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Posters as Primary Source Documents: Analysing a Twentieth-Century Public Health Poster

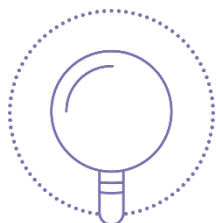
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Posters as Primary Source Documents: Analysing a Twentieth-Century Public Health Poster

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Abstract

This case study will demonstrate how to approach a poster as a historical source and how to understand what it tells us about the past. Posters are powerful and evocative documents that combine striking images and often hard-hitting words in order to seduce, inform, and persuade their viewers to take the desired action. While they are meant to work at a glance and generate an instant reaction in the viewer, what you will learn in this study is that a careful process of description followed by analysis and historical contextualisation can reveal surprising layers of meaning in a poster. Their clever arrangement of visual symbolism and verbal invocations, their emotional aspects, and their calls to action make them a unique mode of communication and

persuasion. The poster analysed in this study, 'The Next to Go – Fight Tuberculosis!', exemplifies these features while demonstrating that it has both local (American) and global (universal) characteristics. While different poster traditions developed in different time periods and cultures throughout the long twentieth century, increased cultural globalisation almost universally enabled their successful deployment by governments, organisations, and individual actors across the world. Understanding how posters work within these specific contexts and traditions and what kind of evidence they offer to a historian will increase your confidence in using them as primary sources.

Learning Outcomes

After reading this case study, you will be able to:

- Identify and describe key visual and textual elements in a poster.
- Interpret a poster's visual codes and symbols, and recognise how – when combined with words – they communicate specific messages to the viewer.
- Assess the purpose and impact of a poster within its historical context.
- Understand the value of using posters in historical research.

Initial Steps and Questions

Before reading this piece and evaluating the primary source in full, you may want to reflect on these questions and initial steps:

1. Posters as a method of communication are meant to work 'at a glance' – their message should be recognised immediately by the intended viewer and subsequently acted on. When analysing a poster, however, the crucial first step for a historian is to stop and 'see' the poster in its entirety; in other words, to see it both as an image and as a poster. This means looking carefully and identifying all the visual elements present in the image, including signs, symbols, and words. As a historian, try not to interpret them straight away, just describe what the image depicts. You may want to make a list of all these elements or mark them directly on the image, so you can ask questions about them later.

2. Consider the composition of the poster and indicate how different elements of the image are arranged. Composition includes:
 - a. Any visible lines that guide the viewer's eye through the image and enable its interpretation: for example, how does the edge of the door (vertical line), or the surface of the floor (horizontal line), or the angle at which the man's left leg is drawn (diagonal line), guide the eye around the image?
 - b. The colours used: colours often have specific meanings and artists use them with a particular effect in mind (e.g., white may connote innocence).
 - c. Darkness and light, shadows and highlights: for example, darkness and shadows can be associated with death and negative emotions.
 - d. Foreground (what is 'closest' to you) and background.
 - e. Text: where it is placed and how it is displayed.
3. Once you have gathered this visual evidence, consider what you already know about the poster. This might include the material properties, such as size; the year it was created and/or published; who created and/or published it; where it might have been displayed; and who the implied viewer was.
4. Identify how the poster makes you feel; this subjective response will allow you to assess how effectively the decisions made in the creation of the poster communicate its meaning. Use your individual interpretation to speculate about how the poster's contemporary viewers might have responded to it but recognise that you may misread it due to being removed from its regional, national, cultural, and historical contexts. Visual vocabularies change over time, and contextualising them will be essential in order to provide as accurate a reading as possible.

Once you have all the visual elements identified, it is time to begin asking questions about their meaning.

Questions:

1. What are the most striking visual elements, symbols, and stereotypes used in the poster and what could they mean?
2. What is the function of the text?
3. How does the poster attempt to emotionally appeal to its audience?
4. How does it make you feel?
5. What information is provided about who created and/or commissioned the poster and what impact does it have on your reading of it?
6. What events does it relate to? What is its most immediate historical context?

