Monsters and Clowns Incorporated: the Representations of Adolf Hitler in British and American WWII Propaganda Posters

Cécile Vallée

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/4880
DOI: 10.4000/lisa.4880
ISSN: 1762-6153

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version
Number of pages: 126-150

Electronic reference

Les contenus de la Revue LISA / LISA e-journal sont mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.
Monstres, clowns et compagnie : les représentations d’Hitler dans les affiches de propagande britanniques et américaines pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale

Dr. Cécile Vallée
(Rouen, France)

Résumé
Dans les affiches de propagande britanniques et américaines de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les représentations d’Adolf Hitler font de lui soit un monstre effrayant, sanguinaire et diabolique, soit un clown grotesque, un pantin ridicule et risible, une cible qu’il faut frapper, écraser, ou détruire d’une façon ou d’une autre. S’adressant au sens de l’humour du spectateur, à ses peurs ou à son aversion, les artistes de propagande des deux côtés de l’Atlantique utilisent des leviers émotionnels et des tons très variés pour faire du dictateur nazi un des ressorts principaux de la participation à l’effort de guerre. Ces caricatures d’Hitler, dont l’objectif final était d’encourager la production et les économies ou de lutter contre les bavardages intempestifs, révèlent une condamnation morale ou politique et font partie de la propagande de soutien au moral, qui vise à galvaniser les Troupes de l’Intérieur en présentant la victoire comme quelque chose de vital ou d’inéluctable. Qu’il soit monstre ou clown, on fait tomber le dictateur déshumanisé de son piédestal, un piédestal si soigneusement construit pour lui par la propagande nazie.
Monsters and Clowns Incorporated: the Representations of Adolf Hitler in British and American WWII Propaganda Posters

Dr. Cécile Vallée
(University of Rouen, France)

The maintenance of civilian morale during WWII was considered by all the warring nations as a vital part of the war effort, essentially because of its direct bearing on industrial production. As a result, domestic propaganda campaigns were launched throughout the war years by the Ministry of Information in Britain, and by the Office of War Information on the American side. While the British naturally started issuing propaganda posters as early as 1939, the Americans largely caught up, and produced a wider range of posters in more styles and in greater numbers that any other country in WWII. There were literally thousands of them.

These “weapons on the wall,” as they were sometimes known, had the advantage of being cheap to produce and easy to distribute. They were intended for display in libraries, post offices, schools, factories,
newsagents and other public places, some for external display on street hoardings, others to be put up inside shops, or pubs. Some aimed at the conservation of food or other wartime necessities or at investing in war bonds to support the war effort, others exhorted workers to greater productivity and quality output, while still others warned of the dangers of leaking critical defence information to unsuspected enemy agents. The targeted audience could be the average citizen, or more specifically war workers, or women in the home. All of them instructed the civilian population how to behave. Indeed, getting people to work harder, to enlist, to save or to keep silent, in other words rallying public support for the war entailed the use of systematic propaganda. One of the best ways to galvanise public opinion, to “win hearts and minds” was through the use of deeply negative representations of the enemy, which in turn entailed the use of caricature. This was far from new. Caricature had already been used as a weapon in the Great War, especially in the form of propaganda posters condemning the atrocities committed by the “Hun”, alongside general indictment were more precise attacks directed at the Kaiser. During (and even before) the Second World War, Hitler, as the symbol both of Nazism and the German war machine, was the obvious target for the overall propaganda effort intended to mobilise home front opinion. In this war of representation, British and American artists made their contribution in the form of posters and cartoons, alongside the written word and radio broadcasts by denouncing the Nazi dictator and his regime through caricature. The power of these artists lay in their ability to create pictorial representations, the emotional impact of which was designed, as always, to galvanise public opinion and sustain the will to fight. This general objective and these representations of Hitler deserve closer observation, and this is the object of the present paper.

Concentrating on the representations of Hitler in British and American WWII propaganda posters inevitably entails looking at the darker side of means of persuasion and the more negative aspects of the techniques used to influence the civilian populations. My purpose here will be to look at the propaganda contexts in which representations of Hitler were used, to examine the variety of these war posters and the techniques used in the representations of the Nazi leader imported into domestic settings in Britain and the United States. Of particular interest

---

2 Wherever displayed, in order to be effective, posters had to achieve three main objectives — they first needed to attract the attention of those passing by; having done so they had to communicate their message clearly; and lastly the message had to imprint itself on the viewer’s memory. Additionally, as the poster message had to be instantly understandable; the pictures reinforced the text, and vice versa.

3 This analysis is based on a representative collection: the 25 British posters representing Hitler, which are held at the British Imperial War Museum, London, and 40 American posters picturing the Nazi dictator, many of which can be viewed on-line as part of the collection of American posters held at the University of Minnesota Library <http://umedia.lib.umn.edu/>
will be how British and American artists triggered the emotions and imagination of their viewers, as well as the lasting image of Hitler that may have been left in people’s minds. The Nazi leader was represented in these compelling and emotional British and American posters in a variety of ways: as an object of scorn, as a despicable, abject creature, as a clown or as a fearsome monster, and sometimes as several of these things at one and the same time.

**Hitler as a threat**

It will come as no surprise that Hitler is repeatedly pictured as a threat, both on the American and on the British sides of the Atlantic. However, the degree of threat associated with the Nazi leader varies, as do the number and types of campaigns in which the fear appeal was used to work on the viewer. One can indeed distinguish a range of emotions, which the posters are designed to trigger, corresponding to varying intensities of danger. In other words, Hitler is sometimes pictured as only mildly threatening while, in other cases, the threat is conveyed in a much more frightening manner.

