

Popular Media, War Propaganda, and Retroactive Continuity: the Construction of the Enemy in Marvel Comics (1942-1981).

Introduction.

The construction of the enemy is a question of doubtless relevance regarding the relationships between war, media, and propaganda. The figure of the enemy may be understood as the result of a radical process of ‘Othering’, i.e. a stereotyping-related social representation that objectifies individuals or groups, leading people to differentiate between an in-group and an out-group, in order to reinforce and protect the Self (Dervin, 2012). Therefore, the “enemy image” can be defined as “a culturally influenced, very negative, and stereotyped evaluation of the ‘other’—be it individuals, groups, nations, or ideologies. ‘Others’ are classified as ‘enemies’ if their appearance is coupled with some kind of extreme threat perception” (Fiebig von-Hase, 1997, p. 2). Such discrimination is instrumental for enemy images, since groups react with biased and stereotype-driven behavior towards alien groups, and group integration benefits from stigmatizing out-groups as enemies (Fiebig von-Hase, 1997).

The potential effects of such depictions are of paramount importance, as the history of propaganda, and of the media, are steeped in examples of enemy-building that stir extreme emotions by demonizing and dehumanizing the out-group in wartime. In this context, World War II (hereafter WWII) is a foremost example of how the logics of Othering and enemy-construction underlying propaganda emerge (Murray, 2011). Alongside the intensity of communicative output, and the use of media like radio or the cinema (Pizarroso, 1993), the warring powers developed different propaganda systems and approaches to message content during WWII. The formidable authoritarian apparatus the Nazis created in the 1930s backed German war propaganda; its machinery was ready

to meet the exigencies of war months before war was declared (Welch, 1995). Though also authoritarian, the other Axis members, Italy and Japan, had weaker propaganda systems; yet, Japan ran a decade-long pervasive campaign advocating self-sacrifice and kamikaze mentality, added to old “proper place” theories on which they based their claim to be the “leading race” (Dower, 1986; Pizarroso, 1993; Thomson, 1999). On the other side, the UK and the US pursued a “strategy of truth” (Taylor, 1995), seeking to distance themselves from the emotional brutality of WWI psychological warfare. Although the American Office of War Information (OWI) had a policy “against the use of atrocity stories” (Hönicke, 1997, p. 265), integrated Anglo-American propaganda was by no means alien to irrational psychological warfare (Pizarroso, 1993).

In this context, the construction of the enemy was not absent from American propaganda. Allied propaganda treated the Axis forces emotively, inspiring contempt and aggression toward a dehumanized enemy, whilst an Othering process separated “us” from “them”. This happened regarding Germany and Japan—American propaganda largely ignored Italy and the other Axis powers (Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria) (Murray, 2011). The OWI and the Office of Strategic Services channeled messages glorifying American soldiers, while demonizing the enemy—including openly racist portrayals of the Japanese. According to Dower, “in its most extreme form racism sanctions extermination [...] Soon after Pearl Harbor, the prospect of exterminating the Japanese vermin in their nest at home was widely applauded” (1996, pp. 173-175).

Therefore, compared to anti-Nazi propaganda, it took less agitation “to demonize the Japanese, because there was already a substantial degree of anti-Asian feeling in American society” (Murray, 2011, p. 235). We must understand this in the historical context in which American antagonism against Japanese immigration and competing expansionist goals in Asia fueled the American image of the Japanese that emerged after

the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 (Fiebig von-Hase, 1997). As a result, the Japanese “were the most alien enemy the United States had ever fought in an all-out struggle” (Benedict, 1967, p. 1). This cultural chasm explains how race pervaded American anti-Japanese propaganda, with the infamous internment of Japanese-Americans in camps coexisting with a campaign inciting racial hatred (Murray, 2011)—indeed, the State Department’s Far Eastern Division produced a memorandum concluding that “one of the important aspects of our war with Japan is that it *is* racial” (in Hart, 2004, p. 80). Anti-Japanese propaganda also revived the atrocity stories that had been widely used during WWI.

The construction of the Japanese enemy coexisted with anti-Nazi propaganda “focused on the barbarism and oppression inherent in fascism”. The Nazis were casted as evil, and the German people, to a lesser extent, as brutal and degenerate (Murray, 2011)—in his 1942 State of the Union address, President Roosevelt spoke of the German enemy’s “unholy contempt for the human race,” and its “world of tyranny and cruelty and serfdom” (in Hönicke, 1997, p. 247). These depictions must be understood in the context of the German stereotypes forged by political considerations and international events in the American media, from the bloodthirsty Hun of WWI to the sadistic Nazi of WWII to the stern-faced East German Communist of the Cold War (Probst, 1991). However, the Cold War also witnessed the development of the good German/bad Nazi stereotypical distinction in American culture and films (Cocks, 2015), and it must be highlighted that the image of the German enemy in the US was never as hideous as that of the Japanese. Although American government regarded Germany as the main enemy and mastermind of the Axis, popular opinion feared and hated the treacherous and cruel Japanese more than the efficient and obedient Germans. Only 5% of Americans surveyed regarded the latter as enemies (Hönicke, 1997), and even after the discovery of the death camps, and

with the image of Germany reaching “an absolute nadir in the United States, Americans were still more favorably disposed toward Germans than toward the Japanese” (Reuther, 2004, p. 602). Hence, both propaganda and popular culture treated the latter with particular violence: “Where similar images of the Nazis had the Germans simply running away from superior American forces, the Japanese were mercilessly rounded up, cornered and shot” (Murray, 2011, p. 222).

In this context, this paper focuses on a chapter in the history of war and popular media that has received less attention than official propaganda strategies regarding the construction of the enemy: how comic-book covers contributed to the representation of wartime adversaries. Our particular focus is on the construction of the enemy in American WWII-related comics, a commercial material that enduringly resorted to WWII imagery, themes, and villains long after the war ended.

