



## Spotlight: World War Two

### Ivan Melhuish Collection, Propaganda Posters

Canadians have defended freedom in every major conflict since 1900.

As part of the British Empire, Canada was automatically at war when Great Britain declared war on Germany in August of 1914. Throughout World War I, or “The Great War” (1914-1918), more than 650,000 Canadians served in the Canadian armed forces, including over 1700 residents of Peel.

When World War II was declared in 1939, the world was split between the Allies (including the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China) and the Axis powers (including Germany, Italy and Japan). Over 2900 Peel residents volunteered to serve.

This Learning Resource will focus on the Region of Peel Archives, [Ivan Melhuish](#) war poster collection.

## Curriculum Connections

### Elementary

Heritage and Identity: Communities in Canada, Past and Present

### Highschool

Historical Inquiry and Skill Development



## Let's Get Started

The Melhuish Collection of Second World War Canadian, British and American propaganda posters are housed in the Region of Peel Archives. They highlight the issues of war as expressed on the home front and are studied for both their artistic and political designs. These posters provide us with some insight into what war time advertisements and messaging was like.



When World War Two broke out, Ivan Melhuish was employed by Canada Packers, Ltd. in Toronto. Certified as medically unfit for enlistment, he was very interested in the progression of the war. A self-confessed pack-rat, he collected newspaper clippings, magazines, programs, letters and other items connected to the war effort in Canada, his native England and beyond. His first poster came from the bulletin board at Canada Packers, and was joined by 295 others, many sent to him from friends overseas and by groups with which Melhuish corresponded.

Regarding Brampton during the war years, Melhuish recalled:

"The whole town was a noise of excitement. Residents were all involved in one way or another with the war effort, through volunteer work with the Red Cross, or at the Maple Leaf Club, in Victory Bond Drives, or by working in essential war industries."

Melhuish continued to work for Canada Packers, a major supplier of meat to the armed forces, and also became a member of the Civil Defence Corps for Brampton. In later years, Melhuish considered his collection as a small contribution to the war, and in 1979, he donated it to the Region of Peel Archives. Ivan Melhuish died in the early 1990s.

Watch PAMA's Regional Archivist talk about one of the posters in the collection.  
[Behind the Scenes in the Archives: War Posters - YouTube](#)



## Closer Look

Explore the *Melhuish Collection Resource package* (see below) for more in-depth information on the war posters.

Take a closer look at some of the poster PAMA has in our collection.

- [Poster 25](#)
- [Poster 69](#)
- [Poster 120](#)
- [Poster 122](#)
- [Poster 137](#)

Use the following questions as a guide when interpreting the above posters:

(You can download all the posters in one file [here.](#))

- What is the poster trying to say? What is its main message?
- What emotions or feelings is the poster trying to provoke?
- What techniques are used in the poster to reinforce an idea or value?
- To what extent do you think the poster would be successful?
- How does the poster depict the enemy? The home nation and its allies?
- How would an enemy nation have illustrated a negative message about Canada or Canadians?
- How is propaganda different from information?

### Other PAMA Resources:

Learning Resource: [First World War: Personal Stories](#) Grade 10 History

Videos : [Snapshots from England: the Second World War as seen by Sam Charters - YouTube](#)

[At Rest, Soldier: Second World War photos - YouTube](#)



## Development of the Poster



Printed advertisements can be traced back to the 16th century, but the poster as we know it today did not emerge until 1860 with the invention of the colour lithographic printing process. Brilliantly coloured posters could be produced cheaply, and the medium reached an artistic peak in Paris during the late 19th century. Advertising products as well as theatrical and musical performances, posters of this time period exhibit the decorative patterns that characterize Art Nouveau. Artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec, who worked in the Art Nouveau style, helped to popularize the poster as an art form.



The 20th century boom in industry and mass production gave rise to the extensive use of posters for advertising. Posters from the early decades of the last century reflect the influences of art movements like Art Deco. Popular in the 1920s and 1930s, Art Deco symbolized the power and speed of the machine age with streamlined shapes and sleek angular design and typography. Cubism and Futurism with their emphasis on geometric forms also had an influence on graphic design.



### WWI Posters

During World War I (1914 - 1918) posters were used to raise money, recruit soldiers and boost volunteer efforts. The Canadian Government helped finance the war by selling victory bonds to Canadian citizens, corporations, and organizations. Victory bonds, certificates paying fixed interest rates in five, ten or twenty year terms, were promoted by massive poster campaigns.



## WWII Posters

The poster also played a significant role in World War II, along with radio and print. WW II posters downplayed text in favour of catchy slogans and were produced in mass quantities using photo offset. They show an increase in the use of photography, bold colours and strong graphic designs. After the war, the use of posters declined in most countries as television became the prime source of advertising.

