

Why We are Good and They are Bad: A Look at Identity and Otherization in American and Japanese Films of World War Two

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This paper examines the wartime policies of the United States and Japan during the Second World War in relation to propaganda. The policies followed by each country included the use of various types of media for propaganda often containing similar messages on both sides of the conflict such as vilification of the enemy or the need to conserve. In the use of film, however, both countries differed. This paper will detail the differences between American and Japanese war films and the reasons for these differences.

Key Words : Otherization, Propaganda, Wartime Policy

Introduction

Mobilization for total war by so many nations across the globe is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Second World War. This mobilization extended into all parts of the economy and culture of the nations involved. It extended into the media as well with nations using propaganda via a variety of mediums. The goal of propaganda often falls into three categories. The first describes a national rally cry for the war such as Pearl Harbor for the United States or the details of the A-B-C-D line for the Japanese. This was often a statement of why the country had no other option but to go to war. The second category is a confirmation that the subject nation is on the side of good. It tells people what they are fighting to defend. The third category is the mirror image of the second describing how the enemy is bad, evil, corrupt, etc. and why they will eventually be defeated as long as people band together and sacrifice for the good of the nation. The total mobilization of the media during the Second World War saw these three categories used across a wide range of media including posters, leaflets, plays, radio broadcasts, speeches, photographs, newspapers, and music. One media form in particular goes against this trend of various messages and instead focused predominately on one message over the

others. Movies produced by the United States and Japan during the Second World War both focus on one element out of the three described above to the exclusion of the others.

War films produced by both the United States and Japan during the Second World War were different from other types of media in their presentation of both the nation and the enemy. In general, U.S. war films placed an emphasis on dehumanizing the enemy in contrast to Japanese war films which almost neglected the portrayal of the enemy and, instead, focused on describing national identity. This is unique to film. In other forms of propaganda both the United States and Japan have propaganda which fall into the three categories described above. How do the war films of the United States and Japan compare with other forms of propaganda produced during the war? Is the message of the film dependant on the intended audience? Why do these films generally focus on one theme over the other and why that particular theme?

Propaganda

War propaganda must be adapted to the actual conditions in the enemy country and to the current attitudes and specific susceptibilities of the enemy audience. This adaptation is

particularly difficult in war propaganda for two reasons. First, contact with the listening audience is almost completely cut off so that there is no way to know accurately the conditions in the enemy country which constitute the other parts of the total situation. Second, the propagandist is generally dealing with peoples of another nation, with different culture, language, and national traditions which are often but imperfectly understood by foreign 'experts'. (Berreman, pg.108)

Japan used a variety of media to spread propaganda in target countries with varying degrees of success. A large focus was placed on occupied countries as these allowed the greatest access and use of various methods of distribution. Attempts were made to vary the message based on the conditions within the country. Due to physical constraints, propaganda distribution against the United States was limited.

One method of using propaganda directly against the United States came in the form of radio broadcasts. While Japanese radio propaganda directed against the United States may be considered to be not commonly well known, however, one only needs to mention Tokyo Rose to dispel this belief. Generally these radio broadcasts used English to address what was considered to be several weak points which could be exploited to weaken moral and the U.S. war effort in general. A large component of these broadcasts contrasted stated U.S. war aims with current conditions within the United States. Addressing the Atlantic Charter and other statements about democracy, Japan countered by describing social conditions within the United States.

Nippon stresses the Americans contempt for nonwhites, their scorn of colored peoples, and their mistreatment of Negroes within their midst. After citing examples of Negro restrictions, discriminations, and Jim Crow laws, the Japanese commentator asked a most embarrassing questing: If these limited rights exist in the America, how can Mr. Roosevelt promise them sincerely to the whole world? How can America be fighting for them? (Padover, pg.197)

The effectiveness of this propaganda is questionable. While Japanese propaganda did make some valid points concerning racial discrimination and overall war goals, it was lacking. In Berreman's article, Assumptions about America in Japanese War Propaganda to the United States, on page 113 in a footnote he states that he worked in the Office of

Facts and Figures in 1942 when that office conducted numerous moral studies showing almost completely that the American public did not consider a Japanese victory in the war a possibility.

In occupied countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Burma, and China, Japan had greater access and could thus use a wide variety of methods to distribute propaganda. The goal of the propaganda was varied and often individualized based upon the conditions in the target country. In general, however, there are several common elements. Efforts were put forth to make Japanese the primary language of many occupied countries with local languages considered secondary but still official languages. Western languages such as English and Dutch became illegal. Music was utilized to spread propaganda and access to American or British music was forbidden. Radio Tokyo stated "The eradication of American and British music is our most pressing duty at the moment." (Berreman, Japanization, pg.170) Education, youth groups, political organizations were all used as tools of propaganda.