The danger represented by the Nazi leader is more often than not brought close to home by the propaganda artists. Indeed, many posters on the American as well as the British side are anchored in everyday life, where Hitler unexpectedly appears as the Tempter. He is alternatively alluring or enticing, and often in human form, to bring the reality of the threat closer, so to speak. In the 1942, American “Keep ’em firing” campaign, for instance, a fairly realistic placating Hitler is tempting a war worker into staying in bed. (Fig.1) The treacherously soothing words, in the form of a common question, are followed by a warning “Lay-offs cost lives!” which makes the viewer aware of the terrible consequences of listening to the Tempter. In the campaign for production, sleeping in and not pulling one’s weight was thus presented as costing lives, and the threat was encapsulated in the figure of Hitler.

http://digital.lib.umn.edu/warposters/> and some on other sites. Links to these sites are provided in the text of this article.
Another typical case where the Nazi leader, in full uniform, suddenly virtually materialises in everyday life to act as a tempter is to be found in a British poster that was part of the evacuation campaign. It pictures a British mother and her children sitting under a tree in a safe area with an enticing, ghost-like Hitler standing behind her and whispering, “Take them back, take them back, take them back” while pointing at a city in the background. (Fig.2) Listening to the Tempter, whose eyes and words have been deliberately drawn in red to suggest danger and evil, is clearly synonymous with putting lives in danger, and Hitler is again pictured as a threatening figure. The same device is used in an American campaign that aimed to encourage car-sharing. The ghost of Hitler is pictured sitting in the passenger seat with the accusatory words: “When you ride alone, you ride with Hitler.” When the Nazi leader takes on the form of a ghost it is more often than not in an everyday context. The spectre is particularly real and frightening in an American “Loose talk can cost lives” campaign poster which features two drunken workers drinking and talking unguardedly at a bar with the ghostly face of Adolf Hitler on the wall in the background. (Fig.3)
The presence of Hitler is made even more ominous by the use of dimension in the picture: the huge smirking face, with its big ear and gloating eyes looking straight at the viewer, is truly menacing. This incarnation of threat has the obvious objective of frightening the viewer or at least of encouraging him/her to think twice before acting or talking.\(^4\) The general message to the population was that Hitler was always liable to be watching them. If the power of persuasion of realistic pictures was probably greater, the combination of carefully scripted words coupled with the face of Hitler drawn in is also likely to have been efficient.

Both in the United States and in Britain, Hitler was represented as a threat to the war effort in all its forms (the battle for production, the fight against loose talk or against waste) and at the same time, as a malignant omnipresence on the look-out for any weakness on the part of the ordinary citizen. The British government produced two posters on the theme of careless talk with the same objective as the above-mentioned American one, albeit with a slightly different tone. In the British poster entitled “Beware”, the darkening expression on Hitler’s half face is not quite as threatening as the American ghost’s but the seriousness of the danger represented by the Nazi leader is to be read in the dark look, with the sinister, drooping eye instantly linked to his outsized lingering ear.\(^5\)\(^{\text{Fig.4}}\) Again, the simple, but nonetheless effective, correspondence between the caption, “Beware”, and the expression on Hitler’s caricatured face clearly turns the latter into the epitome of danger. Warning of the threat posed by the enemy leaders is often symbolised in the American posters by a synthetic unsmiling face, combining the

---


\(^5\) Another version of the poster is to be found at the Imperial War Museum, IWM PST / 4935.
features of Hitler and Japanese leader Hirohito, with the usual suggestive ominous dark shadow. The simplistic propaganda message that accompanies many of the posters has the advantage of being direct, encouraging the viewer to concentrate on the picture. Such is the case of a poster that rhymes “Work to win, or you’ll work for him.” (Fig.5)

The combination of exhortation and threat is mightily powerful and all the easier to keep in mind when it is simple and sufficiently repeated. When propaganda combines an accusatory tone, warning and fear-breeding visions, it is designed to be conducive to action, whether in the context of war production, as in the “Work to win” poster, or as part of the British food saving campaign, in which people were exhorted to avoid waste. Thus, in the famous poster “Better pot-luck with Churchill today than humble pie under Hitler tomorrow,” Hitler is represented as an unappetising humble pie, and caricatured through the Nazi salute. (Fig.6) The effect of the poster is both to highlight the danger the Nazi leader represents and to belittle him through a contrast with the attractive British Prime Minister. Indeed, roundness is what characterises the brown pot, with the chubby, smiling face of Churchill whose features are clearly synonymous with kindness, openness and mirth. Behind the images of the two leaders, one can easily discern the type of society that each symbolises. The saluting Hitler-pie is small and aggressive, as is suggested by the sharp and pointed lines of the face, and the exaggerated arm movement. The features of the pie face, with its small, black, piercing eyes, the lines underneath them and round the mouth, which is both distorted by his “Heil” and smeared by his black moustache, are so aptly drawn that they seem to encompass the nastiness of the character and of the regime that he wants to impose. The choice the viewer should make is simple: follow and support Churchill and reject Hitler.

Indeed, showing Hitler as threatening, unpleasant, or ugly is part and parcel of a propaganda strategy that aims at inducing revulsion in the hearts of the viewers through fear or disgust. In American images, the three Axis leaders are often pictured in the same caricature, thus putting them in the same boat, so to speak. This is the case in an illustration of the “Look who’s listening” slogan, which pictures Hitler and equally repulsive versions of Mussolini and Hirohito, all three with one oversized red ear. (Fig.7) In other cases, the three heads are represented in a more realistic manner, seeking a different reaction. The viewer is no longer exhorted just to “Look” or “Beware”, but to act in a much more aggressive way and “Stamp ’em out!” as the American public was encouraged to do in a poster urging them to buy U.S. Stamps and Bonds.

