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## **Media Combat: The Great War and the Transformation of American Culture**

Andrew Steed Walgren

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# Media Combat: The Great War and the Transformation of American Culture

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project examines the role of professional musicians, stage performers, civilian entertainment organizations, and the federal government in the formation of a nationalized, wartime cultural apparatus during the United States' involvement in the First World War (1917-1919). This process was contested, fragmented, and incomplete, but it laid the foundational groundwork for federal cultural initiatives and programs during the 1930s and 1940s. In many ways, the war forever altered the relationship between American citizens and the federal government.

Specifically, this project examines two major cultural arenas – music and theater – by looking at the institutions and actors that transformed them. During the war, a set of ideas coalesced around a dynamic admixture of popular entertainers, industry functionaries, producers, distributors, and, perhaps most importantly, an energetic state bureaucracy. Under the auspices of the Wilson administration, the Committee on Public Information (CPI) and the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA) were organized in the spring of 1917 to direct federal, state, and municipal recruitment efforts. Entertainment was a crucial aspect of the government's attempts to forge a united, homogeneous citizenry in the crucible of war. The federal government also produced, distributed, and exhibited propaganda plays and music, demanding unswerving patriotism from private citizens and cultural institutions utilizing a variety of coercive measures.

This project argues that the First World War differs from prior conflicts in that it laid the modern foundations for an institutionalized civilian—governmental

entertainment apparatus. The federal government would utilize some of the same agencies and organizations as it had in the past – notably the YMCA – to propagate the war, but, for the first time, it would fully enlist the power, scope, and financial resources of newly industrialized entertainment industries. New agencies and organizations, including the CTCA, the Stage Women’s War Relief, and the Over There Theatre League, would accumulate enormous influence and wield tremendous power over the course of a mere two years. In turn, these organizations’ work for the federal government during the war years allowed them to gain greater legitimacy with the broader American public. Media combat would play a pivotal role in ushering in a new, modern America.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1918, artist and illustrator James Montgomery Flagg unveiled his much-anticipated design for the new and largely unheard-of Stage Women's War Relief (SWWR).<sup>1</sup> Flagg, who scarcely a year earlier had produced one of the most enduring cultural symbols in American history with his rendition of Uncle Sam pointedly asking his citizens to serve in the United States Army, was a significant get for a small, fledgling voluntary association of female theatrical professionals.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Flagg's bellicose and confrontational Uncle Sam, his rendering of the SWWR – personified by a ivory-white woman ensconced in a long, white-hooded dress and luxurious red coat – was supplicant and inviting, with arms outstretched as if waiting for an embrace. In many respects, the SWWR woman embodied Victorian femininity.

Yet it would be a mistake to interpret Flagg's image of the SWWR as simply a traditional depiction of female virtue. The woman gazes straight at the viewer with a piercing, unbowed visage. Her posture is upright and statuesque, in the confident *contrapposto* stance. Most importantly, she dominates the composition, standing on an ornate theater stage and commanding the viewer's attention. Aside from her supplicant

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<sup>1</sup> James Montgomery Flagg, *Stage Women's War Relief* (American Lithographic Co., N.Y. United States, 1918), Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2002712085/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Letter from Daisy Humphries to H.S. Pollard," February 18, 1918, Records of the Stage Women's War Relief, Box 1, Folder 1, Schwarzmann Center, New York Public Library.

gesture, she is distinctly masculinized. Flagg's liminal, in-between image of the SWWR is thus an apt symbol of the many entertainment bureaus and organizations created by or allied with the federal government during the First World War, who found themselves navigating untested waters and uneven terrain from 1917-1919. Never before had professional entertainment industries and voluntary recreational associations so closely intertwined with the federal government; never before had the government been so reliant upon entertainers to successfully propagate an industrialized, society-wide war. This project is the story of that relationship, and how, in two short years, that relationship transformed American entertainment and the federal government as the nation propelled itself into the twentieth century.

This project examines the role of professional musicians, stage performers, civilian entertainment organizations, and the federal government in the formation of a nationalized, wartime cultural apparatus during the United States' involvement in the First World War (1917-1919). This process was contested, fragmented, and incomplete, but it laid the foundational groundwork for federal cultural initiatives and programs during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>3</sup> In many ways, the war forever altered the relationship between American citizens and the federal government.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, this project

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<sup>3</sup> This dissertation is in close conversation with historians who have written on New Deal-era cultural democracy and federal cultural programs, including, but not limited to, Lauren Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal*; Michael C.C. Adams, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*; and Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

<sup>4</sup> This is not a novel concept; Christopher Capozzola, in particular, lays out a compelling argument regarding the government's adoption of "coercive voluntarism" during the war, and how that philosophy created new relationships and obligations between the state and its citizens. This project is adding wartime music and theater into that conversation.



examines two major cultural arenas – music and theater – by looking at the institutions and actors that transformed them. During the war, a set of ideas coalesced around a dynamic admixture of popular entertainers, industry functionaries, producers, distributors, and, perhaps most importantly, an energetic state bureaucracy.

Under the auspices of the Wilson administration, the Committee on Public Information (CPI) and the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA) were organized in the spring of 1917 to direct federal, state, and municipal recruitment efforts. Entertainment was a crucial aspect of the government's attempts to forge a united, homogeneous citizenry in the crucible of war.<sup>5</sup> The federal government also produced, distributed, and exhibited propaganda plays and music, demanding unswerving patriotism from private citizens and cultural institutions utilizing a variety of coercive measures. In turn, these private entities recognized the government as a critical ally in their respective institutional developments.

Theatrical professionals capitalized on wartime publicity and demand by lending their star power and creative capital to Liberty Drives, camp revues, and pro-war propaganda films. Musicians – both amateur and professional – saw the war as an opportunity to grow markets, introduce new sounds, and inculcate a generation of American men and women in their values. The federal government, staffed with reform-minded Progressives, co-opted popular entertainers in its effort to fill the nation's heart with wartime patriotism and to spread the values of white, middle-class America.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Nancy Bristow, *Making Men Moral*.

<sup>6</sup> See Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (Hill and Wang, 1966); Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1987); T.J. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Remaking of Modern*

Seemingly disparate figures like Raymond Fosdick, George Creel, Winthrop Ames, E.H. Sothorn, Rachel Crothers, Elsie Janis, Irving Berlin, Will Rogers, James Reese Europe, Margaret Mayo, and many others utilized the federal platform to showcase their talents and build rapport with national audiences and powerful bureaucrats, or to enlist popular entertainers in the service of broader Progressive reform.

These artists and producers served as crucial nexus points between the federal government, local communities, and professional cultural industries. Europe, Janis, Mayo, and Berlin skyrocketed to stardom after the war, and I argue that the war afforded them unprecedented opportunities to popularize their music by providing them with new audiences and federal sponsorships. Groups such as George Cohan's Over There Theatre League and the Stage Women's War Relief put on shows for troops "over here" and "over there," composing, I argue, the first nationally organized military entertainment tours. The symbiotic relationship between the federal government and American cultural industries was borne out of wartime necessity, but it did not evaporate at war's end.

This study also enters a larger historiographical discussion about the relationship between cultural elites and ordinary Americans in the production and distribution of popular music and theater.<sup>7</sup> During the war, professional entertainers had to contend with the variegated demands of an empowered federal government and of millions of ordinary

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*America, 1877-1920* (Harper Collins, 2006); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> In particular, Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*; Robert Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*; Nicholas Tawa, *The Way to Tin Pan Alley: American Popular Songs, 1866-1910*; Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York City Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture*; Karl Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*.

Americans – soldiers, amateur entertainers, local censor boards, theater managers, and reform-minded civilian associations. In many respects, the training camp and the trench were the frontlines of democratic entertainment during the war, responding to, and in some instances creating, the vicissitudes of wartime sentiment. Camp musical directors, overseas theater troupes, stage professionals, and federal reformers reported conflicting feelings from soldiers over government- and industry-sponsored popular entertainment.

The rise of the modern state in the United States during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries is one of the most salient historical developments of the post-Civil War period. The expansion of state institutions, obligations, and coercive mechanisms unsurprisingly engendered a great deal of negotiation between American citizens, reformers, and bureaucratic functionaries. These negotiations were fraught with issues, ranging from the definitions of citizenship, to the government's role in the economy, to the state's ability to safeguard opportunity and security for its citizens.

In the forty years after the Civil War, American society underwent a series of seismic transformations. The West was conquered and settled; railroads crisscrossed and united the country; millions of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe crowded into America's cities; industrialization proceeded apace, bringing with it conflict over poverty, economic and social inequality, and labor rights. Progressivism emerged in the 1890s to deal with the rapid transformation of American society.

Progressivism, as a movement, defies neat schematization; its adherents had wildly different conceptions of how and what to reform. Nonetheless, Progressives, to one degree or another, placed their faith in scientific rationalization and the idea that ordinary Americans could ameliorate the problems plaguing *fin de siècle* America. The

most noteworthy Progressive initiatives dealt with urban issues like poverty, slums, overcrowding, education, and labor reform. Gilded Age America had been plagued by industrial discord; the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, the Haymarket Square bombings in 1886, and the Pullman Car Company strike in 1894 dramatically illustrated the disconnect between labor and capital. Waves of immigration and urbanization created appalling conditions in American cities. White, middle-class Americans, who made up the bulk of the Progressive movement, viewed both the rapid diversification of the United States and the radicalization of the working-class with alarm.

In this sense, the attempts to inculcate American soldiers with “normative” American values through music and theater during the First World War was a natural extension of the Progressive drive to create a united, homogenous citizenry that would fix the problems engendered by the upheavals of the Industrial Revolution, urbanization, and immigration. The CTCA, the War Camp Community Service, the Young Men’s Christian Association, and other prominent wartime entertainment and recreation organizations were largely staffed by these reform-minded Progressives, thus making the World War I-era federal music programs appear, on the surface, to be nexuses of white, elite America. In some ways, this was true; in others, however, the federal programs confronted significant challenges to their forced cultural hegemony, largely through soldiers’ resistance and the negotiations between federal officials, civilian organizations, and the U.S. military. These interactions complicate the cultural binary between “high” and “low” entertainment, as various individuals and organizations dismantled those cultural distinctions during wartime, and reaffirms Lawrence Levine’s primary argument that

definitions of elite and low culture are fluid, dynamic, and not entirely resistant to change.

The relationship between the U.S. military and American recreational and entertainment organizations did not emerge immediately from the First World War. This process began during the American Civil War, when the Union Army enlisted the services of the YMCA, the Sanitation Commission, and other reformers in providing its soldiers with stimulating diversions and wholesome recreational activities. The Lincoln government also enlisted the services of the United States Christian Commission (USCC) to distribute religious literature and secular books for Union soldiers and sailors. The USCC operated mobile canteens where Union soldiers could purchase newspapers, writing material, and other highly prized items in the midst of war.<sup>8</sup>

During the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the Philippine-American War in 1902, the federal government further enlisted the aid of cultural organizations to further the war effort. The YMCA, for the first time, was allowed to set up “morale tents” inside U.S. military camps and installations, where it supplied soldiers with reading material, food, drinks (non-alcoholic, of course), and creature comforts. In turn, the YMCA was given permission to ritually enact the doctrine of Manifest Destiny by proselytizing the peoples of the Philippines and Cuba in the gospel of Christianity. The beginnings of a reciprocal relationship between civilian recreational organizations and the federal government were established.

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<sup>8</sup> C. Howard Hopkins, *The History of the YMCA in North America*; Copeland and Xu, *The YMCA at War: Collaboration and Conflict during the World Wars*; Richard Lancaster, *Serving the Armed Forces, 1861-1986*.

The Spanish-American War also saw the widespread utilization of film, music, and literature to manufacture jingoism and nationalism among the American public. In particular, cultural institutions utilized gender and race to manipulate Americans' emotions. Cartoons, novels, and songs regularly depicted Spanish soldiers "raping" the virginal, innocent Cuban people. For example, the government actively promoted the story of Evangelina Cisneros, a Cuban escapee who claimed to have knowledge of Spanish atrocities, to newspapers, magazines, and sheet music producers. The Cisneros story was particularly potent because it came in the wake of the "closing of the frontier," and with it, opportunities for American men to demonstrate their masculinity and fitness for citizenship. The narrative of protecting women and feminized subjects became the new form of displaying American manhood, and this idea would be taken to its limits during the First World War.<sup>9</sup>

This project argues that the First World War differs from prior conflicts in that it laid the modern foundations for an institutionalized civilian—governmental entertainment apparatus. The federal government would utilize some of the same agencies and organizations as it had in the past – notably the YMCA – to propagate the war, but, for the first time, it would fully enlist the power, scope, and financial resources of newly industrialized entertainment industries. New agencies and organizations, including the CTCA, the Stage Women's War Relief, and the Over There Theatre

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<sup>9</sup> See Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*; Belinda Linn Rincon, "From Maiden to Mambisa"; Bonnie Miller, "The Visual Ideologies of the Mexican and Spanish-American Wars"; Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of US Imperialism*.

League, would accumulate enormous influence and wield tremendous power over the course of a mere two years. In turn, these organizations' work for the federal government during the war years allowed them to gain greater legitimacy with the broader American public. Media combat would play a pivotal role in ushering in a new, modern America.

**CHAPTER 1**

**MUSIC IN THE CAMPS: WARTIME FEDERAL MUSIC  
PROGRAMS AND THE STANDARDIZATION OF MILITARY  
MUSICAL TRAINING**

In the spring of 1917, the United States government confronted the challenge of national wartime mobilization. For Progressive reformers, the challenges were even greater: protecting millions of impressionable young men and women from the depredations of camp life, while simultaneously producing a generation of Americans fit for postwar citizenship. World War I training camps provided the opportunity for an unprecedented social engineering experiment. Music was a crucial ingredient in this human laboratory.

Under the auspices of the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA), a federal agency tasked with promoting social hygiene and wholesome camp activities, musicals, sing-alongs, and plays were staged in and around military encampments. Here, reformers' middle-class musical tastes often clashed with soldiers' working-class values and desires. The CTCA wanted patriotic music and restrained social events; the soldiers clamored for bawdy Tin Pan Alley tunes and boisterous coed dances. In its organized activities, dances, sing-alongs, and plays, the CTCA would meet both resistance and collaboration.



These competing interests were complicated by the presence of African American soldiers, who brought their own vernacular musical sensibilities to the camps, titillating – and sometimes frightening – white songleaders, soldiers, and audiences. The camp musical scene thus became an intersectional site of race, gender, and class, where the restless impulses of modernity overran seemingly staid Victorian values.

In this respect, the CTCA’s camp musical initiative was one of many wartime Progressive reform movements that failed to achieve its stated goals because it did not facilitate a return to sentimental ballads or parlor songs, nor did it introduce what it considered respectable music to the masses. But the CTCA’s music program had far-ranging consequences that it could not have foreseen. By introducing millions of rural Americans to the sounds and rhythms of urban musical culture, the CTCA dramatically expanded the scope of commercialized music, a development that, absent wartime, may have taken several more decades to develop. A camp musical director put it best: “These boys are coming home crazed for music.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Creating a Morally Pure Military**

The First World War was the first conflict in American history in which the federal government co-opted industrialized cultural industries in the service of widescale wartime mobilization. In nineteenth-century military conflicts, local institutions often dictated soldiers’ cultural tastes. Union soldiers, for example, were not provided with a

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<sup>10</sup> Historian Karl Hagstrom Miller argues in *Segregating Sound* that rural audiences were well-acquainted with urban sounds by the advent of the First World War. My research, particularly into the CTCA’s camp music program, complicates that idea because dozens of songleaders reported wildly different acquaintances with popular (urban) music among their soldiers.

standardized national cultural program. Certain exceptions existed – for example, in the case of the widespread proliferation of songs like “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “John Brown’s Body” among Union soldiers during the American Civil War – but the wartime cultural landscape was generally fragmented by region and geography.<sup>11</sup>

During the Spanish-American War, filmmaking companies, particularly Edison and Biograph, filmed and exhibited military preparations to stir up patriotic fervor, but those efforts were not on the same scale as later film and music productions from the CPI and CTCA.<sup>12</sup> By the advent of the First World War, industrialization and the emergence of powerful cultural institutions had rendered popular culture a vital cornerstone of American society. The federal government is often left out of this narrative, however, in favor of private industrial players such as Tin Pan Alley, Hollywood, and powerful theater syndicates.<sup>13</sup> During the war, the Wilson administration took a keen interest in the

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<sup>11</sup> For literature on the role of music in the American Civil War, see E. Lawrence Abel (2000), *Singing the New Nation: How Music Shaped the Confederacy, 1861 - 1865* (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2000); Christian McWhirter, *Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 7-31; Will Kaufman, *The Civil War in American Culture* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006)

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Auerbach, *Body Shots: Early Cinema’s Incarnations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 15-41.

<sup>13</sup> Leslie M. DeBauche, *Reel Patriotism: The Movies and World War I* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business: The First Four Hundred Years, Volume III, From 1900 to 1984* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Kathleen E. R. Smith, *God Bless America: Tin Pan Alley Goes to War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003); Michael E. Birdwell, “After They’ve Seen Poree: The AEF in Film and Music,” in *Unknown Soldiers: The American Expeditionary Forces in Memory and Remembrance*, ed. Mark Snell (Ohio: Kent University Press, 2008), 238-263; Andrew Kelly, *Cinema and the Great War* (New York: Routledge, 1997), Michael Isenberg, *War on Film: The American Cinema and World War I, 1914-1941* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981), 57-

moral upkeep of the nation's soldiery. Federal agencies, whose staffs were dominated by reform-minded Progressives, envisioned the war as a transformative, even epochal, event in the development of American citizenry. The war provided a useful pretense to impose reformers' white, middle-class sensibilities upon the masses.<sup>14</sup>

The Wilson administration considered cantonments to be critical sites of social engineering and citizen-making. According to historian Nancy Bristow, the United States' training camp program during the First World War was unprecedented in its emphasis on soldiers' physical and moral purity.<sup>15</sup> It was the first war in which the federal government promoted a "conceptualization of soldier training as culturally infrastructural," meaning that organized cultural activities were deemed vital to soldiers' psychological and moral welfare.<sup>16</sup> According to Bristow, the Wilson administration "hoped to use the fluid circumstances of wartime to create a single national culture, based in the progressive social vision" that would live on long after the guns of the Western Front had fallen silent.<sup>17</sup>

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84; Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel, 1911-1967*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972.

<sup>14</sup> For more on Progressive efforts to police sexuality and morality, particularly for women, see Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Nancy K. Bristow, *Making Men Moral: Social Engineering and the Great War* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Sue Collins, "Film, Cultural Policy, and World War I Training Camps: Sending Your Boys to the Show with Smileage," *Film History* 26:1 (2014): 4. (Emphasis in the original.)

<sup>17</sup> Bristow, *Making Men Moral*, 14.

Soon after war was declared in the spring of 1917, Woodrow Wilson's secretary of war, Newton D. Baker, announced that the administration intended to help soldiers forge an "invisible armor" during their stay in the camps.<sup>18</sup> This "invisible armor" consisted of nothing less than a complete overhaul of soldiers' habits, morals, and belief systems. Camp training would replace both the soldiers' parochial and diverse cultural traditions with a monolithic "Americanness." Soldiers would don this invisible armor abroad, keeping them safe from the temptations lurking just beyond the battlefield's horizons. Upon returning home, the soldiers might shed their weapons and gear, but their moral armor would remain with them for the duration of their lives, protecting them from radicalism and immorality.

The Wilson administration hoped that millions of soldiers, many of whom were foreign-born, would pass through the crucible of war and emerge as citizens well-versed in the manners and principles of white, middle-class America. Baker's vision entailed a societal transformation unlike anything yet seen since Reconstruction. Implied in this vision, however, was a latent paternalism and xenophobia characteristic of white Progressivism that viewed soldiers – many of whom came from working-class or immigrant backgrounds – as requiring a guiding hand in their moral and intellectual uplift.<sup>19</sup> Baker's confidence overlooked the near-impossible mission laid out for training

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<sup>18</sup> Newton D. Baker, *Frontiers of Freedom* (New York, 1918), 94.

<sup>19</sup> The literature on Progressivism is prodigious, but several monographs detail Progressives' paternalistic attitude towards minorities, immigrants, and laborers. See Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (Hill and Wang, 1966); Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1987); T.J. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Remaking of Modern America, 1877-1920* (Harper Collins, 2006); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

camp officials, who would be tasked with administering a social engineering experiment well beyond the capabilities of an overstretched and unevenly-administered federal bureaucracy.

### **The Commission on Training Camp Activities**

To fulfill these goals, the government created the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA), an agency charged with cultivating soldiers' moral and intellectual fitness in the training camps. Often overlooked in histories of America's involvement in the First World War, the CTCA was one of the most consequential federal experiments during the war.<sup>20</sup> President Wilson granted the agency unprecedented power over the lives of American soldiers and the communities and encampments that supported them. "[The CTCA] marked the beginning of an epoch," wrote reformer Edward Frank Allen in 1918. "For the first time in history a government looked beyond the machinery of fighting to the personal and moral welfare of the fighter."<sup>21</sup>

The CTCA was also one of several wartime federal agencies tasked with regulating, and eventually producing, the nation's war-related cultural output. Chaired by the energetic Raymond Fosdick, a dyed-in-the-wool Progressive who cut his teeth in New York City's settlement house and social hygiene movements, the CTCA set forth an ambitious programmatic agenda that included athletic competitions, community sing-

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<sup>20</sup> Edward Frank Allen, *Keeping Our Soldiers Fit for War and After* (New York: The Century Company, 1918), 7; James Evans and Ludwig Harding, *Entertaining the American Army The American Stage and Lyceum in the Great War* (Associated Press, 1921), 150-52, 210-11.

<sup>21</sup> Allen, *Keeping Our Soldiers Fit for War and After*, 7.

along, social hygiene education, anti-vice crusades, theatrical entertainment, and musical training.<sup>22</sup>

The CTCA did not set out to merely banish immoral influences from the camps; it also wanted to create programs that would stimulate the men and obviate the need for outside pleasures. In other words, the CTCA was not naïve about the proclivities of young, single men. It considered itself a practical steward of soldiers' wants and needs. "[The CTCA] does not intend to attempt impracticable idealistic standards," Fosdick wrote in the summer of 1917. "We shall be dealing with a fine lot of healthy, red-blooded men and we must have healthy, red-blooded forms of recreation."<sup>23</sup>

The government had reason for concern about social issues. The Wilson administration was keen on avoiding the vice problems that had stricken the American military during the Mexican-American border crisis in 1916, during which a number of soldiers were incapacitated due to venereal diseases they had contracted at the brothels surrounding the encampments.<sup>24</sup> The issues associated with "homesickness, liquor, prostitution, and cheap motion-picture shows" required eradication from camp life.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kristin Luker, "Sex, Social Hygiene, and the State: The Double-Edged Sword of Social Reform," *Theory & Society* 27:5 (Oct. 1998): 601–634.

<sup>23</sup> "Making Vice Unattractive in Soldiers' Camps," *The New York Times*, May 20, 1917, SM3.

<sup>24</sup> James A. Sandos, "Prostitution and Drugs: The United States Army on the Mexican-American Border, 1916-1917," *Pacific Historical Review* 49: 4 (1980): 621-45.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Beaver, *Newton D. Baker and the American War Effort, 1917-1919* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 220.

The CTCA envisioned its camps as “model cities” where trainees would learn the arts of soldiering and middle-class refinement.<sup>26</sup> Frederick Holt, a representative of the CTCA’s War Recreation Commission, wrote that the camps were to serve as “National Universities [sic], training schools to which the flower of American manhood is being sent.”<sup>27</sup> Fosdick shared Secretary Baker’s belief in the transformative power of wartime élan and nationalism. Fosdick believed that the CTCA could achieve utilitarian goals, such as reducing the number of soldiers stricken with venereal disease, while simultaneously inculcating a generation of young men in Progressive values. At stake was nothing less than a redefinition of American masculinity.

