

Historical Thinking Mentorship Project:
Teaching Historical Perspective

Natalie Chiu, Alex Nguyen, Hayden Sawyer
CURR 336: History Teaching, Theory and Practice
Professor Dr. Theodore Christou
April 24, 2026

1. Explanation of the Concept

Historical perspective is the skill of seeing the past through the eyes of those who lived in it, instead of our own. At first, it may seem easy to judge people of the past based on what we know today. We may look at an old belief or decision and think, “That was obviously wrong” or “What were they thinking back then?”. This is called “presentism”, and it should be avoided when trying to make sense of the past. For historians, the task is to understand why people of the past made the decisions and held the beliefs they did. To do this, we must put ourselves in the shoes of those who lived in the period we are investigating. People in the past made decisions and held beliefs that you or I today may find backwards, wrong, or maybe even a little out there, but this is because we live in a different world than they did, with different knowledges, values, pressures, and choices. What may seem obvious to us could have been impossible to know for people of the past. We don’t have to agree with or excuse people of the past and their choices, but good historians try to understand *why* people of the past thought what they did, believed, or said was right. By putting ourselves in the minds of the past, we can more accurately and fairly understand the choices these people made. By using the skill of Historical Perspective, we can transform history from dates and facts to an investigation into the minds of people of the past, their thinking, decision-making, and lived experience.

Here’s an example of using historical perspective:

A long time ago, people didn't know about germs. Some believed you got sick from bad air, smells, or even curses.

Today, this may sound silly, but using historical perspective, we must understand they didn’t have microscopes or modern science and had not discovered germs yet. So instead of saying “That’s ridiculous”, you could use historical perspective and say something like “Based on what they knew at the time, it’s understandable they thought and did what they did”. There are many other examples in history that seem bizarre to us today, but we must remember to use historical perspective to understand *why* people of the past made the choices they made.

2. Curricular Alignment

This resource aligns with overall expectation C1 of CHC2D: describe some key social, economic, and political events, trends, and developments between 1929 and 1945, and assess their impact on different groups and communities in Canada, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities.

The propaganda posters in this resource can be a powerful tool to analyze the social, economic, and political impacts of the Second World War. The different perspectives of each of the countries are reflected within their respective propaganda posters, giving a unique insight into their motivations, values, and beliefs. Many of the posters also provide clues about how different countries viewed each other during the conflict. Additionally, the two Canadian posters show clear examples of how different groups in Canada were impacted, namely women and French Canadians.

3. Primary Source and Worked Examples -

The primary sources within this resource are a collection of propaganda posters from WWII. Two to three posters from each of the following nations are included: Canada, Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union.

Poster C1 is in English and depicts a woman working in a factory making bombs

Poster C2 is in French and depicts a sword smashing a swastika

Poster G1 is in French and depicts German/Vichy French factory workers

Poster G2 is in German and depicts a Hitler Youth boy holding a drum

Poster J1 depicts a samurai destroying American and British ships

Poster J2 is in Japanese and depicts a charging Japanese soldier

Poster J3 depicts a devoted mother of a fictional Japanese soldier

Poster S1 is in Russian and depicts a bayonet stabbing a lion with a swastika on its chest

Poster S2 is in Russian and depicts a soviet soldier pointing a gun at a wolf with a swastika on its neck wearing the skin of a sheep

Guided Explanation -

that shows how the historical thinking concept can be used to work with this source. This may take the form of a short walkthrough, guiding questions, or a structured explanation that demonstrates reasoning. Your aim is to model how historians approach interpretation.

General Guiding Questions

- What do you see?
- What group is being portrayed? How are they being portrayed? What elements of the poster achieve this?
- What emotions does this poster make you feel? What elements of the poster achieve this?
- What message is the poster trying to convey?

- Who is the intended audience? What action is the audience being encouraged to take?
- What values, beliefs, or ideas about society (e.g., duty, unity, sacrifice, leadership) does the poster seem to promote? Why might people back then have seen these as necessary or right?
- How does the poster reflect the kind of society or government this country had during the war (e.g., democratic choice vs. strong central control)?
- How is the way this poster tries to motivate people similar to or different from posters from other countries?
- How did democratic and authoritarian countries utilize poster propaganda? Is it the same or different, and how so?
- How was propaganda used back then, and is propaganda used today? Provide some examples? Is the propaganda similar or different than it was back then?

