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Men of Steel & Sentinels of Liberty: Superman and Captain America as Civilians and Soldiers in World War II

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Men of Steel & Sentinels of Liberty:
Superman and Captain America as Civilians and Soldiers in World War II

by

Richard Donald Deverell

A thesis submitted to the Department of History of the College
at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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by

Richard Donald Deverell

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Superman and Captain America as Civilians and Soldiers in World War II

by Richard Donald Deverell

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I want to dedicate this to
family, friends, and faculty who
helped me over the years as I developed
this idea into the final product
you hold in your hands.

Abstract

This thesis examines Superman and Captain America comics during World War II, arguing that they portray the civilians' and soldiers' experiences of the war, respectively. The thesis begins by examining the creators' backgrounds and how they influenced later portrayals of the war before proceeding to explore the wartime comics. During the war, DC used Superman as escapist fare to distract from the war while Timely Comics used Captain America to explore the issues of the war, such as portrayals of the Nazis and Japanese. The third and fourth chapters focus on these two issues: portrayals of Nazis and the Japanese. Both comics carefully distinguished between Germans and Nazis, avoiding racial stereotyping of Caucasians. The Japanese, however, were the most prevalent in a series of bluntly racist portrayals of non-whites in the comics. Superman and Captain America comics reinforced white supremacy and cast the war in racial terms. The two characters and their respective publishers used the relatively new medium of comic books to engage World War II in distinctly different ways, allowing the comics to portray the civilians' and soldiers' respective experiences.

Keywords

WWII, Comics, Superman, Race, Nazis, Japanese

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Introduction

During World War II, Superman and Captain America represented the respective attitudes of Americans on the homefront and American soldiers in the theatres of war. Created in 1938, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman embodied the narrative of an immigrant to American who believes in his adopted country and strives to succeed. Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's Captain America, created in 1941, represents Americans' belief in their moral righteousness during the Second World War. Both characters serve as stand-ins for American ideas during and about the war and, of equal importance, both characters offer an escape through stories written to avoid the war without offering any criticism of the war itself.

The Golden Age of comics, roughly comprised of issues printed in the late 1930s through the 1950s, began with Superman's first appearance in *Action Comics* number 1. These Golden Age comics ran longer than modern comics to roughly sixty pages and contained multiple stories, allowing writers to examine different themes over the course of a single issue. They largely lacked continuity, meaning that the stories from one week did not necessarily affect the stories of the next so that Superman or Captain America's actions against an adversary need not prevent that adversary from attacking in the following issue with no explanation for the intervening time. *Captain America Comics* demonstrate this when Private Steve Rogers' Army camp, Camp Lehigh appears to move throughout the continental United States and at one point seemingly appears in Scotland for a story that rips off *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in issue 10.

Comics first captured the mindset of the Great Depression, serving as a form of escapism, and later experienced unprecedented growth due to World War II. As a “lowbrow” art form, comics could use artistic conventions that more traditionally “highbrow” art eschewed. Superman, initiator of the Golden Age, quickly expanded to two titles, both *Action Comics* and *Superman*, a novel, written in 1942, a radio drama, and animated cartoon. This thesis focuses primarily on the written work from the Golden Age, including both comic series and the novel.

Captain America reflected the coming threat of World War II far more than the Great Depression, but his creators, having grown up during the worst of the Depression, endowed him with certain sensibilities from that time such as the belief that a man has a responsibility to work hard and support a cause. Unlike Superman, Captain America remained primarily in the medium of comics, likely due to Timely Comics failing to create a media empire around a single character like DC did with Superman. Captain America appeared in his own series, *Captain America Comics*, as well as the team-up book, *All Winners Comics*. A 1944 serial film from Republic Pictures portrayed a version of Captain America that greatly differed from the comics, but that represented one of the primary purposes of comics during the war – escapism. The producers of the serial avoided addressing any larger ideological issues not out of a belief in escapism, but because they did not consult the comics and only had a character sketch to work from while making the film. This study examines Captain America and Superman both through comics and the novel and serial film from this period.

First, I examine Superman and Captain America's respective creators, whose immigrant families and Depression-era backgrounds influenced their work and often characterized the behavior of their characters. After examining their creators, this thesis highlights the pre-war comics of these two characters, particularly paying attention to the characters' early behaviors that influenced portrayals of the war. Following the first section, this thesis progresses to comics published during the war, roughly those issues from January 1942 through October 1945. The war chapter includes escapist issues featuring stories that avoid the war. Separate chapters examine the portrayals of Nazis and the Germans as a whole, as well as the Japanese and the racism associated with their wartime portrayals. This thesis refers to Superman's publisher alternately as "DC" or "National," both of which were names by which the company referred to itself. I refer to Captain America's publisher, on the other hand, as Timely Comics, the name it first called itself.

In all of these chapters, Superman and Captain America clearly demonstrate American ideas during and about the war, such as the distinction between Germans and Nazis, racism, particularly that targeted at the Japanese, and the belief in American moral superiority, while also serving as an escape from the turmoil of war for their readers. In their respective comics, Superman and Captain America embody the civilians' and the soldiers' experiences of the war, respectively.

Chapter One: Origins and First Appearances

Comic books owe their success to newspaper comic strips. The earliest comic books “started as reprints of newspaper strips” in which “someone would repaste the panels – not always in sequence – and the publisher would offer sixty-four pages in color for a dime.”¹ These early comics often featured stories derived from the pulp magazines of the time: fantastic science fiction, creepy horror, and true crime. The stories all offered an escape from the drudgery of life in the Great Depression and, later, the turmoil of World War II. Though the plots of the stories offered an escape, the content reinforced the values of the time, with strong men, pliant women, and a sense of white racial superiority.

Superman, as the first comic book superhero, owed his origin to the Depression-era ideals of his creators, Simon and Shuster. Born Julius Schuster, Jr. on 14 July 1914 to Russian Jewish immigrants, Joe Shuster first grew up in Toronto before his family moved to Cleveland in 1924. A self-taught illustrator, Shuster first began cartooning by copying the comic strips he read in his local paper. Jerome Siegel, born 17 October 1914 to Lithuanian Jewish immigrants, was Shuster’s distant cousin. Siegel grew up reading pulp magazines, preferring the new science fiction pulp magazines, and desperately wanted to publish stories in these magazines he so idolized. In *Superboys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster – The Creators of Superman*, Brad Ricca writes that Siegel became determined to produce comics after reading an article titled “The Funny Papers” in *Fortune*

¹ Mark Evanier, *Kirby: King of Comics* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, Inc., 2008), 38.

magazine that began “with the shocking fact that ‘some twenty comic-strip headliners are paid at least \$1,000 a week.’”² Siegel and Shuster began writing a Buck Rogers knock-off for their school paper titled *Interplanetary Police*. The comic, though it honed their skills, was not particularly successful. On Sunday night, 18 June 1933, Jerry Siegel woke with inspiration and spent the remainder of the night and early the next morning writing the script for what eventually became Superman. Shuster designed the art, though they could not sell it to a newspaper. Siegel contacted Russell Keaton, a ghost illustrator³ for *Buck Rogers* to redo the art, though Siegel and Shuster still could not sell the strip.

Siegel and Shuster continued to mail their work to different pulps and publishers in the hope of breaking into the business. Eventually, their work reached Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson at National Allied Publishing, who gave them a chance. In 1935, Siegel and Shuster published *Henri Duval*, “a Three Musketeers rip-off,” and *Dr. Occult*, a story about a paranormal detective.⁴ According to Ricca, “Siegel and Shuster populated their early comics with people they knew.”⁵ In 1936, Wheeler-Nicholson began securing the funds to create a new title, *Detective Comics*. The success of the title, and collaboration with Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz, led

² Brad Ricca, *Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster – The Creators of Superman* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 46.

³ Similar to a ghost writer.

⁴ Ricca, *Super Boys*, 105.

⁵ Brad J. Ricca, “Discovering the Story of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster,” in *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 195.

to the founding of Detective Comics, Inc.⁶ The company placed its initials on all of its comics by 1940, formally branding itself as DC. Despite the creation of the new company, “Wheeler-Nicholson didn’t remain a part of Detective Comics, Inc.” as “money issues forced him out by the end of the year, and Donenfeld and Liebowitz moved to secure his assets.”⁷ Meanwhile, Siegel and Shuster had not given up on Superman, and continued to revise the comic in the hope of securing a position as a syndicated strip. They redesigned the costume, with the tights representing “a mixture of the strongman’s outfit and the attire of wrestlers and boxers, who frequently wore tights with shorts, often differently colored, on the outside.”⁸ The cape represented a blending of swashbucklers and wrestlers and Shuster added the “S” shield to keep the character’s chest from appearing dull. The costume, rather than disguise Superman’s identity, served “as an announcement of who this character was.”⁹ The boys realized they needed something more for the story and devised Lois Lane. Finally, the two had the primary elements of their Superman story. They brought it to the heads of Detective Comics, hoping to use professional connections to secure a syndicated strip, but the executives convinced the two that the comic book format better suited the character. In return for \$130 and the ability to publish Superman, Siegel and Shuster signed away all creative rights to the character to Detective Comics and

⁶ Alan Cowsill, et al., *DC Comics Year by Year: A Visual Chronicle* (New York: DK Publishing, 2010), 16.

⁷ Cowsill, *DC Comics Year by Year*, 16.

⁸ Ricca, *Super Boys*, 128.

⁹ Ricca, *Super Boys*, 128.

Donenfeld. Donenfeld desperately wanted a major character, similar to Mickey Mouse, after losing a contract to publish *Lone Ranger* magazines.

Superman first appeared in *Action Comics* number 1 and was an immediate success. Donenfeld quickly negotiated a newspaper strip deal, what Siegel and Shuster had always wanted, and told the two that if they signed a ten-year contract “they could do the newspaper strips, and they would get some royalties.”¹⁰ If the two did not sign the deal, Donenfeld threatened he could replace them. According to Ricca, “Though his powers include great strength and the ability to leap great distances, *Superman*’s early stories are more about inspirational situations than smackdowns.”¹¹ Siegel and Shuster imbued the character with elements of themselves and their own lives, using him as an avatar for their own troubles. In this way, “*Action Comics* was about the state of being that is the hapless boy, but Jerry [Siegel] and Joe [Shuster] managed to mythologize it – the nerd is awkward but also heroic, selfless, and strong in the drama of his own imagination.”¹² The success of *Action Comics*, coupled with the self-contained nature of its stories, “made it easy for National to soon consider starting a reprint series to capitalize on Superman’s success.”¹³ In the summer of 1939, Superman began appearing in his own self-titled series.

Captain America, like Superman, grew out of the Depression-era ideas of his creators, though Joe Simon and Jack Kirby endowed their character with thematic

¹⁰ Ricca, *Super Boys*, 155.

¹¹ Ricca, *Super Boys*, 157.

¹² Ricca, *Super Boys*, 161.

¹³ Ricca, *Super Boys*, 161.

elements more commonly found in horror comics. In 1936, Martin Goodman, a pulp magazine publisher, released *Ka-Zar*, a pulp magazine starring “a white man turned lord of an African jungle...in the tradition of Edgar Rice Burrough’s Tarzan.”¹⁴ Two years later, Goodman published a science fiction magazine titled *Marvel Science Stories*, later renamed *Marvel Tales*. In 1937, following Hearst’s downsizing, Joe Simon relocated to Manhattan to seek work. Simon’s first job in New York City was illustrating for Macfadden Publications, a publisher of various pulp magazines. In 1938, Jack Kirby began to work at Eisner and Iger, a comic packaging company run by Will Eisner and Jerry Iger. In 1939, Frank Torpey, the sales manager at Funnies Incorporated, a packager of comics book characters that sold its work to different publishers, “persuaded Goodman to start publishing comics.”¹⁵ Goodman named his comic book company Timely Publications and published the first issue in October 1939, *Marvel Comics* number 1, debuting the Human Torch and Sub-Mariner. In 1939, Harlan Crandall recommended that Joe Simon, seek work in the new comic book business, leading to an interview and eventual position working for Colonel Lloyd Jacquet at Funnies Incorporated. After the success of the Human Torch and Sub-Mariner, Goodman wanted similar characters. To that end, Crandall assigned Simon to create a Human Torch knockoff, which he did over the course of a weekend, naming his character “The Fiery Mask.”¹⁶ Since Simon had not signed an exclusive contract with Funnies, he freelanced for various other companies,

¹⁴ Tom DeFalco, ed., *Marvel Chronicle: A Year By Year History* (New York: DK Publishing, 2008), 10.

¹⁵ DeFalco, *Marvel Chronicle*, 10.

