victory in North Africa in May 1943. Although Superman did not do anything within this issue to address any aspect of the war head-on, the story showcases his complimentary statements about the American military, which could have elicited additional hope for victory from audiences already celebrating American success.

While it might have been tempting to place Superman within the full scope of the war given such a huge American victory, it was far safer to keep him in more neutral territory in case American success did not last through the print release of the comic book. If Superman was prevailing at the same time as a sudden loss, the boost to morale intended by this story would have had the opposite effect. Furthermore, Superman's involvement within a military sphere without actually fighting a real battle continued to adhere to Jerry Siegel's wishes that the character not be sent off to war. It is relevant that this request was respected, considering Siegel's inability to write for Superman at the time due to his enlistment.

During Jerry Siegel's enlistment throughout the latter half of American involvement in World War Two, the writer still provided some input for the Superman comic books back in the United States.³⁹ Given his special status as a well-known comic book creator, he also produced cartoons for the United States Army, writing for the *Midpacifican* Army newspaper while he was stationed in Honolulu. Siegel produced a comic strip entitled "Super GI," about a downtrodden private who secretly possessed all of the abilities of Superman. Siegel was proud of this work, and submitted it to the Writer's War Board for review, claiming it as "the first time in the history of the funnies that a GI version of a leading comic strip has been prepared by its creator serving in the armed forces."⁴⁰

"Super GI" was short lived, only appearing for a couple months prior to the end of the war and never reaching a readership outside of the U.S. military. Even so, the implications that it had for Superman himself cannot be overlooked. Superman continued to endure and maintain a strong readership in the postwar period. At the same time, those characters created specifically to fit within the scope of World War Two faltered following the creation of a welcome peace, even when those characters were not made solely for military consumption. The fact that a special version of Superman was created for the military speaks volumes about the value the United States placed in Superman as morale booster. This is again further bolstered by the creation of specific Superman storylines at the request of the United States military, as was done by the Army Air Force.

While Superman was not placed in a fighting position during World War Two, his presence in American popular culture at the time proved vital for promoting morale for both citizens and soldiers alike. This role is a critical part of what makes him a symbol of hope for readers today. By giving Superman some degree of separation from activity in the war, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster maintained his relevance so that the character could continue to enjoy a growing presence in American culture after the conclusion of World War Two.

Conclusion

Fortunately, for the duration of World War Two, Superman's writers did not risk the credibility of their character by placing him in situations that could put his stories at odds with the course of war. While this might have been playing it safe, this decision maintained Superman's role as a successful morale propaganda figure. Ultimately, these choices

³⁹ "10,000 fans Cheer 'Superman' Creator," *The Philadelphia Inquirer Public Ledger* (1934-1969), February 23, 1945. Accessed March 22, 2018. <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/>

cv_701361/docview/1833942101/72AEB5CBB6924EDAPQ/214?accountid=14270.

⁴⁰ "Super GI" and attached letter signed by Jerry Siegel, December 23, 1944, Box 11, WWB Papers.

also contributed to the mythos of hope that Superman continues to radiate to this day. Limiting Superman's interaction with the war to moments when the Allies were doing well connected the successes and power of Superman to the victories of the U.S. military. By limiting activity to within U.S. borders, Superman could be considered a champion of the home front, a distinction that characters who traveled to the battlefield could not possess. This lack of direct war involvement also kept him in fashion once war-related stories ceased to be culturally relevant. Superman promoted the values and attitudes necessary to buoy morale through the end of the war, while also continuing to defend the common American at home as he had since his creation in 1938. This consistent focus kept Superman relevant beyond the war's end, as the character's appeal never depended on war-driven stories.

Superman's original interactions with the war between 1941 and 1945 set the tone for how his long line of writers presented him during subsequent conflicts. During the Cold War, "truth, justice, and the American way" returned to the forefront of Superman's values system, and his powers grew in scope to include heat vision, as well as the ability to fly rather than just jump to great heights. During the Vietnam War, however, soldiers specifically requested that Superman be depicted fighting alongside them, something the character would never have done in World War Two. The comic writers obliged, complicating the strict moral boundaries normally maintained by the character due to the controversy of the conflict.⁴¹ Following the attacks on September 11, 2001, iconic illustrator

Alex Ross released a moving image showing Superman standing in the shadows of the first responders and citizens who stepped up to help in the face of tragedy. Like the World War Two comic in which Superman is proud to be bested by American soldiers, Superman acknowledges the power of humanity by honoring those who died trying to save others' lives. With that gesture, Superman paid tribute to American pride and highlighted the hope that comes from living in a nation that can produce so many self-sacrificing heroes. The transformation and maturation of Superman's response to national and global challenges finds its roots in the handling of Superman's character when he was first used for propaganda purposes during World War Two. Thanks to Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's decision to keep their character at home as a beacon of hope for American readers in World War Two, the standard was set for Superman's fiction to become a source of comfort for readers struggling to contend with a harsher reality. During times of national strife, Superman acts as a manifestation of the United States' most cherished ideals. As prominent Superman biographer Larry Tye states, "Superman has tapped into the American psyche more effectively than any of our champions and, as a result, has lasted longer than any of them."⁴² This relationship between character and country began with how Superman was written during World War Two, reflecting the hope and confidence Americans needed during the war. Although Superman's involvement in American conflict has expanded since World War Two, his status as a source of hope in times of unease has endured, and defines him as an American cultural icon to this day.

⁴¹ Ian Gordon, "The Moral World of Superman and the American War In Vietnam," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 6, no. 2 (2015): 172-181. Accessed February 11, 2018. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21504857.2015.1021491?journalCode=rcom20>.

⁴² Larry Tye, "Superman's America," *The Boston Globe*, June 8, 2013. Accessed March 23, 2018. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2013/06/07/fighting-nazis-and-terrorists-superman-acts-america-moralcompass/u7JMVJkXNLoxKNwltgL5GL/story.html>.

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