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The Infinite Crisis: How the American Comic Book has been Shaped by War

A Thesis by

Winston Andrus

Chapman University

Orange, CA

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

May, 2021

Committee in charge

Dr. Stephanie Takaragawa-Chair

Dr. Justine Van Meter

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The thesis of Winston Andrus is approved.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and curves, positioned above a horizontal line.

Stephanie Takaragawa (Chair)

A handwritten signature in black ink, featuring a stylized 'J' and 'V', positioned above a horizontal line.

Justine Van Meter

A handwritten signature in black ink, with the name 'Kyle Longley' written in a cursive style, positioned above a horizontal line.

Kyle Longley

May 2021

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by Winston Andrus

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ABSTRACT

The Infinite Crisis: How the American Comic Book has been Shaped by War

by Winston Andrus

This thesis project argues that war has been the greatest catalyst for the American comic book medium to become a socio-political change agent within western society. Comic books have become one of the most pervasive influences to global popular culture, with superheroes dominating nearly every popular art form. Yet, the academic world has often ignored the comic book medium as a niche market instead of integrated into the broader discussions on cultural production and conflict studies. This paper intends to bridge the gap between what has been classified as comic book studies and the greater academic world to demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between war representation in comics, society, and war. This thesis outlines how the relationship between war and comics have been baked into the dawn of the modern American comic book during the interwar period and how that relationship has evolved over time to today.

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In August of 2019, Marvel Comics celebrated their eightieth anniversary. To commemorate the occasion, Marvel published eight retrospective volumes detailing a different decade of the company's existence from its early days in the 1940's as Timely Comics, to the Atlas Comics years of the 1950's, to today. The first book titled "Marvel: The Golden Age 1939–1949" was supposed to come complete with an introduction by *Maus* author Art Spiegelman.¹ However, one line of text changed that outcome and serves as an impetus for this thesis. Spiegelman wrote 'In today's all too real world, Captain America's most nefarious villain, the Red Skull, is alive on screen and an Orange Skull haunts America.'"² Spiegelman's words were met with outright rejection from Marvel, who stated "that Marvel Comics was trying to stay apolitical, 'and is not allowing its publications to take a political stance.'"³

How can Marvel claim an apolitical stance when their oldest popular character is a World War II Captain whose first cover had him punching Adolf Hitler in the face? Moreover, how can the art form of comic books in America uncouple itself from the socio-political world it exists in when every epoch of comics has a direct link to an American war? This paper intends to argue that comic books are historical and cultural actors that continue to shape their audience's understanding of war. This paper will use American comic book production throughout World War II to explain how war and comic books have a direct relationship with each other that can be viewed in a cycle with three distinct sections: the lead-up, the conflict, and the aftermath. This cycle can be found in comic book publishing for every major American war and iconic

¹ Allison Flood, "Art Spiegelman's Marvel essay 'Refused Publication for Orange Skull Trump Dig'" *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/16/art-spiegelmans-marvel-essay-refused-publication-for-orange-skull-trump-dig>.

² Allison Flood, "Art Spiegelman's Marvel essay 'Refused Publication for Orange Skull Trump Dig'" *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/16/art-spiegelmans-marvel-essay-refused-publication-for-orange-skull-trump-dig>.

³ Allison Flood, "Art Spiegelman's Marvel essay 'Refused Publication for Orange Skull Trump Dig'" *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/16/art-spiegelmans-marvel-essay-refused-publication-for-orange-skull-trump-dig>.

representations of the idiosyncrasies of each section will be analyzed and used to explain the influence war has on the American comic book.

The cyclical relationship between war and comic books is a new addition to the current scholarship of both comic book studies and military history. The majority of scholarship between war and comic books revolve around either how comic book creators have reacted to a specific war, or how fictional comic book characters have been shaped by the real-world wars they participated in. This paper adds to this scholarship by arguing that there are identifiable trends found throughout the history of the American comic book medium that are influenced by war. These trends transcend character, creator, or genre produced during the time and are representative of how “wartime is more than a historical signpost, a passive periodizer, and therefore is not only the province of historians. It is thought to function as an abstract historical actor, moving and changing society and creating particular conditions of governance.”⁴

The research for this paper determines that comic books produced in the lead-up to war are overtly patriotic. The narrative settings are usually domestic in nature, with heroes often fighting the corruption of organized crime rather than enemies combatants. The moral standards held by popular characters are polarizing, with the villains epitomizing the absolute worst in humanity and the heroes of any given story embodying whatever is most prized for by American popular culture at the time. This period is marked by an “ends justify the means” approach to solving a problem. Finally, this period is characterized by tying the nation’s worth to the masculinity of its people.

Comic books produced during wartime are less superficially patriotic than the lead-up to war era. However, this is the period where comic books come closest to containing propaganda,

⁴ Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: an Idea, its History, its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

as comic books produced during this period usually contain some sort of government sponsored advertisement that is tied to bolstering the war effort. What can be seen throughout wartime comic books is a revenge fantasy created usually in order to perpetuate racial hatred and xenophobia towards an enemy group of color. The fantasy is typically marked by the use of inhumane acts of violence by the hero of the story as a means of exacting justice on an enemy. The books published during this time often have a more global setting, and the stories continue to have little moral or ethical explorations outside of supporting the war effort in any way possible. Heroes during this time period are the most self-righteous during this period as they are fighting the good fight for America.

Comic books produced during the aftermath are the most socially critical of all three sections of the cycle. The majority of the criticism is leveled toward the American government for the morally dark acts used during the war. This is also the section with the most accurate description of the war experience, as the majority of creators during this time period were veterans of the war they are commenting on. This section returns heroes to domestic threats once more, but these fictional threats usually mimic social problems that American society was not adequately addressing at the time. Heroes are at their most cynical point and often become anti-heroes as a result.

This cycle can be found in every age of American comic book history, as there has been a major American war in each age. The comic book historic timeline is usually broken down into five periods known as ages. The first is the Golden Age, which begins in 1938 with the debut of Superman in *Action Comics #1* and ends in 1956 with the dawn of the Silver Age. The Silver Age begins in 1956 with the debut of the Barry Allen version of The Flash in *Showcase #4* and ends in 1970 when the Bronze Age begins. The Bronze Age of Comics begins in 1970 with

Green Lantern #76 and ends in 1985 with the DC Comics crossover story *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, in conjunction with *The Dark Knight Returns*, and *The Watchmen* mark the start of the Dark Age of Comics, which ends in 2001. September 11, 2001 marks the start of what is known as the Modern Age of Comics which still continues to this day.⁵

It is important to note that comic books in America is an incredibly prolific art form, with an innumerable amount of serialized narratives created in its over eighty year history. As such, the individual comic books used in this paper are mainly drawn from either DC Comics or Marvel Comics. This is not to say that other competing companies or independent publishers did not have proper evidence for this paper. Marvel and DC Comics were used based on the fact that these publishing companies have been the most popular in American popular culture since the dawn of the American comic book when Marvel and DC Comics were known as Timely Comics and National Comics Publications respectfully.

This eighty plus year lifespan for each company makes their most popular characters the best description of what the majority of Americans were reading at the time. The other reason Marvel and DC Comics were used as case studies was that these two companies have had the largest amount of continually serialized narrative of any comic book publisher. This is helpful in proving that the cyclical relationship between war and comic books is not the result of any one person's beliefs, but rather representative of a larger conversation between the comic book medium and war. The length of time these companies have been active in the medium helps explain how American comic books changed throughout its history which is important in supporting the larger argument of this paper.

⁵ There is a comprehensive timeline of the Golden Age of Comics in Appendix B of this paper to better help contextualize the Golden Age in the greater historical narrative of the United States.

Chapter 1 describes the rise of the comic book medium in the late 1930's. The chapter argues that comic books have always been political, as they were created as a commentary on the class struggles that were occurring in America as a byproduct of the Great Depression. The chapter cites the creation of the superheroes Superman and Batman as examples of comic creators creating icons that American youths could look to for protection against the financial and social hardships of the time. The chapter then details how pro-World War II artists and writers changed the narrative of the superhero from a working class protector into a defender of interventionism.

This evolution of the purpose of the superhero in comic books opened the door for feminist comic creators to insert stories and characters that addressed the taboo subjects of gender equality and the patriarchal nature of American society under the guise of interventionist patriotism. The term propaganda is specifically defined to better understand the role comic books play in the World War II war effort. This paper argues that the pre-World War II comic books should not be viewed as propaganda, as propaganda is defined as a message by a government being relayed to an individual, group, or society.

Pre-World War II comic books cannot be classified as propaganda as no member or major publishing company in the comic book industry was employed by the United States government, nor was the interventionist messages being relayed in comics leading up to World War II representative of the public policy of the United States government, or even the American public as a whole. Finally, this chapter argues that racism and xenophobia were heavily used throughout this period in order to create a strong enough moral imperative for the American public to believe in in order to sway public opinion toward engaging in World War II.

Chapter 2 opens with an explanation of the importance of comic books in American society, and how comic books have a great influence on American culture and literacy to this day. The chapter then focuses on how comic book publishers depicted their characters participating in World War II. Specifically, that there was a large divide between National Comics Publications and their minimal depiction of World War II, and Timely Comics and their full embrace of inserting their superheroes into fighting the war. This chapter argues that Timely Comics' attachment to the war effort kept the company in the national spotlight in terms of popularity, and steered the comic book medium to following the Timely Comics model.

Now while National Comics Publications was a strong antagonist to the Timely Comics model, what was shared by both publishers was a steady output of racial hatred towards the Japanese. This chapter concludes by exploring the yellow peril of the 1940's, a period where white Americans created a mass media campaign against "Asians—especially Chinese, Japanese, and South Asians," with the focus on classifying Asian-Americans "as being inassimilable aliens who brought economic competition, disease, and immorality" wherever they went.⁶ World War II helped set the foundation for an over eighty year trend of American comic books spewing racial hatred towards Asians.

The Final concentrates on the comic books published in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The chapter reframes the creation of the Comics Code Authority as a governmental reaction to the culture of comic book publishing during World War II. This reaction and subsequent creation of the Comics Code Authority created a paradigm change within the American comic book industry that saw the. Temporary demise of the superhero comic book, but most importantly did not see the demise of the comic book medium. In fact, this

⁶ Erika Lee, "The 'Yellow Peril' and Asian Exclusion in the Americas", *Pacific Historical Review*, 76, no. 4 (2007): 537.

chapter argues that the American comic book industry thrived in the era of normalcy politics. However, the comic books that were produced during this time had to rely on specific genres in order to sell their work.

This created a shared dominance within the genres of comic books between romance and war in terms of popularity. Both genres contained comic creators who used their medium to critique the shortcomings of how American society was governed. Romance books helped to define the role of the American teenager as a viable identity in society. This gave agency to the rise of American youth culture and is a direct byproduct to the ending of World War II. Yet, the forced heteronormativity, misogyny, and whitewashed nature of romance comic books did not give agency comprehensively. Instead, romance comic books created a hierarchy of acceptability that rewarded being average and punished individualism. Once again, this system of systemic oppression was created as a direct result of the aftermath of World War II.

The other popular genre during this period, war comics, began as a collection of books that had no true connection to war. This was due to a combination of reasons related to the aftermath of World War II. The first being that the depiction of violence had been severely censored under the Comics Code Authority regime. This resulted in war comics being unable to properly translate the dark and violent experiences of World War II to the next generation. The other reason was that the majority of comic book creators making war comics were not participants in World War II.

This led to the majority of the early war comics to only be connected to World War II on superficially. The majority of early war books were superhero comic books dressed in military fatigues. The focus on military superheroes is a large reason why the war comic rose to prominence under the rule of the Comics Code Authority, however these early stories proved to

be problematic. The creators of these early war books relied heavily on outlandish plots and xenophobia from the previous decade. Luckily, the dominance of this period of war comic books was relatively short.

