

# Imaging Axis Terror: War Propaganda and the 1943 “The Nature of the Enemy” Exhibition at Rockefeller Center

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## Abstract

In the summer of 1943, the Office of War Information (OWI) staged an exhibition titled “The Nature of the Enemy” at Rockefeller Center in New York City. It included huge photo-murals showing the destruction and displacement caused by the global conflict of World War II and six scenic installations depicting the cruel practices of the Axis powers. In this essay, I analyze the exhibition, which was designed by OWI Deputy Director Leo Rosten, as an instance of propaganda, relating it to a series of posters on the same topic produced at the OWI by the American artist Ben Shahn, but never shown to the public. Rosten's exhibition depicted the enemy's actions and alleged nature in a prestigious urban location and provocative style, combining elements of instruction with thrilling entertainment. I argue that it signified an important yet ambiguous and contradictory attempt to represent the horrors of war from a “comfortable distance.” While Shahn's poster series aimed for empathetic identification with the victims of terror, Rosten's exhibition promised the vicarious experience of cruelty through the juxtaposition of enemy statements and installations depicting scenes of violence.

## 1 Fighting the “Nazi Method”

In the early months of 1943, the domestic branch of the U.S.-American Office of War Information (OWI) worked on various projects to inform the public about the war. While the majority of these campaigns dealt with practical, war-related matters such as keeping military information secret, preserving food, recycling precious raw materials, and intensified efforts in war production, other campaigns addressed larger ideological issues. The U.S.-American efforts to create a coherent information and propaganda system during World War II was a convoluted process, both institutionally and conceptually (cf. Winkler). Established in June 1942 through the merger of existing agencies, the OWI's role was not clearly defined, as historian Sydney Weinberg notes, asking whether it was “supposed to serve as an ideological, news, propaganda, or advertising instrument?” (73). With its *blitzkrieg* tactics and global scale, the war had developed quickly, complicating the rapid and effective production of messages that expressed basic democratic convictions while also responding aggressively to the propaganda of fascist regimes. As A. H.

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Feller, the general counsel of the OWI, made clear in the spring of 1943, the democratic system based on a free press framed the discussion of the government's role in the United States as a choice between merely providing information and furnishing inspiration through propaganda. Feller concluded that in times of war both had to be combined: "The people want and should have news, information and inspiration" (57). Yet the production of campaigns at the OWI and the larger issue of defining a positive vision of democratic values and norms was a complex process. The agency advocated an informational strategy of truth and information, but critics inside and outside of the OWI saw an attempt to manipulate the public by way of advertising techniques (cf. Friedrich; Weinberg).

This was especially true for attempts to create propaganda about the enemy, which, as contemporary observers remarked in the early 1940s, was a major part of psychological warfare and served the purpose of creating "a concrete and realistic understanding of *who is the enemy* and *who are his allies*" (Friedrich 85; emphasis in original). While the three Axis leaders—Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Michinomiya Hirohito—were easy targets of visual propaganda, caricatured and ridiculed in cartoons such as *Der Fuehrer's Face* (1943) or publications such as *The New Masses*, the issue of how to deal with the horrors of war and their consequences for questions of human nature proved to be more challenging.<sup>2</sup> In the early months of 1943, the OWI worked on two related campaigns regarding this question, both called "The Nature of the Enemy." One consisted of a series of posters, produced by the American artist Ben Shahn at the graphics division; the other comprised an exhibition at Rockefeller Center in New York City, which was designed by Leo Rosten and included photographs as well as six installations. Spanning Rockefeller Plaza and The Channel Gardens connecting the Center with Fifth Avenue, Rosten's exhibition was a bold attempt to affect public opinion and created a vivid public response. Shahn's poster series, on the other hand, was not officially endorsed by the OWI or used for a public campaign and was eventually abandoned. However, both tried to address the same topic, the "nature" of an enemy whose war crimes had created a sense of horror for which new pictorial representations had to be found to inform and move the American public.<sup>3</sup> The main focus in this essay will be on Leo Rosten's exhibition, which has not received much academic attention, but the challenges Ben Shahn faced in the creation of his posters need to be highlighted to draw out the unique character of Rosten's show.<sup>4</sup> The desire to communicate the vicious nature of the enemy to a domestic U.S.-American audience not only meant choosing the right topics, but also raised questions regarding how to address the American public and the best combination of text, image, and three-dimensional displays.

In the early months of 1943, Ben Shahn created five posters for his series on the nature of the enemy featuring the topics of torture, murder,

<sup>2</sup> For a study of caricatures in *The New Masses*, *The Daily Worker*, and *Vanity Fair*, cf. Whiting 8-33.

