

Teaching History with Comic Books: A Case Study of Violence, War, and the Graphic Novel

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THIS ARTICLE IS THE PRODUCT of an unlikely collaboration. One of us is a life-long fan of comic books. The other is a more recent convert. One of us is a graduate student in American history. The other is an assistant professor of African history. Although our research interests may appear to be quite different, we have found substantial common ground in our discussions about teaching. In this essay, we present a case study that demonstrates how graphic novels can be utilized in the history classroom. More specifically, we discuss the benefits (and challenges) of using comic books to teach undergraduates about war and violence. While much of our discussion focuses on the historical particularities of Uganda, our ideas and experiences are likely to resonate with a wide variety of educators, both within and outside the discipline of history.

We are not the first to utilize comic books in the classroom, nor are we the only ones to write about our experiences doing so. Indeed, there is a growing body of literature examining the ways in which scholars have incorporated graphic novels into their lesson plans.¹ Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus* series is perhaps the most commonly utilized, particularly within classes that focus on the Second World War and the Holocaust.² It is not, however, the only available option for historians. There are a number of lesser-known, but equally compelling texts that explore war, displacement, and genocide in a variety of different contexts.³

Thus far, very little has been written about these less familiar comic books.⁴ This essay introduces readers to one such work—*Unknown Soldier*, by Joshua Dysart and Alberto Ponticelli, which we believe does an excellent job of complicating students' understanding of war and violence in Africa.

Although this project has been a collective endeavor from the beginning, we have written about our experiences from two distinct subject positions. In the first section, Mauricio Castro discusses the development of the *Unknown Soldier* series, an early predecessor to the graphic novel utilized in this case study. He draws a number of parallels between the original comic book series, which was set in an undisclosed location during World War Two, and its more recent incarnation, which takes place in northern Uganda in 2002. In the next section, Alicia Decker analyzes *Unknown Soldier: Haunted House* as a classroom text.⁵ Here, she not only focuses on her rationale for using the book, but also discusses its efficacy as a pedagogical tool. She considers student reactions, as well as her own interpretations of the text. It should be noted that although Decker was the course instructor, Castro offered valuable feedback based on classroom observation and subsequent discussions.

Historicizing Wartime Comics: The Origins of *Unknown Soldier* (Castro)

I discovered and fell in love with comic books when I was eleven years old and visiting the United States from my native Costa Rica. Within the confines of the comics' pages, I found a world of engaging characters, of rights, of wrongs, and of excitement. Later, as a teenager, I would grow tired of comics and leave them behind until I was in college and I was introduced to Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* and Grant Morrison's *New X-Men* in the summer after the release of the *Spider-Man* film. I found comics somewhat changed, more adult in most cases, but largely the same. This second discovery and engagement has lasted far longer and even drove me down the path of becoming a comic book creator, co-writing two features which were published in a small press anthology in 2007 and 2008. Comics even had a hand in my acceptance into graduate school; my writing sample used comics to reflect anxieties about communism and nuclear proliferation in the United States in the early 1960s.

I considered comics a useful source in the study of American popular culture. Like most historians, I primarily utilized comic books as a primary source reflecting some aspect of the time and place that produced them.⁶ In my second year of graduate education, however, I took a women's studies course on militarism taught by Professor Decker. Part of the

course involved a militarization exercise based on the work of Cynthia Enloe.⁷ We had been challenged to assess the extent to which an everyday object had been militarized. I evaluated the militarization of an issue of DC Comics's *Wonder Woman*. This exercise opened my eyes to the possibility of using comics in the history classroom beyond their potential as primary sources.

As that semester was drawing to a close, I became aware of a new comic by Joshua Dysart and Alberto Ponticelli titled *Unknown Soldier*. The name was vaguely familiar, calling up indistinct references to war comics of a period before I was even born. This version, however, was set in Uganda and dealt with the military conflict there. Given Decker's area of specialization, I decided to bring this new comic to her attention. We thus began a collaboration that led to her inclusion of the first *Unknown Soldier* collection in one of her undergraduate courses and our co-authoring this piece.⁸ As the half of the writing team more familiar with comics and their history, I took it upon myself to write on *Unknown Soldier* as a concept and as a commodity. In the section that follows, I illustrate the history of the book's publisher, discuss the series that have carried the name *Unknown Soldier* in the past, and provide some analysis of the material in the *Unknown Soldier: Haunted House* collection.

My intent in writing this section is not only to analyze the themes and history of this particular graphic novel, but also to showcase the types of issues that this medium can bring to the forefront in a historical discussion. The comics industry has seen a flourishing of new, independent voices and an increase in the maturity of much of its subject matter in the past four decades. With this analysis of *Unknown Soldier: Haunted House*, my co-author and I seek to present one of these voices as an example of the types of issues that a graphic novel can help illustrate inside the history classroom. My analysis of Dysart and Ponticelli's work is meant to show that, far from being an impediment to instruction, comics can serve as valuable teaching tools both through their strengths and through their weaknesses. This type of exploration can be replicated in classes dealing with different time periods and geographical areas through a similar analysis of other historically themed works of sequential storytelling, a small sampling of which have been included in the appendix to this article. Having gained a new appreciation of comics as an adult, I seek to combine that fondness with academic curiosity to illustrate potential new pedagogical avenues for the history classroom.

