The First Avenger:
Pop Culture Portrayals of Nazis as shown by Captain America

An Honors Thesis (Honors 499)

by

Ashley Cornwell

Thesis Advisor
Edward Krzeminski
Signed

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May 2015

Expected Date of Graduation
May, 2015
Abstract

This thesis examines the Captain America series as a source of propaganda, specifically regarding its portrayals of Nazis. The idea of pop culture as an educational tool is used throughout this thesis to make historical examinations of popular pieces of entertainment by looking at Captain America in all its mediums. The entire 1941 comic run is examined as World War II propaganda regarding the United States’ relationship with both Great Britain and Germany. The way Nazis are portrayed by the Captain America series is analyzed by examining the Super Soldier Serum in relation to Captain America and his foe the Red Skull, how comics refer to Nazis and the way in which they are drawn, and how movies refer to and portray Nazis despite their politically correct restrictions.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Edward Krzemienski for advising me through this project. He provided the guidance and direction needed to make this project a reality.

I would also like to thank Jeremie Dills, who took the time to collect as many digitized Captain America comics as he could for me in order to aid in my research.

I would also like to thank Joshua Arter for his support throughout the process of completing my thesis. Without his support, I am sure it never would have come together.

Lastly, I would like to extend my gratitude to Katrina Pieri and Katrina Engel for their assistance throughout the editing process.
"Captain America: Living Legend of World War II." This is how Captain America is classified in *The Marvel Encyclopedia: The Definitive Guide to the Characters of the Marvel Universe* and this classification is exactly what Captain America proved to be. As a series, Captain America offers insight into how Nazis were, and are, viewed by Americans. By examining the different ways Captain America encounters the Fuhrer’s followers throughout the series’ run, one can analyze how pop culture has portrayed this particular group of villains.\(^1\)

Captain America is the alias of Steve Rogers, a man who was the runt of America’s litter. Despite his small stature, Rogers had the courage of ten soldiers and desperately wanted to defend his country. After being rejected for duty by the United States Army, Rogers was selected as a test subject for the secret Super Soldier Serum project codenamed Project: Rebirth. The aim of this project was to find a serum that would transform ordinary American men into super soldiers with advanced strength and speed. These soldiers would help destroy the Nazi threat. The testing proved successful, and Steve Rogers was transformed from rejected runt into the epitome of American strength: “His body virtually doubled in size as millions of healthy cells were created almost instantaneously. His physique was accelerated to the pinnacle of human perfection, all weakness and deficiency drained out of it.” He was thus dubbed Captain America.\(^2\)

The Captain America story was created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby and released its first issue in March 1941. These two men were writers for Marvel


\(^2\) Ibid.
Comics, which was then named Timely Comics. The first issue's cover sported a lively image of Captain America infiltrating a Nazi stronghold and punching Hitler directly in the jaw. Because of this image, from the moment Captain America was conceived he was the source of controversy. As of March 1941, the United States of America had not yet entered into World War II (the United States would not enter World War II until after the Pearl Harbor bombings of December 7, 1941). Therefore, the creation of a comic featuring a hero who entrenched himself in a war not yet started was a risky venture. What if this comic actually caused Germany to declare war on the United States of America?3

As it was, the comic made quite an impact on American soil; after its release Captain America created a dangerous situation for the employees of Timely Comics. Shortly after Captain America no. 1 was released, Joe Simon reported that "menacing-looking groups of strange men" began to gather in front of Timely Comics’ building. These men were likely either Nazis or Nazi sympathizers. This caused enough of a scare for the writers and owners that they called the New York City Police Department and asked for a protective guard on the premises. New York, illustrating its patriotism, not only provided the guard, but Mayor LaGuardia himself promised, "The City of New York will see that no harm will come to you." If one issue’s release could cause enough of a reaction on its home soil, where Nazis were

---

3 Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Captain America no. 1, (New York: Timely Publications, 1941).
few, it was sure to have a profound impact in Germany. It would seem, then, that the threat of retaliation from the Nazi party was a very real one.⁴

Martin Goodman, founder of Timely Comics, disregarded this risk. It is speculated that this is because Goodman himself was Jewish and had family living in Germany at the time, but it is just as likely that he simply saw the potential profit in such a blatantly American hero. Either way, in 1941, Goodman gave Captain America the okay with his very own monthly comic from the beginning, a rarity in the comic world at the time.⁵

Jewish heritage may have played a large role in the creation of the Captain America series. Like Martin Goodman, Jack Kirby was also Jewish. Kirby’s original name was Jacob Kurtzberg. He was born to Rose and Ben Kurtzberg who were Jewish immigrants. Captain America’s other creator, Joe Simon, was also of Jewish descent. Joe Simon was born Hymie Simon, but his mother disliked the name and referred to him as Joe until everyone else did too. With two Jewish writers, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, and one Jewish supervisor, Martin Goodman, it stands to reason that Captain America’s Nazi fighting ways are a reflection of the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany. With so many of their people being mistreated by Hitler it makes sense that the three Jewish men would want to fight back in their own way. Joe Simon provided a humorous example of this. When deciding on who the next villain would be for a new major comic, Simon said, “I thought to myself, let’s get a real live villain. Adolf Hitler would be the perfect foil for our next new character,