<sup>3</sup> For a general discussion of American posters produced by various individuals and government agencies cf. Heyman. On the history of posters produced for recycling campaigns, cf. Witkowski. German posters and propaganda from the Nazi era are discussed by Luckert and Bachrach.

<sup>4</sup> For an extended discussion of Shahn's work at the Graphics Division of the OWI, see my essay "Fighting for a Free World: Ben Shahn and the Art of the War Poster."

starvation, suppression, and slavery. He painted the image for the poster on slavery himself—showing a man with a sorrowful face standing in an arresting pose behind a barbed-wire fence—but drew on the work of fellow artists for the other posters: a gagged man by Edward Millman, the calm face of a dead young woman by Bernard Perlin, the slashed back of a tortured man by Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and children begging for food by Käthe Kollwitz. Different layouts were tested on the five motifs to find the right caption for the images, one that would avoid creating an overly complicated message. “This is the Nazi Method,” one design stated, while in another version the text complementing the images explained that “[t]his is the method of the enemy, This is what we will destroy, We Fight to Build a Free World.” None of the designs was ultimately used for an official poster campaign, partly, according to biographer Howard Greenfeld, because the OWI administrators “discouraged Ben and his colleagues from emphasizing the ugly side of war and the nature of Nazi crimes” (189). Shahn’s work on the poster series thus revealed the difficulties of trying to deal with serious issues beyond the confines of propaganda on recycling and other more mundane topics. Commenting on a poster exhibition in early 1943, the art critic June Watson identified the heart of the problem, writing that “[o]ne is struck by the numbers of posters that attempt to sell an idea as they would a commodity. Evident also is the difficulty of transmitting the horrors of war from a comfortable distance” (L4). In Watson’s assessment, bridging the gap between the peaceful domestic situation in the United States and the European or Asian battlefields was one crucial issue, and the use of design traditions from advertising or the fine arts was another. For the OWI, this was further complicated by the fact that audiences in the United States had already been introduced to the realities of war and the atrocities perpetrated by the Axis powers at some length and with vivid descriptions in the press.<sup>5</sup> While many posters on everyday topics such as saving or recycling resources managed to balance the verbal and visual elements of their design, complex conceptual arguments on the nature of the enemy and countervailing visions of freedom and democracy posed a more serious challenge.

One of Shahn’s colleagues at the OWI, the poet and writer Muriel Rukeyser, expressed some of the concerns behind this challenge in a number of memos explaining and promoting Shahn’s poster series. In one memo from March 1943, she wrote the series responded to the sense that commercial media, such as cartoons and advertising, had not given adequate explanations of Axis actions:

The inquiry into the nature of the enemy has taken several forms: industrial cartoons will select Nazi or Japanese types, brutalize them, and set them up as targets; the big advertising campaigns will present scenes of horror, done in six colors, and will leave the meaning of these scenes hanging—out of inability to answer them, or from a wish to advertise their product. (“Memo re. the Poster Series” 1; crossed-out section in original)

<sup>5</sup> The level of knowledge and awareness of war crimes among the American public during the war years has been a contentious issue. In his study on the discourse of the Holocaust in the United States, Peter Novick summarizes why the media, on the whole, avoided reporting on atrocities and only began to distinguish among distinct groups of victims, such as the European Jewish population, toward the end of the war (cf. 19–46). However, despite the criticism of a lack of media coverage, avid readers of national newspapers did receive information about the scope and severity of the European and Asian situation (for one example from early 1943, cf. Asch). For studies of press coverage of war crimes and the Holocaust, cf. Lipstadt; Leff.

Rukeyser believed that, in contrast to these structural and rhetorical limitations of commercial media, the poster series would offer a different, more engaged and engaging experience. Suggesting that all of the five motifs were “personal and deep-cutting images,” she explained in her memo that the poster series illustrated how a life under enemy rule would be “hateful to the American people” (“Memo re. the Poster Series” 2). The crucial difference, therefore, between commercial media and the work of Shahn and his colleagues, lies in the fact that the series tried to establish an empathetic connection between the audience and the enemy’s victims without resorting to cartoonish hyperbole or the evasiveness of advertising campaigns.

While in the end these ideas did not convince the OWI administrators to officially endorse and produce the poster series, a Rukeyser memo from February 1943 shows that the posters were part of a larger OWI initiative: “The Enemy series has already had and is having a ‘follow-up’ in the press and on the radio—the other parts of Rosten’s campaign, for which these posters were made” (“Poster Tie-up” 4). Indeed, what actually *was* produced and displayed from May to July 1943 was the “Nature of the Enemy” exhibition at Rockefeller Center. It was designed by Leo Rosten, then the OWI deputy director responsible for a content category called “the nature of the enemy,” and executed by Robert Carson, who was the “director of display” at Rockefeller Center (Feller 60; “Many See Exhibits” 19). More research is needed to establish the exact timeline relating the poster series to the exhibition, but since one tableau in the exhibition was modeled on one of Shahn’s poster designs, it is likely that his series served as an inspiration for Rosten’s show.

