

Americans Respond

Perspectives on the Global War, 1914–1917

by Jennifer D. Keene

Abstract: Neutrality did not mean non-involvement. American communities engaged intellectually, politically, and financially with the wars' multiple fronts throughout 1914 to 1917. This essay discusses the responses of Progressive reformers to the plight of Belgian civilians, African American interest in Africa, and Jewish-American aid to Russian Jewish refugees. The recent historiographic trend emphasizing the war's global dimensions has provided macro-level analyses of strategy, migrations, finances, trade, and empires throughout the world. Considering World War I as a global war, however, offers more than a way to analyze American financing, trade, and diplomacy. It creates a framework for recapturing the smaller, diverse, often locally-based experiences of American communities during the period 1914 to 1917.

In 1914 President Woodrow Wilson urged Americans to be “impartial in thought, as well as action.”¹ Both the government and people, he suggested, must avoid “passionately taking sides” for America to remain a neutral in the present war, a status it maintained until April 1917 when Congress declared war on Germany. Many historians have traced the gradual erosion of the concept of neutrality throughout 1914 to 1917, paying particular attention to the changes in Wilson's definition of neutrality, the close ties that American financiers and industrialists developed with the Allied side, and the debate over military preparedness.² Wilson's statement, however, captured several demographic realities. The United States had recently welcomed millions of new immigrants from both Allied and Central Power nations. Class tensions were rife in the rural and industrial sectors where disputes often turned deadly. Racial violence was also on the rise. America in 1914 was a divided nation that found it impossible to speak with one voice on any matter. This would include, despite Wilson's plea, reacting to the crisis of world war.

1 Woodrow Wilson, US Declaration of Neutrality, 19.8.1914, in: Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65382>.

2 See for example, Robert H. Zieger, *America's Great War. World War I and the American Experience*, New York 2000; John P. Finnegan, *Against the Specter of a Dragon. The Campaign for American Military Preparedness*, Westport, CT 1974; John G. Clifford, *The Citizen Soldiers. The Plattsburgh Training Camp Movement, 1913–1920*, Lexington, KY 1974; Ross Gregory, *The Origins of American Intervention in the First World War*, New York 1971.

Neutrality did not mean non-involvement. Dividing the American experience neatly into a period of neutrality and belligerency works well for diplomatic history, but calling 1914 to 1917 the “period of neutrality” obscures the multiple and diverse ways that Americans engaged directly in the war from its opening days. It privileges presidential leadership, leaving it up to Wilson to proclaim America neutral, and then to request a declaration of war.³ How does recognizing the engagement of average Americans in the war from the opening days of the conflict change this narrative? Some Americans elected to join foreign armies, demonstrating a willingness to participate directly in the actual fighting well before the United States formally entered the war.⁴ This essay will focus on a different response, the efforts of diverse groups to alleviate civilian suffering overseas. Rather than remaining impartial, these communities engaged intellectually, politically, and financially with the wars’ multiple fronts.

For those who decided to act, the so-called period of neutrality became a time when Americans were free to focus their attention on any part of the war they chose without risking censure from their neighbors or the government. The geographical selection varied tremendously, reflecting the diverse backgrounds and passions of the American people. Throughout the period of neutrality Americans, often depending on their race, ethnicity, class, regional orientation or ideological beliefs, focused on different aspects of the global war. The ability to disengage and ignore the war was another freedom Americans enjoyed during the period of non-belligerency. Once the United

3 The most sustained discussions of the United States in the period of neutrality comes through biographies of Woodrow Wilson, which understandably privilege his decision-making. For recent examples see John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson. A Biography*, New York 2009; Justus D. Doenecke, *Nothing Less Than War*, Lexington, KY 2011; Ross A. Kennedy, *Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America’s Strategy for Peace and Security*, Kent, OH 2009. John Branden Little and Julia Irwin are two scholars challenging the idea of an American period of neutrality through their work on Belgium relief and the American Red Cross, respectively. See John Branden Little, *Humanitarian Relief in Europe and the Analogue of War, 1914 – 1918*, in: Jennifer D. Keene and Michael S. Neiberg (eds.), *Finding Common Ground. New Directions in First World War Studies*, Leiden 2011, pp. 139 – 160 and Julia Irwin, *Making the World Safe. The American Red Cross and a Nation’s Humanitarian Awakening*, New York 2013.

4 For American volunteers, see Robert B. Bruce, *A Fraternity of Arms. America and France in the Great War*, Lawrence, KS 2003; Axel Jansen, *Individuelle Bewährung im Krieg. Amerikaner in Europa, 1914 – 1917*, Frankfurt 2003 and id., *Heroes or Citizens. The 1916 Debate on Harvard Volunteers in the European War*, in: Christine Krüger and Sonja Levsen (eds.), *War Volunteering in Modern Times. From the French Revolution to the Second World War*, Basingstoke 2011, pp. 150 – 162.