¹⁶ Joe Simon, *My Life in Comics* (London: Titan Books, 2011), 67.

eventually taking the editor position at Victor Fox's comics line at Fox Publications. While working for Fox, Simon met Kirby, who had moved on to Fox's company after looking for more work opportunities.

Both Simon and Kirby moonlighted from Fox, doing work for various other publishers, the most notable of which was Simon's superhero book for Novelty Press titled *Blue Bolt*. Simon and Kirby first worked together as a team on *Blue Bolt* and discovered that their work styles perfectly complimented each other. When Fox learned that Simon was moonlighting as a writer and illustrator for other companies, he fired Simon, thereby freeing Simon from a job that he had come to hate. Simon and Kirby then set out to create their own, new comic character. Before creating the hero, Simon knew they needed a good villain. In his autobiography, Simon explained that, despite America's official stance of neutrality, he wanted to use Adolf Hitler as a "real live villain" and needed to create a patriotic hero to pit against the Führer.¹⁷ Simon created the Red Skull, who eventually embodied the Nazi threat that Captain America battled, after observing the shape of a melting ice cream sundae that appeared skull-like. Simon and Kirby wrote and illustrated the complete first issue before storing it with some of their better work as insurance against a slow work period.

Shortly after finishing the first issue of Captain America, Goodman called Simon into his office to discuss the possibility of breaking free of the comics packagers to produce all the issues in-house. After talking to Goodman, Simon and

¹⁷ Simon, *My Life in Comics*, 87.

Kirby decided to show him the sketch of Captain America. Goodman liked the concept and offered them “twenty-five percent of the profits for the title, as well as [their] regular page rate.”¹⁸ Furthermore, Goodman “loved Captain America so much that he decided to take another chance” in launching the character in his own book, rather than a generic title, as was the case for Superman, Batman, and many others.¹⁹

Simon summarized the theme of the Captain America series, writing,

Captain America Comics wasn't all about patriotism either. If you look at it, it really was a horror mystery book. Even though Steve Rogers was a soldier at an army camp, most of the stories were adventures like “Case of the Black Witch” and “The Hunchback of Hollywood and the Movie Murder.” Sure, we had stories such as “Trapped in the Nazi Stronghold,” but most of them weren't like that.²⁰

Following negotiations with Goodman, Simon joined the Timely staff as the editor and convinced Goodman “to pay Jack [Kirby] a regular salary,” thereby bringing Kirby with him from Fox's line.²¹

The first issue of *Captain America Comics* featured a March 1940 cover date²², though it “reached newsstands on December 20, 1940.”²³ According to Kirby biographer Mark Evanier, “just nine days later in a fireside chat, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt told the U.S. of A. that war was imminent and that America must be ‘the great arsenal of democracy.’”²⁴ Literature scholar Marco Arnaudo argues, “In

¹⁸ Simon, *My Life in Comics*, 92.

¹⁹ Simon, *My Life in Comics*, 92.

²⁰ Simon, *My Life in Comics*, 92-93.

²¹ Evanier, *Kirby: King of Comics*, 47.

²² Cover dates do not necessarily represent the actual release date of a comic. Artists and writers typically produced the comics months in advance of the cover date. In some cases, the cover date served to tell the magazine distributors when to remove the comic from the racks.

²³ Evanier, *Kirby: King of Comics*, 50.

²⁴ Evanier, *Kirby: King of Comics*, 50.

periods of strong nationalistic sentiment, like during World War II, when Captain America and ‘super’ Uncle Sam comics first appeared, these characters were easily made into positive, reassuring symbols, intervening in a conflict where the line between good and evil seemed to neatly coincide with nationality (Americans good, Axis bad).”²⁵ Simon writes of Captain America’s success, “When *Captain America Comics* #1 came out, it was Timely’s biggest book,” having sold “nearly a million” copies, beating Timely’s previous best-seller, *Marvel Comics* number 1.²⁶

Though the Depression shaped the creation of both Superman and Captain America, the characters’ respective creators followed different paths. Siegel and Shuster, in controlling Superman stories through the war, continued his successful immigrant narrative and molded the character to represent the homefront during the war. Simon and Kirby, on the other hand, only had the first ten issues in which to establish Captain America. Though Stan Lee later oversaw *Captain America Comics*’ production, he did not deviate from the hyper patriotic narratives that spoke to the soldiers’ perspective, nor did he shy away from Simon and Kirby’s more horror-based themes. Even with Simon and Kirby’s limited run, they, like Siegel and Shuster, codified their character’s perspective within a few issues prior to the United States formally entering the war.

Though Superman and Captain America debuted three years apart, they featured vastly different stories in their earliest appearances. Superman represented a

²⁵ Marco Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, trans. Jamie Richards (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 96.

²⁶ Simon, *My Life in Comics*, 111.

fierce individualism, at times overtly flaunting the law in order to bring evildoers to justice. Many of the stories dealt with corruption or gangsters, with the occasional evil geniuses. These stories carry on the tradition of pulp crime and science fiction stories, a tradition that influenced National Comics' handling of World War II. Conversely, Captain America directly engaged the war as more Americans became engaged in it in 1941. Despite this overarching engagement, several of Captain America's stories avoided the war, replicating pulp horror or adventure stories, but the main difference between Captain America and Superman was that Captain America, though possessing enhanced strength, could actively fight in World War II without his actions threatening to present an alternate history in which a single man ended the war. Siegel and Shuster, however, understood that they needed to avoid the war due to Superman's superhuman strength, instead using the character to offer an escapist fantasy. These early issues clearly established the perspectives of Superman and Captain America, with the former focusing on the homefront and the successful immigrant narrative and the latter embodying the hyper patriotism that later narrated the war to American soldiers.

Rocketing into the pages of *Action Comics* number 1, cover dated June 1938, Siegel and Shuster imbued their first story with a breathless pace in keeping with the book's title. Siegel and Shuster quickly establish the character's back-story: coming from a doomed planet, developing superpowers at a young age, and deciding to use his powers for the public benefit. In his first adventures, Superman breaks into a governor's mansion to prevent an innocent woman's execution, fights an abusive

husband, takes on gangsters who have set their sights on Lois Lane, and terrorizes a corrupt Washington lobbyist that wants to embroil the United States with Europe.²⁷ The negative portrayal of this lobbyist demonstrates the isolationist, homefront-focused nature of Superman's stories. The cover of *Action Comics* number 1 expands an interior panel of Superman smashing the gangsters' car after freeing Lois. In these stories, Superman appears as a reckless vigilante, relishing in using his powers to frighten those who threaten the weak. He eagerly announces to the wife beater, "And now you're going to get a lesson you'll never forget!"²⁸ Superman's glee subsides when the man faints from the threat. Later, facing the lobbyist, Superman carries the man by the leg, racing along a power line and laughing at the man's fears of electrocution.

In the story's continuation, published in *Action Comics* number 2, cover dated July 1938, Superman learns the lobbyist works for a munitions manufacturer, whom he threatens and forces to enlist in the army in war-torn San Monté, a fictional South American country. There, Superman takes exclusive pictures for the newspaper back home and ensures that the munitions manufacturer learns of the horrors of war, effectively forcing him out of business. A group of soldiers accuse Lois, who traveled to the war-torn nation for the story, of being a spy after the pictures run in the paper and Superman has to rescue her. Eventually, Superman gathers the leading generals of the two sides and decides "to end this war by having [them] fight it out between

²⁷ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman: The Action Comics Archives, Volume 1* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 1997).

²⁸ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman: The Action Comics Archives, Volume 1*, 16.

[themselves].”²⁹ The two generals, declaring that they hold no animosity for each other, determine to end the war. This story, unlike later issues, portrays Superman easily meddling in the affairs of his adopted planet, not worrying about the larger consequences. Again, this act-first policy reflects the tradition of pulp magazines and the gritty detective novels of Dashiell Hammett. Further, in portraying the negative aspects of war and arguing against those that sought America’s involvement in European affairs, Superman exhibited the isolationist, homefront-oriented themes that later defined him during the war.

Siegel and Shuster initially worked to ground Superman’s abilities in the realm of science. According to physicist James Kakalios, Superman’s initial super-strength and ability to leap great distances fit the concept of his coming from a planet with higher gravity. However, “by the late 1940s, Superman [gained] the power of true flight, able to choose and alter his trajectory after leaving the ground,” as well as “a host of other abilities that could not be reasonably accounted for by the stronger gravity of his home planet” such as “various visions...super-hearing, super-breath, and even super-hypnotism.”³⁰ As his powers increased, Siegel and Shuster continued to isolate Superman from the war in order to avoid the issues that would arise in portraying Superman using his powers to the fullest extent on a battlefield.

Though Superman’s origin bears more than a passing resemblance to the stories of both Jesus and Moses, more than any specific religion he represents a

²⁹ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 1* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 1989), 38.

³⁰ James Kakalios, *The Physics of Superheroes* (New York: Gotham Books, 2005), 22.

positive immigration narrative. Arnaudo states, “Kal/Clark showed how it was possible to combine the specific elements from one’s place of origin (in his case, Kryptonian superstrength) with the culture and values of one’s new country (transmitted to him by the Kent family), thus becoming a completely integrated member of his new society, indistinguishable from the others yet also (as the crowning touch to the myth of success) able to obtain a prestigious position as a journalist.”³¹ Later issues of *Action Comics* and *Superman* portray Superman as reflecting his adopted American values and a Great Depression mentality reminiscent of screwball comedy and gangster films. Rather than address the war, Superman typically combats social issues such as corruption and unsafe drivers. *Superman* number 3 describes its titular character as “Superman, champion of the oppressed,” and all issues begin with a similar banner.³² In avoiding war and capturing the American attitude toward war prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, *Superman* number 2 features a story in which a scientist develops a deadly new gas weapon that can penetrate gas masks. War profiteers kill the scientist and steal the formula for the gas, which the scientist said was for use “only in the case of a defensive war.”³³ Superman follows the profiteers to a fictional country embroiled in civil war and thwarts their plans. This story, like the one that appeared in *Action Comics* number 1, likely uses a fictional country as a stand-in for the Spanish Civil War.

³¹ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 66.

³² Siegel and Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 1*, 157.

³³ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 1*, 96.

Several early covers of *Action Comics* featured images for separate interior stories other than the Superman tales. The cover of *Action Comics* number 11 portrays a non-Superman story of a ship ramming a U-boat, but the Superman story inside avoids any mention of the early days of World War II. *Action Comics* number 35, cover dated April 1941, features a cover depicting Superman stopping the bullets of a soldier with a machine gun. The soldier wears the easily recognizable German Stahlhelm at a time when American fears of war in Europe were growing. Despite this cover, the story within focuses on a crooked mine owner, completely avoiding the issue of European conflict. Several other issues through 1941 follow this pattern: *Action Comics* number 37 depicts Superman preventing two men from throwing a bomb at a U.S. Munitions Works; *Action Comics* number 39 portrays Superman leaping at two more soldiers wearing the Stahlhelm; *Action Comics* number 40 features Superman battling a tank emblazoned with the German cross insignia; finally, *Action Comics* number 43, cover dated December 1941, depicts Superman leaping at a Nazi paratrooper wearing a swastika armband. None of the stories contained within these issues directly engages the war, but the covers serve as pin-ups to stir patriotic sentiment. DC used this technique during the war to reinforce patriotism while continuing to offer escapist fare between the covers.

Action Comics number 26 contains the series' first public service announcement. The story focuses on Clark Kent/Superman and Lois Lane trying to thwart a fake polio clinic offering phony cures to sick children. Superman and Lois prove victorious in their cause, sending the fake doctors to jail. The story ends with a

panel encouraging readers to donate to President Roosevelt's polio relief fund.³⁴ This public service announcement presaged later similar announcements during the war to promote war bonds and aiding the American Red Cross. In using the medium of the comic book, Siegel and Shuster found a way to reach out to a diverse audience, composed not only of children, but also adult readers and soldiers. Later, during World War II, Siegel and Shuster used the comics to forward the sales of war bonds. *Superman* number 12, cover dated September-October 1941, began the tradition of patriotic pinup covers without action scenes that DC carried on through the war. On the cover, Superman walks between a sailor on the left and an Army soldier on the right. All three have their arms linked, suggesting Superman's patriotic support and the two figures both smile and look toward Superman, who in turn looks toward the viewer. The image suggests Superman's role of defining and upholding patriotic values. Through these comics, Siegel and Shuster established their various patriotic techniques prior to the United States' entry into the war.