A few years earlier, New York City had staged the most important exhibition of the decade, the 1939 World’s Fair, dedicated to the idea of a glorious, technology-driven future for mankind. It had introduced new performance environments and spectacular, often mechanical forms of entertainment and instruction that had updated the dominant diorama tradition (cf. Nelson 120-27). Rosten’s show was designed at a much smaller and more modest scale, using, in one section, diorama-like installations that could be approached from two sides. Yet in an important shift, it reflected what contemporary observers had noted about international fairs in the 1930s and their movement away from international cooperation to nationalist propaganda. As Frederick A. Gutheim remarked about the 1937 Paris exposition, “[w]ith the *Adler*-topped granite shaft of the Nazi German government glowering at the stainless-steel sculpture of a group of workers which crowned the adjacent building of the U.S.S.R., it was clear that political propaganda and bitter and aggressive nationalism were the primary note” (621). The OWI exhibition at the Rockefeller Center thus demonstrated that using public displays and three-dimensional installations for the purposes of propaganda had finally arrived in the United States.

To this end, choosing the location of Rockefeller Center in the heart of Manhattan for the exhibition guaranteed a maximum of public exposure and interest. While contemporary observers such as Ralph Adams Cram and Lewis Mumford had been critical of the Center's architecture in the early 1930s, regarding it as a sign of "American popularism and expediency" (Balfour 215), by the 1940s most critics approved of the complex, which included the RCA Building, The Channel Gardens, the Plaza, and other buildings. As architectural historian Alan Balfour writes, "[o]nce established, the Plaza became the ideal focus for civic attention. Although it is but a tiny space in a vast city, it manages to function as a town square. Nowhere in the city can such concentration of public interest be generated" (82). Rosten's exhibition used the Center for political dramatization, but by placing the horrors of war in a modernistic environment of affluence and luxury it also created a distinct contrast for domestic audiences unlike anything that had been on display in international expositions or fairs of the previous decade.

## 2 The "Nature of the Enemy" Exhibition at Rockefeller Center

Born in 1908, Rosten came from a Jewish European immigrant background, arriving in the United States in 1911. He graduated from the University of Chicago in Political Science, Economics, and Psychology, worked on academic studies of Hollywood, and wrote popular novels, screenplays, and numerous books on Yiddish humor (after the war). A representative of an urban immigrant and working-class milieu characterized as much by a craving for education as an interest in mass and popular culture, he brought a viewpoint to the topic of propaganda that combined a scientific outlook with the practical experience of being a successful writer.<sup>6</sup> In an essay titled "Movies and Propaganda," published in 1947 at the height of the House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings, he elaborated on his concept of propaganda. Following the work of social scientist Harold D. Lasswell, Rosten distinguished between education, entertainment, and propaganda. He wrote that "[e]ducation represents the transmission of aptitudes or attitudes on subjects which are *not* controversial. Patriotic reiterations (pageants, poems, patriotic films) involve the dramatization of accepted political values. Entertainment is the communication of the pleasurable" ("Movies" 118). Propaganda, on the other hand, had to work against established convictions. Rosten defined it as "the deliberate attempt to influence mass attitudes on controversial subjects by the use of symbols rather than force" ("Movies" 118). While his 1947 essay introduced these distinctions to defend the movie industry against the charge of communist propaganda, it also sheds light on the 1943 exhibition at Rockefeller Plaza, which brought together elements of symbolism, education, and entertainment.

<sup>6</sup> For an example of Rosten's generally sympathetic yet nuanced and at times critical stance on popular culture, see his 1960 essay "The Intellectual and the Mass Media."

The exhibition, which ran for seven weeks from May 17 to July 4, consisted of two parts (“Exhibit to Open Today” 7). At the western end of Rockefeller Center, placed along the walls of the lower plaza, huge twenty-two-foot photo installations, or “photo murals,” as *The New York Times* called them, showed the victims and damage of war. Placed among the murals was a “block-buster” bomb weighing 4,000 pounds, which visitors could inscribe in exchange for the purchase of war bonds (“Many See Exhibits” 19). The motto “Our Answer: Unconditional Surrender,” which had also been included in one of Shahn’s poster designs, appeared prominently in bold letters behind the Prometheus statue in the fountain in the lower plaza (cf. Balfour 82, Fig. 146). The second part of the exhibition was located at the eastern end of the plaza, in the pedestrian street intersecting with Fifth Avenue, called The Channel Gardens and flanked by the British Empire Building and *La Maison Française*. Visitors entering from Fifth Avenue were greeted by the title “The Nature of the Enemy,” with the word “enemy” blown up to enormous proportions. On both buildings framing the pedestrian street, a huge banner mounted between the second and third story proclaimed, “THE ENEMY PLANS THIS FOR YOU.” At street level, six installations illustrated the actions of the enemy, or, as the press put it, the “Axis Terror” (“O. W. I. Exhibit” 17).