Comics, propaganda, and the “retconning” of war

Besides film documentaries, newsreels, or radio stations like the BBC or Voice of America, entertainment forms were used with political purposes in the context of WWII—for instance, Hollywood made approximately 180 anti-Nazi feature films between 1939 and 1946 (Hake, 2012). Comic books joined the anti-Axis efforts made by the entertainment industry, with almost all superheroes becoming patriotic pitchmen for government propaganda (Johnson, 2012). Although the American government officially sponsored outlets such as *War Victory Comics*, direct interference was not all-pervading as far as comics were concerned. However, the quasi-governmental Writers’ War Board (WWB) encouraged politicization and brutal depiction of Axis enemies in comic books (Hirsch, 2014)—moreover, “unconstrained by the ‘strategy of truth’ imposed upon the OWI, comics provided the WWB with an alluring alternative to more conventional media

and a new means of defining America's enemies on the basis of race and ethnicity" (Hirsch, 2014, p. 483). Anyhow, comics combined official propaganda imagery and strategies with unofficial responses to the war (Murray, 2011), thus exemplifying how popular media can adopt political stances without being officially co-opted. Regarding the comic readership, after the entry of the US into WWII, comic books became extremely popular reading among children and adolescents, as well as servicemen, to whom the government delivered these publications in large quantities at home and abroad (Savage, 1990; Benton, 1989; Benton, 1992).

Although many comic-book publishers joined the war effort (Savage, 1990), the role of Marvel Comics is noteworthy¹. Marvel's Captain America was the first superhero that battled the real-world threats to the US—as the cover of *Captain America Comics* #1 (March 1941) shows, his prime target was Adolf Hitler (Johnson, 2012). Hence, Marvel was an early adopter of the superheroes' orientation to foreign policy issues. More interestingly, WWII stands as a myth of origin in the Marvel Universe, with Nazi villains still regularly returning to threaten the world today.. It must be highlighted that Timely Comics engaged with WWII prior to Pearl Harbor, with the Germans being positioned as the main enemy prior to December 1941, as illustrated by early *Captain America Comics*' covers, which were populated with swastikas and Nazi villains.

Regarding the construction of the enemy, wartime superhero comic books invested villains with every imaginable fault and perversity. They thus performed an extreme tactic of Othering, and made it easier to hate foes—and justify killing them. Moreover, since 1944 the WWB's influence made Germans and Japanese appear “as fundamentally, irredeemably evil and violent” (Hirsch, 2014, p. 451). Superhero comics

¹ For the sake of simplicity, we refer to this publishing house by what has been its official name since 1962. It had its origins in Martin Goodman's Magazine Management Company, which produced popular publications under fifty-nine different imprints since the 1930s. Comic-book collectors and historians often refer to this publisher as Timely in the 1940s, and Atlas in the 1950s (Benton, 1989).

connected with the racist, anti-Japanese hate that had crept into propaganda (Murray, 2011), thus mirroring general propaganda trends, as the image of the Japanese was more hateful than that of the Germans—actually, there was no Japanese analog to the stereotype of the “Good German” (Hirsch, 2014).

The period of U.S. involvement in WWII was the zenith of the so-called Golden Age (henceforth GA) of superhero comics that had started with the debut of Superman in 1938. Indeed, after the war, these characters began to disappear rapidly from comic books, until they almost became extinct between the end of the 1940s and the early 1950s. In 1956, began the Silver Age of superhero comics with the revival of the genre, first by DC Comics, and, in the early 1960s, with Marvel’s new line of titles, in what became known as the Marvel Age of Comics. This publisher’s new phase, under Stan Lee’s editorship, connected its different series in an interwoven fictional universe that, very soon, looked back to WWII, both to what had been published in those years and to the global conflict itself, as a scenario for new stories. It is worth considering that Lee spent his WWII military service inside the US in relative comfort “in a creative position” (Raphael and Spurgeon, 2003, p. 65), while artist Jack Kirby—Marvel’s chief creative force—served for two years on the European front and was decorated for it. The ordeal psychologically scarred Kirby for life and influenced his later work, specifically the creation of the title *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* (Evanier, 2008). Lee and his collaborators recovered characters from the 1940s—like the Sub-Mariner and Captain America—to continue their adventures in the 1960s and into the present day, but also created new series with stories set during WWII, like *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos*. Both strategies involved some form of the narrative technique known as “retroactive (or retrospective) continuity” or “retcon,” consisting in realigning “different historical manifestations of a comics series or figure in order to ensure overall logical coherence or

ideological consistency” (Denson & Mayer, 2017, p. 109), as well as expanding the “narrative fabric” of its imaginary universe backwards (Wolf, 2018, pp. 45-46).

Although neither original nor exclusive to the comic-book medium nor to the superhero genre, retconning has been especially intense and characteristic of this intersection of popular culture. Arguably, the most influential figure in the deliberate and explicit use of retcon as a creative resource has been Roy Thomas, a fan of GA comics in his childhood who began writing and editing comic books professionally in the mid-1960s. Born in 1940, Thomas evidently could not have been a veteran of WWII, nor has he ever stated that his interest in revisiting that conflict as a setting for his stories was personally or historically related to the real-life war. Instead, the choice was due solely to a childhood fascination as a fan of the superhero comic books that had been published during that era (Thomas, 1975). In the Bronze Age (early 1970s-mid 1980s), Thomas created a new title for Marvel, *The Invaders* (1975-79), in which he imagined—and thus incorporated into the canonical continuity of this fictional universe—that the main Marvel superheroes of the 1940s had joined forces to fight the Axis. In reality, such team-ups had been limited to the joint appearances of these characters on the covers of comic books published during WWII, without actual narrative development on the inside pages, but they had so fascinated the young Thomas that he later used those illustrations as starting points for the stories in *The Invaders*. However, the writer did not merely mimic what would have been the content of the 1940s comics, but created the new stories “with (inevitably, unavoidably) a 1970's perspective!” (Thomas, 1975), both in the treatment of the superhero genre and in sociopolitical sensibilities. Indeed, “retcon”—the term originated in a later work by Thomas for DC Comics, *All-Star Squadron* (# 18, February 1983)—casts a contemporary gaze on the recreation, reinterpretation or even alteration of fictional events of the past, whereby the widespread use of this technique has come to be

understood as contributing to create “a cultural atmosphere that is increasingly accepting of revisionist historical narratives” (Friedenthal, 2017, p. 3). Therefore, the study of prominent cases of this storytelling practice can illuminate how the popular perception of history evolves—particularly, of such a momentous episode as WWII, in which so many narratives have been set.