Simon and Kirby's run on *Captain America Comics*, consisting of the first ten issues and written entirely before the United States officially entered the war, shaped the nature of the series' pre-war propaganda and influenced the propagandistic themes of other writers and illustrator's work after the beginning of US involvement in the war. Leaping into history in the pages of *Captain America Comics* number 1, Simon and Kirby quickly established Captain America as a patriotic champion, socking Hitler across the jaw on the cover while a monitor screen displays a fifth

³⁴ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman: The Action Comics Archives, Volume 2*, 92.

columnist saboteur blowing up a United States munitions works. Captain America represented a type of wish fulfillment for Simon, who continually refers to his inability to gain weight in his autobiography, and could use Captain America to embody his patriotism, which Arnaudo describes as “a very different type of patriotism widespread among Americans, in which above and beyond the government, citizens identify with certain fundamental values such as equality, liberty, and justice, and determine the best ways to pursue them and the political figures who can guarantee them as they occur.”³⁵ Captain America enjoyed quick success as the threat of war loomed ever larger in the American consciousness.

The first story of the first issue dispenses with Captain America’s origin, in which frail Steve Rogers undergoes an experimental procedure with the result that “his stature and intelligence increase to an amazing degree.”³⁶ A Nazi spy, having penetrated the upper echelons of America’s military, kills the scientist responsible for the serum and destroys the last vial, leaving Captain America the only super soldier. Later, while at Camp Lehigh, Bucky Barnes, the camp’s mascot, discovers Steve Rogers’ secret and joins his cause as his sidekick. The remaining three stories in the first issue pit Captain America and Bucky against Nazi saboteurs in America, a would-be American dictator loyal to Nazi Germany, and the Red Skull. In his first appearance, the Red Skull is secretly George Maxon, an American industrialist working for the Führer in return for the promise that he will control all American

³⁵ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 96.

³⁶ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 1* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2011), 7.

industry after a successful Nazi invasion of the United States. Though Captain America could have saved Maxon, he allows the would-be war profiteer to die by falling on his syringe of poison. The pre-war issues of *Captain America* warn of America's need to prepare for war³⁷ and preview the theme of Fifth Columnists that appeared throughout the series' wartime run.

Though America had not yet entered the war and continued to maintain a largely-fictitious neutrality, Timely Comics, and specifically Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, declared war on Nazi Germany in the pages of *Captain America Comics* number 1. The most notable story of *Captain America Comics* number 2 features Cap and Bucky traveling to Paris and Berlin, tracking Nazi kidnappers and their victim, an American financier who wanted to fund Britain's war effort. Despite coming face-to-face with Hitler and Goering, Captain America and Bucky only render the two unconscious, thereby saving the financier and returning him to America. The story reads like a Benny Hill comedy, with Hitler and Goering preparing to execute the financier with a cannon and Cap and Bucky appearing out of the cannon's mouth. Interestingly, Captain America and Bucky make no attempt to apprehend Hitler and Goering or force an end to the war. Though Simon and Kirby could easily have written and illustrated such a story, it would have immediately removed the real world setting of the stories and the writers believed it would lessen the series' marketability and popularity. Additionally, portraying Hitler and Goering as comical

³⁷ Nicholas Yanes, "Graphic Imagery: Jewish American Comic Book Creators' Depictions of Class, Race, Patriotism and the Birth of the Good Captain," in *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, Robert G. Weiner, ed. (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 57.

reinforced American beliefs in the ability of the forces of democracy to win the war. So, in portraying Hitler and Goering as comic foils to Captain America and Bucky, Simon and Kirby avoided separating the comic from reality and calmed Americans' nerves about the coming war. Likely realizing their mistake from the first issue, Simon and Kirby resurrected the Red Skull in *Captain America Comics* number 3. The character, who survived his poison from the first issue, now uses electricity to kill American military leaders. The Skull was the first recurring villain in *Captain America Comics* and served as a more threatening adversary than the buffoon-like Hitler from the preceding issue.

Timely only published nine issues of *Captain America Comics* through December 1941, when the United States entered World War II. These nine issues contained thirty-two illustrated stories, of which seventeen feature the Nazis and two feature the Japanese. This ratio allowed *Captain America Comics* to foreshadow the coming trend of war comics and to belong to the pulp style that preceded it in other titles, such as Timely's *Marvel Comics*. Later comics alternated between directly confronting the war, usually in the cover illustration, while possibly only containing one interior story that addressed the war. In refraining from directly confronting the war, the writers avoided fatiguing readers with constant battles and also provided some much-needed escapism. The war-themed stories, however, continually condensed a fictive version of the soldier's experience down to a few panels and onomatopoeia.

In many ways, Superman and Captain America reflected the two extremes of the pre-war years. There were those who ignored the troubles in Europe in order to address domestic concerns, such as Superman in his battles against crime and corruption. Conversely, there were others who felt the United States could not turn a blind eye to what was happening in Europe. Captain America represented this position and appeared to represent the official government opinion, wearing the American flag for a costume and serving in the military. Between Clark Kent and Steve Rogers, the comic book industry addressed the concerns of nearly every white male American in the late 1930s and early 1940s, reaffirming their senses of justice of racial dominance.

Chapter Two: The War and Escapism

Superman and Captain America portrayed the war in vastly different ways. Whereas Captain America actively fought the Axis powers, Superman typically only engaged them on the covers of *Action Comics* and *Superman*. Superman's various comic series offered both soldiers and those on the homefront an escape from the ever-present focus on the war. Captain America, on the other hand, began as a response to the war and, due to his relative lack of powers, Timely Comics could portray the Sentinel of Liberty actively engaging in combat without the stories dishonoring the sacrifice of actual soldiers. Further, Captain America's alter-ego identity of Steve Rogers, himself a soldier, offered a form of wish fulfillment for soldiers in the form of a character with whom they could easily relate. Superman and his alter-ego Clark Kent, meanwhile, represented the average civilian on the homefront who, despite not serving in the military, did what they could to aid in the war effort. The two characters represented two different perspectives of the war: the front and homefront.

In *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, Bradford W. Wright, professor at the University of Maryland University College – European Division, argues, “By the spring of 1941, as the U.S. mobilization was well underway, comic books had already gone to war.”³⁸ Formal U.S. involvement in the war only aided the comic book industry with new defense jobs providing parents with disposable income that they passed along to their children, who in turn spent it on

³⁸ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 31.

comics.³⁹ The comic book industry experienced an unparalleled boom during the war. The war itself gave new impetus to writers who used Hitler, Tōjō, and the Axis soldiers as real life villains. While Captain America represents the most successful and lasting of the patriotic heroes, nearly every other publisher quickly cashed in on the concept of dressing a superhero in the American flag. The popularity of comic books extended beyond the homefront to soldiers on the front lines. Wright writes,

The *New York Times* reported that one of every four magazines shipped to troops overseas was a comic book. At least 35,000 copies of *Superman* alone went to servicemen each month. Comic books became a part of G. I. culture.⁴⁰

Timely even created a second character with a similar costume to fight alongside Captain America. This boom helped the comic publishers rack up profits of nearly \$30 million in 1943 alone.⁴¹ According to Wright, “Comic book makers found creative means to avoid upstaging America’s real-life heroes fighting overseas, having superheroes dutifully volunteer for military service only to be honorably discharged to safeguard the American home front from spies and saboteurs.”⁴² Siegel and Shuster “felt strongly that Superman should participate in the war, but realizing that he could fly to Berlin and Tokyo and promptly bring the war to an end on his own, they did not wish to minimize the daunting task faced by the nation and its fighting forces.”⁴³ DC could not simply have Clark Kent avoid enlistment, however, so Siegel and Shuster explained Superman’s failure to fight in the war by having

³⁹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 31.

⁴⁰ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 31.

⁴¹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 31.

⁴² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 43.

⁴³ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 43.

Clark Kent fail his enlistment physical due to an accidental use of his X-ray vision. Captain America, on the other hand, actively served, but only in a limited capacity as he deliberately acted the fool while in his alter ego of Steve Rogers. While in Costume as Captain America, Rogers typically participated in limited missions intended to serve as focused strikes against the Axis' most dastardly villains.

Furthermore, Wright states, "The United States was not alone in fighting the Axis powers, though comic books tended to give the impression that it was. A reader with no other points of reference would have concluded from wartime comic books that American heroes battled the Axis with only occasional assistance from the subordinate British, Chinese, and Russians."⁴⁴ While *Captain America Comics* occasionally portrayed Cap aiding the British and Clark Kent referred to other countries as places where he could pursue a story, the comic books published during the war years reflected an American sensibility and a belief that only America could defend the democracies of the world and fight fascism.

Philosophy professor Harry Brod argues in his seminal book *Superman is Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way*, prior to the war, "both Jews and superheroes were pro-engagement."⁴⁵ With the advent of war, comic book writers no longer needed to obscure their stories through plainly transparent fictional countries and could instead portray Superman and Captain America actively discussing or engaging the Nazis and

⁴⁴ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 49.

⁴⁵ Harry Brod, *Superman is Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 69.

Japanese. Beyond sales on the homefront, the war provided a great boon to the comics industry. According to Broad, “It was estimated that one out of every four magazines sent to the troops abroad from the U.S. was a comic book” and “sales in the nascent comics industry tripled between 1940 and 1945.”⁴⁶ Since the majority of Americans had yet to learn the truth of the Nazi horrors, especially the nature of the Holocaust, Nazi depictions in comics typically focused on the Nazi war machine. The “tanks, planes, submarines, hand grenades, and other weapons of modern warfare” were ready made for the frenzied panels of the comic book.⁴⁷ Additionally, “the superheroes were either American or clearly identified with the war effort. Kids could join Captain America’s ‘Sentinels of Liberty’ club and help be on the lookout for saboteurs and spies.”⁴⁸ In this manner, the comics industry served to boost morale during World War II and reinforce the American belief in an inevitable American victory. Captain America and Superman, though approaching the war from different perspectives, both contributed to this effort.

Though Superman largely ignored the war, several issues, and one novel, offer key portrayals. DC, realizing the media potential of Superman, quickly adapted the character to other media. In 1942, George Lowther joined Siegel as the second person to write Superman for print media. Lowther, previously a writer for the National Broadcasting Company, adapted Superman to the radio before writing the novel, *The Adventures of Superman*. Roger Stern, a comic writer from the 1990s, later reflected

⁴⁶ Brod, *Superman is Jewish?*, 70.

⁴⁷ Brod, *Superman is Jewish?*, 70.

⁴⁸ Brod, *Superman is Jewish?*, 70.

on Lowther's novel, writing, "In dealing with [Nazi saboteurs], Lowther quite pulpishly reflects the paranoia then prevalent in a United States that had just become an active player in the Second World War."⁴⁹ Though the book primarily targeted juveniles as its audience, "a special Armed Services Edition was also issued...for distribution to American servicemen...not at all surprising, given the Man of Steel's immense popularity with soldiers and sailors."⁵⁰ The novel retells Superman's origin, adding more details than the comics versions typically contained, before following Clark Kent on his first assignment to a supposedly haunted shipyard.

The novel, containing the same fast dialogue and action as the comics, moves quickly with an action-filled story certain to please fans of the comics. When Lois Lane helps Clark Kent in his investigation, Superman reflects,

On the other hand, he had a job to do – a job that had become much more than something merely personal. It was linked now with America's great war effort, and he knew that when he was finished, when the case was at last solved, he would find that the Skeleton Ship had much to do with the sinking of those tankers off the coast. But he had to be free to make use of his amazing powers and abilities as the occasion demanded. He could not play watchdog to a girl reporter.⁵¹

This introspection demonstrates idea that every American must use their abilities to aid the war effort. The book concludes with a fast-paced undersea battle between Superman and five Nazi submarines, continuing a theme in which writers used submarines as a realistic threat for Superman. He disables two, destroys one single-handedly, and aids a military convoy in destroying another. The fifth escapes, but the reader may feel a sense of satisfaction at the swiftness with which Superman

⁴⁹ George Lowther, *The Adventures of Superman* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1995), xv.

⁵⁰ Lowther, *The Adventures of Superman*, xiv.

⁵¹ Lowther, *The Adventures of Superman*, 156-157.

dispatches America's enemies. This book, appearing in 1942, showed how Americans, like Superman, in using their power for good, may quickly and justly defeat any enemy while defending liberty. Superman's own actions promised a speedy and satisfying conclusion to the war, thereby alleviating the fears of readers at the war's outset.

Superman continued the dynamic of the prewar issues in which the covers featuring war-themed art did not match the interior stories. Professor of Asian Studies Todd S. Munson argues, "In contrast to the negligible role the character played in the interior pages of *Action Comics*, *Superman*, and *World's Finest*, 'cover Superman' was fighting on the front lines of the war from the very beginning" to the point that "between 1942 and 1945, approximately fifty percent of the covers of the Superman titles feature World War II in a prominent fashion, though the stories inside the covers rarely addressed the war."⁵² In this way, "while he may not have challenged the Axis powers in the interior pages of *Action Comics*, *Superman*, or *World's Finest*, Superman was nonetheless an integral part of the war effort in all other manifestations of the character during the mid-1940s," such as the above novel as well as radio and animated serials.⁵³ Munson's own research shows, however, that the stories in which Superman directly confronted the war, even in other media, represented the exception rather than the rule for Superman's adventures. DC,

⁵² Todd S. Munson, "'Superman Says You Can Slap a Jap!' The Man of Steel and Race Hatred in World War II," in *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, Joseph J. Darowski, ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 6.