Contextual Information

The poster under study, 'The Next to Go – Fight Tuberculosis', is a public health poster created by an unknown artist and disseminated by the Red Cross in 1919. The poster had two main aims: to raise awareness of the dangers of tuberculosis (TB), a disease for which there was no effective cure at the time, and to generate support for the Red Cross Christmas Seal Campaign. Christmas Seal campaigns originated in Europe and encouraged people to buy special Christmas stamps that raised funds to secure care for the victims of TB. These aims reveal one of the most important purposes of all posters: to persuade the viewers and to inspire them to act.

Below you will find a range of contextual information necessary to situate the poster in its historical setting and understand how it performs its cultural work.

The History of Posters

The development of posters as a means of communication is linked to the history of public announcements and new technologies, such as mechanical reproduction of images, as well as low literacy rates that privileged visual over written communication. Posters flourished after the industrial revolution when the new technique of lithography enabled printing images in thousands of copies without reducing their quality. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, posters adorned the streets and walls of most European and American cities, often serving their citizens' real spectacles of colour. While their initial goals were to encourage consumption and

entertainment, to advertise political causes and to find lost children or property, once artists took a keen interest in the medium, posters became ‘the art gallery of the street’.¹

In the twentieth century, the purposes of posters expanded, including raising awareness about more radical social issues (e.g., women’s rights), recruiting volunteers in wartime (e.g., World War One), selling ideology (e.g., Bolshevik propaganda in the interwar period), seeking support for social public works programmes (e.g., the New Deal in the United States), mobilising factory workers (e.g., World War Two), overthrowing oppressive regimes (e.g., the decolonisation movements), protesting dominant cultural values (e.g., the 1960s counterculture), and provoking people to think critically and independently (e.g., anticommunist posters in Cold War Eastern Europe). Being intrinsically tied to public spaces and available technologies, with the twenty-first-century changes in these social spaces and the emergence of digital printing and sharing, posters have also changed, although they endure as a popular means of communication, continuing to reflect, negotiate, and shape the values of our societies.

Poster Types

The main types of posters include commercial posters (advertising products, pharmaceuticals, and entire companies), entertainment posters (publicising circus, cabaret, theatre, sports events), posters for art’s sake (promoting gallery works and related causes), propaganda posters (selling ideologies and supporting or resisting governments’ agendas), and public health posters (raising awareness of health issues and funds), which are represented in the poster under study. Despite different aims and types, all posters can be seen as a form of propaganda in the broad sense of the word: they are designed to seduce, persuade, and sell goods, causes, and ideologies by combining words and images in a way that encourages the viewer to buy a product or change their behaviour.

The Public Health Poster

By the end of the Great War, the poster was highly developed as a means of communication with the public, and in the promotion of the war effort, it was a ubiquitous presence in the public spaces, especially of European and American cities. It is against this backdrop that a new form of a poster, previously not frequently seen, emerged: the public health poster. More specifically to the poster under study, with the expanded role of the state during the American Progressive Era, and with the alarming increases in cases of untreatable diseases, such as TB and

later the Spanish flu, educational campaigns were necessary to raise awareness and persuade citizens to alter their potentially detrimental habits. When it came to posters about TB, the usual themes included encouraging people to lead hygienic lives and protect others from one's germs, seek early treatment and keep bedroom windows open, or donate money to research for the cure and to help the sick. These posters usually combined conspicuous imagery with commanding words to convey their critical message in the most economical and action-inducing way.

