Superhero Comics and World War II

1

Features of U.S. Comic Industry in WWII

- boom in comic books
  - retail sales up to $30 million in 1943
  - 125 titles in any given month!
- audience?
  - kids with extra income
  - soldiers abroad
- Some limitations
  - shorter length
- lack of artists, writers
- Shift in theme from focus on New Deal to
  - patriotism
  - American democracy
    - superheroes recruited in support of wartime propaganda
- Many racist/imperialist tropes, especially in non-Superhero comics
  - Japanese, Germans depicted as sub-humans
  - Chinese, Russians depicted as subordinate, not that important

2

Patriotism and the Superhero

- Superman asks readers to give to Red Cross
- Batman & Robin asks readers to buy bonds
- Captain America & Bucky ask readers to conserve
- Explicit storylines on fighting the Nazis
  - part of that was undoubtedly an outcome of large Jewish presence in comic book industry
- stories condemning inaction, lethargy, laziness
  - Wright, p. 44
- what was Shuster and Siegel's conundrum about Superman?
  - Superman could have easily defeated Germans
  - instead during the war, stayed at home, defending USA

3

Creation of Captain America

- created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby (né Jacob Kurtzberg)
- Jack Kirby (1917-1994)
  - one of the greatest and influential comic book artists of all time
  - revolutionized comic book art
    - read p. 35
  - grew in NYC to working class family
- Simon wanted to purposely create a patriotic character for the war effort
- *Captain America* # 1 published in March 1941
  - became best-selling title for Marvel Comics

4

2

- **Racism as Normative During 1930s/1940s**
- 1940s comics embodied combination of racism and colonialism
  - "jungle comics"
    - Wright, p. 36-37
      - e.g., *Jumbo Comics* # 19
        - Wright, p. 38
- anti-colonialism movements were always condemned
  - in fact, during WWII, anti-colonial movements were equated with Nazis
- After 1941, explicit stories about Japanese
  - racism against Japanese was the norm during WWII
  - racist caricatures helped dehumanize enemy
  - read Wright, pp. 45-46.
  - had inherent tension:
    - had to show Japanese as threatening
    - had to show Japanese as sub-human

5

- Other wartime themes
  - depiction of immigrants
  - depiction of other allies
    - British, Russians, etc.
    - generally depicted U.S. role as the most important against the Nazis
  - notion of 'fifth column'

6

- First instance of comic book industry reacting to criticism
- DC Comics formed "Editorial Advisory Board"
  - supposedly invited experts
  - for what?
    - to advise and approve content of comics
  - why?
    - social responsibility?
    - improve its image

7