⁵³ Munson, "'Superman Says You Can Slap a Jap!' The Man of Steel and Race Hatred in World War II," 13.

realizing a story portraying Superman as actively engaging in the war would turn off the soldiers who used the comics as an escape and act as a disservice to their families back home, preferred to make use of patriotic pin-up covers while printing the same interior stories as it had prior to the war. In this way, DC kept Superman relevant while still contributing to the war effort with appeals to buy war bonds or partake in other activities for the war effort.

The first issue of *Superman* DC published in 1942, issue 14 with a cover date of January-February 1942, portrayed just such a dynamic, with a patriotic cover that fails to match the interior content. The cover features an overly patriotic pose of Superman standing with a bald eagle perched on his arm. Behind him, a large shield resembling that on the Great Seal of the United States dominates the background. Barely visible around the shield, cover artist Fred Ray portrayed the outlines of tanks and planes representing the United States' armed forces. As per Munson's thesis, the interior content features four stories of varied subjects, from a killer pianist to an undersea kingdom, but none of the stories focus on the war, instead continuing the pattern of pulp science fiction and crime stories that Superman starred in since his first appearance. The first issue of *Action Comics* after the United States entered the war, issue 44 cover dated January 1942, portrays Superman bending the barrel of a Nazi cannon. The cover artist, Fred Ray, emblazoned a large swastika on the cannon's side and all of the soldiers wear the Stahlhelm. Inside, the issue's Superman story focuses on Superman battling a reanimated Neanderthal.

Continuing the theme of escapism and avoiding the war, *Superman* number 15, cover dated March-April 1942, features a few of the standard science fiction and gangster stories as well as two about the war. One of them begins, “At this tense period when the United States is striving to rearm itself in an all-out defense effort, sabotage of defense production and military objectives is of stunning effect.”⁵⁴ Rather than focus on fifth columnists, however, Siegel’s story follows the activities of the fictional nation of Napkan and its ambassador, Hokopoko, who leads the sabotage efforts. If not for the characters’ slightly angled eyes coupled with Siegel’s writing, the reader would never know the characters were Asian. The ambassador’s diabolical plan involves “the Napkan liner, *Sunyat*, [which] will enter the Panama Canal with a suicide crew on board. At the proper moment there will be a devastating explosion” damaging the defense of the United States.⁵⁵ The characters’ suicidal fanaticism capitalizes on commonly held stereotypes of Asians. Of course, Superman thwarts the Napkan plan, holding the liner high in the air so that its explosion does not damage the canal. Importantly, Siegel always portrays the arming and militarization of the United States in a defensive light so that any who threaten it appear overly aggressive, allowing the United States to appear an innocent victim.

Prior to the war, Americans maintained long held racist beliefs about the Japanese. In *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, historian Gary Gerstle writes, “The opponents of Japanese immigration were willing to trade

⁵⁴ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 4* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 1994), 132.

⁵⁵ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 4*, 142.

with Japan and to welcome Japanese visitors to the United States; but any lengthy cohabitation of the same space or commingling in the same families would violate the divine plan and bring social disaster to the United States.”⁵⁶ Americans believed that the Japanese “could be neither assimilated nor made subservient,” thereby casting them as a threat to white hegemony in America.⁵⁷ The war itself only served to reinforce these beliefs. Gerstle describes the war in the Pacific as a “‘race war’...in which two opposing sides engaged in savage struggle...to determine which race would triumph.”⁵⁸ Typically, Americans and Japanese engaged in far bloodier battles than those fought mostly between Caucasians, such as the Germans and Americans.⁵⁹ The wartime comic books reinforced existing notions of the Japanese as a permanently alien culture, forever engaging in barbaric practices. Following that belief, Americans fought all the more violently in the Pacific theatre. The Japanese, countering just as forcefully, only reinforced the stories American soldiers and civilians read in the comics. The comic books gave Americans a framework with which to interpret the Japanese during wartime.

Extending beyond racial depictions of the Japanese, comic books reinforce historian John Dower’s thesis of World War II as a race war. In *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War*, Dower writes, “Both the oppression of blacks and

⁵⁶ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 112.

⁵⁷ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 112.

⁵⁸ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 112.

⁵⁹ Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 202.

the exclusion of Asian immigrants became political issues in wartime America.”⁶⁰ African American soldiers worked for double victory, in which they could combat segregation and win the war abroad. Asians, who the United States deemed “unfit for citizenship,” lamented their place in American culture and with Japanese Americans subject to internment.⁶¹ With World War II highlighting issues of race, the comics of the time portrayed the ideas of their readers and writers. Beyond the racism at home, of which the Jim Crow laws and forced internment of Japanese American citizens were only the most extreme examples, Dower, too, describes the racist ideology that informed popular presentations of the Japanese. Dower writes, “With...tempered disdain, [the Western Allies] portrayed the Japanese as inherently inferior men and women who had to be understood in terms of primitivism, childishness, and collective mental and emotional deficiency.”⁶² Superman and, to a greater extent, Captain America, in their encounters with the Japanese, play on these stereotypes and affirm Americans of their natural superiority in the face of an inhuman threat. This inhuman threat required superhuman combatants.

Fred Ray created one of his most iconic pinups for the cover of *Superman* number 17, cover dated July-August 1942. The cover portrays Superman astride the globe holding Adolf Hitler in his right hand and Hideki Tōjō in his left. Both figures squirm and kick, appearing smaller and undignified next to the Man of Steel, their wrinkled uniforms contrasting with his physique-exposing costume. Readers can

⁶⁰ John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 5.

⁶¹ Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 5.

⁶² Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 9.

easily identify Hitler from his brown uniform, signature mustache and comb over, and the swastika armband he wears. Tōjō wears his characteristic glasses and carries a sabre strapped to his belt. Ray portrays him with slits for eyes, buckteeth, and yellow skin. The issue uses Superman to represent America, a force for democracy that will put an end to the Axis powers. The following issue, number 18, cover dated September-October 1942, features a cover in which Superman, astride a bomb, accompanies a squadron of U.S. dive bombers. The text in the lower right hand corner reads, “War Savings Bond and Stamps do the Job on the Japanazis!”⁶³ The issue coined the term “Japanazi” to refer to any member of the Axis Power at large. Within the issue, the story “The Conquest of a City” focuses on a mock Nazi invasion of Metropolis. Working as Superman, Clark Kent quickly discovers that Metropolis faces a real Nazi invasion and that Nazi spies duped both Kent and other media outlets. Naturally, Superman wins the day and their fifth columnist aides. The story, playing on national fears of fifth columnist threats, also offers hope since Superman accomplishes his victory with the aid of local law enforcement, thereby reaffirming readers beliefs in the power of their own civic institutions.

With the theme of patriotic cover/escapist interior now formally codified, the cover of *Action Comics* number 52 portrays the series’ various stars, with Superman in the middle, all racing toward the viewer. On the right, cover artist Fred Ray portrays Zatara, a magician who appeared in *Action Comics* number 1 alongside Superman, and a typical explorer-type, complete with pith helmet and pistol. On the

⁶³ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 5* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 2000), 61.

left of Superman, Ray drew a Lone Ranger knockoff, with a bandanna for a mask, and a Zorro knockoff. Above the five characters, three fighter planes streak out toward the viewer, recalling the patriotic air shows associated with America's military. In the lower right-hand corner, a small logo of the American flag features the text, "Keep It Flying!"⁶⁴ The story inside, though not about the war per se, describes Superman's battle with the would-be Emperor of America, allowing Superman to represent democratic values against a tyrant, again conferring a patriotic message to the issue's readers. The story also promises that America will win the war, beginning with the text, "This is a tale that could occur only after the war...many years hence! It's up to all of us to see it doesn't!"⁶⁵ The Emperor's soldiers wear golden Stahlhelms, allowing them to stand in for Nazis despite the story ostensibly occurring after the war. In the end, Superman determines that the Emperor uses a ray to sap people's free will and destroys it, thereby standing up for democracy and freedom in a very literal way.

Similar to other patriotic covers, *Action Comics* number 55, cover dated December 1942, features a patriotic cover in which Superman carries an aircraft engine to factory workers assembling a bomber. Several of the workers look up toward the Man of Steel in the midst of their work and wave at him, encouraging his effort. Interestingly, the cover artist, Jack Burnley, portrayed all of the workers as men, despite the fact that many men had entered the armed forces by this point and

⁶⁴ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman: The Action Comics Archives, Volume 3* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 2001), 219.

⁶⁵ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman: The Action Comics Archives, Volume 3*, 220.

Superman was just as likely to encounter female workers. This suggests a gendered dynamic for a comic in which the primary female character, ostensibly a skilled investigative journalist, continually serves as a comic foil to Superman, who laments her ability to find trouble as an inherently feminine quality. *Action Comics* number 60, cover dated May 1943, portrays Superman coming to the aid of U.S. Army soldiers, all of whom appear the worse for wear with tattered uniforms, but all of whom appear equally masculine, sporting stubble on their rigid jaw lines and manning a machine gun. In the image, Superman brings the soldiers boxes of supplies, such as rations and medicine. The image serves as a neat sequel to images in which Superman encouraged his readers to buy bonds since they can now see those bonds put to work aiding U.S. troops. Similarly, the cover of *Action Comics* number 62 portrays Superman flying in front of the strafing fire of a Japanese fighter plane in order to protect a wounded soldier. Superman takes the bullets meant for the prone figure without wincing, having just arrived in the nick of time based on the soldier's move to shield himself with his arm. The image also highlights the inhumanity of the enemy, who fire at wounded soldiers, and reinforces the righteousness of the United States' involvement in the war.

When Superman did engage the war, he did so in a tangential fashion, supporting the troops without portraying the fighting and conflict. *Superman* number 23, cover dated July-August 1943, begins with the story "America's Secret Weapon," which features Superman putting in a U.S.O. appearance for the troops. As Superman arrives, he thinks to himself, "-American soldiers cheering me, when all civilized

peoples in the world are cheering them! It's the greatest tribute I've ever had!"⁶⁶

Superman quickly partakes in war games with the soldiers and Don Cameron's story reaffirms the greatness of American soldiers. At the story's conclusion, Superman says,

And because I lost, this is the proudest moment of my life! I have seen proof that American soldiers cannot be defeated by Superman or any one else – not even by Mr. Schickelgruber's so-called Master Race! I hope the whole world hears of this, and of our nation's real secret weapon – the unflagging courage of her men, no matter what the odds and their indomitable will to win! Against that, Hitler and Hirohito haven't a ghost of a chance!⁶⁷

The story largely serves to boost the morale of both the soldiers reading on the battlefield and the civilians reading on the homefront. Of course, Cameron could not resist the German stereotype in his “master race” reference, but that only aids the hyper patriotic theme.

The September-October 1943 issue of *Superman*, number 24, features Jack Burnley's iconic cover art of Superman standing proudly while holding an American flag as a sun rises in the background against the cityscape of Metropolis, representing hope in the middle of America's involvement in the war and fitting into the larger trend of patriotic pinups that began prior to the war. The final story in the issue, “Suicide Voyage,” features both the Japanese and the Nazis in an expedition to the North Pole. In the story, Superman must aid Americans seeking to establish an Arctic supply route. Once there, the Nazis and Japanese capture him and Lois, leading to a number of comical quick changes and dueling stereotypes of the Nazis and the

⁶⁶ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 6* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 2003), 118.

⁶⁷ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 6*, 126.

Japanese. In the end, Superman pits the two against each other and succeeds in helping establish an American base. While the Nazis and the Japanese, unlike the Allied Powers, never cooperated directly in a mission, the story portrays this fear before offering reassurance that the United States can overcome any such operation.

Action Comics number 66 features a cover in which Superman protects a motorcyclist delivering war dispatches from an exploding shell. The image remains among the most subtle war covers and, if not for the time period, could have easily served as the cover for one of the earlier, pre-war issues. *Superman* number 29, cover dated July-August 1944, features a cover in which Superman looks on as a young woman says to soldiers from the Army, Navy, and Marine, “You’re *my* Supermen!”⁶⁸ The cover, like the story in *Superman* number 23, serves to support the military and boost morale on the homefront. Though Wayne Boring’s art appears simplistic, it clearly conveys its patriotic message. *Superman* number 34, cover dated May-June 1944 features one of the last pinup covers of the war. Jack Burnley’s minimalist artwork portrays the Man of Steel holding a large, three-dimensional red cross while saying, “The American Red Cross Needs Your Support! Give Generously!”⁶⁹ As the war wound down, American soldiers required medical care for injuries and support as well as for supplies the U.S. could send overseas to its allies. The first story in this issue, titled “The United States Navy,” focuses on the work of Naval officers, almost entirely without Superman’s aid. The first panel resembles a tourist photograph in

⁶⁸ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 7* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 2006), 195.