States declared war, the demands (both legal and extralegal) to participate fully in the war effort touched nearly every community.⁵

The recent historiographic trend emphasizing the global dimensions of the war has provided macro-level analyses of how the war affected strategy, migrations, finances, trade, and empires throughout the world.⁶ The United States figures prominently in these accounts mostly through its trade, financing, diplomacy, and ultimately military might. Considering World War I as a global war, however, offers more than a way to tell the bird's eye story of American participation. It creates a framework for recapturing the smaller, diverse, often locally-based experiences of American communities during the period 1914 to 1917. The global dimensions of the war gave Americans choices to make when deciding which aspect of the war mattered the most to them. During this period, Progressive reformers focused nearly exclusively on the plight of Belgian civilians, African Americans on Africa, and Jewish-Americans on Russia and Palestine. Their motivations for making these selections were equally diverse. Progressive reformers hoped to re-define America's humanitarian role in the world. African Americans linked the progress of the racial struggle at home to the continued existence of the global color line. Jewish Americans, immigrants and the native-born, worried about family and friends caught up in the maelstrom of war.

The experiences of these three groups vividly demonstrate that Americans were not sitting on the sidelines during the period of neutrality. Rather than following President Woodrow Wilson's lead and limiting America's concerns to protecting the rights of neutrals, American citizens became avidly involved in multiple dimensions of the global war underway. As Wilson himself predicted in his 1914 neutrality address: "The effect of the war upon the United States will depend upon what American citizens say and do."

I. Progressives and the Plight of Belgium

In the years leading up to the war, Progressive reformers had launched a multi-faceted reform movement known as Progressivism, a domestic campaign against political corruption, the power of monopolies, and the dismal living and factory conditions that consigned many working class Americans to a life of hardship. A standard activist tactic was to organize local committees to investigate, publicize, fundraise, or lobby for legislative solutions to remedy

5 Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You. World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen*, New York 2008.

6 See for example, Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. 1: *To Arms*, Oxford 2001; Michael S. Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War. A Global History*, Cambridge 2005; John H. Morrow, Jr., *The Great War. An Imperial History*, New York 2004; David Stevenson, *Cataclysm. The First World War as Political Tragedy*, New York 2005.

America's social ills.⁷ In undertaking these social reforms American Progressives had also cultivated strong ties to their European counterparts, exchanging methods and approaches to alleviating poverty. Popular tours to Europe by-passed museums and castles in favor of visits to slums and charitable institutions, as American reformers sought to learn from the pioneering urban reforms undertaken overseas.⁸ These experiences of collective organization and international collaboration laid the foundation for a quick and enthusiastic response when the wartime call to aid Belgium civilians came.

Progressive reformers had already cultivated self-image as citizens of the world.⁹ Consequently, the fact that there were no immediate American interests at stake when war erupted in Europe did not deter these Progressively-minded Americans from seeking an immediate role in the conflict. Instead Progressively-minded social workers, businessmen, and engineers acted immediately on the responsibility they felt to alleviate civilian suffering. Their voluntary efforts injected Americans, and perhaps more importantly, the American food economy into the war.

These well-off white Americans traveled to Europe from 1914 to 1917, not to fight, but to aid civilians caught up in the war. The Committee for Relief in Belgium (CRB) took the lead in focusing Americans' attention on the plight of civilians in German-occupied areas, especially Belgium. In 1914 the CRB was only one of nearly one hundred charitable groups initially formed to help Belgium civilians, but it would grow to encompass over 10,000 chapters worldwide.¹⁰

7 Theda Skocpol et al., *Patriotic Partnerships. Why Great Wars Nourished American Civic Voluntarism*, in: Ira Katznelson and Martin Shefter (eds.), *Shaped by War and Trade. International Influences on American Political Development*, Princeton 2002, pp. 134–180. For recent works re-evaluating the reaction of Progressives to the war and the importance of US-sponsored global humanitarianism see Alan Dawley, *Changing the World. American Progressives in War and Revolution*, Princeton, NJ 2003; Ian Tyrrell, *Reforming the World. The Creation of America's Moral Empire*, Princeton 2010; Irwin, *Making the World Safe*.

8 Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings. Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, Cambridge, MA 1998, pp. 52–75.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 267–277.

10 Scholarly interest in American-led humanitarian efforts is growing, as evidenced by the number of recent dissertations devoted to this topic including John Branden Little, *Band of Crusaders. American Humanitarians, the Great War, and the Remaking of the World*, Ph. D. Diss. University of California at Berkeley 2009; Michael McGuire, *An Ephemeral Relationship. American Non-Governmental Organizations, the Reconstruction of France, and Franco-American Relations, 1914–1924*, Ph. D. Diss. Boston University 2012; Jennifer Polk, *Constructive Efforts. The American Red Cross and YMCA in Revolutionary and Civil War Russia, 1917–1924*, Ph. D. Diss. University of Toronto 2012; Thomas Westerman, *Rough and Ready Relief. American Identity, Humanitarian*