The tone and subject matter of war comic books changed once the majority of creators publishing stories in the genre were World War II and Korean War veterans. War comics became increasingly critical of both the Comics Code Authority as well as the American military once veteran comic book creators took over due to the fact that both these institutions were rewarding the depiction of the United States military in a way that bred blind patriotism and social ignorance. The focus on the late aftermath era war books was on attempting to accurately depict every aspect of war and translating what participating in the military was actually like. The chapter concludes by giving voice to the silences that the comic books of this period had, such as the continued racial hatred during the aftermath era.

Chapter 1

This chapter explores the origins of the modern American comic book and how the art form evolves from a visualization of established Great Depression era fiction into its own cultural identity in 1941. This evolution is marked by the rise of public interest into the American interventionist movement before World War II as the comic books of the early 1940's helped to fuel the movement by incorporating interventionist ideals in both the art and the storytelling. This chapter also focuses on how comic books such as Wonder Woman leveraged America's impending involvement in World War II in order to include messages of social change within its pages. The chapter concludes by exploring how American comic books of the lead up to World War II depicted conflict in an extremely polar moral system, with the American military depicted as a messianic entity and the axis powers as racist and xenophobic stereotypes.

Before The Cycle Begins

As previously stated, there is a cycle throughout American history that defines how comic creators depict conflict. However, this cycle does not begin at the dawn of the modern American comic book, but rather roughly three years later. The generally accepted timeline of the modern American comic book begins in 1938, with the debut of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, with Batman in the following year in *Detective Comics* #27. This Golden Age of comics began as a continuation of the Great Depression era heroes such as The Green Hornet and The Shadow which populated both the airwaves and the newsstands of the early 1930's. While American superheroes got their DNA from pulp fiction, the heroes of the early 1930's were a decidedly darker group.

Most of these heroes were domino-masked vigilantes clad in double-breasted business suits and fedoras, who violently broke up organized crime to protect the downtrodden of their

respective cities. Characters like The Shadow had no qualms about murder, and often operated with an ends justify the means mentality toward crime. The black-and-white, hard-boiled world of the pulp era of popular literature makes sense, as pulp creators were reacting to the stark realities of unemployment, famine, and homelessness that plagued Great Depression America.

This dark and gritty world was precisely the source material that Bill Finger built upon when he wrote the first issue of *Batman*. In fact, Finger tread upon “the guns-and-gumshoes tropes from pulp magazines like *Argosy*, *True Detective*, *Spicy Mystery Stories*, and *Black Mask*” throughout the first few years of *Batman*’s existence, including breaking the character’s famous no kill policy.⁷ In fact, in just the first year of publication alone Batman killed “some twenty-four men, two vampires, a pack of werewolves, and several giant mutants...occasionally at the business end of a gun” just as his pulp fiction predecessors had done for decades before him.⁸ The brutality of the early *Batman* comic books did well to endear the multitudes of children, mostly young boys, who consumed dime novels and transition them into reading comic books instead, but the caped crusader was far from the only draw to comic books at the dawn of the Golden Age.

While there were still heroes that basked in darkness of the early 1930’s, there would be an ease for Americans, if only slightly, thanks to the New Deal. American popular culture needed an image of hope to latch onto as the decade closed. Enter Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster and their Superman. The image of Superman lifting a car with just his bare hands to save the life of a man on the cover of *Action Comics #1* certainly gave its readers a much needed sense of hope as well as intrigue. Intrigue was exactly what National Comics Publications wanted in their

⁷ Glen Weldon, *The Caped Crusade: Batman and the Rise of Nerd Culture*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 14.

⁸ Glen Weldon, *The Caped Crusade: Batman and the Rise of Nerd Culture*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 14.

book, as *Action Comics #1* created a publication template born out of the pulp era that relied on bold, action-heavy covers that caught the eye of children. Once bought, readers would find an anthology of self-contained stories that had little to nothing related to the cover. This system of publication was used by every popular comic book publisher as the primary method for the better part of three decades.

Much like Batman, the early years of Superman were spent under the literary shadow of the popular fiction that came before. Superman was preoccupied with breaking up crime rings and corrupt senators while protecting the livelihoods of the downtrodden. Superman also took a dark page from noir when he often used his ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound in order to intimidate criminals into confessing to murder crimes.⁹ This seemed to be the trajectory for comic books in its infancy, just a more visual way to enjoy the pulp novels an entire generation of children grew up on. However, a comic book that debuted at the start of 1941 helped sever the ties between comic book and pulp fiction in the eyes of the public.

A Timely Invasion

The primary reason for why the Golden Age of comic books has been tied to the debut of Superman was due to how imitated the character was. Within a month, every major publication had their own caped superhero encroaching in on National Comics Publications' market. Timely Comics was one such competitor. Their Superman knock-off, The Angel, debuted in *Marvel Mystery Comics #1* a full year after *Action Comics #1*. Timely Comic's strategy at the end of the 1930's was similar to most of National Comics Publication's competitors, flood the comic books market with as many super clones as possible. There was Namor the Superman of the sea, as

⁹ Joe Shuster, Jerry Siegel, "Superman", *Action Comics*, 1, no. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1938), 8.

well as the Human Torch the fire Superman. This strategy changed when Timely Comics hired artists Joe Simon and Jack Kirby.

Jack Kirby was the son of Jewish immigrants from Austria who came to the United States to build a tailoring business on the East Side of New York City. A consummate professional in comic book industry, Kirby started his professional career in comic books in 1936 at the young age of 19. Kirby soon became a student of Will Eisner, an icon of the American comic book industry whose name is now used to define the best the medium has to offer. By the time that Kirby joined up with Timely, he had already made a name for himself as a prolific comic book artist for several companies. As for his politics, Kirby was staunchly anti-isolationist and when interviewed by *The Comics Journal* in 1990, Kirby remarked that “the only real politics I knew was that if a guy liked Hitler, I’d beat the stuffing out of him and that would be it.”¹⁰

Joe Simon was a relatively different hire for Timely Comics, as Simon had less of a professional tenure in the comic book industry than Kirby. Simon was the son of Jewish immigrants from England, and grew up mostly in Rochester, New York. During his time in Rochester, Simon experienced the subtle pain of institutional anti-semitism. In his autobiography, Simon stated “rather than overt anti-Semitism, it was in a relatively hidden form. Maybe you didn’t see it, but you knew what was going on.”¹¹ Simon started his professional career before his time in the comic books industry as a “political cartoonist and anti-isolationist,” where he protested a 1939 gathering of the American Bund Party in Manhattan which erupted

¹⁰ Jack Kirby, “Interview of Jack Kirby,” interview by Brock J. Hanke, *The Comics Journal*, no. 134 (February 1990): 62.

¹¹ Joe Simon, *My Life in Comics* (London: Titan Books, 2011), 17.

into violence.¹² Simon's life history as the son of Jewish immigrants with penchant for punching Nazi's and drawing comic books fit Kirby's life experiences and passions quite well.

Together, Simon and Kirby created several notable books. They collaborated on *The Blue Bolt* and *Captain Marvel* for Fox Feature Syndicate which drew the eye of President of Timely Comics, Martin Goodman, who hired them to write an original story and eventually become the first editors and art directors for the company. The first issue of their new story, entitled *Captain America Comics*, arrived on newsstands carrying this iconic cover¹³:

Simon, Kirby, and Timely Comics utilized the visual language of the burgeoning comic book industry in order to help urge the male youth of America to take up an interventionist mindset in the lead up to World War II. Timely Comics used the tried and true pulp strategy of

¹² Jason Inman, *Super Soldiers A Salute to the Comic Book Heroes and Villains who Fought for their Country*, (Coral Gables: Mango Publishing, 2019), 24.

¹³ Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, "Meet Captain America", *Captain America Comics*, Marvel Comics, India Ink print, March, 1941.

“putting provocative images on the covers of their comic books” which most importantly “not only worked to sell issues, it also sent a powerful message to the public. The story could have little substance beyond a minor escapade, but a cover image could send shockwaves.”¹⁴ The addition of the child sidekick soldier Bucky was in line with what Batman had done months prior with the introduction of Robin to great success. Bucky created a literary vessel for boys to identify with, as well as a political model for which these boys could fashion themselves after.

The titular image of a star-spangled superhero punching Adolf Hitler in the face could not be more direct in its intent. Captain America, with Simon and Kirby at the helm, wanted America to lead the charge in fighting fascism in Europe, a tactic that several other comic book publishers took in the immediate aftermath of *Captain America Comics #1*. It is important to note that the villain on the cover of *Captain America Comics #1* is specifically Adolf Hitler and not the axis powers. Nazism was the evil that American interventionists such as Joe Simon were rallying against, not a global conflict. *Captain America Comics #1* was Simon’s means to an end to visualize his vision of America on the global stage as the gallant knight charging in to protect the innocent from the evils of Nazi Germany.

The knight motif is furthered through Captain America’s shield and chain mail armor, not to mention the winged helmet, a clear nod to the newspaper comic strip *Prince Valiant*, which was a medieval story with the brave knight Valiant as the main character. *Prince Valiant* was an inspiration not only for the design of Captain America, but also for Joe Simon as *Prince Valiant* was a comic strip he cited as the reason he became interested in the comic book industry.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jason Inman, *Super Soldiers A Salute to the Comic Book Heroes and Villains who Fought for their Country*, (Coral Gables: Mango Publishing, 2019), 26.

¹⁵ Joe Simon, *My Life in Comics* (London: Titan Books, 2011), 14.

The cover of *Captain America Comics #1* does an excellent job of laying out the majority of what interventionist platform stood for in a very small space such as a comic book cover. Commentary on masculinity and patriotism seem to be shouted from the top to the bottom of Kirby's cover art. Take for example the title of the book, Captain America, in bright gold letters in front of a red, white, and blue striped background flanked by stars. Kirby not only tied the imagery of the American flag with his character's title, he has also connected the iconography of the American flag to interventionism's view of patriotism. This connection creates the interventionist thought pattern in readers that the American choice in the debate on the United States' involvement in World War II is intervention.

Kirby's visual rhetoric continued down the page with the main cover art that depicts a secret Nazi plan to destroy the United States' munitions supplies being thwarted by Kirby and Simon's representation of the American military might, Captain America. Once again, Kirby was drawing upon interventionists thought by stating that Nazism was already among the American people, and that Germany will brutally destroy the country if the United States did not strike first with all of its military might, which again is depicted by a literal white knight in Captain America. This message would be explored a great deal more within the pages of *Captain America Comics #1*.

Simon and Kirby made sure to craft a direct message to anyone reading *Captain America Comics #1*, and while that message could be felt loud and clear just by the cover alone, that same message of interventionism was heavily amplified within the issue proper. Readers saw a plethora of Nazi imagery on page one of *Captain America Comics #1*, including Captain America on a chessboard to further the knight motif seen one page prior. The Nazis depicted on this page were decidedly different than the ones depicted on the cover.¹⁶

Captain America was no longer dealing with the realistic forces of Nazi Germany as readers might have thought he would based on what was advertised on the cover. Nor was Captain America in vibrant color. Instead, Kirby drew Captain America's first foes as the leaders of Nazi Germany who are sub-human monsters that loomed over each panel menacingly in a stark monochromatic palette. Simon and Kirby used the lack of color and monstrous depiction of

¹⁶ Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, "Meet Captain America", *Captain America Comics*, Marvel Comics, India Ink print, March, 1941.

Nazi soldiers in order to “objectify a person or group” thereby “‘creating the other’, which puts aside or ignores the complexity and subjectivity of the individual”.¹⁷ Othering is a concept best described in Edward Said’s 1978 text, *Orientalism*. In *Orientalism*, Said states that “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident” where “the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony.”¹⁸ Using Said’s example, Kirby and Simon were occupying the Occidental role with their depiction of Nazi Germany’s Orient.