⁶⁹ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 8* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 2010), 172.

which Superman points to American submarines, battleships, and aircraft sinking a Japanese aircraft carrier. This artist's intent is clear: all Americans should celebrate this inverse of Pearl Harbor. The story inside follows an American sub crew as it targets a Japanese fleet. The soldiers all appear exceptionally heroic and, but for the use of Clark Kent as a framing device and a brief appearance of Superman, the story could easily fit into the standard war genre rather than be a Superman story. The story, a celebration of the American Navy man, follows the tradition of *Superman* number 23 in presenting a feel-good patriotic story. Though these various covers portrayed Superman in the war, the interiors continued to avoid the conflagration. Even the content was targeted at people on the homefront, encouraging them to buy war bonds, donate blood, and generally support the troops.

The first three issues of *Captain America Comics* published after the beginning of U.S. involvement in the war carry on the same type of stories from before the war, with a combination of adventure and horror stories and the occasional story of Captain America battling fifth columnists intent on selling out the United States to the Nazis. Timely firmly established *Captain America Comics* number 13, dated April 1942, in the war era, portraying Captain America and Bucky on the cover punching Hideki Tōjō as he stands above Pearl Harbor. Unlike Superman, Captain America, born of the war, finally appeared in his element. Timely Comics' first issue of *Captain America Comics* published after the United States entered the war, issue 10, was also the final issue Simon and Kirby wrote and illustrated.

Despite the cover to *Captain America Comics* number 13, the war did not appear in the comics until *Captain America Comics* number 18 from September 1942. Prior to this issue, writers still pitted Cap against fifth columnists in the United States. In issue 18, Captain America and Bucky go to Japan to disable a super gun that can fire shells and hit the continental United States. As Cap and Bucky's transport plane flies over Hawaii, Captain America says, "Here's where the Japs pulled a sneak punch, Bucky!"⁷⁰ In Japan, Cap and Bucky mow down numerous Japanese soldiers attempting to stop them, leading Cap to remark, "I hate to do this, Bucky, but war is war!"⁷¹ The racism appears subdued in this issue, limited to the Japanese gun builder, who the artist portrays as fat, fanged, and with a Fu Manchu mustache. Possibly the greatest proof that Captain America and Bucky have entered the war comes when Cap beats up a Japanese priest and steals his clothes as a disguise, demonstrating a type of total war when even the enemy's religious artifacts face desecration. At the story's end, Bucky comments, "It won't be long before America will return to Japan in much greater force, eh, Cap?"⁷² Though the writers could easily have written the story so that Captain America took Tokyo by force, thereby ending the war, they wisely chose restraint, presenting a story that could bolster patriotism while still remaining tentatively grounded in reality, ensuring the continued success of the title and offering soldiers further wish fulfillment.

⁷⁰ Stan Lee, et al., *Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 5* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2011), 107.

⁷¹ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 5*, 114.

⁷² Lee, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 5*, 116.

In acknowledging not only America's role in the war, but that of her allies, *Captain America Comics* number 19 portrays Cap and Bucky taking part in a mission to infiltrate Berlin and rescue a captured general. The story begins with Cap and Buck's regiment arriving in Britain as part of the American forces in Europe. Cap works as a commando to rescue the general, limiting his actions to punching various storm troopers who get in his way and issuing wisecracks about America's greatness. In the end, facing defeat, the rest of the U.S. soldiers appear and help Captain America win the day, thereby demonstrating the power of the U.S. military and, like the previous story, limiting Captain America's role in the war to the realm of plausibility. Unlike Superman, who offered a few generalized portrayals of the war, Captain America usually focused explicitly on Nazis or the Japanese. Due to that specificity, greater analysis of these portrayals appears in the following two chapters of this thesis.

The Office of War Information (OWI) encouraged producers of entertainment media to think of helping to win the war effort in the production of all of their products. Despite this ultimate goal, the OWI understood that consumers would reject any stories containing too blatant propaganda and that an overabundance of war-themed media would eventually wear down morale. For this reason, "the OWI asked the entertainment industry to raise American morale, encourage public cooperation and participation in the war effort, identify the menace of Axis powers, and inform audiences about the progressive war aims pursued by the United States and its allies, all in ways that cloaked propaganda within the context of good entertainment as much

as possible.”⁷³ Issues of *Superman* and *Action Comics* met these goals through patriotic pinup covers with interior content that offered an escape from the war, thereby capturing the civilian experience between the issues’ covers. *Captain America Comics*, on the other hand, remained true to its pulp horror and fantasy origins, devoting space in every issue to a story or two that avoided the war and focused on monsters or non-Axis themed diabolical madmen, but these stories generally proved the exception and Captain America, as the fictive embodiment of the soldiers’ war experience, continually engaged the war in a direct manner.

Historian John E. Moser writes, “Comics had from their inception been intended as escapist fare, shying away from politics and other real-world matters.”⁷⁴ To this end, “it was much safer...to find villains among the timeless and traditional line-up of mobsters, mad scientists and space aliens.”⁷⁵ Additionally,

At training camps in the United States comics were extremely popular, outselling the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *Reader’s Digest* (the three most popular magazines in the country during World War II) combined by a ratio of nearly ten to one. Moreover, soldiers and sailors continued to read comic books while posted overseas; by 1944 one out of every four magazines shipped to the European or Pacific Theaters was a comic book.⁷⁶

Comic books at this time offered an escape not only to people on the homefront, but also to soldiers about to ship out to war and those already in theatres of combat.

Nearly every issue of *Action Comics* and *Superman* avoided the war, focusing on the

⁷³ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 35.

⁷⁴ John E. Moser, “Madmen, Morons, and Monocles: The Portrayal of the Nazis in *Captain America*,” in *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, Robert G. Weiner, ed. (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 25.

⁷⁵ Moser, “Madmen, Morons, and Monocles,” 25.

⁷⁶ Moser, “Madmen, Morons, and Monocles,” 27.

same enemies Moser describes. DC, in following this pattern, avoided portraying Superman in such a way that could dishonor the actual sacrifices of soldiers fighting abroad while helping to boost the morale of readers both at home and abroad. To list every instance of escapism in *Action Comics* and *Superman* would require an essay all its own, so this thesis only examines stories portraying the war or examples of racism targeted at the Japanese.

In the vein of escapism, *Captain America Comics* number 16 contains a story perfectly in keeping with Moser's thesis. The story "Captain America and the Horror of the Seas" focuses on a group of sea monsters terrorizing the town of Valley-Port near Satan's Reef. Captain American and Bucky investigate, learning that Nazis instigated the sea creatures' attack, but the rest of the story, including the sea peoples' monstrous servants, is reminiscent of the horror tales of H.P. Lovecraft, specifically "Dagon," first published in 1919. This type of story, while reminding readers of the war, also offered an escape from the war in the form of sea monsters and pagan sacrifice.

Similarly, *Captain America Comics* number 17 features the story, "Captain America combats the Monster from the Morgue" in which a scientist revives a dead gorilla. Unknown to the scientist, his rival replaced the gorilla's brain with that of a killer, and Cap and Bucky must stop the new monster. At one point prior to the experiment, Bucky remarks, "Sounds as if the Doc has been seeing too many

Frankenstein movies!”⁷⁷ This dialogue demonstrates an awareness on the part of the writers that the story serves as an escapist piece, meant to pay homage to the horror genre. The final story in *Captain America Comics* number 20 depicts a mad scientist hell-bent on taking over the world. He uses a solution of “menthyl asulphatine to turn human beings into horrible monsters, called ‘things.’”⁷⁸ These things have elongated arms and flabby jowls and must follow the mad scientist’s orders. Captain America and Bucky quickly defeat the scientist, but not before he threatens to transform Bucky as well. This story, like the one in *Captain America* number 17, fits neatly into the pulp horror genre and offers a reprieve for readers from the constant bombardment of war stories.

Captain America Comics number 21 features a story in which Captain America literally fights Satan. After vanquishing Satan’s soccerous minion, Cap launches into fisticuffs with the dark prince. The inherent goodness in the Sentinel of Liberty’s eyes overwhelms Satan who concedes defeat, crying out, “You have won, mortal! But I shall come again when the time is ripe, when there is no longer a Captain America to champion good! I will come, if need be, again and again!”⁷⁹ To this, Captain America responds, “There will always be an American to fight for mankind against the forces of evil!”⁸⁰ While the story fails to directly address the war, it uses the escapist narrative to symbolically cast World War II as a fight between

⁷⁷ Syd Shores and Don Rico, *Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 6* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2012), 4.

⁷⁸ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 5*, 264.

⁷⁹ Shores and Rico, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 6*, 47.

⁸⁰ Shores and Rico, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 6*, 47.

freedom, represented by Captain America, against tyranny and evil, represented by the devil. The story, in avoiding the war, encourages its readers that America will win the war despite the odds.

In 1944, Republic released a fifteen-part serial film adaptation of *Captain America*. The serial represents one of the least faithful adaptations in the character's history, reimagining its titular hero as District Attorney Grant Gardner, who works as Captain America by night. Rather than carry his signature shield, the character uses a revolver in his battle against the Scarab, an evil scientist seeking the "Dynamic Vibrator" mining device.⁸¹ The story jettisons any part of Captain America's origin from the comics as well as the use of Nazi or Japanese soldiers as villains, despite being released in 1944. Though the serial bears almost no resemblance to the comics that inspired it, with the exception of Captain America's costume, it represents the purest demonstration of wartime escapism in the character's early years. Soldiers or civilians who watched the comics could thrill to a story resembling several of the mad scientist or horror stories found in *Captain America Comics* without feeling bombarded by the war.

Comics, in boosting the morale of or offering escapism to soldiers and civilians, played an instrumental part in the war effort. Brod argues, "World War II was not won by bullets alone. From comics to the USO shows for the troops, both military and civilian morale needed to be kept up through entertainment."⁸² Both

⁸¹ *Captain America*, directed by Elmer Clifton and John English (1944; PR Studios, 2009), DVD.

⁸² Brod, *Superman is Jewish?*, 72.

Superman's and Captain America's comics offered not only a patriotic morale boost in the form of stories that reinforced the American belief in an American victory, but also an escape from the war to avoid fatiguing both soldiers and civilians. In many ways, the escapist stories foreshadowed the future tales featured in *Captain America*, and *Superman*, and *Action Comics*. While the war itself shaped the characters and left an indelible mark on them, many of the war stories had no lasting influence on the characters' continuity. Superman's handling of the war demonstrates more of a need to reinforce patriotism while offering an escape. Since the majority of Superman's war coverage stems from cover art, readers need never feel bombarded by the daily violence and fears associated with wartime. Captain America, on the other hand, finally entered the war for which he had prepared since *Captain America Comics* number 1. While the various writers during this period were careful to avoid stories in which Captain America and Bucky infiltrated Germany or Japan, in order to avoid any disrespect to the men actually fighting and dying who read the comics, they did offer a form of wish fulfillment for soldiers who could identify with parts of Cap's character. When not in costume, Cap and Bucky face constant grief from their sergeant. What soldier could not identify with some of that? Superman's efforts to keep the homefront running smoothly must have resounded with those working in factories or others unfit for service who did what little they could for the war effort. The different manners in which the two characters handled the war offered an identifiable character to nearly any reader at the time.

Chapter Three: Nazis

Germany received relatively little attention in comics once the United States formally entered the war. This may stem from the impetus to war coming from the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the quick racialization of the Japanese enemy. Additionally, the United States possessed a large German immigrant and German American population during the 1940s and the comic companies may have wanted to avoid alienating readers. To that end, in both Superman's and Captain America's comics, writers typically used the term "Nazi" rather than "German" in order to explicitly state that Americans were fighting Nazism and not a German identity. Additionally, while many of the Nazi villains wear monocles and speak in exaggerated accents in the pages of the comics, they generally continue in the tradition of the mad scientists popular before the war. Only the presence of the Stahlhelm or the swastika typically identified a Nazi enemy whereas readers could identify Japanese villains from the demonic appearance with which artists portrayed them. Though modern comics and popular culture portray the Nazis as the ultimate enemy of World War II, the comics of the time favored the Japanese as a racialized enemy that was culturally and racially different from the majority of Americans.

