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OF THE
FIRST
WORLD
WAR**

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POSTERS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

David Bownes
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CONTENTS

THE POSTER WAR

POSTERS OF 1914

POSTERS OF 1915

POSTERS OF 1916

POSTERS OF 1917

POSTERS OF 1918
FURTHER READING

THE POSTER WAR

The Great War (1914–18) was the first truly modern conflict, fought on a global and industrial scale. It required the complete mobilisation of the countries involved, resulting in unparalleled state intervention into the lives of ordinary people, from conscription to the employment of women, food rationing and the gradual imposition of restrictions affecting many aspects of daily life. Communicating these changes effectively, while maintaining public morale, was recognised by all warring nations as an essential element in securing military victory. In an age before the Internet, television or radio, posters emerged as the ideal medium for mass communication, seized upon by governments, private organisations, charities and even retailers to get their war messages across to the widest possible audience. In this respect, posters were especially suited to the task at hand as they could be cheaply produced in very large numbers and distributed in a range of sizes to maximise potential display opportunities.

At the outset of the war in August 1914, the poster was already a mature advertising tool, which had developed over centuries from crude letterpress notices to sophisticated full-colour lithographs. Continental posters, in particular, had established a reputation for considerable artistic merit, pioneered by the likes of Jules Chéret, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Alphonse Mucha during the late nineteenth century. In Britain commercial artists, including Dudley Hardy and the ‘poster king’, John Hassall, popularised a distinctive domestic approach, typified by the use of bold flat colour, a central (often comic) figure and a short direct slogan (see *Skegness is SO Bracing*). Together with the fledgling advertising industry, and supported by the patronage of leading retailers, manufacturers, theatres and transport companies, such artists helped to create a visual language for the poster which dominated the hoardings in the years before the war and was well understood by consumers.