The three disembodied heads of the Axis leaders nevertheless retain their usual sinister attributes and are suitably darkened to suggest their shady or evil characters.\(^7\) (Fig.8)

The menace can be made even more ominous by using a dehumanising process, turning Hitler into a number of negatively-connoted animals associated with evil. Thus, metaphorical stamping out is turned into downright killing in a much more aggressive American poster that was part of the battle for production campaign: Hitler is transformed into an evil snake. (Fig.9) He is no longer a dark human threat that must be rejected and fought; he is much more deadly and is given a new nightmarish dimension.\(^8\) The dehumanisation of the Nazi leader is complete: only the familiar lock of hair and the stamped swastikas remain. What is more, as a serpent, Hitler is condemned as slithering, treacherous and potentially deadly. However, although it is raising its ugly head, one cannot fail to notice that the snake is on the verge of being crushed by a large and very well protected boot, which suggests that, despite the evil and dangerous character of the Nazi leader, he can be overpowered. Thus, the poster can be said to achieve two aims and to play on several feelings at the same time: the realism of the adder raising its ugly head instantly reminds the viewer of the acute threat embodied before his eyes, while the message of the raised boot tells him that the already shrivelling serpent can be crushed. One can easily imagine the impact of such a poster and how it must have struck hearts and imaginations. Disgust and hatred may well have been stronger than fear.

The process of dehumanisation sends various subliminal messages to the viewer according to the nature of the ‘beast’ he is being asked to fight, and the variety of animal representations used in both British and American posters to condemn the Nazi leader shows the severity of the indictment. Indeed, in a poster warning against careless talk, Hitler is embodied as a rat which displays the characteristics of Hirohito but with a huge swastika stamped on its body.\(^9\) (Fig.10) The Nazi-Japanese rat is all the more repulsive as its long tail and sharp claws are prominent. Needless to say the usual connotations of the rat (including disease etc. …) apply here and will be associated with Hitler. Arachnophobia is another reaction exploited to arouse a feeling of revulsion. Hitler is turned into a spider, by British artists this time, in a poster entitled “One by one his

---

\(^7\)The poster can also be viewed at <http://faculty.tcc.edu/LRainard/online/his-122/spri/8b-week/guide10f1.htm>, accessed on 16\(^{th}\) November 2011.

\(^8\)The poster can be viewed by visiting the University of North Texas digital library. <http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc441/>, accessed on 16\(^{th}\) November 2011.

\(^9\)This poster, as well as other, British, ones on the same theme can be viewed on <http://www.homesweethomefront.co.uk/web_pages/hshf_careless_talk_pg.htm>, accessed on 16\(^{th}\) November 2011.
legs will be broken,” (Fig.11) not only because the insect symbolises prehensile greed, but also to induce an immediate desire to crush and kill, for, although the spider’s legs are indeed being cut off one by one, the impending threat remains. Indeed, dehumanisation and association with repulsive and dangerous animals allow the propagandist to represent Hitler as a threat which must be fought actively. Thus, the repulsive rat must be “starved with silence,” which entails action (or rather refraining from action) from the American public. As for the spider crawling over the globe – which is a variation on the common propaganda metaphor of the octopus spreading its tentacles over the world – it will be killed. It should be added that the body of the spider is adorned with the horrid head of Hitler, which necessarily makes the act of cutting off its legs one by one rather satisfying for those who hate them – or of course him. The poster is a metaphorical projection of the progressive end of Hitler’s control over Europe, but what is much more interesting, apart from the statement of confidence, is the propaganda technique of dehumanising, turning into a monster, and necessarily triggering feelings of fear and detestation.

Animals can be threatening in various ways. In British campaigns, there are hardly any examples of posters representing Hitler that may have triggered such intensity of emotion as the American ones. The creature most frequently found in British posters is the “Squander Bug”, a less than fearsome Hitler-like character with some devilish attributes that was created to fight waste and encourage saving. The caricature turns Hitler into a maleficent bug that is “Wanted for sabotage”. Although it is said to be Hitler’s pal, and not Hitler himself, it has the usual characteristics of the Nazi dictator, with the lock of hair brushed to one side, and swastikas stamped all over its body. Additionally, it has been given devil’s horns, has menacing pointed teeth set in a huge greedy mouth, the whole against a threatening dark background.

The Squander Bug is an interesting departure from the usual representations of the fearful dictator, to say the least. Not only is it a clear indictment of the enemy, but it goes a step further in the

---


11 This image was used, for instance, in Nazi posters criticising worldwide Jewish influence.

12 This poster, as well as another one on the same theme, can be viewed at <http://www.prints-online.com/squander_bug_wanted_poster_world_war_two/print/4452511.html>
<http://www.prints-online.com/beware_the_squander_bug_world_war_two_poster/print/4452509.html>.

The Imperial War Museum also holds a number of posters featuring the Squander Bug in variously threatening forms. <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/search?query=squander+bug&submit=&items_per_page=10>, accessed on 16th November 2011.
dehumanising, demonising and thus belittling of the Nazi dictator,\textsuperscript{13} thus tending to move away from previous fear-inducing posters. Indeed, the choices made by the artists in their representations of Hitler have to be analysed in terms of the reactions that they may have aroused in the hearts of the viewers. What are the feelings expected here? Perhaps not fear, but, at least disgust or a desire to crush and destroy, as one does a bug. The picture and the text that accompanies it are more accusatory than conducive to violence, although this is not always the case. In another war savings campaign poster, a similar Squander Bug is pictured running away from danger, while the slogan exhorts the British people to “Kill him with war savings.”\textsuperscript{(Fig.12)} In propaganda, taking part in the war effort may be synonymous with metaphorically eliminating the enemy, which entails picturing Hitler in as ugly, repulsive and hateful a way as possible, and this, as we have seen, is done through animalisation, through association with variously repulsive and dangerous beasts.