Beyond the racial difference, Captain America, in representing the soldier's experience of the war, focused on the Japanese who had attacked Pearl Harbor rather than the Nazis who only declared war after the United States declared war on Japan. Superman, reflecting the civilian's experience of the war, followed suit, possibly taking into account the likelihood that German-American soldiers were eventually

drafted. The various comics could not avoid portraying the Nazis, as this would cost them their credibility, but the writers, aware of the large German presence and primarily focused on the Japanese due to racial and military motivations, generally avoided portraying Nazis with the same grotesque features as the Japanese.

Though Superman comics largely eschewed directly engaging the war, the writers coined the term “Japanazi” to combine the threat of the Nazis and Japanese, as if the two parties of the Axis Powers had a stronger relationship than they ever realistically achieved.⁸³ *Action Comics* number 53, cover dated October 1942, features a cover by Jack Burnley in which Superman charges three Nazi soldiers, identifiable through their swastika armbands and Stahlhelms. All three carry flamethrowers, a heinous weapon, and aim their fire at the Man of Steel. Of course, Superman remains fireproof and passes through the smoke and flames, ready to punch the first Nazi. Despite the bright colors of the fire and Superman, Burnley presents the Nazis in monochromatic black and grey, as though even the evil light of their weapons lacks the ability to illuminate them. Burnley’s art suggests the Nazis’ evil through their unvanquished darkness, dehumanizing them as they face away from the viewer and wear matching uniforms, allowing the viewer to root for their demise without a pang of guilt. The following month’s cover, also featuring Burnley’s artwork, portrays Superman coming to the aid of a ship. In the foreground, Superman engages a Nazi U-boat, identifiable through its swastika insignia and U-designation on the hull. In the image, Superman ties the U-boat’s periscope into a pretzel knot which,

⁸³ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 5*, 61.

while not an effective means of disarming a nautical threat, suggesting the ease with which America will overcome Nazi Germany due to the enemy's inherent buffoonish qualities. *Action Comics* number 59, cover dated April 1943, features a similarly buffoonish portrayal of Nazis. The cover depicts Superman peeling open a tank, emblazoned with the swastika, and exposing the surprised expressions of the soldiers within. A small box proclaims, "War Bonds & Stamps Smash Axis Tanks Too!"⁸⁴ The text allows readers to feel like Superman through the simple act of buying bonds and stamps, thereby converting the escapist fantasies of a comic book directly into patriotic action. The story within, however, reaffirms the escapist theme, retelling the story of Cinderella with the addition of Superman to the plot. This story, though fantastical, offers the standard fairy tale plot of a knight rescuing a prince. Children reading the issue might not read too deeply into its content, but for adults it represented a promise of a happy ending in which the knight, like American soldiers, entered a foreign land and rescued its inhabitants from an evil spell, in this case the spectre of Nazism that clouded Europe.

In addressing Nazi villainy, *Superman* number 20, cover dated January-February 1943 features a cover in which Superman prevents an enemy shell from hitting a lifeboat full of U.S. sailors who watch as their ship sinks in the background. The content suggests that the Axis powers not only sink ships, but also mercilessly kill the defenseless crew. Within the issue, the story "Destroyers from the Depths" begins, "Only the warped, fiendish minds which conceived the bombing of Poland,

⁸⁴ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman: The Action Comics Archives, Volume 4* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 2005), 92.

the execution of innocent millions, the crushing of peaceful nations, could have launched the most terrible horror of the war...*sea serpent terror!*"⁸⁵ Siegel portrays Hitler as a comic buffoon, constantly raving "Ach! Blah!"⁸⁶ Hitler's own sea monsters terrify him, knocking him out of his chair, to which he says, "Herr Fange, I congratulate you! Ve vill beat our foes to dere knees, vunce again proofink ve are a brave master race! Heil Hitler!!"⁸⁷ Naturally, Superman defeats the sea serpent threat, causing the monsters to destroy their own creator, Herr Fange, and his Nazi aids. The story ends with Hitler executing his surviving soldiers from the program to save face. Not only does the story have the interesting twist of arguing that the Nazi leaders are the true monsters, willing to kill their own soldiers rather than face defeat, it also transcends a simple war story to fit into the larger genre of mad scientist stories prevalent in both *Action Comics* and *Superman* prior to U.S. involvement in World War II. In this way, Siegel argues that Hitler represents yet another over-the-top mad scientist rather than a truly unstoppable threat, offering hope to readers that the war will not go on forever and that the U.S., here embodied in Superman, has the capability to defeat him.

In adding a further touch of humour to the Nazi threat, *Superman* number 23, cover dated July-August 1943, depicts two Nazis sighting Superman swimming at them through their U-boat's periscope. The cover artist, Jack Burnley, depicts the Nazis without caricature. If not for the swastika armband on one and the swastika on

⁸⁵ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 5*, 181.

⁸⁶ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 5*, 182.

⁸⁷ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 5*, 183.

the other's hat, they could just as easily pass for gangsters or any other traditional Superman enemy. Part of this may result from the Nazis having a similar ethnicity to white Americans, thereby removing the racial aspect from the European theatre of war. Additionally, the German ethnicity of many Americans could also result in DC wishing to downplay stereotypes of Germans in order to avoid alienating readers. The cover of *Superman* number 26, cover dated January-February 1944, portrays Superman lifting Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels into the air while simultaneously ringing the Liberty Bell in front of a microphone labeled "Radio Berlin."⁸⁸ Wayne Boring presents an easily recognizable caricature of Goebbels, but depicts him in a way that he appears significantly shorter than Superman rather than the realistic difference his 5'5" height would have caused. In minimizing Goebbels, Boring suggests that the man is little more than Hitler's toady, a man small in mind as well as aspiration. The Liberty Bell ringing out over the airwaves to Berlin demonstrates the American belief that soldiers were bringing democracy to combat fascism. On a more subtle level, Superman takes on the role of Paul Revere, ringing his bell to announce to the Nazis that the Americans are coming and will dethrone their leadership, reinforcing the concept of Superman as an American hero in linking him to famous Americans through history.

The story in *Action Comics* number 62 actually focuses on a Nazi plot, though Siegel uses the narrative device of flashback to portray a man telling the story to a group of children in the year 2143, long after the war's end. In the story, a Nazi

⁸⁸ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman Archives, Volume 7* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 2006), 58.

commander captures Lois Lane and forces Superman to dig tunnels under American cities with which the Nazis can launch surprise attacks. At one point the commander, whom artist Ed Dobrotka portrays as old and wrinkled, with a Hitler-esque mustache and monocle, calls out, “Bah! Ve Nazis are der *real* supermen!”⁸⁹ Naturally, Superman disproves this claim, tricking the Nazis and undoing their plot. The narrator ends his flashback saying, “O’ course, it was just one o’ Superman’s contributions to America’s victory in the Great War, which ended – as ye all know – with the destruction o’ the Nazis and their evil allies, and the spread o’ liberty through all the world!”⁹⁰ The story not only refutes the Nazis’ claim to supremacy, but also promises an end to the war and at least two centuries of peace afterward.

Captain America, born of the war and with Nazi spies crucial to his origin, engaged Nazis on a more regular basis than Superman, but still relegated the Nazis to the backburner in favor of the ethnically different Japanese as an enemy, possibly due to the ease with which artists could depict the physical differences between Captain America and the Japanese. According to Moser, “In the forty-nine issues of [*Captain America Comics*] appearing between March 1941 and August 1945 there are only two depictions of ‘good Germans.’”⁹¹ Professor Reinstein, who created the super soldier serum, represents the first good German, though he dies at the hands of a Nazi spy for his troubles. The second good German “appears in the fifth issue; in ‘Killers of the Bund’ we are introduced to Heinrich Shmidt, who has been targeted by the pro-Nazi German-American

⁸⁹ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman: The Action Comics Archives, Volume 4*, 139.

⁹⁰ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman: The Action Comics Archives, Volume 4*, 144.

⁹¹ Moser, “Madmen, Morons, and Monocles,” 29.

Bund for refusing to join the organization.”⁹² After these two characters, *Captain America Comics* never again features a good German. Moser writes, “Indeed, on several occasions a German accent is sufficient to rouse the heroes’ suspicions that someone is an enemy agent.”⁹³ Most of the issues avoided the true Nazi horrors, either due to a lack of knowledge on the writers’ part or to avoid disheartening the readers, while still addressing Nazism in general. Yanes writes, “Unable to truly vilify Nazis, or discuss the Holocaust, writers and artists presented Hitler as pathetically humorous.”⁹⁴

Captain America Comics number 15 contains a story in which a Nazi agent in New York City provokes fifth columnists to attack the city’s infrastructure. He says, “Bewilder them! Frighten them so that they’ll evacuate their biggest city! Shaffe chaos im fein des land!” which the editor translates as “Create confusion in the homeland of the enemy!”⁹⁵ In truth, the Nazi’s statement translates to little more than gibberish. Al Avison, the artist, portrays the Nazi with oversized lips, a hairstyle reminiscent of a razorback hog, and a monocle, turning him into a grotesque monster. The Nazi’s lieutenant has a buzz cut and a similarly ugly mug, offering a contrary opinion to Hitler’s exaltations about the Aryan race and its supposed beauty. Captain America closes out the story with the message, “Now that we’ve licked this Nazi fifth column plot, folks, you can see how important it is not to believe planted rumors, fake reports and terror propaganda! If London can take it...we can! So keep calm... Do your duty... And America will triumph!”⁹⁶ Through this monologue and others like it, Captain America, representing the soldiers’ perspective of the war, reinforced

⁹² Moser, “Madmen, Morons, and Monocles,” 29.

⁹³ Moser, “Madmen, Morons, and Monocles,” 29.

⁹⁴ Yanes, “Graphic Imagery,” 62.

⁹⁵ Stan Lee, et al., *Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 4* (New York: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2010), 141.

⁹⁶ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 4*, 158.

Americans' belief that they were fighting for democracy, as embodied by America's allies who had been fighting since 1939. Additionally, in rendering Nazi speeches as gibberish, Captain America discredited anything the Nazis might say, encouraging his readers to disregard anything that questions America's ability, or right, to win the war.

Though Hitler was useful, as a real person he was best used in a limited sense in order to avoid the question of why Captain America did not simply kill him and end the war. In *Captain America Comics* number 16, Stan Lee resurrected the Red Skull yet again. Avison, in the splash page at the beginning of the story, depicts the Skull with a Japanese Rising Sun flag on his uniform which remains through the first few pages of the story before switching in the middle to contain a swastika as it did in earlier appearances. Interestingly, this story, "Captain America and the Red Skull's Deadly Revenge," foretells many of the later Silver Age stories. In it, the Red Skull captures Cap and learns his secret identity. Having Captain America as a captive, the Skull begins a wave of crime culminating in the theft of secret war plans while wearing Captain America's costume in order to disgrace the Sentinel of Liberty. The story represents a far more mature and well-executed plot than the typical fare in *Captain America*, though the finale feels rushed in order to have Cap save the day. Unlike other Nazi villains, the Red Skull presents a plausible foe for Captain America who, for all his mad villain antics, very nearly succeeds in his plan. At the story's conclusion, the Skull appears dead and Cap and Bucky return to the Army base. The Red Skull, as a villain, represented the Nazi-cum-mad scientist that filled the pages of other wartime comics and gave writers an easy stereotype for their villains, allowing them to avoid continually reusing the same tired German stereotypes from World War I.

For both Captain America and Superman, the Nazis represented nearly perfect villains. Artists could portray them as faceless storm troopers lacking in humanity. Readers could cheer guilt-free as their favorite superhero punched out Nazis or turned their own weapons against them. Had the American public possessed greater knowledge of the true horror of the Holocaust, writers at DC and Timely would easily have gone farther than portraying Nazis with simple dungeons evocative of mad scientists. Comic book writers in the Golden Age lacked the very facts available to modern entertainment producers that allow them to tell compelling stories in which the Nazis represent the most inhuman of evils. Rather than portray the Nazis in this light, American beliefs in racial supremacy led to a racialized portrayal of the Japanese, casting them as the true villains of World War II. As white characters, Superman and Captain America bore a strong resemblance to the Nazis they fought (with Steve Rogers fitting the exact description of the Aryan superman), but the Japanese, as ethnically and culturally different, better accentuated the differences between America and its enemies in the war.

Chapter Four: Japanese Portrayals and Racism

Possibly as a result of comic book writers' desire not to alienate the United States' large German population, the Nazis, while a useful adversary for both Superman and Captain America, receive minimal attention, with writers and artists alike reducing them to little more than extensions of the mad scientists that both characters fought before the war. Additionally, the Nazis were too ethnically similar to Superman and Captain America for the artists to easily caricature them and use their physical difference to visually stand in for their philosophical differences. The Japanese, on the other hand, as ethnic and social "others," represented an easy villain to caricature. Both Superman and Captain America, in their various titles, quickly started fighting demonized Japanese soldiers who typically bore exaggerated slitted eyes and buck or fanged teeth.