The Fight Against TB

Although TB peaked in the mid-nineteenth century (then known as 'consumption') and by 1919 the number of cases in the United States had already decreased, it was still untreatable and caused significant death toll. Multiple voluntary organisations dedicated to fighting TB emerged and campaigned to help prevent the spread of TB and to raise funds to build public sanatoria. This TB-directed reform movement also saw initiatives such as the Modern Health Crusade, which adopted the language and symbolism of the Christian crusades, including the Cross of Lorraine (the patriarchal cross). It was used by the anti-TB activists and organisations and prominently displayed in the Red Cross Christmas Seal campaigns introduced to the United States in 1907.

Source Analysis Questions

1. How does this poster communicate its message about the dangers of TB and what the viewers can do to help minimise the spread of the disease?
2. Knowing that the poster was created in 1919, the year when a global pandemic – the Spanish flu – was receding, what might be the main motivation behind the message? What emotions does it appeal to in order to mobilise the viewer?
3. Why was the poster form chosen to convey the message and who was its intended audience?
4. In addition to the primary purpose of the poster, what other less apparent messages might be coded in it?

While the poster needs to be read visually, in order to understand the relevance of the poster's messages to the contemporary audience these readings have to be located in their historical context and cultural setting. It is thus important to try to reconstruct the world that created this poster so that we can peel back all its layers of meaning. To what extent does the poster reflect the sensibilities of the people at the time of its creation and to what extent does it attempt to influence them?

Critical Evaluation

Introduction

Like all posters, the public health poster 'The Next to Go – Fight Tuberculosis' works by seizing the attention of the viewer through a combination of striking imagery and demanding text designed to appeal to emotions. While using accessible language and graphic vocabulary that contemporary viewers would find familiar, it communicates complex ideas and requires careful decoding. It is our task to identify and interpret the poster's visual codes and symbols, see them in their context so we can speculate about how it might have impacted its intended audience, and understand its value for historical research. When reading this critical analysis of the poster, pay close attention not only to the details of the content itself but also to how this content is approached, arranged, and presented in the analysis.

Key Visual and Textual Elements

The poster is visually divided into two main sections separated by the door: the bright and warm domestic space on the right and the black-and-white, cold, and sinister exterior on the left. In the colourful part dominated by yellow, green, and red, we can identify four main figures: a man, two women, and a girl, as well as a Christmas wreath hanging behind them. In the dark part, a figure veiled in a white ethereal gown set against a black void is pressing against the door and looking at the viewer with a menacing leer. It is a classic representation of death shown in nineteenth-century paintings, and the contemporary viewers would have unmistakably identified its symbolism. The airy and shadowy nature of the gown also resonates with the nature of TB itself as a respiratory disease of the lungs.

The man in the centre of the image dramatically cuts the frame. His body is leaning left in an effort to push close the door, and the horizontal, diagonal, and vertical lines of his well-

grounded boots, his left leg/torso/right hand, and the door create a sense of dynamism and reinforces the strength that the man represents. These lines are critical to the design: although our eyes are initially drawn to the solid body of the man, the triangle formed by his hands and the door guides us to its top corner, which converges with the deathly face behind it. This way, the composition creates an intense perception of danger by juxtaposing two formidable forces representing the energy of life and the dark void of death.

The man is visibly straining, his face flushed and distorted through tension. He is clad in overalls, a staple uniform of the working class. The colours of his clothes are very American: red, white, and blue, with some elements of brown and black. The female figures standing beside him, in contrast, are all dressed in white or pale pink. They are huddled together in comforting embraces and the wreath hanging over their heads creates a halo effect. The use of colour and composition designates them as innocent and vulnerable and in need of protection. One of the figures is wearing a nurse's cap, with a red double cross at its centre and a similar one on her left arm. Other details in the image include the differently coloured door handles – with the black one on the outside representing contamination by disease, as well as a key in the door on the inside – marking it as ready to be locked. In this dynamic composition, the locus is clearly the man in action, while the women stand passively, anxiously waiting.