Research focus, objectives, and hypotheses

Media are vital to war matters because perceptions are crucial to war efforts, and “perceptions are created, sustained or challenged” through media (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2010, p. 5), thus leading to the outstanding importance of war symbols and representations. In this context, popular culture and the entertainment media—like comics—are an integral part of the perception-building regarding war. However, the strategizing and legitimizing of contemporary warfare primarily targeted media like television and national newspapers, with the rhetoric of traditional warfare fitting big news media’s institutionalization (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2010). Thus, although “entertainment has been part and parcel of military propaganda from the invention of mass media forward” (Stahl, 2010, p. 10), media scholarship on war representation has tended to eschew the analysis of entertainment products in favor of news journalism (Burston, 2003). Given this research gap, we aim to illuminate how non-news media legitimize war—specifically, superhero comic books’ function as cultural documents that speak volumes about how Americans “viewed themselves, the war, their allies, and their adversaries” (Murray, 2011, p. 39). These publications stand as relevant parts of the social fabric of the US, because they are cultural icons, linked to Americans’ hopes, desires, and fears, thus mirroring social changes (Johnson, 2012). Consequently, the comic-book

superhero genre is an attractive subject to study how American socio-political trends are mediated, particularly the mediated representation of war.

Our main research objective is to study comic books' contribution to constructing the WWII enemy throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Studying the representation of WWII in superhero comics somehow leads to the historical and discursive core of the genre, as "in many ways World War II continues to serve as the genre's recurring myth of origin" (Murray, 2011, p. 39). More specifically, we focus on Marvel Comics' construction of the German and Japanese enemy. A second research objective is to shed light on the *historical* evolution of these war enemies' portrayal. Previous literature has already studied comic-book propaganda in WWII and in a further period (Scott, 2007); here, we analyze the representation of the Nazis and Japanese at two different times: first, Marvel comics published during American involvement in WWII; second, a set of WWII-themed Marvel comics published during the Silver and Bronze Ages (1960s to early 1980s; hereafter SBA). This research objective aims at ascertaining how Marvel performed retconning in the latter set. In this regard, Friedman highlights a revealing difference concerning the historical evolution of the image of the Japanese and Nazis in American culture: the former were even more vilified during WWII, while the latter "saturate our culture functioning as concrete representations of that specific historical era, free-floating signifiers of universal evil and, for some, emblems of purity, power, and erotic fascination" (2004, p. 256).

Based on this theory and our review of WWII comics and propaganda, we can hypothesize:

H₁. *Japanese are the main WWII enemy in Marvel's GA comics.*

H₂. *Nazis replace the Japanese as the main enemy in Marvel's SBA WWII retcon comics.*

In particular, H2—the core of our research—responds to the fact that it was fascism in its Nazi variant—versus the Japanese one—that played a key role in the assertion of American postwar hegemony (Hake, 2012). According to historian Saul Friedlander, the Third Reich “remains the key reference point of contemporary history” and an “obsession for the contemporary imagination” (in Friedman, 2004, p. 256). Nazis became “the absolute enemy” in the context of democracies, or “the absolute other of liberal democracy” (Hake, 2012, pp. 33, 35). Specifically, the Western world has long regarded Hitler as “the epitome of evil” (Rosenfeld, 2015, p. 1): according to Connor, “Nazism remains profoundly imbedded in western collective memory” (2020, p. 181). Since German National Socialism occupies a privileged place in American mass culture (Friedman, 2004), it is logical to expect that Marvel—a leading purveyor of popular culture—reflects the postwar enthronement of Nazis as the epitome of the enemy.

In addition, the following research questions (RQ) are pertinent to study the features of the WWII enemy constructed by Marvel throughout the decades:

In Marvel’s comics during the GA vs. the SBA, are there differences regarding...

RQ1.... *the themes framing the hero-villain relationship?*

RQ2. ... *the depiction of the war enemy?*

RQ3. ... *the type of enemy?*

Method

We have selected comic-book covers as units of analysis due to their value regarding war propaganda—for Strömberg, “it is evident how much they resemble official propaganda posters from that era. The same rhetorical techniques and strategies were used in order to attract readers” (2010, p. 42). Of course, such a selection does not aim to underestimate the potential propagandistic power that comic-book visuals and dialogue also have. For

this paper, we have purposely taken as sample units the covers of comics, and not the stories inside them, so our findings refer only to the former. All the more so when, especially during the GA, comic covers were rarely directly related to their content, except for the display of the main characters (Savage, 1990). In fact, when writing his scripts for The Invaders series, Thomas (1975) used to take as a starting point the stories suggested by the illustrations on the covers, but never developed within the wartime comic books.

Most of our cover sample comes from the Grand Comics Database (GCD, <https://www.comics.org/>), an international initiative to catalogue every comic ever printed. In 2001, the *International Journal of Comic Art* already predicted that the GCD would be “an important resource for comics scholars” (Rhode & Bottorff, 2001, p. 270); two decades later, it has indeed achieved that status and routinely serves as a fundamental reference in comics studies. Supplementally, the covers of *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* come from the Marvel Database (http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Marvel_Database), because the GCD does not cover the entire 167-issue run of this title.

We divided the sample into two distinct periods: the GA (1940s) and the SBA (1960s-early 1980s) of American comic books. We selected the GA covers’ sample at the GCD by searching issues related to the superhero genre, and published between March 7, 1942, and December 2, 1945—i.e., three months after the dates of Pearl Harbor and the end of WWII, respectively. We did so because the date printed on comic-book covers was usually up to two months ahead of the actual release date (Gerber & Gerber, 1989); plus an additional minimum margin of one month so that these publications could reflect real-life events. The initial search for WWII-era comics retrieved a total of 220 superhero-themed and 37 war-themed comic-book covers which, after purging redundancies,

resulted in a sample of 231 covers from a total of 22 different superhero and non-superhero titles, such as *Captain America*, *All-Winners*, *Comedy Comics*, *Human Torch*, *Marvel Mystery Comics*, *Miss Fury*, or *USA Comics*. Regarding the SBA covers, we performed a purposive sampling method, thereby searching for Marvel titles with series set in WWII: *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* (1963-1981), *Capt. Savage and His Leatherneck Raiders* (1968-1970), *Combat Kelly* (1972-1973), and *The Invaders* (1975-1979). We also included different appearances of the WWII superhero group The Liberty Legion, along with the covers of *Tales of Suspense* #63-70 (1965) and *Captain America* #255 (1981), totaling 259 covers. The total sum of sampling units amounts to 490 covers.