The CTCA’s camp cultural program was dictated by an ideology of respectability and edification. Raymond Fosdick and his staff, many of whom came from the pre-war recreation movement, criticized cheap, tawdry, and lowbrow amusements associated with moral decay, such as vaudeville, nickelodeons, burlesque, and dance halls.<sup>28</sup> According to theater historian Weldon Durham, the War Department’s official stance regarding the theater industry during the war was one of contempt and suspicion.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Weldon B. Durham, *Liberty Theatres of the United States Army, 1917-1919* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2006), 21. According to Sue Collins, World War I-era encampments each housed roughly 40,000 soldiers, meaning that at the time of the war only 180 American cities had populations greater than the camps. Collins, “Film, Cultural Policy, and World War I Training Camps,” 7.

<sup>27</sup> Frederick Holt, “The Pioneer Spirit,” *Camp Custer Bulletin* 1:4, September 27, 1917, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Durham, *Liberty Theatres*, 34-35.

<sup>29</sup> Durham, “The Tightening Rein: Relations between the Federal Government and the American Theatre Industry during World War One,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 30:3 (October 1978): 397.

## Highbrow/Lowbrow

Progressives believed that lowbrow entertainment – vaudeville, nickelodeons, dance halls – propagated values incompatible with effective soldiering.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps even more troublesome was the spatial infrastructure that developed around these modes of entertainment. Middle-class reformers often linked saloons and urban amusements with social deviancy and criminality.<sup>31</sup> Gambling, alcohol, and prostitution corrupted impressionable youths and encouraged behaviors antithetical to American democracy. Theatrical and musical entertainers were also implicated; the War Department considered theater professionals lazy, unproductive, and immoral. To Fosdick, the line between harmless escapism and lawbreaking was precariously thin.<sup>32</sup>

To offer an alternative cultural vision, the CTCA instead championed instructive cultural activities that would edify soldiers in Progressive values such as self-reliance, sexual hygiene, thrift, and deference to experts and authority figures. In place of Hollywood films and raucous dance halls, the CTCA's early cultural program included lyceum-style lectures, documentary films, chaperoned coed socializing, glee clubs, and athletics. The Wilson administration authorized private Christian and Jewish

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<sup>30</sup> This section is heavily indebted to Lawrence Levine's history on the creation of musical hierarchies in the nineteenth century. See Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*.

<sup>31</sup> David Gilbert, *The Product of Our Souls: Ragtime, Race, and the Birth of the Manhattan Musical Marketplace* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2015), 107-116.

<sup>32</sup> National Archives II, RG 165, 56: 399, "War Department Letters," document 25278; Bristow, 23-35.



organizations to participate in the camp recreational program, further mollifying reformers' concerns about the potentially deleterious camp environment.<sup>33</sup>

The Young Men's Christian Organization (YMCA) was particularly active in the camp recreation program, building theaters and other social spaces. While most YMCA-constructed theaters were small – they were often referred to as “huts” – some held equipollent seating capacities with established urban theaters and government-built Liberty Theatres.<sup>34</sup> Here, soldiers could catch a live act or stage an amateur production of their own making. Other private organizations, such as the American Library Association, contributed to the wholesome camp image by constructing makeshift libraries and donating reading materials.

A major component of the CTCA's cultural program was its camp musical initiative. Organized under the auspices of the National Committee on Army and Navy Camp Music (hereafter referred to as the NCANCM), the camp musicals were designed to foster cooperation and build morale among the soldiers in each cantonment. Federal officials envisioned camp music as a unifying measure that would send soldiers “singing into France.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> William H. Taft and Frederick Morgan Harris, eds., *Service with Fighting Men: An Account of the American Young Men's Christian Association in the World War* (New York: Association Press, 1922), 1:383.

<sup>34</sup> Collins, “Film, Cultural Policy, and World War I Training Camps,” 7. Some YMCA camp theaters could accommodate upwards of 2,800 viewers.

<sup>35</sup> “Music in the Camps,” 1:1, RG 165, Entry 405, Box 1, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

While the CTCA's primary goal was wielding music to create an effective fighting force, it also envisioned music as a preventative measure against vice and immorality. Fosdick argued that simply outlawing vice would not suffice; to combat immorality, the CTCA needed to actively engage the men with alternative forms of entertainment.<sup>36</sup> Unlike previous military conflicts, in which musical training was haphazard, uneven, and oftentimes nonexistent, World War I marked a fundamental transformation in the U.S. military's usage of and reliance upon music. Top military officials recognized this at the time; one camp commander noted that soldiers were not taught to sing in "the old days": "We expect [the camp music program] to give the men a great deal of happiness and inspiration."<sup>37</sup> Another official at Camp Dix, New Jersey, wrote to the CTCA that "full military recognition of the power of music is coming even faster than we have dared hope."<sup>38</sup>

The NCANCM assigned song leaders to each camp, and these officials were tasked with organizing camp musicals, professional musical entertainment, and community sing-alongs. At the end of each week, song leaders would submit reports to the NCANCM, detailing song selections, describing shows, and evaluating the overall efficacy of the camp musical program in their respective cantonments. The NCANCM would then combine these briefs into a weekly report that was distributed to all the song

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<sup>36</sup> Raymond B. Fosdick, "The Commission on Training Camp Activities" (transcript of a speech delivered December 15, 1917), *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York* 7, no. 4 (1918): 163–64.

<sup>37</sup> "Singing in the Training Camps," *The Infantry Journal* XIV, no. 7 (January 1918): 542.

<sup>38</sup> "Music in the Camps" 1:7.

leaders across the country. These reports, entitled “Music in the Camps,” allowed camp music officials to share ideas and offer constructive feedback on the camp music program.

### **Music in the Camps**

The first issue of “Music in the Camps” was released on November 3, 1917. By that time, the United States was well into wartime mobilization. National recruitment drives, Liberty Loan campaigns, and wartime propaganda had become staples of most Americans’ lives. The first few months of American involvement in the war engendered a great deal of experimentation among federal agencies tasked with mobilizing the nation’s hearts and minds. Federal, state, and local officials reported on the successes and failures of government cultural campaigns, including the cultural programs in army and navy cantonments. Private organizations, such as the YMCA and the Knights of Columbus, aided federal agencies in wartime cultural output.

“Music in the Camps” was thus an official forum where federal officials, song leaders, and military personnel could exchange news and information related to the CTCA’s camp music program. W. Kirkpatrick Brice, the chairman of the CTCA’s National Committee on Army and Navy Camp Music, envisioned “Music in the Camps” as a medium where individuals engaged in camp music work could freely discuss the program’s failures and successes.<sup>39</sup> Many of the reports found in “Music in the Camps” are remarkably candid given the restrictive wartime environment.

Camp songleaders wrote most of the reports in “Music in the Camps.” Songleaders were drawn from disparate sections of society: academics, professional

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<sup>39</sup> Music in the Camps 1:1, November 3, 1917, RG 165, Entry 405, Box 1, NARA.

musicians, military officers, and songwriters. Each songleader was given significant leeway in their selection of music and instructional style. Depending on the specialty of each camp's songleader, soldiers could participate in classical quartets, minstrelsy, or spiritual hymns, to name but a few examples. The unwillingness of some songleaders to adjust to their trainees' musical proclivities led to conflict in several cantonments. Oftentimes certain songleaders would repeatedly report resistance to their instructional efforts but do little to ameliorate conditions with their trainees, blaming soldiers' recalcitrance rather than their own failures to adapt.

Despite the CTCA's willingness to cede some control to the camp song leaders, federal officials expected them to adhere to certain standards. For example, song leaders could not profit from their military service, nor could they use the camp stage for professional self-aggrandizement. Most importantly, song leaders were expected to encourage a "unanimity of spirit" among all the soldiers, regardless of each leader's respective musical style.<sup>40</sup> The songs, in other words, were designed to foster an army whose moral unity would outweigh any differences in color or creed.

Singing and soldiering developed a symbiotic relationship during the First World War. Soldiers sang to relieve boredom, to inspire comradeship and élan, to remember fallen brethren, and to help endure the strains imposed upon their minds and bodies. In turn, soldiers crafted a unique musical language, re-writing well-worn ballads and creating their own original songs. One of those soldiers was Patrick MacGill, who wrote and compiled a soldiers' songbook entitled *Soldiers' Songs* during the war. In the dedication, MacGill notes soldiers' multivalent usage of music: "The soldiers have songs of their

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

own, songs of the march, the trench, the billet and the battle. The origin is lost; the songs have risen like old folk-tales, spontaneous choruses that voice the moods of the moment and of many moments which are monotonously alike...In moments of stress, or monotony, or grief, or hope, his thots [sic] find best expression in music.”<sup>41</sup>

Here, MacGill characterizes soldiers’ music as intangible and organic. It was an ephemeral product borne of the moment. However, MacGill did not believe that soldiers were natural songwriters or lyricists; to the contrary, he argued that soldiers had “no sense of poetic values” and cared little for a song’s content.<sup>42</sup> The idea of soldiers as a musical tabula rasa resonated with CTCA officials, who by and large held paternalistic views about soldiers’ musical capabilities and tastes. Government officials and Progressive elites considered themselves the best adjudicators of soldiers’ musical consumption.

CTCA officials deemed unacceptable certain styles of music, and the reports from camp song leaders indicate a concerted effort to stamp out these forms of musical expression among the soldiers. Soldiers, however, resisted many of the CTCA’s prescriptions through subversive behaviors such as parody and protest. Many of these subversive acts were incorporated into the musical performances, where soldiers critiqued their superiors and the rigor and impersonality of soldiering.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “Music in the Camps” 1:2, November 10, 1917, RG 165, Box 405, NARA, 5.

<sup>42</sup> “Music in the Camps” 1:2.

<sup>43</sup> World War I soldiers commonly used parody and humor to critique the war and authority figures, often through poetry, satirical newspapers, and plays. Such “trench humor” is often explained as a coping mechanism for soldiers dealing with the war’s destructiveness and futility, but I argue that it was also a vehicle through which soldiers rebelled against stifling Victorian cultural mores. See Clementine Tholas-Disset and

During the war, federal officials intended for musical shows and productions to foster a martial identity. In many respects, they succeeded in that effort. Camp songleaders often reported stirring accounts of their trainees' musical talents and martial spirit. Others, however, reported resistance to the CTCA's musical program, in the form of "slacking off" or exhibiting little interest in the musical offerings. Certain regiments employed musical theater to criticize camp officials and the war; others rewrote lyrics in the CTCA's songbook and performed them without alerting their superiors.<sup>44</sup>

Military officials and federal agencies were quick to grasp the relationship between music, nationalism, and martial spirit. Camp commanders, bureaucrats, reformers, and soldiers all stressed the necessity of a robust and vibrant military musical program. For decades prior to 1917, American military bands faced legal restrictions on where and what they could play due to the lobbying efforts of professional musicians. Legislation passed at the behest of the American Federation of Musicians, a union representing 80,000 professional band and orchestral players, successfully kept military musicians out of the public sphere.<sup>45</sup> This legislation forced state militias to rely upon civilian musicians who varied greatly in talent.

In December 1917, General John J. Pershing, the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in France, sent out a directive to camp directors, ordering them to adjudicate more time, money, and effort towards musical endeavors. "Pershing

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Karen A. Ritzenhoff (eds.), *Humor, Entertainment, and Popular Culture during World War I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> John Jacob Niles, *Songs My Mother Never Taught Me* (New York: Gold Label Books, 1929). It took the soldiers awhile to "find out how humorous it was to hold up our officers, our pack mules, our mess, our allies, and our enemies up to ridicule." Niles, 10.

<sup>45</sup> "Music in the Camps" 1:13, January 26, 1918, 2.

Wants Good Music,” thundered a headline in *The Boston Post*, highlighting the U.S. military’s newfound preoccupation with musical training and preparedness.<sup>46</sup> The *Post* article noted that the United States’ military musical program was far inferior to that of France’s, posing a major problem for American soldiers heading to the Western Front. It even implied that American bandsmen were spending too much time learning “first aid” and too little time honing their musical chops.<sup>47</sup>

The impetus for musical training was less about soldiers’ recreation and morale than about fostering an impervious nationalism that would see the troops through difficult trials. To this end, CTCA officials included an excerpt of Rudyard Kipling’s “France at War” essay in an issue of “Music in the Camps,” in which Kipling extolled the virtue of France’s military music. The French bands played a “tune that seemed like the very pulse of France”; their “passion and gaiety and high heart of their own land [rendered] in the speech that only they could understand...to hear the music of a country is like hearing a woman think aloud.”<sup>48</sup> Kipling’s gendered language hints at martial music’s perceived ability to evoke primal emotions. Effective martial music could instill an unshakeable bond between soldier and country.

### **The Music Program’s Broader Goals**

The CTCA did not reserve its musical programs solely for soldiers. Each cantonment sought to establish connections with the surrounding communities, and music was a critical component of that endeavor. During mobilization, community leaders in the

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<sup>46</sup> “Music in the Camps” 1:7, December 15, 1917.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

host cities voiced concerns about having military encampments – and the accompanying vices – so close to home. These concerns were not unwarranted; not only had military camps in previous conflicts proven to be hotbeds of prostitution, gambling, and other vices, but the sheer size of the camps meant that surrounding communities were subjected to thousands of unvetted men living in close proximity to vulnerable young women.<sup>49</sup> In many instances, the camp population dwarfed that of the surrounding community. Wrightstown, New Jersey, the home of Camp Dix, had a 1910 census population of 220; the neighboring town to Camp Devens counted 2,797 in the same year.<sup>50</sup>

The influx of 35,000-50,000 recruits had the potential to destabilize these communities. Camp directors and CTCA officials envisioned camp music as a means of mollifying these concerned communities. If the CTCA could get ordinary citizens involved in camp work, it could show them the value of the new camps and, in the process, expose rural communities to Progressive values. Some camps built stages, theaters, auditoriums, and dance halls to serve both military personnel and civilians. At Camp Upton, New York, camp officials authorized the construction of a 10,000-seat community hall for music, lectures, and motion pictures. Officials at Camp Gordon, Georgia, shortly followed suit.<sup>51</sup> Ferdinand Bunkley, a prominent choral composer, founded a “Liberty Chorus” in Seattle to bring soldiers and civilians together in song.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See Bristow, *Making Men Moral*, particularly Chapter Two, “‘Full-Orbed Moral Manhood’: Cultural Nationalism and the Creation of New Men and Women.”

<sup>50</sup> *AERA* (New York: American Electric Railroad Association, 1918), 113.

<sup>51</sup> “Singing in the Training Camps,” 541.

<sup>52</sup> “Music in the Camps” 1:3, November 17, 1917, 6.



In other locations, camp officials organized sing-alongs, parades, and live musical entertainment for the surrounding communities. Geoffrey O’Hara, the song leader at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, and the writer of the wildly popular war song “K-K-K-Katy,” enthusiastically reported that military choruses had invigorated the community of nearby Lafayette. “Through the instrumentality of a jolly good old-fashioned sing,” O’Hara wrote, “we have been able to turn [Lafayette] right around and head it in the right direction.”<sup>53</sup> The “right direction” was, of course, a more favorable dispensation towards the encampment and its occupants.

To streamline camp musical productions, the U.S. military produced and disseminated an army and navy songbook, appropriately titled *Songs of Soldiers and Sailors*, beginning in November 1917.<sup>54</sup> The relatively slim pamphlet was distributed to each cantonment’s song leader and sold to the soldiers at the camp post offices. It contained a diverse set of musical styles, from Civil War-era ballads to contemporary marching songs, but the song selections almost exclusively spoke to the lived realities of white, native-born Americans.<sup>55</sup>

Surprisingly, given the CTCA’s ambivalence towards popular entertainment, Tin Pan Alley songs comprised the greatest share of the songbook’s music selection. While this may seem like a significant concession from the CTCA, the selected Tin Pan Alley tunes reaffirmed the values propagated by the federal government: loyalty to country;

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<sup>53</sup> “Music in the Camps” 1:7.

<sup>54</sup> “Music in the Camps” 1:2.

<sup>55</sup> “Singing in the Training Camps,” 541; Maci Reed, “A Singing Army is a Fighting Army: American Soldiers’ Songs and the Training Camp Experience in World War I,” *Voces Novae: Chapman University Historical Review* 8:1 (2016): 127.

obedience to superiors; moral uprightness; and chaste and monogamous relationships with the opposite sex. The CTCA's inclusion of Tin Pan Alley songs in its official songbook was a recognition of Tin Pan Alley's power over the national musical imagination. Without its help, the camp music program could not succeed. It is little wonder that Tin Pan Alley's sheet music sales plateaued during the war years.<sup>56</sup>

Songleaders greeted the new pamphlet with relief; coordinating entertainment for 40,000 soldiers in each camp was a monumental task fraught with challenges. In addition to easing the logistical burden of organizing music for thousands of men, the songbooks also standardized arrangements for vocalists and instrumentalists.<sup>57</sup> The songbook was envisioned as a vital piece of soldiers' military equipment, providing solace, hope, and comradery for the difficult times ahead. The CTCA also hoped that the songbooks would help maintain the soldiers' moral "armor," keeping them safe not from artillery shells or bullets but from salacious influences. Major General Leonard Wood, the commandant at Camp Funston, Kansas, articulated this view in a speech to the camp's soldiers: "It is just as essential that the soldiers know how to sing as it is that they carry rifles and know how to shoot them."<sup>58</sup>

Camp songleaders shouldered the considerable burden of coordinating musical entertainment for what were, for all intents and purposes, large cities. Leaders devised various methods of distributing the logistical workload. Stetson Humphrey, the song

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<sup>56</sup> Glenn Watkins, *Proof through the Night: Music and the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 249.

<sup>57</sup> *Music in the Camps* 1:2.

<sup>58</sup> "Singing in the Training Camps," 540. While song leaders were formally mustered into the Quartermaster Corps, they remained under the CTCA's supervision.

leader at Camp Dix, trained quartets in each company stationed at the camp. Each week, Humphrey would meet with the company quartets and introduce them to new songs. The quartets would, in turn, instruct their respective companies and report back to Humphrey on their development.<sup>59</sup>

Other songleaders took a more hands-off approach, delegating responsibilities to regimental bands and trusting them to decide their own music and style. A popular method of delegation was through regimental competition. Song leaders would promise trophies or rewards to the regiments with the finest musical skills.<sup>60</sup> Still others leaned upon civilian organizations to provide support. Vernon Stiles, the camp song leader at Camp Devens, enlisted the aid of the YMCA, which provided musical instruction to his men “four nights a week” at the YMCA’s “huts.” “The YMCA’s [sic] try the boys in the same song and by the time they come to marching or field duty they know them pretty well,” Stiles wrote. “In other words, we use the huts and theatres and other places of assembly to teach them what they put into practical use outside.”<sup>61</sup>

These examples demonstrate that, despite the CTCA’s heavy-handed rhetoric, the camp music program became far more decentralized than the Wilson administration had originally intended. Song leaders could try to follow CTCA dictums to the letter, but most of the program’s day-to-day implementation fell to local camp officials, regimental officers, and rank-and-file soldiers. The literal and figurative distance between the CTCA

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<sup>59</sup> “Singing in the Camps,” 541.

<sup>60</sup> “Music in the Camps,” 1:2, 8-9.

<sup>61</sup> “Music in the Camps,” 1:5, December 1, 1917.

and local camp officials allowed for commercialized popular music to infiltrate the camp music program.

The CTCA's camp songleaders faced several other daunting obstacles. Many military officials were dismissive of the musical program. Songleaders who worked for unsympathetic commanders found that their main problem was not overwork but relegation. These camp commanding officers viewed musical training as ancillary or superfluous to the real work of drill and march.<sup>62</sup> In these locations, the CTCA's musical program became mired in military politics.

Another major problem was the camps' routinely shifting demographics. Soldiers and officers were always on the move, creating an unstable and difficult work environment for camp song leaders. It was not uncommon for a songleader to develop a rapport with his men and his commanding officers, only to have that work undone overnight when well-trained companies were shipped out and replaced by a new batch of raw recruits. A camp commander who was receptive to musical training could be substituted for one who was antagonistic to it.<sup>63</sup>

The main problem, however, was the chronic lack of musical supplies. Sheet music was always in demand, and even when songleaders had a ready supply, it was often outdated and uninspiring. "What songs do soldiers like?" asked one exasperated songleader in an early issue of "Music in the Camps."<sup>64</sup> Though civilian organizations tried to meet camp demand (a process examined in chapter two), it was never quite

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<sup>62</sup> "Music in the Camps," 1:11, January 12, 1918, 1.

<sup>63</sup> MIC 1:11, 2.

<sup>64</sup> MIC 1:7.

enough. In addition, songleaders had difficulties procuring musical instruments and performance spaces for the soldiers. Pianos were the songleaders' instrument of choice, but they also requested string and brass instruments. Stages and theaters were needed for practices and performances. Some songleaders made do with makeshift wooden structures, but others demanded inviting and spacious arenas. Unsurprisingly, securing funding for these costly expenses during wartime proved challenging. Although some camp facilities improved over the course of the war, many song leaders had to content themselves with inferior entertainment infrastructure throughout the war's duration.<sup>65</sup>

Songleaders' main priorities were providing soldiers with musical instruction and instilling martial spirit through song. W. Kirkpatrick Brice, the chairman of the NCANCM, opined that camp song leaders' primary task was to create a "singing, victorious army."<sup>66</sup> General Leonard Wood, camp commander at Camp Funston, Kansas, urged song leaders to envision their task as a moral imperative. Song leaders, and the love of music they would hopefully instill in their men, had the power to make soldiering tolerable, even in the direst of circumstances. "I have seen men toiling for hours thru the mud and rain, every one of the dejected, spiritless, tired and cold, wet and forlorn, cursing the day they entered the army, transformed into a happy, devil-may-care frame of mind thru a song," Wood said. "We hope every man in training will become a singer...we desire him to be happy and care-free and to help keep his comrades that way."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> MIC 1:2, 1-2.

<sup>66</sup> MIC 1:1, 2.

<sup>67</sup> MIC 1:1, 6.

Song was not only a morale-building participatory exercise, but an aural salve for loneliness, drudgery, and exhaustion. Soldiers who spent their days amidst the cacophony of artillery salvos, screaming men, and withering gunfire could find brief respite in the soothing tones of a gramophone or company song. One dispatch from the Western Front noted that the “discomforts of the past thirty-six hours were sent into oblivion when [the gramophone] calmly churned out ‘When You Come to the End of a Perfect Day.’”<sup>68</sup>

Song leaders could also assuage soldiers’ anxiety, particularly as they left the comfort of America’s shores for the uncertainty of the Western Front. At Camp Greene, near Charlotte, North Carolina, song leader Howard D. Barlow marched his men to the camp auditorium the evening before they were to be shipped out to France. The men were reportedly weighed down with “personal grief” and thoughts of the war’s “horrors.” For over an hour, Barlow led his men in song. The men performed lighter tunes like “Over There” and “Good-bye Broadway” with such fervor that any sense of the “cheap or banal” was banished away. When the soldiers concluded the performance with more rousing songs, such as the “Star-Spangled Banner” and “The Marseillaise,” the atmosphere of dread that preceded the show had dissipated. As the men filed out of the auditorium, copies of the *Songs of Soldiers and Sailors* were handed out, to great appreciation. “We little realize what [music] means,” the report concluded.<sup>69</sup>

### **Ragtime in Black and White**

The major problem facing songleaders was not motivating soldiers to sing but regulating what they sang. CTCA officials, camp commanders, and song leaders all

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<sup>68</sup> MIC 1:13, 6.

<sup>69</sup> MIC 1:21, March 23, 1918, 1-2.

stressed the importance of “patriotic music” that would help win the war. Songs that did not meet this somewhat vague criteria were to be rejected. To this end, the CTCA and the NCANCM constructed a hierarchy of musical genres. Orchestral music, sentimental ballads, patriotic airs, martial marches, and choral music contained values that were missing in ragtime and jazz.