The boldly integrated text, 'The next to go', is placed on the sunny side of the image, with the letter 'T' aligned with the edge of the door, seemingly in an effort to add weight and support the man's determination to close it. It is a message of careful optimism and a promise that the fight against TB will be won just like the fight against influenza had been, and thus, the joy of Christmas might be saved. The textual details at the bottom of the poster clarify what the family represented here is fighting against and whose help they can rely on. The sponsor of the poster is revealed as the American Red Cross promoting its Christmas Seal Campaign, with two more visual symbols placed on either side of the text: a red double cross to the right and a stamp to the left. The stamp is the tangible product the poster is selling. It depicts Santa Claus set against a starry sky and snowy landscape, reaching into a red cross-marked bag of gifts. It also displays two more double crosses and boldly proclaims: 'Merry Christmas 1919. Health and Happy New Year'.

While the general message of the poster is anticipative and hopeful, the sense of peril and valiant struggle it creates encourages the viewer to act. Perhaps they cannot help this particular

man to close and lock that door so he can protect his family, but they can help other families by donating to the national struggle and purchasing a Red Cross Christmas seal stamp.

Critical Analysis in Context

Once we have identified and described the main elements of the poster, we may begin situating its meanings in its historical context. This will allow us to understand what the poster was responding to and why it was created. A productive way to start is by revisiting the formerly recognised visual messages and mining them for meaning while exploring the historical context to aid in our interpretations.

We know that TB was one of the greatest public health issues of the nineteenth century and remained a challenge until a cure was found in the 1950s. By 1919, the year of the poster's creation, the most common strategy for fighting TB was to either isolate the ill or send professional nurses and Red Cross-trained volunteers to the homes of the sick, both to care for them and to educate them about the disease, which may explain the presence of the nurse in the poster. She represents the official public health efforts to stem the spread of TB, including introducing federal and state regulations regarding personal hygiene, antisputting laws, sanitary food consumption, disinfecting public spaces, and instructing people to turn away to cough.² Although she would have been well trained in personal hygiene and infection control, the nurse in the poster is still depicted as immobilised and powerless against the disease.

It is the man who seems to be the most effective line of resistance. He is depicted as a labourer who works hard to support his family, likely outside of the home, in a potentially crowded and unsanitary place and as such, a fertile ground for the spread of germs. His cheeks are inflamed, suggesting he might be feverish and his strength against the death figure weakening. In the early twentieth century, promoting nose, mouth, and hand hygiene began to reduce contamination and the resultant cases of TB, but the death toll was still high and it destroyed many families and livelihoods. One of the most effective ways to control the spread of TB was in fact to isolate the ill.³ People were encouraged to move away to the countryside or temporarily relocate to specially built sanatoria. But not everyone could afford to leave their jobs and families and to pay the expenses of such convalescence, certainly not the poor.⁴ The sanatorium was an elite option, with most being privately owned and costly, so publicly funded alternatives were needed to help those in need. This is what the poster is pleading for: if you want to help

people like this good man, join our effort to raise funds in order to build state-financed sanatoria.

This two-pronged approach to stemming the spread of the disease – hygiene and self-isolation – put the onus of responsibility onto the citizens. Since the crusade against TB largely depended on the willingness of people to behave in a responsible way, public discourses around it were imbued with moralism about how to live a healthy life. This included admonishing “careless consumptives” who flouted advice to stay off work, shield and seek relief, and praising ‘careful consumptives’ who followed public health recommendations and willingly subjected themselves to the approved solutions.⁵ Many contemporary anti-TB posters featured men or boys (never women) instructing other men and boys to cough or sneeze into a handkerchief in order to protect others. It was men, with their reported poor hygiene habits, who seemed to be the weakest link in this chain of disease.⁶ In the context of Progressivism, TB became the kind of danger that implied the looming demise of the American man and – by extension – America itself.

