PROPAGANDA
THE GOLDEN YEARS

Once a powerful vehicle for changing the world, propaganda posters have taken on new meaning for the mass media generation. And as Chris Wright explains, the best of their kind provide a powerful look back at the life and death issues of a war-torn age

"Art," wrote the Russian artist and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, "is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it." He should know. In revolutionary Russia, Mayakovsky was one of the most powerful exponents of propaganda art.

What is propaganda art, really? The author Colin Moore, in his book *Propaganda Prints,* calls it "art in the service of social and political change" — and if that seems like a broad definition, it's because propaganda is universal, covering the world, the ages, and a host of different evil and noble intents.

Chairman Mao's face beneath a red-starred cap. Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin holding a hammer and sickle aloft while satellites soar into space behind him, with the words: "Glory to the Soviet people — the pioneer of space!" A feisty American production worker with a red, white-spotted handkerchief knotted in her hair, her bicep curled, saying "We can do it!" Posters from Cuba, from Mexico, from Vietnam; from World War I, World War II, the Cold War. Hitler in a suit of armour, holding a flag with a swastika on it. Obama in stylised red, white and blue stencil above the single word, "Hope". Posters warning you that "Careless talk costs lives", imploring you to grow vegetables, to buy war bonds, to avenge the sinking of the *Lusitania,* to send your husband to war, to "Fight for the dear old flag," to "Keep calm and carry on." All of this is propaganda.

We often think of propaganda as a negative word, but it really refers to any effort to persuade, by the use of art and other media. "When most people talk about propaganda, what they have in their head is Nazis and totalitarianism. It's what the bad people do, and it's all lies," says Ian Cooke, a curator at the British Library, which launched an exhibition called *Propaganda: Power and Persuasion* in London in May. "But when you start looking at people who saw themselves as propagandists, it gets blurred. Public health propaganda, for example, saves lives. Even in wartime, you can argue that it saves lives, if your aim is to get people to surrender rather than to keep fighting."

Yet one can see why it has such a bad press. Perhaps the most successful uses of propaganda have been for some of the worst causes: the Third Reich in Germany, the Cultural Revolution in China, Stalin's purges in Russia. The nastiest people have been among the fastest to recognise the power of persuasion. As Joseph Goebbels, propaganda minister for Hitler, noted, "It would not be impossible to prove with sufficient repetition and psychological understanding of the people concerned, that a square is in fact a circle. What after all are a square and a circle? They are mere words, and words can be moulded until they clothe ideas in disguise."

EARLY PUBLIC MESSENGERS

Propaganda is pretty much as old as communication. Moore cites examples as

LEFT: WORLD WAR II POSTER OF A SHIP SINKING INTO THE OCEAN, AND A HAND REACHING FROM BENEATH THE WAVES. THIS WAS PART OF A SERIES THAT WARNED AMERICAN CITIZENS ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF REVEALING SENSITIVE INFORMATION
RIGHT: REVOLUTIONARY POSTER FEATURING A RUSSIAN SAILOR, PRODUCED AROUND 1919
OPPOSITE: A DIGITALLY RESTORED WORLD WAR II POSTER FROM THE UNITED STATES. BESIDES THE WORDING (A BOLD "NEVER!"), THE POSTER'S IMAGERY — THE STATUE OF LIBERTY WITH HER TORCH EXTINGUISHED AND HER HANDS CHAINED — REALLY SPEAK TO THE VIEWER

IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES

LEFT: JAPANESE POSTER SELLING WAR BONDS DURING WORLD WAR II

ABOVE: PRINTED IN 1971, THE MANDARIN TEXT SAYS, "DEFEND YOURSELVES AGAINST ATOMIC, CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL WARFARE." AS EXPECTED OF A POSTER PRODUCED DURING MAO'S REIGN, MEMBERS OF THE RED ARMY ARE LED BY A SOLDIER CARRYING THE LITTLE RED BOOK
RIGHT: ELECTION CAMPAIGN POSTER IN ITALY FEATURING ANTI-COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA
BELOW: PICTURING A SHIP WITH SMOKE POURING FROM ITS STACK AND A JAPANESE SUBMARINE LOOKING VERY SHARK-LIKE, THIS POSTER WAS CREATED AROUND THE EARLY 1940s, UNDER THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION AND THE FEDERAL ART PROJECT