CRB head Herbert Hoover created the managerial structure needed to effectively collect, transport, and deliver food relief on a massive international scale. Hoover had no direct ties to the domestic Progressive social reform movement but he shared its values. Hoover had spent his adult life as an engineer working overseas to perfect the organizational structure of mining operations. His problem-solving approach privileged efficiency, maximizing productivity, and minimizing costs – values that also informed Progressive attempts to purge corruption and inequity from American politics and industry. Hoover recruited similarly-minded American businessmen, engineers, physicians, and public health experts to run the CRB, and set about tackling the problem of starvation in occupied Belgium.¹¹ In his autobiography, Hoover succinctly laid out the enormity of the task:

It would require that we find the major food supply for a whole nation; raise the money to pay for it; get it past navies at sea and occupying armies on land; set up an agency for distribution of supplies for everybody justly; and see that the enemy took none of it. It was not ‘relief’ in any known sense. It was the feeding of a nation.¹²

The CRB indeed exercised the powers of a quasi-nation. The subject of nearly daily news stories, the CRB centered attention on the civilian casualties of total war. The escalating naval battle between Britain and Germany to control the flow of food and munitions from the United States to Europe, a key step in the war’s global expansion, forced Hoover to engage in intense negotiations to feed civilians in Belgium, and eventually northern France. Hoover, a private American citizen, successfully secured a German promise not to torpedo ships carrying food relief or confiscate CRB food to feed its army, along with a British pledge to allow the food through the blockade. He then raised a billion to pay for the purchase of five million tons of goods that he transported with a fleet of seventy vessels that flew red and white CRB flags. Once food and clothing arrived in Belgium, the CRB worked in concert with the Belgian Comité National de Secours et d’Alimentation which stored and distributed food, controlled consumption through rationing and price controls, and ran soup kitchens for the indigent.¹³

The American-led relief mission that delivered aid to Western Europe demonstrated the war’s global reach in several ways. The procurement of food ultimately became an international operation, with the CRB obtaining

Experience, and the Commission for Relief in Belgium, 1914–1917, Ph.D. Diss. University of Connecticut 2013.

11 George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover*, vol. 2: *The Humanitarian, 1914–1917*, New York 1988, pp. 20 f.

12 Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover. Years of Adventure, 1874–1920*, New York 1951, p. 154.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 156; Tracey B. Kittredge, *The History of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, 1914–1917*, n. p. 1919, p. 61; Branden Little, *Band of Crusaders*, p. 301.

foodstuffs primarily from the United States, Canada, Argentina, and the UK, and some provisions from China, Australia, India, and Guatemala.¹⁴ The financing of the relief effort, both from governmental monies and private donations also assumed global dimensions. Belgium, France, and Great Britain provided the bulk of governmental subsidies until 1917. Once the United States government entered the war, it contributed directly to the relief effort in the form of loans to Belgium and France. Overall, Americans provided 66 percent of the cash and in-kind donations, followed by the British Empire with 31.6 percent (encompassing the UK, Dominions, and colonies) and 2.2 percent from other nations including China, Italy, Spain, Holland, and Argentina.¹⁵ In fact, “the per capita contribution collected by the committees in Canada, Australia and New Zealand was a considerably higher figure than that for the United States,” noted Tracey B. Kittredge in his 1919 history of the CRB.¹⁶ The success of the Belgian relief effort rested on exploiting and expanding the existing international trade and financing infrastructure. The American-led CRB mobilized peoples and resources throughout the globe to alleviate the suffering of one small portion of Europe. This worldwide undertaking illustrated the impact of global war on a local level. CRB-negotiated agreements on Belgian crop harvests, for instance, dictated how a Belgian disposed of his crop. “In time we requisitioned all the farmer’s production above the needs of his own family,” Hoover noted as the CRB “ultimately took control of all food warehouses, flour mills, slaughter houses, dairies, bakeries and restaurants.”¹⁷ Bread ration cards determined how much families consumed, with CRB experts designing a super-nutritious cracker to serve to school children at their noon-day meal.¹⁸ The relief effort did more than dictate food consumption patterns in Belgium. It also created an opportunity for enhancing the global perspective of those Americans energized to join this crusade. Enjoying a plentiful harvest, Kansas donated 50,000 barrels of wheat in November 1914, enough for the state to

14 George I. Gay, *The Commission for Relief in Belgium. Statistical Review of Relief Operations*, Stanford 1925, p. 25 and pp. 28–30; Branden Little, *Band of Crusaders*, p. 319 and p. 496.

15 Gay, *Statistical Review*, p. 65 and pp. 67 f.

16 Kittredge, *History of the Commission for Relief in Belgium*, p. 65. As modern relief efforts demonstrate, the best charitable donation is cash. Donations in kind, such as food and clothing, come in fits and bursts, often of uneven quality. A relief effort relying strictly on donations meant that a town could “be supplied with an ample amount of flour one week and the next week have to subsist on beans,” noted George Gay in his statistical overview of the CRB (Gay, *Statistical Review*, p. 62). Donated food made its way to Belgium, but was often sold to supplement the purchases made to feed the destitute.