As with any other text, we must consider the origins of the comics that we bring into the classroom and who is producing them. The Vertigo imprint, publisher of *Unknown Soldier: Haunted House*, for example, is a large part of the reason I came back to comics. The trade paperback

collections of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* introduced me to a different kind of comic, one that greatly contrasted the gaudy excesses that had driven me from the medium in the mid-1990s and that convinced me that I could enjoy comics as an adult. Vertigo is a subdivision of DC Comics, which has produced classic comic book characters such as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. Vertigo is DC's "mature readers" line—something that sets it apart from the rest of the company's publishing output. While the great majority of the comic book buying market consists of adults of college-age and above, mature readers comics tend to have greater latitude in their handling of controversial issues. This is not to say that mainstream superhero comics completely shy away from social consciousness or relevant real world issues, but corporate ownership of classic characters often leads to the prevention of possible controversy. In a world where comic book properties provide the basis for Hollywood blockbusters, the thought of negative publicity arising from sensitive issues being handled in superhero comics often makes stockholders nervous. A mature readers line allows a publisher to handle sensitive issues with greater latitude than their main line allows. This is similar to the way in which a film studio might produce R-rated prestige material while making most of their profit from PG and PG-13 blockbusters. Much like the prestige work created by studios, most Vertigo titles survive on critical acclaim and better sales of collected editions that make up for the low monthly sales of individual issues.

Now the home of mostly original concepts, Vertigo grew out of the revival and reinvention of several DC Comics characters during the 1980s. While the imprint did not come into being until 1993, the work of several British authors assembled by DC editor Karen Berger would set the tone for what would become Vertigo. Unlike many of the mainstream comics published in the late 1980s and 1990s, the tone of each title was often set by the writers instead of the art teams. It was thus that creators like Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, and Grant Morrison took seemingly outdated characters like Swamp Thing, the Sandman, the Doom Patrol, and Animal Man and established the basis for a mature readers line. Many of the proto-Vertigo and early titles under the imprint were solidly located within the horror genre. The mature readers label on the titles allowed the writers and artists to not only deal with particular issues, but also to present more graphic imagery and situations. While the line's strong horror origins in no way prevented the development of other genres, Vertigo continues to publish horror books to the present.

The Dysart-Ponticelli reimagining of *Unknown Soldier* in many ways continues the horror and revival trends that defined the early Vertigo titles. The original Unknown Soldier character was a sort of globetrotting

master of disguise who operated in different theaters of the Second World War. The character first appeared in *Star Spangled War Stories* #151, cover dated July 1970, in a story written and illustrated by Joe Kubert. Touted as “a man who **no one knows—but—is known by everyone,**” the Unknown Soldier was an American operative whose early adventures directly related to specific historical events.⁹ In his first appearance, for example, the Unknown Soldier helped lead the surviving crews that had participated in the Doolittle Raid to safety. As the series progressed, the audience was shown the Soldier’s origin as a nameless infantryman whose face had been irreparably scarred in the Philippines after he and his brother attempted to hold off a Japanese attack. The character’s iconic look, a bandage-covered face, was explained in the story, but beyond this, it served as a patriotic tribute to the unknown soldiers of previous American wars. In denying the Unknown Soldier an identity, his creators thus left open the possibility for him to be any man, or at least any Caucasian male, in the armed forces.¹⁰

These early adventures served as a patriotic homage to the American soldier. One of the themes it sought to illustrate was the capability and bravery of the American G.I. as an individual. In the character’s second appearance, he remarks on this importance while stating, “Strange...How sometimes **one man** in a pivotal position...can exert an influence on hundreds—even **thousands**—of others!”¹¹ This sentiment was repeated several times in the character’s early appearances as he single-handedly carried out missions vital to the outcome of the war. The tone of these early stories bolstered the idea of American power and American intervention throughout the globe as a force for good. And yet, given the time period in which the stories were produced, this stance seems to avoid directly addressing the controversy over American involvement in Vietnam. The series’ World War Two setting might have been a conscious decision on the part of the creators and DC Comics to avoid the controversy while still honoring the dead of any conflict.

Historian Bradford W. Wright has written on the lack of commercial viability for comics set in the Vietnam War. Wright notes that most comic book publishers followed the larger trend in entertainment, with the important exception of rock ‘n’ roll, of avoiding all but passing references to the divisive conflict.¹² Of the Vietnam comic books that did appear, Wright notes that they were unable to find a lasting audience in a market dominated by superhero comics that, at the time, were not well-matched to grim conflict. He presents Charlton Comics’s non-superhero war comics set in Vietnam as an example of the commercial perils that lay in dealing with the conflict. Charlton’s comics were infused with a pro-war sentiment that bordered on propaganda, which—if the low sales numbers are any

indication—did not resonate with the youth market they were trying to reach.¹³ Given the failure of their competitors in attempting to publish Vietnam War comics during the late 1960s, it is hardly surprising that the bulk of DC's war comics were set in World War Two. They could circumvent the dangers of a controversial war by setting their stories in a conflict that still held the popular imagination.¹⁴

This is not to say that as mainstream comic books were becoming more socially conscious, the creative teams producing *Unknown Soldier* stories completely ignored the issues of the day. Several times during the early years of the Soldier's feature in *Star Spangled War Stories*, the creators used the book's setting in past decades to illustrate race problems in the United States. In "Invasion Game," the Unknown Soldier is surprised to discover that "Chat Noir," the French resistance leader he is supposed to meet during a mission, is actually an African American soldier. The character would go on to become the faceless protagonist's aide during the series, but in their initial meeting, they clash over Chat Noir's bitterness at having been "**railroaded into a court-martial...because I was a top sergeant...and black!**"¹⁵ As the series progressed, it continually dealt with the ambiguities and tragedies of war, largely shedding its previously jingoistic tone.