⁵ Ibid.
what with that hair and that stupid-looking mustache and his goose-stepping. He was like a cartoon anyway." While Simon's comment is indeed funny, it also reveals many negative feelings towards the Fuhrer, showing that the men may have used these feelings as a justification for the creation of Captain America.6

From the moment Steve Rogers successfully underwent the Super Soldier Serum procedure, he became a hero. Since the Super Soldier Serum and its creator, Dr. Abraham Erskine, were both destroyed by a Nazi infiltrator moments after Rogers transformed, Steve Rogers became the one and only super soldier; he made it his life's work to defend the United States from those who would do her harm.7

As Captain America, Steve Rogers hunted down the Nazi spies that would threaten the United States of America. In 1941, Timely Comics produced nine Captain America issues, with almost every one making Steve Rogers fight against the Nazis in some way, before the bombing of Pearl Harbor that brought the United States of America into World War II. Each issue of Captain America that was released featured multiple separate stories, called cases. Almost all of these cases depicted the Nazis as the enemies.

In the March 1941 comic, Captain America no. 1, there are four cases. The first case, "Meet Captain America," simply tells the origin story of the hero. Steve Rogers is injected with the Super Soldier Serum by Dr. Erskine. A Nazi spy, having

---


7 The Marvel Encyclopedia: A Complete Guide to the Characters of the Marvel Universe, s.v. "Captain America: Living Legend of World War II."
infiltrated the highest ranks of the United States Army, shoots Dr. Erskine. On his fall, the last of the Serum is destroyed and the secrets to recreating it die with Dr. Erskine. In the second case, “Captain America,” Captain America and his side kick Bucky Barnes take down the “psychic” duo Sando and Omar, who claim to predict acts of terrorism that will occur in the United States moments before they actually happen. The patriotic duo reveals the diviners to be the faces of the Nazi ring causing the terrorism and shut them both down. Case three, “Captain America and the Chessboard of Death,” pits Captain America against a deformed chess-playing Nazi named Rathcone. This Nazi uses his chessboard, filled with pieces such as Captain America and key American generals, to decide which prominent American will be murdered next. Bucky walks into a trap and tries to take down Rathcone and his henchmen single handedly. Luckily, Captain America discovers the location, bursts in, and saves the day. The last case of the issue, “Captain America and the Riddle of the Red Skull,” marks the first appearance of a prominent Captain America enemy, the Red Skull. This Red Skull (Mister Maxon), however, is not the one from canon. In this case, Captain America and Bucky try to solve the mystery behind a slew of deaths that seemingly occur from fear alone. The murders are revealed to have been committed by a man wearing a grotesque mask of a red skull who injects his victims with a poison as they stare into his “eyes of death.” In the end, the Red Skull falls on his own syringe, thus greeting death.8

---

8 Comic book canon refers to the story lines that are accepted as the definitive history of a comic; Johann Schmidt is the canon Red Skull.

8 Simon and Kirby, Captain America no. 1.
Captain America no. 2, released in April 1941, contains only three cases. The first case, "The Ageless Orientals Who Wouldn't Die," is one of the handful of stories that does not deal with the Nazis. In this case, large green giants are terrorizing the United States. When they are shot, they do not die. However, when a cannon goes off, missing the giants, they fall to the ground dead. Captain America and Bucky discover that the monsters are from ancient Tibet and were brought in by a banker to do his dirty work. The giants can only be killed by loud noises, hence the cannon's boom killing them; Captain America and Bucky use this knowledge to take both the giants and the banker down. The next case, "Trapped in the Nazi Stronghold," features Captain America and Bucky taking the fight directly to Hitler and his Nazi regime. The Nazis abduct Henry Baldwin, a prominent American financier promising to provide the capital needed to keep Great Britain supplied in the war against Germany. The Nazis plan to impersonate Baldwin and make him sign a pact with Mussolini, causing the rest of Europe to join Germany and their allies. However, Captain America lands in Germany just in time to stop this plan. He and Bucky infiltrate the Nazi stronghold and fight off tanks, dive-bombers, and machine gunners, all before delivering a flurry of punches to the Fuhrer himself, thus helping Britain to continue the fight against the Nazis. The last case of Captain America no. 2 is "Captain America and the Wax Statue that Struck Death." In this case, Captain America works to discover the killer behind a string of murders involving wax heads. They catch up with the murderer, the Wax Man, only to discover that he has been building a tank division underneath his wax museum. The Nazis in the tanks rush towards Fort Lehigh, Steve Rogers' (Captain America's secret identity) army
camp. Captain America works with the soldiers to stop the tanks, saving America from the secret Nazi invasion.9

