

Art and Propaganda in Republican Spain – Lesson and Resource Pathfinder

This is a lesson for a 9th through 12th -grade World History, 20th Century History, or Civics class.

Overview - Methods and Strategies

This lesson requires three to five days with 50-minute blocks. This lesson utilizes ALBA's online lesson [Spanish Civil War Posters](#).

This lesson examines the role of art and propaganda in mobilizing resistance to Fascism before the fall of the Spanish Republic. Students will engage in visual and historical inquiries into the archival collections of wartime posters contained within ALBA and [The Visual Front](#) exhibit from University of California at San Diego.

By focusing upon these uses of poster art, students will be able to recognize the power visual imagery to convey complicated ideas of loyalty, responsibility and dedication to a cause. As a result, students can develop a deeper understanding of the urgency to communicate both the immediate needs to defend the Republic, and some of its wider political and social goals.

Learning Outcomes:

During this lesson, students will:

Examine the role of graphic arts in communicating fundamental principles of the Spanish Republic

Identify key components of posters used within the Spanish Republic

Reflect on the power of images in influencing public opinion and behavior in their own lives

Extend this lesson by comparing and contrasting these images with other examples of visual propaganda used during the Second World War

Resources

Digitized posters on ALBA's [site](#)

[The Visual Front](#), University of California, San Diego

[German Propaganda Archive](#), Calvin College

[World War II Poster Collection](#), Northwestern University

[La Guerra Ilustrada](#), Blog (in Spanish)

[International Institute of Social History](#) in the Netherlands, visual documents digital library

Activity Description

Robert Merriman, first commander of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, wrote in his diary upon arrival in Spain in early 1937:

*Barcelona beautiful.
Streets aflame with posters
of all parties for all causes...*

Introduce the lesson by asking students to describe or display an example of how a powerful visual image conveys a complicated message. Rather than refer to television or film, encourage students to examine **print media, book covers, CD covers, or posters**.

Following an initial discussion of the examples they have presented, introduce the idea that the visual arts play a crucial role in motivating civilian populations during times of war and crisis. It's essential to remind students that visual propaganda is a powerful tool and has played a fundamental role in creating and controlling popular opinions in both authoritarian and democratic societies.

Establish historical context for the use of posters in Republican Spain by having students review two key sites:

[Spanish Civil War Posters](#) lesson on ALBA's site

Advanced students can read the *Introduction to the Exhibit* of [The Visual Front](#)

Following this introduction, have students brainstorm about what functions posters have played during wartime in general, and in Republican Spain in particular. Ask students to list key messages posters would need to convey.

Introduce students to the following technique for interpreting posters:

Observe: Without assigning meaning, simply study the poster for several minutes, listing all images, text, dates, references to locations, etc.

Analyze: Using existing background knowledge about this period, discuss what might have been the goal of this poster. Develop and evaluate several alternative ideas about the poster.

Interpret: Combine your observations, analyses, and any additional information about this period into a succinct interpretation of the poster. Consider the intended audience and what impact this poster would have had upon people who saw it.

Divide students into pairs or small groups. Either at school or as homework, students will examine several online archives of posters from Republican Spain. Their primary task is to locate and interpret at least **three** examples of how posters communicated key information, principles, or ideas

Students can use the sites below to complete the assignment:

[Spanish Civil War Posters](#) lesson and other digitized posters on ALBA's [site](#)

Advanced students can read the *Introduction to the Exhibit* of [The Visual Front](#)

[La Guerra Ilustrada](#), Blog (in Spanish)

[International Institute of Social History](#) in the Netherlands, visual documents digital library

NOTE: [The Visual Front](#) site does include extensive interpretations of its collections. Advise students to click through the interpretive pages to the enlargements in order to complete their assignments.

Provide students with time to develop and present the results of their investigations. Before presentations, remind students of their initial efforts to interpret images they collected from their own lives, and ask them to reflect on the differences or similarities between these and the ones they've studied from the Spanish Civil War.

Following student presentations have students discuss in either small groups or as a whole class several concluding questions:

What were the main reoccurring themes depicted in the poster art of the Spanish Republic?

What impact do you think these posters had on the Spanish population? Why?

What distinguishes the images of the Spanish Republican posters from the kinds of images you see every day in your own lives? Why do you think these differences exist?

Considering the variety of images you've collected, interpreted and discussed in this lesson, why do you think governments, businesses, and organizations rely upon visual imagery to communicate fundamental ideas and values?

Suggestions for follow-up activities

For a more extended examination of wartime propaganda, students could compare and contrast the content and design of the Spanish Republican posters with visual imagery used in Nazi Germany during roughly the same period of time. Additionally, collections of American propaganda can be examined to compliment this activity.

For examples, see the following sites:

[German Propaganda Archive](#)

[World War II Poster Collection](#)

Suggestions for assessment of student learning

Provide individual students with reproductions of propaganda posters from the Spanish Civil War and, if necessary, other conflicts. Have students write an interpretive essay in which they identify the core message of the poster(s), the graphic devices used to communicate this message, and the likely impact it would have had upon the civilian and military population.

Pose an historical situation derived from classroom study of the Spanish Civil War and/or the Second World War, such as the need for civilians to conserve natural resource. Have students develop and design a propaganda poster, song, slogan etc which could be used to communicate this objective. Students could create their sample propaganda, and write an accompanying essay in which they demonstrate an understanding of the historical context, the function of wartime propaganda, and power of visual imagery