
From Our Archives

The Wertham Campaign Against Violent Comics

by Richard Welsh

The following is adapted from a longer article in EIR, Nov. 18, 1994. See this week's Feature, for a speech by Helga Zepp-LaRouche that discusses this campaign during the 1940s and '50s against the marketing of media violence to children.

The German-American psychiatrist Frederic Wertham (1905-81) was the moral and intellectual leader of a campaign, which began in 1948, to eliminate what he called “the curse of the comic books.” To this day, publishers and devotees of crime, horror, and superhero comics—the predecessors of today’s violent video-game culture—are still screeching at their long-deceased nemesis.

Wertham’s battle was unique in postwar history. Outraged by the violence, sexual perversity, crime glorification, and sadism of children’s comic books—which are more like today’s video games “Mortal Kombat” and “Night Attack” than the comics those under 50 grew up with—parents and others rallied to a grassroots boycott campaign that cut crime and horror comic sales by 40%; scores of states, counties, and municipalities banned the display and sale of these atrocities to minors; and in 1954, a Senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency, following in the wake of the mass-publicized Kefauver crime committee hearings, heard testimony by Wertham and by comic industry defenders on the subject. The comics industry was forced into a temporary retreat.

Sex, Blood, and Gore

The comic book had emerged in 1934, featuring crime and detective storylines. The publishers and distributors of the comics were largely those who produced pulp novels and pornography: organized crime. The same tactics were used as well, strong-arming corner newsstands and drug stores. The Nietzschean “Superman” appeared in 1938, a fitting counterpoint to Hitler’s march across Europe. By 1939, scores of imitators had appeared, including the Gestapo-like Batman. By 1941 there were over 30 publishers, and the first psychologist-designed superhero made her debut, William Moulton Marston’s lesbian dominatrix Wonder Woman.

Opposition to comics grew into 1942, but the debate was swept away by the U.S. Army’s policy of shipping vast numbers to the troops abroad. Still, by 1946, the opposition was sufficient to induce the formation of a “code” in the industry—

which was ignored. The return of the veterans to civilian life did collapse the superhero market, but other genres soon took up the slack; by 1948, crime comics ruled the racks. That March, Wertham convened a symposium on the subject, and began the fight that culminated in the 1954 Senate hearings.

A Passionate Commitment

Wertham was born in Munich, and immigrated to the United States in 1922. He held positions of responsibility at several New York City hospitals, and was often called on for expert testimony in court. If the accused were African-American, he was often the only psychiatrist willing to testify. Working with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s Thurgood Marshall, his clinical studies and testimony played a key role in a school desegregation suit in Wilmington, Delaware, which became one of the four cases consolidated into the 1954 landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

In “The Curse of the Comic Books” (published in 1954 in the journal *Religious Education*), Wertham ridiculed the idea that an industry “code” would solve the problem of violence. “You do not need a code to leave out harmful ingredients from comic books. All you need is to do it. No new principle is needed so that children will not be shown pictures where a girl is about to be raped with a red-hot poker,” he wrote. Refuting the claim, made then as now, that suppressing sale of violent comics is a violation of the First Amendment, he said, “Free speech does not mean—and has never meant—that you can tell and sell anything you please to a child.”

The publishers’ first response to Wertham’s campaign was to shift out of crime into “love” (soft porn) comics, in 1949-50; but by the end of that year, a “new” genre was introduced, the “weird” comics of supernatural, gothic, and science-fiction horror. It was the same old sadism and grisly retribution. The industry also formed its “Comics Code Authority,” which proscribed a few narrowly defined themes, such as vampirism, while leaving the superstructure intact.

Though Wertham and his associates kept up the fight, the public largely lost interest, assured that things had been brought under control. The Senate committee punted, buying the industry line—still repeated today—that only psychologically “predisposed” children were harmed by comics. The code did eliminate the worst of the gore and overt sadism, and from the late 1950s into the 1960s, the heroes were tamer and the crime less graphically brutal. However, the fundamental problems had not been solved.

With the “post-industrial society” in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the comics industry was deregulated, the code was loosened, and beginning in the 1980s, a new wave of comics surged, fueled by a booming “collection” industry financed by both children and nostalgic baby-boomers, and serving as an evil complement to the larger video-game and rock music culture. The LaRouche movement’s campaign today against this, takes up where Wertham left off.