17 Hoover, *Memoirs*, p. 174.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

single-handedly fill the hold of the *Hannah* which sailed for Rotterdam in January 1915.¹⁹ With the Kansas state flag fluttering atop the ship, state dignitaries gave speeches asserting that “Kansas had only begun to give.”²⁰ A year later, the now-empty flour sacks made their way back to Topeka, Kansas. Belgian women had returned them, not to ask that they be refilled but as a gift of thanks. Renowned for their lace-making and embroidery skills, Belgian women had embroidered the sacks’ original lettering, plus added some designs of their own. Displayed in Topeka’s storefront windows, these beautifully decorated sacks fostered connection between peoples on each side of the Atlantic where none previously existed.²¹ Americans donating clothes also tried to reach out to individual Belgians by putting notes, bibles, and sometimes even money in the pockets. Vernon Lyman Kellogg wrote in 1918:

In fact, the enclosing of messages and books caused us much trouble, for the Germans allow no scrap of paper, printed or written, to enter Belgium uncensored. We now have to unpack all the clothing in Rotterdam and go through it carefully to remove all notes and books.²²

Through embroidery and charitable food and clothing donations, Belgians and Americans demonstrated their desire to establish an unmediated connection with one another. These individual gestures reveal yet another way that Americans were drawn in the global war.

International relief work fostered a sense of national pride by emphasizing numerous admirable qualities about the United States. The publicity surrounding Belgian relief efforts underscored the superiority of American business methods and Americans’ generosity. “How Americans Organized the Commission for the Relief of Belgium and Saved Ten Million People from Actual Starvation,” the sub-heading of an essay on food relief in the 1920 “Harper’s Pictorial Library of the World War,” celebrated American business acumen and efficiency for heading off famine. The same article showered attention on average citizens like the “druggist in a small town in Indiana [who] sent one dollar a week for more than two years” and the “pennies, dimes and quarters” contributed by “children who earned them by running errands, giving up birthday parties and presents, winning high marks in school, and taking medicine without complaint.”²³ These donations from children, church

19 Kansas Gives 50,000 Barrels of Flour, in: *New York Times*, 23. 11. 1914.

20 \$ 400,000 Food Ship, Kansas Gift, Sails, in: *New York Times*, 6. 1. 1915.

21 Rebecca Martin, Cool Things. Embroidered Flour Sacks, <http://www.kshs.org/kansasedia/cool-things-embroidered-flour-sacks/16791>. This was not an isolated example. A torrent of embroidered pillows, cards, and flour sacks flowed from Belgium to the United States during the war.

22 Vernon Lyman Kellogg, *Fighting Starvation in Belgium*, New York 1918, p. 19.

23 O. A., *Saving Belgium from Famine*, in: Albert Bushnell Hart et al. (eds.), *Harper’s Pictorial Library of the World War*, vol. 7: *The Armies of Mercy*, New York 1920,

congregations, and local clubs demonstrated the generosity of Americans, a laudable national characteristic, the magazine opined.

The war also encouraged Americans to recognize the position of privilege they occupied in the world order. Having been spared from the war's deadly impact, Americans accepted their moral responsibility as global citizens to help others in need.²⁴ The visibility of the aid Americans rendered served to further enhance the international status of the United States. Participation in international relief projects offered a way for average citizens to help promote and protect their nation's global reputation. The merging of international humanitarianism with patriotism was well-illustrated in the response of a local chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic (a Civil War veterans' organization) to an appeal for donations. "Comrades and Brethren, our fighting days are over," announced one member. "But we can yet do our mite [sic] to right wrong and win honor for Old Glory."²⁵ As an organ played "The Star Spangled Banner" (the American national anthem), the veterans fished in their pockets for coins. Their rhetoric and ritual transformed the altruism of sending aid to feed starving Belgium children into an act of patriotic duty.

II. A Pan-African View of Global War

Learning about the plight of Belgian civilians under German occupation failed to automatically trigger the same desire to donate money and food among educated African Americans as it did in many white communities. Recalling the Belgium conquest of the Congo and the murderous reign of King Leopold, the African American press viewed the plight of Belgium somewhat differently.²⁶ New York City resident DeMond Lewis reflected upon the stories that filled mainstream white-run newspapers detailing the loss of irreplaceable medieval books and manuscripts when German soldiers burned the library in Louvain, along with stories of massacres and rapes of innocent civilians. Instead of

pp. 116–144, here pp. 142 f. These same stories are included in Kellogg, *Fighting Starvation in Belgium*, pp. 107 f.

24 Branden Little, *Band of Crusaders*, p. 318.

25 O. A., *Saving Belgium from Famine*, p. 143. Old Glory was the popular name for the American flag.

26 William G. Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914–1920*, Chapel Hill, NC 2001. Jordan's work is one of the very few works on African Americans that offers a sustained discussion of the period from 1914 to 1917. Most works begin in 1917 with the American entry into war. On the history of the black press see Charles A. Simmons, *The African American Press. A History of News Coverage during National Crises, with Special Reference to Four Black Newspapers, 1827–1965*, Jefferson, NC 1998 and Albert Lee Kreiling, *The Making of Racial Identities in the Black Press. A Cultural Analysis of Race Journalism in Chicago, 1878–1929*, Ph. D. Diss. University of Illinois at Urbana 1973.

