

How to Use the Digital History Reader

Evidence: Cartoons

As historical sources, cartoons usually require analysis of both the literal, or obvious, meanings and the symbolic, or coded, meanings. Cartoons also require analysis of both written text and visual images. Cartoons may include many elements working in tandem to convey an overall message, such as images, captions, dialogues associated with different characters, symbols, logos, or other markers.



Consider the cartoon above, taken from the module entitled "The End of Optimism? The Great Depression in Europe." The sign in the foreground reads, "The Struggle against Fascism," and the speech bubble above the uniformed man in the background contains the words, "Demonstrating is prohibited." Once you identify the various elements depicted, you can begin to discern the historical people, events, and processes they reference, as well as the perspective or point of view the cartoon conveys. In this case, the men and women holding the sign represent the German working class, symbolized by their practical clothing, and the uniformed man a policeman. The policeman's disproportionately large hand emphasizes his determination to stop the popular protest. The cartoon comments with irony on Hitler's Nazi Party, which was openly against political freedoms, by portraying workers prohibited from demonstrating against a political movement. In other words, the cartoon criticizes the police for preventing protesters from defending their rights to speak freely. Only by analyzing all of the elements depicted in political cartoons can you appreciate the messages and perspectives they convey.