Kirby and Simon were integral to othering Nazi Germany by inventing characters such as the Red Skull as the enemy instead of Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Eichmann, or even Adolf Hitler himself. In this case, the othering of Nazi Germany in *Captain America Comics #1* has two long lasting effects for its readers. The first effect is an erasure of humanity of all people of Germany. This erasure helps Simon, Kirby, and Timely Comic’s cause of pushing the American public to advocate for war, but at a terrible cost. When Americans finally engaged in World War II, the soldiers that participate have digested the better part of two years of anti-Nazi media, *Captain America Comics #1* included. As a result, the American soldiers of World War II have a baked in black-and-white mentality with regards to an entire nation of people. This mentality opened the door for a myriad of hate based actions from xenophobia to war crimes against German soldiers and civilians alike.

The second effect the othering of Nazi Germany had on the United States was that the act elevated the United States to become the epicenter of the international system, if only in the

¹⁷ Fred Dervin, Edited by Jane Jackson “Cultural Identity, Representation, and Othering”, *The Routledge Handbook on Language and Intercultural Communication*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 41.

¹⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 2,5.

pages of a comic book for now. The America of pre-World War II was one where its highest ambition was “global influence in the realm of ideas: their Declaration of Independence had, after all, advanced the radical claim that all men are created equal. But they made no effort, during their first fourteen decades of independence, to make good on that assertion.”¹⁹ *Captain America Comics #1* attempted to rectify America’s apprehension to interact with the rest of the international system by constructing Nazi Germany as the other. However, Kirby and Simon’s ambition for America had little reflection on the actual influence the country had on the rest of the world. Therefore, *Captain America Comics #1* was more than just about the degradation of another country through sub-human caricature. Kirby and Simon’s comic book was about the restructuring of the entire international system by making the personification of American military might the sole solution to the greatest threat to the industrialized world, Nazi Germany.

Timely Comics seemed to agree wholeheartedly with Kirby and Simon’s ideals and jumped on board the interventionist train once *Captain America Comics #1* became a hit. Suddenly Namor the Sub-Mariner’s debut issue had Nazis invading the undersea world of Atlantis and the Human Torch was busting munitions depots in place of his one man crusade against the mafia. In doing so, Timely Comics shifted the American comic book industry away from the Great Depression’s escapist stories of Superman and Batman and grounded the art form in political action. The pulp heroes of National Comics Publications answered by altering their characters, specifically Superman to fit in with the trendy new ideas.

As 1941 continued, Superman became more of a globe trotting hero, with newer abilities to help as many people as he could. Superman’s villains also changed to resemble the looming threat of World War II. This sudden change occurred two months after the debut of *Captain*

¹⁹ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, (New York, Penguin Books, 2006), 15.

America Comics #1 with an *Action Comics* story entitled “Fifth Columnists!”. In the story, Lois Lane attends a non-rearmament rally lead by the charismatic Stuart Pemberton, a nod to the likes of anti-rearmament champions like Charles Lindbergh and Henry Ford.²⁰ The rally is quickly revealed to be a ruse to lull Metropolis into becoming defenseless from a surprise invasion by the not so thinly veiled German cognate, Nation-X.²¹

Luckily for both Metropolis and Lois Lane, Superman saved the day and thwart the invading force with ease.²² “Fifth Columnists!” might not have been as direct as Captain America punching Hitler, but the message to readers was clear: Nazi Germany will take over the world if America does not enter World War II. This story also ties patriotism to militarism, with its implication that the only people who argued against intervention are secretly enemies themselves. “Fifth Columnists!” and subsequent Superman stories became weighty additions to the overwhelming cry for war from nearly every popular American comic book publisher by the time that the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, a feat that would not have been accomplished without *Captain America Comics #1*.

Defining Terms

Now some intellectuals view the trend that Simon and Kirby started of creating interventionist comic books during the lead up to World War II as merely “propaganda tools and morale boosters for service members.”²³ Classifying *Captain America Comics #1* and its fellow publications as a propagandist tool would be an unfair assessment for two reasons. First, the definition of the word propaganda has become a catch-all term for any form of media that

²⁰ Henry Boltinoff, et al, “Fifth Columnists!”, *Action Comics*, (New York, DC Comics, 1941), 1.

²¹ Henry Boltinoff, et al, “Fifth Columnists!”, *Action Comics*, (New York, DC Comics, 1941), 2-4.

²² Henry Boltinoff, et al, “Fifth Columnists!”, *Action Comics*, (New York, DC Comics, 1941), 7-14.

²³ Jason Inman, *Super Soldiers A Salute to the Comic Book Heroes and Villains who Fought for their Country*, (Coral Gables, Mango Publishing, 2019), 26.

contains some form of a call to action message inside. This broad understanding of propaganda leaves no room for context or nuance. Under the current definition of propaganda, a marketing campaign for a teddy bear now has the same criteria put upon it as a United States Army recruitment video. This simply cannot be true.

Instead, there should be a division of terms between media that intend to alter the user in some form or another, and propaganda. That division should be by who has created the media. For the purpose of this thesis, a piece of media created with the intent to relay an underlying message to the user, such as *Captain America Comics #1*, will be defined as a cultural signifier. Whereas propaganda will be defined as the use of cultural signifiers by governmental actors and non-actors to relay policy. *Captain America Comics #1* and the rest of the retooled Timely Comics would therefore not be considered propaganda, as Timely Comics was acting on their own without any funding or association with the American government.

The lack of government backing leads to the second reason why it is unfair to label the anti-isolationist comic book movement as propagandist. Using propaganda to broadly define these comic books creates an historical narrative that heavily erodes the agency these creators had and paves over the ambiguous atmosphere America had leading up to World War II. As previously stated, there was an equally strong isolationist movement that had a strong foothold in American life. The American government was split on whether or not to engage in what was termed at the time as “Europe’s War”, and there were several strong chapters of the Nazi party throughout the country.

The collective mindset of America shifted into martial action only after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and even then there was a strong minority within Congress that believed that the United States should exclusively declare war on Japan instead of getting involved in a total

global war with the rest of the Axis powers. If the generally accepted belief that the comic books of the early 1940's were merely a propagandist tool leveraged by the United States government, then the creation of *Captain America Comics #1*, *Action Comics #36*, and the flood of pro war comics of this era would be part of a constructed historical memory of a self-righteous and belligerent government hell bent on policing the globe. Once again, this mentality is simply not true as America was a highly divided country on the topic of war even in the immediate aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Therefore, this more specified definition of propaganda should stand.

A Time of Wonder

The comic books of the early 1940's might have been predominantly pro-war, but that does not mean that the industry was an iterative monolith. There were some creators that had other socio-political messages that were at the forefront of their stories. The best example of such creators would be William Moulton Marsten and Harry G. Peter and their character, Wonder Woman. Marsten had a previous career as an American psychologist, and gained some notoriety for being an early advocate for the use of the polygraph test. By the 1930's, Marsten was a freelance psychological journalist and the "resident psychologist of Family Circle magazine" where he had a regular column answering reader's questions, one of the more famous claims he made in the New York Times was "that 'within 100 years the country will see the beginning of a sort of Amazonian matriarchy.'"²⁴ Marsten was quite keen on making his future happen, and aimed at influencing the next generation of Americans to embrace more feminist approach to life through the creation of *Wonder Woman*.

²⁴ Geoffrey C. Bunn, "The lie detector, Wonder Woman and liberty: the life and work of William Moulton Marsten", *History of the Human Sciences*, 10, no. 1 (1997): 105, 106.

The character of Wonder Woman debuted as the back story to *All Star Comics* #8 exactly one week before the attack on Pearl Harbor. As such, the issue follows the general focus on Europe which interventionist comic books were preoccupied with. For example, here is the not so mysterious German villain of the story²⁵:

The villainous Von Storm, referred to by his driver as “mein herr”, follows the same rules that were set up in *Action Comics* #36.²⁶ Marsten and Peter evoked Nazi Germany through disguising Adolf Hitler with a monocle and fedora, they even made sure to put a swastika on the not-Hitler so that readers of all ages could easily understand the message they were making. The wink-and-nod method of including ideology into a comic book without actually referring to any part of the real world was representative of how All-American Comics, National Comics Publications sister company until their merger into DC Comics in 1944, would handle their interventionism during the lead up to World War II which suited Marsten and Peter just fine.

²⁵ William Moulton Marsten, Harry G. Peter, “Introducing Wonder Woman”, *All Star Comics*, DC Comics, India Ink print, December, 1941.

²⁶ William Moulton Marsten, Harry G. Peter, “Introducing Wonder Woman”, *All Star Comics*, (New York: DC Comics, 1941), 65.

After all, there was no world war for America just yet, and Marsten and Peter were much more interested in including other ideological issues into the pages of Wonder Woman's origin story.

Specifically, Marsten and Peter wanted a champion that represented feminist ideals such as gender equality and the destruction of the global patriarchy, and they created that champion in Wonder Woman. World War II-era patriotism was a background player to the feminist narrative of Wonder Woman's first story. Steve Trevor, for example, has the majority of his story where he chases Nazi spies through land and air in the name of the United States of America condensed into two pages. Whereas the majority of "Introducing Wonder Woman" has passages that look like a history textbook detailing how the Amazons evolved from being "the foremost nation in the world" to being enslaved by men, to creating a woman-run utopia called Paradise Island where there is "no want, no illness, no hatreds, no wars" and "the power of Eternal Life" as long as they do not succumb to the evils of men.²⁷ Every aspect of Wonder Woman's origin was designed with feminism in mind, especially in the story's focus on American patriotism in the lead up to World War II.²⁸

²⁷ William Moulton Marsten, Harry G. Peter, "Introducing Wonder Woman", *All Star Comics*, (New York: DC Comics, 1941), 62-63.

²⁸ William Moulton Marsten, Harry G. Peter, "Introducing Wonder Woman", *All Star Comics*, DC Comics, India Ink print, December, 1941.

This panel is a perfect representation of how Marsten and Peter wanted to contribute to the war debate, or rather, how the war debate would contribute to their work. Aphrodite and Athena's dialogue continue the interventionist position that the United States is the progenitor and protector of the ideal of freedom, and that it is America's duty to engage in conflict with the totalitarian government of Nazi Germany.

However, Athena's addition that the United States is "the last citadel of democracy, and for the equal rights for women" reveals why "Introducing Wonder Woman" is uniquely important in the lead up to World War II.²⁹ The very next panel sets the foundation for what Wonder Woman's true purpose was during this time as Hippolyte says that her champion for the world will "go forth to fight for liberty and freedom and all womankind."³⁰ The debut of Wonder Woman used the popular interventionist talking points that the likes of Captain America and Superman tread on earlier as an ideological bridge to get readers to understand the importance of feminism on a global scale.

This tactic of heightening the importance of feminism through pro-war imagery was unprecedented in the comic book industry at the time, as including pro-war imagery was seen in 1941 as quite an unprecedented step for comic book creators to take in the first place. Marsten and Peter's work in manipulating the popularity of pro-war sentiment to include seemingly unrelated social movements will become a hallmark of the comic book industry the next time America has a lead up to war.

How Is War Depicted in the first Lead up era?

²⁹ William Moulton Marsten, Harry G. Peter, "Introducing Wonder Woman", *All Star Comics*, (New York: DC Comics, 1941), 67.

³⁰ William Moulton Marsten, Harry G. Peter, "Introducing Wonder Woman", *All Star Comics*, (New York: DC Comics, 1941), 67.

The depiction of war in the lead up portion of the cycle of American comic books and conflict can be summed up in one word: non-existent. This makes sense, as comic book creators could not describe the United States's war effort if there was no official American war effort to speak of outside of the Lend-Lease Act. As a result, even the forward thinking Captain America was busting Golden Age spy rings in his first issue instead of the promise of “smashing thru” and coming “face to face with Hitler” as *Captain America Comics #1*'s cover implied.³¹ The heroes of the more popular National Comics Publications had the exact same solution to America's lack of military involvement in World War II, with one major exception.

The villains of *Action Comics #36* followed the same trope of being enemy spies from a German analogous country, however the depictions of the enemies and the villain's plot were had a distinct difference from the likes of Captain America and Wonder Woman. Here is what the villains of *Action Comics #36* were drawn as:³²

³¹ Jack Kirby, Joe Simon, "Meet Captain America", *Captain America Comics*, (New York: Marvel Comics, 1941), Cover.