Poster-Specific Questions

- C1 How did might a large-scale war like WW2 affect women on the home front?
- C2 How did French Canadians view WW2 differently than English-speaking Canadians? Does the poster reflect this difference?
- G1 What does this poster reveal about Nazi Germany's ideology? How might this ideology have motivated its actions during WW2?
- G2 In a speech in 1935, Hitler said, "He alone who owns the youth the Youth gains the future!" What does this quote mean? How is this book cover related to this quote?
 - <https://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/documents/1168-extract-from-a-speech?mode=text&q=ps+2656+type>
- J1 Why might an Italian artist create pro-Japanese propaganda? What does this tell us about the relationship between these two countries?
- J2 Propaganda can take on many forms, not just posters or broadcasts. What advantages could there be to using a manga (comic book) as propaganda?
- J3 Why might it be powerful to include aspects of a country's culture or past in propaganda posters?
- S1 Why do you think Nazi Germany is depicted as an animal rather than a human? How could this effect how Russians treated Germans?
- S2 How could this poster affect how Russians treated their friends, acquaintances, and strangers?

Teacher Note- Potential Instructional Use:

Teachers may group students into four groups, with each group receiving the respective propaganda posters of one of the following countries: Canada, Germany, Japan, or the Soviet Union during the WWII. Students will be prompted to examine the poster and try to identify as

much information about the poster as possible. The class will progress as each group is provided more context regarding the posters. Students will be encouraged to examine the text with the guidance of the guided contextual explanation and accompanied guiding questions. The end of the activity will call for students to compare and contrast their group findings with the rest of the class in a collaborative discussion.

This activity encourages students to identify and critically engage with primary sources that reflect a range of political aims. Students will visually analyze these sources and use context clues to interpret meaning and intentionality across different visual mediums. Depending on the primary source, student responses may focus on decoding symbolic significance or artistic choices. Students may also draw conclusions from contextual details to examine the intentions and perspectives of the historical figures who engaged with the material, as well as the government bodies responsible for creating the images.

4. Visual or Interactive Component

Name: _____

Date: _____

Historical Perspective Visual Worksheet

Step 1: Your First Reaction (Present Thinking)



Examine this image. What is your first reaction when looking at this propaganda poster? What do you notice in the image? (characters, symbols, expressions). What message do you think the poster is trying to send? How does the image try to make people feel? (fear, suspicion, patriotism)

Step 2: Investigating the Past (Research):

Now, your job is to find out what people knew and didn't know then.

Questions to guide your research:

- Who might the “enemy” represent in this image?
- Why might the enemy be shown as an animal or disguised?
- What do you think the colors of the animals mean?
- What does the caption say? What does the caption imply?

What people <i>*knew*</i> at the time	What people did <i>*not*</i> know at the time

--	--

Step 3: Thinking Like a Historian:

Now that you understand the historical context, revise your first reaction to one which uses historical perspective.



What is your revised reaction to this belief? Do you think this belief makes sense? Why/why not? Use evidence from your research, and explain the historical perspective based on their knowledge and situation. How might someone living in the Soviet Union during WWII interpret this poster differently than you do today?

Step 4: Bringing it all together. Finish this sentence:

At first, I thought _____

Now I think _____

I now think this because _____

Step 5: Reflection:

In 2-3 sentences, reflect on why you think it is important to understand decisions and beliefs of the past through the historical prospective of those who lived it.

5. Scholarly Rationale -

Peter Seixas argues that it is "impossible to construct meaning from a story of the past without making moral judgements" (Seixas 1993). The specific primary sources were chosen to support a multidimensional and nuanced examination of history, enabling students to draw moral judgements while considering the historical context and potential motivations behind the decisions of each historical actor. The scaffolded guiding questions were designed to encourage students to critically examine how propaganda appealed to the emotions of its viewers, evoking feelings of fear, pride, and national loyalty as intended by its creators. By providing historical context for each poster and exploring the political ideologies behind the propaganda, the lesson aims to immerse students in an understanding of the calculated tactics used to encourage participation in the war effort, thereby building historical empathy for the motivations of those involved. Embedding the analysis of propaganda posters within a unit that more broadly examines the violence and atrocities of WWII allows students to construct meaning from the history they study through moral judgement, supported by a variety of historical perspectives from both sides of the war.