The May issue of Captain America is divided into three cases. The first case is titled “Captain America and the Return of the Red Skull.” In this case, readers see that the Red Skull, previously thought dead from an injection of his own poison, managed to survive. The Red Skull steals the plans for a massive American weapon known as the Power Drill. Using these plans, the Red Skull builds the Power Drill and turns it loose on Brooklyn in another clear Nazi attack on America. Captain America and Bucky, working with the police, manage to force the Nazis to retreat. At the same time, two con men impersonate Captain America and Bucky; these imposters are captured by the Red Skull’s men and are executed. The Red Skull lowers his guard, thinking his enemies dead, thus leaving an opening for the real heroes to save the day. During the ensuing fight a bomb goes off, killing the Red Skull. The second case of Captain America no. 3, “The Hunchback of Hollywood and the Movie Murder,” shows the soldiers of Fort Lehigh, with Steve Rogers among them, being cast as extras in a medieval film designed to be propaganda against tyrants and the Fuhrer himself. During filming, a series of murders are committed by a grotesque hunchback. The hunchback is revealed to be Talbot, the leading actor. Talbot admits he was trying to derail the film because he is, in fact, a Nazi supporter. The third case is titled “The Queer Case of the Murdering Butterfly and the Ancient Mummies.” This case is another of the few not involving the Nazis. In this story, a museum has just accepted a new exhibit from ancient Egypt.

museum is plagued by a giant butterfly stealing the precious artifacts. Bucky, attempting to stop the thefts, gets himself captured. Captain America then discovers that the giant butterfly is merely the curator of the museum in a costume. After stopping the butterfly, the curator reveals the location of Bucky. Captain America saves both his sidekick and the day.10

Captain America no. 4, the June 1941 issue, contains four cases: “Captain America and the Unholy Legion,” “Captain America and Ivan the Terrible,” “The Case of the Fake Money Fiends,” and “Horror Hospital.” In “Captain America and the Unholy Legion,” murders are taking place all over the city, and the killers are the homeless. Readers see the homeless convene in an abandoned building where the password for entry is, “down with democracy.” The homeless are revealed to be Nazis in disguise who are donating their earnings to Germany and doing Hitler’s dirty work. Bucky sneaks into the secret hideout but, lacking the swastika brand, is quickly recognized as an outsider and captured. After freeing Bucky, Captain America follows one of the Nazis to a German submarine lurking just offshore. The heroes beach the U-boat and capture the remaining Nazi killers, thwarting yet another plan of invasion. “Captain America and Ivan the Terrible” pits Captain America and Bucky against Ivan the Terrible and his tyrannical ways. Rather than facing off against Nazis, the duo takes down Ivan the Terrible and forces him to abdicate the throne to his brother, Peter. Bucky then wakes up, revealing that the entire story has simply been a dream. In “The Case of the Fake Money Fiends” Captain America discovers a counterfeiting gang. These men are operating in a

---

10 Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Captain America no. 3, (New York: Timely Publications, 1941).
haunted house and they dress up as ghosts to keep people away. Captain America and Bucky punch past the “ghosts” and stop the operation. The last case of issue no. 4, “Horror Hospital,” starts with an injured Bucky being sent to a creepy hospital. Bucky discovers that the doctor there is responsible for creating monsters and feeding his nurses and patients to them. Captain America, fearful for Bucky, jumps to the rescue, ending both the experiments and the doctor’s career.\footnote{Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, \textit{Captain America no. 4}, (New York: Timely Publications, 1941).}

\textit{Captain America no. 5} was released in August 1941; Timely Comics did not produce a July issue. The first case in this issue is “The Ringmaster of Death.” In this case, Captain America and Bucky go head to head with a Nazi circus leader who spins his wheel of death to determine which important American shall die next. After following the clues left at the first two murder scenes, Captain America is able to pinpoint the culprit and take him down. The next case, “The Gruesome Secret of the Dragon of Death,” depicts sea attacks on United States warships just outside of Hawaii by Orientals using a sea serpent to disguise their giant submarine. The Orientals’ plan is to force a volcano to erupt, thus trapping the United States Pacific Fleet. Captain America, after infiltrating the secret submarine, follows the Asians to the island, and blows their plan up in their face, thus saving the bulk of the United States Navy from Oriental attack. The third case is “Killers of the Bund.” In this case, the duo goes up against a Nazi gang specifically targeting what Bucky calls, “loyal German-American citizens.” The gang is recruiting these citizens, and beating them bloody if they refuse to join, to enact a plan to drench the city in sleeping gas so that Hitler may invade. After escaping his gangster captors, Captain America takes to the
skies in an enemy plane to shoot down the gassers. By ending the sleeping gas plan, he effectively stops yet another of Hitler’s invasions. The fourth case, “Captain America and the Terror that was Devil’s Island,” shows Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes traveling to a French prisoner-of-war camp that is holding an American pilot. After discovering that the French guards, under orders from the Nazis controlling France, are torturing their prisoners, Captain America and Bucky spring into action against them and free the pilot. The pilot flees to Greece, where he proceeds to once again fight against Nazi air strikes.12

