

Yellow Peril: Placing Anti-Japanese Wartime Images in Historical Context

Placing Anti-Japanese Wartime Images in Historical Context

Developed by: Dr. Zach Smith on behalf of ARNCTA

SUBJECT World Geography / World History / U.S. History	GRADE LEVEL Grade 5 - 12	DURATION 45 minutes	FORMAT Discussion + image analysis
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Rationale and Explanation

This lesson plan explores racialized images of the Japanese during World War II and places wartime images of the Japanese within the broader historical context of the “Yellow Peril” - a cluster of anxieties about the Japanese Empire and immigration from Asia that began at the turn of the twentieth century. Students will compare 1940s propaganda posters, advertisements, comic books, and earlier images of the “Yellow Peril” to see how wartime images produced a uniform picture of the Japanese. By exploring the underlying assumptions within each image, students will develop a critical toolset for analyzing visual culture, while also discovering that American animosity toward Japan did not begin with Pearl Harbor. **Content note:** This lesson features many racist depictions of Japanese and other Asian people, and students should be made aware that they do not reflect reality.



“Put the Squeeze on the Japanese” RCA Manufacturing Company, from “American War Posters,” (University of North Texas Digital Library”

Lesson Objectives

Knowledge Understand the historical context behind the “Yellow Peril” myth of the early twentieth century and its impact on World War II depictions of Japan.	Analysis Compare and contrast anti-Japanese propaganda during World War II, and connect visual choices to broader assumptions about Japanese people.
Application Use wartime imagery of Japan to offer historical explanations for the forced relocation and imprisonment of Japanese Americans.	Critical Thinking Evaluate how repeated imagery across different domains reinforces harmful stereotypes.

Arkansas State Standards

Course / Grade Band	Standard	Relevant Focus
Grade 5 World Geography	G.2.5.7	Analyze perceptions people have of places and regions around the world, including Arkansas, based on direct experiences and indirect experiences, and support or challenge those perceptions using evidence.
High School World Geography	PR.3.G.3	Analyze the impact of cultural and social factors on individuals' varying perceptions of places and regions created by physical characteristics and human influences.
High School World History	H.6.WH.20	Examine causes of global conflict in the first half of the 20th century leading up to the outbreak of World War I and World War II, including imperialistic and nationalistic rivalries, alliances, militarism, fascism, totalitarianism, and communism.
High School U.S. History Since 1929	H.5.US.H.8	Analyze the social, economic, and political effects of World War II on the American people, including war efforts at home, Japanese-American internment camps and Korematsu v. United States, and service member casualties.

Lesson Outline (45 mins)

STEP 1
15 minutes

Prework: Understanding the Yellow Peril

As a class, analyze the following French postcard, published during the Russo-Japanese War (1905). How does this postcard depict Japan ("Japon") and Russia ("Russie") respectively? Take note of specific exaggerated physical features for each. What argument is the postcard making about the Japanese attack on Port Arthur (in China)? [For more context on the Russo – Japanese War, See MIT Visualizing Cultures – Yellow Promise / Yellow Peril]



French postcard published during the Russo-Japanese War (1905).

STEP 2

30 minutes

Large Discussion

Materials

- “Yellow Promise / Yellow Peril” MIT Visualizing Cultures Unit:
https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/yellow_promise_yellow_peril/yp_essay04.html
- “Anti-Japanese Propaganda,” *Hampton Roads Naval Museum*:
<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/museums/hrnm/Education/EducationWebsiteRebuild/AntiJapanesePropaganda/AntiJapanesePropagandaInfoSheet/Anti-Japanese%20Propaganda%20info.pdf>
- “Collections of Japanese Americans in World War II: Propaganda,” Fresno State University Lib Guide:
<https://guides.library.fresnostate.edu/c.php?g=636720&p=4459994>

Small Groups (20 minutes)

Divide the class into 4-6 groups and have each group analyze a specific pair of images from the database below. Invite students to write draft answers to the attached questions. Then, have each group share their assigned image, including one important visual detail and one answer to an analysis question.