In a later story, the Unknown Soldier and Chat Noir must work together to stop the conflict between segregated army units after several African American soldiers are gunned down in a café. The Caucasian troops are suspected by the African American troops and violence almost erupts until the Unknown Soldier and Chat Noir convince them that the crime was perpetrated by German infiltrators. This allows the units to put aside their differences and mount a unified defense against German tanks during the Battle of the Bulge. The story, however, ends ambiguously as the Unknown Soldier reveals in conversation that white American soldiers had indeed been responsible for the massacre and he had lied to the troops to unify them. Chat Noir responds by saying he had realized this too, but felt a need to unify the troops. The Soldier's response conveys an ambiguous view of the future of race relations: "And we succeeded...for **now**. But nothing's solved, nothing's cured...the hate that almost **destroyed** this town is still **there!** Yet if we can handle it for one battle, one war...maybe someday we can make it forever! Maybe..."¹⁶

Star Spangled War Stories was eventually re-titled *Unknown Soldier* with issue #208, and was cancelled after issue #268. The character would be referenced and featured in a different comic book limited series throughout the decades after the original title's cancellation. Perhaps the most high-profile revival prior to the current series took place in a four-issue limited series written by Garth Ennis and illustrated by Kelly Plunkett in 1997,

also under the Vertigo imprint. This series dealt with the activities of the original Unknown Soldier in the decades after the Second World War. American foreign policy was portrayed as being often monstrous and the Unknown Soldier was the ultimate enforcer of this policy. Ennis's take on the Soldier shows the reader an idealistic man who blindly believes in the moral correctness of the United States. He is shown to be a ruthless operator responsible for such operations as the rise to power of the Shah of Iran, atrocities in Cambodia, and the slaughter of Nicaraguan civilians during the training of the Contras.

In the last issue of the mini-series, the Soldier, now seventy-five years old, has a conversation with the man he intends to have replace him, William Clyde. He attempts to convince Clyde that "There must be a soldier," and that "Ultimately we are always right. And everything we do is right."¹⁷ The Soldier, however, has learned that the government for which he fought had betrayed him. He tells Clyde, "You have to be the soldier because I can't do it anymore!"¹⁸ His intended replacement, however, does not accept his justifications for his action and rejects his view of the role of the American military:

You justify regimes and atrocities every bit as bad as the ones you fight against. You want me to do your work, even though you no longer believe in it yourself. You would have concealed your loss of faith in what you fight for, and you expect me to carry on as if I'd never learned the truth. Well, sir, you are not an American soldier. I deny your legacy. I will not let you wash the blood off your hands and onto mine.¹⁹

Early on in the series, Clyde has been identified as a "boy scout," much like the Soldier had been in his original portrayal. But, unlike the Soldier, he rejects the idea that the ends justify the means. It is a biting indictment of American covert involvement in the affairs of other nations and a rejection of the Soldier's mantra of the good that a single individual can do in a military conflict. In the end, Clyde chooses to end his own life and deprive the Soldier of his replacement. The last page of the mini-series shows the Unknown Soldier, tired and defeated, leaning against a flagpole simply stating, "God damn me."²⁰

More than a decade later, in the fall of 2008, Vertigo would introduce the current volume as reconceived by Dysart and Ponticelli. This *Unknown Soldier* series would seem to have little to do with the first Vertigo titles. There is nothing overtly fantastical about it, nor does it deal with supernatural horror. It does, however, continue the tradition of reinventing established concepts from DC Comics's lore and changing them, aiming them at a mature audience. The current volume, set in Uganda in 2002, features a new protagonist and a very different take on the actions of one man in a larger conflict than the original. Unlike the first nameless

protagonist, the current Unknown Soldier has a well-established identity before taking on the role of a single faceless fighter within a conflict. Dr. Moses Lwanga is introduced as having fled the regime of Idi Amin at the age of seven with his parents and having been raised in the United States. The readers learn much about the character from a speech he delivers when honored for his pacifism and humanitarian work as a doctor back in his native Uganda. Within the space of one issue of the comic, however, the character becomes embroiled in the violence of the conflict and comes to disfigure his own face in an attempt to quiet his inner demons.

This retooling of the Unknown Soldier takes many of the concepts of the original series and turns them on their head. Where the original series hinged on the idea of the positive impact that an individual could have in a larger conflict, the current iteration of the Unknown Soldier shows that individual violent action can only make things worse inside a war zone. Where Lwanga was acclaimed for his humanitarian work and his ability to bring attention to the conflict, the bandaged figure he becomes increases instability in the area. During the first storyline, Lwanga attempts to prevent the kidnapping of several young girls by rebel forces, known as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). He is captured himself, but later leads the girls away from the LRA camp in a violent escape that costs one of the girls her life. Sister Sharon, the Australian nun who runs the school in which the girls were living, tells him that she could have gotten the girls back her way, "Through proper channels. Violence wasn't necessary."²¹

At that moment, there appears to be room for debate over what the greater evil was—the death of one of the girls during the escape or the rape and sexual slavery of the entire group while their possible release was being negotiated. Later, however, when Lwanga returns to the school and finds it deserted, he learns that the LRA had returned, cutting off the arms of several of the children and taking the rest for their "brides," thus forcing Sister Sharon back to Australia. His individual action was unable to prevent the enslavement of the young girls. It also caused the death and disfigurement of several of them and removed a positive presence from the area in the form of Sister Sharon and her school. Here, the violence of the individual only seems able to make things worse.

Dysart and Ponticelli, however, seem to be commenting on the continuing belief that violence and individual action can affect the outcome of a conflict. Undeterred by the death and destruction he has brought upon those he chose to protect, Lwanga makes a pledge to personally hunt down and kill the rebel leader, Joseph Kony. A stunned journalist who has come to seek him out is aghast at the possibility, stating that this type of personal crusade "means declaring war against an army of demoralized children."²² Even as he takes in the horror expressed in the journalist's face,

he convinces himself that what he brings is hope: “I see now how it is. How it must be. Someone has to sacrifice. Do horrible things. Commit to ending this once and for all by any means necessary.”²³ Lwanga puts away the pacifist beliefs that had sustained him throughout his life in favor of what seems to him to be a simpler, faster, and more violent solution—the removal of Kony by any means necessary.²⁴

The graphic novel’s creators, however, do not present a simplistic world view in which the new Soldier’s actions have no consequences. The violence in *Unknown Soldier* is blatant, not glamorized or white-washed in service of the story’s action. The art by Ponticelli is exceedingly graphic in its depiction of the violence and carnage of war. These images are often hard for the reader to take in. Dysart and Ponticelli are clearly striving for social relevance by setting their comic in a conflict that is much closer to the contemporary reader than the Second World War was to the readers of the stories from the 1970s. Where the art in those original stories clearly showed the destruction created by large-scale military conflict, the depictions of violence were almost always heroic as the Soldier battled the overwhelming, monolithic axis forces. Though often more despicable than the Nazis portrayed in the stories from the 1970s, the enemies this soldier faces, particularly in the first story arc, are child soldiers, as much victims of the conflict as anyone else in the book. Their violent deaths at the hands of the book’s titular “hero” can produce little but horror in the mind of the reader.