Ragtime was a well-known genre by 1917, and many white Progressives associated it with African-Americans, vulgar “coon songs,” and minstrelsy. Upper-class African Americans, those of the Talented Tenth, also considered ragtime inappropriate for both white and Black singers. Respectability politics required adhering to certain musical standards, and ragtime did not meet them.<sup>70</sup> A turn-of-the-century article from the musical monthly *Étude*, fittingly titled “Musical Impurity,” referred to ragtime as a “malarious epidemic” that infected the nation’s youth “to such an extent as to arouse one’s suspicions of their sanity.”<sup>71</sup>

The American Federation of Musicians, the same union that lobbied to keep military bands from publicly advertising their music, characterized ragtime in pestilential terms as “musical rot” that required eradication.<sup>72</sup> The military also viewed ragtime with suspicion and disdain. A resolution to allow military bands to play ragtime during a Civil War veteran’s parade was shot down as “sacrilege.”<sup>73</sup> It is telling that the Camp Greene

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<sup>70</sup> Gilbert, *The Product of Our Souls*, 8-12.

<sup>71</sup> “Musical Impurity,” *Étude* 18 (January 1900): 16.

<sup>72</sup> *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 14, 1901, 1.

<sup>73</sup> *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 11, 1902, 11.

performance of ragtime hit “Goodbye Broadway” required a uniquely stirring rendition in order to wash away the song’s inherent “cheapness and banality.”<sup>74</sup>

Early in the war, it appeared that some of the soldiers themselves resisted the allure of popular music. The *Camp Custer Bulletin*, a camp newspaper, reported in September 1917 that the men much preferred “good old tunes” and classic songs to ragtime hits.<sup>75</sup> These attitudes would change, however, as the war wore on and soldiers were exposed to new sounds, relationships, and ways of envisioning themselves in the nation’s social and cultural fabric.

The music’s source also mattered; songs originating from commercial enterprises were considered suspect compared to songs that sprung organically from regiments or communities, or songs that had a distinguished and well-defined historical lineage. Frederick Holt, a representative of the CTCA’s War Recreation Committee, wrote in late 1917 that American soldiers clamored for songs that spoke to their innate “pioneer spirit,” primarily classic songs and patriotic airs. These were songs that would send the soldiers to France in high spirits and return them with even higher morals. “The Commission does not consider it enough that the education of these camps should avoid the wholesale propagation [sic] of physical disease and moral deterioration,” Holt wrote. “America demands something more than that. We must make these men stronger in every sense, more fit morally, mentally and physically than they have ever been in their lives.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> MIC 1:21, 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Camp Custer Bulletin* 1:2, September 13, 1917, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Frederick Holt, “The Pioneer Spirit,” *Camp Custer Bulletin* 1:4, September 27, 1917, 5.



This attitude was reflected in the song handbook distributed to soldiers and sailors. Most of the handbook's song selection was comprised of popular songs, military airs, and marching tunes. The commercially produced songs, such as "Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny" and "Old Black Joe," tended to be older and more established. Perhaps most importantly, the approved commercial tunes spoke glowingly of hearth and home, conveyed values appropriate to soldiering, and reaffirmed traditional racial hierarchies and gender roles.<sup>77</sup>

The CTCA was fully aware of popular music's allure, and it advised songleaders to stick to well-known songs to avoid spreading subversive ideas and values. A poem critical of old-fashioned music was circulated among the camp song leaders in late 1917. The poem's author, Roy K. Moulton, a popular New York City culture columnist, criticized traditional music's saccharinity and vapidness:

"I cannot sing the old songs;  
I haven't the time to try.  
There are ten thousand new ones  
I've got to learn or die.  
They're so-called "patriotic" –  
Put up the hammer. Hush.  
It's not good form to knock them  
Tho' they are mostly mush.

The soldiers will not sing them  
Amid the bombs or mines;  
They will not chant nor mumble  
The woozy, floozy lines.  
They'll sing the good old war songs  
When hiking or in mess.  
They 'can' the silly flub-dub  
And cheap damfoolishness."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Songs of the Soldiers and Sailors* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1917).

<sup>78</sup> MIC 1:2, 9.

Moulton's words were prescient. Throughout the war, it proved difficult to weed out commercial songs, particularly in camps around major cities and commercial centers. George Mitchell, the camp song leader at Brooklyn Navy Yard, found it nearly impossible to stop his men from consuming the latest shows and sheet music in nearby New York City: "Boys who hear all the latest and newest 'musical comedies' look with contempt upon 'Old Black Joe' and I have to administer 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' as I do castor oil to my youngsters of eleven and thirteen – but they've got to take it [even] if I do have to hold their noses and pour it down."<sup>79</sup> Much like the AMF, Mitchell characterized commercialized music in epidemiological terms as a sickness requiring medicinal treatment.

While white soldiers were steered away from "lower" forms of music, African American trainees were encouraged to indulge in folk music and ragtime. Much of this was due to ingrained racial beliefs about African-Americans' musicality.<sup>80</sup> Foremost amongst these beliefs was the idea that African-Americans possessed innate musical skills particular to their race. Unlike white musicians, who required years of training to hone their talents, it was believed that musical skill came preternaturally, indeed biologically, to African Americans.

This belief, however, came with a crucial caveat: African Americans specialized only in certain kinds of music. "Negro melodies" encompassed a wide variety of genres – slave spirituals, minstrel tunes, plantation melodies, coon songs – but the category

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<sup>79</sup> MIC 1:43, August 24, 1918, 7-8.

<sup>80</sup> Aaron Celious and Daphna Oyserman, "Race from the Inside: An Emerging Heterogeneous Race Model," *Journal of Social Issues* 57:1 (2001): 153.

explicitly left out “higher” forms of music. Only through close association with whites could black musicians shed their primitive musical origins.<sup>81</sup>

During the late nineteenth-century, this widespread belief acquired the patina of academic support. The *Journal of American Folklore* regularly included scholarly articles that contained racial stereotypes regarding African American music. These articles linked black music to racist tropes and slavery apologia, such as slaves’ childishness and the tranquility of plantation life during slavery. Alec Fortier, in an 1888 entry entitled “Customs and Superstitions in Louisiana,” wrote that the “childlike” slaves’ music was “strange and savage” yet “not disagreeable” due to their natural ear for music.<sup>82</sup>

Historians have demonstrated that these beliefs, borrowed directly from minstrelsy, were motivated by a search for white national identity during the turbulent racial upheavals of the post-Civil War period, and that they bore little resemblance to the actual musical practices of the black community. White elites’ veneration of “negro melodies” provided a useful pretense to enjoy black music while doing little to ameliorate the injustices and inequalities faced by African Americans during Jim Crow.<sup>83</sup>

In the training camps, black soldiers served in segregated regiments, often under the command of white officers. Neither the Wilson administration nor the U.S. military

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<sup>81</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 105-108.

<sup>82</sup> Alec Fortier, “Customs and Superstitions in Louisiana,” 136-37; quoted in Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 107.

<sup>83</sup> Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 108-11; Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Jennifer Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of American Society* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

expressed interest in using the war as an opportunity to mitigate the country's "race question," preferring instead to paper over substantial racial divisions with colorblind, uplifting rhetoric and appeals to patriotism.<sup>84</sup>

Most black draftees were consigned to "service battalions," tasked with menial jobs like constructing barracks, digging trenches, and cooking for the camp mess. In the camps there were only two black songleaders, and most black regiments received musical training from white songleaders who carried the racial prejudices of the day with them into camp. The CTCA even segregated its songbooks, instructing songleaders in charge of black battalions to procure a book of "Negro Melodies" instead of the standard-issue *Songs of Soldiers and Sailors*.<sup>85</sup>

Kenneth N. Westerman, a white member of the vocal faculty at the University of Michigan and the songleader stationed to Camp McArthur in Waco, Texas, approached his wartime camp tenure as an opportunity to study African American vernacular styles of music. Waco, which a year prior had received notoriety as the site of the brutal spectacle lynching of a black teenager named Jesse Washington, was a curious place to station armed black soldiers and have them perform for the surrounding community.<sup>86</sup>

Yet Westerman overlooked this tension, instead focusing on expanding his knowledge of African American folk music and showcasing his soldiers' talents. Unlike

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<sup>84</sup> "Problems in Training Negro Soldiers," *The New York Times*, January 6, 1918, 42.

<sup>85</sup> MIC 1:48, 2.

<sup>86</sup> Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 181-83. Washington's lynching was so violent that Wood characterizes it as a "defining moment in the history of lynching."

the camp songleaders assigned to white soldiers, Westerman exhibited no intention of teaching “higher” forms of music to the black soldiers in his charge. Initially, he was strictly focused on locating authentic “negro melodies,” but found that little of it was in writing. Luckily for Westerman, he quickly realized that he could locate those organic melodies within the hearts and minds of his soldiers. Westerman’s second dispatch to the CTCA revealed that racist notions of inveterate black musical prowess had spread to the camps: “No one but a ‘nigger’ can sing [negro melodies]. I can’t describe it so you can get the atmosphere, but 1200 black men stretched out in the sun, with their eyes half shut, droning away on these songs are something that only the heat of the South can produce; and still ‘droning’ doesn’t express it for they have more volume and tone color than a whole regiment of white men.”<sup>87</sup>

Westerman also took a studious interest in the black laborers employed at the camp. Westerman believed that it would take “a good many years” to teach them “war rag,” but he marveled at the laborers’ natural renditions of “negro spirituals” such as “Death Comes Creepin’ (Whatcha Gonna Do?)”. “[The laborers] stand in a class by themselves,” he wrote.<sup>88</sup>

Some black trainees expanded their entertainment repertoire to include boxing and dancing. Word spread quickly, and soon they became a hot ticket item among the other recruits stationed at Camp McArthur.<sup>89</sup> Despite Westerman’s stereotyped attitudes

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<sup>87</sup> MIC 1:36, July 6, 1918, 2.

<sup>88</sup> MIC 1:34, June 22, 1918, 4.

<sup>89</sup> MIC 1:36, 2.

towards African Americans, his relationship with them was complex and even reciprocal at times. He was one of only two white officers to participate in the celebration of Juneteenth, the holiday marking the final abolition of slavery in the former Confederate states, in the summer of 1918. Westerman proudly noted that it was a “wonderful celebration.”<sup>90</sup> His soldiers also invited him to a picnic thrown by the “town niggers,” and Westerman noted with pride that he was the only white participant.<sup>91</sup> When his men departed for France later that summer, Westerman saw them off with tears in eyes, “in spite of the fact that they are black as the ace of spades.”<sup>92</sup> In his later dispatches, Westerman even dropped his usage of the racial epithet “nigger.” Song could both reify and erode racial divisions.

Black soldiers often used white stereotypes to their advantage, as evidenced by the commercialization of black musical prowess at Camp McArthur. This phenomenon was not unique to Waco; across the country, black soldiers capitalized on racist musical beliefs to ease tensions with white soldiers and to earn extra money. At Camp Meade, Maryland, black troops performed Carrie Jacobs-Bonds’s parlor song, “A Perfect Day,” followed by a rendition of George Cohan’s “Over There.” White trainees gathered around the men and threw money on the stage, all the while singing along.<sup>93</sup>

By performing songs sonically categorized as “white,” black soldiers subtly challenged the musical color line that had been imposed upon them in the camps and in

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> MIC 1:43, August 24, 1918, 9.

<sup>92</sup> MIC 1:39, July 27, 1918, 3.

<sup>93</sup> MIC 1:9, December 7, 1917, 4.

civilian life. In Mississippi, black troops gave such stirring performances of “plantation songs” that the camp songleader decided to break CTCA protocol and teach them “a few of the songs our white troops sing.”<sup>94</sup> Likewise, at Camp Greene, North Carolina, a white songleader was so moved by his black soldiers’ rendition of the traditional African-American spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” that he resolved to instruct the men in as many “regulation” songs as possible; to do anything less, he argued, would be a waste of the soldiers’ extraordinary natural talent.<sup>95</sup>

Black trainees at Camp Jackson, South Carolina, performed for ten-thousand citizens at a local community sing in September 1918.<sup>96</sup> Two months later, the Sixth Brigade “negro minstrels” performed at Camp Jackson for the soldiers of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Regiments. The show was such a hit that the black soldier-minstrels were booked for public shows in Columbia and surrounding Sumter later that year.<sup>97</sup> Camp music offered African Americans an opportunity to temporarily breach the spatial arrangement of segregation and Jim Crow.

The CTCA’s stated opposition to popular forms of music proved difficult to enforce. While the CTCA and the Wilson administration clearly expressed their collective vision for the camp music program, its implementation and enforcement were undertaken by a patchwork network of civilian, federal, and military organizations. Civilian organizations such as the YMCA and the Knights of Columbus had markedly

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<sup>94</sup> MIC 1:42, August 17, 1918, 7-8.

<sup>95</sup> MIC 1:52, October 26, 1918, 5-6.

<sup>96</sup> MIC 1:45, September 7, 1918, 4-5.

<sup>97</sup> “Moonlight Minstrels Make Merry,” *Camp Jackson Click* 1:4, November 16, 1918, 2.

different vetting procedures and demanded higher standards of morality from their entertainment than did the War Department.<sup>98</sup>

The War Camp Community Service (WCCS), a successor organization to the pre-war Playground Association of America (PAA), a Progressive group devoted to healthy childhood recreational activities, only authorized “patriotic music rallies” at its camp venues. The WCCS was intent on fixing the moral problems that had plagued the U.S. Army during the Mexican border conflict in 1916, particularly prostitution, gambling, and venereal disease – the “vicious elements” that had afflicted army camps for centuries.

Yet the WCCS’s concerns over soldiers’ morality also extended to music. The WCCS only booked “wholesome” musical entertainment that had been properly inspected by community and organizational leaders.<sup>99</sup> CTCA directives expressed a similar desire for rigid musical standards, but the agency’s tenuous ideological and logistical control over the encampments meant that local agents were far more influential in the implementation of the camp music program than federal bureaucrats in Washington.

During the early months of mobilization, songleaders regularly wrote about the soldiers’ competing musical tastes. Depending on the soldier’s geographic origins, he may have preferred folk songs, sentimental ballads, coon songs, or feisty ragtime hits.

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<sup>98</sup> Durham, *Liberty Theatres*, 45, 192.

<sup>99</sup> Rowland Haynes, *What New York Did for Fighting Men through New York War Camp Community Service in the World-War of 1917-1919* (New York, 1919), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t9z03km1p>; Joseph Lee, “War Camp Community Service,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 79 (September 1, 1918): 189–94; “Work Agencies into Relief Army,” *The Horry Herald* (Conway, S.C.), November 7, 1918, 6.



Tin Pan Alley had a large reach along the East Coast, but regional sheet music publishers claimed significant market shares in western cities like Chicago, St. Louis, and Seattle. The CTCA's musical program touched every corner of the United States, from rural farming communities to bustling metropolises, filling the nation's proverbial airwaves with a strikingly similar set of songs. In this sense, both the federal government and Tin Pan Alley publishers benefited from the CTCA's musical program. The federal government was able to spread its message effectively to millions of Americans through music, while Tin Pan Alley publishers established new market footholds and gained the government's imprimatur.

## CHAPTER 2

### “THE COMMUNITY-MUSIC IDEAL”: COMMUNITY SINGING AND COMPLEX BEHAVIORS

The most ambitious aspect of the Commission on Training Camps Activities’ (CTCA) camp music program was its community singing initiative. The initiative had its roots in the Progressive-era community music movement, which sought to spread messages of moral uplift to rural communities through song. The movement combined secular ideals of brotherhood and patriotism with the religious goal of a “spiritual awakening.”<sup>100</sup> It aimed to harness communal spirit in furtherance of the greater “social good” and to satisfy the “longings which make life...worthwhile.”<sup>101</sup>

In many ways, the movement was a reaction against the growing tide of consumerism and new media, and the erosion of traditional social ties. The editor of the influential *Musical Monitor* wrote that the community singing movement kindled “an inherent, human instinct for expression of the inner life of man, enduring regardless of the advent of all mechanical devices for pleasure—the automobile, motion picture, etc.”<sup>102</sup> Phonographs encouraged “passivity” and isolation in

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<sup>100</sup> Peter W. Dykema, ed., preface to *Twice 55 Community Songs*, no. 1, “The Brown Book” (Boston: Birchard, 1919).

<sup>101</sup> Dykema, *Community Songs*.

<sup>102</sup> “Community Music Department,” *Musical Monitor* 6, no. 1 (September 1916): 27.

its listening audience, but communal singing was expressive, performative, and connective.<sup>103</sup> The movement, in short, was a respite from the dislocations engendered by industrialization and modernity.<sup>104</sup>

Community singing was also unashamedly socialistic: “Stated positively and concretely, community music is socialized music; music...for the people, of the people, and by the people.”<sup>105</sup> Most of the community performances were organized and led by local musicians or municipal organizations. There were no entrance fees or musical training requirements. The movement intended to activate citizens around the country in organic expressions of communal solidarity. It was democracy through music.

Most of the pre-war community music program was centered around choral singing in an effort to engage entire communities through song. According to music historian Aaron Ziegel, choral songs were the “requisite outlet for [musical expression] because only through a collective effort could the benefits accrue.”<sup>106</sup> Choral singing lent itself naturally to communal music because it required group harmonization and

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<sup>103</sup> Dykema, *Community Songs*.

<sup>104</sup> A similar postwar communal singing movement arose in England during the 1920s. Like its American counterpart, the English community music movement yearned for a return to an imagined past through the expression of traditional songs. Unlike the American movement, however, the English viewed communal music not as a reaction against popular music and modernism but as an antidote to the social, political, and economic turmoil following the First World War. See Dave Russell, “Abiding Memories: The Community Singing Movement and English Social Life in the 1920s,” *Popular Music* 27:1 (2008): 117-133.

<sup>105</sup> Dykema, *Community Songs*.

<sup>106</sup> Aaron Ziegel, “National Service and Operatic Ambitions: Arthur Nevin’s Musical Activities during World War I,” *American Music* 34:4 (Winter 2016): 416.

coordination. It was also a useful vehicle for spreading the movement's message to the widest possible audience.

In this regard, the movement was a resounding success. Hundreds of local choruses sprang up around the United States in the years leading up to American wartime mobilization. Prominent musical educators quickly recognized community singing's applicability to wartime preparation. "When groups and crowds of people throughout the country come together regularly to voice themselves in song, it is beyond human power to estimate the extent of the force which has been launched," said Arthur Farwell, a prominent community music organizer, in a 1917 speech to the Music Teachers' National Association. "An individual song is potent in its magical effect upon the listener, upon his sentiments, his emotions, his aspirations, his will. But the song of the nation is powerful beyond all knowing or dreaming."<sup>107</sup>

### **"The People Treated Us Like Gods"**

Early in the war, federal officials explicitly linked community singing with nationalism and military preparedness. W. Kirkpatrick Brice, the chairman of the National Committee on Army and Navy Camp Music, argued that community singing was integral in defeating Germany. In order to combat Germanism, the United States needed to create a sustainable musical infrastructure of its own. This included rejecting German music, even classic works by famous German composers such as Beethoven and

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<sup>107</sup> Arthur Farwell, "Community Music and the Music Teacher," in *Papers and Proceedings of the Music Teachers' National Association at Its Thirty-Eighth Annual Meeting* (Hartford, CT: Music Teachers' National Association, 1917), 197.

Bach.<sup>108</sup> “I wouldn’t trust a German to lead us in music any more than I would trust a German to make our ammunition...or teach in our public schools,” Brice wrote.

Community singing was the starting point in the creation of a “new musical art”; through community singing, soldiers would spread patriotic music to communities across the country, leading to a popular demand for more authentic, “American” music. According to Brice, German music created a subservient people who blindly submitted to autocracy; American music would espouse “liberty and human brotherhood” and ultimately remake the country in a new spirit of democracy. Although Brice’s words were characteristic of wartime xenophobia and hyperbole, it is clear that federal officials were cognizant of community singing’s ability to shape public values and beliefs.<sup>109</sup> Frances Brundage, writing in the war’s aftermath in 1919, argued that the camp music program brought to the “community-music ideal” to its perfect form: “simple, democratic, and adaptable to all moods.”<sup>110</sup>

Several of the CTCA’s camp song leaders were musical educators heavily involved in the community music movement.<sup>111</sup> Unsurprisingly, given the success of the

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<sup>108</sup> In one of the United States’ most infamous episodes of wartime xenophobia, German-born conductor Karl Muck, head of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, faced death threats and calls for deportation after failing to play the national anthem during one of his orchestra’s performances. He was later imprisoned for alleged pro-German sympathies. See Edmund A. Bowles, “Karl Muck and His Compatriots: German Conductors in America during World War I,” *American Music* 25 (2007); Melissa D. Burrage, *The Karl Muck Scandal: Classical Music and Xenophobia in World War I America* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2019).

<sup>109</sup> MIC 1:5, December 1, 1917, 1-3.

<sup>110</sup> Brundage, *Music in the Camps*, 8.

<sup>111</sup> At least six of the camp song leaders were directly involved in the community music movement, and it is highly likely that other song leaders, most of whom were music educators and professional musicians, were familiar with it. See E. Christina Chang, “The

pre-war movement, these educators sought to extend it into the camps. Community sings served both pragmatic and ideological functions. They were employed to help raise money for Liberty Loan drives, to build rapport and trust with surrounding communities, to showcase the CTCA's recreation programs, to spread patriotic fervor, and to inculcate rural communities in Progressive values.

Local songleaders, community leaders, and camp officials dictated most of their respective camp musical programs. Depending on the camp commander or song leader, soldiers could freely partake in all forms of musical fare or be strictly limited to traditional music. This was evident even early in the war. A CTCA official stationed at Camp Jackson organized Chautauqua (Lyceum-style) lectures and led prearranged YMCA sings while concomitantly leading his "Khaki Minstrels" through performances at local state fairs. The official appeared to anticipate Washington's disapproval of his minstrel troupe, and he attempted to quell any fears of impropriety by noting that they always performed in full military regalia.<sup>112</sup>

At Camp Custer, O.H., camp officials allowed the Elks' Musical Comedy Minstrels – composed of both theatrical professionals and soldiers – to perform an original show for the men in camp. The minstrel troupe regaled the soldiers with an original musical comedy called "The King of Zu Zu Island," a racially charged minstrel

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Singing Program of World War I: The Crusade for a Singing Army," *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 23:1 (October 2001): 19-45.

<sup>112</sup> MIC 1:1, November 3, 1917, 6.

show performed in blackface. Most unusually, the show's musical centerpiece was jazz, which the local camp paper described as a "riot of action."<sup>113</sup>

Arthur Nevin, the classically trained composer and camp song leader at Camp Grant, I.L., actively solicited musical preferences from his soldiers and catered the camp music program to their tastes. Although Nevin disapproved of Tin Pan Alley tunes, he adjusted his expectations in order to effectively implement music and singing into the soldiers' daily routines. "The popular style is what the men want and they cry for the favorites of the day," Nevin wrote in the military periodical *Trench and Camp*. "To have successful singing one must respond to the style that has the general appeal."<sup>114</sup> Unsurprisingly, Nevin's flexibility and accommodation resulted in a successful camp music program.

At Camp Upton, N.Y., however, local camp officials reserved the capacious, 10,000-seat camp auditorium solely for mass singing, lectures, and "concerts by eminent artists."<sup>115</sup> An artist's "eminence," in this case, was judged by his or her musical specialty, not by popularity. Camp officials at Camp Lewis, Washington State, seemed to agree with this assessment, as evidenced by their hiring of Madame Alma Gluck, a lesser-known opera singer, to perform for the camp's trainees in November 1917.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> "Elks' Minstrels Will Be a Wonderful Show, *The Camp Custer Bulletin* 1:7, October 18, 1917, 11.

<sup>114</sup> Arthur Nevin, "Interest is Shown in Camp's Mass Singing," *Trench and Camp*, edition for Camp Grant, Rockford, Illinois, November 5, 1917.