The central object of this paper is to concentrate on the image left with the viewer by the different representations of the Nazi dictator. As suggested above with the example of the serpent, it can be argued that the most impressive posters are those combining a degree of realism with pictorially powerful religious and moral condemnation. Interestingly, the dictator is pictured as truly frightening only in a minority of posters. The menace is, however, most acute in a “Warning!” poster that is part of the American “Keep ‘em firing” campaign, picturing a bloodthirsty Hirohito and a cruel, evil, murderous Hitler both bent on preying upon the American homeland. \textsuperscript{(Fig.13)} In this case of bringing the threat closer to home, the realism of the faces (and of the weapons) combines with the text to make the call even more urgent. One other poster, in a secondary American campaign aiming at preventing forest fires, raises the stakes by making Hitler’s murderous intentions and madness even more patent \textsuperscript{(Fig.14)}\textsuperscript{14} Technically speaking, the poster employs distortion of features and emphasises ugliness or monstrosity. Hitler’s bulging eyes and the predominance of red and fire suggest both folly and evil, and, indeed, in this caricature, both Axis leaders look not only thoroughly inhuman, but dangerously mad.

Of course, Hitler always deserves moral condemnation, but its intensity varies with the message, being all the more vivid when actual photographs are used. An American example includes the severed head of the bombastic, screaming Nazi leader, warning, “We shall soon have

\textsuperscript{13} On the other hand, unlike the previous cases of animalisation, it may not be without a touch of humour as the tone and representations on other posters are more light-hearted. Indeed, it is sometimes pictured as a jollier creature albeit still devilish, with the tail often forked and the bug’s body always covered in swastikas.

our Storm Troopers in America! What do You say, America?”  

(Fig.15) A British montage published in winter 1942-43 contains a quote from the Führer, “One is either a German or a Christian ..... you cannot be both.” (Fig.16) It combines an actual full-length photograph of a stern-faced, hateful Adolf Hitler raising his clenched fist, with bombed-out London and homeless human figures walking out of the blitzed ruins in the background. The symbolic red used in the American poster is even more emotionally striking in the British one, since the whole sky has been coloured blood-red, thereby clearly expressing the nature of the man and of his regime. Hitler is not only deliberately presented as rejoicing in his own avowed cruelty, but also condemned as immoral and incapable of redemption. Despite the similarity in the pictorial technique, there is a significant difference between the American use of the photograph of the Nazi leader and the British montage. Indeed, the American viewer is openly asked to react to Hitler’s aggression, whereas the British poster is a statement, a moral condemnation.  

One may argue, however, that the viewer is expected to react in both cases by fighting the menace. Moral condemnation is coupled with dehumanisation in the extreme case of a poster entitled “Maneater,” picturing Hitler as a cannibal. (Fig.17) Not content with with deliberate mass murder, the Nazi leader is represented as eating his victims. The monstrosity of Hitler as a Nazi ogre is highlighted through vivid red and black colours, thus exposing atrocity in an even more gruesome fashion; the metonymical skulls of the countries invaded by the Nazis are pictured lying in a sea of blood, and the giant cannibal’s teeth are busy eating the remaining flesh off a leg bone, which is dripping with gore.

---

15 The poster can be viewed on the Marshall Foundation Library site: <http://library.marshallfoundation.org>, accessed on 16th November 2011.

16 Churchillian rhetoric made much of the moral duty of the British to defend Christian civilisation.

17 This was one of a series of Russian posters translated into English and published in 1942-43 in Britain by the Ministry of Supply in support of the propaganda campaign aiming to “rush arms to Russian hands.” What is interesting here is that these posters were published in English alongside the more subdued ones by British artists.

18 The poster can also be viewed on the following site: <http://www.trinity.edu/mkearl/death05/skulls/propaganda.htm>, accessed on 17th November 2011.

The Maneater poster is reminiscent of British and American WW1 depictions of the barbaric Hun. It undeniably reaches the pinnacle of monstrosity, but, as we have argued, Hitler was not so virulently condemned in World War II British and American posters. Moral or philosophical indictment seems to have been more the exception than the rule; the majority of the posters are not awe-inspiring. The Nazi leader is pictured as enticing, luring, lurking, mildly threatening, ugly, repulsive, greedy, fearsome, screaming, mad, violent, cruel, satanic, evil and barbaric. The accumulation is nevertheless impressive, and the same features and techniques were used in both countries, with the same propaganda objectives.

Interestingly, representations of Hitler as a monster seem to suggest either moral or political statements which the viewer is expected to accept as facts. They are all the more powerful and convincing, of course, as they address the deeper emotions and will, one may suppose, engrain themselves all the more effectively in people’s minds as they are violent and fearsome, thus triggering emotions which are likely to linger. Repetition being inherent in propaganda, one may add that the multiplication of the same visual message was likely to increase its efficiency. However, the propagandists of the day were probably not concerned with long-term, lasting impressions; their objective was to elicit immediate action on the part of ordinary citizens, so that triggering powerful emotions conducive to saving, keeping quiet or working harder by using the figure of Hitler was what mattered. The imperative of effectiveness meant that the authorities ensured that a variety of tones and propaganda devices were used to achieve the same objective, so that both in Britain and in the United States, Hitler was represented alternatively as a despicable, abject creature, a dangerous menace, a fearsome monster or paradoxically, a laughing stock and an object of scorn.

**Hitler as a clown**

When Hitler is not presented as threatening in one form or another, he is an object of contempt or ridicule, and/or a direct target of violence. The many sources available tend to suggest that belittling the Nazi leader was more common, which tends to show that ridicule was considered as a very efficient tool. However, there is wide variety in the tones used or the emotional impressions that seem to stem from the humorous posters. With varying degrees of subtlety and credibility, the Nazi

---

20 This, one may argue, is even more the case in times of war, when people’s feelings are more on edge than in normal circumstances.

21 Although the way the posters are perceived today is not necessarily the same as it was in the war years, since the perception of humour is, to a certain extent, anchored in time, the fact
leader is turned into a clown-like figure, an object of contempt, of mockery, of ridicule, which seems to be at odds with the threatening representations, all the more so as these contrasting devices were used in to the same ends in same British and American campaigns: fighting against carelessness, fighting against loose talk, encouraging saving and, above all, encouraging production. Far from being menacing, the clown-like figure of Hitler is ripe for metaphorical destruction.