Debrief Questions (10 Minutes)

- In many wartime drawings and posters, Japanese people were shown with the same features: round glasses, big front teeth, small or slanted eyes, and long fingernails. How do you think showing everyone from one group looking exactly the same might change the way people feel about that group?
- How are the anti-Japanese images made during World War II alike or different from images of Japanese people that were made before the war?
- Thinking about today's world, can you think of any other groups of people who are almost always drawn or shown in the same way?

Group A

Reflection Questions:

- **IMAGES:** What exaggerated or unrealistic features stand out in these depictions of Japanese people? How do they make the individuals depicted appear less human?
- **ARGUMENTS:** What is the overall argument of each image?
- **CONTEXT:** Both of these images are produced by private companies, not government offices. Why might businesses also employ this kind of imagery?



Material conservation campaign by Douglas Construction, 1943
[Fresno State Lib Guide: Anti-Japanese Propaganda]

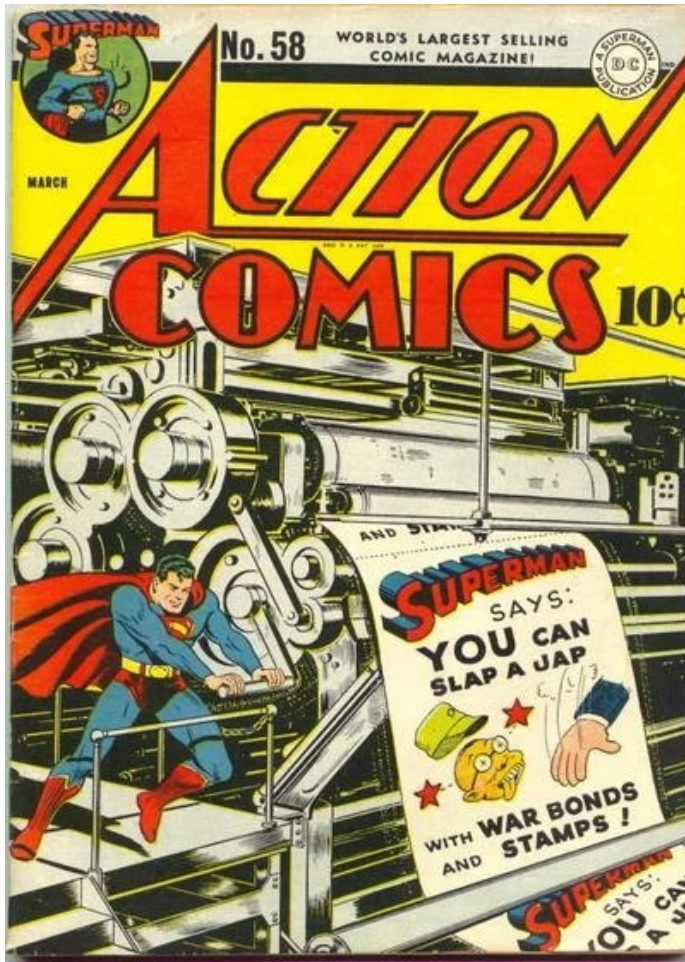


WRA photo by Dorothea Lange
Anti-Japanese advertisement from Sutro Baths in San Francisco, 1942
[WRA Photo, Dorothea Lange, Museum of the City of San Francisco]