Propaganda in the Philippines generally focused on rallying the Pilipino people behind the Japanese cause. Descriptions of the enemy described how they were occupiers while the Japanese were liberators. The Japanese were freeing Asia from western influence and giving Asia back to Asians. In December of 1941, planes dropped leaflets into Manila before the arrival of Japanese army.

The best sections of manila, as you all know, have been seized by Americans and they own the best clubs, the best stores, and the best residences in utter disregard of your rights. You are scorned in public and made fun of in their exclusive clubs where you are not allowed admittance. (Padover, pg 199)

As in the United States radio broadcast were used in the Philippines and in one broadcast from occupied Manila the link between education and propaganda was clearly stated.

Part of the task of Philippine education is to make the people understand they must cooperate with Japan, must subscribe to the Japanese language, need to learn more about the Japanese and gain from their knowledge of art, social breeding, science, and determination. The Imperial policy . . . must be the starting point of education. (Berreman, Japanization, pg.171)

The goal was focused on bringing the occupied people into the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Freedom from western powers was

promised, but at a cost. The Philippines was not the only country to pay this cost.

Propaganda in Burma and Malaysia had many similarities to propaganda in the Philippines. Promises made to the Burmese and Malaysian people were the same as promises made in the Philippines and elsewhere. The propaganda effort emphasized the shared background between the occupied people and Japan and stressed a common future.

If Burma cooperates with Japan, she will realize her age-long desire for independence. As Burmese people are of Asiatic race and are Buddhists, as are the Japanese, it is only natural that every Burmese cooperate with Japan. Those who resist will be looked upon as an enemy of East Asia. (Padover, pg. 200)

It stressed a common enemy as propaganda in the Philippines did.

A deep-rooted hatred that you Malaysians shall hold against your British officers and men is rightfully shared by the Japanese Army. . . . Men who have been oppressed, exploited and driven into submission are not enemies of Japan. In fact, you Malaysians should be fighting shoulder to shoulder with us against our common enemy. (Padover, pg.201)

It also stressed the importance of education for propaganda purposes. One Japanese official wrote the following statement after returning from Burma:

At present in Burma the establishment of the new education is progressing steadily day by day. The date is not far distant when the Burmans who are to undertake the responsibility of the new East Asia will be completely molded according to its pattern. (Berreman, Japanization, pg. 171)

Was this propaganda effective? In June, 1943, Burma's Minister of Education U. B. Lwin, made the following statement while visiting Japan:

We have no doubt about the integrity of the Co-Prosperity policy, Asia for the Asiatics, and we are an integral part of Asia. We are Orientals, and the Japanese are also of the Orient. As Orientals, we are proud to see the Japanese achieving victories unprecedented in history. Therefore, we in Burma should do our best for the ultimate victory of Japan in this war. (Padover, pg. 200)

In general, propaganda in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Burma tried to create a common background between the occupied people and Japan.

There was less emphasis on the dehumanization of the enemy probably because all of these countries had first hand knowledge of the intended targets. A much safer course was to exploit the inequalities in the social systems placed by the former colonial powers. These generalities did not apply in one country that Japan, at least partially, occupied, China.

Japanese propaganda in China did utilize the common background appeal used in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Burma, however, this was only a small part of the effort. Propaganda efforts concerning China were directed towards three primary groups, the Chinese population, foreigners in China, and Japanese citizens at home. The primary goal intended for the Chinese population was cooperation while the objective for the foreign community living in China was neutrality. Finally propaganda efforts relating to China for the home islands was intended to gather positive support for operations in China. In order to achieve these goals propaganda tactics varied, but favorite targets included leaders of the Nationalist Chinese government and the communists. This differed sharply with propaganda efforts in other countries. Very negative images vastly outnumbered statements about the shared background between China and Japan. (Rowe, pg 571-572) Leaflets and posters played a large part in propaganda activities in China. As the war progressed and widened, the Japanese film industry played a larger part in propaganda operations, however, focusing on a different theme than some other forms of propaganda.

Japanese War Films

Japanese film industry along with other parts of the economy mobilized for war. In contrast to the various messages distributed in other types of media, in the film industry, the message was clearly to reinforce a strong sense of national identity. In order to produce films to carry this message during a time of national shortages the government became directly involved in the film industry.