There is little doubt upon examining the first few issues of *Unknown Soldier* that the book fits well into Vertigo’s tradition of horror comics. While there are no overtly supernatural elements in the story, the horrors of child soldiers, violence, poverty, and displacement are plainly evident in the book. The questions we must contend with when considering the use of a comic like *Unknown Soldier* in the classroom are: What message does it convey? While carefully researched and well intentioned, is this work still an outsider’s perspective that is more concerned with the spectacle conveyed by the book’s horror than with an earnest exploration of the issues surrounding the conflict? And what is the reaction that it will arouse from the students to whom the work is exposed? Could the use of *Unknown Soldier* as a text in the classroom be counterproductive?

It must be stated, however, that the authors seem to be fully aware of the problems posed by their outsider perspectives and the dangers of perceiving Uganda only in terms of its conflict and its horrors. Early in the first issue, Lwanga addresses the gathered attendants of a conference on humanitarian affairs. Although he indicates his appreciation for the foreign aid Uganda receives and the attention of the United Nations, he believes that “ultimately this must be **our** fight.”²⁵ The theme of African

solutions for African conflicts runs strong throughout the series. Dysart and Ponticelli challenge the assumption that Uganda is a perpetual victim by introducing readers to the character of Margaret Wells, a Hollywood actress involved in local humanitarian relief efforts. When Lwanga's wife asks him if he thinks Wells is pretty, he responds, "She looks at us and sees only **genocide, child soldiers, AIDS and famine**. Her altruism borders on **fetishism**. It's hard to find that kind of attitude **attractive**."²⁶ Despite the tremendous violence portrayed throughout the text, the authors do not want their audience to see Uganda as just another horror show.

Dysart, in particular, describes his ambivalence about these negative portrayals of Uganda. He suggests that in his research travels, he "witnessed people at the lowest point of their lives, and I came back and turned it into an action-packed war comic... We try our best not to be exploitative, but in my heart I don't know if this is the right way to do it."²⁷ Can Dysart's self-awareness, evident in the meta-textual musings of his characters and in his own statements, overcome the lack of scholarly depth of research or Ugandan perspective? Should scholars simply address these concerns in the classroom and then utilize the work in such a way that it allows the students a different perspective from a scholarly monograph? Can *Unknown Soldier's* intended status as popular art provide a gateway for a deeper understanding by undergraduates *because* it is not a scholarly tome? My co-author and I believe so. In the discussion that follows, she reflects upon how she utilized this particular text in the classroom.

Pedagogies of Pain: Teaching *Unknown Soldier* in the History Classroom (Decker)

One of the most pressing issues of our times is the globalization of military values—the idea that military intervention is the most effective and efficient means of solving international (and oftentimes domestic) crises. We are living in a time of war, and yet, most of our students have a hard time grasping the repercussions of this reality. Because most of them are removed from the daily brutalities of violence, they imagine war as an abstraction of sorts—something that exists, but that is tangential to their daily lives. They may have friends enlisted in the military or family members who are serving overseas, but unless they have actually been to an active warzone, they lack a crucial frame of reference. Our responsibility as educators is to provide that reference point, filling in the blanks and helping them to understand the larger historical context(s).

In the fall of 2009, I had the opportunity to teach an undergraduate course about violence, war, and militarism in modern Africa at Purdue University, a large, land grant institution located in the heart of the Midwest.

Although I had previously taught a number of women's studies courses about war and militarism, this was the first time that I would be teaching the subject from a historical perspective. I wanted to be creative in my pedagogical approach, but at the same time, still be taken seriously by my more "classically trained" colleagues.²⁸ In the end, I selected a number of texts that would expose students to ideas about violence and war from many different historical vantage points. These included the more traditional scholarly articles and monographs, as well as an array of novels, memoirs, speeches, song lyrics, poems, and comic books. Although I have experimented with a wide variety of primary and secondary sources in the classroom, this would be my first attempt at teaching a graphic novel. I worried that this particular type of literary genre might not be appropriate for such a serious subject. Would the students think that the comic book was supposed to be funny? Would they be able to grasp the intricacies of war and violence within this context?²⁹

As mentioned in the introduction, the decision to utilize a graphic novel in a history course was unconventional, but certainly not unheard of. For a number of years, educators have been teaching their students about the horrors of war and genocide through the medium of comics. The difference in my case, however, had to do with the geographic location of this particular class—Africa. Generations of students have "learned" about Africa through harmful stereotypes that reinforce the myth of primordial savagery.³⁰ What sort of message would I be sending my students if I introduced them to a text that depicted violence in such a graphic manner? Would the text "confirm" African violence, rather than trouble their understanding of it? Would it be too violent, too demoralizing? Or, would it simply encourage more students to do the reading? I knew that the only way to figure out the answers to these difficult questions was to go ahead and assign the text. And so I did.