In September of 1941, Timely Comics released *Captain America no. 6*, complete with three cases. In the first case, “Captain America Battles the Camera Fiend and his Darts of Doom,” a criminal photographer plots to steal the Crown Jewels as they make their way to America. To stop Captain America from thwarting his plans, the lethal photographer sets Bucky up to kill his partner by switching out Bucky’s camera for his own, which shoots poison darts. Narrowly avoiding death by poison, Captain America swings his shield up in a flash to block the death speeding towards his throat. Using his skills at deduction, Captain America figures out that the fiend is none other than Bucky’s teacher. Using this information, Captain America defeats the camera fiend and saves the Crown Jewels. In case two, “Meet the Fang: Arch Fiend of the Orient,” Captain America faces off against an Oriental gang leader, Fang, and his crew as they try to stop Chinese diplomats from securing a loan from the United States of America. The gang drugs Steve Rogers and abducts both Bucky and the diplomats. Captain America, bursting into the gang’s hideout,

12 Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Captain America no. 5*, (New York: Timely Publications, 1941).
arrives mere moments before Bucky quite literally loses his head. The two then fight off the gang members and defeat Fang, allowing a peace loan to be signed between China and the United States. The next case is "The Strange Case of Captain America and the Hangman." In this story, a man named Doctor Vardoff creates a new super strong material from which ropes and strings will be made. Immediately, he receives offers for the new material from criminals and the military; after declining the criminals, Vardoff is found dead, having been murdered by the Hangman. After several more bodies are found, Captain America finally realizes that the Hangman has really been Vardoff the entire time. Consumed by guilt over his actions, Vardoff requests that Captain America deliver the new material and the formula used to create it to the United States Army and then commits suicide.13

The next issue, Captain America no. 7, was released in October 1941. This comic contained three cases. The first case is "Captain America and the Red Skull." This case shows the return of the Nazi villain known as the Red Skull, who was previously thought dead. In this story, the Red Skull is once again picking off high-ranking American officials. This time, his calling card is an eerie whistle of Chopin’s Death March. During his investigation, Captain America discovers that the Red Skull is still, in fact, very much alive and pursues him. This pursuit leads to both parties jumping into the water; after being unable to locate the villain, Bucky declares that the Red Skull cannot swim and therefore must be dead. The case ends with the speculation, "...but is the dreaded Red Skull really dead – or will he return once more as a far greater menace than ever?" In the second case of this issue, "Death

13 Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Captain America no. 6, (New York: Timely Publications, 1941).
Loads the Bases,” Steve Rogers and Bucky are attending a baseball game where the players continue to be mysteriously murdered. In order to catch the ball players’ killers, Captain America and Bucky take their places on the team; while up to bat, the pitcher throws a baseball bomb at Captain America. This reveals the location of the murderer and Captain America and Bucky quickly leap to the chase, catching the criminal and once again making baseball a safe American pastime. The third case, “Horror Plays the Scales,” centers on the deaths of senators who vocalize full support for the British in World War II and also condemn the Nazi party. These senators are found dead in their homes from a bomb blast originating in their radios; the blast was triggered by a Nazi violinist airing his eerie concert over the radio waves. Both the violinist, and the fake butlers who placed the bombs in the radios, were employed by Hitler to destroy American support for Britain. Captain America, however, catches the culprits and once again sets the United States on the right path.14

*Captain America no. 8* was released in November of 1941 and contained three cases. In the first case of the issue, “The Strange Mystery of the Ruby of the Nile and its Heritage of Horror,” Captain America goes head to head with an ancient pharaoh. Henry Sanders found a ruby in the tomb of a pharaoh; in order to rid himself of the curse that he believed accompanied the gem, Sanders quickly sold it. As men are dropping dead left and right, Captain America sets out to find the criminal. It turns out that Sanders was the killer all along, and sought an extra profit by selling it only to reclaim the gem off of the bodies. The next case, “Murder Stalks the Maneuvers,”

---

shows the soldiers of Fort Lehigh participating in war games. However, the games
take a turn for the worse when men actually fall to the ground, wounded. Captain
America discovers that a malcontented soldier turned on his comrades and allied
himself with a French traitor. These men switched the ammunition and pitted the
Americans against themselves. Captain America stops both the turncoat and the
traitor, and in doing so makes Fort Lehigh a safe place once again. The final case of
this issue, “Captain America and the Case of the Black Witch,” deals with a young
woman seeking to fulfill the requirements of her uncle’s will; she must stay in a
haunted house for three nights in order to acquire the property. Captain America
and Bucky decide to keep watch lest harm befall the girl. The house is plagued by
ghosts and an evil witch trying to end the young woman’s life. However, Captain
America is not fooled by the antics and soon uncovers the real culprit, the girl’s
lawyer, who merely wanted the land for himself.15