The ten major film companies then operating (Nikkatsu, Shochiku, Toho, Shinko, Daito, Tokyo Hassei, Nan-o, Takarazuka, Otaguro, and Koa) were told that they had to form themselves into two companies, and that each company was to make two films a month. Raw stock would not be made available unless the studios made the kind of pictures the state required. (Richie, pg.97)

As the movie companies were restructured to produce films more efficiently for the war effort, the movie industry focused not on dehumanizing the enemy as seen in so many American wartime films, but instead focused on reinforcing a sense of national identity.

The 47 Ronin directed by Kenji Mizuguchi was not a film with a story based on the war, but a film about the Chushingura incident during the Edo Period. The government asked Mizuguchi to make a film for the war effort and he decided on this story which is very well known. In his version, however, some of the most famous scenes occur off camera. The film is supposed to reinforce the concept of bushido and rally the nation, but even in the end of the film when the 47 samurai commit suicide the audience is not allowed to see this. The only suicide shown is by a female character.

Akira Kurosawa's *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* produced in 1945 is another wartime film based on a very well known story from Japanese history. It is the story of Yoshitsune and his small band of followers including the warrior-monk Benkei as they escape from Yoshitsune's brother who has ordered Yoshitsune killed after the end of the Gempei War. The story has been told as a kabuki play and as a Noh drama even earlier. When the film was complete the wartime censors banned the film stating that the characters were too individualistic. This was a trait of the West and opposed to the national identity the government wanted to portray. After the war the U.S. occupation censors reviewed the film and decided it looked to favorably on Japan's militaristic past and banned the film. The film was not released until after the occupation ended.

Another film by Akira Kurosawa *The Most Beautiful* (1944) is set in an optical factory during the war. There is no image of the enemy, but the war is ever present. A group of girls work and live at the factory producing optical lenses for the army. The story shows the girls struggling and working hard together as their quotas are increased.

Good production is dependent on good character, and the film demonstrates in anecdotal fashion what this good fashion is. The women fall ill, sustain physical injury, and even lose family members, but never waiver in their commitment to the factory and their quotas. (Prince, pg. 55)

There is no sign of the evil nature of the enemy or discussion of why Japan is on the side of good. The film shows the sacrifices of these individuals for the good of the nation. There is no equivalent film produced by the United States which stresses solely

identity during the war.

In 1940 the movie *Shina no Yoru* was released. It starred Yamaguchi Yoshiko who was also known by her Chinese name Li Hsiang-lan, the Chinese pronunciation of her Japanese name Ri Ko-ran, and by Shirley Yamaguchi during the occupation. It was the story of a young Japanese merchant sailor who was working in Shanghai during the war. He meets a young Chinese girl played by Yamaguchi and they fall in love. The most interesting aspect of this film is that it was filmed with three different endings. Each ending was made with a specific audience in mind. In one ending the hero is killed by Chinese bandits after the couple gets married. Upset by the loss of her new husband, the young wife kills herself. This ending was shown to audiences in the Japanese home islands. In the second ending the final scene is the wedding ceremony of the young couple. This ending was intended for Chinese audiences in Japanese occupied china. In the third ending the young wife is about to kill herself because she believes her husband died, but he returns wounded just in time to stop her from killing herself. This third ending was intended for other Japanese occupied areas outside of china.

In the film *Chocolate and Soldiers* produced in 1938, a young boy receives letters from his father who is fighting in China. The father collects chocolate wrappers from his friends in the army and sends them back to his son. Eventually the boy's father is killed in action. The chocolate company receives a letter describing the situation and it provides a scholarship for the boy so he is able to attend school. At the funeral for his father, the boy is told his father was a brave man and the boy replies "Yes, but I can't go fishing with him anymore." (Dower, pg.37-38) The national identity is clearly being expressed. Things are difficult, but all must pull together. There is no equivalent in American war films.

American War Films

The opening of the conflict with the attack on Pearl Harbor set the stage for the description of the Japanese people as deceptive, uncivilized, and fanatic in various forms of media. This was not lost on the film industry. "It was a rare film that did not employ such terms as Japs, beasts, yellow monkeys, nips, or slant-eyed rats." (Koppes, pg.254) Not just the use of racial terms, but a focus on depictions of the enemy were part of 107 movies released from 1942-1944, accounting for almost 30% of Hollywood film production. (Jones pg4) In contrast to other types of propaganda during the war, American war films focused almost exclusively on demonizing the

enemy. The enemy is not only on the battlefield, but also in the local neighborhood. Despite statements by the Department of Justice in the fall and winter of 1942-1943 indicated that in the United States no major acts of sabotage or espionage had been uncovered that were definitely traceable to enemy sources. (Jones pg5) both movies and serials used this as a continuous theme. In one serial entitled *G-Men vs. The Black Dragon*, a group of Japanese spies try to blow up the Boulder Dam.