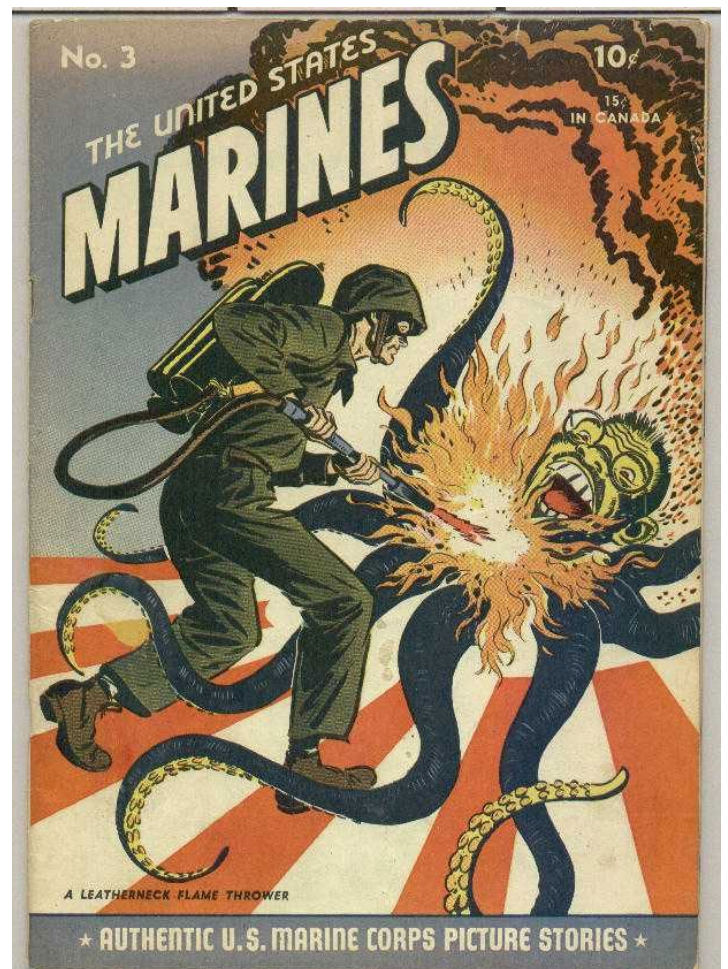
Group B

Reflection Questions:

- **IMAGES:** What exaggerated or unrealistic features stand out in these depictions of Japanese people? How do they make the individuals depicted appear less human?
- **ARGUMENTS:** What is the overall argument of each image?
- **CONTEXT:** In the 1940s most readers of comic books were young kids. What do you think they would make of these images?



Henry Boltinoff and Bernard Bailey, et al., Action Comics #58, March 3, 1943



The United States Marines #3 [US Marine Corps Comic, 1942]

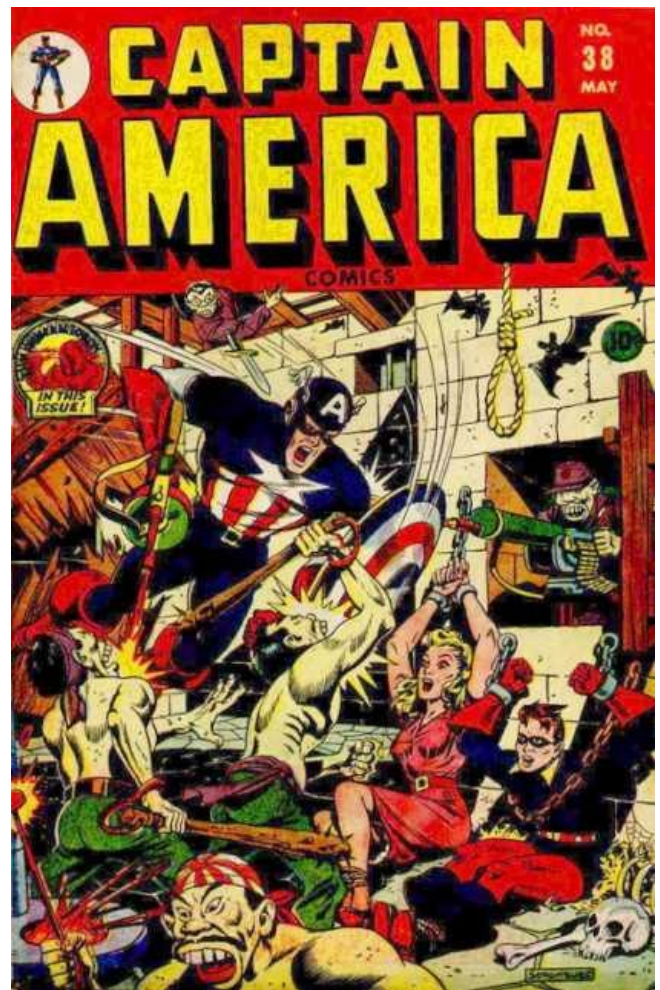
Group C

Reflection Questions:

- **IMAGES:** What exaggerated or unrealistic features stand out in these depictions of Japanese people? How do they make the individuals depicted appear less human?
- **ARGUMENTS:** What is the overall argument of each image?
- **CONTEXT:** In the 1940s most readers of comic books were young kids. What do you think they would make of these images?