The empirical study of the sampled covers consists of a quantitative content analysis, specifically frequency analysis, given our objective to indicate the emphasis on certain features and themes in a stream of messages (Krippendorff, 2004). We did not perform cross-tabulation because we did not aim to analyze statistical relationships between variables. In terms of operationalization, we understood “enemy” for analytical purposes as any entity that goes against, threatens, or hurts American heroes, superheroes, US interests, or any victim under the protection of American heroes. We content-analyze the discursive construction of the enemy through the operationalization of a set of variables and categories that attempts to quantify the presence of heroes/victims/enemies, the nationality of the enemy, the cover’s thematic framework, the representation of the enemy (through physical depiction, stereotyping, and metonymy), the typology of the enemy (soldiers, super-villains, gangsters, etc.), and the presence of real-world politicians and leaders, such as Hitler or Emperor Hirohito. Several of these variables are grounded on Christopher Murray’s book (2011) on superhero comics and propaganda during WWII, whose in-depth study of the representation of different groups is valuable for this paper. Additionally, we have used further scholarly work to refine the operationalization

of some variable and categories, such as stereotyping (Barrier, 1999; Dellecese, 2018; Moser, 2009), physical appearance of the enemy (Dower, 1986; Kerr, 2016), and type of villains (Eury, 2004).

The basic units of analysis are visual depictions and words—“symbols,” in the traditional language of content analysis—whose frequency was computed. For instance, codifying a unit as “Jap stereotype” is empirically grounded on the visual representation of the Japanese as yellow-skinned, buck-toothed, bespectacled characters. The units of observation are the main scenes portrayed on the comic-book cover—but inserts in the cover are not considered at coding. The codifying of some subtle variables in our coding sheet—such as characters’ roles or the cover’s main theme—requires interpreting the context of the entire cover as a criterion. Since implicit ideologies may manifest themselves through the way discourse units constitute a coherent whole (Van Dijk, 1998), we consider the context of linguistic and visual expressions to assess their intended meaning, with other parts of the text—sentences, images, or even the whole sampling unit—being useful to infer the value ascribed to the recorded symbol. Moreover, although the coding of characters’ nationalities often relies on visual elements, such as national flags or national-political symbols, in some cases we have also used extratextual data sources—such as online comic databases—as context units. Concisely, interpretation primarily rests on (a) value-laden visual elements and symbols, pre-connoted artistic styles, and linguistic elements; (b) the interpretation of the whole cover as a context unit, whose structure and semantic content could lead coders to interpret particular images and words.

Regarding reliability, we conducted two inter-coder agreement tests with the same coders throughout the methodological design. It resulted in a progressive refinement and improvement of the coding sheet. We calculated inter-coder reliability through

Krippendorff's alpha, obtaining a 0.92 two-coder agreement for the average of variables, with all variables scoring equal to or above 0.89—which is an acceptable coefficient (Krippendorff, 2004).

Results

Our analysis begins with the roles the characters play on the covers. As Figure 1 shows, the hero role is the most frequent in both the GA and SBA samples. However, the data also indicate that the role of villain is notably relevant in both samples—specifically, the presence of villains and supervillains is even more relevant in the GA covers, with a frequency almost equal to that of heroes. Also interesting are the frequencies corresponding to characters with a victim role, which drop from 52.81% (GA) to 32.05% (SBA), indicating that this role is more important in wartime comics.

FIGURE 1 HERE

The data in Table 1 are crucial to our study. As frequencies indicate, there is a clear reinterpretation of the war enemy in the SBA comics: while Marvel's production during WWII focuses on the Japanese as the main enemy, the frequency of these Asian villains drops drastically in the SBA to 10%. In this regard, the Nazi enemy's historical evolution is even more interesting, as its presence more than doubles during the SBA. In short, while the number of Japanese enemies falls to one-third between the GA and the SBA, the frequency of German enemies doubles in relative terms.

TABLE 1 HERE

In this sense, it is noteworthy that *The Invaders* also features some non-German villains linked to the Third Reich, like the Atlantean U-Man or the British vampire Baron Blood. The cover of *The Invaders* #16 (May 1977) provides a clear example of the predominance of the retconned Nazi enemy in the SBA—the swastika is highlighted on the chest of Nazi super-villain Master Man (Image 1). The Nazi enemy also stands out in the totals, since 232 covers (i.e. 47.35%) out of the 490 total sample feature them, while only 111 covers feature Japanese villains. As for the rest of nationalities, they are statistically irrelevant.

IMAGE 1 HERE

Regarding the comparative analysis of the main enemy-related themes conveyed by the covers, Table 2 indicates that while GA covers focus strongly on threatening aggression, SBA comics emphasize mostly the militaristic traits of the villains; interestingly, militarism is even more relevant in the SBA than in the wartime publications. It should be noted that GA covers are much more brutal and terrifying in portraying the enemy, thanks to the considerable frequencies attained by themes such as horror imagery and monstrous inhumanity—the cover of *Marvel Mystery Comics* #50 (December 1943) shows both themes.

IMAGE 2 HERE

At the same time, GA covers focus much more on retaliatory force, with themes such as defeat and extermination of the enemy both reaching frequencies above 15%. Furthermore, our main conclusion regarding thematic representation is that wartime comics feature every single enemy-related theme—excluding militarism—more

frequently, indicating that GA comics are much more devoted to depicting Axis enemies as treacherous aggressors and herd-like inhuman savages, while SBA Marvel's depiction of the Germans and Japanese as cowards and sadists tends towards zero.