Lest the viewer see the poster as an admonition of the man who should not be putting his family in danger if he is ill himself, his all-American clothing protects him against this reading. He stands for the masculine resistance to TB; he is portrayed in the spirit of the Progressive Era’s ideal of a man of vigour and physical strength, as honest and hard-working, patriotic and self-reliant. He is not passive in the face of the disease, like the women are, but manly, the protector of the family. The patriarchal cross appearing five times across the different areas of the poster adds to this sense of propriety, encouraging the poster’s viewers to see him as respectable and worth their support. In fact, his representation is in line with the soldier figure, still fresh in people’s minds after the Great War, which was represented in many wartime posters. ‘The Next to Go’ bears a striking resemblance to one of the most memorable posters released just the year before: Frank Brangwyn’s ‘Put Strength in the Final Blow. Buy War Bonds’.⁷ It is almost quoting from it, by copying and exploiting its memorable imagery. Many viewers of the public health poster under study would have been familiar with such wartime representations and might have made links between them, thus solidifying the need to act.

It is also not insignificant whom the man is protecting. The girl and the woman in the picture, possibly mother and daughter, represent the most vulnerable demographics with the highest TB mortality rates in America. There were more cases of TB among schoolgirls than schoolboys, and more among women than men.⁸The public health efforts including placing nurses in families

provided limited relief, and most people never received medical help. While boards of health across the country invested significant amounts of money into social campaigns to prevent the spread of disease, ultimately – the poster seems to argue – the responsibility for the family’s well-being is placed on the man’s shoulders, which reinforces the existing social order by appealing to traditional, conservative values, particularly compelling at Christmas time.

Speculating About the Poster’s Impact

Posters were a cheap medium, which could be quickly and easily mass produced and reproduced, as well as disseminated in public spaces. They could also be easily read and understood at a glance because people were already familiar with their visual language. As such, their impact and effectiveness could be considerable. Like the wartime posters, citizens viewing this poster could see themselves as part of a larger effort and a bigger cause shared by the entire nation. Viewed at Christmas time, it would have added another level of emotion and exploited the holiday season’s charitable sentiment.

Published in 1919, the poster appeared on the heels of two devastating events of the early twentieth century: the Great War and, even more recently, the Spanish flu pandemic, with its staggering number of deaths – 500,000 in the United States and over fifty million across the world.⁹ As the war ended and the dreaded influenza retreated, the Red Cross campaign announced that TB was ‘the next to go’, thus bringing people’s attention back to the disease that continued to kill slowly and silently.

The poster’s aim is not to educate; it does not provide any information about the causes of the illness or ways of treating it. In fact, the pushing of the door could be seen as counterproductive, as the general health advice at the time was to keep bedroom windows open at night. Instead, the poster tries to rally support for those who could not afford to self-isolate and could even be bankrupted by the expenses of sanatorium treatment. The state of affairs required united public intervention, aided by charities such as the Red Cross and other voluntary organisations campaigning to raise funds and awareness, and emotionally stirred by posters such as this one.

The Poster’s Value for Research

When you complete the reading of a poster, it comes alive. What initially seemed like a simple image or illustration acquires multiple levels of meaning and may change the way you feel about

the source. The historians' task is to understand the poster's visual, textual, and symbolic language so they can understand the poster itself.

Posters reveal people's contemporary attitudes, offering us a valuable insight into social and cultural history. The poster under study, for example, illustrates national discourses concerning the dangers of contagion, imaginaries of the masculine nation, and narratives of overcoming national threats, while inculcating in citizens the socially accepted and culturally appropriate behaviours. Such posters also show us which graphic and verbal idioms resonated, what imagery was familiar or even seen as universal, and what was valued by and appealed to audiences.

Nevertheless, we must be cautious not to mistaken the mere appearance of certain visual codes and symbols for their effectiveness and acceptance by the audience. While gauging public reception of the poster can be difficult, comparing it with other contemporary posters, other health posters, and other posters specifically from the anti-TB campaigns could offer us the necessary insight into what themes these campaigns experimented with and which ones they deemed the most persuasive. Effective secondary source and archival investigations are essential to contextualise this primary source research.