far back as the first settled communities of the ancient world in Mesopotamia in 3,000 BC. There are many examples through the ages, from the Greeks and Romans to the Reformation and the Catholic Church, and certainly the Napoleonic era. Cooke says one of his favourite pieces in the forthcoming exhibition is a two-metre-high portrait of Napoleon in imperial robes. "To express authority at a time of radical change, you make a tall picture of yourself, staring down on the people. It's an early example of ticking a lot of the boxes of modern propaganda." Moore writes, "Throughout history, people have used art to influence the beliefs and behaviour of others. From the earliest time the leaders among us have known that a good picture, song, sculpture or building can get our attention and maybe change our minds."

But what you might call the golden age of propaganda occurred from World War I, which began in 1914, to the early days of the Cold War in the 1950s and '60s, and China's Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Before this period, mass communication was difficult, and largely unnecessary. Afterwards, while propaganda was very much still intact (and still is), it was communicated less by art, and more by TV. In that period, which spans two world wars and numerous revolutions and conflicts, the power of the poster image was often about life or death. And in a less cynical age, before we all learned to distrust what we see and hear, propagandists could say pretty much anything — and they did.

Many see World War I as the birthplace of modern propaganda, because it was the first major conflict to happen since the vast improvements in communication of the previous 30 years, from the printing press to the telegraph and wireless. Certainly, this would be the first time propaganda would really matter — and the side that won would be the one that realised this fastest.

In England, a new bureau was set up in London's Wellington House, specifically to cajole America into joining the war. Politician and journalist Charles Masterman ran it, and it produced pamphlets, posters and articles for distribution in the United States at a breakneck pace from 1914, until America finally joined the war in 1917.

At the same time, America was at it too. Dr Noam Chomsky, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States, who is better known to most of the world as a seething political critic, reckons the first modern government propaganda operation in America came when Woodrow Wilson was elected president of the United States in 1916 on a platform of "Peace Without Victory". That is, not entering World War I, when in fact Wilson actually did want to engage in the war. Wilson had established a government propaganda body called the Creel Commission, "which succeeded, within

IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES; CORBIS (RED ARMY POSTER)

six months, in turning a pacifist population into a hysterical, war-mongering population which wanted to destroy everything German, tear the Germans limb from limb, go to war and save the world," Chomsky writes. Creel himself would later call his work "the world's greatest adventure in advertising."

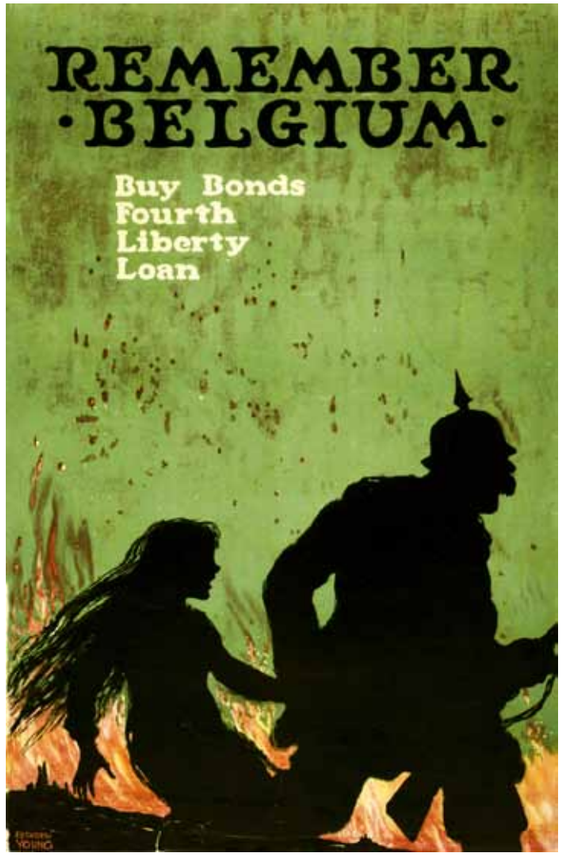
KEY PURSUASIVE ELEMENTS

A few standards for modern propaganda were already clear by World War I. One was simplicity of message, the more emotional the better. And for this, Germany's invasion of Belgium — or Brave Little Belgium, as it would be depicted throughout the war — was ideal. This is where the idea of Germany as The Hun took form: "the cruel and bloodthirsty creature the elimination of whom was the clear duty of the civilised world," as Moore puts it.