Of the two parts of the exhibition, the six scenic tableaux were certainly the more spectacular installation, although the huge photo murals showing the devastation and displaced victims of the war were also relatively new and impressive (they had been used previously at Rockefeller Center in the show “This Is Our War” from February 12 to March 14, 1943). Like the poster series produced by Ben Shahn, the six tableaux displayed individual scenes but also developed a serial logic connecting them thematically through the evil nature of the enemy, to which they all contributed a specific facet (see the view from above in Figure 1).<sup>7</sup> While there was some topical overlap between the poster series and the three-dimensional tableaux, there were also crucial differences. In contrast to the posters, which showed condensed yet expressive iconic symbols, all of the installations included life-sized figures. Furthermore, the framing of the exhibition invited the viewers to imagine what it would be like to live under the rule of the Axis powers in the United States. As *The New York Times* wrote, “[t]he exhibit, the OWI said, will show what could happen to Americans under Nazi or Japanese domination” (“Tableaux to Show” 23). Thus, while the poster series had focused on the Nazi methods in general and at a distance, the exhibition at Rockefeller Center shifted the focus to scenes closer to home. The tableaux prominently featured “various threatening statements made by Axis leaders,” as the *New York Herald Tribune* reported, but the scenic installations placed them in a U.S.-American setting, creating a daring combination of educational purpose and entertaining thrill (“O. W. I. Exhibit” 17).

7 The OWI photographs are available in low resolution on the Library of Congress website. Due to their partially random character, with blocked views, chance compositions, and awkward postures, they seem to have primarily served the purpose of documenting the event as an OWI activity. I am not aware of press campaigns or art exhibitions in which they were used. Roger Smith and Gordon Parks were among the few Black photographers working for the OWI and Farm Security Administration. On the context and history of their work, cf. Natanson 203-67.



**Figure 1.** Roger Smith. "New York, New York: View of the Nature of the Enemy Exhibition Designed by the OWI (Office of War Information) and Installed on the Plaza of Rockefeller Center." June 1943. Safety film negatives. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information photograph collection. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USW3-031096-C

For visitors entering The Channel Gardens from Fifth Avenue and walking west towards the lower plaza, the first tableau showed a scene called "Desecration of Religion." It included a white church "with a twisted cross" ("O.W.I. Exhibit" 17) and suggested in a legend that "Adolph [sic] Hitler is the True Holy Ghost" ("Tableaux to Show" 23). The next installation, "Militarization of Children," presented a group of four boys, armed and walking in military formation with gas masks over their faces, "goose-stepping beneath the weight of rifles" ("O.W.I. Exhibit" 17). It featured a quote attributed to Captain Hideo Hiraide on one side: "The passion of the (Samurai) spirit is conveyed in the following stirring words [...]. Even after you have been beheaded in action, your bodiless head should kill one enemy by fastening itself on him by means of the teeth" (cf. Balfour 82, Fig. 147). The third tableau was titled "Concentration Camps." It assembled a group of four men standing behind a barbed-wire fence, one kneeling in desperation, one with muscles tightened, one resigned, and one in a pose of pensiveness. The next podium featured the topic "Abolition of Justice," showing "an American citizen, with hands bound and back lacerated by a whip, standing before a judge whose parted robes reveal a Nazi uniform" ("Tableaux to Show" 23). The fifth tableau was titled "Slave Labor" and depicted a scene from a munitions factory. American workers, building bombs, were threatened by five guards sitting in a tower and armed with machine-guns. Finally, the last podium illustrated the topic "Suppression

of Thought.” It displayed a replica of the New York Public Library and “a pile of discarded books” ready to be burned (“O.W.I. Exhibit” 17; cf. “Many See Exhibits” 19). On the south side it included a statement by Joseph Goebbels highlighting the lack of freedom: “The people who criticize us should consider themselves lucky still to be alive. It would be too much of a good thing if those who live at our mercy should be allowed to criticize.” As the press noted at the time, the six installations, individually and as a group, depicted in dramatic form “what would be America’s fate if the Allies did not win the war” (“Many See Exhibits” 19). To this end, they showed violent scenes that went further than Shahn’s series. And in contrast to the two-dimensional pictorial space of posters, the exhibition was able to create a mixed-media experience, including verbatim statements, three-dimensional scenes, informational displays, and a guiding motto, all of which were presented in a well-known, urban environment.