**Metaphorical destruction: punching, crushing, and out and out violence**

The device is at work in several series of American posters linked to the drive for production, in which the Nazi leader is subjected to punching, kicking, crushing and overall physical maltreatment. The direct violence used against Hitler naturally encourages an equally fierce reaction from viewers, metaphorically speaking, through their active participation on the Home Front. The idea is that if ordinary people take the right actions, Hitler will be beaten. The fight against the dictator is staged in a variety of metaphorical situations, violence occurring in the form of punching three times in American posters and once in British ones. “Keep punching ... every day” reads the caption on one of the American posters, published in 1943 by an unnamed “labor-management production committee,” picturing a strong, energetic worker punching for work and punching Hitler’s disembodied face at the same time. (Fig.18) “Give ‘em the old 1-2,” runs another slogan, where Hitler is turned into a tiny, clown-like puppet that has obviously been floored. (Fig.19) “More Hell for Hitler”, promises a more realistic poster, in which an undersized, half-frightened Hitler sitting in the corner of a boxing ring is obviously going to be severely battered by the hugely muscular American contender in the foreground. (Fig. 20) As well as being demonstrations or statements of strength, (with the outcome scarcely left to the viewer’s imagination), the posters belittle the Nazi leader and picture him as a loser.

![Fig. 20 (University of Minnesota Media Archive)](image)

remains that the degrees of derision as well as the mechanisms that raise a smile or a laugh remain universal and timeless.

22 “Keep ’em pulling for victory”, “Keep ’em firing”, “Win the war with wire”.
The only British poster that echoes its American counterparts is a cartoon-like picture depicting a female part-time war worker slapping Hitler hard in the face, with the slogan: “Just a good afternoon's work!”²³ (Fig. 21) The Nazi leader himself is depicted full-length as frightened, pink-cheeked and helpless, since the blow has actually made him lose his balance. It is a typical case of reversing the usual representation of the fearsome dictator, and this caricature through inversion aims at encouraging emulation through humour. Naturally, the feelings expected from the viewer include satisfaction at seeing Hitler’s discomfiture and, hopefully, an obvious desire to repeat the medicine. The belittling and ridiculing is still there, but the British slapping of Hitler is nothing compared to the violence that the American artists use in their propaganda posters, (which at least implicitly stresses the industrial muscle of the United States). For instance, as part of the “Keep ‘em pulling for victory” campaign, the dazed head of Hitler is seen trapped in the heel of a shoe and on the verge of exploding, as “production” has already lit the fuse; “Give this heel the hot foot”, reads the caption. (Fig. 22) Hitler is presented as an easy, vulnerable target and production (active participation in the war effort), will inevitably result in victory over him.

Fig. 22 (University of Minnesota Media Archive)

The metaphorical destruction of the Nazi leader also involves reifying him through caricature, as in a series of examples from the “Keep ‘em firing” campaign, some of which are not without a touch of humour. In one poster, he is turned into a frightened, sweating golf ball. The grim determination and the anger that can be read on the golfer’s face are clear indications of the impending violence of the drive expected from American workers. Not only does the representation make the reduced

²³ The poster can be viewed at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/theartofwar/prop/production_salvage/INF3_0400.htm>, accessed on November 17th 2011.
Nazi leader an easy prey to be hit as hard as possible, but the dehumanisation is complete.

Caricature enables the artist to make Hitler look helpless and easy to overcome in “Put him in a ‘pincers’”, which features him with another puppet-like body whose fat head is being inexorably squeezed by enormous pincers.

Arguably, the visual satisfaction of seeing the Nazi dictator at the mercy of American hardware is fairly innocuous, as the traits are rather humorous. Moreover, one cannot fail to note the play on the word “pincers”, presumably echoing “panzers”, (which mirrors the pun on the word “heel” and the double meaning of “drive” in the examples discussed above). In some cases, however, Hitler is not only helpless, but subjected to serious torture, as in “Helping to crack the world’s biggest nut.” (Fig.23) Despite the presence of yet another play on words (with the usual technique of a catching caption illustrated by a picture), the caricature is here much more violent. Indeed, the realism of the strong hands belonging to the factory worker, the size of the fearsome nutcracker, the horrid bulging eye and the thick red pleats of Hitler’s squashed face all contribute to the brute reality of the scene. Of course,
this is another case of deriding and belittling the enemy, reduced to a sweating severed head, but not one likely to provoke laughter.

Still less so are a series of old-fashioned-looking posters in dark blue or black, white and red. Their humourless nature lies not only in the twisted features of the ugly Hitler-Hirohito characters, but also in the presence of blood, which is notably absent from all the other posters representing Hitler. The enemy is represented as overwhelmed: either at the mercy of Uncle Sam’s double-barrelled gun, or a completely knocked out, distorted puppet. Nowhere is torture more apparent than in the “Win the war with wire” posters, which picture the puppet figure of “Hiro-Hitler” being either electrocuted, tied up and hanging from a hook, flattened and lying in a pool of blood, or squashed to death in a press,(25) (in “We can stiffen the axis” pictured below). The discrepancy in the sizes of the characters, the looks of horror on Hitler’s face, and his helpless position at the mercy of the American production machine all combine to send the viewer the same message: not only is Hitler utterly vulnerable, but the violence to which he is subjected clearly smacks of revenge. The bloody murderer is being given a taste of his own medicine, and he is no longer an active threat. The utter helplessness of the puppet is obvious, and, as a graphic encouragement to harm Hitler, the series is brutally powerful.