The last Captain America issue to release in 1941 came out in December;
Captain America no. 9 featured three cases. In the “The White Death,” Captain
America and Bucky face a classic estate case. All the heirs gather at the estate for the
reading of the will and begin to be picked off by a mysterious killer. Captain America
deduces that the killer is one of them, simply trying to get a larger share of the
estate. He and Bucky capture the greedy killer and put things right once more. The
next case, “Captain America and the Man who could Not Die,” features an American
gangster, supposedly killed by the electric chair, who is going on a huge crime spree.
It is revealed that Nick Pinto’s (the gangster) death is merely a well-acted trick by

the coroner. Captain America goes after the fiend, captures him, and Pinto is sentenced to death again. In an escape attempt, he climbs the prison fence, which is actually electrified, unlike the chair, and meets his end. In the final case of *Captain America no. 9*, "The Case of the Black Talon," prominent American artists are being strangled by someone with a strange black hand. Captain America, following the clues, tracks the hand back to an auto accident where the artist Pascal lost his hand. A doctor managed to graph a death row inmate's hand to Pascal, but the murderous blood in the hand caused Pascal to only paint the images of the people he feels compelled to kill. Captain America, after being captured, breaks his bonds, then breaks the cycle of death by defeating Pascal. Pascal, however, gets away and lives to kill another day.16

In 1941, Captain America's first year, the super soldier faced all sorts of villains. The most notable among these were the Nazis. During a time when Hitler was a dominating force in Europe, Captain America showed audiences what could happen if he was not stopped: invasion. If Great Britain failed to stop Hitler and his Nazi party then Europe would fall, and if Europe fell, what was to stop Hitler from aiming his blitzkrieg at the United States of America next? In four different cases during 1941, Captain America stopped a potential invasion by the Nazis onto American soil. For instance, in *Captain America no. 4* he beaches a German U-boat just off of America's shore, and he joins with the soldiers of Fort Lehigh to stop a tank invasion in *Captain America no. 2*. However, Captain America was not real. If Hitler invaded the United States there would be no comic book super soldier to beat

back the enemy. But, in addition to the Captain America comics warning of what could happen if the Nazis were not stopped, they also instructed the audiences on what should be done to stop them.17

Two cases portrayed the United States of America coming to the aid of Great Britain. In *Captain America* no. 2, when Hitler and his forces capture the American financier Henry Baldwin just before he signs with Britain so that they can use him to bring down Europe, Captain America, portrayed as an extension of America herself, is there to stop it. He stops the plan so that America can continue to help Great Britain. The Captain America stories also show Hitler realizing that America's support of Britain was dangerous to him, hence the evil violinist going after the senators that supported the United States' tie with Britain in *Captain America* no. 7.

The Captain America stories were propaganda. Not only did they tell America to stand by Britain so that together they might stop the Nazi wave of destruction, but they also warned of what would happen if that wave were to come to the United States of America.18

The Captain America comics of 1941 also warned of another enemy: Japan. Three cases feature Captain America facing off against "Oriental" enemies. He fights the unkillable giants, the gang leader Fang, and the Orientals in the sea serpent submarine. Of these, the case "The Gruesome Secret of the Dragon of Death" is most clearly a warning to the hero's audience. The Orientals are in a hidden submarine sneak attacking American warships just off the shore of Hawaii with an ultimate goal of destroying the entirety of the United States' Pacific Fleet. Looking at this case

with modern eyes, it seems less like a warning and more like a prophecy of what was to come on December 7, 1941. Captain America may have been presented as a comic but in reality its 1941 run was just as much propaganda as entertainment.

Captain America entered the American pop culture scene in March 1941 and he still has not left it. The Captain America comic series that began in 1941 continues to this day. Prominent comic storylines include Captain America no. 1 (1941), the very beginning of the hero's grasp upon the hearts of Americans; Captain America vol. 4, issues 1 through 6 (2002), the storyline where Captain America reveals his true identity to the world; and Captain America vol. 5, issues 1 through 14 (2005-2006), where Captain America chases down the deadly Winter Soldier.19

The red, white, and blue hero has dominated more than just the comic sector of pop culture. Marvel comics were sent from the page to the silver screen with stories such as Blade, a Marvel Comic story made into film by New Line Cinemas in 1998. In 2008, Marvel Comics created the Marvel Cinematic Universe (commonly shortened to MCU) with the release of Iron Man. Since then, Marvel has produced origin stories for three other Avengers (The Hulk, Captain America, and Thor) and has woven these origins into the foundation of the Avengers, a story that continues in the MCU.20

---

Captain America has played a large role in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In his debut, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, released in 2011, Marvel takes Captain America's origin story to the big screen. Rogers then appears as a member of the Avengers in the film *Marvel's The Avengers*, released a year later. By this point, Steve Rogers is no longer a hero of the past, but rather a member of modern society, as he had been frozen in ice, allowing him to live from World War II into the 2000s virtually un-aged. Captain America's latest presentation in cinemas was *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, where Captain America is forced to revisit his past by facing off with the Winter Soldier, a man also from the World War II era.\(^{21}\)