### 3 Empathy vs. Vicarious Experience

To be sure, both series were premised on the assumption of the enemy’s evil nature. The words and deeds of the Axis powers, in particular Nazi ideology, were presented as the antithesis to American values and norms. As the six tableaux suggested, religion, childhood, freedom, justice, work, and knowledge were all threatened in the current global conflict. Yet while Shahn’s series showed examples of evil acts which had to be fought and overcome, Rosten’s series presented scenes to be witnessed at close range. Both series, therefore, served the purpose of informing the public by showing types of cruelty that had been neglected, even consciously avoided, in the U.S.-American press and media. But they addressed the domestic audience in fundamentally different ways. As Rukeyser explained, Shahn’s series aimed for an empathetic identification with victims of injustice and cruelty. Rosten, on the other hand, invited visitors at Rockefeller Center to see themselves *as* the victims of Axis cruelty, thus offering a form of vicarious experience.

At the opening of the exhibition in May 1943, John B. Powell, a former editor of *The China Weekly Review* who had lost his feet in a Japanese internment camp, gave an opening speech to a large audience, followed by other speakers (cf. “Many See Exhibits” 19). Pictures taken by Arthur S. Siegel and Gordon Parks, two photographers working for the OWI, show The Channel Gardens packed with visitors. But little information about how these visitors reacted to the scenes offered by the exhibition has survived. The press covering the opening noted the horror depicted by the tableaux but had little to say about their effects on the visitors or, indeed, about the effectiveness of their design. However, a letter by the American psychologist Joseph Jastrow published in *The New York Times* in June 1943 shows that the exhibition did have an impact in the public sphere. Describing it as “impressive,” Jastrow highlighted the inscriptions and quotes as particularly noteworthy, claiming that the American public “has been



far from alert to the deadly ideas that have convulsed the world” (20). To ignore the nature of the enemy had been a “colossal error,” Jastrow wrote, because Germany would have to be re-educated after the war. In this case, then, the informative aspects of the exhibition documenting Axis ideologies turned out to be the most effective element of the displays.

Rosten’s design combined informational with educational aspects, but it also included elements of entertainment. Indeed, the basic notion of what it would be like for ordinary Americans to live under Nazi rule was also the main idea of the popular Disney cartoon *Der Fuehrer’s Face* from January 1943 featuring Donald Duck. It included in its opening scene a group of goose-stepping Nazis, playing the title song of the cartoon, who eventually force Donald Duck to work in a munitions factory under dreadful conditions. Although Rosten’s design opted, on the whole, for a realistic representation, neither comical nor cartoonishly exaggerated, the four goose-stepping boys of the “Militarization of Childhood” tableau and the “Slave Labor” workers in the bomb factory echoed topics and pictorial designs from the Disney cartoon (Figure 2).<sup>8</sup> The main difference, however, was that the comic persona of Donald Duck, with its mixture of ignorance and indestructibility, provided a sense of relief and playfulness that was supported by the mocking tone of the title song, “Der Fuehrer’s Face,” written by Oliver Wallace and sung by Spike Jones. At the end of the cartoon Donald wakes up safely in the United States as the vision of living under Nazi rule turns out to have been a bad dream.



**Figure 2.** Arthur S. Siegel. “New York, New York: Spectators Looking at One of the Exhibits at the Nature of the Enemy Show, Put up by the OWI (Office of War Information) at Rockefeller Plaza.” May 1943. Safety film negatives. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information photograph collection. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USW3-028583-D

<sup>8</sup> In her brief discussion of “The Militarization of Children” installation, Barbara McCloskey points out that, in the German context, John Heartfield had created the photomontage “Nach zehn Jahren: Väter und Söhne” [After Ten Years: Fathers and Sons] in 1924, similarly showing children marching as soldiers against the backdrop of their fathers’ skeletons (89–91). Heartfield’s image had used the military paraphernalia of World War I, while Rosten placed his characters into the contemporary setting of World War II.