The violence directed at the puppet figure of Hitler is also apparent in the Russian posters used in Britain with the aim of encouraging productivity,(26) which tends to suggest that crushing the enemy with tools, belittling and hurting Hitler was a common feature of allied propaganda. Indeed, the dictator is systematically put into a position of weakness and dehumanised at one and the same time. In a poster with the caption

---


26 This series of posters was commissioned by the British Ministry of Supply in 1941. They are part of the Imperial War Museum’s collection as indicated below.
“but Russia needs the tools NOW!” Hitler has been drawn to look bug-like with a small fat body lying on its back and ridiculously small arms and legs. The features of its face are grossly distorted and the miniature gun with its thin wisp of smoke is no match for the huge red butt of the gun that will inevitably squash him to death. In addition, Hitler is likened to Napoleon, which obviously signifies that his fate will be identical. Such are the lessons of history. In “Rush British arms to Russian hands,” the ugly, distorted face of a puppet-like Hitler is being strangled by the combined efforts of the British and the Russians. In “Smashing the enemy,” violence is combined with humour as he is again belittled and ridiculed, helplessly brandishing pistols while his head and raised arms are on the verge of being crushed by an enormous red tank. Hitler’s face almost always expresses surprise and fear, thereby showing how the tide of the war is changing. It is clear that the “smashing” will be the prelude to victory achieved by allied cooperation.

Ridiculing and lampooning

The Nazi leader’s vulnerability goes hand in hand with the viewer’s positive (and active) response to the propaganda message, and, in order to hammer it home, the British and American authorities obviously encouraged as wide a variety of tones as possible.

Thus, as in the case of the threatening representations of Hitler, belittling and dehumanising the dictator could be achieved with varying degrees of humour. It is as if, through pictorial representation, the viewer was invited to watch Hitler’s discomfiture and to rejoice at his prospective defeat. This is illustrated by a 1942 poster which pictures an ugly Hitler (as well as the other two Axis leaders) running for his life with a fearful look on his face, pursued by a giant snowball bearing the label “more production”. American war workers are made to think that more production, an urgent necessity in the context of “total war”, will inevitably be the end of the Nazi dictator. The message is clear: Hitler is doomed, as are the other two Axis leaders. The technique used is derision coupled with insistence on the need for the viewer to do what is expected of him. Indeed, the propaganda strategy often consists in presenting an already beaten Hitler to anticipate the results of the

27 Kukryniksi, 1941, IWM, PST/3142. The poster can also be viewed at <http://vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=25861>, accessed on November 17th 2011. The metaphorical killing is particularly violent in these Russian posters, a characteristic that is also to be observed in the Russian “Maneater” poster analysed above.

28 The colour red is naturally predominant, as is the recourse to history as a sure sign that victory is bound to ensue if the civilian population participates in the war effort by arming the Russians.

29 IWM, PST / 0010.

30 Kukryniksi, 1941, IWM, PST / 3143.
viewer’s active involvement. This naturally entails the use of cartooning, of caricature, and generally speaking of pictorial representations that depart from realism, with the humorous quality or comical dimension of a picture lying in the pleasure felt by the viewer at the contrast between reality and (impossible) fiction. Here, the satisfaction derives from the reversal of the position of Hitler, from the viewer’s pleasure at seeing the supposedly powerful leader reduced to a frightened midget.

Such metaphorical destruction of Hitler is staged in another poster entitled “Bowl them over,” in which the Nazi leader is turned into a skittle, necessarily legless and armless, which makes him appear clown-like or puppet-like, completely dehumanised and therefore, once again, vulnerable.31 (Fig.25) Hitler is sent flying in another skittle alley in a “Keep ‘em pulling for victory” campaign. (Fig. 26)

The pictorial techniques at work in many of these posters range from fairly bland stylisation with little appeal to the imagination or feelings, to graphic humour that is all the more attractive as it implicitly involves the viewer in the picture through a process of expected imitation or emulation. The belittling process is systematic, but, while some posters evidently encourage aggressiveness, if not hatred, and are definitely unfunny, others rely on ridicule and lampooning in a much more humorous or light-hearted vein, sometimes by means of aesthetic exaggeration and simplification. What is particularly striking in these representations of Hitler is the systematic toppling from the position of the supposedly powerful dictator. In American pictures, he becomes a ridiculous puppet with a long face, drooping eyes and an overlong lock of hair (a sort of overgrown school-boy), in one case being kicked in the buttocks with obvious glee by a factory worker.32 Through such devices, the artist expresses a certain vision of the dictator, by limiting him to one

Fig. 26 (University of Minnesota Media Archives)


32 This poster can be viewed at: <http://usapropaganda.com/propaganda-shop/shirt-a-day-missed-a-chance-lost.htm>, accessed on November 17th 2011.
particular characteristic. Hitler is thus repeatedly reduced to a trapped, frightened face, suggesting that he is easily scared.\textsuperscript{33} The Nazi leader is made to look extremely worried in an inter-allied strength through unity poster, depicting British and American sailors raising their pints together in a pub whilst Hitler and Goebbels lurk despairingly in the background saying: “Unless we can divide those two fellows – we’re sunk!”\textsuperscript{34} The idea is to encourage confidence in victory through a contrasting picture staging strong, cheerful, united British and American servicemen as against a pale, worried-looking, weak leader. The belittling and ridiculing of Hitler may even induce scorn on the part of the viewer in the SHHH! poster, where Hitler looks positively sheepish.\textsuperscript{35}

The most obvious case of reversing the usual representation of the fearful dictator through ridicule is undoubtedly a British one entitled “Help put the lid on Hitler by saving your old metal and paper,” (Fig.27) which is an illustration of a metaphorical expression reducing Hitler to rubbish (indeed, he is being squeezed into a bin) and making him look like a frightened puppet\textsuperscript{36}. Making Hitler a burlesque or grotesque figure subject to visual and/or verbal ridicule enables the propagandist to diminish him to a single characteristic which supposedly reflects his character. The same principle is at work in the American “Keep ‘em pulling for victory campaign,” in which Hitler, sitting in a ridiculously small car (together with the other two Axis leaders) is alternately choked with dust, (Fig.28) bespattered with mud, or trapped in a bottle, (Fig.29) clearly indicating his fear, in direct opposition to the usual image of the fearsome dictator.