abject horror at hearing these tales, Lewis admitted to feeling some ambivalence in a 1914 letter that he wrote to the *New York Age*, an African American newspaper published in New York City:

Not many years ago the same report could with perfect justice and truth have been issued from darkest Africa, namely, the Congo Free State, where evil, cruel and notorious Leopold king of the Belgians, exacted a cruel toll from the innocent natives of the jungle. Of course, these poor people had and have no way of putting their tale of suffering – compared to the Belgians – before the world.²⁷

Unlike the steady stream of appeals made to alleviate the suffering of Belgian civilians, those sending letters to the *Age* noted that no one ever suggested mounting an international relief effort to stem the suffering in the Belgian Congo. These atrocities included villagers whose hands were cut off when they failed to meet the quotas of rubber and ivory, prohibiting the Congolese from selling crops or ivory, and widespread land confiscation.

For African American intellectuals, activists, and journalists Africa served not only as a geographical region where key events occurred, but also as a symbolic mirror to hold up against European combatant nations and the United States to reveal their ideological hypocrisy.²⁸ “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea,” W. E. B. Du Bois, a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and editor of its journal, *The Crisis*, had contended in 1903.²⁹ The global war underway in 1914 offered African American intellectuals a myriad of examples to underscore the truthfulness of this often-quoted line from “The Souls of Black Folk.” The comparisons they drew between German outrages in Belgium and racial violence in the Congo and United States provided evidence of how the global color line affected the lives of black people throughout the world. The war laid bare the universality of racial prejudice and the shared

27 DeMond Lewis, Letter to the Editor, in: *New York Age*, 1. 10. 1914, p. 4; Cruelty to Congo Natives is Recalled, in: *New York Age*, 22. 3. 1917, pp. 1 f. Publicity exposing King Leopold’s reign of terror in the Congo received wide circulation within the United States in the early 1900s, see Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost. A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, New York 1998.

28 For the awakening Pan-African movement during the war years, see Richard Cullen Rath, Echo and Narcissus. The Afrocentric Pragmatism of W. E. B. Du Bois, in: *Journal of American History* 84. 1997, pp. 461–495; David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois. Biography of a Race*, New York 1993.

29 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in: Eric J. Sundquist (ed.), *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, New York 1996, pp. 97–240, here p. 107. For Du Bois’s influence within the black community see Mark Ellis, *W. E. B. Du Bois and the Formation of Black Opinion in World War I. A Commentary on “The Damnable Dilemma”*, in: *Journal of American History* 81. 1995, pp. 1584–1590.

assumption among the world's white population that they had the right to exploit and dominate those with darker skin.

W. E. B. Du Bois turned away from the conventional explanations of the war's causes that focused primarily on power struggles to control European territory. Why did each nation believe that its very survival was at stake in 1914? Du Bois found no satisfying answers to this question in the death of the little-admired Archduke Franz Ferdinand, France's desire to recapture Alsace-Lorraine, or the German violation of Belgium neutrality.³⁰ Instead, he believed that the imperial drive to control Africa was the root cause of the war. In his 1915 essay "The African Roots of the War" he wrote:

In a very real sense Africa is a prime cause of this terrible overturning of civilization which we have lived to see; and these words seek to show how in the Dark Continent are hidden the roots, not simply of war to-day but of the menace of wars to-morrow. [...] We speak of the Balkans as the storm-centre of Europe and cause of war, but this is mere habit. The Balkans are convenient for occasions, but the ownership of materials and men in the darker world is the real prize that is setting the nations of Europe at each other's throats to-day.³¹

Du Bois took a global view that placed Africa at the center to explain the existence of a worldwide color line. Other African American journalists used a global perspective to highlight the pervasiveness of racial prejudice and violence within the United States. The widespread American condemnation of German atrocities in Belgium, the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and the Turkish expulsion of Armenians especially irked James Weldon Johnson, another NAACP activist and contributing editor to the *New York Age*. Why did Americans howl with protest when German soldiers "knock the head off some old statue in a Belgian cathedral?" he asked.³² Given its own dismal record denying African Americans their constitutional rights, how could the United States claim to be "the protector of human rights before the world?" he wondered.³³ In the wake of the May 7, 1915 sinking of the *Lusitania* the nation became obsessed with upholding international law and protecting the rights of Americans to travel on ships into the war zone. Yet no one in power paid attention that same month to reports of mobs in Georgia and Texas wrenching black men and children from courtrooms, and then shooting or burning them at the stake before putting their corpses on display for the entire community to

30 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater. Voices from Within the Veil* [1920], in: Sundquist, *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, pp. 481 – 623, here p. 503 and p. 506.

31 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The African Roots of the War*, in: *Atlantic Monthly* 115.1915, pp. 707 – 714, here p. 707 and p. 711.

32 James Weldon Johnson, *Is This Civilization?*, in: *New York Age*, 21.1.1915, p. 4. Johnson's protests can also be put into the context of the NAACP's broader campaign against lynching. See Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909 – 1950*, Philadelphia 1980.