³² Henry Boltinoff, et al, "Fifth Columnists!", *Action Comics*, DC Comics, India Ink print, May, 1941.

Once again, artist George Papp used visual othering by creating carbon copies of the villainous fifth columnists. However, these nondescript businessmen had a real life inspiration in Charles Lindbergh and his America First Committee seen here at a rally in October, 1941:³³

Action Comics #36 was unique in the respect that their other represented the non-interventionist movement rather than Nazi Germany outright as Captain America and Wonder Woman had done. This twist on interventionism grounds *Action Comics #36* by heightening the domestic threat that Americans were facing to include businessmen, politicians, and celebrities that disagreed with interventionism.

Now, while each of these monumental comic books did not depict how World War II was fought, they did have an idea of how America should fight in World War II. Each of these books proclaim in their own way that the American military should dive into the fray of World War II with reckless abandon and rescue the future Allied Powers from the grips of tyranny. America was not fighting for revenge, but for loftier concepts like freedom, equality, and liberty. To serve would be for honor and glory, and victory would not only be inevitable, but also incredibly easy.

³³ Irving Haberman, *America First Committee Meeting*, October 30, 1941, Getty Images, New York.

America is practically bullet-proof in these comic books in every way, and all the citizens of the United States had to do was commit to war and it would be over. The trends of American might makes right and invincibility will not last long, however these beliefs will reappear in the pages of American comic books, as well as the mindset of the American public when the call to war is strong once more.

Chapter 2

This Chapter intends to explain how comic books have influenced the popular culture of America and why sequential art is still important today. The chapter then explores the ways in which comic book publishers controlled how much of the realities of World War II seeped into the fictional worlds of comic books. This control led to the rise of Timely Comics popularity, as well as the perpetuation of yellow peril comic books. Finally, this chapter will detail how American comic books depicted World War II, and how that depiction helped cause a rise in violence and racial hatred towards the Asian American community.

Why Comic Books?

It is important to pause here in the greater thesis discussion on the intrinsic connection between American comic books, war, and culture to ask if comic books are even that great an influence on American culture to begin with? For some academics, such as Matthew J. Costello, the American comic book was once “the dominant medium for youth culture before the advent of television” dominated the industry after World War II.³⁴ Luckily for comic books, there was a surprising revival in “the 1960’s with a broader readership extending to young adults and college students” of course until “poor management, and increasing competition from television, movies, and video games” in the 1980’s and onward have relegated comic books into a “cultural ghetto” where only the fiercely loyal and those trying to make a speculative fortune exist as comic book consumers.³⁵

This argument hinges on the notion that each art medium is a completely independent entity from the other. Therefore, the global success of the superhero media genre should not be

³⁴ Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America*, (New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009) 4.

³⁵ Matthew J. Costello, *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America*, (New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009) 2, 4.

attributed to the comic books, but that success rather should solely be attributed to the cast and crew of those films, video game, and television productions. This argument is flawed for so many reasons. First and foremost, the only reason for the success of the superhero genre of any media outside comic books proper is due to the influence of the characters and storylines within that piece of work, all of which were derived from American comic books. That means that American comic books are being digested in some form or other, even if the majority of the world has never been to their local comic book shop.

The limitations within this argument extend into what exactly a comic book is. This argument contends that a comic book is a fifteen to twenty page serialized magazine produced monthly that combines images with text and is generally dominated by white men in spandex saving the world. According to Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, the definition of any comic book would be a book that contains "sequential art", that is all.³⁶ McCloud's "definition says nothing about superheroes or funny animals, or fantasy/science fiction or reader age"and for good reason.³⁷

This simple definition of sequential art is paramount to understanding the impact that comic books have on the world because it shows that comic books are a fundamental first stop in humanity's journey to literacy. If comic books are simply a collection of sequential art pieces, then "for as long as comics have been a recognized popular form of media, children have read them" due to the fact that "picture books have been using the storytelling techniques of comics since at least the 1940s" in America alone.³⁸ In fact, these picture books lay the groundwork for children to venture on their own and begin reading comic books as their first piece of literature

³⁶ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, (New York, Harper Collins, 1994), 21.

³⁷ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, (New York, Harper Collins, 1994), 21.

³⁸ Philip Nel, edited by Charles Hatfield, and Bart Beaty, "Children and Comics", *Comics Studies : A Guidebook* (New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2020) 128.

due to comic books and picture books having the exact same sequential art structure. For American comic book creators such as Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, the vast audience of children readers was paramount to spreading interventionist ideology across the American home front. Other creators that will be covered later use the connection between children and comics to educate and inspire social change in much the same way as the creators of the Golden Age as the comic book art form matures over time. Two bigger questions arise now that the proper definition for a comic book is in place.

Why are comic books being used at such a foundational level of literacy, and how are comic books the vessels of their creators' ideology? Both of these questions can be answered by exploring how a comic book functions at the structural level. According to Roland Barthes, in any given panel of a comic book there exists "three messages: a linguistic message, a coded iconic message, and a non-coded iconic message" that has been created by the panel's creators for the reader to interpret.³⁹ The linguistic message refers to all of the written captions, dialogue, and non-diegetic narration contained within the panel, the non-coded iconic image is all of the drawn art pieces contained within the panel, and the coded iconic image is all of the images in the panel that have a cache of related images and definitions created by the zeitgeist of the time attached to them.

The text in a comic book "helps to identify purely the elements of the scene" and in so doing creates "an *anchorage* to all possible (denoted) meanings of an object" within the readers mind.⁴⁰ In other words, all of the text in a comic book is designed to embed one unified image into the mind of the reader. For example, there is a strategy used by authors to associate letters

³⁹ Roland Barthes, edited by S. Heath, "Rhetoric of the Image", *Image, Music, Text*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 36.

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, edited by S. Heath, "Rhetoric of the Image", *Image, Music, Text*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 37.

with related objects when children begin to learn the alphabet. These authors write that A is for apple, and have a picture of a red delicious apple next to the letter A. In this example, the reader has had the image of a red delicious apple anchored in their mind to represent what an apple should look like whenever the word apple is used in the future. Comic book creators have taken the anchorage model one step further by inverting the roles of language and image by using specific image shapes to denote the type of language used within a given panel. If a character is speaking, that character's dialogue is written in a word balloon. If there needs to be a description of a new location, there will be a caption at the top of the panel in a square bar letting the reader know the information about the change of scenery. All of these images anchor in the mind of the comic book reader a certain way to read each piece of the text within the given panel, but anchorage is not all these images do.

Word Balloons, narration captions, onomatopoeia, and similar images found primarily in comic books give the illusion of movement and spoken dialogue on the printed page. The connotation that a reader gleans from an image is what Barthes refers to as "the function of relay."⁴¹ Relay is all for the connected definitions to any given image. A perfect example of Barthes' relay concept are all of the images of the swastika in *Captain America Comics #1* discussed in the previous chapter. Those swastikas anchored in the reader's mind the fact that these individuals were members of the Nazi party, but the image also relayed everything the Nazi party stood for: fascism, racism, xenophobia, genocide, et cetera. That swastika therefore evolves in the reader's mind to become a representation of absolute evil through the power of relay. The greater the image's connotation in the society, the easier it is for comic book creators to use that image's relay value in a comic book. If the image does not have a high relay value, those same

⁴¹ Roland Barthes, edited by S. Heath, "Rhetoric of the Image", *Image, Music, Text*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 37.

creators will have to anchor that image more in the readers mind to increase the relay. This is the critical mechanism to how comic books transmit ideology into a popular culture.

Now while comic books have an incredibly strong bond with building the cultural foundation of American youth, the art form is far from the only one that has an influence on youth culture production. Nor are Marvel and DC Comics the only companies attempting to influence public opinion during World War II. Walt Disney Studios and the animation art form has a comparable history to Marvel Comics, DC Comics, and the American comic book industry. Walt Disney Studios even produced several propaganda films for the United States government promoting the American war effort as well as disparaging the Axis Powers through racial stereotypes and caricature.⁴² However, comic books differ drastically from other mediums created for children in terms of the unique process in which comic books are produced.

Comic books have often been linked to other children's media like animated films, since both art forms have a similar audience, each medium is comprised of multiple creators attempting to create one cohesive piece of narrative art, and both mediums use similar visual methods in which the creators attempt to broadcast their message. However, that is where the connection between the two mediums end. An animated film is still a part of a genre of filmmaking, and as such, animated films are constrained and defined by the limitations of film. The comic book is an art form unto itself, its visual language has no equivalent nor any real constraint. A comic book does not need written literature to be classified as a comic, nor does there need to be specific printing method for a comic book to be defined as a comic book.

⁴² The biggest example of Walt Disney Studios' propaganda is the 1942 short film *Der Fuehrer's Face*. In the film, Donald Duck dreams that he has become a Nazi and goes about a day in the life of a Nazi soldier, complete with Donald repeatedly saluting caricatures of Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Hideki Tojo.

The closest comparison that comic books have to another art form in the greater popular culture sphere would be television. Both mediums utilize a serial narrative that has the ability to span multiple years. Yet, comic books still stand apart from television, as comic book narratives have a continuous timeline that are multiple decades long. If *Action Comics* were run as a thirteen episode season, as modern television shows are organized, the over 1000 issues of *Action Comics* would be on its seventy-seventh season. That type of continuous narrative timeline is unique to comic books, as is its importance to the cultural production of children.

Superheroes and the Good War

Now that the cultural importance of comic books has been properly explained, this chapter can now refocus to how American comic book creators translated global conflict onto the pages of comic books. Superheroes were still synonymous with the hyper-masculine, power fantasy depiction of war during World War II. However, there was a much larger divide between Timely Comics and National Comics Publications over how the war would be depicted by each publisher. National Comics Publications was more than willing to limit their visible support of the American war effort to their covers as well as their back-up stories found on the last pages of more popular character's books.

National Comics Publication's policies on war commitment might have worked during the pulpy 1930's, but the sensational covers created a rather disjointed experience for the readers of the 1940's. Take for example, the cover of *Action Comics* #54 in November, 1942.⁴³

This cover heavily implied that *Action Comics* #54 would have revolved around Superman thwarting the Nazi German naval fleet and saving the Allied Powers from a U-Boat attack. However, what readers actually read in *Action Comics* #54 was how the “swaggering Captain Ironheart...this long-dead pirate [appeared] out of the past to plague twentieth-century merchantmen with cutlass and shell” and how Superman put a stop to his ilk.⁴⁴ The dissonance between cover and story is very apparent, and is reflective of a company that was performing

⁴³ Henry Boltinoff, et al, “The Pirate of Pleasure Island”, *Action Comics*, DC Comics, India Ink print, November, 1942.

⁴⁴ Henry Boltinoff, et al, “The Pirate of Pleasure Island”, *Action Comics*, (New York, DC Comics, 1942), 1.

patriotic cues set out by the greater comic book industry rather than embracing a strong pro-World War II point-of-view like competitors such as Timely Comics and All-American Publications.

The closest National Comics Publications to merging the company's surface-level support of the American war effort in World War II occurs in September, 1942 with *Action Comics* #52.⁴⁵

The cover depicts every starring hero of Action Comics, lead by Superman who had taken over the title at this point with American fighter planes in the background. What elevated this cover from all the others of this era is the “Keep it Flying” stamp in the bottom right corner. This stamp was a reference to the “Keep ‘em Flying” recruitment poster that the United States Army had

⁴⁵ Henry Boltinoff, et al, “The Emperor of America”, *Action Comics*, India Ink print, September, 1942.

implemented in June, 1941.⁴⁶

“Keep ‘em Flying” became a popular saying among soldiers and civilians alike, even going so far as to being the title of an Abbot and Costello comedy in November, 1941. National Comics Publications used a variation of the slogan only once during World War II on the cover of *Action Comics* #52. The issue followed a similar plot to the other pro-World War II comics with the major driving force of the issue being fear of totalitarianism on American shore, in this case a man only referred to as the Emperor found a mind control ray that would make anyone docile if they did not wear a special helmet. The Emperor and his gang used the ray to blanket

⁴⁶ Dan V. Smith, Albro F. Downe "“Keep 'em flying’ is our battle cry! : First Class Fighting Men Needed.”, poster, 1942; [Washington D.C.]. (<https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc273/>: accessed March 5, 2021), University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library, <https://digital.library.unt.edu/>; crediting UNT Libraries Government Documents Department.

