"On My World, It Means Hope:" Superman as Symbolic Propaganda to Cultural Icon, 1939-1945

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Abstract

Truth, justice, and the American way. This iconic phrase is instantly familiar to anyone who has interacted with popular culture in the past seventy-five years, and immediately recalls an image of the paragon of American comic book heroes: Superman. Superman's idealistic motto has endured throughout American culture almost as long as Superman himself. These well known words can be first attributed to a 1942 Superman radio serial, and were originally conceived as encouragement for home-front audiences struggling to come to terms with a war not yet going in the Allies' favor. Once American forces began to experience success during World War Two, the phrase was largely forgotten until the Cold War, when it became popular to contrast American values with those of the Soviet Union. 1 With the removal of such a direct reminder of these patriotic values, how did Superman become such a cultural icon, connected so strongly with American ideals? Why did his character endure as a symbol of American virtue and hope beyond World War Two, while other more explicitly patriotic comic book characters faded out of the limelight once victory was secured?

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Stalin as symbol. Writing in 1936, Swiss theologian Adolf Keller observed that, in contemporary authoritarian societies, the state itself had become a myth, and was increasingly depicted as possessing personal, and often divine, characteristics that came to be embodied in the symbolic persona of the leader. Stalin's relationship with Lenin, as depicted in propaganda, was another area of ambiguity, and highlights the androgyny of the symbolism associated with some charismatic leaders.47 In her study of mythopoetic elements in memories of Stalin, Natalia Skradol explores how Stalin's mythology places him both as Lenin's son and as a sort of symbolic husband to Lenin. Women at War, 1939-1945. Symbolic of the defense of Sevastopol, Crimea, is this Russian girl sniper, Lyudmila Pavlichenko, who, by the end of the war, had killed a confirmed 309 Germans — the most successful female sniper in history. The Second World War changed the United States for women, and women in turn transformed their nation.