[left] Captain America #13, April 1, 1942

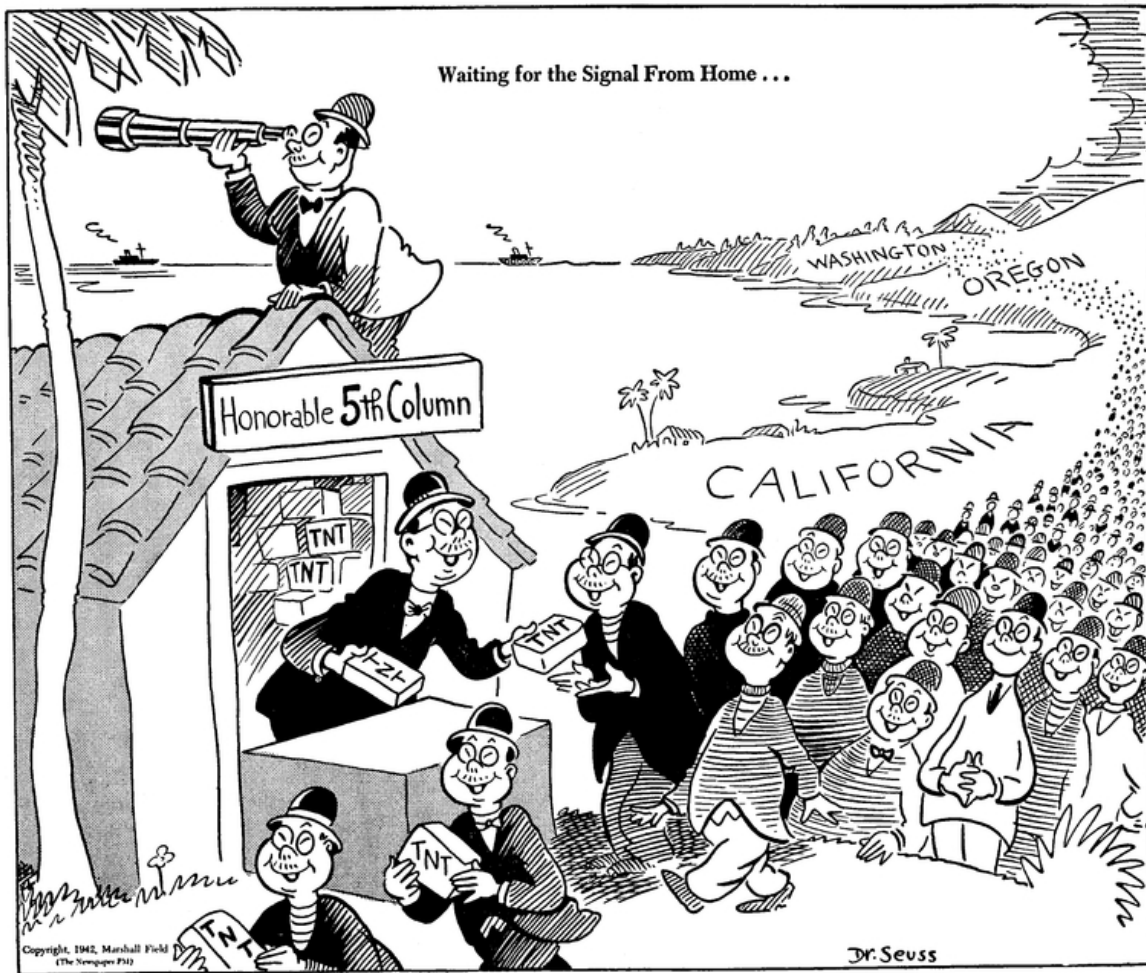


[right] Captain America #38, May 1, 1944

Group D

Reflection Questions:

- **IMAGES:** What exaggerated or unrealistic features stand out in this depiction of Japanese people? How do they make the individuals depicted appear less human?
- **ARGUMENTS:** What is the overall argument of the image?
- **CONTEXT:** How might images like this promote popular support for the forced removal and imprisonment of Japanese immigrants on the West Coast? How does the argument of this comic compare with other themes in the work of Dr. Seuss?



"Waiting for the Signal from Home" by Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Geisel, February 13, 1943