America and replaced President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the fascist ruler of the country.

The comic ended with the analogue for the Superman saving the day and ending the fascist rule of America by force. *Action Comics* #52 did not differ from the likes of *Captain America Comics*, or even the *Justice Society of America* with one major exception. The gold-obsessed Emperor of America was none other than Benito Mussolini.⁴⁷

Benito Mussolini was an incredibly rare villain in American popular culture as Adolf Hitler and Emperor Hirohito's crimes against humanity were the primary focus in American propaganda

⁴⁷ Henry Boltinoff, et al, "The Emperor of America", *Action Comics*, DC Comics, India Ink print, September, 1942. Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini in Munich, Germany, (June, 1940), 540151, 242, 7, Eva Braun's Photo Albums ca. 1913- ca. 1944, National Archives, Maryland. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/540151>.

and pro-World War II media. When Mussolini was seen in American media, he was often depicted as one member of the Axis Powers as a unit, not so much a unique dictator in his own right. *Action Comics* #52 stands out in this era of American comic books by making Mussolini the exclusive villain of the story as well as the “Keep it Flying” stamp, but this issue was not the only story that fully embraced the American war effort.

Meanwhile, both All-American Publications and Timely Comics continued to publish pro-World War II books. Timely Comics responded to the success of All-American Publications team comic book and created a team comic book in June, 1941 to compete with *Justice Society of America* which came out the previous month of the same year. The book, titled *All-Winners Comics*, starred Captain America and Bucky, Human torch and his sidekick Toro, Black Marvel, The Angel, and Namor the Sub-Mariner. *All-Winners Comics* joined *Captain America Comics* and *Marvel Mystery Comics* to become Timely Comics’ primary war books, with each issue having the heroes fight the Axis Powers both at home, and on the war front. *All-Winners Comics* helped diversify Timely Comics during the war, as a dedicated war comic book freed up the solo hero books to have non-World War II related stories. Even Captain America and Bucky took a break to fight the odd mad scientist or criminal ring from time to time during this period. Timely Comics also partook in the sensational cover, however the majority of Timely Comics covers related to the war had a story to match.

Yellow Peril and Comic Books

While the comic book publishers of the World War II era had differing strategies towards depicting their support of the American military effort, there was one subject that every company could agree on, and that was that the greatest threat to the United States came from Japan. Most Americans agreed that “the Japanese were more hated than the Germans before as well as after

Pearl Harbor. On this, there was no dispute among contemporary observers. They were perceived as a race apart, even a species apart—and an overpoweringly monolithic one at that.”⁴⁸ The attack on Pearl Harbor helped to justify an unprecedented surge of Anti-Japanese hatred that infected every level of American life. American comic books could not escape the yellow peril of the 1940’s, in fact, comic creators embraced the racial stereotyping and hatred towards Asians for nearly eighty years.

World War II was a major catalyst in putting anti-Asian comic book stories to the forefront of newsstands nationwide, with covers like the one for *Action Comics* #58, released in March, 1943.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ John Dower, *War Without Mercy Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 8.

⁴⁹ Henry Boltinoff, et al, “The Face of Adonis”, *Action Comics*, India Ink print, DC Comics, March, 1943.

Action Comics #58 was the only other depiction of a civilian support movement for World War II that National Comics Publications made, and the only *Action Comics* cover that contained overt anti-Japanese racism. This cover appears to be more an endorsement by National Comics Publications to use Superman in anti-Japanese hate speech to fuel the purchase of war bonds rather than a full-throated exclamation of racial hatred, especially since the story contained within *Action Comics* #58 had no connection to the cover at all.

The National Comics Publications model of relegating hatred towards Japan and Japanese-Americans to the comic book cover was not shared by the other publishers. All-American Publications had stories that were much more concerned with the mental health and well-being of the American military, and therefore had no books that racially stereotyped Asians and Asian-Americans during World War II. Timely Comics had no such focus, and instead created several issues that perpetuated racial hatred towards Japanese-Americans, and Chinese-Americans to a lesser extent. Timely Comics' most notable attacks on Asian-Americans occurs in *Captain America Comics* #13 and *Sub-Mariner Comics* #5 which were both released April 1, 1942, and *Human Torch Comics* #7 which was released April 10, 1942.

Sub Mariner Comics #5 is the most notable of the three issues as the creators applied the power fantasy of the superhero comic book directly onto World War II with disastrous results. Namor consistently committed heinous war crimes against Japanese soldiers in the name of "saving the day" like in these panels below.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Bill Everett, Al Gabrielle, Syd Shores, Allen Simon, "Namor Raps the Japs", *Sub Mariner Comics*, Marvel Comics, India Ink print, April, 1942.

Writer and artist Bill Everett indirectly revealed how terrible having a superhero in combat could be. “Namor Raps the Japs” was a revenge fantasy with Namor graphically depicted committing war crimes against the Japanese Army, who are depicted as either cannon fodder or cowardly villains who chose to attack Namor in the back rather than fight him like a man. The use of Namor aiding the American Navy is not just because Namor is of the sea. John Dower remarked in *War Without Mercy Race and Power in the Pacific War* that “in the wake of Pearl Harbor, the single word favored above all others by Americans as best characterizing the Japanese people was “treacherous,” and for the duration of the war the surprise attack on the U.S. Pacific Fleet remained the preeminent symbol of the enemy’s inherent treachery.”⁵¹ By

⁵¹ John Dower, *War Without Mercy Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 8.

aiding the Navy, Namor gives the reader an outlet to unleash their own private rage and racial hatred under the guise of righting the wrongs of Pearl Harbor.

Everett made sure to heighten the otherness of the Japanese soldiers by drawing the Japanese characters' eyes shut, giving all the Japanese characters donkey like teeth, and lengthening the fingernails until they resembled claws. The story ended with Namor victorious followed by an advertisement to buy war bonds that continued the American revenge fantasy of World War II.⁵²

⁵² Bill Everett, Al Gabrielle, Syd Shores, Allen Simon, "Namor Raps the Japs", *Sub Mariner Comics*, India Ink print, April, 1942.

The advertised message “Remember Pearl Harbor” was the final anchor to relay the message to the reader that the nation of Japan are sub-human entities and the rules of engagement should be thrown out, replaced with the belief that the only good Japanese citizen is a dead one.

The second story of *Sub Mariner Comics* #5 focused on the other major principle espoused during the World War II era of yellow peril comic books, which was paranoia.⁵³

Artists Syd Shores and Allen Simon played on the racist fear that Japanese men were vicious rapists for the opening page to “The Sub Mariner Smashes an Uprising in Manilla”. Shores and Simon continued the othering methods used by Everett in the previous story. They also added a beautiful damsel in distress that the Japanese officers could lust over menacingly while she is being whipped. Now, the use of powerless women to heighten the level of racism in an image is by no means exclusive to yellow peril, nor to American comic books. In fact, the inclusion of

⁵³ Bill Everett, Al Gabrielle, Syd Shores, Allen Simon, “The Sub Mariner Smashes an Uprising in Manilla”, *Sub Mariner Comics*, India Ink print, April, 1942.

“the American Gi-Gi” was precisely because of the pervasiveness of the image of a woman being overpowered by monstrous depictions of people of color.⁵⁴ Once again, the creators of *Sub Mariner Comics* #5 used the cornerstones of the yellow peril in order to sow fear and anger in the minds of American boys towards anyone with Japanese ancestry.

Captain America Comics #13 magnified all of the yellow peril tenets found in *Sub Mariner Comics* #5 quite literally.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Bill Everett, Al Gabrielle, Syd Shores, Allen Simon, “The Sub Mariner Smashes an Uprising in Manilla”, *Sub Mariner Comics*, India Ink print, April, 1942.

⁵⁵ Al Avison, “The League of the Unicorn”, *Captain America Comics*, India Ink print, April, 1942.

Everything about Avison's art was bigger and bolder than what had been previously published. The Japanese officer did not have donkey's teeth and slightly longer fingernails, but fangs and claws. The iconography of revenge is not buried in the middle of the book, but emblazoned on multiple areas of the cover, from the "Remember Pearl Harbor" pin in the bottom right corner, to the "All Out For America Issue" title in the upper left corner, to Captain America shouting "You started it, now-we'll finish it" as he punches the Japanese officer in exactly the same manner as he punched Hitler in *Captain America Comics* #1.⁵⁶

Even the size of the characters on the cover towering over the military forces of Japan and the United States heightened the revenge fantasy of the yellow peril of World War II. Captain America was no longer a gallant knight doing what was morally just, Captain America was now an avenging force representing the full might of the American military sent to destroy the devilish monstrosity of the Japanese Army. The first story within *Captain America Comics* #13 reflected the avenging spirit version of Captain seen on the cover. "The League of the Unicorn" opened with Captain America and Bucky Barnes witnessing the murder of a Chinese man at the hands of a secret Japanese cabal that kill with sharpened unicorn horns attached to their forehead.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Al Avison et al, "The League of the Unicorn", *Captain America Comics*, 1, no. 13 (New York, Marvel Comics, 1942), 1.

⁵⁷ Al Avison, "The League of the Unicorn", *Captain America Comics*, India Ink print, April, 1942.

Avison's art in these two panels revealed a huge problem with yellow peril media during World War II, how can the message of racial hatred towards Japan continue when Japanese and Chinese citizens look alike. This problem was particularly important to World War II America as China was a member of the Allied Powers at the time. Avison's solution was to dress his Chinese characters in the most stereotypical Chinese costuming possible, while also adding inhuman characteristics such as unnaturally long bony fingers. *Captain America Comics #13* legacy is that of a comic book that perpetuated the myth that the United States was a global savior through their military might during World War II and Japan was a grotesque evil destined for eradication.

The final World War II era yellow peril comic book of note from Timely Comics was *Human Torch Comics #7* which continued the themes of revenge and paranoia found in *Sub Mariner Comics #5* and *Captain America Comics #13*. What makes *Human Torch Comics #7* stand out from the others was that writer and artist Carl Burgos mainly focused on perpetuating the racist myth that there were clear physical differences between all Chinese and all Japanese citizens that Americans could use to determine friend from foe. While this myth did not originate from American comic books, the belief in physiognomic differences between Chinese and

Japanese citizens was heavily influenced by the December 22, 1941 article in *Life Magazine* entitled “How to Tell the Japs from the Chinese”.⁵⁸

Burgos expanded the “rules” of differentiating Asian nationalities to include gait, as seen in these panels.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Unknown, “How to Tell Japs from Chinese,” Digital Exhibits, accessed March 11, 2021, <http://digitalexhibits.wsulibs.wsu.edu/items/show/4416>.

⁵⁹ Carl Burgos, “The Agent of Death”, *Human Torch Comics*, India Ink print, April, 1942.

Both the *Life Magazine* article and “Agent of Death” cut to the core of the absurdity of World War II yellow peril, a hierarchy or racism. Those who read and believed in yellow peril media on China and Japan were engaging in racism and discrimination towards Asians. However, those that produced yellow peril media created a dissident concept of model minority. The identifiers in both the *Life Magazine* article and Timely Comics still highlighted the otherness of Asians vis-à-vis Americans even if one culture is favored above the other. The cognitive dissonance

produced by popular culture is extremely important when governmental policies based on racist ideology are implemented, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 or Executive Order 9066 during World War II.

How was Conflict Depicted?