<sup>115</sup> MIC 1:2, November 10, 1917, 10. Camp Upton officials would later drop their opposition to popular music, staging the wildly popular Irving Berlin soldier-musical *Yip Yaphank* in the summer of 1918.

<sup>116</sup> MIC 1:2, 7-8.

According to the CTCA's official records of the camp music program, community sings were among the most popular wartime music initiatives. Song leader David Griffin, who had formed the camps' first soldier-minstrel troupe, took his "Kelly Field Glee Club" on a statewide tour through Texas in support of the fourth Liberty Loan drive during the fall of 1918. Griffin's glee club reportedly sent his Austin, T.X., audience "wild" with excitement, and a local official later wired him that the club's performance was the "greatest rally ever held in the city."<sup>117</sup> During the club's fifteen-city swing through Texas, Griffin had to turn away "hundreds" of people at every stop. "The people treated us like gods," he later wrote.<sup>118</sup>

Song leaders regularly estimated attendance at community sings well into the thousands. In Seattle, trainees from Bremerton Navy Yard staged a "Carnival" for "thousands and thousands of people" in August 1918, much to the surprise and delight of the crowd. The local song leader pledged to have "twenty thousand" at the next community sing.<sup>119</sup> He apparently kept his word: the Seattle Daily Times reported in October 1918 that ten-thousand Seattleites paraded through town in a "spectacle" never before witnessed in the city's history.<sup>120</sup> The New York branch of the WCCS, a civilian auxiliary of the CTCA, estimated that it reached 1,284,817 people over the course of a

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<sup>117</sup> Brundage, 31.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> MIC 1:40, August 3, 1918, 1-2.

<sup>120</sup> MIC 1:49, October 5, 1918, 1-2.



few months.<sup>121</sup> The camp songleader at League Island Navy Yard in Philadelphia estimated that his “baton” had directed over half-a-million citizens during the summer of 1918.<sup>122</sup>

Major community sings were not confined to urban spaces; in rural Lafayette, G.A., the camp trainees led “innumerable thousands” of people in song. Later that day, the same trainees sang along with another 3,000 in a nearby town.<sup>123</sup> Comparable attendance figures could be found across the country, from Camp Sherman, O.H., to Vallejo, C.A.<sup>124</sup> Numbers eventually became so inflated that their veracity became suspect.

Song leaders increasingly felt compelled to exaggerate their attendance numbers as the war bore on, lest their work be seen as a failure.<sup>125</sup> One anonymous camp song leader penned a sardonic report in which he claimed to have led “10,000,000” soldiers in song without any rehearsal. Upon hearing the throng of men engaged in song, his “sobbing” commanding officer approached the song leader and credited him with “winning the war.”<sup>126</sup> Despite some obvious inflation of attendance figures in official CTCA reports, local newspapers and personal accounts verify the sizable crowd sizes at

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<sup>121</sup> Haynes, *What New York Did for Fighting Men through New York War Camp Community Service in the World-War of 1917-1919*, 14-15.

<sup>122</sup> MIC 1:47, September 21, 1918, 4-5.

<sup>123</sup> MIC 1:42, August 17, 1918, 3.

<sup>124</sup> Chang, “The Singing Program of World War I,” 32; MIC 2:28, May 10, 1919, 5-6.

<sup>125</sup> Chang, 28-29.

<sup>126</sup> Brundage, 12.

camp-sponsored community sing-alongs.<sup>127</sup> Wartime brought millions of Americans together in performative patriotism through song.

### **Organizing Communal Sings**

In official records, wartime community sings generally followed a specific pattern. Trainees would rehearse a set of songs with the camp songleader, usually for several weeks. After the camp songleader was sufficiently pleased with the trainees' progress, he would schedule a camp-wide sing at one of the camp's communal areas. These camp-wide sings often numbered well into the thousands, providing trainees ample opportunity to practice their material before performing for a larger civilian crowd.<sup>128</sup>

City-wide sings were organized with local officials, who urged songleaders to stage community sings at prominent local establishments – parks, community halls, civic centers, churches, and schools – to reinforce the connection between music, patriotism, and civic duty. These associations were particularly important because immigrants and foreign-born trainees filled the ranks; by participating in these communal sings, immigrants would become assimilated into the American body politic. Of course, this particular social and cultural program was dictated primarily by middle-class whites concerned with the destabilizing effects of immigration, urbanization, and

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<sup>127</sup> Camp and local newspapers are some of the best records available to judge community sing crowd sizes. Attendance figures found here are general estimates – some undoubtedly inflated – but camp song leaders were keenly aware of the need to regularly record attendance to showcase the efficacy of their work. J.R. Jones, song leader at Camp Sherman, O.H., kept a running tally of his community music attendance, which he “conservatively” estimated at nearly 500,000. The camp newspaper notes that this figure is understated, and that actual attendance likely reached into the “millions.” See “Over One Million Directed in ‘Sings’ Conducted by Song Leader J.R. Jones, Resigned,” *The Camp Sherman News* II:36, July 17, 1919, 1.

<sup>128</sup> Brundage, 16.

industrialization. It was designed to produce homogeneity.<sup>129</sup> The sings were, in the words of historian Christine Gier, exercises in “performed cultural hegemony.”<sup>130</sup>

Women often took the lead in organizing community sings, whether through local institutions, the YMCA, or the Knights of Columbus.<sup>131</sup> They would distribute copies of the Songs of Soldiers and Sailors to their respective local community and apprise it of the musical program. The sings would begin at the camp and proceed down a major thoroughfare towards the main singing location. The men would sing while parading down the streets, attracting attention and audience members as they went along. Finally, the event climaxed with the trainees leading the town in a communal sing.

Unlike pre-war communal sings, which tended to focus on traditional choral arrangements, the wartime camp sing-alongs blended popular, orchestral, and patriotic music. Oftentimes prominent military, ecclesiastic, or government officials would give speeches in between the music, lending the proceedings a ceremonial air. It was, in many ways, a musical call-to-arms. A typical program would begin with restrained tunes, then slowly crescendo into more spirited music, and climax with a rousing hit – generally George Cohan’s “Over There” or “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”<sup>132</sup> According to

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<sup>129</sup> Maci Reed, “A Singing Army is a Fighting Army: American Soldiers’ Songs and the Training Camp Experience in World War I,” *Voces Novae* 8:1 (2016): 113-115.

<sup>130</sup> Christina Gier, *Singing, Soldiering, and Sheet Music in America During the First World War* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Book, 2017), 138.

<sup>131</sup> “News of the War Camp Community Service,” *Over the Top* (Fort Morgan, AL), September 7, 1918, 3.

<sup>132</sup> MIC 1:30, May 25, 1918, 2. Singing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” was about more than patriotic pride; as the unofficial song of the Union Army during the Civil War, its performance by both northerners and southerners was intended to evince sectional reconciliation.

reports, the sings often produced a euphoric, rapturous atmosphere more reminiscent of a religious revival than a patriotic showcase.<sup>133</sup>

### **Community Singing and Social Transgression**

The most blatant transgression of CTCA rules occurred during the camp communal sings, in which soldiers and professional musicians put on shows for the surrounding communities. Songleaders, camp newspapers, and press releases testified to the carnivalesque atmosphere of some CTCA-sponsored extravaganzas, where thousands of people – most of whom were youths – engaged in behaviors that CTCA leaders considered unacceptable. In this way, soldiers and civilians resisted not only CTCA guidelines, but also broader Progressive ideals about proper social behavior. The “craze for music” was also a craze for social and sexual liberation.

Given the traditionalist background, intent, and format of the community music movement, it is ironic that it would become a vehicle for transgressive behaviors and the spread of popular music. In their official records of the camp sings, the CTCA and the WCCS omit the events following the patriotic revelry. Memoirs from members of the CTCA leadership also elide the persistence of salacious influences.<sup>134</sup>

Outside accounts, however, testify to the sometimes carnivalesque atmosphere that ensued after the banners unfurled and the crowds dispersed. Vice, defined by the CTCA as any activity that fell outside the boundaries of middle-class comportment, was a

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<sup>133</sup> “Community Singing,” *The Camp Sherman News* 2:23, April 10, 1919, 6.

<sup>134</sup> Raymond B. Fosdick, *Chronicle of a Generation: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper, 1958), 145-48. Fosdick conceded that anti-vice measures required “eternal vigilance,” indicating that the problem was never fully resolved.

problem that vexed the agency throughout the war, despite its intensive efforts to eradicate it.<sup>135</sup> Included in the CTCA's definition of vice was unsanctioned dancing, and the agency attempted to regulate both where and with whom it was appropriate for soldiers to dance.

The CTCA, along with the YMCA, the YWCA, and the WCCS, regularly held chaperoned coed dances near the camps, but there were strict rules governing conduct and musical selection. These chaperoned dances only permitted respectable women to socialize with the soldiers, all under the watchful gaze of elderly matrons.<sup>136</sup> Prostitutes and women "who lost their heads" at the sight of men dressed in military regalia were strictly forbidden. Women who fit this vague categorization could face imprisonment or psychiatric institutionalization; men could receive fines.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Bristow, *Making Men Moral*; Neil A. Wynn, *From Progressivism to Prosperity* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986), 121-125; Eric Olund, "Multiple Racial Futures: Spatio-Temporalities of Race during World War I," *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 35, no. 2 (April 2017): 281-98. One of the CTCA's few victories against "vice" was its battle against venereal disease, which dropped by 300% during the war years. That victory, however, came at the cost of civil liberties. The Chamberlain-Kahn Act of 1918 authorized the government to forcibly examine and quarantine anyone suspected of transmitting venereal diseases. Despite the act's gender-neutral language, it was primarily wielded against women.

<sup>136</sup> Gier, *Singing, Soldiering, and Sheet Music in America During the First World War*, 135-153.

<sup>137</sup> Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War* (Routledge, 2013), 73; Bristow, *Making Men Moral*, 208-210. One of the greatest injustices of wartime repression was the forced imprisonment, sterilization, and institutionalization of "promiscuous women" accused of spreading venereal disease, broadly termed "The American Plan." Thousands of women, most of whom were poor and non-white, suffered this fate. According to historian Rachel Ziepf, "Gender and class-based anti-prostitution and venereal disease control laws...reinforced a sexual double standard, one that acknowledged the sexual impulses of men while it repressively punished women, particularly those at the lowest economic rung." See Rachel Ziepf, "In Defense of the Nation: Syphilis, North Carolina's 'Girl Problem,' and World War I," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 89:3 (July 2012): 276-300; Scott Stern, *The Trials of Nina McCall: Sex, Surveillance, and the*

A camp newspaper summarized the CTCA's perspective on appropriate dancing: "There is a difference between dancing all night and every night and dancing two or three hours. There is a difference between the promiscuous dance of the public hall and the dance where the partners either know each other or are introduced by responsible people. And, too, there is a difference in the dances themselves. Moderation, self-control [sic] should be our attitude here as elsewhere in life."<sup>138</sup>

In a remarkable expansion of federal authority, the CTCA worked with local law enforcement to establish "five-mile-zones" around the training camps, wherein prostitution, drinking, and gambling were punishable by arrest. Towns that failed to honor that request risked forfeiting their right to host the encampments.<sup>139</sup> Some officials, however, defended the soldiers' right to engage in rowdy behavior and in businesses' right to serve them. The mayor of Vallejo, C.A., promised to "fight" the federal government at every turn if it attempted to close the town's saloons and breweries, which were owned by a powerful local businessman.<sup>140</sup> The chief medical officer at Mare Island Navy Yard in San Francisco refused to endorse the CTCA's anti-prostitution campaign, arguing that men were "animals and needed sexual activities."<sup>141</sup>

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*Decades-Long Government Plan to Imprison "Promiscuous" Women* (Beacon Press, 2018).

<sup>138</sup> "The Value of Amusements," *The Camp Sherman News*, May 22, 1918.

<sup>139</sup> Allen, *Keeping Our Boys Fit for Fighting and War*, 191-205.

<sup>140</sup> "Letter from Edwin E. Grant to Josephus P. Daniels," October 3, 1917, JPD Papers, Box 458, Reel 1, LOC.

<sup>141</sup> "Letter from Raymond Fosdick to Josephus P. Daniels," October 10, 1917, JPD Papers, Box 458, Reel 1, LOC.

Despite the risks, enlisted men and young women found ways to circumvent CTCA proscriptions. A distressed mother wrote to the CTCA in May of 1918 to report that she had witnessed unsavory women who “would not keep away” from the soldiers.<sup>142</sup> There were widespread incidences of unruly behavior, alcohol consumption, and unsanctioned socializing. In May 1918, *The Ladies’ Home Journal* published an editorial decrying the CTCA’s failure to police the men outside of the camps: “Over 90 per cent of the social functions provided for the men outside of the camps have taken the form of dances, kept up until ‘all hours,’ the physical vitality of the men is impaired and they show the results in their work.”<sup>143</sup>

Dance halls and dive bars sprouted up in the vicinity of the encampments, servicing soldiers and young women looking for an adventurous night on the town. One federal raid of “Germania Dance Hall” in New York turned up 140 “hopelessly drunk” soldiers and sailors. Accompanying them were 150 girls, the majority of whom, according to the marshals, were underage. The report also noted that the dance hall was a “stone’s throw” away from the local city hall where “singing” had taken place earlier that day. The marshals’ ire was not directed at the soldiers, however, but at the men and women who had corrupted them with promises of liquor and dancing.<sup>144</sup>

These incidents were not localized; reports testified to the war’s adverse impact upon the nation’s youth and their morality. The New York Probate Commission found

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<sup>142</sup> NARA, RG 165, Box 56, Entry 399, “War Department Letters, etc.,” doc. 28900. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>143</sup> “Let the Soldier Be a Soldier,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, May 1918, 1.

<sup>144</sup> “Raid Open Dives Run for Soldiers,” *The New York Times*, December 3, 1917, 22.

that vice crime prosecutions increased by 13% from 1916 to 1917.<sup>145</sup> The U.S. Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, forwarded an eyewitness report to CTCA Chairman Raymond Fosdick that spoke of soldiers patronizing “brothels on wheels,” getting “collared” by pimps, and imbibing heavily on liquor.<sup>146</sup> Similar situations were reported in Charleston, Pensacola, Newport, Philadelphia, and Vallejo.<sup>147</sup>

The CTCA also kept watch on young women near the camps, although, unlike its treatment of the soldiers, the commission was less interested in reforming women’s sexuality than in repressing it, as evidenced by the forced incarceration of thousands of women suspected of carrying venereal disease.<sup>148</sup> Other CTCA officials were concerned about young white women intermingling with black soldiers. A vice dispatch from Charleston – a town that, the report noted, was “one-half negro” – described the dire situation of young factory women in the city. The report warned that if the CTCA did not invest time and money into healthy entertainment for the girls, they would inevitably turn towards “commercial amusements and vice – the latter in these days beginning with the

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<sup>145</sup> “War Increasing Vice,” *The New York Times*, April 8, 1918, 5.

<sup>146</sup> “Letter from Josephus P. Daniels to Raymond Fosdick,” May 7, 1918, Josephus P. Daniels Papers, 1829-1948, Box 458, Reel 1, Library of Congress.

<sup>147</sup> “Letter from Raymond Fosdick to Josephus P. Daniels,” November 23, 1917, JPD Papers, Box 458, Reel 1, LOC; “Fosdick to Daniels,” October 24, 1918, JPD Papers, 458:1, LOC; “Reports on Conditions in Philadelphia,” July 10, 1917, JPD Papers, 458:1, LOC.

<sup>148</sup> Fosdick, 147-8. In his autobiography, Fosdick recalls, apparently without remorse, the dismal conditions in one of the institutions for “charity girls.” It was so overcrowded that “every inch of floor space on three floors was covered in mattresses...for the inmates.”



automobile ride.”<sup>149</sup> Here, the trappings of modern popular culture are characterized as threats to female virtue.

After the war’s conclusion, camp newspapers and soldiers’ memoirs belied the CTCA’s sanitized description of the camp music scene. An August 1919 article in *The Camp Bragg News* attributed dancing’s declining reputation in “soldier-civilian communities” to vulgar, unregulated dance balls during the war months. The author, a WCCS representative, decried the spread of “checking” and “shimmieing” [sic] among the nation’s innocent youth. Unsurprisingly, the article blamed commercial entities for the new dance craze. Surprisingly, however, it also criticized local agencies and city governments for their failure to enforce the laws in the camps and in nearby communities.<sup>150</sup> Though not mentioned by name, the CTCA, as the federal commission in charge of training camps and the adjoining communities, is implicitly indicted in the promulgation of commercial amusement.

### **Consequences**

The CTCA’s camp musical program had both intended and unintended consequences. On the one hand, the program helped introduce millions of Americans to CTCA-sponsored songs, most of which contained messages conducive to the federal government and its interests. Some historians have posited that a national musical

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<sup>149</sup> “Letter from Fosdick to Josephus P. Daniels,” October 24, 1917, JPD Papers, Box 458, Reel 1, LOC.

<sup>150</sup> Jamie McIver, “WCCS to Teach Correct Dancing,” *The Camp Bragg News*, August 14, 1919; Bristow, 208; Grier, 143. The “shimmy” would become one of the most popular dance styles of the 1920s.

audience predated America's involvement in the First World War, but CTCA records, camp newspapers, and soldiers' memoirs tell a different story.

During the early months of mobilization, songleaders regularly wrote about the soldiers' competing musical tastes. Depending on the soldier's geographic origins, he may have preferred folk songs, sentimental ballads, coon songs, or feisty ragtime hits. Tin Pan Alley had a large reach along the East Coast, but regional sheet music publishers claimed significant market shares in western cities like Chicago, St. Louis, and Seattle. The CTCA's musical program touched every corner of the United States, from rural farming communities to bustling metropolises, filling the nation's proverbial airwaves with a strikingly similar set of songs. In this sense, both the federal government and Tin Pan Alley publishers benefited from the CTCA's musical program. The federal government was able to spread its message effectively to millions of Americans through music, while Tin Pan Alley publishers established new market footholds and gained the government's imprimatur. It is little wonder that Tin Pan Alley's sheet music sales plateaued during the war years.<sup>151</sup>

In addition to exposing millions of Americans to the sounds of Tin Pan Alley, the CTCA also taught thousands of Americans how to properly sing. CTCA records attest to the rigor of camp musical training: songleaders taught vocal and instrumental training, music theory, and musicianship.<sup>152</sup> The commission was not exaggerating when it advised that camp commandants allot equal time to musical training and drilling.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Glenn Watkins, *Proof through the Night: Music and the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 249.

<sup>152</sup> MIC 1:51, 2.

<sup>153</sup> MIC 1:53, 1.

Although some soldiers initially resisted the camp music program, by the end of the conflict many songleaders reported on their soldiers' remarkable improvement and newfound enthusiasm for singing. Several songleaders even witnessed spontaneous outbursts of song among the men, a phenomenon that, according to them, would have been unthinkable before the war.<sup>154</sup>

The community sings also stimulated civilian interest in song. "How did you make us sing?" asked one bewildered spectator to a song leader following a community sing near Camp Meade, Maryland. "Why, I never sang in my life before."<sup>155</sup> More importantly, the CTCA music program magnified the nation's patriotic fervor. The ritualistic performances of patriotism, in which communities sang the same songs over and over again, homogenized Americans' musical tastes, at least for a short while. "Singing," wrote one songleader near the war's conclusion, "has been transformed in [wartime]. She went into training camps ardent and enthusiastic but rather vague as to purpose and methods, she [sic] now finds herself definite, dignified, and recognized as a power equally valuable for military and civilian needs."<sup>156</sup>

The CTCA's ability to dictate soldiers' musical consumption was more tenuous than it imagined. The official Army and Navy Songbook included a number of popular Tin Pan Alley tunes, but, as mentioned previously, they tended to be older songs that conveyed ideals appropriate to soldiering. For many soldiers, these were not satisfactory;

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<sup>154</sup> MIC 1:51, 4; MIC 1:41, August 10, 1918, 6-7.

<sup>155</sup> "Camp Singing Helps Soldier on His Way," *The New York Times*, February 10, 1918, 53.

<sup>156</sup> MIC 2:2, November 9, 1918, 1.

they demanded more. Some soldiers refused to sing unless song leaders procured newer sheet music.<sup>157</sup>

Others simply re-worked the lyrics of popular songs, adding bawdier tales and criticisms of military leadership. Tales of sexual escapades, insubordination, and withering loneliness could be found in regimental songbooks across the country.<sup>158</sup> In these songs, soldiers rejected the Victorian ideals forced upon them by CTCA leadership and military officers. Those ideals died in the trenches and camps alongside their naivete. “When the horror of this man’s war is forgotten,” Niles wrote, “a few of us will still be thankful for the death of certain silly conventions – certain ideas our fathers and mothers inherited from the middle area of Victoria’s reign – ideas that stopped original minds a long way this side of reality.”<sup>159</sup> According to Niles, camp musical training allowed the soldiers to “ape” the Tin Pan Alley style and create songs more suited to soldiers’ needs. “Our songs told a tale the histories will try to untell [sic] for a good many years,” he concluded.<sup>160</sup>

The CTCA’s community singing program injected new life into the community music movement and helped propel it into the 1920s. In particular, it showcased music’s ability to project normative American values onto diverse groups of people. The People’s Liberty Chorus was founded less than a year after the war’s conclusion with that express purpose: “The realization of a nation’s ideals depends, first, upon a common

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<sup>157</sup> MIC 2:2, 9-10.

<sup>158</sup> Niles, *Songs My Mothers Never Taught Me*, 10-13.

<sup>159</sup> Niles, 33.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

understanding of those ideals by the individuals who make up the nation. To attain that common understanding in a nation composed...of many different peoples...there must be discovered a common ground upon which we can all meet, a common language that we all speak. That language is music.”<sup>161</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the war, states across the country set up “Community Councils” to help transition soldiers back into civilian life and to assimilate foreign-born veterans into American citizenship. A vital piece of the councils’ work was organizing communal sings, which would comfort returning soldiers, provide English lessons for immigrants, and instill American values in communities across the nation.<sup>162</sup> Some music professionals intended to wield the movement in the service of eliminating jazz and ragtime. John C. Freund, the editor of *Musical America*, predicted that the movement would drive ragtime, jazz, and shimmying “into oblivion.” Community singing would inspire Americans to embrace “music of the higher order,” in no small part because of its association with the federal government and the war effort.<sup>163</sup>

Community singing exploded in popularity during the 1920s and 1930s, but not in the way that reformers like Freund and Fosdick anticipated. Instead of becoming the foundation of a nationwide musical renaissance, community singing became an aural evangelist for popular music. Freund was not mistaken in his belief that community singing would stimulate Americans’ interest in song; where he erred was in his assumption that Americans would associate the movement with patriotic and classic

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<sup>161</sup> “Community Chorus Will Start Today,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 1919, 23.

<sup>162</sup> “Community Council in After-War Work,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 1919, 8.

<sup>163</sup> “Predicts Doom of Ragtime,” *The Washington Post*, March 10, 1919, 9.

songs. Tin Pan Alley tunes had been the driving force behind wartime communal sings, and the majority of Americans remembered it that way.

In the postwar years, motion picture exhibitors and sheet music publishers capitalized on the nation's newfound love of communal singing and brought the practice into the newly constructed movie palaces sprouting up across the country.<sup>164</sup> The practice was both lucrative and pragmatic. Sheet music publishers and motion picture exhibitors made a profit and expanded their markets while simultaneously utilizing community singing's association with wartime patriotism and the federal government to divorce the movie-going experience from its working-class stigma.<sup>165</sup> Community singing would expand ticket sales, spread new music, and draw in middle-class patrons.

The commercialization of community singing was not without controversy. At an upper-class theater in Montclair, New Jersey, some patrons objected to the community singing of frivolous "curl and girl" songs. "An adult may escape looking like a fool singing them," one patron lamented, "but he cannot help feeling like one." The theater management responded to the controversy by simply stating that it booked what audiences demanded.<sup>166</sup> Other theater managers defended the practice along similar lines.