TABLE 2 HERE

Regarding the depiction of the enemy, Table 3 shows that GA covers focus heavily on ugliness and deformity, as well as stereotypical Japanese features. Also noteworthy is the animalization of the enemy, with over 17% of the covers emphasizing animal likeness. The cover of *Young Allies* #8 (July 1943) exemplifies the stereotypical—and racist—portrayal of Japanese soldiers, with one of the young heroes machine-gunning a yellow-skinned, buck-toothed, bespectacled officer (Image 3). As evidenced by this cover, racist stereotypes were not limited to the depiction of the enemy, but also served to portray friendly but buffoonish characters who were decidedly inferior to their white teammates, as in the case of *Young Allies*' African-American Whitewash Jones (Austin and Hamilton, 2019).

TABLE 3 HERE

IMAGE 3 HERE

In contrast, the only prominent physical feature on SBA covers is that of the stereotypical monocled Nazi officer, which, not coincidentally, is more relevant than in the GA period. A recurring example of this stereotype in SBA Marvel is Baron Strucker (Image 4).

IMAGE 4 HERE

These differences notwithstanding, soldiers and militaries are the main type of villain found in both GA and SBA (Table 4).

TABLE 4 HERE

Officers and soldiers are the most frequent villains, appearing on almost 60% (285) of the total average (490). SBA covers use soldiers more frequently than wartime comics in relative terms and, more significantly, tend to use supervillains much more than GA comics. Here, it is worth mentioning a qualitative distinction between low-ranking and high-ranking servicemen: GA covers tend to depict hordes of undifferentiated privates, while SBA covers tend to depict high-ranking Nazi officers—not coincidentally, some are also supervillains, such as the aforementioned Strucker, indicating a more personalized approach to soldiers in the SBA. As for other types of villains, only real-world dictators and leaders surpass 5% in the average total, while the statistical presence of fantastical menaces such as aliens, robots, or supernatural beings is irrelevant. Entrepreneurs do not appear as villains even once.

A closer examination of the real-world leaders appearing on the covers (Table 5) reveals the retconning of the enemy in the SBA, a period in which Japanese leaders such as Hirohito or Admiral Tojo do not appear. Although the presence of real-world leaders is more or less irrelevant in all cases and periods in relative terms, it is noteworthy that the only ones appearing on SBA Marvel covers are German: Hitler and Hermann Göring.

TABLE 5 HERE

Discussion and conclusions

Propaganda innovations in the WWII period are usually related to media such as radio, films, or leaflets. Consistent with previous studies underlining the propaganda value of comics in WWII (Murray, 2011; Johnson, 2012; Hirsch, 2014), our analysis provides further evidence that popular culture joined the war effort, with GA Marvel Comics fulfilling a propagandistic role whereby enemies were depicted as militaristic aggressors performing monstrous atrocities.

A key narrative concerning the role of mainstream media in communicating conflict is that of the “publicist”, i.e., a role whereby the media “reproduce the frameworks of political and military leaders and in so doing provide propaganda” (Thussu & Freedman, 2003, pp. 4, 6). Marvel’s WWII output clearly fulfilled this role, with superheroes and villains embedded in a narrative that mirrored official propaganda trends. In this regard, Marvel’s comics from the 1940s can be seen as an early contribution to what nowadays we might call the military-entertainment establishment, or the military-entertainment complex (Burston, 2003). Marvel’s output also indicates the need to question the so-called “informative” quality of Anglo-American WWII propaganda—an official strategy of “truth” challenged by comic-book depiction of the enemy.

Concerning the content of this propaganda, our data are consistent with the notion that American WWII propaganda was overtly racist, insofar as comic-book covers portray Japanese enemies as ugly, stereotyped, de-individualized hordes, hence enacting a strategy of Othering that de-humanizes the enemy. Marvel’s covers fit the idea that superhero comics were an important part of the “othering” strategy regarding the enemy (Murray, 2011). The hard-core racism of anti-Japanese comic-book propaganda somehow reflects the racial discrimination of real-world policies, like wartime internment of Japanese Americans (Hart, 2004). WWII comics were not only harsh as regards racial stereotyping: as to enemy-related themes conveyed by the covers, every single one is

more frequently used in wartime—except militarism, which is more relevant in SBA comics than in wartime publications. Therefore, we can answer to our research question about the differences in how the hero-villain relationship is framed thematically in the affirmative. Thematic representation is much more violent in the GA than in the SBA, with Japanese and Nazis depicted as fearful, savage aggressors in Gothic horror scenarios. However, that horrifying image of enemies subsides considerably in the SBA, with much less brutal covers not focused on the defeat and/or extermination of the enemy. Besides the obvious fact that wartime logic might have pushed Marvel towards exploitative atrocity propaganda, another factor underlies this change: in 1954, the comic-book industry—including Marvel—adopted the so-called Comics Code, whose self-regulatory rules expressly prohibited scenes of “excessive violence, ... brutal torture ..., physical agony and gruesome crime,” as well as “[r]idicule or attack on any religious or racial group” (Comics Magazine Association of America Comics Code, in Nyberg, 1998, pp. 166-167).

In this line, changes also occurred regarding our second RQ (*Are there differences regarding the depiction of the war enemy in Marvel’s comics during the GA and the SBA?*). Overall, we might conclude that racism and ugliness were more or less eliminated from Marvel’s SBA covers. Wartime comics focus heavily on ugliness and deformity, along with stereotypical racial features, and nearly a third of the covers feature yellow-skinned, buck-toothed, bespectacled soldiers—in this regard, our results are consistent with Kimble and Goodnow (2016), who emphasize—in their edited collection on comics, propaganda and WWII—that strategies of dehumanization were particularly relentless against the Japanese, often reduced to “little more than beasts or vermin” (p. 17). In the SBA, however, Japanese racial stereotypes are almost absent from the covers, enemy ugliness substantially attenuated, and animalization irrelevant. Interestingly, SBA covers