Belittling and deriding naturally involve staging and representing in various manners, which means that Hitler comes in many different shapes and sizes: more often than not in the form of a puppet, an object, an animal, or a child. Animalisation is an age-old lampooning technique, and Hitler is either given monkey characteristics or even turned into an animal in two American posters: an ape-like stupid-looking Hitler, 

\textsuperscript{33} Such is the case of an American poster entitled “Fast and steady speeds my lathe,” which deals with the theme of slackness or carelessness in the war production and pictures Hitler being trapped in a torpedo by a happy-looking worker. See <http://tutorial51.com/2010/01/inspiration-80-amazing-wwii-allied-propaganda-posters/>. Although this is not evident at first sight, the poster is intended to induce guilt. Indeed, the caption at the bottom reads: “Brave men shall not die because I faltered”; the hesitation between modes (humour/warning/moralising) might suggest that it dates from early in the war.

\textsuperscript{34} The poster, part of an exhibition entitled “Weapons on the wall”, can be viewed at <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~pv/pv/courses/posters/images7/unless.html>.

\textsuperscript{35} The poster can be seen at <http://history1900s.about.com/library/photos/blywiiwp132.htm>, accessed on November 17th 2011.

\textsuperscript{36} The hand closing the lid of the bin is disproportionately huge, as usual, and again a feeling of satisfaction is expected from the visual effect, which will hopefully lead to emulation on the part of the viewer.
reduced to a mere head in a “Don’t talk out of turn” campaign; an improbable monkey climbing up a telegraph pole illustrating the “Look who’s listening” slogan. Nevertheless, if treating Hitler in this way is both dehumanising and derisive, the shrinking device of reducing him to a child while retaining his usual physical traits and dress is probably more efficient. In the 1942 British poster entitled “Let’s speed the things we make (for Hitler’s birthday cake),” a baby Hitler in uniform is sitting in his high chair reading a birthday card that presumably contains a suitably unpleasant birthday message. The gnome-like Hitler with his oversized cap is dwarfed by the cake in front of him which is decorated with Hurricanes and the letters RAF included in the icing. The powerfully sarcastic mode clearly adds to the belittling/reducing device.

Lampooning for real effect is a subtle art, requiring careful balance. While you take the enemy down a peg, you also have to make sure people still take the threat seriously. This combination is probably best achieved through the grotesque and, given the number of posters in this vein, one cannot but conclude that the British and American authorities deemed the device efficient. It is illustrated by the graphic design of an American “loose talk” poster picturing a barely camouflaged Hitler turned into a clownish waitress with an oversized ear, but the most effective ones are to be found in the British context, with the “Careless talk costs lives” series of posters by Fougasse. They are undoubtedly the best known examples of such grotesque representations of Hitler. The Führer is pictured in everyday life situations, eavesdropping in all sorts of absurdly incongruous places, in ludicrous contexts, systematically hiding, and equally systematically ridiculed. Fougasse draws a dog-like Hitler listening in through an open sash window, a Hitler stylised on sheets of wallpaper, and a clown-like object of decoration in a pub; the Nazi leader is also pictured taking notes, sticking out from under a table, or dressed up as Louis XIV in a painting, with his usual black lock still showing. Arguably, the humorous tone enables the viewer to rationalise the danger, while hopefully doing what the propaganda says, i.e. not talking carelessly.

Taking the ridicule one stage further, Hitler is not only the butt of visual or verbal mockery, but is also the object of puerile humour. In a

---


38 The Fougasse posters, part of the “Weapons on the wall” exhibition, can be viewed at <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~pv/pv/courses/posters/posters4.html>, accessed on November 17th, 2011. The original posters are held by the Imperial War Museum. One can imagine that the number of the posters commissioned is an indication of their usefulness and of the importance of the message.
great many posters, the technique at play is obviously derision. The artists poke fun at Hitler’s physical characteristics, mock his usual attributes and stigmatise his attitudes of mind. To fight carelessness, for instance, an American caricature turning Hitler into yet another child-like puppet poster pokes fun at his accent with the caption “for carelessness I gif nice medal.” (Fig. 30). Other derisive posters ranging from the burlesque to the grotesque rely similarly on wordplay and encourage the American viewer to give Hitler a taste of his own medicine, so to speak. Such is the case in “Give him a ‘putsch’ in the puss”, in which a strong hand pushes Hitler’s face so violently that he is knocked off balance, his bulging eyes and red face suggesting the usual fear and vulnerability. (Fig. 31) The deriding of Hitler’s power is also at work in “Knock the ‘Heil’ out of Hitler,” from the “Let’s keep ‘em pulling for victory” campaign, picturing Hitler as a puppet with a round, stupid face and a somewhat fat rear end in a ridiculous position on the verge of falling off a truck and again in “Set ‘em on their Axis”, showing the three Axis leaders landing on their ample posteriors. (Fig. 32)

In similar childish vein, “Let’s catch him with his ‘panzers’ down” shows Hitler in a sheepish and utterly ridiculous position with his toy tanks lying broken on the floor. (Fig. 33)
These illustrations of the burlesque, accompanied by amusing plays on words, effectively satirise the Nazi leader’s usual boasting attitude and implicitly put the average American in a position of superiority. The burlesque is often combined with sarcasm, and, in the same vein as above, the “Mark the spot” poster pictures an oversized child-Hitler being interrupted while playing with his toys by American fighter-planes firing at his huge buttocks which have been branded with a swastika. (Fig. 34) It is undoubtedly the most effective illustration of the “Keep ‘em firing” slogan. Finally, after the Heil, the putsch and the panzers, derision and plays on words are coupled with dehumanisation in a humorous tone in yet another American poster in the same campaign with the caption “Give him a whiff of his own B.O.” (Fig. 35) This is a typical case of “getting one’s own back” on Hitler who is, one must admit, a far cry from the threatening figures examined at the beginning of this paper.

