

World I and II as seen in propaganda posters and postcards of Germany

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INTRODUCTION

Authentic texts have been vital for the teaching of German as a foreign language. Contemporary cognitive theories regard images as “Texts”, which can be read and interpreted like any written text. In language teaching, visual material such as photographs, advertisements, billboards, maps, sketches, caricatures, paintings, works of art, graffiti, video-clips, documentary films and television advertisements can be used to introduce a theme or to instigate curiosity in the mind of the learner or steer the learning process to other aspects, not mentioned in the written text. Images therefore can open the learner’s mind for critical thinking as well.

World War I and World War II are two topics in the syllabus of the students reading for the honours degree at the University of Kelaniya. With the help of introductory material from book *Die Weltgeschichte. Die Wichtigsten Ereignisse* (2005) basic information, vocabulary and sentence structure are given. Through a series of texts from *Chronik der Deutschen* (1983) the information on root causes for confrontation between stakeholder countries, the chronology of the war and the horrendous results of the two wars, are disseminated. Germany’s igniting role in the two wars is made clear, which leads to discussions on Militarization and the effects Militarization has on a society. Also creation of “father like authoritative figures” (*Vaterfiguren*) as sole representative/ “guardian angel” of a nation and the use of such images during election campaigns are discussed. Books written for school children in Germany published by the *Deutsch Historisches Museum* have introduced me to the world of images that can be used in teaching German social history. Most of this material have been used successfully in German Studies at the University of Kelaniya in the past years.

PURPOSE

The aim of this study is to find out how the image of a common enemy “*Feindbild*” through racial and ethnic stereotyping is propagated, suggesting an offensive, aggressive and a military solution to the economic or social problems faced by peace-loving people. The effects of war seen in the genre of “War Photography” and how the civilians at home are manipulated with reports which conjure a near victory by political propaganda too were discussed. Such exercises should ideally reflect how ideologies, such as the supremacy of a specific chosen nation (as in the times of the German Kaiser), and “pure race” (in the times of Hitler) can be used to effectively sustain support a war.

METHODOLOGY

In the classroom, we have discussed how posters and billboards have been used to motivate persons to access and consume a particular product (*Produktwerbung*) and also motivate young people to enlist. How posters and caricatures have supported racial stereotypes, help to establish and sustain racial prejudices was the next step. Propaganda posters of 1914 to 1918 and during the Nazi Régime show how the “enemy” of the Germans, the French, British and Russians were stereotyped, and reciprocally how these countries stereotyped the Germans, with Images of the German Kaiser, the personification of Germany as “Germania”, Hitler and the SS as dangerous figures. The German propaganda projected the image of the Kaiser and his family as a family protecting true German values systems and Hitler too as the protector in the service of the German Nation. Also how the image of the soldier was instrumentalised to project a positive and aggressive role for the Germans living away from the front and battle fields too was discussed with the help of propaganda posters. Finally how postcards called “*Feldpost*” demonstrated a harmonious image on the front of happy soldiers celebrating Christmas. The texts written by German soldiers to friends and family members at home, seldom mention the hazards during the war. These images, as researched today, have been very strong material for enlisting young men and women to eager fight against

the “Enemy”, that was created before the war actually began or defend the value systems of the Fatherland called “*Varterland*”.

RESULTS

As contemporary language teaching does not come to an end after language acquisition and appreciation of culture and diverse life styles, but should ideally lead to a reflective phase, often called “Transfer Phase”, the unit had to be rounded off by using similar material from Sri Lanka. Students were asked to write down their own opinions, how the image of the soldier was used to transfer state ideologies.

CONCLUSIONS

The students were free to use images and captions from a large palette of internet portals as well as sites and write down their observations based on a similar set of questions. The sites included images from the Ministry of Defense and other humanitarian organizations and NOGs. Most students were happy to reproduce the results that well could be predicted: The Thirty Years War in Sri Lanka was quite different to the two wars of Germany, they unanimously said, and the enlisting campaigns of the Defence Ministry did have a positive outcome. The official photographs that documented the end of the war and the heroes of war on a humanitarian mission, they felt, reflect the actual situations of the war. This was in 2013, just only four years after the end of the “Humanitarian War”.

At the German Teacher’s Conference in Bozen-(IDT) 2013, when we presented the results of this action based research, the participants of the academic session mentioned that one cannot expect any other reaction from young students, due to distance between teacher and students, in times of much political tension created by an authoritarian regime. This leads to the question of trust on the teacher to divulge inner most political convictions. Also willingness of young people overloaded with images to believe the “official version” and not question if images of war reflect the reality.

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KEYWORDS

propaganda posters, reporting war, manipulation of public opinion, reflecting on the Sri Lankan war

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