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<sup>164</sup> Esther M. Morgan-Ellis, "Edward Meikel and Community Singing in a Neighborhood Picture Palace, 1925–1929," *American Music* 32, no. 2 (2014): 172–200; Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing! Community Singing in the American Picture Palace* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 2–5.

<sup>165</sup> For more on the working-class stigma surrounding early cinema, see Robert C. Allen, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985); Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship and American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>166</sup> "Songs Upset Montclair," *The New York Times*, August 4, 1919, 2.

“It is my frank opinion that you can’t shout down a thing editorially against popular preference,” wrote exhibitor Edward Meikel in 1927. “The public seems to want community singing, and there isn’t a showman in the world who isn’t trying to give the public what it wants.”<sup>167</sup>

“Someone has suggested that ‘Nineteen Nineteen’ be proclaimed a year of song,” opined an anonymous song leader in a late issue of “Music in the Camps.” “As a matter of fact all the proclamations to the contrary could not prevent its being just that.” The pressing question was not whether Americans would sing but “what kind of singing” they would engage in, and to what end?<sup>168</sup> In the postwar years, Americans of all stripes made it clear that they wanted to sing popular songs. The federal government’s camp music program was one of the primary driving forces behind the postwar craze for music. The CTCA exposed millions of Americans to the songs, singing techniques, and rhythms of urban musical culture. In doing so, it played a key transitional role in the development of a national music audience. If the boys were crazed for music, so was the nation.

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<sup>167</sup> Edward Meikel, “Community Sings Passing? Not Yet, Says Organist,” *Exhibitors Herald*, November 26, 1927, 25, quoted in Morgan-Ellis, *Everybody Sing!*, 6.

<sup>168</sup> MIC 2:9, December 28, 1918, 1.

## CHAPTER 3

### ARMIES OF MERCY: THE STAGE WOMEN'S WAR RELIEF

In the immediate aftermath of the United States' entry into World War I in April 1917, Rachel Crothers, a prominent Broadway playwright and director who produced the smash 1906 hit *The Three of Us*, organized a meeting of female theatrical professionals in New York City to discuss the ways in which the theater industry could aid the war effort. Crothers's plans were ambitious: Entertain hundreds of thousands of soldiers destined for Europe; manufacture clothing, first aid, and other supplies needed for the war effort; conduct national fundraising campaigns; establish a national media presence; and aid the federal government's Liberty Loan programs. The effort would require the full mobilization of the theater industry.

In addition to providing practical support for the war effort, Crothers envisioned the SWWR as a vehicle through which theatrical workers would raise the public stature of their industry. For many Americans in 1917, particularly middle- and upper-class whites, theatrical enterprises symbolized the ills of urbanization and industrialization.<sup>169</sup> The values allegedly found in the theater, as well as the literal infrastructure that often surrounded it, were antithetical to American democracy, at least as it was conceptualized

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<sup>169</sup> David Monod, "The Eyes of Anna Held: Sex and Sight in the Progressive Era," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (July 2011): 289-327; Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Harvard University Press, 2006), 163-196.



by white Progressive social reformers. Leading up to America's entry into World War I, popular theaters, particularly those that housed vaudeville and burlesque performances, were associated with immorality, social deviancy, and vice. Crothers and her peers were keenly aware of this sordid reputation, and they viewed the war as an opportunity to expurgate those misguided stereotypes.

Crothers believed that theatrical professionals were natural wartime propagandists; the charm, charisma, and communicative skill required to enthrall an audience on-stage translated well to the requirements of inflaming the American public's wartime fervor. Yet Crothers was not simply interested in mobilizing the faces of the industry; she believed that the war required the concerted effort of all female theatrical workers, from stylists and ushers, to custodial staff and seamstresses. All hands were required to fill the roles of both theatrical producers and practical relief workers. Crothers's vision entailed nothing less than the largest collaborative enterprise of female theater workers in American history. The meeting resulted in the foundation of a pathbreaking organization, the Stage Women's War Relief (SWWR).

Central to this effort was the cultivation of a relationship between the theater and the federal government. Crothers planned to mine the various connections between theatrical professionals and federal officials to secure the theater industry's prominent seat at the wartime table. Daisy Humphries, an actress and later the chairman of the SWWR's Press Department, had close ties with officials in the federal Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA), the department tasked with providing soldiers with wholesome entertainment in the training camps and abroad. Blanche Bates, another prominent actress, was the spouse of George Creel, the director of the influential

Committee on Public Information (CPI), the federal agency responsible for disseminating, producing, and censoring America's wartime cultural output. During the war, Creel would devote a great deal of time and energy to promoting the SWWR's work, which would prove indispensable to the organization's success and to its ability to exert considerable influence over the national media and the federal government.

### **Theater Women Band Together**

The opening meeting of the SWWR, held on April 13, 1917, at the Hudson Theater in New York City, was nothing less than an extravaganza. The Hudson, owned and operated by Renee Harris, the widow of the recently deceased theater owner Henry B. Harris, was a fitting venue for an organization driven and operated by women. Harris, who took over her husband's business following his untimely death aboard the RMS *Titanic* in 1912, was the first female theatrical manager and producer in the United States, making the Hudson a potent symbol of women's growing power and stature within the theater industry. On the program were the standard fares of wartime entertainment: the screening of war films; the speechmaking of foreign actresses who had been serving on the Western Front for years; and the renditions of patriotic music from the nation's leading Broadway performers.

Admission was limited to theatrical professionals, and priority seating was granted to the "elderly women of the profession" as a sign of organizational deference to the industry's female pioneers.<sup>170</sup> The seating arrangements were more than mere symbolism; at the meeting, Crothers announced that the new women's relief organization

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<sup>170</sup> "War Films at Women's War Meeting," *Moving Picture World*, April 21, 1917, 445.

would outlast the war and serve as a permanent guild for women of the stage.<sup>171</sup> The SWWR, in other words, would serve as the permanent standard-bearer for American theater women. The *New York Clipper*, an influential trade publication, acknowledged the unprecedented nature of this meeting: “[The SWWR] is the first concerted movement of the women of the American stage on behalf of the country.”<sup>172</sup>

A mere week after the SWWR’s formation, the organization mounted its first large-scale propaganda effort at the “Wake Up America” parade through downtown New York. The SWWR purchased its own float and enlisted the aid of dozens of prominent theater women. In addition to the float, which featured a large moneybag emblazoned with the slogan “Uncle Sam’s Pocketbook. It Must Be Filled,” the SWWR mobilized a fleet automobiles and horses, all piloted by stage women in patriotic garb. The entire caravan was flanked by show girls brandishing brightly colored “dippers” in which the surrounding crowd could deposit money. Naturally, all of this ostentatiousness required funding, and it speaks to the SWWR’s clout that it could immediately procure the needed financing scarcely a week after its genesis.

Amidst all of the glamor, however, the SWWR made its most radical statement in its quiet inclusion of a suffragist contingent within the theater caravan. Dressed in sober-minded clothing, the suffragists appeared to strike an odd balance with the garish theatricality surrounding them. To assume this, however, would be to misunderstand the SWWR’s programmatic goals. For Crothers and the other women who headed the SWWR, the idea of welding pragmatic war work with ambitious political aims was

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<sup>171</sup> “War Films at Women’s War Meeting,” 445.

<sup>172</sup> “Men of the Stage Prepare to Take Arms,” *The New York Clipper*, April 11, 1917, 4.

apparent from the beginning. According to historian Lynn Dumenil, the mere act of marching in public spaces was radical: “The bold occupation of public spaces was an important demonstration of women’s legitimacy as political actors, but it was a contested one, so it is particularly significant that women played such a visible role in patriotic demonstrations.”<sup>173</sup> The SWWR parade symbolized the organization’s vision of the new woman that would emerge from the war: brash, unapologetic, and politically empowered.<sup>174</sup> Though the SWWR never explicitly endorsed the suffragist movement, the actions, demands, and power its members wielded were public testaments to a new vision of femininity.

Crothers immediately recognized that the SWWR would require help if it wanted to successfully achieve its goals of war work, theater productions, and professional aggrandizement. The SWWR quickly recruited the women of the moving picture industry, a burgeoning cultural entity that commanded the attention of millions of Americans. Paula Blackton, an actress and silent film director, volunteered to head the new Moving Picture Division of the SWWR.<sup>175</sup> The new division vowed to make screen actresses a visible part of the war effort.

Due to the burdensome time constraints placed upon screen actresses, the division emphasized monetary contributions over volunteer work. The “Movie Ambulance Fund”

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<sup>173</sup> Lynn Dumenil. *The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War I* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2017), 222.

<sup>174</sup> “60,000 Paraders Stir Zeal of City for Call to War,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 1917, 1, 5.

<sup>175</sup> Lillian May, “The Ambulance Fund of the Motion Picture Players,” *Moving Picture Magazine*, August 1917, 45-46.

was created, and it operated in a similar manner to the CTCA's Smileage (see chapter one) campaign for soldiers in the training camps: Actresses would sell \$5 "books" to their friends and colleagues, enabling them to have their names engraved in the ambulances carrying soldiers from the battlefield. The Ambulance Fund urged screen actresses to take their public roles seriously: "Every American fighting in France has a claim on [screen actresses]. The word 'movie' is part of a universal language. The movie fans at the front (and their name is legion) who love these women for their work onscreen will honor and revere them for contributing to their comfort and relief – perhaps their very lives."<sup>176</sup> The Ambulance Fund, in this sense, was a textual predecessor to the pin-up girls of World War II; in their darkest moments, often before death, soldiers could look upon the name of a cherished star and feel a sense of comfort and normalcy – of a world before the war.

The SWWR's urgency was due in no small part to the widespread enlistment of theater men in the U.S. military. Immediately upon President Wilson's declaration of war in April 1917, thousands of male theater professionals organized into regiments, many of which carried the particular culture of their theater troupe into the training camps. Lee Shubert, the owner of a chain of theaters, proclaimed that theater men had always answered the calls for national defense, and this war would prove no different.<sup>177</sup> Of the estimated 100,000 male theater professionals in the United States, Shubert predicted that the overwhelming majority yearned to lend their help in the fight. In the immediate days and weeks following Wilson's war declaration, thousands of theater men enlisted in

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<sup>176</sup> May, "The Ambulance Fund of the Motion Picture Players," 46.

<sup>177</sup> "Men of the Stage Prepare to Take Arms," 4.

specialized regiments. John Pollock, an actor, comedian, and founding member of the New York Friars Club, pledged that upwards of 120 Friars would enlist. The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees recruited more than 5,000 of its male members in the war effort.<sup>178</sup>

The country's male moving picture players also quickly mobilized. 250 members of the Greater Vitagraph Company immediately registered for military service in the days following the declaration of war.<sup>179</sup> Although famous stars-turned-servicemen received the lion's share of media attention, the majority of theater men to directly enlist came from the industry's lower ranks: ushers, stewards, custodians, and roadies. The mass exodus of theater men from the industry meant that female-led organizations like the SWWR would serve as critical nexus points in the entertainment industry's wartime relationship with the federal government.

#### **“Doing Their Bit”: The SWWR Joins the Training Camp Entertainment Enterprise**

The SWWR's first wartime initiative was a relatively modest one: open a workshop where theater women could volunteer their time and talent towards sewing clothing, preparing first aid kits, and commiserating over shared fellowship.<sup>180</sup> The workshop, located off Fifth Avenue in New York City, was in the heart of the theater district, and it attracted a wide clientele of volunteers, donors, and well-wishers. The

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<sup>178</sup> “Men of the Stage Prepare to Take Arms,” 4.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Rachel Crothers, “The War and the Women of the Stage,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 1917, 75.

SWWR's workshop was, according to reports from Crothers and press chairman Daisy Humphries, always filled with journalists, media personalities, and entertainers.

Even in its early days, the SWWR exploited the theater industry's unique national spotlight as a source of income and publicity. Some entertainers added personal touches to the garments they made in order to comfort the soldiers abroad and to enhance their own self-image. Popular screen and theater actress Elsie Ferguson claimed to have autographed every aviation jacket that she produced, explaining that the "boys" told her it added to their "comfort."<sup>181</sup> Apparently, there was a widespread belief among the soldiers that jackets made from Ferguson's hands "turn[ed] the wind more quickly" while airborne.<sup>182</sup>

Professional solidarity was never far from the organization's priorities, however, and the SWWR made sure that it looked after its members' families. Due to the broad enlistment of American men in the draft, many theater families relied on the SWWR to make ends meet while husbands, fathers, and sons were at war. The SWWR served as a headhunter of sorts, scouring classified ads for potential jobs for theater family members, including clerical positions and secretarial work.<sup>183</sup> Other stage women used their talents to grow food, produce jam, and collect clothing for destitute children in Europe.<sup>184</sup> The SWWR also secured the cooperation of male theater owners, who agreed to let the

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<sup>181</sup> "Stars of Screen and Stage in Roles of Mercy and Service," *Film Fun*, January 1919, 16-17.

<sup>182</sup> "Stage Women's War Relief," *The Merritt Dispatch* 1:2, February 7, 1919, 7.

<sup>183</sup> Crothers, "The War and the Women of the Stage," 75.

<sup>184</sup> Crothers, 75.

SWWR pass around collection bins during theatrical productions, a practice that under normal circumstances would be considered quite taboo.<sup>185</sup>

The SWWR's most important early development was establishing a relationship with the federal government. Raymond Fosdick, the influential chairman of the federal Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA), reached out to Mary Kirkpatrick, a Broadway producer and the secretary of the SWWR, scarcely a month after war had been declared. His message was simple: The U.S. government needed the help of the theater industry to provide wholesome camp entertainment to the troops.<sup>186</sup> At stake was nothing less than the war itself; a demoralized army was a losing army.

The SWWR recognized that it could not meet the immense logistical challenge of providing camp entertainment alone. Kirkpatrick turned to two of the most influential men in Broadway for help: George M. Cohan and Sam H. Harris. Cohan and Harris were responsible for some of the most popular plays and revues of the 1910s, and their names had become synonymous with Broadway royalty. Crothers had a close relationship with the two, and had been writing a play, *He and She*, for them before the onset of war. Initially, Harris was skeptical of the plan's feasibility. "This looks to me now colossal and impossible," Harris told Kirkpatrick in May 1917.<sup>187</sup> It would require an unprecedented degree of industry centralization, as well as cooperation between rival theater syndicates and stage owners. Adding to the plan's difficulty was the question of

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.



how the federal government would proceed. Would the Wilson administration impose its will on the industry?

Despite Harris's misgivings, the pair agreed to help the SWWR provide entertainment to the troops in the camps and overseas. The day after meeting with Kirkpatrick, Harris wired the SWWR that he and Cohan would "do their bit by starting a scheme by which the theatrical profession can give good shows to the boys in the camps."<sup>188</sup> Less than a month later, on June 9, 1917, the first wartime camp theater performance took place at Fort Meyer, in front of President Wilson himself. Theater stars such as Irving Berlin, Cohan, Frank Tinney, and James Corbett regaled the audience with songs and plays. It was, according to one report, the inauguration of a "campaign of camp entertainments unique in the annals of the theatrical profession."<sup>189</sup>

It is worth emphasizing that Fosdick and the officials at the CTCA did not merely view the SWWR as a conduit between the federal government and star Broadway producers. The CTCA and the CPI considered the SWWR an active partner and policymaker in the wartime entertainment effort.<sup>190</sup> The scale of the SWWR's mobilization, combined with its considerable star power and cultural clout, made it a natural choice for federal officials seeking aid in maintaining soldiers' morale. In fact, the SWWR was the first organization approached by the CTCA for camp entertainment, and it would prove to be the most substantive and productive relationship between the CTCA

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<sup>188</sup> Crothers, 75.

<sup>189</sup> "Friars Folic for Fund," *The Washington Post*, June 9, 1917, 4.

<sup>190</sup> Letter from George Creel to Daisy Humphries, March 14, 1918, Records of the Stage Women's War Relief, Correspondence, Box 1, Folder 1, New York Public Library.

and a civilian entertainment agency due to the longevity and personal connections between the two agencies. In the records of the CTCA's Dramatic Division, several firsthand reports mention the SWWR's indispensability regarding camp entertainment.<sup>191</sup>

It cannot be stressed enough that the CTCA valued the SWWR because it knew female stars would draw crowds, money, and attention to government shows. Soldiers clamored to catch a show starring Blanche Bates, Billie Burke, Margaret Mayo, or Mary Pickford, and those that were successful were treated to a rare opportunity to see their favorite stars. Camp newspapers testified to the rapturous atmosphere of SWWR spectacles, and to the force with which the women of the stage held sway over the trainees. One camp hospital paper recounted actress Grace Leigh's "vampiric" effect on the soldiers: "If Sergt. Theodore F. Slattery hadn't been so bashful, Miss Grace Leigh of the Stage Women's War Relief would never have dared to be so affectionate toward him on high C up on the stage of the Red Cross building the other night. But she took advantage of him. Sergt. Slattery, all hunched up in his chair, was too shy to discourage her, and hence she warbled at him all over the place [sic] that song telling how her heart got the palpitations at [the] sight of his tortoise shell specs."<sup>192</sup> By the end of the performance, none could resist the "wiles of Miss Leigh."<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> "Dramatic Division Report," June 13, 1918, Records of the Commission on Training Camp Activities, Box 5, Folder 2, National Archives-College Park.

<sup>192</sup> "Sgt. Slattery Too Bashful to Resist: Can't Withstand Vampire Voice of Miss Leigh at Stage Women's Show," *The Cure* 1:3, June 29, 1918, 3.

<sup>193</sup> "Sgt. Slattery Too Bashful to Resist," 3.

## The First Year of War Work

Despite this colorful anecdote, most of the SWWR's work during the first year of war paralleled other female-led relief organizations.<sup>194</sup> The SWWR's first public report devoted the majority of its attention to the organization's work outside the theater, in particular its manufacturing of clothing and first aid. On average, forty women worked in the SWWR's workshop every day, performing tasks ranging from knitting to making surgical dressings.<sup>195</sup>

The report attests to the organization's productivity: Between April and August 1917, the SWWR disseminated 60,000 surgical supplies, thousands of clothing items, and 722 hand-knitted materials.<sup>196</sup> In addition, the SWWR provided clothing and aid for theater families unduly impacted by the war. Tellingly, the report mentioned the SWWR's entertainment work last, merely noting that its members were helping the U.S. military entertain troops in the training camps. Its most unique work was deemed relatively inconsequential. The SWWR also staged open-air markets in the summer of 1917, where citizens could buy homegrown vegetables and fruit, mirroring the Wilson administration's directive to plant "Victory Gardens" in order to assuage wartime demand for food.<sup>197</sup> The SWWR's organizational priorities would change in 1918, however, as the organization – and the women in it – increasingly exerted their political

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<sup>194</sup> Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense*, 58-76.

<sup>195</sup> "Stage Women's War Relief, *The New York Times*, September 9, 1917, 71.

<sup>196</sup> "Stage Women's War Relief," 71.

<sup>197</sup> "Actresses to Grow War Relief Crops," *The New York Times*, May 6, 1917, 18.

and cultural influence in response to wartime demands and the growing call for woman's suffrage.

The first substantial collaboration between the SWWR and the federal government was for a Red Cross fundraising drive in the summer of 1917. The drive is significant because it is indicative of how the government initially conceptualized the SWWR's role in war work. The Committee on Public Information sent hundreds of "Four Minute Men" into theaters, movie houses, churches, and other areas of public congregation. These men and women were tasked with delivering prepared four-minute speeches urging Americans to donate their time and money to the Allied cause. Part manifesto, part panegyric, the speeches generally followed the same structure: Decry German atrocities, laud the U.S. military and government, extoll the virtues of America's soldiers, and implore Americans to donate money to the cause.<sup>198</sup>

Over the course of America's involvement in the First World War, the Four Minute Men, of whom about 25% were women, would deliver 755,000 speeches to 5,200 communities, according to the official report of the Committee on Public Information.<sup>199</sup> The Red Cross drive in the summer of 1917 was one of the CPI's first large-scale speechmaking efforts. The SWWR's role in the drive was to serve as a "stationary parade" in support of the Four Minute Men. Thousands of theater women lined the edges of New York's Fifth Avenue. According to *The New York Times*, the women did not

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<sup>198</sup> Stephen Vaughn, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines: Democracy, Nationalism, and the Committee on Public Information* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1980), 116-140.

<sup>199</sup> *Report of the Committee on Public Information, 1917, 1918, 1919* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 2.

speak, “their appeal being entirely silent.”<sup>200</sup> Compared to later events, the SWWR’s function in the drive was remarkably deferential, in keeping with the traditional gender ideals of the period. Although there is no direct evidence to suggest that the SWWR resented its treatment during the drive, it is relatively safe to infer, based on the SWWR’s later functions, that leadership decided to press for more active assignments going forward.

The SWWR’s other significant partnership with the U.S. government during the first year of war was raising funds for the Liberty Loan program. In order to meet the immense fiscal demands required of wartime, the federal government issued billions of dollars’ worth of government bonds. Americans were urged to “do their part” by buying these government securities. Over time, purchasing Liberty Loans became a public declaration of patriotism. Accusations of pacifism or treason were often initiated by a person’s failure to participate in the Liberty Loan program. The First Liberty Loan drive, however, portended disaster. Sales failed to meet expectations, in large part because the government struggled to market its program to the masses.<sup>201</sup>

The need for effective sloganeering became evident. The Second Liberty Loan drive began in October 1917, and the SWWR partook in it for the first time. According to *The New York Times*, the SWWR broke the record for single-day sales of Liberty Loans among “women’s organizations.” “A galaxy of theatrical and movie picture stars disposed of bonds worth \$330,000,” the paper noted. “The speakers became so hoarse that they enlisted the aid of a Scotch piper to call attention to their campaign for

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<sup>200</sup> “Final Day of Rally for Red Cross Fund,” *The New York Times*, June 25, 1917, 11.

<sup>201</sup> *The Electric Journal*, September 1917, 51.

bondholders.”<sup>202</sup> Actresses began to be seen as vital components of the government war machine.

In December 1917, Marc Klaw publicly announced the theater industry’s plan to bring entertainment to soldiers in the training camps. Klaw was one of the most powerful men in the theater business; he, along with partner A.F. Erlanger, headed the booking company known as the Theatrical Syndicate, which dominated the theater industry during the opening decades of the twentieth century.<sup>203</sup> Klaw was tapped as the liaison between the theater industry and the CTCA in late 1917. His job was to coordinate all entertainment ventures in the training camps. Klaw’s task was made considerably harder by the jealousies and rivalries inherent in the theater business.<sup>204</sup>

The SWWR proved invaluable in smoothing over internecine rivals within the theater industry due to its wide-ranging membership. In addition, the SWWR did the bulk of the work, though it never received its full due. The women of the SWWR coordinated the professional troupes, raised money for the construction of the Liberty Theaters, provided talent for the camp performances, and distributed the Smileage books to communities across the country. For example, scarcely a month after Klaw announced the camp theater program, the SWWR, as representatives of the entertainment industry,

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<sup>202</sup> “Actresses Sell Many Bonds,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 1917, 3.

<sup>203</sup> John Tenney, “Marc Klaw,” in *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present*, vol. 4, ed. Jeffrey Fear, German Historical Institute, accessed January 2, 2020.

