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Learning History Through Political Cartoons

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For a long time, we history teachers seldom pay attention or even totally ignore the few political cartoons that appeared in our textbooks and reference books. However, the political cartoon is a useful tool for historical analysis and history teachers should be encouraged to look upon them as evidence equally worthy of our attention as official documents, letters, diaries, and other printed primary sources.

The political cartoon first gained prominence in the 19th century with the advent of the mass press and improved printing technology, especially graphic reproduction. Politicians soon felt the power of this art form in the press since cartoons carried their message even to the illiterate. Most of the best known political cartoonists experienced first-hand the world they portray. Well known among them are Thomas Nast (*Harper's Weekly*), Bill Mauldin (*Chicago Daily News*), Herbert Block (*Washington Post*) and David Low.

Historians, however, tend to look upon political cartoons with suspicion. After all, historians argue, exactly what do cartoons really prove? It is important to note that, likely any work of art, cartoons are the creations of an individual artist. They may or may not reflect the view of others. Therefore, history teachers should exercise caution when assessing the impact produced by political cartoons.

How do political cartoons serve as useful tools for learning history? In the first place, they can act as a diagnostic tool when reviewing a unit or topic, to see if students clearly understand the material covered for any particular time period. They can also be used for teaching the skills of analysing historical evidence. The exercises below show how political cartoons can be utilised to test pupils' knowledge of both factual historical information and higher-level concept comprehension.

Cartoons are always entertaining, and this makes them an attractive way of presenting history. Their impact also helps us to remember things that might otherwise soon be forgotten. Most of us enjoy comic strips when we are young, and cartoons seem to be an extension of these.



Figure 1

1. What period in Chinese history does this cartoon represent?
2. Who are the imperialists?
3. Why are they so eager in slicing up China?
4. Notice that the Japanese is thinking hard. Why? How was Japan looked upon by the Western powers at this time?
5. The Manchu official is trying desperately to control the situation. Why did he fall to do so?
6. What were the immediate results of this situation?



Figure 2

1. To which country does the man holding the spade belong? How do you know? Why is he smiling?
2. What do you think is the significance of the beaming sun?
3. Do you think the Japanese considered themselves superior vis-a-vis other Asians? What evidences in the cartoon suggest this notion?



Figure 3

1. Who is the fat man in this cartoon?
2. How did the Japanese view the British as depicted in this cartoon? Use the evidences in the picture to support your answer.
3. Who are those in chain? Why were they made prisoners? How did the Japanese invasion of South East Asia affect them?
4. What is the significance of the bayonet?

NOTES ON THE CARTOONS

FIGURE 1

This cartoon appeared in a French journal. It was drawn in 1898 and it shows the woes experienced by China during the so-called "Scramble for Concessions" which took place during the years 1895 to 1898. The victory of the Japanese in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 encouraged the Western powers to proceed to annexations of Chinese territory and to divide China up into "spheres of influence", preserves, so to speak, for their exploitation of the ancient empire's wealth. The old, conservative Manchu court, now finally stripped of her splendour, confidence and pride, stood helplessly aside.

FIGURE 2

This cartoon entitled *People of the Southern Region* appeared in the *Osaka Puck* in December 1942. It shows the Japanese liberation of the countries in South-east Asia. It reveals many of the ways the Japanese signified their racial superiority vis-a-vis other Asians. Here, the familiar purifying sun (labelled *Co-Prosperity Sphere*) beams down on Indonesia. The Dutch imperialists were driven out. The Japanese hand is far bigger and lighter in colour than the small, dark-skinned native's and a jacket cuff is in evidence, whereas the "southern person," obviously a manual labourer, is half-naked and implicitly half-civilised.

FIGURE 3

This cartoon entitled *India! Now is the time to rise!!* was published in the *Osaka Puck* in February 1942. The flag bears the motto *Greater East Asia Holy War*, and the demonic nature of the western enemy is revealed by Churchill's telltale small horns. It also exemplifies the fondness for the bayonet as, in effect, a wartime rendering of the pure sword of Japanese righteousness facing and defeating the enemy

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge the sources of the cartoon reproduced in this article : Fig. 1 from *The Heart of the Dragon* by Masdair Clayre (1984), William Collins, Glasgow p. 21, and Figures 2 & 3 from *War Without Mercy* by J. W. Dower (1986), Faber & Faber, London, pp. 196 & 200.