I decided to introduce the text in the second half of the semester, after students had become more conversant with the topics of the course. They had already learned to interrogate problematic representations of Africans as "essentially" violent and were knowledgeable about the many causes of conflict on the continent. They had immersed themselves in Mau Mau and were struggling to understand the system of oppression that undergirded the Kenyan Gulags. They had been inspired by the liberation struggles in Zimbabwe and were later disheartened by the country's tragic collapse. And then, after learning about the spate of military dictatorships that had peppered the African landscape since the end of colonial rule, I introduced them to Uganda vis-à-vis the graphic novel, *Unknown Soldier*. My fear was that by this point in the semester, the students had already reached a threshold—saturated in despair and unable to absorb any additional

trauma. Would they have the intellectual and emotional capacity to analyze the particularities of yet another conflict? In order to help me gauge the efficacy of the text, I asked my co-author to observe the class during that week. Our experiences in the classroom and our subsequent conversations about pedagogy more generally form the basis of the discussion which follows.

Students were asked to read the first three issues of *Unknown Soldier* before coming to class.³¹ Because most of them knew little if anything about the war in northern Uganda, I wanted to assess how much they had learned from the text. We began the class by discussing their overall impressions of the novel. For many of the students, particularly the women, this was their first experience reading a comic book, especially in an academic setting. They expressed appreciation for the opportunity to read something “different.” Many of them commented on the high levels of violence that were depicted in the novel, not as a criticism of the text, but instead, as a reflection of how bad things seemed to be on the ground. They wanted to know if the author (and artist) of the book had exaggerated the violence or whether it was “real.” The sad truth, I told them, was that the realities of war were much worse than those reproduced through fiction. To illustrate why this was the case, we watched the powerful documentary, *Invisible Children*, an excellent film that chronicles the tragedies of war as seen through the eyes of Ugandan children.³² Most of the students remained in their desks as the credits rolled, even after the class period was over.

The following class period, we began with a brief discussion of the film, particularly as it related to the themes of *Unknown Soldier*.³³ Most of the students could not believe that they had never heard of the war or the plight of the forgotten children. This opened up an interesting conversation about the politics of media coverage—what gets attention in the news and what does not. Following this, I provided the students with a brief overview of the war.³⁴ I deliberately chose to focus on the historical narrative last, since I wanted to see what they could learn from other types of sources first. The class ended with a “big picture” discussion about the war in relation to what they had learned from the graphic novel, the film, and the historical lecture. Everyone seemed to agree that the comic book was a welcome addition to the course. They enjoyed the readability of the text and appreciated the author’s candor. Several of the students were inspired to learn even more about the conflict. I know that at least two of them were looking for ways to volunteer in Uganda over the summer. This seems to suggest that if you can get students excited about history, they are more likely to become socially and politically engaged in the world around them.

There are a number of reasons why *Unknown Soldier* works well in the classroom, apart from those articulated by the students. Most significantly, the text lends itself well to classroom discussions about larger historical issues. For example, what does the novel teach us about gender relations in northern Uganda? What do we learn about the politics of humanitarian aid and intervention? In what ways are structural inequalities reflected in the landscape of war? I also found that students who were not as likely to read throughout the course *did* read this book. It was a way for me to connect with more of my students on a deeper level. The book made it easier for students to think critically about the content, as well as the context in which it was presented. The class discussed the ways that Africans and African violence were represented, and why such a subject was important to consider. Would, for instance, a comic book about the current “war on terror” portray violence in a similar manner? And finally, the novel clearly demonstrated to students that history did not have to be boring. There is not simply one correct way to “do” history, but instead multiple points of engagement.

Of course, one of the challenges of using comic books in the classroom is that it requires instructors to fill in more of the gaps. Given that the principle author of *Unknown Soldier* spent only one month in Uganda doing research for the series, it was inevitable that many of the historical subtleties would be lost. It is therefore the instructor’s responsibility to situate the text within a larger historical context. One should also think carefully about when to introduce the subject to students. I would recommend using the book in the second half of the semester, after students are familiar with violence as a concept and can demonstrate a reasonable understanding of modern African history—at least from a macro-level. Otherwise, students may lack the analytical skills to engage in critical discussions about the text. One way of assessing the students’ ability to make sense of the material would be to incorporate a short writing assignment into the lesson plan. Ask them to reflect critically upon how the novel reinforces and/or challenges stereotypes about Africa. This could be done as a free-writing exercise at the beginning of class or as a more structured take-home essay.³⁵

Conclusion

Although the graphic novel presents a variety of unique pedagogical challenges, it has the potential to drastically enliven any classroom. We ultimately recommend this particular text because of its affordability (just \$9.99 for the first six issues), the seriousness with which it treats its topic, and the opportunities for classroom discussion it provides. Instructors can

easily compensate for its shortcomings through proper contextualization. Even though the content of this particular novel is best suited for a class on African history or militarism, other comic book series would work well in other types of history courses. The wide breadth of styles and subject matters within the medium provide coverage for many different areas and time periods. It is indeed a simple, yet highly effective strategy for enriching students' experiences within the history classroom.

Notes

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1. In January 2009, Fordham University's Graduate School of Education hosted an academic conference on "Graphica in Education," which examined the serious usages of comics in the classroom. For details, see Debra Viadero, "Scholars See Comics as No Laughing Matter," *Education Week* 28, no. 21 (February 2009): 1-11. For an excellent discussion of how to use graphic novels in the world history classroom, see Maryanne Rhett, "The Graphic Novel and the World History Classroom," *World History Connected* 4, no. 2 (February 2007).

2. See *Maus, A Survivor's Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) and *Maus, A Survivor's Tale II: And Here My Troubles Began* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991).

3. These titles include Gabriel Akol, Santino Athian, Mathew Mabek, and Michael Ngor, *Echoes of the Lost Boys of Sudan* (Dallas, TX: Non-Fiction Reality Comics, 2004); Joe Kubert, *Fox from Sarajevo: A Story of Survival* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 1996); Keiji Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1990); Joe Sacco, *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992-1995* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2000); Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 1993;2001); and J. P. Stassen, *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* (First Second, 2006).