The most prevalent theme that can be observed across publishers during the course of World War II was a severe lack of humanity among all characters, good or bad. Both villains and superheroes were at their cruelest at this time, with entire comic books depicting grotesque deaths and torture including whipping, drowning, and immolation. There was no consideration for the lives of the enemy, specifically those that were a part of the Japanese Imperial Army. This is most likely due to the fact that the creators of these war stories were not engaged in war themselves. These stories were crafted by civilians in large part to bolster the support for World War II on the home front. The use of comic books during war time was also the closest the comic book industry got to the definition of propaganda, as several publishers ran issues with government programs designed to fund the war effort such as stamps and bonds, which in turn endeared the American military to the comic book industry in an unprecedented way.

The American military now had an entire generation of young boys that they had influence over, which was also a contributing factor to a lack of nuance in the storylines of the wartime comic books. The tone of wartime comic books would soon change once veteran comic book creators would enter the workforce, but the shadow that World War II cast on comic books and popular culture was much longer than the conflict itself.

Chapter Three

This chapter explores the comics created in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the impact the Comics Code Authority on the comic book industry. This chapter will also focus on how romance comic books helped shape youth culture by acknowledging the American teenage experience. Finally, this chapter details how commemorating World War II in the immediate postwar years influenced the comic book medium.

Romancing the Comics Code Authority

There needs to be one more observation on Matthew J. Costello's timeline of American comic books. Costello states that "the industry went into the doldrums in the 1950's", and while there is some truth to this statement, Costello has created a silence with his framing of the American comic book timeline. Costello is accurate in saying that the comic book industry had a sales dip in the 1950's, mostly due to the popularity of *Seduction of the Innocent* written by Frederic Wertham in 1954 and the subsequent congressional hearing later the same year on whether or not the United States government should start censoring comic books. These two events lead to the introduction of the Comics Code Authority, a censorship board self-governed by a group of comic book publishers known as the Comic Magazine Association of America aimed at limiting violence and "deviant" acts in popular American comic books.

The Comics Code Authority was in charge of enforcing a code of thirty-seven laws that covered all aspects of comic book production. Laws were created for how comic books were written, such as forcing comic book creators to only publish books where "in every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds", as well as what could and could not be advertised in a comic book, like how the Comics Code Authority eliminated

“liquor and tobacco advertising” altogether.⁶⁰ It is important to note that the code of the Comics Code Authority was completely voluntary with several publishers never following the Comics Code Authority. However, the Comic Magazine Association of America made a point of pushing comic publishers that disobeyed the Comics Code Authority to the periphery, thus creating a social contract between comic book publishers and the Comic Magazine Association of America to put the stamp of approval from the Comics Code Authority on every issue of American comic books.

Seduction of the Innocent and the Comics Code Authority primarily targeted superhero and horror comic books and left other genres relatively alone. The unequal censorship of American comic books lead to a reshaping of what comic book genre would dominate the newsstands in America in the postwar years. The introduction of the Comics Code Authority meant that superheroes had to change. Superhero comic books either became much tamer and formulaic than their 1930’s predecessors, or they stopped existing altogether. Other genres, like horror comic books could not make simple adjustments, as the Comics Code Authority directly targeted the genre for elimination. Romance and war comic books sprung up in popularity to fill the void left by the absence of horror comic books. These two genres kept American comic books not only afloat, but incredibly popular among the early postwar youth. Therefore, while superhero comic books were nearly erased from newsstands, American comic books were still an integral part of American youth culture at the time.

The rise of romance books like *Archie Comics* marked a sea change in the art medium. American comic books that sold the best up until the post-World War II era had a focus on

⁶⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency*, Interim Report, 84th Congress, 1955. For a complete list of the laws enforced by the Comics Code Authority, please see Appendix A.

escapist fantasy with larger than life men saving the world with their superpowers. Even the more grounded superheroes like Batman or the Green Hornet were created to contain some sort of wish fulfillment for the reader as these heroes “embodied a glamorous lifestyle free of prosaic concerns like paychecks and debt, foreclosures and defaults.”⁶¹ As mentioned in the previous chapter, World War II took the escapist fantasy in American comic books to a violent extreme. Superhero stories that were once focused on protecting the little guy had mutated into power fantasies filled with moments of racial hatred under the pretense of justice. This hyper-violent period of American comic books became superfluous the moment that World War II ended, as did readers desire for escapism.

The answer to how American comic books would move beyond World War II was a combination of Comics Code Authority censorship and American comic book readers desire for stories that came closer to the day to day life of American youth, the romance comic book.⁶²

⁶¹ Glen Weldon, *The Caped Crusade: Batman and the Rise of Nerd Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 16.

⁶² Al Fagaly, Bill Vigoda, Bill Woggon, Bob Montana and Al McLean, “Archie the Frog Catcher”, *Archie Comics*, India Ink print, February, 1946.

Archie Comics and the early romance comic books shifted the anchor and relay systems that had been set up by the comic books medium edition since its creation. The focus of these comic books is best represented by the February 1946 issue of *Archie Comics*' nom de plume as "America's Typical Teen-Ager" in bright yellow letters against an even brighter red banner background.⁶³ Romance books were not interested in being the strongest, the fastest, or the best. Instead, romance comic creators were focused on instructing children to be the most average human that one can be.

The stories of the romance comic book genre gave their characters goals that children could identify with in a world that reflected post-World War II America. The visual language of the romance comic book gave agency to the predominantly young reading demographic by representing their needs and wants on the page. Characters in romance comic books have real world problems like keeping a job, going to school, and of course, finding love. The books also cater towards the real world by replacing the narration boxes that dominated the early Golden Age comic books with expositional dialogue. This replacement might seem subtle, but it grounded romance comic books in reality and made superhero comics feel more like radio serials of the 1930's than media that represented the youth.

All of these stylistic changes were implemented in order to support the message that American romance comics relayed to not stand out, which was a direct reaction to how much superheroes stood out during World War II. However, the rise in popularity of romance comics was not simply an organic reaction to the horrors of war. Comic books like *Archie Comics* were some of the best sellers due to their stellar adherence to the normalcy politics eschewed by the

⁶³ Al Fagaly, Bill Vigoda, Bill Woggon, Bob Montana and Al McLean, "Archie the Frog Catcher", *Archie Comics* (New York: Archie Comics Publications, 1946), Cover.

Comics Code Authority. *Archie Comics* publishers Bill Vigoda, Bill Woggon, Bob Montana and Al McLean were keen to make sure that their comic books have a “respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered.”⁶⁴ The publishers took special care in enforcing the code stating that “the treatment of live-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage” by making every issue of *Archie Comics* of the post-World War II era represent a white-washed suburb as seen by the male gaze.⁶⁵

Take for example, the way that men were drawn in *Archie Comics*:⁶⁶

⁶⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency, Interim Report, 84th Congress, 1955.

⁶⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency, Interim Report, 84th Congress, 1955.

⁶⁶ Bill Vigoda, Bill Woggon, Bob Montana and Al McLean, “Archie the Frog Catcher”, *Archie Comics* (New York: Archie Comics Publications, 1946), 3.

In this panel, Archie and his friend Jughead are expressive and appear to be more of a caricature than the chiseled features of the Golden Age superhero. Both Archie and Jughead have visual

cues drawn for them to exaggerate how to read the dialogue above them. Artist Bill Vigoda makes sure to flesh out his characters so that the beads of sweat flying from Archie's head make Archie's words feel frantic in the reader's mind, whereas the sneering, squinty-eyed mannerisms of Jughead denote a true hatred in his words. This expressionism was not quite shared by the women of *Archie Comics*.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Bill Vigoda, Bill Woggon, Bob Montana and Al McLean, "Archie the Frog Catcher", *Archie Comics* (New York: Archie Comics Publications, 1946), 2.

The writers and artists of *Archie Comics #18* were direct in how they represented women in their book, using Betty and Veronica as literal props to display the table of contents with Archie ogling at them from above. Betty and Veronica did not have any of the cartoonish expressionism that was afforded to the male characters in the issue. Instead, Betty and Veronica are drawn as statuesque models with the only exaggerated waists and eyelashes to heighten their role as objects of affection for Archie Andrews. To add insult to injury, their solo story in the issue stated that “when these two pin-ups aren’t fighting over Archie, they’re just fighting-period!”⁶⁸ Even the depiction of Veronica kneeling on the floor with her hands clasped in prayer on the cover of *Archie Comics #18* is drawn to represent women as submissive objects at the mercy of their white male counterparts.

The complete objectification of Betty and Veronica was endemic to much of American popular culture of the time. The end of World War II led to a devolution in women’s agency in American society as the creation of steadfast gender roles were being laid out as “the popular culture was filled with stories about young adults who shifted their allegiances from the old ethnic ties to the new nuclear family ideal.”⁶⁹ Betty and Veronica reflect the change “in the popular media [where] women’s sexuality became increasingly central to their identity. The promising as well as the troublesome potential of female eroticism found expression in the plots and genres of the decade.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Bill Vigoda, Bill Woggon, Bob Montana and Al McLean, “Archie the Frog Catcher”, *Archie Comics* (New York: Archie Comics Publications, 1946), 2.

⁶⁹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 28.

⁷⁰ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 62.

Archie Comics #18 represented all of the good and bad that America's post-World War II fixation with legally quantifying normality in popular culture. On one end, American romance comic books as a product of the normalcy politics of the post-World War II era were helping to identify the different striations within America's youth culture. These books help to create and normalize who the American teenager was and how teenagers operated within American popular culture as a valid identity. On the other hand, these same books were preoccupied with defining the majority of the American youth experience as evil which helped propagate systemic discrimination and misogyny in American comic book readers.

Sgt. Rock's World War II

The shift in popularity from superhero to war comic books was far more organic than the transition to the romance genre. Comic books that focused on World War II contained all of the larger than life stakes and action that superheroes are used to having while also being a real life event that readers could understand and identify with. Comic publishers saw an opportunity to parlay their experience with selling superheroes into selling war hero books like *Our Army at War* by making superhero stories set in World War II with the American military replacing Superman and Captain America in the role of the protagonist.

A perfect example of a superhero plot finding its way into World War II would be the opening story of the very first issue of *Our Army At War* entitled “Last Performance”. The story, which was created in 1952 by Dave Woods, Frank Giacoia, and Joe Giella, followed two vaudevillian acrobats turned soldiers who use their athletic skills to infiltrate a Nazi hideout and singlehandedly take down the German army with tricks pulled directly from fellow DC Comics heroes Batman and Robin.⁷¹

Using this page as a reference, the only aspect of “Last Performance” that was attempting to recreate the experience of fighting in World War II was the uniforms the two acrobat soldiers had on. Every other element, from the expository dialogue the characters had to the physical

⁷¹ Dave Wood, Frank Giacoia, Joe Giella, “Last Performance”, *Our Army at War*, India Ink print, August, 1952.

manifestation of a spotlight created by artist Frank Giacoia and inker Joe Giella highlighting the superfluous action that occurs in the next panel, all of these story beats were cribbed directly from a Golden Age superhero. It is no wonder that the final panel of the story has the commanding officer of this unit scream at the two G.I. superheroes to quit their antics and just tell actual war stories.⁷²

Unfortunately not all of the writers and artists of *Our army at War* took their own advice in “Last Performance”, which made for eighty two comic books containing a wildly inconsistent tone between each story. Most stories followed the “Last Performance” model, but other stories hewed closer to reality, like “Dig your Foxholes Deep” which also appeared in the first issue of *Our Army at War*.

⁷² Dave Wood, Frank Giacoia, Joe Giella, “Last Performance”, *Our Army at War*, India Ink print, August, 1952.