One of the most striking propaganda images of the time was the "Remember Belgium" poster by Ellsworth Young (*pictured page 88*), used to promote the fourth batch of war bonds in the United States in 1918. Against a backdrop of flame and a grim green sky, it shows in silhouette a helmeted German soldier abducting a frightened young girl.

Images like this were vital in turning American public opinion so that they joined the war. They were part of a horrific story told by the Allies, of Belgian children being abused and murdered, with their hands chopped off and nailed to walls as trophies. "Whether or not such stories were true, was of no consequence in any case," writes Moore. "The result, the political objective of the exercise, was to propel a peace-loving and self-absorbed nation into war. No amount of talk about 'national interest' could have achieved this. It took a direct and systematic appeal to people's sense of moral outrage to move them."

This simplicity of message was also used in British posters of the time to galvanise



LEFT: THIS "REMEMBER BELGIUM" POSTER IS ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS FROM WORLD WAR I
ABOVE: FASCIST PROPAGANDA POSTER DURING AUTARKY. THE TEXT, "*ACQUISTATE PRODOTTI ITALIANI*", TRANSLATES TO "BUY ITALIAN PRODUCTS"

ABOVE, TOP LEFT: THIS AMERICAN WARTIME POSTER IS ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN IMAGES IN THE WORLD TODAY, AND YOU MAY KNOW IT AS "ROSIE THE RIVETER". ALLUDING TO THE ICONIC IMAGE OF THE FEMALE PRODUCTION WORKER. IT WAS ORIGINALLY AIMED AT BOOSTING MORALE AMONGST FACTORY WORKERS
ABOVE, BOTTOM LEFT: A JAPANESE WORLD WAR II POSTER PUSHING THE SALES OF WAR BONDS. THE TEXT AT THE TOP MENTIONS SUPPLYING THE FRONT LINES WITH AMMO
ABOVE: CREATED DURING WORLD WAR II, THIS POSTER ENCOURAGES SKILLED LABOURERS TO JOIN THE US NAVY CONSTRUCTION BATTALION TO HELP WAR EFFORTS

ordinary people. The poster of Lord Kitchener, then the British Secretary of State for War, pointing directly at the viewer with the words "Your country needs you" (or numerous variations on the theme), remains iconic a century later and has been borrowed by other nations, notably the Uncle Sam figure in American ads.

There was also a widespread use of flags, a propaganda standard ever since, and the use of a sense of guilt, duty and family. One popular poster of the era shows children sitting with their well-dressed father asking, "Daddy, what did YOU do in the war?" Another shows plaintive women staring out of a window at marching soldiers: "Women of Britain say — Go!" A related, later version said, "To the women of Britain. Some of your men are holding back on your account. Won't you prove your love for your country by persuading them to go?"

These posters have a certain 'home front' quaintness that recalls the famous 1939 "Keep calm and carry on" wording now so popular on greeting cards, mugs and other paraphernalia — things which now sell through a mixture of self-mocking irony, and wistfulness for a more earnest age. But in their time, they were highly potent messages.

SIMPLE IS EFFECTIVE

Simplicity of message has never gone away in successful propaganda, hence the fact that Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign was predicated, more than anything else, on a single word, "Hope." Chomsky is a professor of linguistics as well as a historian and political critic, and he notes a certain practical emptiness in most propaganda, going back to the strike-breaking messages of the 1930s, which "worked very effectively [by mobilising] community opinion in favour of vapid, empty concepts like Americanism. Who can be against that? Or harmony. Who can be against that? Or, as in the Persian Gulf War, 'Support our troops.' Who can be against that? Or yellow ribbons. Who can be against that?" Basically, he asserts, any message that is totally vacuous.