<sup>204</sup> At the time of Klaw’s announcement, he and Erlanger had just filed a \$5,000 lawsuit against a booking company for breach of contract – hardly an indicator of professional goodwill. See “A Challenge by Britt Wood,” *Variety*, November 1917, 26.

staged movies and plays at the “Hero Land” war relief bazaar in New York City, raising millions of dollars for the war effort.<sup>205</sup>

The CTCA, in partnership with private theater companies, would finance the construction of sixteen “Liberty Theaters” at cantonments across the country. Klaw promised that eight professional touring companies – four vaudeville, four dramatic – would canvas the country at all times. The performers would play for free, but troops would still need to pay a nominal fee (\$0.10 per person) to see the plays. Private citizens and organizations would sell “Smileage” coupons (named for the “smiles” they would bring to the trainees) that soldiers could then redeem at the Liberty Theaters, providing them with free entertainment during the training period. On the weeks when professional troupes were elsewhere, soldiers were encouraged to stage their own plays and musicals.<sup>206</sup>

Klaw was not alone in his mission to aid the CTCA. In his first public statement on the camp theater program, Klaw prominently included the pictures of Broadway stars George Cohan, Sam Harris, and Irving Berlin.<sup>207</sup> All three men would aid the CTCA in varying degrees over the course of the war, and Berlin eventually enlisted in the military and produced one of the most successful wartime revues of World War I, *Yip Yip Yaphank*, in the fall of 1918. Cohan, Harris, and Berlin made the first tours of the

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<sup>205</sup> “Leading Motion Pictures Hold Screen at Palace,” *Motion Picture News* 16:24, 4146.

<sup>206</sup> “Real Theaters in Every National Army Camp,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 1917, SM3.

<sup>207</sup> “Real Theaters in Every National Army Camp,” SM3.

cantonments and ascertained the investments required to organize a national camp theater circuit. Their contributions to the program should not be understated.

### **“One for All and All for One”: The SWWR Goes Nationwide**

As 1918 dawned, SWWR representatives decided to take advantage of the burgeoning national media market. The SWWR planned to flood newspapers, magazines, periodicals, film producers, and sheet music publishers with appeals to support the organization. The SWWR had chapters throughout the country, but it had not yet achieved widespread recognition outside of the theater and film industries.<sup>208</sup>

The woman in charge of this effort was Press Department Chairman Daisy Humphries, a veteran of the stage and a savvy public relations specialist. In the private letters between her and various media companies, Humphries articulated a strikingly forceful image of the organization. She often presented herself as a media novice, but her demands reflected an inveterate understanding of persuasion and of the SWWR’s leverage in wartime matters.<sup>209</sup> Humphries regularly touted the organization’s close ties to the CPI, the CTCA, and the Wilson administration, ostensibly as a means of asserting legitimacy and authority.

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<sup>208</sup> The SWWR had chapters in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Atlanta. Control was relatively decentralized, and Crothers often let individual branches make decisions according to the local situation on the ground. The New York branch, however, was the sole conductor of national media campaigns.

<sup>209</sup> Humphries often began her letters with an admission of naivete; for example, in a letter thanking the editor of the New York *Evening World* for including a piece on the SWWR, she opens by disclosing her ignorance of press “etiquette.” “Letter from Daisy Humphries to H.S. Pollard,” February 18, 1918, Records of the Stage Women’s War Relief, Box 1, Folder 1, Schwarzmann Center, New York Public Library.



Despite this, Humphries still generally couched her language and approach within the traditional discourse of Victorian femininity.<sup>210</sup> Her letters emphasize the SWWR's maternal role in keeping soldiers happy, safe, and well-fed; its deference to male-led federal agencies and entertainment syndicates; and its willingness to take a secondary role in entertainment ventures. In this sense, Humphries's letters offer a glimpse into both the opportunities and limitations the war presented to American women.

Humphries's first priority was to broadcast the SWWR's mission in print media, particularly in trade publications, local newspapers, and women's magazines. The SWWR opened a "canteen" in New York City during the early months of 1918, which served as a kitchen, theater, and social space for soldiers. In order to raise funds for the canteen's food and entertainment, the stage women relied on the support of local New Yorkers and theater industry personnel. "I'm sure of one thing," Humphries wrote in March 1918 to the city editor of the *Evening World*. "There's only one way for the [SWWR] matinee of "Everyman" ... to be a success. That's for the Press to make it."<sup>211</sup>

She also pressed newspaper and magazine editors to include profiles of SWWR stage women and their war work. Humphries urged Harry Thalheimer, the city editor of the aptly named *Editor and Publisher*, to include vignettes of Blanche Bates's work for the SWWR. Unsurprisingly, given the visual nature of show business, Humphries often

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<sup>210</sup> For an extended discussion of American conceptions of femininity during wartime, see Lynn Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War I* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 58-104.

<sup>211</sup> "Letter from Daisy Humphries to the City Editor of the *Evening World*," March 7, 1918, Records of the Stage Women's War Relief, Box 1, Folder 1, New York Public Library, Schwarzmann Division.

asked publishers to include pictures of stage actresses.<sup>212</sup> These requests served a dual purpose: Increase the SWWR's visibility and grow the professional brands of its constituent members.

The SWWR also branched out into the sheet music business. SWWR member Grace LaRue wrote an original war song, "One for All and All for One," and Humphries urged sheet music publishers and distributors to advertise the song in markets across the country. "Won't you try to get as many people to sing it as you possibly can?" Humphries implored the director of the Mason Opera House in Los Angeles.<sup>213</sup> The SWWR's entreaties to popularize the song reveal the ways in which civilian organizations and the federal government attempted to navigate the constellation of new media during the war.

In addition to utilizing the tried-and-true method of hiring song-pluggers to spread sheet music, the SWWR also reached out to department stores, "talking machine" companies, and federal agencies.<sup>214</sup> Humphries clearly understood how to sell the idea. "We want, and need, all the publicity we can get," she wrote to the editor of Leslie's Weekly. "The public loves the profession and once they are brought in contact with it

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<sup>212</sup> "Letter from Daisy Humphries to Harry Thalheimer," March 18, 1918, Records of the Stage Women's War Relief, Box 1, Folder 1, NYPL, Schwarzmann Division.

<sup>213</sup> "Letter from Daisy Humphries to Mrs. William Wyatt," June 4, 1918, Records of the Stage Women's War Relief, Box 1, Folder 1, NYPL, Schwarzmann Division.

<sup>214</sup> "Letter from S.G. Kresge Company to Daisy Humphries," June 13, 1918, Records of the SWWR, 1:1, NYPL; "Letter from Art Music, Inc. to Daisy Humphires," June 8, 1918, Records of the SWWR, 1:1, NYPL; "Letter from W.T. Grant Company to Daisy Humphries," June 18, 1918, Records of the SWWR, 1:1, NYPL.

they are quick to love it.”<sup>215</sup> Humphries knew that the SWWR was uniquely positioned to help the press sell copy; readers wanted to see the goings-on of famous screen and stage stars, and news editors keenly understood this. It was a reciprocal relationship. She also urged press outlets to view the SWWR’s shows personally: “It must be seen to be felt.”<sup>216</sup> Perhaps most remarkably, Humphries managed to sell the song to the highest echelons of the Wilson administration: First Lady Edith Wilson was anxious to try the song and “hope[d] to be able to sing it.”<sup>217</sup>

### **The Home Stretch: The SWWR and the Liberty Loan Drives**

The zenith of the United States’ wartime involvement occurred in the summer and fall of 1918. Millions of men passed through American military encampments during this time, a process accelerated by Russia’s withdrawal from the war in March 1918.<sup>218</sup> Accordingly, the civilian organizations aiding the war effort escalated their involvement in the camps and cities playing host to the throng of American manhood. The SWWR was no exception. Up to June 1918, the bulk of the SWWR’s war contributions centered around producing clothing, first aid, and other material needs for the Allied armies in France. Beginning in the summer of 1918, however, the SWWR faced mounting pressure

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<sup>215</sup> “Letter from Daisy Humphries to John A. Sleicher,” June 19, 1918, Records of the Stage Women’s War Relief, Box 1, Folder 1, NYPL, Schwarzmann Division.

<sup>216</sup> “Letter from Daisy Humphries to John A. Sleicher,” NYPL. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>217</sup> “Letter from the secretary of Edith Wilson to Daisy Humphries,” June 17, 1918, Records of the Stage Women’s War Relief, Box 1, Folder 1, NYPL, Schwarzmann Division.

<sup>218</sup> David R. Woodward, *The American Army and the First World War* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

from concerned federal and military officials to coordinate, produce, and field the talent for “wholesome” entertainment for the men in the training camps.

The CPI and the CTCA began regularly requesting SWWR personnel for the camp theater program; sometimes, perhaps out of desperation, the federal government even found talent for the theater organization. The CPI’s Foreign Press Bureau introduced the SWWR to a “Miss Elsa Ziegler,” whom the bureau promised was ripe with talent and potential – a promise backed up by the fact that a CPI official had personally seen Ziegler perform. Here again we see the beginnings of a symbiotic relationship between the entertainment industry and the federal government. Ziegler, the official wrote, was eager to aid the war effort, but she also wanted an “opportunity to have managers see and hear her.” “Please do what you can for her,” the CPI official concluded.<sup>219</sup> The CPI returned the favor several days later when it pushed a favorable article on the SWWR to *The Ladies’ Home Journal* and circulated positive, government-backed reports to foreign entertainment entities.<sup>220</sup>

Other CPI bureaus wanted access to the SWWR’s star talent, especially as American casualties began to mount in the Western Front. The CPI’s Division of Pictorial Publicity, headed by artist Charles Dana Gibson, the man behind the ubiquitous “Gibson Girl,” sought out screen and stage actresses for government posters. In addition, the division requested hundreds of copies of James Montgomery Flagg’s depiction of a

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<sup>219</sup> “Letter from the CPI Foreign Press Bureau to Daisy Humphries,” July 25, 1918, Records of the SWWR, Box 1, Folder 2, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

<sup>220</sup> “Letter from the CPI Foreign Press Bureau to Daisy Humphries,” July 29, 1918, Records of the SWWR, Box 1, Folder 2, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

personified SWWR.<sup>221</sup> These images were deployed to quell anti-war sentiment and to motivate average Americans to continue sacrificing for the war effort.

The SWWR's utility was not merely confined to the United States. Edward Bernays, an official in the CPI's Foreign Press Bureau who would later come to be known as the "Father of Public Relations," urged the SWWR to continue sending pictures of actresses sewing clothing, staging plays, and interacting with soldiers for the Government Photographic Service. Some actresses had cultivated a global following prior to the war, and the CPI sought to use them to its advantage. The SWWR loaned out Geraldine Farrar, opera singer and actress, to the CPI's Foreign Service Bureau for interviews that would be published across Europe. Farrar's appeal extended into France and Italy, and her presence in American propaganda was seen as a major boon for the Allied cause.<sup>222</sup>

The SWWR's growing stature within the war relief effort made it a key target for feminist publications seeking potential allies. In August 1918, the influential editor of women's news at the pro-suffrage *New York Tribune*, Marie de Montalvo, reached out to Daisy Humphries to inquire about a prospective partnership between the Tribune and the SWWR. De Montalvo had devoted the previous five years of her life towards breaking down the boundaries between "news" and "women's news" in American media. "Women's news," de Montalvo argued, was often printed as a "freak of the day's

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<sup>221</sup> "Letter from the CPI Division of Pictorial Publicity to Daisy Humphries," August 2, 1918, Records of the SWWR, Box 1, Folder 2, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

<sup>222</sup> "Letter from Edward Bernays to Daisy Humphries," August 9, 1918, Records of the SWWR, 1:2, NYPL, Schwarzman Division; "Letter from Ernest Poole to Daisy Humphries," August 9, 1918, Records of the SWWR, 1:2, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

happenings, trimmed with pictures and epigrams and put on an obscure page with the fashions and the recipes.”<sup>223</sup>

The war had changed all of that. De Montalvo viewed the nation’s women – including the SWWR – as integral cogs in America’s war against Germany. As a result, women had broken down barriers in industry, politics, and military life, and the news needed to reflect that seismic shift. “Every time a woman swabs down a locomotive or paints a roof or sweeps a crossing when no other woman has done this job before, it is news – and the Tribune wants to know about it, and print the story,” she wrote.<sup>224</sup> The professional solidarity expressed by de Montalvo reflected Rachel Crothers’s original vision for the SWWR. This trend would only accelerate as the war dragged on into the fall of 1918.

The SWWR’s principal successes came during the Third and Fourth Liberty Loan drives in the summer and fall of 1918, respectively. The First and Second Liberty Loan drives had been failures, and the federal government turned to the entertainment industry to boost sales. The SWWR drew on its government connections to have a Liberty Theater set up in front of the New York Public Library (NYPL) in April 1918. The NYPL Liberty Theater, located on Fifth Avenue, was in close proximity to the SWWR’s national headquarters, making it an ideal spot for stage entertainers to hold rallies, plays, and speeches.

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<sup>223</sup> “Letter from Marie de Montalvo to Daisy Humphries,” August 19, 1918, Records of the SWWR 1:2, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

<sup>224</sup> “Letter from de Montalvo to Humphries,” NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

Over a two-month period from April to May, the SWWR staged weekly rallies at the NYPL Liberty Theater, calling upon all famous stars of the stage and screen. Adolph Zukor, one of the founders of Paramount Pictures, used his influence to bring Hollywood figures from across the country to campaign for the SWWR rallies. Mary Pickford, Billie Burke, Mildred Manning, William A. Brady, Will Rogers, Elsie Ferguson, and Jesse Lasky all appeared for the SWWR during the Third Liberty Loan drive. Even New York's governor, Charles S. Whitman, gave a speech on the SWWR's behalf. According to news reports, traffic along Fifth Avenue was suspended during the rally's duration, an honor rarely bestowed upon civilian organizations.<sup>225</sup> Over the course of one weekend in May, the SWWR sold \$300,000 in liberty bonds, smashing previous records for relief organizations. The entire fundraising haul for the Third Liberty Loan drive was \$2,398,808, a stunning figure for one organization.<sup>226</sup> The SWWR was officially a force to be reckoned with.

Paradoxically, the SWWR's success in the Liberty Loan drive came at the long-term expense of the public's perception of appropriate femininity on the stage. Female performers, including SWWR members like Elsie Ferguson, Blanche Bates, and Mary Pickford, were carefully scrutinized and compartmentalized while on stage. Only appropriate feminine theatrical performances – notably, as Susan Glenn writes about extensively, mimesis and impersonation – would draw the crowds necessary for a successful drive.<sup>227</sup> “Keep your arms controlled; your body balanced; your posture

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<sup>225</sup> “Zukor Day Breaks Records in Loan Drive,” *Motography* 19:19, May 11, 1918, 904.

<sup>226</sup> “Stage Women Sold \$2,398,808 Bonds,” *The New York Times*, May 9, 1918, 11.

<sup>227</sup> Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 134. Glenn situates mimesis as a tool of

straight – otherwise we’ll drive folks across the sea,” cautioned an internal SWWR bulletin.<sup>228</sup> The SWWR appeared to be aware that its audience expected a normative performativity of gender, to fulfill, in the words of Judith Butler, an “identity constituted through time through a stylized repetition of acts.”<sup>229</sup> Once again, the stage offered opportunities, but they were often circumscribed by gender roles and expectations.

By the time the Fourth Liberty Loan drive began in October 1918, the SWWR and the federal government were firm partners. Not only had the SWWR proven its value in coordinating camp entertainment, but it had been a steadfast partner in war relief, fundraising, and propaganda initiatives. For the Fourth Liberty Loan drive, the SWWR planned on performing an original play. This was no ordinary play, however; the SWWR mobilized the best talents from the stage, screen, and opera, as well as writers, set designers, and stage directors – all under one umbrella. It was a collaboration that, a year prior, would have been unthinkable.

Daisy Humphries appealed to the CPI for help in publicizing the show. The SWWR received more than they could have asked for: President Wilson sent out a press statement praising the SWWR’s work and calling upon all Americans to support the endeavor. Wilson envisioned the play as more than a show; it was a movement that would bring together professional entertainers, amateur dramatic associations, fraternal

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empowerment and female agency, but, in this instance, particularly in front of a mostly-male audience, it could prove stultifying.

<sup>228</sup> “Attention Volunteers!”, August 7, 1918, Records of the SWWR,” 1:2, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

<sup>229</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 179.



orders, and charitable organizations from across the nation in a show of patriotic force. “It is a novel idea that promises a very high degree of effectiveness,” Wilson wrote, “and I am glad to give it my heartiest approval and support.”<sup>230</sup> The SWWR received similar approval from the Secretary of the Interior, Franklin K. Lane; the Secretary of State, Robert Lansing; the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels; and the chairman of the Board of War Industries, Bernard Barusch.<sup>231</sup> The District Attorney of New York City, Edward Swann, also gave unequivocal support: “I consider the Stage Women’s War Relief a most efficient and excellent organization, and am glad to endorse the plan for the production of a war play.”<sup>232</sup>

The show was named “When a Feller Needs a Friend,” a comedy melodrama infused with “propaganda designed to arouse the people to the necessity of doing everything possible to push the War.”<sup>233</sup> Written by well-known playwrights Harvey O’Higgins and Harriet Ford, and based on Claire Briggs’s syndicated cartoon serial, the play was designed to appeal to the widest audience possible. “[The play’s] appeal is unlimited – father, mother, sister, and the boys will find equal and unqualified delight in them,” exclaimed a Paramount advertisement.<sup>234</sup> The Committee on Public Information

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<sup>230</sup> “President’s Endorsement,” Press Statement from Woodrow Wilson, October 17, 1918, Records of the Stage Women’s War Relief, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

<sup>231</sup> “President’s Endorsement,” NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

<sup>232</sup> Edward Swann, “Memorandum from the District Attorney’s Office, New York City,” October 29, 1918, Records of the Stage Women’s War Relief, Box 1, Folder 2, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

<sup>233</sup> “Memorandum from the Stage Women’s War Relief,” undated, Records of the SWWR,” 1:2, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

<sup>234</sup> Paramount-Briggs Advertisement, “When a Feller Needs a Friend,” *Motion Picture News* 20:16, October 11, 1919, 9.

had exclusive advertising rights, and, using its wartime powers, ensured that newspapers across the country would grant the play prime copy space.

The first round of shows would take place in New York City, featuring professional talent, production, and marketing. After the premiere, organizing committees were formed in major production; the national SWWR did not intend to keep tabs on every city. Instead, the SWWR intended to “take advantage of amateur enthusiasm and community interest.” In other words, after the play left New York, it was out of the SWWR’s hands. Despite the tour’s decentralized structure, the SWWR’s plans for the show were ambitious. SWWR leaders hoped to harness the energy of every community in the United States, regardless of size. According to the official SWWR memorandum, “A special effort will be made to reach the small, out-of-the-way towns, where it is difficult to spread propaganda.” Much like the CTCA’s communal singing program, the SWWR counted on the federal government’s enhanced power and scope to bring its message to the masses.<sup>235</sup>

The SWWR’s most publicized propaganda campaign during the Fourth Liberty Loan drive was undoubtedly its Liberty Theatre performances and its mobile “Little Theatre.” During the drive, the Liberty Theatre played host to famous entertainment stars, musicians, and speakers, including soldiers newly returned from the Western Front. A *New York Times* dispatch gives a glimpse into the electrifying atmosphere: “Each day seems more thrilling than the one before, for in addition to artists of the stage and screen, of the opera, and of the pen and brush, who give their time and talent, the crowd stands

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<sup>235</sup> “Memorandum from the SWWR,” NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

breathless at the chance to hear and to welcome boys who have gone across into the great fight.”<sup>236</sup>

These shows combined traditional theater with ritualistic enactments of patriotism. An average spectator could expect to see an operetta from Geraldine Farrar or Anne Case, followed by Elsie Ferguson, whose husband was serving, exhorting the audience to remember the “boys,” or catch Harry Houdini enacting “wonders” on the stage. The festivities usually closed on a somber note, with soldiers recounting the horrors of the “Hun” or remembering a fallen comrade. A correspondent for the *Sunday Tribune* observed that the closings were melancholy in order to entice – or guilt – audience members into purchasing war bonds.<sup>237</sup> The SWWR’s methods were remarkably successful. The main theater received such effusive praise that SWWR leadership decided to take the shows “on the road” around New York City.

The Little Theatre was an offshoot of the Liberty Theatre located in front of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue. In order to meet the demand for wartime entertainment, the SWWR constructed a miniature stage atop a fourteen-ton truck. Though certainly less ornate than a proper Broadway theater, the mobile stage was outfitted with instruments, a stage curtain, and lighting. The truck would move all over downtown New York City, attracting raucous crowds as it moved down the Battery to Central Park. Actors and musicians would take turns performing, entering and exiting the

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<sup>236</sup> “Unique Theatre Headlines Bond,” *The New York Times*, October 6, 1918, 48.

<sup>237</sup> “Stage Women’s War Relief’s Liberty Theatre,” *Sunday Tribune* (NY), undated, Records of the Stage Women’s War Relief, Box 2, Folder 3, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

stage via a trapdoor along the side of the truck. The theater's novelty was outshone by the talent performing in it.

The SWWR enlisted the aid of famous Broadway stars – male and female – to raise money for the Liberty Loan drive; among them were Irving Berlin, Blanche Bates, Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, Irene Castle, May Irwin, Jack Hazzard, and Henrietta Crosman. These stars congregated not to merely sell war bonds; they were acting as representatives of the theater industry. The SWWR's Liberty Theatre Committee account noted that the entertainers were trying to “prove to the crowds that all are giving to the limit of their powers in their deep desire to help in this great cause.”<sup>238</sup> According to *The New York Times*, the SWWR sold \$100,000 per week in war bonds, making the mobile tour a stunning success.<sup>239</sup> In her year-end report, SWWR Press Chairman Daisy Humphries claimed that the SWWR raised more money “than any other war relief.”<sup>240</sup>

### **The Postwar SWWR**

World War I's conclusion in November 1918 did not bring the SWWR any respite from work. In many respects, the work was only beginning, for the end of war did not mark the end of suffering or privation. It would take many months to transport the roughly one million American soldiers in France back to the United States.<sup>241</sup> Those

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<sup>238</sup> Liberty Theater Committee, “Report on Liberty Theatre War Drive,” undated, Records of the Stage Women's War Relief, Box 2, Folder 3, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

<sup>239</sup> “The Littlest Theatre,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 1918, XX2.

<sup>240</sup> Daisy Humphries, “The Story of the Stage Women's War Relief,” undated, Records of the Stage Women's War Relief, Box 2, Folder 3, NYPL, Schwarzman Division, 5.

<sup>241</sup> Woodward, *The American Army and World War I*.

soldiers, many of whom were wounded or suffering from shellshock, needed entertainment and comfort while they awaited their discharges.

To compound the problem, thousands of soldiers in the United States were falling prey to an unknown illness, an influenza-type infection that savagely attacked the respiratory system.<sup>242</sup> Once again, the federal government turned to civilian relief organizations, including the SWWR, to help manage the logistical nightmare.

In many respects, the SWWR's post-war relief work mirrored its wartime efforts. The SWWR continued to book plays for soldiers, sew bandages and clothing, hold fundraisers, and send its members to camps in New York City and across the country. In January 1919, the SWWR staged an "All-Star Vaudeville" performance at the Manhattan Opera House, free of charge to the soldiers. Movie stars (including the beloved Marie Dressler), jazz musicians, comedians, and choral singers regaled the troops during a week-long showing.<sup>243</sup> Daisy Humphries continued to diligently market the SWWR in publications and films. Some members used soldiers as test audiences to gauge the quality of their theatrical material. SWWR President Rachel Crothers debuted her new play, "A Little Journey," solely to soldiers stationed in New York City.<sup>244</sup> Life appeared to hum along at a consistent pace.

The arrival of Spanish influenza in New York City in the fall of 1918 added to the SWWR's workload. Stage and screen women had performed for sick soldiers during the

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<sup>242</sup> Nancy Bristow, *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>243</sup> "New York Shows for Soldiers," *The Merritt Dispatch* 1:1, January 28, 1919, 5.

<sup>244</sup> "Shows for Soldiers," *The Merritt Dispatch* 1:4, February 21, 1919, 6.

war, particularly in convalescent wards and military hospitals.<sup>245</sup> For the most part, however, the SWWR operated in training camps and public theaters. That changed when the flu hit New York City and forced the municipal authorities to institute lockdowns and stay-at-home orders. Churches, non-essential stores, subways, and trains were closed to the public until further notice.