The static character of the tableaux and their grim realism provided fewer avenues for relief. Some of the installations borrowed their mise-en-scène from Hollywood settings, populating them with Axis actors. The towers with machine guns were familiar from prison films such as *The Big House* (George Hill, 1930), while the final confrontation between judge and defendant represented a well-established dramatic scene from social problem films like *Black Legion* (Archie Mayo, 1936). A related design issue was to create scenes that were persuasive in terms of scale. The tableau depicting the “Suppression of Thought” included a model of the New York Public Library, renamed “Official Library,” with lions framing the entrance and a pile of books to be burned in the foreground. But in order to fit the building into its designated space, the scale was reduced in comparison to the other installations and the building appeared as a miniaturized, if not diminished, replica (Figure 3). Since the actual New York Public Library was only a few blocks from the exhibition, this scaling down was probably not a major issue for contemporary audiences. But the installation as a whole, placed against the spectacular backdrop of Rockefeller Plaza, in particular the RCA Building, faced the challenge of expressing and highlighting the enormity of the war’s horrors in a spatially overwhelming urban landscape.<sup>9</sup> Viewing these scenes through a contemporary lens, it is not surprising that some visitors like Joseph Jastrow were more impressed by the quotes and inscriptions spelling out the underlying ideology than the scenes illustrating



<sup>9</sup> On the history of Rockefeller Center as “theatrical” architecture, cf. Balfour. Joshua Hagen has examined how public parades in German cities such as Munich in the 1930s had to be similarly adjusted to architectural and spatial structures.

**Figure 3.** Arthur S. Siegel. “New York, New York: Spectators Attracted by the Exhibits at the Nature of the Enemy Show, Put up by the United States OWI (Office of War Information) at Rockefeller Plaza.” May 1943. Safety film negatives. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information photograph collection. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USW3-028600-D

the consequences for Americans living under Nazi rule. The displays, it seems, were more important for showing hitherto neglected or suppressed realities than for presenting a coherent design. While Shahn's poster series had foregrounded different pictorial styles for representing the cruel acts of the Nazi method, Rosten's tableaux were bound, for better or worse, to a figural realism that relied heavily on the inscriptions to explain the inhumane ideologies informing the scenes.

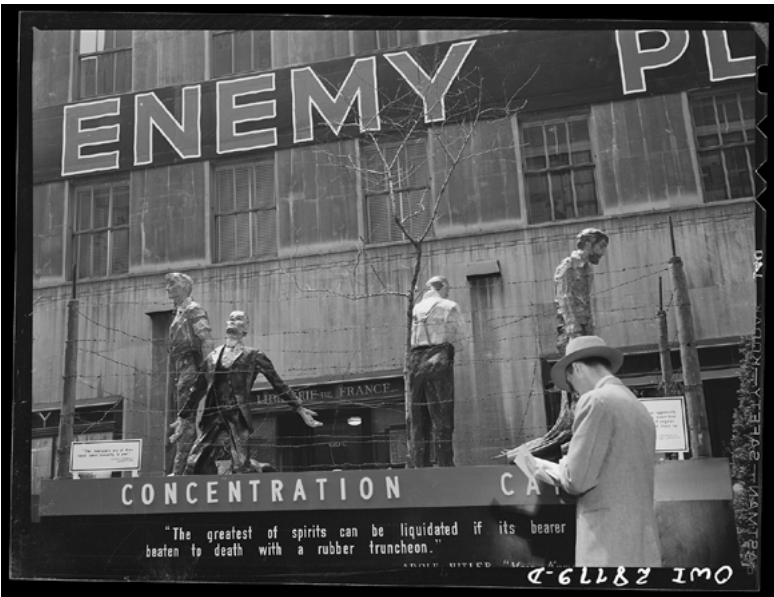
#### 4 Concentration Camps on Display

A closer look at the tableau "Concentration Camps" illustrates the relationship between text and display in the exhibition. It featured a scene with four prisoners behind a barbed-wire fence, and included a small tree and pieces of wood lying on the ground (Figure 4). On the south side of the podium two small signs referenced the German context. One quoted the words of Goebbels: "The bourgeois era of false ideals about humanity is past." The other reproduced a cynical quote from the Nazi party's magazine *Der Angriff*: "Anyone can grumble—who is not afraid to go to a concentration camp." Beneath the title of the tableau and reproduced in larger letters, the main inscription was attributed to Admiral Shigetarō Shimada: "The Japanese must make no scruples about eliminating from this sphere any element reluctant to conform to the will of the Japanese race." With the racist and inhumane ideologies of the Axis powers undergirding the system of concentration camps thus highlighted, the fate of the four men seems to be clear. Yet not much, if anything, identifies them as Americans. The photos by Siegel and Parks show that they are all relatively young White men with clear-cut faces, well fed, wearing clothes that characterize them as urban types such as workers, intellectuals, or businessmen. But they are neither marked geographically nor distinguished in religious or ethnic terms. Indeed, as the photos inadvertently reveal by including, as visitors of the exhibition, a man with a hat and three well-dressed young women laughing heartily in front of the tableau, 1940s fashion codes allowed for elaborate distinctions that are not shared by the group on the platform (Figures 4 and 5).