Marvel Comics' Captain America has also appeared in other forms of pop culture. In 2006, Captain America was featured as a playable character in the video game *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* for the Playstation 2 and other consoles, and has appeared in several video games since then. He has also appeared in many television shows, such as *Marvel's Super Heroes* (1966), which featured an entire season focused on Captain America that ran for thirteen episodes. Another, more recent, example of Captain America's portrayals in television shows is his part in *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes!*, which ran for two seasons from September 2010 to May, 2013.\(^{22}\) The stories of Captain America have truly stood the test of time. From the comic *Captain America no. 1*, released in 1941, to his upcoming

\(^{21}\) *Captain America: The First Avenger*, directed by Joe Johnston (Marvel Studios, 2011), DVD.; *Marvel's The Avengers*, directed by Joss Whedon (Marvel Studios, 2012), DVD.; *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo (Marvel Studios, 2014), DVD.

appearance in the movie *Avengers: Age of Ultron* on May 1, 2015, Captain America has remained a prominent character in pop culture.23

Before going any further with this examination of Captain America and his relationship to the Nazis in pop culture, it must be clarified as to why the stories of Captain America are a good representation of Nazi portrayals in pop culture. Captain America serves as a good representation because of how long it has lasted. As it was created in 1941, the original story arc of Captain America was just before, and during, wartime. As examined earlier, it can be analyzed as a source of propaganda. It also allows readers to look back and get a sense of American feelings towards the Nazis during that time. The story has also continued through to modern day America, therefore allowing the same examinations to be made of today's feelings towards the Nazis and what they did. While not every story arc has Captain America facing off with the Nazis, the ones that do offer valuable insight.

By March 1941, Europe was already engaged in a bloody war against Germany, Hitler, and his Nazi regime. At this time, however, the United States of America, under the leadership of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was not yet an official part of the conflict. Despite not officially being at war, President Roosevelt made sure his people knew exactly who the enemy was. President Roosevelt made this especially clear through his garden hose speech, which he gave to justify the Lend-Lease program the country was utilizing as a means to supply Britain during their struggle against Hitler.

In its first release in March 1941, *Captain America no. 1*, case no. 1, “Meet Captain America,” writers Joe Simon and Jack Kirby clearly reflected the feelings of Americans at that time that Germany and the Nazis were the enemy. This is shown largely through the vocabulary used to refer to the Germans. In one instance, Germans are called “vermin” and in another they are referred to as “skunks.” This colorful use of derogatory terms for the United States’ unofficial enemy by the writers clearly illustrates how pop culture, specifically Captain America, can reflect the feelings of the time in which it was created.24

While comics are often a good pop culture reflection of the time, Captain America is especially good for analyzing the portrayals of Nazis. This is because Captain America delved directly into the controversial issue of the war with Germany. Other comics of the time, notably the great Superman, often avoided the issue. During the time before the United States would enter into World War II, Superman was portrayed as he always had been. He would fight crime, stop the super villain Lex Luthor from taking over Metropolis, and stay safely within his fictional comic book bubble. It was not until October 1941 that Superman decided to deal with the conflict. In a story entitled, “How Superman Would End the War,” appearing in Look magazine, Superman encountered not only Hitler, but also Joseph Stalin. He flew into Hitler’s bunker, grabbed the warmongering Nazi, and loudly declared, “I’d like to land a strictly non-Aryan sock on your jaw, but there’s no time for that!” He then swooped in on Stalin, grabbed him as well, and deposited the two men safely, and unmolested, in the League of Nations headquarters, where they

24 Simon and Kirby, *Captain America no. 1.*
were sentenced like two children caught with their hands in the cookie jar. This imagery illustrates that the writers of Superman took the easy way out. There is no controversy behind simply policing the two bad men. Superman even declared how he would like to punch Hitler, but refrains, unlike the iconic punch that Captain America delivered directly to the Fuhrer's jaw on the cover of his very first issue.  

Superman, however, was not the only comic hero to mostly stay away from the issue of the war. The Caped Crusader himself, Batman, and his Boy Wonder, Robin, also kept to their own fictional city of Gotham and dealt with their own super villains. This is what makes Captain America such an educational piece of pop culture when used to analyze the portrayals of Nazis. Not only did the super soldier immediately dive directly into the conflict and start rooting Nazi spies out of American institutions, but he also never lived in or kept to a fictional universe. While he often fought fictional super villains alongside the real villains, he fought them in a real setting. Captain America was always the hero of the United States of America. He fought for the country as it was, unofficially facing off with Nazis that would soon become very real, very dangerous, and very official enemies.  