What is striking in these propaganda posters is the large variety to be found in the representations of Hitler as well as in the emotional levers used to invite action on the part of the viewer. Regardless of the tone used, the menace (and indeed the reality) of Nazi aggression is exposed. Whether Hitler is represented as a threat irrupting into people’s ordinary lives or as an easy target to be relentless and variably aimed at, the obvious or implied message is that the Nazi leader should or could be beaten. Indeed, through the sheer variety of these British and American posters, and regardless of the motivational tools used by the propaganda artists that produced them, one can discern the same underlying message: whether the destruction or the ousting is actually staged or simply

---

39 When aimed at the enemy, ridicule has a social function, which aims to exclude the other side so as to achieve unity. Of course, public derision also enables the author of caricature to side with his viewers. Needless to say the immediate and automatic laughter excludes the target. In the case of propaganda posters, the target is “not one of us” and is recognised and ultimately assimilated to everything hateful or scorned which does not belong to the values of the group.

40 As is suggested by the polecat, B.O. usually means “Body Odour”, not “Blitzkrieg Offensive”.

---
presented as desirable, the representations of Hitler are – not surprisingly – aimed at convincing people that they must reject him and all that he stands for.

When Hitler is represented as a clown, his impending defeat is often suggested as is usual in any morale-boosting propaganda. Simultaneously, (and this is the aim of the propagandist), the viewer is encouraged to act, so as to render this downfall possible. When the Nazi dictator is shown as a monster, however, the motivational tools used by the propagandist are totally different. Indeed, he no longer works on feelings of national pride and responsibility, but on powerful undercurrents of anxiety and fear. The variety of emotional levers at play in these propaganda posters is precisely what makes the representations of the dictator so interesting.

The enduring picture of Hitler is a combination of monster and clown. It remains difficult to assess the balance between the two. Interestingly, when Hitler is pictured as a looming threat in a particular campaign, the tone is somewhat attenuated by the number of derisive or humorous posters available on the same theme. Overall, rather than reminding the viewer what sort of beast he is fighting, which was more a feature of First World War propaganda campaigns, it seems that British and American World War 2 posters tend to oscillate between monster and clown, albeit with a distinct prominence of the latter.

Is there a difference between the British and the American output? It can be argued that similar pictorial techniques are used on both sides. The difference lies first in the volume of production, which was much greater in America and in the frequency of the tones used. One cannot fail to notice that the British posters portraying Hitler are generally much more serious in tone, while the American ones tend to be light-hearted or downright humorous. At the same time, some of the posters published in Britain tend to be more violent and more accusatory. One may be tempted to conclude that this reflects a different viewpoint on the part of the British authorities regarding how best to motivate the troops on the Home Front. Fear, revulsion and hatred are hugely powerful propaganda weapons when it comes to urging people to act. Were they considered to be more efficient than humour? Given the success of the Fougasse posters, one may have one’s doubts. Interestingly, the posters that are truly threatening or that make a moral or religious statement hardly ever suggest ultimate victory. This is especially true of the British posters, the American ones being much more positive in this respect. Moreover, even though cartooning and humour are more systematic on the American side, and despite the lack of fearsome realism in the American representations of Hitler, they are far from being devoid of violence and condemnation. Indeed, crude metaphorical beating, punching, squashing
and crushing are characteristic of the American output. In comparison, there is hardly any violence in the British humorous posters.

How can one interpret these distinctive features? Admittedly, American and British experience of the war and of the nature of the threat was very different. Can it be said that ridicule was not appropriate when the war situation did not lend itself to laughter? Is the degree of seriousness dependent on the geographical distance between the warring country and the enemy? This might account for the variations between countries, but it would seem that national cultural idiosyncrasies were also at work, explaining the difference in tone between the two outputs, (or indeed between the Soviet posters translated for the British public and the others).

The dates and war contexts of the posters may also explain changes in approach, but since many of the WW2 posters are not dated and the artists unknown, any conclusions must remain speculative. As far as timing and scale of circulation are concerned, one may wonder whether or not the output was carefully planned. For instance, do the fear-inducing posters correspond to a period of slackness on the Home Front? British recourse to the violent Russian posters in 1942 and the almost systematic bloodthirstiness and evil linked to Hirohito in the US may suggest that stronger feelings of repulsion were necessary at some key points in the war. One must inevitably face the difficult question of the impact and effectiveness of these very different representational techniques. How can one reconcile the clown and the monster? Were the violent posters published after the more comical ones had been found ineffective? Or was there a deliberate attempt on the part of the authorities to produce a medley of tones to ensure maximum efficiency? As always with propaganda, the reactions of the recipients are hard to assess. Similarly, while the objectives of Home Front propaganda campaigns are very clear, the instructions that may have been given by to the various artists throughout the war years are not. One may wonder how far they were guided by the authorities and how much leeway they were allowed to interpret these propaganda objectives in pictorial form. More research is needed to try and explore these strategic choices.

Looking at the finished product however, we may well wonder at the imagination of these war artists on both sides of the Atlantic, at the multiple techniques they used to appeal to the hearts and minds of the ordinary citizens, and at the resulting lasting impression these representations of Hitler must have made: murderer, madman, or megalomaniac in the United States; brute, cannibal or monster in Britain; a tempting devil in both. Hitler, whether monster or clown, was pictured as the personification of greed, folly, bloodthirstiness or evil, and knocked off the pedestal the German propaganda had carefully built for
him. The war of representation was undoubtedly just as fierce as the war of words.

Selective Bibliography