What does distinguish the men, however, are the individual poses carefully chosen for each figure. Three of them seem to be taken from the theatrical repertoire of codified emotional gestures. A bearded man with glasses in his hand stands resigned and depressed in one corner; a man wearing a suit is seen kneeling with arms spread wide in desperation and pleading for mercy; lastly, a muscular man with rolled-up shirt sleeves clenches his fists in anger. If the three figures thus take on symbolic meanings of resignation, desperation, and rage, it is less clear what the fourth man, facing the south side of the tableau, represents. His right arm is crossed over his waist, holding his left elbow to stabilize his left arm. The left arm, in turn, touches his face, as if he is deep in thought; his eyes appear to be closed. He thus evokes pensiveness



**Figure 4.** Arthur S. Siegel. "New York, New York: Spectators at the Nature of the Enemy Show, Put up by the United States OWI (Office of War Information) at Rockefeller Plaza." May 1943. Safety film negatives. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information photograph collection. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USW3-028582-D



**Figure 5.** Gordon Parks. "New York, New York: Exhibit at the Outdoor Exhibition Entitled 'The Nature of the Enemy,' Held on the Plaza of Rockefeller Center." May 1943. Safety film negatives. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information photograph collection. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USW3-028779-D

or silent meditation, and it is not surprising that this pose is less readily decodable, because it represents the closest link between Rosten's exhibition and Shahn's posters. In the design of the "slavery" poster, which he painted himself, Shahn included the image of a man behind a barbed-wire fence. This image was based on a photograph of the farmer Sam Nichols that Shahn had taken in the 1930s while working for the Farm Security Administration. He had thus repurposed one of his photographs to serve as an inspiration for the representation of a man imprisoned in a concentration camp, while Rosten obviously used this poster as an inspiration for his tableau. Ironically, then, Sam Nichols, an impoverished American tenant farmer from Boone County, Arkansas, served as a model for an OWI installation of prisoners in a U.S.-American concentration camp, although his figure had lost most of its individual features, such as the wrinkles in his face and the battered look of his clothes.

However, there were crucial differences between the ways in which the two series used the Nichols photograph. As was common for his work, Shahn transfigured the photograph by changing and bringing out certain aspects in the painting, such as the man's expressive hands (cf. Decker 93-101). Rosten, on the other hand, used Nichols as a three-dimensional figure in a stylized yet basically realistic setting. While Shahn focused on one individual characterized by a unique gesture and standing in for a larger community, Rosten's group of four men symbolized four facets of an overwhelming and ultimately more conventional, if not melodramatic, sense of victimization. To be sure, pictorial representations of concentration camps at the time were either not widely available or conceptually inadequate, avoiding the camps' industrial character or failing to identify groups of victims such as Jews or political prisoners, aspects which were mentioned repeatedly in press reporting (cf. Lipstadt; Leff).<sup>10</sup> Yet from today's perspective it is even more surprising that one of the main conceptual premises of Rosten's exhibition, the experience of Americans living under Axis domination, did not result in more explicit signs of Americanness such as region, class, ethnicity, or cultural background.

One possible explanation for this lack of specificity relates to the realities, and grim ironies, of warfare. While the dehumanizing production of bombs at gunpoint was criticized in the "Slave Labor" tableau, the OWI was itself busily promoting increased war production efforts in the United States via a general drive for a more efficient and higher output of weapons and machines. Moreover, American history, too, was characterized by periods of violent racism and the memories of slave labor. This domestic history was understandably absent in an exhibition on the enemy, but it was also deflected at the design level through a surface realism that highlighted the evil nature of the Axis powers but avoided any unwanted allusions to the history of the United States. Thus, although the premise of the exhibition would have called

<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive study of pictorial scenes from concentration camps, cf. Amishai-Maisels.

for distinct and recognizable representations of Americanness among the victims of the Axis powers, the OWI reverted to an average notion of melting-pot Whiteness and Christianity that was deemed to be most effective for the purposes of propaganda but disavowed the complex realities of war.<sup>11</sup>

## 5 Framing the Horrors of War

A final difference between Shahn's poster series and Rosten's exhibition lies in the ways they addressed their audiences. Shahn's series put the emphasis on the "we," claiming that the Nazi or enemy method had to be destroyed in order to build a "free world." For Shahn and some of his colleagues, this "we" was understood to be an inclusive category, encompassing immigrants as much as non-White and White American groups. In this sense, empathetic identification was based on the idea that victims of Nazi terror deserved empathy because they were first and foremost human beings (cf. Decker 93-95). Rosten's exhibition at Rockefeller Center, on the other hand, shifted the focus to the "you." Framing the show in huge letters with the slogan, "THE ENEMY PLANS THIS FOR YOU," the six tableaux appealed to a sense of victimization that was not experienced by way of empathy but, rather, through a form of vicarious participation. If, as I have suggested, the exhibition was ultimately more effective because of its ideological inscriptions and the introduction of hitherto suppressed topics than its artistic execution, it still offered micro-narratives that defined the "you" for its urban audience. Judging from the scenes and figures depicted, this implicit audience was not as inclusive as the "we" of the poster series, privileging groups of victims who were White and male.