"The point of public relations slogans like 'Support our troops' is that they don't mean anything," he writes. "Of course, there was an issue. The issue was, do you support our policy? But you don't want people to think about that issue. That's the whole point of good propaganda. You want to create a slogan that nobody's going to be against, and everybody's going to be for. Nobody knows what it means, because it doesn't mean anything. Its crucial value is that it diverts your attention from a question that *does* mean something."

Around the same time as World War I, another landmark in the field of propaganda was taking place with Lenin's return to Russia. The Russian revolution turned out to be custom-made for the propaganda poster.

"The widespread illiteracy of the working classes was a serious challenge to the propagandists," writes Moore. The answer was art, in particular agitprop satirical posters for the Russian State Telegraph Agency, ROSTA. He notes, "Between 1917 and 1923, art and politics coincided in an experimental programme to invent a universal visual language, a new language which owed nothing to the past, and which would serve the people in their struggle for self-determination."

The ROSTA posters were illustrations like comic strips, which could be made using stencils and put up in empty shop windows. And this was another key feature of propaganda — ease of spreading the word. The more people see your art and read your message, the further it spreads.

This would become clear, time and time again. Cooke estimates that a painting called *Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan,* depicting a young Mao striding among mountains to lead a miner's strike, is the most reproduced image in history, at an estimated 900 million copies. According to some accounts, the US Information Agency dropped nearly 50 billion leaflets on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia during its seven years of engagement there. And as Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf,* "Only constant repetition can finally bring success in the matter of instilling ideas into the memory of the crowd."

ART AS UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

Another important era for propaganda was the Great Depression in the 1930s, partly

IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES (ITALIAN, JAPANESE AND US NAVY POSTER)

IMAGES: CORBIS (THIS PAGE); GETTY IMAGES (RIGHT)

OPPOSITE: THIS 1929 POSTER SAYS, "FOR THE DEFENCE OF THE USSR", AND PICTURES FACTORIES, FIGHTER JETS AND SOLDIERS ON THE MARCH
THIS PAGE: CREATED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE US FEDERAL ART PROJECT IN 1941 FOR THE CLEVELAND DIVISION OF HEALTH, THIS POSTER ENCOURAGED VICTIMS TO REPORT DOG BITES TO THE PROPER AUTHORITIES

THE VALUE OF PROPAGANDA ART

Propaganda art has become very collectible. *DCM* asked Joe Taylor from Paul Fraser Collectibles about its appeal

What can you tell us about propaganda posters and ephemera as a collectible market? Posters as a whole are extremely collectible, with several leading auction houses dedicating entire sales to the genre. Propaganda posters normally form a considerable portion of these auctions and continue to see strong demand.

Within the world's thriving economies, we have certainly seen a sharp rise in interest. Countries such as Russia are now home to scores of high-net-worth individuals following the collapse of communism, and those with a newfound disposable income see their country's recent past as a source of inspiration when forming a collection.

This is also the case in China, the world's leading market for art and collectibles, where items relating the Cultural Revolution are some of the most popular and valuable.

Websites like Picollecta.com have also increased interest in collecting as a whole, providing a place for like-minded people to meet and share their collections online. Propaganda posters are a great visual form of collectible, and I would say that we can expect increased demand for the genre spurred by the internet.

What do you think is the appeal? Perhaps the biggest draw is that, particularly with posters, these materials provide a visual time capsule of an important moment in history — a record of the era in which they were created.

Some collectors will focus solely on propaganda items from events that have occurred within their own nation's or people's history, preserving these historically important records for generations to come. For example, we find Jewish people tend to be some of the most prominent Nazi memorabilia collectors, as they strive to ensure that the crimes against their people are never forgotten. This is also the case with Cuban memorabilia, where collectors from the United States are the biggest buyers, as they gather propaganda from both sides of an important conflict to give a wider angle to their collection.

Other collectors choose to buy propaganda items as a whole, looking at the history of the medium throughout different cultures and periods, or as part of a larger collection, be it historical, militaria or posters. Some simply value propaganda posters for the fantastic designs, which are often an incredibly powerful display of advertising art.