Interestingly, theaters were exempt from the lockdown, under the rationale that they functioned as “community houses” necessary for the upkeep of morale.<sup>246</sup> In fact, municipal health authorities tasked theaters with educating the public about the disease and providing instructions on how to keep safe. According to Dr. Royal S. Copeland, the New York City health commissioner, theaters performed a public good by flashing public health directives on the screen before shows began and during intermissions, thus helping to prevent future outbreaks.<sup>247</sup> Once again, the industry displayed its worth in a time of imminent crisis.

The SWWR’s performances at the Liberty Theatre and Little Theatre for the Fourth Liberty Loan drive occurred in the middle of New York City’s first outbreak. The SWWR’s ability to mobilize the brightest stars in the industry apparently outweighed the risk of contracting the Spanish flu. The flu, however, did not spare the theater community. Smaller theaters were hammered economically by the virus, as would-be-

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<sup>245</sup> “Entertainment Epidemic,” *The Cure* 1:2, June 15, 1918, 4.

<sup>246</sup> “Drastic Steps Taken to Fight Influenza Here,” *The New York Times*, October 5, 1918, 1.

<sup>247</sup> “Epidemic Lessons Against Next Time,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1918, 42.

patrons decided to stay home rather than risk infection, and many were forced to close their doors.<sup>248</sup> The SWWR's own Daisy Humphries was forced to quarantine for several weeks after she came down with severe flu-like symptoms. Even upon recovery, Humphries reported lingering effects from the illness that impacted her ability to respond to press releases and letters.

In keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of the SWWR, the organization debuted its first films in the summer of 1919. The SWWR partnered with Universal Pictures to make twelve two-reel films – one for each month of the year. Named the “Stage Women’s Green Room Series,” the films would eschew propaganda and war, focusing on a wide array of “lighter” subjects, including romances, comedies, animal hunts, and adventures, to alleviate soldiers’ stress as they awaited their discharges. All of the labor was voluntary; writers, directors, and actors freely donated their time to the cause. For some stage actors, the SWWR films were the first time they stepped in front of a movie camera; for a select few, it would not be their last.

The proceeds went towards the maintenance of the Grand Central Palace Debarkation Hospital in New York City, which was being used as a military hospital for soldiers suffering from influenza and battle-related injuries.<sup>249</sup> The films would feature prominent Broadway actor David Belasco, who, prior to the Green Room series, had never acted in front of the camera, despite repeated entreaties from studio producers to do

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<sup>248</sup> “Red Cross Nurses to Preach Health,” *The New York Times*, February 22, 1919, 22.

<sup>249</sup> “Stage Women’s Green Room Series,” *The Moving Picture Weekly* 7:23, January 25, 1919, 1.

so. In fact, the only reason Belasco consented was due to the SWWR's "fame" and its noble mission to help soldiers and sailors.

The SWWR's newfound cultural clout was evident in its relationship with Universal. Universal President Carl Laemmle, a pioneer of early filmmaking, said that he was "proud" that the SWWR chose Universal to distribute and produce its pictures. "For years I have dreamed, in common with other motion picture producers, of assembling such casts," Laemmle said.<sup>250</sup> Indeed, that is how Universal advertised the series: "The collection of greatest stars ever assembled." Laemmle had more in mind than just charity and notoriety; for him, the Green Room series was an opportunity to elevate the standards of the moving picture industry: "The appearance of these great players and these great stage folk in these splendid film productions means the setting of a new and a higher and a better standard in all motion picture production."<sup>251</sup>

The SWWR's war work, and its relationship with the federal government, had imbued the organization with mainstream legitimacy. Hollywood producers envisioned the SWWR as a vehicle through which the moving picture industry might also achieve the same legitimacy and status. Throughout 1919, Laemmle would use the Green Room series as leverage in contract negotiations with exhibitors. If the exhibitors wanted to screen the "greatest assemblage of stage and film talent in history," they would need to purchase Universal's other reels.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> "Stage Women's Green Room Series," 1.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid*, 35.

<sup>252</sup> "Fall Plans: Carl Laemmle Announces the Greatest Year in the Universal's History as the Eighth Year Begins," *The Moving Picture Weekly* 8:15, May 31, 1919, 1.



On May 26, 1919, the New York Friars Club broke custom to honor the women of the SWWR. Over 100 SWWR members were in attendance, and throughout the course of the evening they were praised for their selflessness during the war years. Rachel Crothers was the keynote speaker, and in her address she praised the men and women of the theater and film industries for lending their talents to the SWWR's numerous drives, fundraisers, and shows. But Crothers had a more important statement to make: "The SWWR will not disband with the passing of the war emergency. Our house on Lexington Avenue will continue as a refuge for disabled men, and the other energies of the organization will be bent upon taking care of stage children and assisting them to get their start in life." In other words, the SWWR was no mere ephemera of wartime, no ethereal presence meant to dissipate after its utility had ceased. The SWWR was permanent. Crothers also called upon the federal government to reward the theater industry's wartime sacrifices by creating an official administrative position that would advocate for the theatrical world.<sup>253</sup>

In many ways, Crothers's speech reaffirmed the broader staying power of American women in the public sphere. By mid-1919, reactionary forces across the country had already begun the process of shuttering women back into domestic roles. The SWWR stood firm against those forces, however, and continued its work well into the 1920s. On the advent of World War II, the Roosevelt administration, still cognizant of the organization's success during the Great War, asked Crothers to reconvene the SWWR. The organization re-named itself the American Theatre Wing (ATW) and provided

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<sup>253</sup> "Women Guest of Friars," *The New York Times*, May 26, 1919, 4.

invaluable service during the Second World War. The ATW persisted after the war's conclusion, fulfilling Crothers's original goal of becoming a permanent guild for theatrical professionals – male and female alike.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> “History of the American Theatre Wing,” accessed April 26, 2020, [https://web.archive.org/web/20140422233041/http://americantheatrewing.org/about/history\\_of\\_atw.php](https://web.archive.org/web/20140422233041/http://americantheatrewing.org/about/history_of_atw.php).

## CHAPTER 4

### “DOING THEIR BIT”: THE OVER THERE THEATRE LEAGUE AND THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF MILITARY

#### ENTERTAINMENT

*“To the A.E.F., with all my love,  
I dedicate this book,  
And hope if they ever read it,  
They will smile with me and look  
Back on the ‘good times’ over there,  
And think only of the day  
When after their work was done I came  
And then we would start to play.  
Oh; it was fun, wasn’t it, ‘fellahs’?  
I’ll say it was ‘some swell guerre,’  
For I lost my heart to each one of you  
In the big show ‘Over There.’”<sup>255</sup>*

-Elsie Janis, 1919

On a dark, starless night in September 1918, 36-year-old playwright Margaret Mayo gazed sleepily out of her car’s passenger window as it wound down a dusty road in the French countryside. She was accompanied by four other entertainers – two musicians and two actors. World War I was raging mere miles from them, but the fighting may as well have been halfway across the world. The sloping hills and endless stretches of verdant fields were a novel – and welcome – sight for Mayo, who was accustomed to the grey, industrial gloom of New York City. Mayo’s reverie was suddenly broken by the

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<sup>255</sup> Elsie Janis, *The Big Show: My Six Months with the American Expeditionary Forces* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1919), iii.

sound of a body slamming into the side of the vehicle. She turned quickly, only to see an American officer hanging on the car's running board. The man yelled at them to halt the vehicle, and the passengers dutifully complied. The officer demanded to see the group's "countersign," a covert hand gesture that would validate their presence behind American lines, and was unsatisfied by the group's response. He ordered the car back to headquarters to face interrogation.

Once there, the five entertainers tried desperately to prove their innocence, to no avail. Mayo was ready to resign herself to a night of torture when, to her surprise, the interrogator erupted in fits of laughter. It was only then that the group recognized the interrogator as one of the guests at their previous show. They had been the victims of an elaborate prank. The experience, though shocking, was not out of the ordinary. This was the way of life for the first organized group of professional entertainers to venture beyond America's shores during wartime in American history.<sup>256</sup>

### **Beginnings**

In June 1917, scarcely two months after the United States had entered the First World War, General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), entreated the Wilson administration to provide "morale-building entertainment" for American soldiers stationed in France.<sup>257</sup> Pershing's plea found receptive ears: As

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<sup>256</sup> Margaret Mayo, *Trouping with the Troops* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1919), 48-49.

<sup>257</sup> Felicia Hardison Londre, "The Range of Laughter: First Person Reports from the Entertainers of the Over There Theatre League," in C. Thomas-Disset, K.A. Ritzenhoff (eds.), *Humor, Entertainment, and Popular Culture during World War I* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 70-71.

explained in the previous three chapters, the reform-minded Wilson administration considered “wholesome entertainment” a vital cornerstone of a healthy, morally-fit military. The Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA) and the War Camp Community Service (WCCS) were immediately formed to help military officials coordinate entertainment for the soldiers in the thirty-four military encampments scattered across the United States. For the few soldiers and military advisors already abroad, the Wilson administration recommended to Pershing the services of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), which had already provided invaluable help in coordinating camp entertainment in the United States. Pershing immediately relayed his request to the YMCA and left the matter in its hands.<sup>258</sup>

The American iteration of the YMCA, on which this chapter will solely focus, was founded in 1851, and by the advent of the First World War had established itself as a reliable, if at times moralizing and sanctimonious, partner to the federal government in domestic and foreign military conflicts.<sup>259</sup> Edward C. Carter, the American-born and Harvard-educated National General Secretary of the International YMCA, had spent the previous twelve years deployed to British India, where he successfully secularized the local organization by shedding its reputation as self-righteous Christian evangelists and establishing it as a significant diplomatic powerbroker and intermediary.

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<sup>258</sup> Londre, “The Range of Laughter,” 71.

<sup>259</sup> Katherine Mayo, *“That Damn Y”: A Record of Overseas Service* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), 8-10, 16-19; Jeffrey C. Copeland and Yan Xu (eds.), *The YMCA at War: Collaboration and Conflict during the World Wars* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), 1-2, 4-7, 17-35. In this chapter, when I refer to the “YMCA,” I am referring to the American branch of the YMCA unless noted otherwise.

When the United States entered the war in 1917, Carter's clout within British military circles and popularity with the broader British public, combined with his close relationship with General Pershing, made him a natural fit for command of the overseas American YMCA. Carter's reputation and the YMCA's prior history in aiding the U.S. military entrenched the organization within the upper echelons of Allied leadership. Katherine Mayo, a contemporary journalist and early historian of the YMCA, noted that Carter alone granted the YMCA a "position of secure advantage" due to his prior war work. This meant that the YMCA would receive benefits and cooperation from Allied command not granted to other civilian organizations. Unfortunately, it also meant the YMCA would take on great burdens that it often could not resolve.<sup>260</sup>

On May 9, 1917, the United States War Department issued Administrative Order No. 57, which officially recognized the YMCA as "a valuable adjunct and asset to the service," as "contributing to the happiness, content, and morale of the personnel," and ordered all military officers to "render the fullest practical assistance and cooperation...to the [YMCA] both at permanent posts and stations and in camps and fields."<sup>261</sup> A later General Order, issued in August, established the YMCA as the primary caretaker of the AEF's "amusement and recreation," by providing "social, educational, physical, and religious activities" (the other voluntary organization mentioned, the American Red Cross, was charged with coordinating relief efforts).<sup>262</sup> The War Department also placed

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<sup>260</sup> K. Mayo, "That Damn Y," 13.

<sup>261</sup> K. Mayo, 22.

<sup>262</sup> "General Order No. 26," in *United States Army in the World War, 1917-1919* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1988), 60-61.

the YMCA in full control of the “canteens,” or mail exchanges, which granted the organization an enormous sum of power over the day-to-day lives of American soldiers. Going forward, the YMCA was the federal government’s official overseas recreational bureau. Although the YMCA was not an official government agency, it strictly adhered to the Wilson administration’s policies, rhetoric, and prerogatives as it helped propagate the American war effort.<sup>263</sup>

### **Establishing an American Presence**

U.S. military officials and YMCA representatives planned on significant delays in the arrival of American soldiers, during which they could construct theaters, cantinas, lodging, hospitals, and other vital infrastructure to service the troops abroad. The federal government even explicitly told the American YMCA that no American soldiers would arrive in France in 1917.<sup>264</sup> This promise, however, was quickly broken, likely due to Allied pressure amidst the unfolding collapse of the Russian Empire and the renewal of German offensives in the summer of 1917.

By December 1917, 125,000 American soldiers were in France, compared to a relatively paltry 500 YMCA personnel.<sup>265</sup> Compounding the problem was France’s and Britain’s insistence that the American military and its auxiliaries provide services for its

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<sup>263</sup> In this regard, the YMCA’s relationship to the federal government abroad and domestically closely mirrored one another, although with a crucial caveat: The YMCA carried greater responsibility in France and Britain due to the absence of the CTCA and other voluntary associations who would ordinarily help shoulder the logistical and financial burdens.

<sup>264</sup> K. Mayo, 73, 403.

<sup>265</sup> Keene, 88; K. Mayo, 403.

own soldiers as compensation for the horrors they endured during America's three-year absence. General Pershing agreed, telling Carter in June 1917 that "the greatest service which American can render to the cause of the Allies at the present moment is to extend the work of the [YMCA] to the entire French Army."<sup>266</sup>

The YMCA's primary focus in 1917 was establishing the infrastructure and procuring the supplies required to field an army. Carter and other YMCA officials found the process slow and onerous; messages and requests took weeks to traverse the 3,000-mile distance from London to New York, and Washington devoted most of its energies to the home front. Many YMCA officials blamed the federal government's lack of planning for the scarcity of supplies. In order to adequately prepare for the influx of hundreds of thousands of men, the YMCA would need fuel, timber, food, telegraphs, mail facilities, and other necessities.<sup>267</sup>

To further complicate matters, the YMCA needed the War Department's approval before it could officially requisition supplies. Carter mused that the "famous three thousand miles, as an actual fact, lies less between America and Europe than between America and a true perception of her own affairs." It would be a full three months, from the War Department's order, before the first contingent of YMCA secretaries arrived in Europe (and they only numbered twenty). Nonetheless, by the end of 1917, the YMCA had established dozens of camps, cantinas, Hostess Houses, and chapels along the Allied

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<sup>266</sup> K. Mayo, 371.

<sup>267</sup> K. Mayo, 23-26.



line in France, and had financed the construction of 125 *foyers du soldat* (“huts”) for the French Army.<sup>268</sup>

Another pressing concern for Carter and YMCA officials was deciding who could serve the organization. Before the war, the YMCA mandated that its volunteers were, or at least appeared to be, chaste, morally sound, sober, and members of the Christian church. The demands of war forced the YMCA to relax those standards. The federal government ordered the YMCA to allow men and women of all faiths to serve among its ranks, both because of the need for manpower and the desire to make the U.S. military appear to be an inclusive, polyglot institution representative of America.<sup>269</sup>

Nonetheless, the AEF’s preoccupation with social and sexual hygiene meant that female YMCA workers had to pass stringent purity tests. “Under the conditions of temptation which surround the military camps in French towns,” Edward Carter wrote in June 1917, “the presence of really good women alongside the men workers in YMCA huts is of the highest military, moral, and social value.”<sup>270</sup> Reflecting broader pre-war Progressive concerns about venereal disease amongst American youth, and a prevailing belief in French women’s promiscuity, the U.S. military insisted that only “respectable” women could prevent the soldiers from seeking comfort in carnal pleasures.<sup>271</sup> Historian

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<sup>268</sup> K. Mayo, 17-41, 372.

<sup>269</sup> Edward Frank Allen, *Keeping Our Men Fit to Fight*, 31-34.

<sup>270</sup> Allen, 19.

<sup>271</sup> This view of French women was largely driven by the French government’s state sponsorship of brothels near the front lines during the war.

Lynn Dumenil notes that, specifically, the army sought out women that symbolized “home and family” and “[who] would deter soldiers from sexual misadventure.”<sup>272</sup>

For the YMCA, respectability was inseparable from whiteness, and it primarily drew women from the ranks of the white middle- and upper-classes.<sup>273</sup> These women generally embodied the Progressive ideal of white, feminine propriety and comportment, which was reflected in their pre-war occupations; collegiate women, clubwomen, social workers, clerks, educators, and nurses comprised the majority of YMCA overseas female workers. Only a small number of YMCA women were “unclassified” relative to work experience. Each candidate had to be at least twenty-five years of age, healthy, and without relatives serving in the military. Even then, female applicants had to pass a stringent interview before gaining clearance to go abroad. Despite their class and level of education, YMCA women were discouraged from engaging in activities deemed too “independent,” and instead ordered to focus on servicing soldiers’ needs in the canteens.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Lynn Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War I* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2017), 117. In many respects, YMCA women were expected to adhere to the same feminine standards found in wartime popular music: A matronly figure or a chaste, supportive partner; either way, a woman’s position was always defined in relation to the men around her. See Gier, *Singing, Soldiering, and Sheet Music*, 161-162; Iris Young, *On Female Bodily Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 39.

<sup>273</sup> Of the 3,500 women who served in the YMCA overseas during World War I, only nineteen were African-American. Like the military, Black women were segregated from white women and could only service Black regiments. White women were forbidden from working in Black canteens, placing a tremendous burden on the few women of color employed by the YMCA, who were already dealing with rampant discrimination and abuse. For more on Black women in World War I, see Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices*; Nikki Brown, “Your Patriotism is of the Purest Quality”; Zeiger, *In Uncle Sam’s Service*, 51-76.

<sup>274</sup> Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense*, 116-118.

### The First Entertainers Arrive in France

For most of 1917, the shortage of trench-side entertainment escaped notice. Domestic mobilization steered the priorities of the YMCA and U.S. military, and the relatively small number of soldiers abroad did not command the nation's attention.<sup>275</sup> A handful of zealous pro-war entertainers came to France of their own accord (and with their own money), and civilian organizations such as the Salvation Army and the Knights of Columbus attempted to coordinate sporadic shows for American soldiers featuring French or British players. Those American entertainers who came early often did so because of personal connections, past experiences, or professional opportunities.

Jack Barker, a musician and recent graduate of Northwestern University, was the first American entertainer to leave for Europe after the U.S. entered the war, arriving on May 16, 1917, under the auspices of the YMCA. Barker conducted sing-alongs and staged plays at a time when, according to military officials, "entertainers were worth a regiment." His one-man circuit traveled through French, British, and American camps, regaling troops with popular songs and melodies. Over the next several months, a handful of entertainers found their way to Europe, including magicians, opera singers, actors, and pianists.<sup>276</sup>

Elsie Janis, perhaps the most famous American entertainer to arrive early in Europe, was motivated by the rousing nationalism and elan she witnessed in England during the first months of war in 1914. The sinking of the *Lusitania* – a ship that had

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<sup>275</sup> Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, 74-86.

<sup>276</sup> Evans and Harding, *Entertaining the American Army*, 7-13.

previously borne Janis across the Atlantic -- by German submarines in May 1915 only steeled her resolve to return. When the U.S. military personally solicited Janis's help in the summer of 1917, she needed little coaxing.<sup>277</sup>

The YMCA immediately dispatched her to camps and outposts along the Western Front. Janis did this with little complaint, although she did worry that performing for "Young Christians" might "cramp her speed." According to Janis, the soldiers greeted her with unabashed adulation and ecstasy: "I never realized what it would mean to [the soldiers] to see a girl from home who they knew," she wrote in 1919. "They cheered so long and so loud when I appeared that I nearly burst into tears."<sup>278</sup> For most of 1917, Janis was nearly alone in her efforts to entertain soldiers in France, and despite the individual efforts of entertainers like her and Barker, the lack of a centralized clearinghouse for camp entertainment lowered morale and left American soldiers feeling adrift.

By the middle of 1918, as significant numbers of American troops began decamping to France, the dearth of wholesome diversions became particularly acute. American military officials warned the Wilson administration about the British Army's problem with venereal disease, and the federal government worried about what young,

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<sup>277</sup> Janis, *The Big Show*, ix-xiv. Janis claims in her memoir that she was solicited to serve by none other than General Pershing, indicative of her stature within the theater industry and of her hawkish sentiments. See Gier, *Singing, Soldiering, and Sheet Music*, 165; Lee Alan Morrow, "Elsie Janis: A Compensatory Biography," PhD Dissertation (Northwestern University, 1988), 9.

<sup>278</sup> Janis, 7-10.

single men would do if left unattended, far away from the watchful eyes of Progressive guardians.<sup>279</sup>

In particular, YMCA and military officials were concerned about American soldiers cavorting with unscrupulous French women, who, the officials believed, were filling in the gaps created by unstructured and unsupervised leisure time. “The American soldier is the most social human being in the whole world – and he soon began to realize, amid the dreary rain and mud of the fall and winter, how completely he was cut off from home,” wrote contemporary commentators.<sup>280</sup> American soldiers wanted to “hear American voices, American jokes, American laughter, and American songs, to see American girls, American movies, American shows.”<sup>281</sup> The soldiers’ desire for a discursively and sonically *American* space, reinforced by the military leadership’s equally strong desire to preserve the independence of America’s armed forces in Europe, animated the creation of a standalone, centralized YMCA entertainment division.<sup>282</sup>

### **The Ames-Sothern Expedition**

In the midst of mass mobilization, the YMCA’s entertainment functions were secondary concerns for most of 1917.<sup>283</sup> What would become, in the words of

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<sup>279</sup> K. Craig Gibson, “Sex and Soldiering in France and Flanders: The British Expeditionary Force along the Western Front, 1914-1919,” *The International History Review* 23:3 (September 2001): 535-579.

<sup>280</sup> Evans and Harding, *Entertaining the American Army*, 8.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> Woodward, *The American Army and the First World War*, 106-123.

<sup>283</sup> Katherine Mayo’s voluminous 440-page history of the overseas YMCA (she does not cover domestic programs) during World War I makes no mention of the division. This is perhaps indicative of what the postwar International YMCA considered its main wartime work; theatrical and musical entertainment were clearly not among them.

contemporary historians James Evans and Gardner Ludwig Harding, the “greatest entertainment enterprise in history” had humble beginnings as a lecture bureau within the YMCA’s Publicity Department.<sup>284</sup> Arthur H. Gleason, an American soldier who had served with the French Army, recommended a rotating circuit of speakers to visit both American and French outposts along the front. The speakers would often lecture on war preparedness, social hygiene, history, and other edifying subjects. The so-called “trench circuit” became the primary route along which entertainment troupes, musicians, speakers, and other YMCA recreational personnel would visit the soldiers. When the first theatrical company arrived in October 1917, it utilized the trench circuit in order to reach the greatest number of soldiers possible.<sup>285</sup>

The number of American soldiers in France increased dramatically during the winter of 1917-18, necessitating a new conceptualization of the YMCA’s entertainment program. The sheer scale of soldiers requiring stimulating diversions was unlike anything the YMCA had previously confronted. Perhaps most importantly, the YMCA did not have experience coordinating secularized entertainment for an ethnically and religiously diverse audience. “The problems were without precedent,” wrote Evans and Harding. “Never in the history of warfare had such an undertaking been attempted.”<sup>286</sup> The YMCA

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<sup>284</sup> James W. Evans and Gardner Ludwig Harding, *Entertaining the American Army: The American Stage and Lyceum in the World War* (Association Press, 1921), 15. Unlike Katherine Mayo, whose trenchant history of the YMCA reads as remarkably modern, Evans and Harding’s account of the war is colored by nationalism. *Entertaining the American Army* was intended to rouse Americans’ patriotism, which makes its veracity suspect in areas. Nonetheless, its intimate knowledge of the chronology and the personalities of the YMCA entertainment program makes it an invaluable resource.

<sup>285</sup> Evans and Harding, *Entertaining the American Army*, 12-17.