4. For a brief but notable exception, see Lila L. Christensen, "Graphic Global Conflict: Graphic Novels in the High School Social Studies Classroom," *The Social Studies* 97, no. 6 (November-December 2006): 227-230, <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/whc/4.2/rhett.html>>.

5. This is a collection of the first six issues of the comic book series. See Joshua Dysart and Albert Ponticelli, *Unknown Soldier, Vol. 1, Haunted House* (Vertigo Comics, 2009). "Haunted House, Chapter One" (Issue #1, December 2008) is available in downloadable format directly from Vertigo at <http://www.dccomics.com/media/excerpts/12182_1.pdf>.

6. For a discussion of comic books as an historical source, see Brett Bowles, "Comic

Books as Literature and History,” *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 29 (2001): 112-116. See also Hugo Frey and Benjamin Noys, “History in the Graphic Novel,” *Rethinking History* 6, no. 3 (June 2002): 255-260.

7. In particular, see Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

8. Concerning terminology, we use the term “comic books” to refer to graphic story telling in general. While the term “graphic novel” has come to refer to any book-length comic or sequential art story, this is most accurately reserved for original graphic novels that were not first published in serial form. Even though the term graphic novel may be used in places, *Unknown Soldier* is best described as a comic book series and *Unknown Soldier: Haunted House* as a collection.

9. Joe Kubert, “They Came from Shangri-La” (Issue #151, June-July 1970), *Star Spangled War Stories, Vol. 1* (DC Comics, 1970): 3.

10. This anonymity served as a way to connect the character’s name to the most common context of the term Unknown Soldier: the honor bestowed upon all those who sacrificed their lives in military service and whose identities will never be known. It is no accident that the Soldier’s base of operations in these stories was located within Arlington National Cemetery. The character carried on the legacy of the dead; his nameless service was meant as a constant reenactment of the bravery and sacrifice of the fallen.

11. Joe Kubert, “Instant Glory” (Issue #152, August-September 1970), *Star Spangled War Stories, Vol. 1* (DC Comics, 1970): 4.

12. Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 193.

13. *Ibid.*, 195-199.

14. For a discussion about the popularization of war in comics, see Brian Edwards, “The Popularisation of War in Comic Strips,” *History Workshop Journal* 1996, no. 2 (Autumn 1996): 180-189.

15. Bob Haney and Joe Kubert, “Invasion Game” (Issue #155, February-March 1971), *Star Spangled War Stories, Vol. 1* (DC Comics, 1971): 6.

16. Frank Robbins and Jack Sparling, “A Town Called Hate!” (Issue #179, March 1974), *Star Spangled War Stories, Vol. 1* (DC Comics, 1974): 13.

17. Garth Ennis and Killian Plunkett, “Unknown Soldier, Book 4” (Issue #4 of 4, 1997), *Unknown Soldier* (Vertigo Comics, 1997): 17.

18. *Ibid.*, 20.

19. *Ibid.*, 21.

20. *Ibid.*, 24.

21. Joshua Dysart and Alberto Ponticelli, “Haunted House, Chapter Four” (Issue #4, March 2009) *Unknown Soldier, Vol. 1, Haunted House* (Vertigo Comics, 2009): 21.

22. Joshua Dysart and Alberto Ponticelli, “Haunted House, Conclusion,” (Issue #6, May 2009) *Unknown Soldier, Vol. 1, Haunted House* (Vertigo Comics, 2009): 21.

23. *Ibid.*

24. There is an in-story tie between Lwanga, his new attitude, and the original Unknown Soldier. During several of the dream/hallucination sequences during the comic, there are indications that Lwanga may have been programmed by the American government with the skills he displays in his war against the Lord’s Resistance Army. In one of these sequences, there is even a panel in which Lwanga is led into a room to have a conversation with a very elderly man in a wheelchair whose face is covered in bandages—the original Unknown Soldier. This might be discounted as part of the mentally ill Lwanga’s hallucinations, but the existence of the bandaged man is corroborated elsewhere. Another one of the characters in the book, Jack Lee Howl, a former CIA operative, has a flashback to his early career in former Zaire in 1960, where his conversation with his direct superior

is watched over by a man with a bandaged face. Whereas the original *Unknown Soldier* stories held American military power and intelligence operations as a force for good, the new series shows the darker consequences of American involvement in the affairs of other nations, much like the 1997 series. Later issues of the Dysart-Ponticelli series reveal that the original Soldier sought to subvert the CIA's attempts to replicate him by embedding the fictional Moses Lwanga personality into the recruit. Decades of bloodshed and atrocities had led him to seek the creation of a man of peace who could end conflicts nonviolently. Thematically, these story developments provide a good counterpoint to the original Unknown Soldier's activities. Given how late these revelations come in the series, however, educators using *Haunted House* as a standalone piece in the history classroom need not concern themselves with this connection.

25. Joshua Dysart and Alberto Ponticelli, "Haunted House, Chapter One," (Issue #1, December 2008) *Unknown Soldier, Vol. 1, Haunted House* (Vertigo Comics, 2009): 3.

26. *Ibid.*, 5.

27. Quoted in George Gene Gustines, "Civil War in Uganda, Illustrated and in Panels," *The New York Times*, 12 August 2009, < <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/12/books/12unknown.html>>.

28. Because I (Decker) have a Ph.D. in Women's Studies, I often feel the need to work harder to prove that I am capable of teaching courses in a history department.

29. For an interesting discussion of this issue in relation to American history classrooms, see Paul Buhle, "History and Comics," *Reviews in American History* 35, no. 35 (June 2007): 315-323. He argues that the task of making comic books appear serious is usually more daunting for the teacher than for the students.

30. Curtis Keim does an excellent job of discussing how we "learn" about Africa and why these lessons can be harmful. See Keim, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

31. The first six issues of *Unknown Soldier* were published as a collection in August 2009. The next six issues were released in March 2010. See Joshua Dysart and Albert Ponticelli, *Unknown Soldier, Vol. 2, Easy Kill* (Vertigo Comics, 2010). Individual issues were released on a monthly basis and are also available for purchase.