What are the most collectible and valuable parts of the genre? Which items have the greatest rarity value? German Nazis during World War II have become the archetype of an oppressive regime and therefore, propaganda materials issued by the state during this era [*such as the one pictured left, which reads "One battle, one victory"*] are some of the most valuable at auction. The swastika and other devices of the Nazi state are instantly recognisable, which has led to a wide collector base.

Due to the sizeable presence of Chinese collectors on the current market (64 percent of China's millionaires are presently forming a collection, according the 2012 Hurun Report), propaganda materials from the country's recent history are selling extremely well. It will be intriguing to see how this passion develops, should communism collapse in China.

There is always continued interest in US Army recruitment posters, like the famous Uncle Sam "I want you" examples that were created for the two world wars. Rare versions of these sell for up to US$10,000, depending on condition.

Could you give examples of prices that have been achieved?
Cuban revolution posters [*similar to that pictured right*] sold for £2,860 (US$4,257) at our sister company, PFC Auctions' recent sale [on February 28, 2013], a 257 percent increase on estimate.
Late-1960s Chinese communist poster entitled "Taking our root among the masses, never change our true colour" sold for £7,500 (US$12,139) last year.
Hans Sachs' poster collection sold in a major auction in January 2013, with a censored Vienna Secession poster by Gustav Klimt selling for US$18,000. The motto of the Secessionists was "To every age its art. To art its freedom."
Jersey Nazi stamps sold for £16,000 (US$25,781) in September 2012.
The Whole Country is Red stamp is one of the most expensive of all Chinese stamps. It was printed with an error in which Taiwan had not been painted red, and was hastily withdrawn. There are very few copies bearing the error known to have survived.

Where do you think the skill and artistry lies in this art form? All posters are created to advertise, and these posters display some of the most powerful advertising art known. Unlike many other forms of advertisement, propaganda does not tend to rely on subtlety, instead evoking

and preying on the strongest emotions in the human nature. Pride, hatred, fear, patriotism and unity, among others, are used to full effect in order to sway the thoughts of a nation.

However, I think it is the simplicity with which these emotions are delivered that's where the real skill lies. With posters, the message is often succinctly portrayed by little more than a silhouette and less than five words — many advertisers would pay a handsome sum to have such an effective design.

For example, Shepard Fairey's "Hope" poster of Barack Obama uses many of the traditional design techniques. Upon release, it "acquired the kind of instant recognition of Jim Fitzpatrick's Che Guevara poster", according to *The Guardian's* Laura Barton. Despite it not being an official campaign poster, the image is now synonymous with Obama's 2008 presidential campaign and is seen as the flag under which his supporters united. One of the "Change" variants sold for £2,500 (close to US$4,000) in mid-April, from a limited edition of 5,000.

IMAGE GETTY IMAGES (NAZI POSTER)

because of a programme called the Federal Art Project, designed to help thousands of struggling artists by commissioning various graphic arts from them. It set up a poster division in the 1930s to publicise social issues such as health and safety, and as a result, a huge new body of propaganda emerged with a different purpose — social good.

"The resulting output, some 35,000 designs in all, contributed significantly to the evolution of the graphic arts in America, joining the principles of modern art with American advertising know-how," writes Moore. A look at them now reveals a mix of the comic and the practical. Keep your teeth clean. Prevent syphilis in marriage. Smoking stacks attract attacks.

By now, another theme of propaganda was becoming clear. No matter how simple and noxious the message, propaganda art could be a vehicle for some truly exceptional ability and artistry. "I have found myself describing things as beautiful that are anything but," admits Cooke. "Often the state has used the leading artists of the time — Norman Rockwell, Dmitry Moor — who were innovative. There is a lot of artistic vision and innovation, and striking material."

Rockwell was a gifted American artist, Moor, a Russian. But examples are global: Cuba, for example, is considered one of the places where art and politics have met to the greatest and most vigorous outcome, through brilliant artists like Eduardo Muñoz Bachs.

Cuba is renowned for its art in any event — whatever else Fidel Castro's government may have done, it has always encouraged widespread participation in art.