“Dig your Foxholes Deep” was a dark tale by Robert Kanigher, Irv Novick, and Bernard Sachs about a group of soldiers that were entrenched on the front lines of the Pacific Theater. Two soldiers mishear orders passed down from soldier to soldier and the miscommunication leads to a disastrous encounter with the enemy.⁷³

The depiction of the Japanese army throughout the story in a racially stereotyped font in the black of night is a problem when viewed out of context. Nevertheless, having the enemy be represented as a formless set of words in the empty blackness as the two heroes try in vain to

⁷³ Robert Kanigher, Irv Novick, and Bernard Sachs, “Dig your Foxholes Deep!”, *Our Army at War*, India Ink print, August, 1952.

stop the words from appearing in the next panel helps to show readers the feeling of war. “Dig your Foxholes Deep” relays the fear of fighting an unknown enemy in a life-or-death arena and having to make the ultimate sacrifice to save the rest of your team. The story ends on a dark note, with the commanding officer to relieve the men as the next day dawns.⁷⁴

“Dig your Foxholes Deep” and war comic books often subverted the bylaws of the Comics Code Authority that attempted to curtail violence, racism, and sad endings due to two reasons. One was that while the sillier stories in war books failed to capture the authenticity of war, the stories did an excellent job of following the Comics Code Authority rules. These stories were typically put at the front of the issue which helped to hide other stories that had darker messages or contained commentary on the American military. The second reason war books did

⁷⁴ Robert Kanigher, Irv Novick, and Bernard Sachs, “Dig your Foxholes Deep!”, *Our Army at War*, India Ink print, August, 1952.

not come under much scrutiny from the Comics Code Authority was the fact that war books were set in the reality of World War II.

Even the most outrageous stories of heroism helped fuel support for the interests of the American military, and by extension the United States government, which in turn would influence how the Comics Code Authority would evaluate war comic books. Comic creators Joe Kubert and Robert Kanigher saw an opportunity to comment on the failures of the American military they served in while still perpetuating a pro-American military comic book that would fly under the radar of the Comics Code Authority, and in June of 1959, Sergeant Franklin Rock was born on the pages of *Our Army at War* #83.

Robert Kanigher is a titan in the history of DC Comics. He was the first person to write *Wonder Woman* once William Moulton Marsten died in 1947, he helped create one of the first super team books in the *Justice Society of America* in 1945, and he helped usher in a new period in comic book history when he co-created a new version of *The Flash* in 1956 which is marked as the start of the Silver Age of Comics. Yet even all these accomplishments pale in comparison to the work he did in 1952, when he became the editor of the five highest selling comic books of the 1950's for DC Comics, all war books lead by *Our Army At War*. Kanigher's team might not have always focused on the realities of war during the first few issues of his tenure, but this was to change when Kanigher brought artist and writer Joe Kubert in to draw *Our Army at War* in 1952.

This was the second time Kubert had worked for DC Comics, as he was brought on in the 1940's to do work on *Hawkman* as well as other freelance stories. Kubert left the comic book industry for a time when he was drafted into the Korean War in 1950. Kubert spent the better part of three years in the Army, which gave him all of the tools necessary to craft a human story

of American soldiers in conflict as opposed to the super-heroic yarns that were being spun on the pages of war comic books in Kubert's absence. Once back home, Robert Kanigher sought Kubert and several other veteran artists and writers for *Our Army at War*.

It is important to focus on Easy Company was a group introduced two issues prior by Bob Haney and Ross Andru. Easy Company's first mission in *Our Army #81* saw Sgt. Rocky, later referred to as Rock in *Our Army at War #83*, singlehandedly defeat a Nazi villain known as "the Iron Kaptain" in a knife fight.⁷⁵ *Our Army at War #81* became an incredibly popular book in large part due the success of Sgt. Rock and his Easy Company. Kubert and Kanigher seized the characters of Sgt. Rock and Easy Company to better explore what the American military should be in *Our Army at War #83*.

Our Army at War #83 opened with the story "The Rock and the Wall" and completely reset how war comic books would be written from that point on. The first page sets the expectations to the reader that this issue would be different than what they might have read in the past. The opening panels follow the tried and true formula of crafting a superhero soldier that *Our Army at War* had been using for eight years at this point. However, the praise of the exploits of Sgt. Rock was shared by the entire Easy Company. Sgt. Rock was not the acrobat soldiers showing off in the debut issue of *Our Army at War*, but the leader of a group of men praised for being able to execute the missions no one else could.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Robert Haney, Ross Andru, "The Rock of Easy Company", *Our Army at War*, 1, no. 81 (New York: DC Comics, 1959), 15.

⁷⁶ Robert Kanigher, Joe Kubert, "The Rock and the Wall", *Our Army at War*, India Ink print, June, 1959.

The other major difference that Kubert and Kanigher imbued on Sgt. Rock was in the audience that was praising Easy Company's success. Sgt. Rock was "an enlisted man who would protect you. Shield you...the grunts in the dirt and foxholes can look up to him."⁷⁷ Kubert and Kanigher made Sgt. Rock and Easy Company the heroes of the United States Army instead of Captain America who was more the hero of the United States than the military itself. In so doing, Kanigher and Kubert can show the future generation of American soldiers what model to follow when they fight.

⁷⁷ Jason Inman, *Super Soldiers: A Salute to the Comic Book Heroes and Villains who Fought for their Country*, (Coral Gables, Mango Publishing, 2019), 136.

“The Rock and the Wall” was essentially an illustrated model of what to do, and most importantly, what not to do in war. Sgt. Rock represented everything a soldier should do, whereas the new recruit of the story, Private Joe Wall, represented everything wrong with the United States military as well as how the military was depicted in comic books. For example, take the introductions of Sgt. Rock and Pvt. Wall:⁷⁸

Sgt. Rock is described by his fellow enlisted men as the savior of Easy Company, “cause when the going gets so rugged that only a rock can stand, he stands!”⁷⁹ Pvt. Wall is described as a dangerous daredevil who has a reputation of sacrificing his fellow soldiers for the glory of war. In fact, Pvt. Wall looks down on Sgt. Rock as a weakling specifically because Sgt. Rock refuses to be the superhero he once was in *Our Army at War* #81.

Kubert and Kanigher made sure to show how a superhero soldier like Pvt. Wall would fail in a real war by pairing Wall with Rock in an shootout with an invading Nazi air and land

⁷⁸ Robert Kanigher, Joe Kubert, “The Rock and the Wall”, *Our Army at War*, India Ink print, June, 1959.

⁷⁹ Robert Kanigher, Joe Kubert, “The Rock and the Wall”, *Our Army at War*, 1, no. 83 (New York, DC Comics, 1959), 2.

force. During the skirmish, Pvt. Wall's overconfidence in his abilities caused him to get injured, forcing Sgt. Rock to hold true to his namesake and finish the fight. As Sgt. Rock is covering fire for the injured Wall, Pvt. Wall cajoles himself for his ego jeopardizing the mission, as well as his ability to be a good soldier.

Pvt. Wall's self-doubt is the vocalization of everything wrong with how the American military should be in the eyes of Kubert and Kanigher. Pvt. Wall is selfish, hyper aggressive, and willing to sacrifice his fellow man for the glory of war. These are all of the criticisms Kubert and Kanigher are laying on previous comic creators who had depicted war without actually experiencing it, as well as the United States government for promoting the American military as a group of superheroes that could solve the world's problems instead of a collection of human beings that are trained to fight for what is morally just. Pvt. Wall's failure is an representation of the failure of the United States. It is at this moment that Sgt. Rock makes the decision to have Pvt. Wall fire his weapon to kill the final target, thus saving the day and the soldier's self-confidence once again.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Robert Kanigher, Joe Kubert, "The Rock and the Wall", *Our Army at War*, India Ink print, June, 1959.

“The Rock and the Wall” ends with Pvt. Wall understanding the importance of fighting a war as a team, and becomes a true member of Easy Company by describing why they call Sgt. Rock the Rock of Easy Company.⁸¹

⁸¹ Robert Kanigher, Joe Kubert, “The Rock and the Wall”, *Our Army at War*, India Ink print, June, 1959.

In one story of one issue of *Our Army at War*, Joe Kubert and Robert Kanigher completely reframed how the American military should be viewed by the public and utilized by the American government. Sgt. Rock as a representation of the United States military tells much about how Kubert and Kanigher thought the role of America should be in the international system. America should be the world's protector, not its aggressor. This means that the United States military should not be the largest global military force, nor should it be the one with the largest budget, but rather the force most interested in saving lives. *Our Army at War* #83 and "The Rock and the Wall" was merely the first statement in Joe Kubert's manifesto on the purpose of the American military, but the first true appearance of Sgt. Rock made a strong enough impact to become a timeless character in American popular culture.

How War Was Depicted

American comic books have had an eighty-plus year relationship with depicting the experiences of World War II, but the comic creators in the immediate postwar years had an incredibly painful path to depicting combat. All of the creators lived through World War II, with some even fighting in the war, meaning that their understanding of how the war should be depicted was the best of any subsequent generation of creators. However, governmental regulations made depicting World War II accurately nearly impossible. The mandate for governmentally enforced normalcy divided publishers and comic creators alike, with some embracing the changes that the Comics Code Authority made and heavily sanitizing their books whereas others found outlets to showcase their voice without bowing under the pressure of censorship.

What can be generally agreed on in terms of how war was depicted in the immediate post-World War II years was that the United States was the moral center of the world. At the extreme that meant comic books that depicted the American military as a one-man super human soldier that would decimate the enemy with little regard for nuance or humanity. As this period progressed, this image of the American military savior motif diminished until all that was left was characters like Sgt. Rock whose strength was born from the bonds created in his Easy Company.

The enemies of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan were not depicted as grotesque stereotypes as was the practice during World War II, however strong stereotypes were still utilized by comic creators to relay the otherness of the Axis Powers. The increase of humanity in the American comic books of the immediate post-World War II era affected how combat was depicted as well. Comic creators were concerned with depicting every emotion a soldier has

during war, so several stories were published that focused on translating the fear, anger, and sadness of combat onto a comic book panel instead depicting the grand strategy and glory of war. These stories often depicted very little actual combat, but gave the readers an understanding of how combat should feel. When stories were published that did depict combat, the Axis Powers were depicted as dangerous, cunning, and adept. There were several stories where American soldiers complimented the enemy for how well matched they were. These descriptions of the enemy gave the countries of the Axis Powers agency that they previously could never attain in an American comic book. The concepts of war and identity were even put into question during this time period, which will have ramifications for American comic books during future wars.

Conclusion

The iconic figurehead of Marvel Comics, Stan Lee, once said that “Marvel has always been, and always will be, a reflection of the world right outside our window. That world may change and evolve, but the one thing that will never change is the way we tell our stories of heroism.”⁸² This quote can be applied to the comic book medium as a whole, each piece of art has been crafted as a reflection of the life experiences of its creators. As such, that reflection can be distorted and reshaped by the events of the real world, and there has been no real life event more important to crafting the trajectory of comic books in America than war.

The long history of the American comic book has shown that war has an intimate relationship with war that takes the form of a three-section cycle. The lead-up section prepares the American people for war by signifying that participation in war is an act that will grant a soldier the largest amount of glory. Any enemy, foreign or domestic, that disrupts the process of war is an enemy of the state. The wartime section takes the patriotic fervor generated in the previous section, and levels that energy against the enemy. This process leads to a collection of comic books that rely on the propagation of racial hatred and a severe increase in violence disguised as acts of justice. The final section of the war and comics cycle, the aftermath, focuses on introspection. This takes the form of heavy censorship as well as comic books that are subversive and critical of the status quo.

World War II alone has been responsible for the largest amount of change in the American comic book industry with the likes of Wonder Woman, Batman, Captain America, Superman, Archie Andrews, and Sgt. Rock among the lengthy list characters and publishing companies that can be directly linked to the global conflict. World War II was eighty six years

⁸² “A Message from Stan Lee”, YouTube video, 1:17, “Marvel Entertainment”, October 5, 2017, <https://youtu.be/sjobevGAYHQ>.

ago for America though, and the country has changed a great deal in those eighty six years. Yet the cycle of war and comics continues on with Vietnam and the global War on Terror.

New heroes have been created or updated in order to fill the roles of the previous generation and help guide the youth of America to make more peaceful choices in the future. Yet the cycle continues. America's War on Terror has been the longest conflict in American history, which has had an interesting effect on the war and comics cycle. Several characters have gone through the cycle from the patriotic lead-up to cynical aftermath multiple times in the over fifteen years America has been at war.

