

BACKSTORY WITH THE HISTORY GUYS

THE BATTLE LINES ARE DRAWN

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NOTE: TRANSCRIPT IS FROM AN EARLIER BROADCAST AND MAY CONTAIN SOME INACCURACIES.

BRIAN: When the United States was thrust into World War II in 1941, Franklin Roosevelt's administration took on the work of defining the enemy in this new fight. The Office of War Information printed posters, churned out film reels, and promoted a united front against fascism. But the administration knew it had to be careful, especially considering the role that propaganda played for the enemy.

PAUL HIRSCH: They wanted to make sure that American state sanctioned propaganda did not look like propaganda coming out of fascist countries like Germany, or Japan, or Italy.

BRIAN: This is historian, Paul Hirsch.

PAUL HIRSCH: It was called the strategy of truth. And what Roosevelt and his administration wanted was to focus on dry facts and figures. And so, as a result, the Office of War Information really focused on factual, dry, almost clinical propaganda.

BRIAN: But for some in the administration, the facts simply were not enough. They thought there had to be an emotional appeal if America was to defeat its enemies. So, in order to sidestep this strategy of truth, they turned to a hugely popular medium of the early 1940s, comic books.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

PAUL HIRSCH: They realized, this is the perfect camouflage for propaganda. All of the ads for cheap toys, and wait bulking kits, and all of these things in comic books. And they looked at the violence and the sexuality and said to themselves, there's no way anyone would ever look at a comic book and think that the US government had anything to do with this.

BRIAN: And comics could reach a large audience. At the time, sales reached a billion copies a year. And it was not just children who read comics. More than 40% of servicemen read them to. So, the administration created an organization called The Writer's War Board. Its novelists and journalists produced lots of war related popular culture, including comic books, and they also set policy for the industry.

PAUL HIRSCH: The board was supposed to be independent. It was ostensibly separate from the government. But that wasn't really the case. It got funding and support from the Office of War Information. But because it looked independent, it was able to say things that government propagandists couldn't.

BRIAN: Comics allow for dramatic plots, extreme violence, and a demonized enemy, things harder to get away with in the office of war information. From the beginning, The Writer's War Board had no problem portraying Japanese characters as inhuman. As for Germans, well, at first the board drew a distinction. They wanted Americans to see Nazis, not the German people as the enemy.

PAUL HIRSCH: At the beginning of the war, there is a difference between the way Germans and Nazis were portrayed in comic books. Germans, that is, non-members of the Nazi party, were very often presented as sympathetic characters, as people very different than the tyrannical Nazis who were ruling them.

BRIAN: Hirsch says one example of this can be found in an issue of the comic book, War Heroes. The protagonist, an American soldier, is captured by a German U-boat, where the Nazi captain tortures him relentlessly.

PAUL HIRSCH: While all of this is happening, the German sailors who are explicitly not Nazis who are on this U boat sympathize with the American sailor. They secretly help him behind the back of the Nazi officer. They tend to his wounds. And then ultimately, they help him escape.

BRIAN: Because Nazi ideology was so racially motivated, board members didn't want to commit the same mistakes in their own anti-German propaganda. But all this changed as the war intensified. In 1944, comic book publishers started getting new memos from The Writer's War Board, explicitly reversing this policy.

PAUL HIRSCH: The board condemns all Germans as members of a degenerate nation, whose people, throughout the centuries, have always been willing to follow their military leaders into endless, bloody, but futile warfare. They actually give comic book publishers a template on how to present Germans and Nazis.

BRIAN: Soon, the pages of comic books had no sympathetic German characters. That's because The Writer's War Board rejected plot lines that didn't fit the template. One of the starkest examples was produced at the home of Batman and Superman, DC Comics. It was called *This Is Our Enemy* and had been drafted and redrafted by the board. This comic book showcased familiar superheroes, like Wonder Woman, Green Lantern, and The Flash. These superheroes taught Americans about a millennium of apocryphal German history. The scenes were gruesome.

PAUL HIRSCH: They see a German gazing over a battlefield full of injured and dying soldiers. And he gloats. He says, this is what we Germans have always been taught. And then he laughs at all of these young men dying on the battlefield. And the implication is that there's something inherent in the German mind that causes them to be violent.

BRIAN: This reversal came at a time when the war seemed to have no end in sight. As the Writer's Board says, the stakes had gotten too high for any subtlety in its propaganda.

PAUL HIRSCH: The war is dragging. The United States and its allies invade Italy, and they're having a very tough time of it. The Soviet Union is losing enormous amounts of men and property on the Eastern Front, and what the propagandists at the Writer's War Board realize is that if they are going to build support for this long term war, they have to explain it to Americans in very stark terms, as a war of annihilation.

BRIAN: Now, it's not like The Writer's War Board didn't recognize that representing an entire people as evil was a problem. In fact, they set out to juxtapose the Nazi's racial intolerance with comics praising racial unity in America, despite deep segregation in the Jim Crow South. The result, says Hirsch, was a cognitive dissonance at the heart of the messages conveyed in these comic books.

PAUL HIRSCH: The US propagandist at The Writer's War Board are asking Americans to fight hatred and fascism by themselves, hating on the basis of race and ethnicity. And the way this is put across is by explaining that it's a unique American kind of hatred that's acceptable in the context of a war, that Americans hate the Germans, because the Germans are a threat to the world.

BRIAN: At the war's end, The Writer's War Board shut down, and the pages of comics like "This Is Our Enemy," ended up as mostly a forgotten fiction. Policy had changed in a postwar world. America's enemies could no longer be seen as hopelessly despotic people. Instead, West Germany and Japan received billions of dollars in US aid to help build a new future.

[MUSIC PLAYING – THE BEATLES, "I WANT TO HOLD YOUR HAND"]

We had help on that story from historian, Paul Hirsch, a resident fellow at the Institute for Historical Study at the University of Texas at Austin.

PETER: It's time for us to take another break. When we return, Americans riot over a shadowy foreign threat, the pope.

END TRANSCRIPT