Various scholars and existing educational guidelines have emphasized the importance of collaborative deliberation and group discussion for student learning and growth. Keith C. Barton and Li-Ching Ho emphasize collaborative deliberation as a means to dispel the assumption that "deliberation inevitably involves competition between opposing ideas" (Barton and Ho 2023). The lesson was designed to facilitate deliberation on a variety of primary sources, encouraging

students to present and engage with historical perspectives from multiple sides of the war. This approach allows students to collectively participate in meaningful discussion while reducing the risk of polarizing the class through the unproductive, dead-end discussions that Barton and Ho caution against.

POSTERS



Library and Archives Canada / Bibliothèque et Archives Canada
www.collectionscanada.gc.ca

C1

Origin: Canada

Source: <https://thediscoverblog.com/2015/07/30/propaganda-second-world-war-approach/>

Victory Bonds were created by the Canadian government with the purpose of raising funds to pay for the war; the targeted buyers of the bonds were Canadian citizens, private corporations and various other organizations. The appeal of the Victory Bond was the promise of a return in investment, where purchased bonds could be exchanged for money with interest after 5, 10, or 20 years (Archives of Ontario). Posters such as the current image was often printed in on a mass scale using inexpensive and poor-quality paper.



C2

Origin: Canada

Language of original text: French

Source: <https://www.alamy.com/canadian-french-wwii-vintage-propaganda-poster-smash-the-swastika-1941-through-1942-anonymous-image186061416.html>

Text: “Because your arm knows how to carry the sword”

During WWII, French-Canadians were among the populations least motivated to participate in the war. Unlike many English-speaking Canadians who held loyalist sentiments toward the British Empire, French-speaking Canadians did not share the same sense of loyalty toward either France or the UK. When Nazi Germany defeated France and established Vichy France (1940–

1944), a puppet state governing the southern territories of the country, many French-Canadians felt no emotional connection to the new regime. Adding to this disengagement, French-Canadians feared and strongly opposed conscription, largely due to the memory of the 1917 Conscription Crisis during WWI. At that time, the Canadian government passed the contentious Military Service Act, which was broadly supported by English-Canadians but met with fierce opposition from French-Canadians.

GERMANY



G1

Origin: Germany

Source: <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/HTML-Articles/AP-World-History/Unit7/Source-Collection-World-War-II>

Language of original text: French

Text: “They give blood, give your work to save Europe from Bolshevism”

This German and Vichy France's propaganda poster encouraging the population to participate in the STO (Compulsory Work Service), 1942, Private collection"

<https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/HTML-Articles/AP-World-History/Unit7/Source-Collection-World-War-II>



G2

Origin: Germany

Source: <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/hans-scholl/>

Language of original text: German

This image is the cover of a book titled Klaus-der Hitlerjunge, "Klaus-the Hitler Youth," an illustrated children's book with a preface by Heinrich Himmler, published in Berlin in 1933.

Heinrich Himmler was a member of the Nazi Party, who later became the assistant chief of the Gestapo (Secret State Police). He held significant power and authority over the police force in Nazi Germany.



J1

Origin: Italy

Title: Unknown

Source: <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/HTML-Articles/AP-World-History/Unit7/Source-Collection-World-War-II>

Although illustrated by an Italian artist, this poster is explicitly pro-Japanese and appears to be depicting the Pacific Theater of the war, so it has been included as a Japanese poster in this resource.

Traditional Japanese values, particularly Bushido — known as 'the way of the warrior' — were occasionally referenced in propaganda promoted by the Japanese government. Bushido first emerged in prominence during feudal Japan during the period of 1185 to 1868. The unwritten codex of proper samurai conduct stressed several key principles: loyalty, honour, and mastery of the martial arts. Most significantly, it emphasized fearlessness in the face of death and dying with valor.

The flag directly center behind the samurai figure is the Rising Sun flag, in which the design was adopted by the Japanese imperial Army in 1870 and used until 1945. The flag on the right is Italy's National Fascist Party Flag, adopted during Benito Mussolini's leadership as the prime minister of fascist Italy until 1943. The flag on the left is the Reich and National Flag, commonly known as the Swastika Flag, and was the flag used to represent Nazi Germany under Hitler's fascist leadership.



