Oh What a Lovely War

A lesson plan inspired by the Northern Stage production of Joan Littlewood’s OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR by Theatre Workshop, Charles Chilton, Gerry Raffles and Members of the Original Cast. Title suggested by Ted Allan.

KS2 History

National Curriculum: Primary History

This lesson plan supports the Year 6 requirement: Study of an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066 (this may be 20th or 21st century).

Learning Objectives

Pupils will gain a coherent knowledge and understanding of Britain’s past and that of the wider world.

Suggested Classroom Activity

Show the pupils the four videos featuring songs from the stage show Oh What a Lovely War. Show the pupils the selection of WW1 posters.

Ask the class:

• What is propaganda?

  Propaganda is information used to promote a political cause or point of view.

After a short discussion, divide the class into four groups; give each group lyrics of one song to study along with the sheet of poster images. Ask the groups to analyse their song and match it to a poster which shares a similar sentiment or theme.

Pupils can be prompted with the following questions:
• Which of the posters illustrated were used to recruit men to join the army?

• Which of the posters illustrated were used to recruit women to help with the war effort at home?

• Which of the posters illustrated were used to keep morale high at home?

• Which of the posters illustrated were used to encourage people to save food?

Further group discussion around the following questions can develop the themes introduced in the activity.

1. Why did the government need more troops? Why wasn't the army big enough?

Possible answers include:

• at the outbreak of war the army was geared up for a different type of warfare - the British Expeditionary Force was relatively small

• the emergence of trench warfare over a huge distance needed a lot of men to man the trench system]

• the war was being fought on many fronts

2. Why did the government need women to work? Where did they find employment and what organisations were set up to help?

Possible answers include:

• the country’s workforce was being depleted as men joined up. Women made an increasingly varied contribution, working in labs, mills and factories

• the First World War was fought on a huge industrial scale. Vast quantities of munitions were needed to feed the guns and a variety of products were required to supply both military and civilian needs.

3. Why did the government feel it necessary to use propaganda to keep morale high at home

Possible answers include:

• the war continued for a lot longer than expected. Troops marched off in August 1914 with shouts of “we’ll be home by Christmas!”

• Casualties were huge - the Central Statistical Office stated that the total number of soldiers killed in action from the UK was 704,803

• At various points it seemed as though Germany might have the advantage, particularly when the Russian Tsar was overthrown by the Bolsheviks in 1917

• The government needed the civilian population on side - unrest at home would seriously impair the war effort
Task:

Ask groups or individuals to design their own poster or write a song to fit with one of the propaganda aims.

Resources, Notes and Links

Four video clips featuring songs from Oh What a Lovely War. Lesson requires print-outs of song lyrics and posters.

Films of other versions of the songs are available on Youtube:

Keep the Home Fires Burning (Till the boys come home) 1918
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mngRoSIJJUI

We Don't Want To Lose You (But We Think You Ought To Go)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTJxwOs2_bA&list=UUnR7Y5S4DnFVgzkNB7o69

12 Bombed Last Night (aka Drunk Last Night, Goddamned Dutch)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUHh5uAcaBw&list=PLCB5E933A851C0A26&index=2

WW1 images & songs "Goodbye-ee" by Courtland And Jeffries 1918
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8I-OlduoEU

PDFs:

Synopsis Oh! What a lovely war

The words for the four songs featured

Posters of WW1

Development Activity

Ask the groups to analyse the song ‘Bombed Last Night’ (the second verse is Gassed last night).

Ask the groups:

• why is this song different from the others?
• why doesn't it fit the propaganda aims?

This could lead you to look in more detail at the play Oh! What a Lovely War.