The first portrayal of Nazis to be analyzed comes from the very origin of Captain America himself. The basis of the Captain America story is that Steve Rogers is injected with the Super Soldier Serum, which turns him into a soldier with strength and speed increased to the pinnacle of man's possibility. He is then left as the only super soldier because the serum was destroyed by a Nazi spy. However,

---

26 Roy Thomas, introduction to *Golden Age Captain America*. 
this story is not entirely true. In the movie, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, the doctor heading Project: Rebirth, Dr. Abraham Erskine, did his original research in Germany, before Hitler came to power. After declining to create super soldiers for the Fuhrer, Dr. Erskine left Germany, defecting not only to the United States of America for residency but also joining their side of the war as well. However, before Dr. Erskine left Germany, Johann Schmidt, otherwise known as the Red Skull and a member of Hitler’s inner circle, injected himself with an early version of the serum. While giving Schmidt advanced strength and speed, the serum had other effects as well. Schmidt’s skin turned blood red and his face became sunken, resembling the skull of a dead man rather than one as alive as Johann Schmidt.27

The difference in the effects of the Super Soldier Serum on the Nazi Johann Schmidt and the American Steve Rogers represents the first important portrayal of Nazis that the Captain America stories provide. In *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Dr. Erskine explains the men’s different reactions to the serum, “The serum was not ready, but more important the man. The serum amplifies everything that is inside, so good becomes great; bad becomes worse.” This quote essentially says that the Nazi was inherently bad and the American was inherently good. This explains why Johann Schmidt became demon-like, with red skin and a skull as a face, when he injected himself with the Super Soldier Serum. Meanwhile, when Steve Rogers was injected with the Super Soldier Serum, his muscles grew into perfectly chiseled abs and pectorals, his jaw line was defined, and he even became slightly more tan; he developed nearly all the features one must possess in order to be considered

27 *Captain America: The First Avenger*, directed by Joe Johnston.
handsome by society. Rogers became a hero, an angel to deliver the Americans from the evils of Germany, while Schmidt became a devil devoted to bringing the good people down.28

The Red Skull is one of the most notable villains from the Captain America series and arguably the one with the most vivid imagery. The character’s first appearance was in March 1941, in Captain America no. 1. In this comic, the Red Skull is simply a typical Nazi wearing a mask. Captain America, and his sidekick Bucky, defeat the Red Skull, leading to his death. This, however, was not the last of the Red Skull. In Captain America no. 7, released in October 1941, the Red Skull makes his return by revealing that the man who was killed was merely his servant. The Red Skull from the early comics was not a by-product of the Super Soldier Serum. In the comics, Johann Schmidt was found as a young man and trained personally by Hitler himself. To increase the effectiveness of his new servant, Hitler gave Schmidt a uniform sporting the demonic red skin and skull. Despite not having the serum, as he does in Captain America: The First Avenger, the Red Skull in the comics is still an opposite of Captain America. Just as Captain America is a symbol for America to rally behind, the Red Skull is a symbol for the Nazis. His juxtaposition with the unbreakable Steve Rogers makes him a constant reminder of how the Nazis are evil and the Americans are good, a reminder that even at a glance speaks volumes. As

28 Captain America: The First Avenger, directed by Joe Johnston.
"The Marvel Encyclopedia" says, "The Red Skull and Captain America are symbolic of tyranny and freedom.\(^{29}\)

The next important portrayal of Nazis in the Captain America series is found in comics. As discussed earlier, Hitler and the Nazis are very common enemies throughout the Captain America series, especially during 1941. Throughout the comics, the vernacular used to refer to Nazis is very negative. They are called "ruthless warmongers," "vermin," "skunks," and "ratzis." In one instance, Hitler is even referred to as the "phewrer." Language like this is used to quickly communicate to readers that these people are evil, that they are the bad guys. This is seen even more clearly when juxtaposed with the vernacular used to describe Captain America. He is called a variety of positive names, such as "America's savior."

The negative portrayals regarding vernacular do not stop with the words used to refer to the Nazis, however. The Nazis themselves are portrayed as uneducated and their English is broken and halted. Their accents are thick and their words are mispronounced. When they do speak clearly, they use phrases such as "dogs of democracy." By utilizing all of the nuances of language, the writers of Captain America were able to create a very negative image of the Nazis, reinforcing the idea that these people were truly awful.\(^{30}\)

The writers also use the images themselves to communicate the inherent differences between the good Americans and British and the evil Nazis. In many

---


\(^{30}\) Simon and Kirby, *Captain America* no. 1.
instances, the Nazi characters are drawn as grotesque and deformed. They look like the monsters that they are portrayed to be. For example, the Red Skull wears the red skin and sunken skull of a demon, and Rathcone has nails like claws and fangs in his mouth. The Nazis' actions are deemed monstrous and so the images of them were drawn to be monstrous as well.31

Lastly, the swastika is used as a symbol of evil in the comics, as it has come to be in reality as well. The cover of Captain America no. 1 features five swastikas prominently displayed in the room Hitler and his men are standing in. This cover also depicts Captain America directly in the center of it, sporting a red, white, and blue costume bearing the stars and stripes of democracy. This cover alone illustrates the symbolism behind the swastika. The men bearing the guns are covered in the symbol while the one man faces off against them with only his fists. By using the swastika copiously in relation to the Nazis, readers can easily identify in a quick glance who is good and who is evil. While the swastika is the symbol of the Nazi party, the comics clearly use it to delineate bad guy from good guy, villain from hero, instead of merely delineating party lines.32