32. Jason Russell, Bobby Bailey, and Laren Poole, dirs., *Invisible Children: Rough Cut*, 55 mins., (Invisible Children, 2006).

33. Students were required to read the last three issues of the comic before coming to class.

34. For an excellent scholarly analysis of the conflict, see Ronald R. Atkinson, "From Uganda to the Congo and Beyond: Pursuing the Lord's Resistance Army," International Peace Institute Policy Paper (New York: International Peace Institute, December 2009) and "Afterward: A Perspective on the Last Thirty Years," in *The Origins of the Acholi of Uganda before 1800*, second ed. (Kampala, Uganda: Fountain Publishers, 2009). For additional information on the war in northern Uganda, see Sverker Finnstrom, *Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) and Chris Dolan, *Social Torture: The Case of Northern Uganda, 1986-2006* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

35. Instructors might also find it useful for students to analyze how the war has been covered and/or represented by various activist organizations. Key websites include: Human Rights Watch at <www.hrw.org/Africa/uganda>; Amnesty International at <www.amnestyusa.org/all-countries/uganda/page.do?id=1011260>; Invisible Children at <www.invisiblechildren.com>; and World Vision at <www.worldvision.org/content.nsf/learn/globalissues-Uganda>. Students may also be interested in looking at how the International Criminal Court covers the conflict. See <www.iccnw.org/?mod=northernuganda>.

Appendix: Graphic Novels for the History Classroom

What follows is a compilation of historically themed graphic novels, grouped by geographic area. This is by no means a comprehensive list and we make no claim to having read all of these examples. These graphic novels represent some of the possibilities available for use in the history classroom.

Africa

Akol, Gabriel, Santino Athian, Mathew Mabek, and Michael Ngor. *Echoes of the Lost Boys of Sudan*. Dallas, TX: Non-Fiction Reality Comics, 2004.

This biographical comic is based on the experiences of four Sudanese boys who fled their nation's second civil war (1983-2005). The publisher of the comic meant for it to be used as an educational tool to help American students understand why there are nearly 4,000 Sudanese "lost boys" in the United States. The comic is aimed at middle and high school students.

Dysart, Joshua and Alberto Ponticelli. *Unknown Soldier: Haunted House*. New York: Vertigo, 2009.

This graphic novel series focuses on the war between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (1987-present). Analysis and teaching recommendations for this graphic novel can be found in the body of the article.

Getz, Trevor and Liz Clarke. *Abina and the Important Men*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

This graphic history examines the life of Abina Mansah, a young woman who lived in the Gold Coast during the late 19th century. Her story is recreated using a transcript from an 1876 court case in which she discusses her experiences as a slave. The book includes the original transcript, a background section providing historical context, and detailed reading and teaching guides.

Stassen, J. P. *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda*. New York: First Second, 2006.

Deogratias is a surreal tale that explores the trauma and guilt experienced by the survivors of the Rwandan genocide (April-July 1994). Told in a series of flashbacks, this graphic novel also deals with themes of responsibility and imperial complicity in the genocide.

The Americas

Baker, Kyle. *Nat Turner*. New York: Abrams, 2008.

This highly acclaimed graphic novel depicts the cruelty of American slavery and the violence of Nat Turner's rebellion (August 1831). Drawing heavily from *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and other sources, Baker attempts to present a historically accurate, if very graphic, version of events.

Buhle, Paul and Nicole Schulman, eds. *Wobblies!: A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World*. New York: Verso, 2005.

This collaboration between historians and graphic artists is intended to illustrate the labor struggles of the early twentieth century. This collection requires at least some knowledge of the IWW and would serve as a useful complement to class materials.

Helfer, Andrew and Randy Duburke. *Malcolm X: A Graphic Biography*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2006.

This graphic novel presents Malcolm X's philosophies, his life, and his work (1925-1965). The creators do not hesitate to illustrate any part of their subject's life, even pointing out inconsistencies in his autobiography.

Lockpez, Inverna and Dean Haspiel. *Cuba: My Revolution.* New York: Vertigo, 2010.

This is a semi-autobiographical graphic novel based on the experiences of Inverna Lockpez. The narrative traces the protagonist, Sonya, through the course of the 1959 Cuban revolution and beyond. She is shown moving from an idealistic supporter of the revolution to a disillusioned exile.

Ottaviani, Jim. *Fallout: J. Robert Oppenheimer, Leo Szilard, and the Political Science of the Atomic Bomb.* Ann Arbor, MI: G.T. Labs, 2001.

Ottaviani and a series of artists draw on the life and times of Oppenheimer and Szilard to illustrate how each man developed reservations in regards to nuclear weapons. Drawing on primary sources, the creators attempt to tell a story that is both personal and historically relevant.

Pekar, Harvey, Paul Buhle, Gary Dumm et al. *Students for a Democratic Society: A Graphic History.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2008.

This graphic novel explores the revolutionary history of the SDS movement (1960s), cleverly alternating between Pekar's narration and that of actual participants.

Pekar, Harvey, Nancy J. Peters, Ed Piskor et al. *The Beats: A Graphic History.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2009.

Pekar and his collaborators incorporate bits of the beats' own writings as they explore the beat identity and the achievements of each individual member.

Rodriguez, Spain. *Che: A Graphic Biography.* New York: Verso, 2008.

Ernesto "Che" Guevara's beliefs are front and center in this biography of the revolutionary leader (1928-1967). Critics attribute a keen grasp of the socio-political context of the Cuban Revolution to Rodriguez, but also a largely uncritical eye when it comes to Guevara.

Asia

Delisle, Guy. *Burma Chronicles.* Montreal, Canada: Drawn & Quarterly, 2008.