33 James Weldon Johnson, *Concerns Not Even the Sheriff*, in: *New York Age*, 5.8.1915, p. 4.

see.³⁴ “It is worth while to think about the hypocrisy of this country,” Johnson wrote. White Americans organized food relief and sent peace missions to Europe “while the wholesale murder of American citizens on American soil by bloodthirsty mobs hardly brings forth a word of comment.” When African Americans complained, white America routinely counseled patience, rather than insisting on equal rights. Johnson saw a double-standard here as well. “Let them tell the Belgians to be patient. Let them tell the Armenians, the Serbs, the Poles, and the Jews in Russia to be patient.”³⁵

A few months later, after the United States had entered the war, Johnson heard of a lecture given by a visiting Irish-Australian soldier to a New York City audience. Captain David Fallon recounted how he had personally seen the corpses of nuns and soldiers crucified by the Germans. A commonly circulated atrocity tale, Johnson’s first reaction was to accuse the soldier of lying either to impress the women in the audience or to whip up anti-German hysteria within the United States. Did this soldier really expect Americans to believe that men from a civilized nation would behave this way? Before Johnson could write his planned article refuting this soldier’s claims, he came across testimony given before Congress just after the East St. Louis race riot which occurred on July 2, 1917.³⁶ In this testimony an American officer told of seeing men in uniform, both state troops and city police, shoot African Americans in cold blood.

He saw this mob go to the homes of these Negroes and nail boards up over the doors and windows and then set fire and burn them up. He saw them take little children out of the arms of their mothers and throw them into the fires and burn them up.

After reading this account, Johnson had a change of heart about the veracity of German atrocity stories. “Since civilized Americans could commit such acts against other unoffending Americans in peace, there is no reason to doubt that Germans would commit the acts related by Captain Fallon against their foes in war. We again apologize to Captain Fallon” for doubting him, Johnson wrote in the *New York Age*.³⁷

African American commentators took note that the Allies immediately drew on their colonies in Africa and the West Indies to increase their manpower advantage. The *New York Age* claimed in the opening weeks of the war that its readers,

34 Scholarly accounts tracing the rise in lynchings during this era include W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South. Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930*, Urbana 1993 and Stewart E. Tolnay and Elwood M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence. An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882–1930*, Urbana 1995.

35 James Weldon Johnson, *Well Worth Thinking About*, in: *New York Age*, 15.2. 1917, p. 4.

36 More detailed accounts of the East St. Louis riot include Charles L. Lumpkins, *American Pogrom. The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics*, Athens, OH 2008 and Elliott M. Rudwick, *Race Riot in East St. Louis, 2 July 1917*, Urbana, IL 1982.

37 James Weldon Johnson, *Almost Unbelievable*, in: *New York Age*, 15.11.1917, p. 4.

if they favor one side more than another it is the French, because that people have less prejudice against Negroid people than Germany, and have been more generous in their treatment of the West Indian and African natives of their colonies than Germany, or than any other country.³⁸

It was, the paper added, “human nature to sympathize with those who sympathize with us.” When Germany denounced the Allies for setting black men against white men on the battlefields of Europe, France’s reputation as a color-blind society only deepened within the African American community.³⁹ Introducing uncivilized, savage fighters into the heart of civilized Europe, Germany claimed, violated the traditional rules of war. The charges that Germany leveled against Allied colonial troops bore a striking resemblance to the ones Allied reports attributed to invading German troops: rape, pillage, mutilation of corpses, and execution of prisoners.⁴⁰ Which side was responsible for introducing new levels of barbarism into the war interested African Americans less than the question of how the employment of colonial soldiers might impact the global color line.

“‘Colored help wanted.’ It is not too much to say that the various warring nations of Europe have hung out this sign,” noted the *Northern Budget* of Troy, New York.⁴¹ Yet African American commentators expressed little concern that sending colonial troops to fight and die for their colonial masters represented still another form of racial exploitation. Instead, many embraced the idea that wartime military service could offer an opportunity to advance the cause of racial equality worldwide. By 1914 a clear narrative about the US Civil War (1861 – 1865) had taken root within the African American community. The war ended slavery and black soldiers serving in the Union Army spearheaded the demand for equal rights once slavery was abolished. The addition of two constitutional amendments granted citizens equal protection before the law and black men voting rights. This history created an expectation that black

38 African Troops in the War, in: *New York Age*, 3.9.1914, p. 4.

39 For examples see *Colonial Policy of France and Its Result*, in: *New York Age*, 25.1.1917, p. 1. For recent work questioning the “color-blind” image of France see Joe Lunn, “Les Races Guerrières.” Racial Preconceptions in the French Military about West African Soldiers during the First World War, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 34.1999, pp. 517 – 536; Tyler Stovall, *The Color Line behind the Lines. Racial Violence in France during the Great War*, in: *American Historical Review* 103.1998, pp. 737 – 769; and Jennifer D. Keene, *W. E. B. Du Bois and the Wounded World. Seeking Meaning in the First World War for African-Americans*, in: *Peace & Change* 26.2001, pp. 135 – 152 and id., *French and American Racial Stereotypes during the First World War*, in: William Chew (ed.), *National Stereotypes in Perspective. Frenchmen in America, Americans in France*, Amsterdam 2001, pp. 261 – 281.