The last important Nazi portrayal from the Captain America series comes from the movies starring Captain America. These movies, Captain America: The First Avenger and Captain America: The Winter Soldier, were both produced through Marvel Studios as part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. These movies were created after the MCU had already attracted a large fan base and were released in movie theaters around the world. As such, they reached a far larger audience than the

31 Simon and Kirby, Captain America no. 1.
32 Ibid.
comics were ever intended to. Because they are for a wider audience, the movies, released long after the Nazis were defeated in World War II, are more politically correct. While it is still clear that the Nazis are the enemy, they are merely referred to as Nazis or Germans. There is no outright derogatory language like that of the comics. The movies were produced in America at a time when Germany and the United States were at peace, with no threat of going to war. As such, there is no hostility towards Germany or its people in the movies. This being said, the Holocaust, the mass extermination of Jewish people by the Nazis, has become common knowledge and has made the Nazis not just military enemies, but truly evil people. Because this is common knowledge, the portrayals of Nazis shifted in the movies, from enemy to monster.\footnote{33 Captain America: The First Avenger, directed by Joe Johnston.; Captain America: The Winter Soldier, directed by Anthony Russo.}

While not using the derogatory language to make the Nazis out as monsters, the movies do utilize imagery in a stronger way than the comics do. In the movie Captain America: The First Avenger, the main Nazi, Johann Schmidt, actually is a monster instead of a man in a costume. As stated earlier, the Super Soldier Serum turns Schmidt into a red-skinned monster. By making the villains monsters instead of merely cold and calculating humans, the movies still manage to portray the Nazis as not only villains, or military enemies, but as inherently evil.\footnote{34 Captain America: The First Avenger, directed by Joe Johnston.}

An interesting fact about the Captain America movies, specifically Captain America: The First Avenger, which takes place during World War II, is that the swastika is notably minimized, especially when compared to its copious use in the
comics. Viewers see several Nazi officials in full uniform but the swastika on the armband is almost always out of view. Instead, the focus is placed on the fictional Hydra (the organization that the Red Skull created) logo. The lack of swastikas and other Nazi symbolism makes this fun and action-packed comic book film easier to handle by keeping the painful and hard to comprehend parts of World War II out of sight and out of mind, thus making it more appropriate for a larger audience.

Pop culture can be just as much of an educator as any book or lecture. While pieces like Captain America can be traced through time to show how a group of people is presented before, during, and after wartime, they can also be used to determine what a culture deems important. This can be seen by the actual historical events a piece of pop culture references. For instance, Captain America: The First Avenger references the activities of a group known as the Monuments Men. These men travelled through a war-torn Europe in order to save priceless pieces of art and history from being destroyed. Because the Monuments Men were referenced in a huge movie like Captain America: The First Avenger, it is clear that American society deems this an important event in history that should be remembered.

Pop culture can also be used as a tool for education. The Captain America series teaches a lot about World War II. As a comic, a piece of pop culture widely accepted as intended for children, it educates its readers on the basics of this war. It details that Hitler was the enemy, and that his followers were called Nazis. It also shows that Germany was fascist at the time. For children, this piece of pop culture is a fun way to learn about the basics of a war that they might not learn about until

35 Captain America: The First Avenger, directed by Joe Johnston.; Captain America: The Winter Solider, directed by Anthony Russo.
later in their education. Pop culture, however, is not merely an educational tool for children. The graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* takes a far darker and more realistic look at the Second World War. Readers actually go into the death camps and experience the Holocaust with its characters. The author, Art Spiegelman, took his father’s description of his time spent in the concentration camps and relayed the story through imagery. Books like this allow older audiences to learn about historical events like the Holocaust from those who were actually affected by it.36

Captain America is a truly vital piece of pop culture. By examining this series, readers can learn how, during its first year, 1941, the Captain America comics served as propaganda for American audiences. They can also see how the series as a whole portrayed its most classic enemy, the Nazis, by looking at important facets of the storyline, such as the relationship between the Red Skull and Captain America. The differences in the way Nazis are portrayed not only through different mediums, such as comics and movies, but also at different points in time can be seen through analysis of the series as well. While Captain America is a great source of history and education, he is first and foremost a comic book hero. Therefore, regardless of how he and his creators educate their readers, the patriotic hero’s first duty is to entertain. From the first time he slammed his fist into the “phewer’s” jaw to when he joined the ranks of elite heroes as a member of the Avengers, Captain America was a hero who stole, treasured, and defended the hearts of Americans.37

---

37 Simon and Kirby, *Captain America no. 1.; Marvel’s The Avengers*, directed by Joss Whedon (Marvel Studios, 2012), DVD.
Bibliography

The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes!. Aired September 22, 2010, on Disney XD.


Marvel's Super Heroes. Aired September 1, 1966