"The result has been a distinctive Cuban art, free to engage in the contemporary developments of the Western artistic community to which it naturally belongs, but committed to the socialist project of the society which nurtures it," writes Moore. "From the early 1960s to the 1980s, various Cuban agencies produced thousands of posters which for their vitality, graphic quality and originality have earned an international reputation." In his book, Moore calls the archive of work from this era "an important artistic legacy, a high-water mark in the world history of propaganda art, and a permanent testament to the creativity of the Cuban people and their revolution."

It helped, perhaps, that they had such a visually iconic figure to portray, in Che Guevara — although the man would probably rail against his own portrayal today, on countless T-shirts and tattoos the world over.

A MOST POTENT MESSAGE

Probably the era when propaganda art was most potent, to both good and bad effect, was World War II. Hitler and his acolytes had been making extraordinarily successful use of propaganda for well over a decade before the war — pioneers of radio propaganda, they developed a mass-produced cheap radio called the Volksempfänger for exactly this reason. By the 1930s, they had turned to anti-Semitism. Posters from this era are among the most chilling and upsetting, especially since the Holocaust was around the corner.

The Eternal Jew, for example, was an exhibition that opened in Munich in November 1937, showing the supposed features and behaviour of Jews. The poster image showed a Jew in a kaftan, holding gold coins in one hand and a whip in the other, with a map of Germany under his arm imprinted with a communist hammer and sickle. In the space of a few months, 412,300 people attended the exhibition, which clearly helped to stereotype Jews, and promote anti-Semitism in Germany.

"A potent campaign of manipulation taught normal Germans not to see the neighbour who happened to be Jewish," Moore writes, "But to see the Jew, 'The Eternal Jew', the one with the big nose, sloping forehead and shifty foreign appearance, even when the individual bore no physical resemblance whatever to this grotesque invention." This was perhaps the most vicious use of stereotyping in propaganda, and it helped lay the groundwork for the unthinkable atrocities that followed.

Propaganda in World War II was as much about radio — and, increasingly, the cinema newsreel — as art. But the poster still played a powerful role. "So rich in colour and symbol was the Nazi visual identity that designers had no trouble in producing powerful graphic images, and free rein was given to the vilification of the enemies of the regime," writes Moore. The Nazis used propaganda against communists and opposition figures, as well as in the countries that they invaded.

At the same time, British propaganda was coming into its own again too, the nation cranking back up the apparatus that had been so successful in World War I. Recruitment was not a problem, with conscription in place, so the focus was around morale and public information, particularly as British citizens had to deal with widespread bombing for the first time. (Watch your talk for his sake: never mention arrivals, sailings, cargoes or destinations to anybody. Dig for plenty: grow food in your garden or get an allotment. Replace covers; prevent falls.)

In America, the focus was on production — of both munitions and food — as well as security and the sale of war bonds. At one point, the War Advertising Council was producing 1.5 million copies apiece of its posters to get the message across. There were differences in styles: British posters tended to be modernist, Americans, more like commercial advertising. While the British focused on Germans as the enemy, for the

Americans, the enemy was the Japanese, leading to a host of "yellow peril" images.

BEYOND POSTERS

The next chapter of this age in propaganda came with the Cold War, as nuclear weapons were developed, and built up into terrifying arsenals. "In order to justify the huge expense of maintaining these doomsday weapons, the people on both sides had to be convinced, and periodically reminded, of the wicked intentions of the other side," writes Moore. By now, TV, film and radio were the main organs for spreading propaganda rather than art. In particular, one could argue, the Cold War was fought through brands.

"It would be difficult to overstate the influence of Hollywood films, American popular music and American branded consumer goods such as Coca-Cola, Ford or Frigidaire," writes Moore. "In fact, in the long term, these may represent the most potent propaganda resources available to the United States throughout the entire Cold War period." He adds, "Of course, for those less well-disposed towards the West, the same brands stood for all that is undesirable in the capitalist system."

By now, propaganda was not just an American and European tool, either. It gained one of its most powerful forms of expression in China with the Cultural Revolution, launched by Mao Zedong in 1966. Here was propaganda as the cult of personality, and Mao used it to a degree seldom seen before.