40 Richard S. Fogarty, *Race and War in France. Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914 – 1918*, Baltimore 2008, p. 8 and p. 85.

41 Quoted in: *The World War*, in: *Crisis* 11.1914, p. 15.

men would improve their political status through honorable military service.⁴² Projecting the American narrative onto French colonial troops, many black intellectuals predicted, as did the *Richmond Planet* in an article entitled “The Opportunity of the Dark Races,” that by fighting for France colonial soldiers would earn the “rights and privileges to which they are entitled.”⁴³ African American journalists also suggested that a valiant battlefield performance by African soldiers might assist the cause of racial equality in the United States. By November 1914 the *New York Age* reported hints of this possibility from an unlikely source, the normally unsympathetic editorial staff of the *New York Times*. Why did so many white Americans feel uneasy seeing African and Indian soldiers fearlessly and successfully attack white soldiers, the paper asked. Wasn’t it because “when this is done, the ‘savages’ show themselves practically equal to us in the very things for which we admire ourselves most?” the *New York Times* suggested to its white audience.⁴⁴ In 1916 the *New York Age* again reported the favorable comments made by a white reporter on the fighting abilities of African soldiers. “African Troops in France are Fighters,” extolled the headline.⁴⁵ The *New York Age* article quoted at length from the article (published in the *New York Globe* and *Chicago Daily News*), but made no direct comment on the reporter’s descriptions of the Africans’ “childish” behavior behind the lines and blind obedience to their white officers. Where African Americans saw black soldiers proving their mettle on the battlefield, white Americans saw black men laying down their lives in service of their white master. This was an indication that the premise of white supremacy would survive the war intact.

There were other signs, however, that the war might result in the global spreading of democracy. “One of the first effects in this city of the news of the Russian revolution was the rejoicing of the Jews on the East Side,” James Weldon Johnson noted in the *New York Age* on March 22, 1917. In March it looked like the fall of the Tsar’s government had ushered in a new era of democratic government in Russia (the communists would take control of the revolution in November 1917). From the vantage-point of an African American civil rights activist, Johnson could only “foresee the future disappointments” for Russian Jews unless they mounted “a hard and stubborn fight” to erase past prejudices and secure the equal rights promised by the new government. “The

42 The best recent scholarly works tracing the connection between the African American military service and expectations of gaining civic and social equality is Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy. Black Veterans and the Struggle against White Supremacy in the Postwar South*, Princeton, NJ 2009.

43 The Opportunity of the Dark Races, in: *Richmond Planet*, 5.9.1914, p. 4, quoted in: Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America’s War for Democracy*, p. 36.

44 *New York Times* article quoted in: James W. Johnson, *The New York Times Solves a Puzzle*, in: *New York Age*, 5.11.1914, p. 4.

45 *African Troops in France are Fighters*, in: *New York Age*, 5.6.1916, p. 1.

greatest thing that the American Negro gained as a result of the Civil War and the amendments to the Constitution was the right to contend for his rights," Johnson wrote. He hoped the same would be true for Jews in Russia.⁴⁶

III. The Jewish Diaspora

Rather than contending with a global color-line, Jews confronted universal anti-Semitism. The fates of Jews throughout Europe immediately concerned American Jews, both native-born and immigrants. The majority of the world's Jewish population (10 million of 15 million Jews worldwide) lived in the German, Russian, and Austrian-Hungarian Empires and the Kingdom of Romania, focusing attention on the Eastern front within the American-Jewish community. Besides helping Jews caught up in the general mayhem of the war, American Jewish leaders sounded alerts whenever evidence arose that wartime passions were unleashing renewed persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe. The question of how the war might further or impede the Zionist goal for a Jewish homeland in Palestine further encouraged American Jews to look beyond the Western Front in considering the global reach of the war.

Because Russian Jews had recently immigrated in large numbers to the United States, intense interest arose within the Jewish press and community over how the outbreak of war would affect Jewish communities in Russia. The *Jewish Criterion* in Pittsburgh offered readers a steady stream of war news that focused on Russia.⁴⁷ Initially these articles expressed hope that the need for Jewish manpower or pressure from Russia's British and French Allies might prompt the Tsar's regime to reverse its anti-Semitic policies. In a December 18, 1914 editorial, the paper's editors opined that the war had revealed "a saner side of the Russian" as they saw Jews stand loyally by the government in its time of need.⁴⁸ The paper celebrated the "patriotic work of the Russian Jews" who offered their hospitals and donated funds to treat wounded soldiers, going so far as to repeat doubtful stories that some Russian male Jewish reservists even returned from abroad to fight for Russia.⁴⁹ The Jewish-American hope that loyal wartime service by the nearly one million Jews serving in the Russian

46 James Weldon Johnson, *Russian Democracy and the Jews*, in: *New York Age*, 22. 3. 1917, p. 4.

47 The *Jewish Criterion*, an English-language newspaper for the Pittsburgh Jewish community, mostly reflected the views of the prosperous German-Jewish community which traced its roots in Pittsburgh to the 1840s and embraced Reformed Judaism. Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews began settling in Pittsburgh in the 1890s.