Yet, taken as a whole, including the installations in the pedestrian street and the huge photo murals of destruction and displacement around the lower plaza, the exhibition at Rockefeller Center suggests a more nuanced audience that was diverse and shaped by the idea of a global community united in its struggle against the Axis powers. If Rosten believed that propaganda was necessary to influence attitudes on controversial subjects, then one of the major points of the shift from "we" to "you" in the exhibition was to highlight the radical ideologies at the heart of the Axis dictatorships and the threat they posed to core tenets of American institutions and beliefs. Another implication of the exhibition for the domestic cultural moment was probably less obvious. Some commentators noted that in order to win against the enemy, U.S. society and its institutions would have to become hard and ruthless. At the end of 1943, military historian and *New York Times* editor Hanson W. Baldwin claimed that Americans had finally learned to fight. He saw the summer of 1943 as marking "the coming of age of American military power," the shift from being amateurs in the art of war to "rapidly becoming professionals" (SM5). In this quest for hardness and strength,

<sup>11</sup> According to Laurel Leff, this was a key problem for the Jewish community in the United States, which, since the beginning of the war, had been trying to raise awareness of the special plight of the European Jews. This concerned the situation of refugees and reporting in national media, but also the campaigns of the OWI. As Leff writes, after a meeting with OWI director Elmer Davis and Leo Rosten in December 1942, the leaders of the World Jewish Congress "were particularly concerned about Davis's and Rosten's conviction that emphasizing the Jewish victims would not make for good propaganda" (247).

Baldwin saw the affective evolution of the “fighting heart” as the decisive step, writing that “[t]he German and Japanese will to fight and military morale were initially far stronger than our own. The Japs often died to a man; the Germans sometimes surrendered, but were—and are—scornful, bitter, hating foes. We were softer, less tough psychologically than our foes; we hadn’t learned that we must kill or be killed” (SM<sub>5</sub>). In order to win the war, therefore, Baldwin suggested that Americans had to learn to be tough and ruthless, not soft.

In this wider sense, the verbal and visual discourse of the “Nature of the Enemy” exhibition represented one instance of OWI propaganda conducive to hardening the American public emotionally. While Shahn’s focus on empathetic identification with victims of injustice tried to keep the “we” in the sphere of civilized affects, Rosten’s shift to vicarious participation moved the “you” into a more ambiguous co-existence with the enemy’s evil nature. His exhibition thus illustrated an affective and inspirational dilemma that democracies faced in their confrontation with Axis terror. If the military logic and hardness of fascist dictatorships had to be emulated to become an equally deadly military power, as some commentators seemed to suggest, the workings of the “Nazi Mind” (Jastrow 20) also brought with them a deadly sense of inhumanity. Following psychologist Joseph Jastrow’s observation, this Nazi mindset had to be resisted to uphold democratic values and a sense of sanity. Yet, as the exhibition intimated, in attempting to expose the nature of the enemy one also risked being contaminated by its dehumanizing logic.

Considering the photographs of the show with visitors strolling leisurely through The Channel Gardens, this risk was probably more academic than real. In the affluent context of Fifth Avenue, the exhibition created a curious, if not downright uncanny, contrast between Axis terror and American consumerism. But it did represent a bold attempt to register, by way of the imagination, sympathy for the victims and condemnation of the enemy, thus addressing the difficulty identified by art critic June Watson at the time of transmitting the horrors of war “from a comfortable distance” (L<sub>4</sub>). While one element of the exhibition used documentary evidence to this end—the inhumane enemy statements and the huge photo-murals of displacement and destruction—the other drew on symbolic scenic installations. Both made a unique contribution, yet in the end it seems that disrupting a public space famous for its Christmas celebrations and upscale shopping with an exhibition on Japanese and Nazi terror was the crucial strategy for creating a sense of discomfort. Rosten’s show, therefore, readjusted the utopian spirit of recent fairs to the narrower purposes of war propaganda by confronting domestic audiences with the grim realities of warfare while also, ultimately, failing to engage with the diversity of the home front and the complexities of human nature.

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