A Note on Identifying Suitable Posters for Analysis

This critical analysis of the public health poster 'The Next to Go – Fight Tuberculosis' has proposed a set of tools you can now use to analyse any poster. When looking for a suitable poster for your own investigation, search in archival collections that will give you access to enough basic information to perform a full analysis. The minimum you want to be able to identify includes the provenance of the image (who created and/or commissioned it), its material characteristics, and its conditions of production. Not all images have this information; so the more you can find out about the poster and the more effectively you can locate good secondary sources to frame it in historical context, the more compelling your analysis will be. At the end of this resource, you will see a list of suggested digital archives for poster research.

Post-evaluation Questions

1. How does this poster compare to other public health posters created in the United States and across the world in 1919? Can you find posters that deploy similar techniques to achieve a similar effect on their viewers?

2. What discursive traditions does the poster represent? What signs and symbols it draws upon can be seen in other mediums, such as postcards, photographs, paintings, or film? What other contemporary posters can you cross-reference your analysis with in order to either confirm or problematise your interpretations?
3. Was the goal of the Red Cross Christmas Seal campaign, as communicated in the poster, reflected in its results? Did it resonate with the public and achieve its aims?
4. How does the poster help us understand the priorities of the state and voluntary organisations, such as charities, in the early twentieth-century struggle against TB?
5. What does the poster not do or instruct its viewers about? Does it sanitise the brutality of the real human cost and the death toll of TB? What cultural values does the poster reinforce?
6. What documentary, textual, material, and other primary sources might corroborate your findings?

Further Research Considerations

If you were to research this area further, you might consider the following questions and discussion points:

1. Many posters do not contain any information about their authors or the conditions of their making, their distribution and reception, as a result provoking more questions than they can answer. How might we methodologically extend this analysis onto other posters that lack sufficient contextual information?
2. How do secondary sources, including methodological and contextual analyses, as well as those dealing specifically with the source type and even the source chosen, allow us to frame and situate a poster as a valid and relevant primary source?
3. How accurately does a poster represent contemporary anxieties and preoccupations? Whose perspective is it and is there a discernible bias?
4. What role do archival collections play in situating posters under scrutiny?

Further Resources

- Brown, Elspeth. "Reading the Visual Record." In *Looking for America: The Visual Production of Nation and People*. edited by Ardis Cameron. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.
- Helfand, William H. "'Some One Sole Unique Advertisement:': Public Health Posters in the Twentieth Century." In *Imagining Illness: Public Health and Visual Culture*. edited by David Serlin, 126-42. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- James, Pearl, ed. *Picture This: World War I Posters and Visual Culture*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

Many institutions and archives have outstanding collections of digitised posters. You can start your explorations with the following:

- The Imperial War Museum: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205316194>.
- The Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/search/?in=&q=posters&new=true>.
- The London Transport Museum: <https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/collections/collections-online/posters>.
- The National Archives: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/government-posters/>.
- The Victoria and Albert Museum: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/posters>.
- The Yale Medical Poster Collection: <https://library.medicine.yale.edu/find/poster>.

Notes

1. Barnicoat, *A Concise History of Posters*.
2. University of Virginia, "The American Lung Association Crusade."
3. Tomes, "Destroyer and Teacher."

4. Ott, *Fevered Lives*.
5. Feldberg, *Disease and Class*.
6. Tomes, "Destroyer and Teacher."
7. Timmers, *The Power of the Poster*, 146-53.
8. Feldberg, *Disease and Class*, 105.
9. Olson, "The Spanish Flu of 1918," 33.

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Ott, Katherine. *Fevered Lives: Tuberculosis in American Culture Since 1870*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.

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University of Virginia. "The American Lung Association Crusade." Historical Collections at the Claude Moore Health Sciences Library. 2007. <http://exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu/alav/campaigns/>.

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