do emphasize the stereotype of the monocled Nazi officer, probably because it had become a popular-culture icon by that time. Contextually, the less dehumanizing—and less racist—perspective Marvel adopted in the SBA can be related to wider political factors. As Hart notes, “the importance of image—especially with respect to race—became clear to policymakers during the course of World War II” (2004, p. 84). This shift in perception may be related to the role of US image in the postcolonial world that emerged after WWII, in which racism might have problematized the postwar imperial design of US dominance and the American Century (Hart, 2004). Although by WWII the US still adhered to a semi-isolationist foreign policy, the global war, and later the Cold War, gave focus to America’s involvement in world affairs (Brzezinski, 1973). In this geopolitical framework, the lessening of racist attitudes, and of their spread throughout popular culture, would have been instrumental for the US public image. Given its role as the leading capitalist superpower during the Cold War, the US deliberately sought to extend the perceived superiority of its culture and the American Way of Life: “Gradually the United States acknowledged a greatly increased need to protect what it perceived as the rightness of its stance and superiority of its way of life in every part of the world” (Thomson, 1999, p. 286). However, this aim faced what Hart calls “the nearly universal perception that the U.S. government endorsed racism” in the WWII context (2004, p. 78). The WWB confronted a similar contradiction: on the one hand, it promoted racial harmony to portray the US as an inclusive society; on the other hand, it encouraged race-based hatred to support the US policy of total war (Hirsch, 2014).

Just as the OWI attempted to counter the widespread image of the US as a racist country during WWII (Hart, 2004), we may interpret SBA Marvel’s comics as another effort to purge racism—and more specifically, anti-Japanese racism—from popular culture, thus resolving the contradiction faced by American propaganda in WWII. Factors

related to the ideological evolution of war comics should also be considered: as Scott (2014) indicates, most comics during the Vietnam-era were pro-war, or neutral, but there was also a significant number taking an *anti-war* stance. Nevertheless, the anti-racist, progressive strategy must be understood as a specific trait of Marvel's approach to politics, since it has been pointed out that representations of the Asian "Other" remained usable after WWII—after the Korean War started in 1950, for instance, there was a flood of war comics (Rifas, 2021)—and were even central in depictions from the 1960s (Connor, 2022)—actually, Marvel's engagement with the Vietnam war in the early 1970s offers an essentialized characterization of "Orientals" which underscores a long-standing tradition of racialization (Schlund-Vials, 2015). Thus, Asian characters took even longer than African Americans or Hispanics to break free of popular culture's racist stereotypes, and Marvel continued to present different forms of the so-called yellow peril, from the villainous Yellow Claw of the 1950s to the Vietcong guerrilla in the origin of Iron Man and his archenemy Mandarin in the 1960s to Fu Manchu himself, licensed by this publisher in the 1970s (Madison, 2013).

We should also consider cultural changes in the comics industry, and particularly in Marvel. From the beginning of the Marvel Age, racial diversity manifested itself in the publisher's comic books, sometimes in stereotypical roles such as Doctor Strange's Asian valet, but also in others reflecting more advanced thinking, especially the African-American soldier Gabe Jones in *Sergeant Fury...*, or, since 1966, the superhero Black Panther, monarch of the fictional African nation of Wakanda (*Fantastic Four* # 52, July 1966). Throughout the following decade this trend towards diversity intensified in terms of both race and gender, consistent with social changes and thanks to the incorporation of a new generation of more progressive-minded writers. In general, Marvel comics began to host new non-white characters, such as the case—especially interesting for the present

study—of the Japanese superhero Sunfire, a mutant born with superhuman powers due to the radiation of the Hiroshima A-bomb (*X-Men* #64, Jan. 1970); his creator was the same Roy Thomas who would later revise Marvel's version of WWII in *The Invaders*. As to our third RQ—concerning the type of enemy prevalent in each period—officers and soldiers are the most frequent villains in both periods. However, SBA covers tend to use super-villains much more than GA comics. This could be interpreted as a further step away from a realistic account of war horrors during the SBA, thus reinforcing the fantastic aspects of the Marvel Universe. Moreover, this reflects Marvel's move towards depoliticizing the villain in the SBA. Although the enemies depicted in *The Invaders* or *Sgt. Fury*... are representative of Nazi Germany, we must understand these comics in a context where superheroes “did not rush off to fight against the hordes of communist forces in Indo-China ... Rather it was the great age of the supervillain, with superheroes staying at home to fight fantastic villains, rather than becoming involved in these international conflicts” (Murray, 2011, pp. 243-244). The covers analyzed reflect this “age of the supervillain,” ultimately implying a more fantastic—if not fanboyish and childish—retconning of Marvel's past.

Our first hypothesis, which stated that the Japanese are the main enemy in Marvel's GA comics, is verified. Certainly, the Japanese are the most frequently featured enemy on the covers of WWII comics; however, the percentage difference between Japanese and German enemies amounts to a meager 6%. Simply put, the Japanese are the main rival of WWII heroes and superheroes, but the distance with respect to the Germans is not statistically relevant. This leads us to the main finding of our research: the fact that the Nazis replace the Japanese as the main enemy in Marvel's WWII-related SBA stories, hence supporting our second hypothesis. Marvel retconned the past in two ways: by substantially downsizing the presence of Japanese villains on comic-book covers; and by

more than doubling the presence of Nazi and German enemies. Thus, there is a clear reinterpretation of the historical war past whereby individual Nazi supervillains replace the original hordes of vermin-like Japanese soldiers. Such a retconning by Marvel conforms to the notion that warfare culture's fields of perception alter war in significant ways (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010).

