

# A HIDDEN HISTORY PRESERVED

## ◀ POSTERS from El

"In all Paris I have seen only the upper half of one poster still remaining. I had to hunt out the printers who made the posters in order to get single copies from their small remaining stock."

Duncan Emrich, Oct. 12, 1944

Two men, an academic and an art collector with oddly parallel lives, are at the center of the story of how a rare collection of 147 posters with subhuman caricatures of Jews and announcements of executions of resistance fighters ended up at St. Olaf's Flaten Art Museum in Northfield.

Duncan Blackie MacDonald Emrich was born to missionary parents in Turkey in 1908. He came back to the States to get an elite East Coast education at Brown, Columbia and Harvard universities.

After World War II, he became a professor of American folklore, headed the American folk song section at the Library of Congress and was the cultural affairs officer at the American embassy in Greece.

During the war, he was an Army intelligence officer who served as a historian on the staff of Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe.

That's when Emrich was tasked to preserve a particularly cynical part of history: the vast propaganda poster campaign used by the Nazi regime in occupied count.

He tracked down private collectors, local officials and printers to collect posters as well as stories on how the public reacted to them.

He sent the posters home to his wife, Marion Emrich, who was a historian in America's wartime spy agency, the Office of Strategic Services. In 1945, some of the posters were exhibited in Washington, D.C., and New York City to raise money for United Nations war relief efforts.

Then, they were largely forgotten — until they were discovered by St. Olaf curators in the art collection of alumnus Richard Norman Tetlie.

Like Emrich, Tetlie was born overseas, in 1921 in China, to missionary parents. His father, the Rev. Joseph Tetlie, was St. Olaf's first Rhodes Scholar. Richard Tetlie graduated from St. Olaf in 1943 with a degree in history.

He then enlisted in the U.S. Navy, serving as a military historian and journalist assigned to the battleship New York.

After the war, Tetlie became a foreign service officer like Emrich, spending time in Israel before coming back to the United States to become an art broker and collector.

Tetlie wasn't a wealthy man, but he amassed a collection of more than 2,000 classic paintings, sculptures, wall reliefs, textiles and furniture, often overextending himself to buy works attributed to Edvard Munch, John Singer Sargent and Winslow Homer.

Both Tetlie and the Emrich ended up living in Washington, D.C., and apparently became friends, according to Jane Becker Nelson, director of the Flaten Art Museum at St. Olaf. At some point Tetlie purchased the posters from Emrich.

When Tetlie died in 1999, he left his art collection to his alma mater. It took years for the college to sort out which pieces it wanted to keep and bring back to Northfield. The most prized pieces of fine art in the collection went on exhibition at the college in 2006.

It wasn't until 2015 that the college got around to examining the posters, which had been discovered rolled and stacked on the cement floor of a storage warehouse in D.C. "I had never seen imagery like that," said Jill Ewald, former director of the Flaten Art Museum. "It was very disturbing."

Correspondence showed that Marion Emrich and Tetlie had tried unsuccessfully to get institutions like the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum or the Library of



Mona Weselmann of the Flaten Art Museum at St. Olaf College laid out WWII Nazi propaganda posters collected by historian Duncan Emrich.



Duncan Emrich oversaw an exhibition of his collection in Washington, D.C., and New York City in 1945 to raise money for U.N. war relief efforts.



"Everyone is very aware of how sobering the subject matter is," said Dolores Peters, associate professor of history at St. Olaf.



Left, an image of Franklin Roosevelt and New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia was used in a poster asking "Who steals our North Africa? Roosevelt. Who inspires him? The Jew." Right, this poster, used in France in 1943, tried to recruit French workers to help in the German war effort.



Congress to purchase the poster collection. Initially, St. Olaf wasn't sure what to do with them.

"At first there wasn't a consensus that the posters belonged with the art collection," Becker Nelson said. "I squirmed when I first heard St. Olaf was going to be bringing in a collection of Nazi posters. It seemed like a very touchy and inflammatory collection."

"... within fifteen minutes or half an hour of their posting, Frenchmen would smear them with black or red paint, would tear them with knives, scratch them, spit at them and do everything to destroy or change their meaning..."

Duncan Emrich, Oct. 12, 1944

The image of a scowling man in a black bowler hat wearing a Star of David watch chain peers from behind the flags of the U.S., Great Britain and the Soviet Union. "Behind everything stands the Jew!" declares the poster that the Germans used in

occupied Belgium.