Delisle observed Burmese life while his wife was working with *Medecins Sans Frontières* (MSF or Doctors Without Borders). He uses non-fiction vignettes to illustrate life under the country's military junta.

Kouno, Fumiyo. *Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms.* San Francisco, CA: Last Gasp, 2007.

Set in 1955, Kouno's narrative explores the effects of the Second World War and the dropping of the Atomic bomb on Japan and its people.

Mizuki, Shigeru. *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths.* Montreal, Canada: Drawn & Quarterly, 2011.

Mizuki uses his own experiences as a Japanese soldier to tell the semi-autobiographical tale of Japanese soldiers ordered to die in battle or face execution if they returned alive.

Nakazawa, Keiji. *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima.* Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1990.

This classic manga illustrates not only the horror of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, but also deals with the devastation and deprivations of long-term armed conflict.

O'Reilly, Sean and Khoi Pham. *Khan.* Rockford, IL: Arcana Studio, 2010.

This brief graphic biography of Genghis Khan focuses on his military achievements in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Europe

Eisner, Will. *The Plot: The Secret Story of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.* New York: W. W. Norton, 2005.

Eisner uses new archival evidence uncovered in the post-Soviet age in an attempt to reveal the origins of the insidious anti-Semitic document.

Ellis, Warren and Raulo Caceres. *Crécy.* Rantoul, IL: Avatar Press, 2007.

Told from the perspective of a soldier at the battle of Crécy, in 1346, this brief graphic novel illustrates the role of military technology in the Hundred Years' War.

Kubert, Joe. *Fax From Sarajevo: A Story of Survival.* Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 1996.

Joe Kubert based this graphic novel on the faxes he received from his European comics' agent and friend Ervin Rustemagic throughout the latter's 1992 migration between Dobrinja and Sarajevo during the war in the former Yugoslavia.

Pak, Greg, Carmine Di Giandomenico et al. *X-Men: Magneto Testament.* New York: Marvel Publishing, 2009.

Despite its association with the popular superhero franchise, there are no supernatural powers in this graphic novel. Instead, Pak and Di Giandomenico tell the story of one young boy's experience during the Holocaust. This collection includes a teaching guide.

Sacco, Joe. *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992-1995.* Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2000.

Sacco spent four weeks in the Muslim enclave of Gorazde while it was under siege by Bosnian Serbs. He uses this experience to illustrate stories of the war that go beyond traditional news coverage.

Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.

Spiegelman's *Maus* is the gold standard in historical biography graphic novels. It is based on the experiences of Spiegelman's father Vladek during the Holocaust and is one of the most widely used graphic novels in the history classroom.

Middle East

Folman, Ari and David Polonsky. *Waltz with Bashir: A Lebanon War Story.* New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009.

This graphic novel reconstructs the experiences of a soldier during Israel's occupation of Lebanon. It is unique in that it is not an original graphic novel or comic, but instead a direct film-to-book translation of the film by the same name.

Sacco, Joe. *Footnotes in Gaza: A Graphic Novel.* New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010.

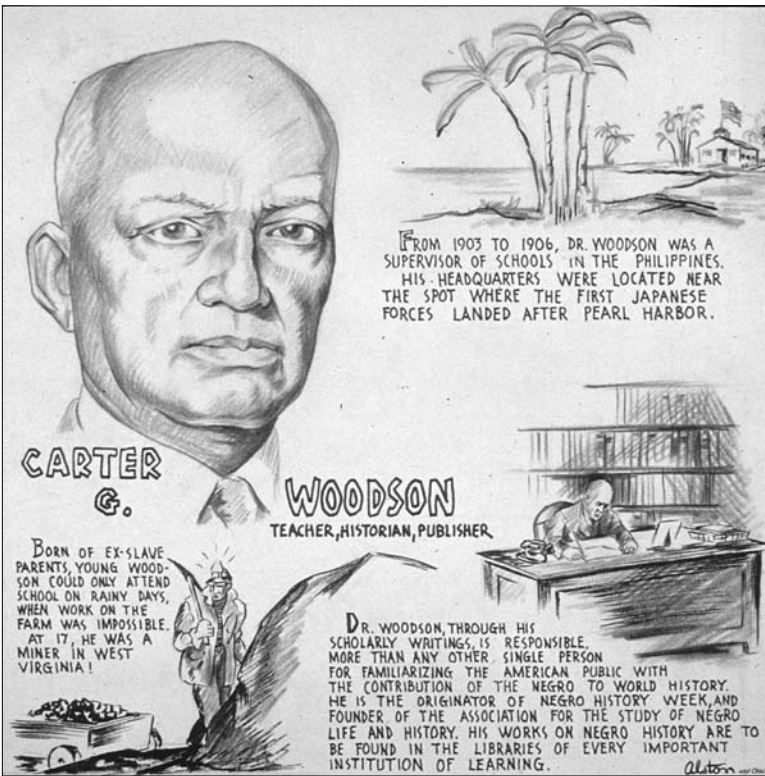
Sacco ties the past to the present in his exploration of the history of Rafah, a town in the Gaza strip. Based on a bloody incident in 1956, this graphic novel explores the nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Sacco, Joe. *Palestine.* Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 1993/2001.

Palestine predates *Footnotes in Gaza* and was Sacco's first major work. He uses material gathered in over 100 interviews with Palestinians and Jews to illustrate the conflict. The new edition includes an introduction by Edward Said.

Satrapi, Marjane. *The Complete Persepolis.* New York: Pantheon Books, 2004.

Satrapi recounts her coming of age during the 1979 Iranian Revolution. At once personal and illustrative of the changes in her nation, *Persepolis* is a powerful historical memoir. It was adapted into an animated film in 2007.



"Carter G. Woodson—Teacher, Historian, Publisher," Charles Henry Alston, 1943, NARA.



"Charles Henry Fletcher—Soldier of Production," Charles Henry Alston, 1943, NARA.