As Stahl observes, the line between entertainment and war is a political space that functions as "a barometer for public attitudes about war" (2010, p. 10). What is more, popular culture is the fountainhead of what many people know about the Nazi past (Abbenhuis and Buttsworth, 2010), hence it can be regarded as the "primary avenue through which Nazism is introduced, explained, and interpreted. Post-war American war comic books certainly represent an important medium for doing that" (Connor, 2020, p. 181). In this context, Marvel's post-1945 war-related comics interpret Nazism and WWII in a concrete way, and the company's reinterpretation of the past relates to broader cultural trends regarding the public image of Germany in the 20th century. German-American political relationships between 1945 and 1968 were remarkably harmonious and convergent (Schwartz, 2004), and, a few years later, Gerald Ford's term of office was marked by "[c]lose harmony between West Germany and the United States" (Schwabe, 2004, p. 5). However, German-American political collaboration, diplomatic cooperation (Schwabe, 2004), and the reactivation of positive, efficiency-related ideas about Germany, did not eliminate the Nazi shadow. As Schwartz (2004) notes, the necessity of the alliance for both the US and Germany, and the American role in supporting German democracy, coexisted with the memory of the Nazi era and the wars that the Americans waged against Germany. Although the "bad guy" German stereotype shifted to the arrogant East German Communist after WWII (Probst, 1991), both our data and previous literature indicate that the stereotype of the brutal Nazi has remained a presence in the

media and popular culture. Echoes of National Socialism and the war period “remained an enduring theme in scholarly and popular culture”, hence Nazi Germany became “a cliché figure of countless films, television shows, war novels, and fiction, although ever more strongly beginning in the 1960s” (Reuther, 2004, p. 605). In the early 1960s, and alongside the Eichmann trial in 1961, William L. Shirer’s bestseller *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* sold more than three million copies in the US between 1960 and 1975, releasing a wave of publications about the Third Reich; in 1978, an extraordinarily large audience followed the television series *Holocaust* (Reuther, 2004; Schwartz, 2004); and 75% of all Hollywood-produced feature films since 1946 associate Germans with WWII, Nazism, and the Holocaust (Hake, 2012). Therefore, although the American image of Germany had improved after the war, the Nazi experience retained a place in the American mind in the decades in which Marvel was retconning its war mythology (Reuther, 2004). The 1953-1968 Gallup polls indicated that only about 15% of Americans held unfavorable views towards West Germans; on the grounds of such findings, Kayser pertinently noted in 1977,

then how can we account for the pervasive negative attitude towards the Germans we find in certain books, periodicals and films which exploit the Nazi image as a means of entertainment? The answer is obvious. The media feed on violence and the Nazi image is the epitome of brutality and sadism - so it continues to be used to tickle the fantasy of the American public (1977, p. 848).

We might enhance Kayser’s explanation: the Nazi image not only functions as an exploitative archetype of sadism, but also as a template for the notion of the Perfect Enemy, as Marvel’s comics illustrate. It must be taken into account that the archetypal Nazi relates to the function of Nazism in popular culture, that is, a “signifier of secular evil” (Abbenhuis and Buttsworth, 2010, p. xix). Therein, the comic books whose covers

we have analyzed belong to a much broader cultural phenomenon: “Non-fictional as well as fictional accounts of the Nazi period since 1945 have long been defined by a shared belief in Nazism’s absolute evil” (Rosenberg, 2005, p. 18)—a phenomenon that spans decades, since, as Abbenhuis and Buttsworth point out, Nazism “continues to exert potent currency in popular culture” (2010, p. xiv). In this regard, Marvel’s SBA comics strengthen what Connor calls “the seemingly undisputable and uncomplicated interpretation of World War II as the “good war” fought by the “greatest generation” against the uncontested evil of Nazism” (2020, p. 183).

Marvel’s retconned war narrative also has interesting implications regarding the image of Japan in the second half of the 20th century. Postwar Americans fears that the Japanese would be “a nation of watchful avengers who might sabotage any peaceful program” proved unjustified (Benedict, 1967, p. 210). Instead, the Japanese rejected militarism and opted for cooperation, peace, and friendliness—and, in turn, the US administration of Japan under General MacArthur avoided humiliation techniques (Benedict, 1967). Although postwar American popular culture has depicted Japan ambivalently—for instance, the Japanese have appeared in the hit television show *The Simpsons* as both robotic workaholics and polite people (Dobson, 2006)—the historical development of Japan-US relations may shed light on the context of Marvel’s pro-Japanese retconning. Historical factors also influence wider changes in the representation of the Asian “Other” in comics: as Connor explains (2022, p. 113), “In World War II Comics, the Japanese were the enemy because they were Japanese”, while in the context of the Vietnam war, the foe was constructed on an ideological, anti-Communist basis, rather than on a racial basis.

Postwar peace enabled Japan to recover economically and engage in global commercial activities, hence redirecting its nationalism towards economic supremacy in

the Cold War. Since the US was Japan's predominant occupier, post-war reforms "became bound up with U.S.-Japanese relations"; by welcoming domestic transformations, the Japanese developed a stable view of their relations with the US—actually, Japan's orientations were based on a tradition of "cooperation and interdependence across the Pacific" (Iriye, 1981, p. 266). Moreover, after Japan's postwar resurgence from the ashes, "hindsight has allowed, if not compelled, Westerners to reconsider Japan's creative wherewithal" (Tanner, 1994, p. 125). As Tanner suggests, the 1960s pacifist ethic encouraged American Baby Boomers to be more open-minded about differences, with the pleasurable visions of Japanese pop culture counting among the alternative possibilities. These political-economic factors may help explain the vanishing of the Japanese enemy in Marvel, thus supporting Johnson's thesis (2012) that superhero comics consistently change whenever America needs them to.

Our paper has tried to show that popular culture, and war stories in particular, can start conversations about the past and the present (Connor, 2020). Definitely, other comic book publishers deserve their own studies, although not all of them can support a comparison between two time frames of their production separated by several decades. This would be possible in the case of Marvel's main competitor DC Comics no doubt, and also to some extent for Charlton and more so for MLJ/Archie. However, for such an interesting body of work as Harvey Kurtzman's war titles for EC Comics, we could not take such a comparative approach given the publisher's short lifespan. Moreover, the 21st-century boom of Marvel-related superhero films and television shows—some of them set in WWII and the postwar era—opens new research lines on the construction of the war enemy. It would also be interesting to compare Marvel's wartime covers with additional pre-Pearl Harbor covers, as well as post-"Victory over Japan Day" covers.