Iron Man, for example, began the early 2000's as a tech giant CEO whose America first politics granted him an authority position within the United States Government. As the decade progressed, Tony Stark's might makes right ideology was challenged by the likes of Captain America. After a lengthy war that split the entire Marvel pantheon, Tony eventually changed his perspective, and became an industrialist to help end war instead of continuing to profit off of them. This cycle took years to tell in the pages of comic books, but Tony Stark's arc during this period was retold in cinemas worldwide when the 2008 film *Iron Man* kicked off what is now known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Other characters during this prolonged conflict have had their story hijacked altogether by groups who misinterpreted the core message of what the comic creators originally intended. *The Punisher* fits this criteria perfectly. *The Punisher* was created during the height of the Bronze Age of comics by Gerry Conway, and represented the trends of the time with ease. Frank Castle was a "a marine so damaged beyond repair" by his time in Vietnam that "his only way of

functioning [was] to always be fighting a war.”⁸³ Every aspect of the design of the Punisher was made to highlight Frank Castle’s broken nature.

His iconic white skull on a black background painted on his suit was meant to evoke poison and death, not elicit joy or heroism. Yet today ultra-right wing groups and domestic terrorists from around the world have embraced Frank Castle’s skull as a representation of what a hero stands for. The Punisher skull was an ever present icon during the January 6th, 2021 attack on the White House, and could be seen on clothes and flags of a majority of the participants. This led to Conway condemning anyone who used the Punisher’s iconography during the attack as well as a campaign to redesign the Punisher’s iconic skull in order to separate the character from his hateful fans. Therefore, comic books must stay political, they must always have a chance to reflect the world they are made in so that they can push the next generation of comic book readers to end this cycle once and for all.

⁸³ Jason Inman, *Super Soldiers A Salute to the Comic Book Heroes and Villains Who Fought for their Country* (Coral Gables, Mango Publishing, 2019), 173.

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Appendix A: The Comics Code Authority

CODE OF THE COMICS MAGAZINE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, INC.

Adopted October 26, 1954

PREAMBLE

The comic-book medium, having come of age on the American cultural scene, must measure up to its responsibilities. Constantly improving techniques and higher standards go hand in hand with these responsibilities. To make a positive contribution to contemporary life, the industry must seek new areas for developing sound, wholesome entertainment. The people responsible for writing, drawing, printing, publishing, and selling comic books have done a commendable job in the past, and have been striving toward this goal. Their record of progress and continuing improvement compares favorably with other media in the communications industry. An outstanding example is the development of comic books as a unique and effective tool for instruction and education. Comic books have also made their contribution in the field of letters and criticism of contemporary life. In keeping with the American tradition, the members of this industry will and must continue to work together in the future. In the same tradition, members of the industry must see to it that gains made in this medium are not lost and that violations of standards of good taste, which might tend toward corruption of the comic book as an instructive and wholesome form of entertainment, will be eliminated. Therefore, the Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc. has adopted this code, and placed strong powers of enforcement in the hands of an independent code authority. Further, members of the association have endorsed

the purpose and spirit of this code as a vital instrument to the growth of the industry. To this end, they have pledged themselves to conscientiously adhere to its principles and to abide by all decisions based on the code made by the administrator. They are confident that this positive and forthright statement will provide an effective bulwark for the protection and enhancement of the American reading public, and that it will become a landmark in the history of self-regulation for the entire communications industry.

CODE FOR EDITORIAL MATTER

General standards—Part A

- (1) Crimes shall never be presented in such a way as to create sympathy for the criminal, to promote distrust of the forces of law and justice, or to inspire others with a desire to imitate criminals.
- (2) No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime.
- (3) Policemen, judges, Government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.
- (4) If crime is depicted it shall be as a sordid and unpleasant activity.
- (5) Criminals shall not be presented so as to be rendered glamorous or to occupy a position which creates a desire for emulation.
- (6) In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds.
- (7) Scenes of excessive violence shall be prohibited. Scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gunplay, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated.

- (8) No unique or unusual methods of concealing weapons shall be shown.
- (9) Instances of law-enforcement officers dying as a result of a criminal's activities should be discouraged.
- (10) The crime of kidnapping shall never be portrayed in any detail, nor shall any profit accrue to the abductor or kidnaper. The criminal or the kidnaper must be punished in every case.
- (11) The letters of the word "crime" on a comics-magazine cover shall never be appreciably greater in dimension than the other words contained in the title. The word "crime" shall never appear alone on a cover.
- (12) Restraint in the use of the word "crime" in titles or subtitles shall be exercised.

General standards—Part B

- (1) No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title.
- (2) All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted.
- (3) All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.
- (4) Inclusion of stories dealing with evil shall be used or shall be published only where the intent is to illustrate a moral issue and in no case shall evil be presented alluringly, nor so as to injure the sensibilities of the reader.
- (5) Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism, and werewolfism are prohibited.

General standards—Part C

All elements or techniques not specifically mentioned herein, but which are contrary to the spirit and intent of the code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency, shall be prohibited.

Dialogue

- (1) Profanity, obscenity, smut, vulgarity, or words or symbols which have acquired undesirable meanings are forbidden.
- (2) Special precautions to avoid references to physical afflictions or deformities shall be taken.
- (3) Although slang and colloquialisms are acceptable, excessive use should be discouraged and, wherever possible, good grammar shall be employed.

Religion

- (1) Ridicule or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible.

Costume

- (1) Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure.
- (2) Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable.
- (3) All characters shall be depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society.
- (4) Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities.

NOTE.—It should be recognized that all prohibitions dealing with costume, dialog, or artwork applies as specifically to the cover of a comic magazine as they do to the contents.

Marriage and sex

- (1) Divorce shall not be treated humorously nor represented as desirable.
- (2) Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at nor portrayed. Violent love scenes as well as sexual abnormalities are unacceptable.
- (3) Respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered. A sympathetic understanding of the problems of love is not a license for morbid distortion.
- (4) The treatment of live-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage.
- (5) Passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions.
- (6) Seduction and rape shall never be shown or suggested.
- (7) Sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden.

CODE FOR ADVERTISING MATTER

These regulations are applicable to all magazines published by members of the Comics Magazine Association of America, Inc. Good taste shall be the guiding principle in the acceptance of advertising.

- (1) Liquor and tobacco advertising is not acceptable.
- (2) Advertisement of sex or sex instruction books are unacceptable.
- (3) The sale of picture postcards, "pinups," "art studies," or any other reproduction of nude or seminude figures is prohibited.
- (4) Advertising for the sale of knives or realistic gun facsimiles is prohibited.
- (5) Advertising for the sale of fireworks is prohibited.
- (6) Advertising dealing with the sale of gambling equipment or printed matter dealing with gambling shall not be accepted.
- (7) Nudity with meretricious purpose and salacious postures shall not be permitted in the advertising of any product; clothed figures shall never be presented in such a way as to be offensive or contrary to good taste or morals.
- (8) To the best of his ability, each publisher shall ascertain that all statements made in advertisements conform to fact and avoid misrepresentation.
- (9) Advertisement of medical, health, or toiletry products of questionable nature are to be rejected. Advertisements for medical, health, or toiletry products endorsed by the American Medical Association, or the American Dental Association, shall be deemed acceptable if they conform with all other conditions of the Advertising Code.

Appendix B: Golden Age of Comics Timeline

1929

October 29, 1929: Black Tuesday

. The largest stock market crash in American history, this event lead to a period of widespread poverty around the world known as the Great Depression.

1930

July, 1930: *The Shadow* Radio Program Debuts

. The Shadow Radio Program helps to bolster the popularity of Pulp Fiction in Great Depression-Era America.

1931

September 18, 1931: The Mukden Incident

. Japan invades and subsequently annexes the Harbin (then known as Manchurian) region of China. This event marks the beginning of World War II in Asia.

1935

January, 1935: *New Fun: The Big Comics Magazine* #1

. The American comic book medium begins when National Comics Publications (Now known as DC Comics) publishes *New Fun: The Big Comics Magazine*, the first nationally distributed comic book in America.

1938

June, 1938: *Action Comics #1*

- . The Golden Age of Comics officially begins with the first appearance of Superman in *Action Comics #1*.

1939

March, 1939: *Detective Comics #27*

- . The first appearance of the Batman.

September 1, 1939: Germany and the Soviet Union invade Poland

- . This joint invasion of Poland is marked as the official beginning of World War II in Europe.

December, 1939: *Marvel Mystery Comics #1*

- . Timely Comics' (Now known as Marvel Comics) first major publication debuts.

1941

March, 1941: *Captain America Comics #1*

- . First appearance of Captain America.

March 11, 1941: An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States is Signed into Law

- . Commonly known as the "Lend-Lease Act", this program saw the United States support the Allied Powers with food and military equipment in exchange for America to gain access to foreign military bases.

May, 1941: *Action Comics #36*

- . The "Fifth Columnists" story is published showcasing Superman's fight against the Anti-Interventionist Movement.

December, 1941: *All-Star Comics* #8

. The first appearance of Wonder Woman.

December 7, 1941: The Attack of Pearl Harbor

. The Japanese Imperial Navy surprise attacks the Hawaiian port of Pearl Harbor. This marks America's official involvement in World War II.

1942

April, 1942: *Captain America Comics* #13, *Namor: The Sub-Mariner Comics* #5, and *Human Torch Comics* #7

. These three comic books highlight the increased racial hatred toward the Japanese people through the use of racial stereotypes and revenge fantasy plot. These issues are also the closest Marvel Comics get to government propaganda as each issue was published with some form of governmental advertisement for the war effort throughout each book.

September, 1942: *Action Comics* #52

. Superman's first wartime story, the cover features the "Keep 'em Flying" stamp as well as a story seeing Superman face off against Benito Mussolini.

November, 1942: *Action Comics* #54

. This issue is the first example of how DC Comics created covers that were pro-World War II in order to boost sales.

1943

March, 1943: *Action Comics* #58

. This issue marks the closest DC Comics got to producing true propaganda. The cover states that “Superman Says You Can Slap A Jap with War Bonds” and features a racially stereotyped drawing of a Japanese soldier.

1945

May 8, 1945: V-E Day

. Germany officially surrenders to the Allied Powers, thus ending the European Theater of World War II.

August 6 & 9, 1945: The Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

. The first use of a nuclear weapons in a war. Seventy to eighty-thousand people were killed in the blast and firestorm that followed. Nagasaki was bombed three days later, with thirty-five to forty thousand people killed in the immediate events of the bombing. These two bombings are seen as the moments that ended World War II.

September 2, 1945: V-J Day

. Imperial Japan officially surrenders to the Allied Powers, thus officially ending the military conflicts of World War II.

1946

February, 1946: *Archie Comics* #18

. The first Archie comic published in the post-World War II era ushers in a change in what type of comic books dominated American newsstands.

1950

June 25, 1950: The Korean War Begins

. The Korean People's Army of North Korea invades South Korea which sparks a military conflict known today as the Korean War.

1952

August, 1952: *Our Army at War* #1

. This issue helped bring the war comic genre into the forefront of popularity in the American comic book industry.

1953

July 27, 1953: The Korean Armistice Agreement is Signed

. This document, signed by both the North and South Korean governments, marks the cessation of fighting during the Korean War. The agreement also marks the 38th parallel as a demilitarized zone which acts as an artificial dividing line between the two countries.

1954

April 19, 1954: *Seduction of the Innocent* is Published

. The book that helped to usher in the Comics Code Authority is first published.

April 22, 1954: The Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency Hearings

. Frederic Wertham, author of *Seduction of the Innocent*, as well as the members of the governing body of the American comic book industry are brought before the United States Senate in order to debate the need for censorship in comics. During this debate, the creation of the Comics Code Authority, a self-governed censorship group lead by the Comics Magazine Association of America, was formed.

September, 1954: The Comics Code Authority is Formed

. The censorship board for the American comic book industry is created. This board would influence the production of American comics books for over six decades before its dissolution in 2011.

1959

June, 1959: *Our Army at war* #81

. The first appearance of Sgt. Rock.