Bataan made in April, 1943 starring Robert Taylor was the story of a mixed group of soldiers defending against the attacking Japanese army in the Philippines. Facing overwhelming odds these soldiers fought to the very last man. There are two interesting points to note about this film. First there was an emphasis on the mixed nature of the soldiers fighting together. Rich, poor, white, black, Latino, and Filipino are all shown fighting side by side against a common enemy. Second, this film shows the main characteristic of American film war heroes. They kill lots and lots of the enemy. Not breaking from the trend of World War Two films, *Bataan* details the brutality and inhumanity of the enemy. Japanese planes are seen attacking an ambulance and women and children are killed.

In 1945, Errol Flynn starred in the movie *Objective Burma*. U.S. troops in Burma on a mission to destroy a radar installation. The troops destroy the radar station, but are unable to get to an airfield for their withdrawal. They are forced to march out of the jungle. Splitting into two forces the film follows the group led by Flynn. While fighting the Japanese constantly during their retreat, the group enters a village and finds the second group. The members have all been killed and their bodies mutilated. A news correspondent who was Flynn's group makes the following speech after the discovery:

I thought I'd seen or read about everything one man can do to another, from the torture chambers of the middle ages to the gang wars and lynchings of today. But this- this is different. This was done in cold blood by people who claim to be civilized. Civilized! They're degenerate, immoral idiots. Stinking little savages. Wipe them out, I say. Wipe them off the face of the earth. Wipe them off the face of the earth. (*Bataan*)

The speech was considered controversial by some people involved in the making of the film, however, the only controversy to surface after the release of the film was in Britain where some complained that

there were no American troops fighting in Burma. The extreme racial element of the film was not a problem.

In 1943 Universal Pictures produced the movie *Gung-Ho*. It is the story of a group of Marines from their training in San Diego to a mission to attack Minkin Island.

As in *Objective Burma*, this film has numerous racial comments. "The film is littered with references to 'Japs' and 'monkeys who live in trees'. Several wounded Japanese fake death to try and kill unsuspecting Americans." (Koppes, pg. 265)

American war films produced during the Second World War did not exclusively focus on the demonization of the enemy, but it was the primary focus. Some films showed the home front and others such as *Bataan* introduced cooperation between different racial groups and allies, however, this was clearly a secondary goal. It was even counter-productive in the case of *Objective Burma*, where the film caused some controversy between the United States and its ally Britain. This still leaves us with the question of why the focus on dehumanizing the enemy in American films.

Conclusion

Propaganda activities reached new heights during the Second World War as countries across the globe mobilized all their resources for total war. Propaganda was one resource mobilized and it was applied to a variety of media to spread its message. Generally propaganda could be divided into three categories. The first describes a national rally cry for the war stating why the country had no other option but to go to war. The second explains why god is on our side. The third category tells us why the enemy is bad so it is okay to kill them. Most propaganda during the war fell into these three categories and within each media, such as posters or radio broadcasts, elements of all three categories can be found, except for one media. Film, both American and Japanese really focused on one element. For the Japanese this was the reinforcement of a national identity. Very little attention is paid to the evil enemy. American films stand in stark contrast as they focus heavily on describing the enemy as less than human. The enemy is otherized into a less than human form of evil. Why the focus and why the difference?

The answer lies in the nature of film. A movie requires more time, resources, and investment than a poster or even a song. It is affordable to produce a poster on a subject that is part of a country's

propaganda agenda, but not its central goal. This is not the case with film. For Japan the war involved protection of acquired natural resources and the cooperation of local populations to help exploit these resources. The war was also more defensive in nature after the initial six months. Reinforcing the national identity which Japan saw as its greatest strength and then exporting that identity to newly acquired populations within the empire was critical. Making a maximum effort to define the enemy as less than human would be counter-productive to the best possible solution to the war with the United States and Britain – a negotiated settlement.

For the United States, a negotiated settlement was not the best outcome to the conflict and it envisioned a long war of attack followed by attack across the expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Providing the U.S. population with an image of an American national identity asking for acceptance of hardship would not encourage young men to storm islands in the Pacific. Combining the circumstances of the outbreak of the war at Pearl Harbor with national war aims clearly showed the best policy would be to dehumanize the enemy.

For the Japanese wartime cinema it was best to show why we are good and for the American film industry it was best to tell why they are bad.

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