Another poster featured a photo of President Franklin Roosevelt within a Star of David. It asked the French, "Who steals our North Africa? Roosevelt. Who inspires him? The Jew."

"Anti-Semitism was the dominant theme in German propaganda in France," according to Margaret Collins Weitz, a professor at Suffolk University in Boston who has written about what she calls the "poster war" in occupied France.

German propaganda posters in the St. Olaf collection also cast the British as the enemy, reminding the French that the English burned French heroine Joan of Arc. Other posters portrayed the war as a struggle against the evils of communism.

Some posters sought cooperation and collaboration, urging the defeated countries to support the German war effort.

"If you want France to live, you will fight in the Waffen SS against Bolshevism," urges one 1943 poster used to get

Frenchmen to volunteer for German military service.

"The bad days are over! Papa is making money in Germany!" proclaims another poster to get Frenchman to go work in Germany.

When the carrot didn't work, Nazi broadsheets branched the stick, menacing the population with announcements of people arrested by the Gestapo, executed as hostages or shot for working in the resistance.

"Louis Berrier, condemned to death and shot for having engaged in acts of espionage by corresponding with England by carrier pigeons," reads one announcement in the St. Olaf collection, posted in France on Aug. 2, 1941.

Resistance groups fought back with their own posters that used competing iconography. Both Nazi and liberation posters employed the image of a beautiful woman draped in the tricolor French flag to represent the nation.

In the liberation poster, the woman has broken manacles at her wrists, symbolizing her newly won freedom from occupation. In the German poster, the woman lies on the ground as a vulture wearing the Star of David crouches over her.

"Everyone is very aware of how sobering the subject matter is," said St. Olaf history professor Dolores Peters of the collection.

Despite the evil intent behind the images, the college decided the posters had educational value worth preserving and bringing back to Northfield.

"You can't learn about the past by ignoring it," said Peters, who specializes in modern European history.

She believes researchers and scholars will be interested in the collection for the

same reason people were in 1945: They give a graphic picture of daily life under Nazi oppression.

Cheaply printed in large numbers, propaganda posters were unavoidable during the war. They were mass communication in the days before television and the internet.

The Nazi propaganda machine bombarded occupied populations with the large, lurid images, plastering them on the sides of buildings and in metro stations. Some posters in the collection are as large as 15 by 18 feet.

"Consider the possible impact on a young person of the several-story high caricature of a Jew. Their public space was invaded, literally, during the poster war," wrote Weitz.

"... stories behind each of the posters ... stories which the French tell about them ... jokes made about them ... legends practically."

Duncan Emrich, Feb. 1, 1945

Posters, at their best, are temporary, disposable street art. The ones at St. Olaf also were hateful, hated objects. Most of them were quickly destroyed after the war. That's why the college believes the Emrich collection is so rare.

"They're an extremely valuable historical record," said Randall Bytwerk, a communication professor and expert in Nazi propaganda at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich. "This is a major collection."

Peters and Becker Nelson said the posters may be studied for insights on iconography and visual rhetoric, on the nature of collaboration in occupied countries, on how Nazi authority varied between countries or grew increasingly severe over time.

Peters already has used them in an undergraduate seminar. And students may also be helping to curate a public exhibition of the posters at St. Olaf's Flaten Art Museum in 2020.

But first, the school has to stabilize, conserve, store and digitize the posters.

Some are in good shape — the garish colors and the images of bayonets and cities on fire as powerful and alarming as they were more than 70 years ago. Others are crumbling, having been damaged by water or mold.

Last year, the college spent \$25,000 to do a conservation assessment of the posters. It recently got an \$8,000 grant that will be used to continue the assessment work. It's only a start on the fundraising that will be needed to make the posters accessible to researchers. The cost of conservation could end up being \$2,000 to \$25,000 per poster. The plan is to eventually house the posters in the special collections department of St. Olaf's Rolvaag Library.

"It's a massive project, not something we can financially take on all at once," Becker Nelson said. Students who have worked with the posters realize their value.

Sophomore Nick Gonneman, who studied an SS recruitment poster for Peters' class, said seeing a large poster that may have hung in a wartime Paris metro station had a profound impact.

"They have that musty smell that old books have," he said. "They smelled like World War II."

"There is some spirit in the object," Becker Nelson agreed. "It was there. It witnessed history."

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