<sup>286</sup> Evans and Harding, 22.

had to embark on an ambitious social and cultural experiment. How many entertainers would it need? What kind of entertainment did soldiers want? How would the YMCA transport and protect thousands of civilians? How would it procure thousands of expensive instruments and theatrical stage equipment? These questions led Edward C. Carter to seek help from the professional theater and the professional music industries in early 1918.<sup>287</sup>

In January 1918, the YMCA officially created an autonomous entertainment department. Tasked with leading the effort was Charles M. Steele, a relatively unknown YMCA official who had been serving as a “hut” manager with the AEF’s First Division since the summer of 1917. Steele’s first and most pressing assignment was to enlist the aid of the professional theater. Mrs. August Belmont, a performer and one of the early arrivals to the Western Front, telegraphed Steele immediately upon hearing of his promotion with one, definitive sentence: “Belmont suggests Ames.”<sup>288</sup> The “Ames” in question was Winthrop Ames, a 38-year-old Broadway producer and director known for his wide-ranging productions of Shakespeare, children’s fairy tales, and classical dramas.<sup>289</sup> More importantly, Ames had a reputation for knowing how to pull strings within the theatrical profession. Ames initially balked at the YMCA’s offer, suggesting that he was too “high brow” for the job, but eventually relented on the condition that one of his favorite stars, E.H. Sothorn, should accompany him. Steele agreed, and by late

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<sup>287</sup> Evans and Harding, 23.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>289</sup> David E. MacArthur, “Ames: The Gentleman as Producer-Director,” *Educational Theatre Journal* 16:4 (December 1964): 349-352.

January 1918, Ames and Sothern were in France for a one-month tour of the front.<sup>290</sup>

What they saw would profoundly change their views not only of the war, but of the possibility for theater to change soldiers' lives and the fortunes of battle.

For the next full month, Ames and Sothern, along with Steele and other YMCA Entertainment Division officials, went on a grand tour of the front lines. Their primary objectives were to ascertain the number of performers needed to adequately entertain the troops and the kinds of music and theater that would resonate with young, tired, scared, and homesick men.<sup>291</sup> Both Sothern and Ames were most comfortable with the classics, and they started their tour with such theater staples as "The Taming of the Shrew," "Hamlet," and "King Lear." They also sang familiar Broadway songs, recited war poems, and told stories of home. Ames and Sothern found that what "sold" well with the boys overseas were the same things that sold well at home along the Great White Way. They wanted to sing, to laugh, to relax, and, most importantly, to see American girls.<sup>292</sup>

Foreshadowing the later experiences of the Over There Theatre League's performers, Sothern and Ames's expedition was exposed to tremendous dangers and to the depredations of trench life. On one of Sothern's first performances, he was asked to be silent in the middle of a monologue to avoid a possible air raid. On another occasion, Sothern, ill met by moonlight, was forced into an abandoned, lightless cathedral to wait out an artillery barrage. Ames and Sothern also encountered the main irritant to future

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<sup>290</sup> Evans and Harding, 35.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 37; E.H. Sothern, "The Over There Theatre League: A Player on the Fighting Front," *Scribner's* LXIV (July 1918): 29-30.

<sup>292</sup> Evans and Harding, 37; Sothern, 31. In their respective memoirs, Margaret Mayo and Elsie Janis also recalled the soldiers' pronounced desire for them.



performers: The utter lack of stage infrastructure, props, and instruments. One evening, Ames and Sothern witnessed a regimental production of “School Days,” in which the soldiers had to borrow stage clothes from nearby French peasants (who did not have much to begin with) and use old school desks that “Napoleon studied over” as the stage. The show was a fiasco, due largely to the fact that the soldiers ruined the peasants’ clothes and desks. Poor entertainment, in this instance, could fray diplomatic relationships.<sup>293</sup>

One of the most striking aspects of the Ames-Sothern expedition was the meeting, and eventual breakdown, of supposedly “high” and “low” cultures.<sup>294</sup> Sothern, in particular, was renowned for his classical pedigree and scholarly attention to dense texts. When the YMCA approached Ames and Sothern to play for the men overseas, Ames initially refused because he thought the assignment beneath him. Other theatrical figures seemed to agree; Sothern recounted that an old military friend derided his decision to play for the YMCA: ““It is the first time,”” the playwright said, ““that I have ever heard that fighting-men must have with them a company of comedians.””<sup>295</sup> Implied in this statement is both a denigration of Sothern – who becomes a *comedian* instead of an actor in the presence of soldiers – and a gendered statement on soldiers’ masculinity.

The idea that soldiers would be emasculated or weakened by theatrical training and entertainment was widespread within military circles and certain conservative

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<sup>293</sup> Evans and Harding, 23-27, 40-42; Sothern, 34-38.

<sup>294</sup> Here, I am using Lawrence Levine’s categorizations of “high” and “low” culture, including their fluidity and subjectiveness.

<sup>295</sup> Sothern, 33.

circles.<sup>296</sup> To his credit, Sothern rebuffed the notion, and wrote that performing in front of “stomping, hollering, boisterous men” was the most exhilarating performative experience of his life.<sup>297</sup> Furthermore, the men not only enjoyed Shakespeare, but could also recite it alongside Sothern. Within the YMCA outposts on the Western Front, class and cultural barriers dissolved in the face of mutual suffering and understanding.

### **The Over There Theatre League is Born**

Immediately upon returning home in the spring of 1918, Ames and Sothern called upon prominent members of the theatrical profession to gather at the Palace Theatre in New York City to discuss plans for an entertainment circuit “over there” on the Western Front. Over 2,000 theatrical and musical professionals attended the gathering, including representatives from the Stage Women’s War Relief (SWWR), the Theater Syndicate, the YMCA, and the CTCA. The meeting opened with George M. Cohan, a co-sponsor, reading messages of approval for the new organization from President Woodrow Wilson and General John J. Pershing of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF).

Ames and Sothern then proceeded to recount their month-long journey with the men “over there.” What they described was nothing short of horrific. According to Sothern’s account, the Western Front was a charnel house. Debris and detritus littered the roads; dirty, bedraggled peasants struggled to survive amidst shelled homes and cratered fields; women and children sobbed over unending lines of crudely dug graves. The French people were on their knees, and American soldiers were soon to experience the

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<sup>296</sup> Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense*, 138.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 39; Evans and Harding, 40-41.

unforgiving realities of the Western Front.<sup>298</sup> The soldiers, Ames and Sothern argued, needed healthy diversions; more specifically, they needed fun diversions. “I can tell you, as a fact beyond dispute, that entertainment is not a luxury to the modern man,” Ames said. “Once deprive him of it, even for a little time, and he learns that it is a necessity as vital to him as sugar in his food [and] as needful in this war as overcoats or shovels.”<sup>299</sup>

Sothern and Ames called upon the profession’s comedians and vaudevillians to volunteer, arguing that this was the cause for which they had been waiting. In addition, the theater infrastructure on the frontlines was non-existent, so the volunteers needed to be able to improvise, adapt, and work with limited supplies. Staging elaborate Shakespearean dramas was not feasible. By the end of the meeting, Ames and Sothern had recruited some of the brightest stars in the industry: Maude Adams, Margaret Mayo, Julia Marlowe, Billie Burke, Lillian Russell, and William Collier, among others. The new organization would also need “lesser lights” from the industry, including back-up musicians, stagehands, and prop designers. According to *The New York Times*, so many people volunteered that Ames, Sothern, and Cohan had to turn most of them away. The Over There Theatre League was born.<sup>300</sup>

The Over There Theatre League took its name from Cohan’s runaway hit song “Over There,” which by 1918 had become America’s unofficial anthem of World War I. Unfortunately, the reality of League life “over there” was much less glamorous than the

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<sup>298</sup> E.H. Sothern, “America’s ‘Over-There’ Theatre League,” *Scribner’s* 64:2 (August 1918): 130-133. Sothern wrote of his time in France in two installments for *Scribner’s*.

<sup>299</sup> Winthrop Ames, “The Actor Who Goes Over There,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 1918, 54.

<sup>300</sup> “Stage Rallies to Call for Over There,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1918, 13.

depicted in the song. Ames himself made this clear in his speech at the Palace Theatre. For one, League performers had to wear YMCA uniforms at all times (YMCA uniforms looked similar to military fatigues, with the exception of the YMCA red triangle replacing the insignia of rank). Failure to do so could end in death. “You have about as much chance of getting about the camps in civilian dress as a convict in stripes would have of walking down Broadway,” Ames memorably analogized.<sup>301</sup>

Performers were also required to live a Spartan lifestyle; material possessions beyond the absolute necessities were off-limits. Like soldiers, the entertainers would be transported to France via cramped warships, and they ran the risk of being targeted by German U-Boats. A YMCA pastor onboard the doomed passenger liner *Oronsa* recalled being struck by torpedoes and forced to abandon ship in the cold waters of the Atlantic. Due to the transatlantic communication lag, the pastor’s wife believed him dead for several days before he was able to contact her.<sup>302</sup>

Once in France, performers could expect rudimentary accommodations. They would live in tents and eat spare meals. If they were lucky, a car or horse-drawn carriage would take them from camp-to-camp; otherwise, travel was by foot. Aside from the obvious dangers of living in close proximity to a war zone, performers also needed to be careful of common frontline diseases, such as trench foot, trench fever, influenza, and malaria. Psychologically, performers needed to prepare themselves for the hard realities of the Western Front: Ruined villages, scorched landscapes, broken families.

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<sup>301</sup> Ames, “The Actor Who Goes Over There,” 54.

<sup>302</sup> “Diary of S.R. Leland,” April 1918, S.R. Leland Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, NYPL, Schwarzman Division.

But for entertainers, Ames said, perhaps the most difficult part was accepting that their work may go unnoticed, unheard, or uncared for. The soldiers lived a difficult existence, and each camp was different. Performers might get a rousing ovation from a regiment yet to see action, or they might get vacant stares and muffled sobs from men who just returned from no-man's-land. Despite all these hardships, Ames reassured League performers that the majority of the men sincerely appreciated a brief reprieve from the boredom and horror of war: "You'll never realize how much it will mean to those boys to have you come 3,000 miles to serve them – how much they need you – till you stand before your first audience and get their welcome."<sup>303</sup>

### **The League Arrives**

Despite the fact that Ames and Sothern gave their call-to-arms address in April 1918, it was not until the last day of July that the first performers stepped foot on French soil. Wartime restrictions made passport and visa approval arduous, and performers recalled having to make dozens of trips to-and-from the customs office.<sup>304</sup> Even a well-known star like Margaret Mayo had to call upon Committee on Public Information chairman George Creel to have her passport expedited.<sup>305</sup>

In addition, the League conducted a rigorous vetting process that oftentimes took weeks or months to complete. Winthrop Ames wrote to Mayo in May 1918, asking her to

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<sup>303</sup> Ames, 54.

<sup>304</sup> Mayo, *Trouping with the Troops*, 2-4.

<sup>305</sup> "Letter from George Creel to Margaret Mayo," April 25, 1918, Margaret Mayo Papers, NYPL, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

verify a potential volunteer's character, patriotism, and professional qualifications.<sup>306</sup> The first League contingent consisted of twenty-eight performers. The group represented a wide variety of theatrical genres and skillsets, from standard actors, playwrights, and musicians, to niche performers like animal impersonators and ventriloquists.<sup>307</sup> The one thing that united them was comedy; all knew how to incite an audience to laughter and revelry.

The journey overseas from New York City to Bordeaux was, from all accounts, a trying experience. Much like the YMCA pastor aboard the *Oronsa*, the passengers headed for France in August 1918 lived on pins and needles. According to Margaret Mayo, the general attitude onboard was sullen. Mayo was confronted with “sallow faces and dull eyes staring out from the backs of steamer chairs.”<sup>308</sup> The mood was understandable – most of the passengers were soldiers, humanitarian workers, nurses, or volunteers. All were bound for the Western Front; all awaited a grim future. On the second night, a submarine struck one of the ships in the convoy, and the orders were given to extinguish all lights. For the next several days, the League contingent lived under the oppressive specter of death. Some passengers managed to sing, drink, and dance when permitted, but the prevailing mood aboard the steamer remained anxious. Finally, on the seventh day, the steamer reached Bordeaux.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> “Letter from Winthrop Ames to Margaret Mayo,” May 16, 1918, Margaret Mayo Papers, Box 1, Folder 3, NYPL, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

<sup>307</sup> “Over There Players May be on the Way,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 1918, 9.

<sup>308</sup> Mayo, 18.

<sup>309</sup> Mayo, 21.

Over the course of the next two months, six hundred League performers would make the dangerous voyage across the Atlantic. Upon arrival, they were immediately put to work. The performers' schedules were hectic; some troupes could expect to perform four or five shows in one day. Margaret Mayo's troupe, "The Mayo Players," played twelve shows over the course of seven nights.

Compounding the logistical burden was the fact that the performers often had nothing to use other than what they brought and their own imaginations. Mayo ruefully noted in her diary that the stage materials at the Wood Camp Engineers site numbered a "piano formerly tuned," a "small tent," and a "smaller platform."<sup>310</sup> The entertainers were also plagued by a chronic undersupply of costumes, wigs, and other wardrobe materials. The League sent twenty trunks of costume material to France in August 1918, and representatives called upon volunteer donations, but, from all accounts, the supply never met the demand.<sup>311</sup>

Despite these hardships, U.S. military personnel did their best to provide League entertainers with individualized reports for each camp. Oftentimes these reports simply listed the available stage materials, but on several occasions regimental liaisons provided advanced reconnaissance on the mood and temperament of the camp populations. One of Margaret Mayo's reports noted that the men of the Gas Regiment had "just been to the front."<sup>312</sup> Statements such as these were subtle hints that the troupe needed to exercise

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<sup>310</sup> Margaret Mayo, "Diary Entry," undated, Margaret Mayo Papers, NYPL, Billy Rose Theatre Division.

<sup>311</sup> "Costumes Wanted," *Variety*, August 1918, 9.

<sup>312</sup> Mayo, "Diary Entry," NYPL, Billy Rose Theater Division.

greater restraint or caution; at times, it may have even served as a warning: do not expect comfort here. Over time, League performers were able to gauge an audience's mood with non-verbal cues. "As we got more familiar with the traditions of war we came to know the sudden suspension of social candour – the tightening of the moral fibre," Mayo wrote. "Until the big guns are actually firing...one has the feeling of being suspended in space awaiting some unavoidable cataclysm."<sup>313</sup> Mayo's statement reflects the psychological toll exacted on frontline performers.

Aside from logistical problems, the performers of the Over There Theatre League faced perpetual exhaustion and overextension. Mayo recalled performing for a group of 2,500 men in a downpour. The troupe was exhausted, wet, and emotionally drained, yet they carried on, for fear of letting the boys down if they declined to play. As the play reached its climax, an enemy observation plane roared overhead, and the men slinked back to their tents like animals returning to the brush.<sup>314</sup>

On another night, a crowd of soldiers surrounded the troupe's tents, clamoring to see a "second show" for the night. Evidently, the YMCA official forgot to notify the men that Mayo and her troupe could only perform once that evening. The crowd became belligerent and combative. Mayo urged the men to come see the show the next evening; this was met with boos and hisses. One soldier bitterly spoke from the darkness: "We'll not be here to-morrow night. You needn't trouble. We'll be in the trenches to-morrow night."<sup>315</sup> After the men disassembled, Mayo retired to her "desolate little room" and

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<sup>313</sup> Mayo, *Touring with the Troops*, 56.

<sup>314</sup> Mayo, 85-86.

<sup>315</sup> Mayo, 115-6.



sobbed with her head in her hands. The guilt gnawed at her. “I didn’t care a whoop if I lived or died,” she wrote.<sup>316</sup>

For Mayo, the breaking point came during a performance one day before the Armistice. The Mayo Players, after performing for hours in the middle of a downpour, reached their final “stage” for the evening. The “stage,” in this case, was the bed of a truck parked in the middle of a dirt road. Despite the nasty weather, the soldiers turned out in droves, excited to experience some levity. Mayo mounted the back of the truck and began to open the show with her signature joke, when she looked down at her feet. Underneath the thin tarpaulin covering the truck-bed were tiny, but unmistakable, cannisters of mustard gas.

Something snapped in Mayo’s mind. The happy words on the tip of her lips quickly morphed into an uncontrollable sob. Mayo hurriedly left the stage and had to be led to a first-aid tent.<sup>317</sup> An anonymous newspaper clipping found in Mayo’s papers detailing the event was outright cruel and tinged with sexism: “Just as Miss Mayo bounced forward to say something snappy and full of laughs to start the show, she burst...into a flood of tears that would have swamped a court room scene. She was last seen being led off to a first-aid station, and Crying Jane can look out for her laurels.”<sup>318</sup> It would be her last performance in the war.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> “Drama in Khaki: Incidental Music by the Booming Guns,” *Current Opinion* 65 (December 1918): 373.

<sup>318</sup> “Untitled Newspaper Clipping,” undated, Margaret Mayo Papers, Box 40, Folder 3, NYPL, Billy Rose Theater Division.

<sup>319</sup> Mayo never mentioned the incident in her published account of the war, a curious omission given her otherwise striking candor.

Not all League performers reported such negative experiences. Will Cressy, an obscure vaudevillian and one of the first League members to set foot in France, recalled his experiences with fondness. Cressy and his wife, Blanche Dayne, came to France together. The duo had performed together for thirty years, and, though largely unknown, had developed somewhat of a cult following along the B.F. Keith circuit. Cressy and Dayne's experiences closely mirrored those of Mayo, but they took away divergent memories. In a postwar dispatch to the periodical *Current Opinion*, Cressy fondly reminisced about his war experiences. His response is worth quoting at length:

“Our gas-masks and ‘tin hats’ are as much a part of our clothing as our shoes and stockings. I don’t know that we could play our performance without the more or less distant roar of the big guns for ‘incidental music.’ Sometimes I announce an intermission so that all can step outside and watch air battles over head. We have had to dismiss an audience right in the middle of a performance in order that they might answer a sudden call to the Front. We have played a performance straight through under shell-fire. We have given exactly the same show on fine stages in lovely theaters, on platforms six feet by eight, on dining-tables in mess-halls, on the tail boards of army-trucks, on the ground in fields, in the woods, on the steps of town halls and churches, and in halls and between the cots in the wards of hospitals.”<sup>320</sup>

Unlike Mayo, Cressy viewed the war as the backdrop to a grand adventure, a grand calling. In keeping with his casual attitude, Cressy imparted ironic names to his familiar routes, including the “Trench Circuit” and the “Schrapnel Circuit.”<sup>321</sup>

In many respects, the performers' experiences from the Over There Theatre League were shaped by gender. Cressy was clearly accorded respect and acceptance from the soldiers that Mayo and her co-trouper Elizabeth Brice were not. Cressy wrote often

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<sup>320</sup> Will Cressy, quoted in “Drama in Khaki,” 373.

<sup>321</sup> Will Cressy, quoted in James W. Evans, *Entertaining the American Army: The American Stage and Lyceum in the World War* (Association Press, 1921), 114-115.

about how the men viewed him as a religious authority and a man of God. He was neither, but, like a good actor, he played the role well.<sup>322</sup>

Mayo and Brice, by contrast, repeatedly had to validate their presence on the battlefield. For example, Brice and Mayo were subjected to repeated humiliation at the hands of a military officer tasked with instructing them to use gas masks. Over the course of an hour, Mayo alleged that the instructor blamed the women's long hair for their inability to correctly deploy the masks. The men training alongside them offered up alternate possibilities: Perhaps it was their teeth, nose, ears, or lungs?<sup>323</sup> Brice and Mayo also endured unwanted touching and groping, often under the pretense that the men had not "seen a girl in so long." After one night of being passed around during a dance by hundreds of men, the weary women decompressed in the backseat of a car. "Well, I've only one life to give for my country, thank God!"<sup>324</sup>

The Over There Theatre League disbanded in June 1919, after sending over hundreds of entertainers, lecturers, and performers to the Western Front. Despite the mixed experiences of the performers themselves, the Over There Theatre League was a success. The organization's stellar record in the First World War animated the creation of the United Service Organizations (USO) in 1941. The uneven, and often slapdash, application of the program was testament to the unprecedented nature of the work. The Over There Theatre League was the first organization of its kind, and the sacrifices made

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<sup>322</sup> Will Cressy, "They Don't Know We're Actors," *Association Men* (January 1919): 741.

<sup>323</sup> Mayo, 70-71.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid*, 141-43.

by theatrical professionals left an enduring mark on the profession and its relationship to the federal government, laying the foundations for an enduring military-entertainment infrastructure going into the twentieth century.

## EPILOGUE

Writing in the aftermath of the war, historian and dramatist James Evans congratulated the CTCA, the YMCA, the SWWR, the Over There Theatre League, and the federal government for producing, funding, and enacting thousands of plays, sing-alongs, and lectures for millions of American soldiers. Evans was even prouder, however, of the uniquely American achievement of keeping its men fit to fight. “The history of war is that the forms of diversion which have followed armies did more to destroy the armies than did the actual fighting,” he wrote.<sup>325</sup> The United States government and its auxiliaries, in Evans’s opinion, reversed the seemingly ineluctable tide of history by keeping the overwhelming majority of its men safe *off* the battlefield. In this telling, the U.S. government and American entertainers returned American boys home with sound bodies and minds. Raymond Fosdick, chairman of the CTCA, agreed, arguing that American soldiers “learned the meaning of concerted effort, obedience, loyalty, cheerfulness, courage, and generosity...they will come back with a new set of ideals, as men who have been tried by fire and found good metal.”<sup>326</sup>

While the notion that American entertainers kept most soldiers from engaging in salacious behavior is not supported by the historical record, they did transform many Americans’ relationship to music, theater, and the federal government. According to a

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<sup>325</sup> Evans and Harding, *Entertaining the American Army*, 237.

<sup>326</sup> Edward Allen, *Keeping Our Fighter Fit*, 207.

War Department circular distributed in January 1920, music was to be a vital cornerstone of military training going forward: “Previous to the World War singing was considered as only a form of entertainment and not as a means of developing military spirit. Now...the value of singing as a contributing factor to the efficiency of the soldier is recognized.”<sup>327</sup> Going forward, music would be an integral facet of military training.

The federal government also financed the postwar Student Army Training Corps (SATC), led by community singing advocate and former CTCA songleader Paul Dykema, which systematized vocal and musical training in the U.S. military. Additionally, the SATC also established auxiliary programs with colleges and universities across the United States, who would select and finance promising young songleaders. In essence, the SATC ensured that the U.S. military would have a sustainable supply of musical talent for its officer corps going into the interwar period.<sup>328</sup>

CTCA, YMCA, and League officials also believed that soldiers would continue singing long after they had left the military. The songs, and the memory of singing them with their comrades, would become part of the soldier, as indispensable an appendage as an arm or a leg. “The singing of these songs will continue at camp fires [*sic*] and reunions for fifty years to come,” James Evans wrote. “Some of the songs will remain when the Great War has become a part of America’s tradition of humor and buoyancy under danger and difficulty.”<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> NARA, RG 165, 56:399, Item 54679.

<sup>328</sup> Gier, *Singing, Soldiering, and Sheet Music*, 190-91.

<sup>329</sup> Evans, 212.

Professional musicians and stage performers also benefitted from their wartime service. Elsie Janie parlayed her war experience into a successful postwar Broadway career, and even appeared in several war-related silent films, the most famous being *Behind the Battle Lines* (1926).<sup>330</sup> Alfred Arnaud, a vocalist and consistent League performer during the war, became one of the pioneers of radio in the early 1920s with the Verdi Opera Company, who hired him due to his League work and high accommodations from generals, doughboys, and even European nobility.<sup>331</sup> Margaret Mayo channeled her organizational talents she honed as leader of The Mayo Troupe into the formation of the Dramatists Guild in 1926. E.H. Sothern was so moved by his experience with common soldiers that he became a popular lecturer on Shakespeare during the 1920s, in an effort to bring the famous English playwright's work back into everyday American parlance.<sup>332</sup> Their lives, and the lives of the men and women they touched, helped create a common cultural language that endures to the present day.

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<sup>330</sup> Janis, *The Big Show*, 211-218; Gier, 196-7.

<sup>331</sup> "On the Air Again," *The Wireless Age*, volume 9 (1923): 51.

<sup>332</sup> Sheridan Morley, *The Great Stage Stars* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1986), 265-267.

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