As a visual medium free from the highbrow constraints of other media, comics were "uniquely suited to portray the Asian enemy as many Americans saw him – a sinister, ugly, subhuman creature who asked for and deserved no quarter."⁹⁷ The Japanese soldiers appeared particularly brutal when compared to their Nazi counterparts. The portrayal of this brutality allowed comic book writers to encourage a race war against the Japanese, as if the brutal actions of fictional characters represented an innate genetic barbarism. Furthermore, comics implied that the Japanese had stolen their formidable military technology from the United States or other Western nations in order to reinforce American notions of racial superiority

⁹⁷ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 45.

while simultaneously suggesting the diabolical nature of the Japanese.⁹⁸ In addition to the Japanese, writers failed to portray any nonwhite race as fully human. Wright states, “When they appeared at all in comic books, Africans and African Americans were relegated to the status of bumbling, clownish sidekicks or childlike jungle savages.”⁹⁹ More than white intolerance, “some comic books even suggested that it was nonwhites who needed a lesson in tolerance.”¹⁰⁰ Wright continues, “A recurring theme found superheroes urging American Indians to abandon their traditional hostility towards the United States for the sake of the national war effort.”¹⁰¹ *Captain America Comics* demonstrated this story, portraying the American Indians as aiding the Japanese due to their racial difference from white Americans. While both Superman and Captain America portrayed the Japanese as extremely racialized, nearly every Golden Age issue of *Captain America Comics*, *Action Comics*, and *Superman* demonstrates a pattern of racism in the portrayal of minorities of any race or ethnicity. To the white readers and writers, soldiers and civilians were working in the war effort to preserve and spread white American values to the world.

Similar to Gerstle and Dower, Munson writes of the racial nature of World War II, “The ‘race war’ against the Japanese was very much a part of Superman’s adventures, and...the so-called Man of Tomorrow was very much a man of his

⁹⁸ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 47.

⁹⁹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 54.

¹⁰⁰ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 54.

¹⁰¹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 54.

time.”¹⁰² The work of Fred Ray “drew on the many stereotypic images of Japan popular at the time: Japanese as de-personalized, diminutive, sub-human creatures with fangs and yellow skin – without the airplane, a foe scarcely worth Superman’s time.”¹⁰³ Nearly every image featuring the Japanese on the covers and within the pages of *Action Comics* and *Superman* followed this pattern, transplanting stereotypes of the Chinese to the Japanese as per Dower.

Exemplifying the dehumanization of the Japanese, *Action Comics* number 48, cover dated May 1942, features a cover with Superman punching a Japanese plane. Under the force of his fist, the plane’s propeller and engine crumple. The pilot, a dusky yellow, has but slits for eyes and oversized buckteeth. His face suggests a grimace, as though Superman’s blow to the plane inflicted pain upon the pilot’s own body. The cover artist, Fred Ray, portrays the two battling above the ocean in which a Japanese aircraft carrier launches a second plane and a Japanese destroyer provides an escort. Ray identifies the aircraft carrier as Japanese through the use of a large rising sun logo emblazoned on its side. The Japanese pilot’s appearance reuses several preexisting stereotypes for Asians, specifically Chinese, now reapplied to represent the Japanese. Despite the patriotic cover, the story within focuses on a shady used car salesman, like Superman’s early traffic safety obsession.

In tying cartoon violence against the Japanese to victory in the war, *Action Comics* number 58, cover dated March 1943, features an image of Superman working

¹⁰² Munson, “‘Superman Says You Can Slap a Jap!’ The Man of Steel and Race Hatred in World War II,” 5.

¹⁰³ Munson, “‘Superman Says You Can Slap a Jap!’ The Man of Steel and Race Hatred in World War II,” 6.

an oversized printing press, cranking out a poster that says, “Superman Says: You can Slap a Jap with War Bonds and Stamps!”¹⁰⁴ The cover artist, Jack Burnley, portrays the Japanese figure in an excessively cartoonish fashion, with an oddly shaped head, x’s over his eyes from the slap, and his tongue hanging out under his large buckteeth. This image not only encouraged Americans to do their part for the war effort, but also reassured them that the Japanese were not human, mitigating guilt as the government rounded up Japanese Americans in the United States or when Americans called for the total war against all Japanese. *Action Comics* number 63, cover dated August 1943, features a similarly cartoonish depiction of a Japanese pilot who recoils as Superman prepares to punch him in the face. Burnley portrays the pilot with dark yellow skin that nearly matches the background color and large buckteeth. His goggles fly away from his head as though Superman already hit him once. Superman, straddling the plane’s fuselage, glares at the pilot, encouraging viewers to share his racial hatred of the Japanese. The cover, like that of number 58, argues for the righteousness of physically attacking the Japanese.

In many cases, Superman attacked the technology of his adversary rather than the adversary themselves, such as with the Nazi submarines. *Action Comics* number 76, cover dated September 1944, featured the last wartime cover. On it, Superman punches a Japanese motorcycle, identifiable from its stereotyped Japanese writing, and sends the driver and his officer in the sidecar flying. Both have dusky yellow skin, narrow eyes, and buck teeth, however they lack the extreme exaggeration of

¹⁰⁴ Siegel and Shuster, *Superman: The Action Comics Archives, Volume 4*, 78.

earlier covers. The viewer can only identify the officer as such from the epaulets on his uniform and the sword on his belt. Otherwise, he remains remarkably subtle, not even resembling Tōjō. The story within follows Clark Kent as he travels with some sailors around the world. In Sumatra, a group of Japanese rubber bandits attempts to hijack the ship's supply. The interior artist, Ed Dobrotka, portrays the Japanese with the expected slit eyes and buck teeth, using broken English dialogue when they communicate, as when one rubber-coated soldier says, "Oh! Most unhappy fix!"¹⁰⁵ Despite this, however, this episode serves as a single part of the whole story and the ship soon travels to India. This story, the last of its kind, remains largely tame. Nearly every story that followed focused on gangsters or Superman's growing rogues' gallery, now featuring the Toyman and Mr. Mxyzplk. When Superman engaged race, he reaffirmed the beliefs of readers on the homefront, though his escapist stories served more to offer a break from the constant barrage of war news.

Unlike Superman, Captain America offered racial commentary on various different ethnicities, including African Americans, Native Americans, the Chinese and the Japanese. This reflects the simplicity with which writers presented the racial dynamic of the war as "whites" against "others." *Captain America Comics* number 5 features one of only two portrayals of a black character in the prewar issues. The character, an unnamed member of the Sentinels of Liberty (a sort of fan club/youth war effort organization) appears grouped with the other young boys. Of the group of seven, including Bucky, the nameless character represents the only minority. Kirby

¹⁰⁵ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman: The Action Comics Archives, Volume 5* (New York: DC Comics, Inc., 2007), 106.

portrayed the character in stereotypical minstrel fashion, dressing him in a red zootsuit with only his white eyes and red lips to give expression to his all-black countenance. Despite portraying a black character, his lawn jockey appearance reinforces traditional views of African Americans during the war. Worse yet, the character never appears again, not even in the group shot when the Sentinels of Liberty uncover Nazi spies working within German-American bund organizations and brawl with the Nazis. A second black character appears briefly in *Captain America Comics* number 9. Though the character appears more human, only featuring overly-proportioned muscles, Simon's narration identifies him as a murderer who decided to donate his hand to an artist in need of a hand transplant prior to his execution. True to the pulp science fiction and horror genre, the hand infects its new owner and causes him to begin a murderous rampage, attempting to paint his victims' horror in his madness. This portrayal offers little improvement over the earlier character, as the black character is not only a murderer, but his body parts have the ability to poison others into committing similar crimes. Such a portrayal echoes contemporary Southern ideas of eugenics and black inferiority, especially the concept of one drop of black blood corrupting an otherwise white person.

Though the war offered an easy racial "other" in the form of the Japanese, Captain America continued to reaffirm white supremacy against *all* races. *Captain America Comics* number 10 contains the first wartime depiction of African Americans in the title. The characters, two black porters on a train, discuss the fact

that Captain America and Bucky may be traveling among them. They say to each other,

Keep yo' eyes peeled, Rastus! Cap'n 'Merica might be on dis here train!
Immm-Imm! He's mo' impo'tant dan "Rochester," ain't he!¹⁰⁶

Though the character's dialogue continues the tradition of writing in the vernacular in an attempt to imbue the stories with a sense of realism, it also reinforces racial attitudes of black Americans as ignorant servants. Even the name "Rastus" is a pejorative for an older black man. The most important man the porters can think of is Jack Benny's valet, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, at the time the richest black man in America, though still a servant to a white man.

In many issues, Captain America reaffirmed racial stereotypes of blacks that were meant for readers to interpret as lighthearted humour. *All Winners Comics* number 4 features a Captain America story in which Cap and Bucky must track down a magician. They ask an African tribesman for direction and the man appears overly superstitious, saying, "No, no... 'Sorcerer's Hollow', full of ghosts, devils! Me no tell!"¹⁰⁷ Though this character only appears for three panels in one issue, the concept of Africans and African-Americans fearing ghosts appears throughout the Captain America stories. *Captain America Comics* number 19 features more black characters, though all of them work as servants in a plantation house for an ancient white woman.

¹⁰⁶ Joe Simon, et al, *Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 3* (New York: Marvel Publishing, Inc., 2009), 84.

¹⁰⁷ Joe Simon, et al., *Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age All Winners, Vol. 1* (New York: Marvel Publishing, Inc., 2005), 224.

The author identifies the first one as “a terrified negro servant”¹⁰⁸ while the first one Cap and Bucky encounter addresses them as “Massa.”¹⁰⁹ Later, when Captain America and Bucky return to rescue the plantation from a thief in a crocodile suit, the servant exclaims, “Praise de lawd! It’s Captain America and Bucky, done come to save us from death!”¹¹⁰ Naturally Cap and Bucky prove victorious, defeating the thief and discovering hidden treasure for the old plantation owner, allowing her to reclaim her family’s wealth and reassert her racial dominance. The idea of blacks fearing ghosts may trace to the popularity of D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* in which the Ku Klux Klan chooses their wardrobe to play on the supposed superstitious character of African Americans. Griffith, in turn, based his portrayal on earlier nineteenth century stereotypes. With Captain America representing the soldier’s experience of the war, these issues reflect the segregated military in which black soldiers served under white commanding officers. The various black characters in *Captain America Comics* all react like stereotypical mammy characters who want to serve Captain America, thereby suggesting that the segregation in the military was just.

Beyond African Americans, any race other than white was fair game for writers to portray as diabolical. *Captain America Comics* number 14 begins with a story portraying Cap and Bucky fighting Native Americans, whom Bucky calls “Injuns” as Captain America calls out, “Let’s give their copper hides some

¹⁰⁸ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 5, 142.

¹⁰⁹ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 5, 143.

¹¹⁰ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 5, 144.

exercise!”¹¹¹ The artist, Al Avison depicts the Native Americans with large noses, either long braided hair or Mohawks, and wearing little more than loincloths and moccasins, like cigar store Indian statues. Captain America addresses one of the Indians, a friend of his, as “Little Moose,” despite the fact that no moose inhabit the American Southwest.¹¹² The issue, appearing after the attack on Pearl Harbor, employs the most bizarre racial transference. At one point, Captain America yells at the Indians’ leader, “Vulture! I denounce you! You are a Japanese Officer, fighting America!”¹¹³ Later, Captain America repeats, “I’m convinced, Vulture, that you are a Jap or worse!”¹¹⁴ In the end, Captain America’s intuition proves accurate when he reveals the Indian leader as a white man who sold out to the Japanese. The story ends with the message, “This story has a lesson! No telling where the enemy of America may be lurking! Captain America urges every citizen to check on suspicious characters and happenings, and help win the war!”¹¹⁵ In this light, the story reduces Native Americans to little more than potential Japanese spies rather than “true” Americans. Though the Japanese never reached out to Native Americans, Japanese Americans in internment did meet Native Americans since the internment camps bordered Indian reservations. These meetings, like the story in *Captain America Comics* number 14, served to reinforce to both Native Americans and the Japanese

¹¹¹ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 4, 73.

¹¹² Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 4, 76.

¹¹³ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 4, 80.

¹¹⁴ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 4, 82.

¹¹⁵ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 4, 89.

that they were permanently excluded from white America.¹¹⁶ In representing the military perspective of the war, *Captain America Comics* linked Native Americans with the Japanese, America's newest enemy.