References

- Abbenhuis M and Buttsworth S (2010) Introduction. In Buttsworth S, Abbenhuis M (Eds) *Monsters in the Mirror*. Santa Barbara, Praeger: xiii-xl.
- Austin AW and Hamilton PL (2019) *All New, All Different?*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Barrier M (1999) *Hollywood Cartoons*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Benedict R (1967) *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Benton M (1989) *The Comic Book in America*. Dallas: Taylor.
- Benton M (1992) *Superhero Comics of the Golden Age*. Dallas: Taylor.
- Brzezinski (1973) U.S. Foreign Policy. *Foreign Affairs* 51(4): 708-727.
- Burston J (2003) War and the Entertainment Industries. In: Thusu DK, Freedman D (eds) *War and the Media*. London: Sage, 163-175.
- Cocks G (2015) Hollywood *über Alles*. *Film & History* 45(1): 38-53.
- Connor S (2022) Ordinary Enemies. *The International Journal of Comic Art*, 22(2): 180-212.
- Connor S (2022) Victor Charles and Marvin the ARVN. In: Alexander DL, Goodrum M, and Smith Ph (eds) *Drawing the Past, Volume 1*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 109-141.
- Dellecese D (2018) *Comic Books as American Propaganda during World War II*. Master's Thesis, SUNY Polytechnic Institute.
- Denson S and Mayer R (2017) Spectral Seriality. In: Kelleter F (ed) *Media of Serial Narrative*. Columbus: The Ohio State University, 108-124.

- Dervin F (2012) 11 Cultural identity, representation and othering. In: Jackson J (ed) *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication*. Abingdon: Routledge, 181-194.
- Dobson H (2006) Mister Sparkle Meets the *Yakuza*. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39(1): 44-68.
- Dower JW (1986) *War Without Mercy*. New York: Pantheon.
- Eury M (2004) World War II and the Superhero. In: Misiroglu G, Roach DA (eds) *The Superhero Book*. Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 636-639.
- Evanier M (2008) *Kirby*. New York: Abrams Comic Arts.
- Fiebig-Von Hase R (1997) Introduction. In: Fiebig-Von Hase R, Lehkuhl U (eds) *Enemy Images in American History*. Providence: Berghahn, 1-40.
- Friedenthal AJ (2017) *Retcon Game*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Friedman LD (2004) Darkness Visible. In: Pomerance M (ed) *Bad*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 255-271.
- Gerber E and Gerber M (1989) *The Photo-Journal Guide to Comic Books. Volume One (A-J)*. Minden NV: Gerber Publishing Company.
- Hake S (2012) *Screen Nazis*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Hart J (2004) Making Democracy Safe for the World. *Pacific Historical Review* 73(1): 49-84.
- Hirsch P (2014) "This Is Our Enemy". *Pacific Historical Review* 83(3): 448-486.
- Hönicke M (1997) "Know Your Enemy. In Fiebig-Von Hase R, y Lehmkuhl U (eds) *Enemy Images in American History*. Providence: Berghahn, 231-278.
- Hoskins A and O'Loughlin B (2010). *War and Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Iriye A (1981) *Power and Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Johnson JK (2012) *Super-History*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

- Kayser HCh (1977) The Sadist and the Clown. *Journal of Popular Culture* 10(4): 848-851.
- Kerr A (2016) *Heroes and Enemies*. PhD thesis, University of Lincoln.
- Kimble JJ and Goodnow T (2016) Introduction. In: Goodnow T, Kimble JJ (eds) *The 10 Cent War*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 3-25.
- Krippendorff K (2004) *Content Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Madison NV (2013) *Anti-Foreign Imagery in American Pulps and Comic Books, 1920–1960*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Moser JE (2009) Madmen, Morons, and Monocles. In: Weiner RG (ed) *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero*. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 24-35.
- Murray Ch (2011) *Champions of the Oppressed?*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Nyberg AK (1998) *Seal of Approval*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Pizarroso A (1993) *Historia de la propaganda*. 2nd edition. Madrid: Eudema.
- Probst G (1991) Images of Germany and the Germans in American Media. In Bredella L (ed) *Mediating a Foreign Culture*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 81-92.
- Raphael J and Spurgeon T (2003) *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.
- Reuther T (2004) In Hitler's Shadow. In: Junker D (ed) Vol. 1 of *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1945–1968*. Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 601-607.
- Rifas L (2021) *Korean War comic books*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Rosenberg GD (2005) *The World Hitler Never Made*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosenfeld GD (2015) *Hi Hitler!*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Savage WW (1990) *Comic Books and America 1945-1954*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Schlund-Vials CJ (2015) (Re)Collecting Vietnam. In: Chiu M (ed) *Drawing New Color Lines*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 189-208.
- Schwabe K (2004) Détente and Multipolarity. (Transl. Richard Sharp) In: Junker D (ed) Vol. 2 of *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1968–1990*. Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 1-17.
- Schwartz TA (2004) “No Harder Enterprise”. In: Junker D (ed) Vol. 1 of *The United States and Germany in the Era of the Cold War, 1945–1968*. Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute and Cambridge University Press, 29-43.
- Scott C (2007) Written in Red, White, and Blue. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40(2): 325-343.
- Scott CA (2014) *Comics and Conflict*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press.
- Stahl R (2010) *Militainment, Inc* New York: Routledge.
- Strömberg F (2010) *Comic Art Propaganda*. Lewes: Ilex Press.
- Tanner R (1994) Toy Robots in America, 1955-75. *Journal of Popular Culture* 28(3): 125-154.
- Taylor, Philip M (1995) *Munitions of the Mind* New edition. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Thomas R (1975) “Another Agonizingly Personal Recollection”. *Giant-Size Invaders* no. 1, June, n.p.
- Thomson O (1999) *Easily Led.*. Gloucestershire: Sutton.
- Thussu DK and Freedman D (2003) Introduction. In: Thussu DK, Freedman D (eds) *War and the Media*. London: Sage, 1-12.

Van Dijk TA (1998) Opinions and ideologies in the press. In: Bell A, Garrett P (eds)

Approaches to Media Discourse. Oxford: Blackwell, 21-63.

Welch D (1995) *The Third Reich*.. London: Routledge.

Wolf MJP (2018) Narrative Fabric. In Wolf MJP (ed) *The Routledge Companion to*

Imaginary Worlds. New York: Routledge, 45-50.