As in the Russian revolution, it was all about simplicity of delivery. Big character slogans, or *dazibao*, were hand-made sheets of text that would appear on schools, factories and other public places, "a continuously updated record of the ebb and flow of the revolution's ideological tide," Moore describes in his book. The Red Guards would use portable printing presses — woodblocks in black and red — to print them on the spot. Mao's Little Red Book was in itself a great instrument of propaganda. "Visually, however, the dominant image of the Cultural Revolution was that of Mao himself," Moore writes. "Endlessly repeated, the figure of Mao was rendered in every possible medium and context, and subject to strict convention."

Mao controlled the press tightly, and used it whenever he needed it. Jung Chang, the author who lived through the Chinese revolution and recorded it in *Wild Swans* before writing a biography of Mao, recalls a headline from the *People's Daily:* "Rebuke the rubbish that 'peasants' lives are hard!'"

The artwork from that period is enormously striking. Consider the well-known image of a muscular man, painted red and holding a red book, punching chairman Liu Shoaqi and general secretary Deng Xiaoping, with a line of lively Chinese script beneath it. It is evocative on many levels: the precision, somewhat clunky in translation, of the slogan, "Thoroughly smash the Liu-Deng anti-revolutionary line". The blatant violence of the image itself, brazenly identifying the two men being punched. The sense that people are falling from greatness before your eyes, as indeed they were, in a purge of party officials (though Deng would in the end succeed Mao, unlike Liu, who died in prison). Once the revolution was over, the emphasis shifted to a sense of duty, whether in agriculture, education or the military.

Looking back at this assembled body of propaganda art, it is amazing just how closely a style can be identified with a moment or place. Stocky, muscular workers, striving and looking upwards, surrounded by blocky text? Lenin-era Russia. Stoic, rather patronising instruction, often with no image? That's the British home front, in either war. Strident, colourful, motion-filled cheerfulness, as if straight from an ad for soap? America, World War II. Bright reds and yellows with some military green, and a smiling man — always the same man — in a position of benevolent authority? Chinese Cultural Revolution. And a swastika? That needs no answer.

Preparing the British Library exhibition, Cooke found propaganda in numerous guises. There is the idea of creating a sense of citizenship, from wartime bravado to big sporting events. There is competition, like the Space Race. Cult of personality, from Mao to Hitler and Stalin. The demonisation of an enemy, be it a state, religion or movement. There is domestic instruction, from wartime behaviour to health and social education, as with the AIDS campaigns, or drink driving.

His exhibition also examines what is happening today. But haven't we become too cynical for this stuff to work? "Yes and no," Cooke says. "In some ways we've become a lot more desensitised and recognise things for what they are. Which is why you don't see so many posters up, except for in public health."

Yet the issue is not quite that simple. "What people don't necessarily notice is the issue of new media," he explains. "People aren't able to stop it when it's coming up on web pages, Twitter campaigns, and videos on YouTube. Al-Qaeda, as an organisation, would not have been able to function in the same way before the internet."

He is right, of course. What more effective propaganda is there than the suicide bombing martyr video? It's enough to make one wistful for the age of the propaganda poster — when at least the horrors of the message were leavened by the beauty of the art.

LEFT: POSSIBLY THE MOST FAMOUS PRE-WORLD WAR II COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA POSTER. IT WAS RELEASED IN 1931 AFTER THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF PLANS TO BUILD A FLEET OF ZEPPELINS
ABOVE: A POSTER ISSUED BY THE UNITED CHINA RELIEF, URGING AMERICANS TO MAKE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE NATIONAL WAR FUND IN SUPPORT OF CHINESE ALLIES IN NEED
RIGHT: A SOVIET POSTER SHOWING CUBAN REVOLUTIONARIES WITH MACHINE GUNS AND A PEASANT WOMAN IN FRONT OF THE CUBAN FLAG. THE TEXT READS, "THE PEOPLE OF CUBA HAVE NOT BROKEN!"

IMAGES: CORBIS (LEFT AND RIGHT) GETTY IMAGES (UNITED CHINA RELIEF POSTER)