Writers even sent Captain America outside of America to combat other racialized enemies. *Captain America Comics* number 20 features the story "Captain America battles the Fakir" in which Pvt. Rogers' Army unit travels to India to battle a local fifth columnist aiding the Japanese. The artist portrays the fifth columnist, known as the Fakir, wearing a turban and loincloth and little else. He continually prays to various stereotypes of Hindu gods, performing rituals involving fire while praying for the power to kill. The artist gave the Fakir a wild mustache and unruly white hair which flows around his head and fanged mouth. One of the Indians, helping Captain America after the Fakir captured him, explains, "I have been to state school...I have read of you and your deeds! America is the hope of the free world! Go free, brave sahib, and crush the evil Fakir who sells us to the little brown devils [the Japanese]!"¹¹⁷ Captain America informs the prostrate man that, "In America we kneel to no man!"¹¹⁸ This portrayal of Indians replicates the style of Kipling and other British officers, representing them as superstitious savages. Interestingly the author accurately captures the Japanese sense of racial superiority. When two Japanese soldiers deliver weapons to the Fakir, one says, "It all goes velly well, yesss? This

¹¹⁶ *Rabbit in the Moon*, directed by Emiko Omori (1999; California DVD, 2004), DVD.

¹¹⁷ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 5, 250.

¹¹⁸ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 5, 250.

Fakir, he he is so stupid! Heh, heh, heh!”¹¹⁹ Though the writer deliberately bastardized the Japanese soldier’s speech, he demonstrated the Japanese disdain for other Asian peoples. *Captain America Comics* number 23 contains yet another Hindu character. Syd Shores portrays Captain America and Bucky with a look of pure racial hate as they observe “a strange couple...a Hindu and a white woman!”¹²⁰ Like the earlier Indian character, the Hindu in this story, wearing an ornamented turban, invokes various pagan gods in a false ceremony designed to defraud and kill rich white widows. Cap and Bucky handily end the man’s operation, uncovering the Hindu’s employer, a rich white lawyer. This story contains the titillation of miscegenation while also reinforcing white superiority since the Hindu ultimately works for a white man.

Despite the racist depictions of Indians, blacks, and Native Americans, the Japanese fared far worse if only due to the sheer amount of content. Writers and artists translated earlier stereotypes of the Chinese to the new Japanese threat. Yanes writes, “As racist depictions of the Japanese increased after the attack on Pearl Harbor, American comic book writers ‘coined epithets like ‘ratzi’ and ‘Japanazi’’...and their stories went from defeating Asians to specially killing Japanese.”¹²¹ *Captain America Comics* number 5, cover dated August 1941, features the first appearance of the Japanese as antagonists, though Simon and Kirby continually refer to them as either Orientals or Asians. The Oriental antagonists

¹¹⁹ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 5*, 242.

¹²⁰ Shores and Rico, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 6*, 183.

¹²¹ Yanes, “Graphic Imagery,” 61.

belong to the Axis Powers and use a massive dragon-shaped submarine to strike terror into Hawaiians and the U.S. Navy. Captain America and Bucky travel to Hawaii and uncover the Orientals' plans, which involve triggering a volcanic eruption to destroy the Pacific fleet. Again, Timely Comics published this issue depicting the Japanese threat to the Pacific Fleet a full four months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Japanese generally appear less racially stereotyped than they did in later issues, though the regular sailors still all wear long topknots of hair and carry on in minimal clothing, embodying a subdued barbarism. The submarine's commander threatens an American commander at one point, saying, "We Asiatics have ways of getting what we want!"¹²² Though Simon and Kirby never refer to the Orientals as "Japanese," they name various characters "Toshio" and "Hiroshi," obvious Japanese names that any American reader would recognize.¹²³

The depiction of Hideki Tōjō on the cover of *Captain America Comics* number 13 reused many of the Japanese stereotypes presented earlier in the series. Al Avison's artwork features a banner in the upper left corner that proclaims, "All Out for America Issue!"¹²⁴ An icon in the lower left corner enjoins the reader to "Remember Pear Harbor."¹²⁵ Captain America stands in the center, with Tōjō on the left and Bucky on the right, standing behind Cap. All three are portrayed as larger-than-life and stand over Battleship Row at Pearl Harbor. Cap's punch draws up from

¹²² Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 2* (New York: Marvel Publishing, Inc., 2008), 19.

¹²³ Simon and Kirby, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 2*, 20.

¹²⁴ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 4*, 1.

¹²⁵ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 4*, 1.

the American flag planted on the island and connects with Tōjō's fanged mouth, knocking off his helmet before he can reach his pistol with his clawed hand. Cap yells at Tōjō, "You started it! Now- we'll finish it!"¹²⁶ Though Japanese zeroes zip past Captain America and the smoke of the damage rises around his feet, the damage is minimized, so that the patriotic message is not lost in the horrible reality of the devastation. The stories contained in this issue have nothing to do with Pearl Harbor, demonstrating the trend during the war for comics to feature patriotic pin-up covers that do not relate to the content within.

Despite the lack of content specifically addressing Pearl Harbor, the first story of issue 13, "Captain America Battles the League of the Unicorn!" features the racialized depiction of the Japanese that defined wartime comics. The story depicts a Japanese crime organization, who derive their name from metal spikes implanted in their foreheads, attempting to upset relations between the United States and China by killing a Chinese prince and princess. In the story, the artist, Avison, portrays the Japanese with exceedingly long, almost reptilian slanted eyes. They all have erratic, fanged teeth and their leader wears a long Fu Manchu mustache. At one point, Bucky performs a swinging kick on one of the criminals while saying, "You should get a kick out of this, Slant-Eyes!"¹²⁷ Though the Chinese hardly fare better than the Japanese, possessing long claw-like fingernails, they still appear more human and the writers recognize them as American allies. The Chinese princess wears a low-cut dress, casting her as an exotic sexual object for Western readers. When the League of

¹²⁶ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 4, 1.

¹²⁷ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America*, Vol. 4, 7.

the Unicorns abduct her, Bucky cries out, “Hand off Princess Yana, you Nippon back-stabber!”¹²⁸ Bucky’s turn of phrase not only racializes the Japanese, but also refers to their sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. He continually makes various racist comments throughout the story, at one point asking the leader of the Japanese criminals if he wears a mask or if Bucky sees his real face. The Japanese leader later signs his ransom note with his stereotypical name, Zong, and a cartoon of his face, featuring stylized eyebrows, slits for eyes, a wide nose, and a Fu Manchu mustache. By the story’s end, Bucky predicted Zong’s secret identity, a white railroad magnate with an indeterminate motive. The story’s writer never felt the need to explain his rationale for his actions, but, in revealing Zong as a white man, the writer reinforced white notions of racial superiority.

Linking racial differences to a supernatural threat, *All Winners Comics* number 5, cover dated Summer 1942, features the Captain America story “The Vampire Strikes!” in which Cap and Bucky fight a Japanese doctor who discovered a formula to turn himself into a vampire. As if the depiction of the Japanese lacked an element of the grotesque, the unknown artist portrays the already heavily fanged and nearly eye-less Japanese transforming into a large green winged demon, with even more fangs and extra-large eyes. The vampire cries out, “Blood! I must have blood! Blood of American swine!”¹²⁹ Naturally, Cap and Bucky defeat the mad scientist,

¹²⁸ Lee, *Golden Age Captain America, Vol. 4*, 11.

¹²⁹ Carl Burgos, et al., *Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age All Winners, Vol. 2* (New York: Marvel Publishing, Inc., 2006), 18.

who, while in his human form, wears spectacles reminiscent of Tōjō. The story concludes with Cap and Bucky mailing a letter to the Japanese that says,

Dear Saps: -
Your vampire, Togo, has been taken care of! This is just to let you know that 130,000,000 Americans are beginning to march toward Tokyo! We'll be seeing you soon! Our slogan for Japs: Keep 'em dying!¹³⁰

This story again contains the promise of Pearl Harbor that Americans will finish the war. Interestingly, the contents of the letter seem to advocate for genocide against the Japanese as a result of the racial nature of the war.

Between Superman and Captain America, the two flagship characters of their respective publishers, readers at home and abroad were learning racial values in which America equated to whiteness and the Japanese were barbaric beasts who American soldiers needed to destroy. The issues capture the prevailing racial attitudes of their day, whether about African Americans, Indians, or Native Americans, and reinforce those views by indoctrinating readers to them through the unassuming format of the comic book. Any white male reader who picked up one of these comics in the 1940s could rest assured of their dominance in the world. Comic books failed to portray minorities in a positive context until the 1960s, when American society began to change. Though many publishers presented stories in which characters argued that not all ethnic and racial minorities were bad, in a larger context these stories only serve to suggest that “good” minorities are an exception to the typical example of these races. The portrayal of the Japanese only reinforced the

¹³⁰ Burgos, et al., *Golden Age All Winners, Vol. 2*, 27.

belief that World War II was a racial war. Wright argues, “High-minded and hateful, the comic book image of World War II betrays some of the contradictions inherent in America’s wartime experience.”¹³¹ The Nazis, despite fighting against American soldiers, shared a common ethnicity with the majority of Americans and thus were more complicated than the obvious “other” embodied in the Japanese.

¹³¹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 55.

Conclusion

Captain America, himself a soldier and with powers best described as human plus, could actively fight in the war while Superman, born of the successful immigrant narrative and too powerful by the time the U.S. entered the war, could not. In this way, Captain America and Superman represented and offered escapism to the soldiers and civilians, respectively. Beyond escapism, the comics encouraged readers to support the war effort and expressed values of race to their readers, establishing the racial nature of the war and thereby justifying it to civilians and soldiers.

Siegel and Shuster's Great Depression values permeated Superman's character, fitting him into the successful immigrant narrative that Depression-era readers easily understood. The pulp science fiction framework of the character led to the development of ever greater powers with the result that he was too powerful by the time the United States entered World War II for DC to portray him actively fighting. Despite this setback, Superman served to boost morale through his hyper patriotic covers and escapist stories. Readers could identify with his All-American values and fantasize about punching bad guys as they read of his adventures. The War Department understood the value of these stories and shipped his comics to soldiers overseas to boost their morale. In this light, Superman's homefront-focused stories allowed soldiers to think of home and a future after the war.

Though DC largely ignores Superman's role in World War II, retroactively altering the character's continuity so that he and his supporting cast remain the same age throughout the series' publication, Munson argues that the war played a pivotal

role in shaping the Superman readers enjoy today. Munson argues, “Superman’s clash against the Axis powers on comic book covers, newspaper strips, radio, and cartoons was a part of the character’s transformation from a social avenger to the patriotic defender of ‘truth, justice, and the American way’ – a fact which has too often been obscured in the collective American memory.”¹³² Superman, as demonstrated in this thesis, began as a vigilante figure with little regard for the formal laws but, by the war’s end, he embodied the values Americans held most dearly. This transformation fundamentally changed the character, but it allowed him to survive Fredric Wertham’s comic book witch-hunts of the 1950s.

Timely’s Captain America served to disseminate war propaganda to readers in a more direct way. Through Steve Rogers, who exemplified the blonde haired and blue eyed Aryan superman, readers could see the downfall of Hitler’s plans. Captain America was one of the soldiers, an unassuming figure fighting alongside the very men who read his comics. He offered an ideal that readers in the military could strive towards. Captain America also advocated the righteousness of the war, continually referring to the barbarism of the Japanese soldiers he regularly fought. Americans reading these stories were reassured of their racially biased values and need not have felt guilt when advocating for the eradication of the Japanese.

Both Superman and Captain America demonstrated a difference between ethnic Germans, of whom there were many living in America, and Nazis, a faceless enemy identifiable through their prolific swastikas and Stahlhelms. While the writers

¹³² Munson, “‘Superman Says You Can Slap a Jap!’ The Man of Steel and Race Hatred in World War II,” 13.

attempted to suggest that Japanese Americans were loyal to the cause of the United States, they never advocated for racial equality, insisting that the Japanese were less human than white Americans. Though the racism in Superman appears relatively tempered, the writers of *Captain America Comics* proliferated every racial bias available to white Americans at that time. No group of nonwhites appeared entirely human.

Though the war eventually ended, neither character could escape its lasting cultural effect. Later continuities kept Superman perpetually in his early 30s, and eventually in his late 20s, distancing him from the active role he played on the covers of wartime comics, but the hyper-patriotism of the war forever influenced his character. Captain America, meanwhile, could never successfully escape the war. Those films and adaptations that ignored World War II generally failed while other writers used the war to discuss issues of race and gender. Even unto this day, Superman and Captain America remain men out of time, reflecting back on the liberal policies of FDR's administration while moving forward through time.

Superman embodied the civilian experience of the war, uncertain as to its outcome but continually projecting hopeful patriotism into the future. Captain America represented the military experience of soldiers who, while not always actively in battle, wished for a quick end to the war with a minimum of bloodshed. Each character boosted morale and reaffirmed ingrained American beliefs. Though the publishers of both had to reinvent the characters after the war, neither has escaped its impact.

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