## Posters and Propaganda



Propaganda is information used to persuade a group of people or to promote a cause or idea.

Propaganda has always been crucial during periods of war. During WWII, the Wartime Information Board brought news to Canadians. Public opinion polls were used to determine information strategies and government employees, private sector companies and individuals generated poster artwork, text, and film to keep citizens up-to-date on the home front and abroad.

Posters became an effective means of communication. They could be produced at low cost, printed in different sizes and displayed on billboards, in shop windows, theatres, buses, streetcars, workplaces, even on matchbox covers, and produced from a few hundred to tens of thousands.

## Poster Designers



Poster designed by  
A.J. Casson

Poster designers included anonymous graphic artists as well as noted Canadian painters like Group of Seven member, **A.J. Casson**. In the United States, the well-known illustrator, **Norman Rockwell** made a series of four paintings illustrating the "Four Freedoms" that were widely reproduced and collected. Many posters drew upon popular advertising and commercial art styles using realistic renderings of people and settings. Others were more stylized with Cubism geometric motifs. The design vocabulary of many poster artists was influenced by artists, architects, and designers who left Europe at the outbreak of war for North America.





Posters designed by  
Norman Rockwell

## Promoting a Common Purpose

On the home front, the war effort included production of weapons, airplanes, food and other materials with over one million Canadian men and women employed in war industries. Posters helped to mobilize the workforce and promote a common purpose. During WWI, posters were used to sell victory bonds and war savings stamps. The cash sale of victory bonds during the WWII totalled billions of dollars, owed largely to poster campaigns. Financial support of the war and calls for increased production and labour were important messages conveyed by propaganda posters. Canadians responded and their efforts contributed to winning the war for the country and its allies.



## Delivering the Message



Posters played a major role in convincing Canadian men and women of their duty to enlist in the armed forces by focusing on the adventure and excitement of war. During WWII, women became more involved in the military and in wartime production industries. With slogans like *"do the job he left behind"*, posters encouraged women to seek employment in defence industries, positions previously considered to be suited only for men.

Female war workers were typified by the fictional *"Rosie the Riveter"*: confident, determined and with her sleeves rolled up, ready to do the work required. Homemakers, farmers and munitions plant workers were all urged to help *"finish the job"*, an euphemism for destroying the enemy.

War poster designs generally delivered one or more of the following characteristics:

- **Symbols** - rather than depicting the horrors of war, such as the lone man dying because "someone talked", implying even small amounts of information might aid the enemy and be leaked by spies
- **Dark colours and frightening imagery** - brought the realities of war closer to home
- **Requests for public discretion and secrecy** - often using a story format to illustrate how careless talk about troop movements can lead to acts of sabotage
- **Emotional appeals** - to stir feelings of patriotism, hatred or revenge, as seen in the many American posters that appeared following the bombing of Pearl Harbour

- **Caricature** - to ridicule and vilify the enemy or to dehumanize the target of attack.
- **Importance of everyone contributing something to their country** - from working in war industries and food production to donating blood and conserving and recycling in the home. With the rationing of fuel, posters called for car-pooling and the reduction of unnecessary travel. Salvage efforts included saving waste paper, old tires, scrap metal, bones and fat for munitions production, and tons of materials were collected during scrap drives.



## Understanding the Posters

The success of wartime propaganda posters depends on their ability to exploit commonly held values and viewpoints. As cultural artifacts, the posters reveal the prevailing attitudes of a society under the extreme conditions of war, a factor which should be taken into account when interpreting their meaning.

To communicate well, posters must grab the viewer's attention and deliver a message in a matter of seconds through its complex arrangement of words and symbols. A poster's ability to do this reflects the conceptual and design choices made by its creator.

Images, text, composition, typography, and colour influence meaning. A poster can be powerful with a picture alone, as was demonstrated by the many striking images created during the Russian Revolution for a mostly illiterate audience.



Posters require a use of visual shorthand and symbolism to imply more than is shown. Some things to look for:

- **Images of women** - depicted as victims; in traditional roles as wives and mothers; or ministering to the wounded as Red Cross "angels"
- **Images of children** - threat to children's lives through the use of symbolic shadows, children doing their part by purchasing war savings stamps or anxiously awaiting their father's return from the battlefield
- **Stereotypes and caricatures of the enemy** - such as Hitler in uniform with an exaggerated moustache and iron cross
- **Hitler mentioned by name** - instead of referring to the Nazis or the Third Reich, the posters personify the evil of the Nazis in Hitler compared to German propaganda posters where he embodied everything good about the Reich
- **Symbols used for the allies** – representations of Winston Churchill and the lion for Britain; beaver for Canada; stars and stripes for the United States

