Limited war, limited enthusiasm: Sexuality, disillusionment, survival, and the changing landscape of war culture in Korean War-era comic books and soldier iconography

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how Korean War-era comic books and soldier-produced iconography between 1950 and 1953 reflected the conflict and helped construct ideal soldier masculinities. Differentiating between romantic, soldier-produced, and realist imagery, this thesis argues that comic books—traditionally treated as low-brow children’s literature—articulated diverse and sophisticated discussions about the nature of warfare and its impact on manhood. Soldiers and artists reflected a war that came on the heels of World War II, and the disillusionment expressed in these sources reflected a broader cultural conflict between representing World War II sentimentalism and the new, limited war in Korea. This struggle resulted in contradictory presentations of soldiers and masculinity in comic books. In particular, realist narratives explored in chapter three invoked an alternative discussion of war that decoupled manhood from warfare. The anti-war rhetoric used by Entertaining Comics’ realist narratives constitutes a new phenomenon during the Korean War, and laid the foundation for subsequent anti-war critiques during the 1960s. Comic books, newspapers, film, and other media anchor this thesis, and allow the following pages to contextualize comic book imagery in broader 1950s war culture.
between North Korea, aided by China, and South Korea, aided by the UN with the U.S. as principal participant. The fighting expanded into a limited border war between the South’s newly formed Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) and the North Korean border constabulary as well as the North’s Korean People’s Army (KPA). The North launched 10 cross-border guerrilla incursions in order to draw ROKA units away from their guerrilla-suppression campaign in the South.