J2

Origin: Japan

Language of Original text: Japanese

Title: “We Will Never Stop Attacking”

Creator: Miyamoto Saburo

Date of creation: 1942

Source: <https://brian.carnell.com/articles/2021/japanese-propaganda-painting-we-will-never-stop-attacking-by-saburo-miyamoto/>

The text on the right says “撃ちてし止まむ” “I will stop by utterly destroying it.”

The text on the top left says “第三十八回,陸軍記念日”, “Chapter 38, Army Day.”

The text on the bottom right says “省軍陸” “Provincial Army”

Miyamoto Saburo was a Japanese artist who became one of the most prolific wartime painters in Japan, known for creating many notable propaganda pieces. Miyamoto spent a duration of his time in northern China under the Japanese government’s instruction and commissioned to create a ‘campaign record, later titled ‘Attack on Nanyuan, Beijing’. During the war, numerous art exhibitions were held, such as the “Second Holy War Art Exhibition in 1941” and the “First Greater East Asian War Art Exhibition in 1942” (Ikeda, 2009). This specific image is the cover of a manga (Japanese comic book).



J3

New artistic trends emerged, particularly in the various forms of propaganda in Japan, much of which were directly commissioned by the then Japanese government. One such form of propaganda came in the form of adopting existing modes of art into the wartime context. *Kamishibai* (紙芝居), or "paper play" was an inexpensive and accessible play performed with narration accompanied with visual prompts on the streets. This medium was popularized in the 1930s, particularly enjoyed among young children.

Title: *Mother of a War God* (軍神の母)

Date of creation: June 10 1942

Nonoguchi Shigeru (artist), Suzuki Noriko (author)

Source: <https://fanningtheflames.hoover.org/kamishibai-collection>

The story is as follows: "Saku worked tirelessly to send her son, Sadamu, to school. Instead of returning to help his parents after graduation, he joined the Japanese Naval Academy. Despite the hardship, his mother continued to support him and his decision. Sadamu became one of the nine hero officers of the tokkotai (special forces unit) in the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, to have perished "like gods". Yet Sadamu's mother continues to work hard and is an example of the Japanese mothers who bore one of the nine war gods. The play ends with a patriotic proclamation that now is the time for the youths of Greater Japan to unite and show their love for the nation by fighting for it." (Hoover Institution)

S1



Origin: Soviet Union

Text: "Fight German animals! We can and must destroy Hitler's army"

Source: <https://www.allworldwars.com/Russian%20WWII%20Propaganda%20Posters.html>

The five -point star was a popular symbol used in the

The hammer and sickle were another key symbolic emblem of the Soviet Union, representing the working class and peasantry. This symbol later became the defining emblem of the USSR, appearing on the official flag of the Soviet Union.



S2

Origin: Soviet Union

Text: "Enemy is inventive, so you are to be vigilant."

Source: <https://www.allworldwars.com/Russian%20WWII%20Propaganda%20Posters.html>

Framing/Guiding Questions:

- What do you see in these posters? What do you notice? What stands out to you?
- What action or feeling is represented in this poster?
- Who is featured in the poster (men, women, youth, etc.,)?
- What emotion does this poster make you feel?
- What is the poster asking the viewer to do (is there a call to action)?
- What values, beliefs, or ideas about society (e.g., duty, unity, sacrifice, leadership) does the poster seem to promote? Why might people back then have seen these as necessary or right?
- How does the poster reflect the kind of society or government this country had during the war (e.g., democratic choice vs. strong central control)?
- How is the way this poster tries to motivate people similar to or different from posters from other countries?
- How did democratic and authoritarian countries utilize poster propaganda? Is it the same or different, and how so?
- How was propaganda used back then, and is propaganda used today? Provide some examples? Is the propaganda similar or different than it was back then?

Works Cited

- Barton, K. C., & Ho, L.-C. (2023). COLLABORATIVE DELIBERATION IN THE CLASSROOM IN CLASSROOM. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 104(5), 44–49. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27243090>
- Ikeda, Asato (2009) “Japan’s Haunting War Art: Contested War Memories and Art Museums,” *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 18, Article 2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.18.02> Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol18/iss1/2>
- Seixas, P. (1993). Historical Understanding among Adolescents in a Multicultural Setting. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 23(3), 301–327. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1179994>