48 *Jewish Criterion*, 18. 12. 1914, p. 1.

49 The inability of Russian Jews to practice their religion within the military had encouraged many to leave Russia before the war, cf. *The Russian Jews and the War*, in: *Jewish Criterion*, 25. 9. 1914, p. 10.

military would bring about greater equality and an end to religious discrimination echoed similarly optimistic views expressed within the African American community.

A year later, the paper's view had shifted dramatically as the German army drove into the Pale of Settlement, the area in Russia where Jews were allowed to live permanently. "In spite of all acts of loyalty and high sense of patriotism shown by the Jews towards Russia, the Czar's government is still convinced that the Jews are spies in the employ of Germany and has decided to expel them from the war zones," *Criterion* editors reported.⁵⁰ Accusing the Jewish population of giving aid and information to invading German troops, Russian Gentiles unleashed a series of violent pogroms against their Jewish neighbors. They ransacked Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues, taking lives as well as destroying property. Herman Bernstein wrote in the *Jewish Criterion* after visiting Eastern Europe:

Having been defeated upon the battlefield by their enemy and by their own system of demoralization, the Russian military authorities [...] sought to justify themselves before their own people and before the outside world-to justify the collapse of their military system by blaming the Jews.⁵¹

The Russian government subsequently forced nearly 600,000 Jews, often at a moment's notice, to pack up their belongings and move further east in 1915. Epidemics of disease and famine threatened as refugees poured into Pale of Settlement towns. The German occupying army allowed many Jews to return to their homes, a respite that anti-Semites viewed as a reward for helping the German invasion succeed.⁵² A similar pattern of scapegoating and expulsion occurred in Russian Poland and Lithuania, and in Ottoman-controlled Palestine. The Russian army's march in Galicia, an area of Jewish concentration within the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, sent 400,000 Jewish refugees westward. None of these eastern European governments took responsibility for helping Jews relocate. The 100,000 refugees who descended on Warsaw in 1915, for instance, sought medical care, food, and shelter from the existing Jewish community.

Funneling aid to Jewish refugees thus became a major concern of American-Jewish organizations as the hopes for a short war ended. Multiple committees initially formed to provide relief such as the Central Committee for Relief of the Jews Suffering Through the War (CRC), an Orthodox group representing recently arrived, religious Eastern European Jews. Anxiety over the fate of

50 *Jewish Criterion*, 11. 6. 1915, p. 4.

51 Herman Bernstein, *The Tragedy of the Jews in this War*, in: *Jewish Criterion*, 10. 12. 1915, p. 8.

52 Salo W. Baron, *The Russian Jew under Tsars and Soviets*, New York 1987, pp. 156–163. Martin Gilbert, *The First World War. A Complete History*, New York 1994, p. 103, pp. 108 f. and p. 139.

relatives created a sense of urgency within the Jewish American community. “[T]he assistance of this committee may save the lives of those who are near and dear to you. You cannot know where your father or mother, sister or brother is. Your help through us, may help them” in Europe or Palestine, noted one appeal.⁵³

To streamline the process of aiding Jewish refugees, leaders from the Orthodox and Reform community (representing the assimilated, middle-class with German Jewish roots) agreed to put aside their ideological and religious differences to form the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) in November 1914.⁵⁴ When the socialist labor groups came on board a bit later, the JDC became the organization that coordinated the bulk of aid American Jews sent to Jewish war refugees abroad. Over the course of the war the JDC appealed continuously to the three million Jews living in the United States, collecting funds and supplies which its staff delivered to Jewish aid organizations operating in Palestine, Russia, Austria-Hungary and Poland.⁵⁵ The JDC allowed local groups and individuals to direct their contributions to specific regions or “a designated relative or friend in the war zone,” recognizing that communal and familial ties drove many Jewish American donations. JDC operatives also quizzed Jewish refugees for the names and addresses of relatives in the United States, and then sent these American residents a direct appeal to assist their loved ones overseas.⁵⁶

Still it was not enough just to help relatives, author Mary Antin scolded a New York audience in 1915. Antin’s 1912 best-selling book, “The Promised Land,” told her story of fleeing persecution in Russia with her family and using education to assimilate and succeed in America. In 1915, however, she urged Jewish women in New York to remember their responsibility to those Jews unable to escape. “What will you give, you comfortable Jews of America, to save the scattered remnants of Israel, wandering unprotected amidst the hell-flames of war and persecution joined?” she asked.⁵⁷

53 To the Jews of America, in: *Jewish Criterion*, 6. 11. 1914, p. 4.

54 In forming the JDC, the two groups merged the Orthodox Central Committee for Relief of the Jews Suffering Through the War and the Reform community’s American Jewish Relief Committee. Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother’s Keeper. A History of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1929–1939*, Philadelphia 1974, pp. 6–8. The JDC distributed 15 million US-dollar from 1914 to 1918.

55 Jonathan Frankel, An Introductory Essay. The Paradoxical Politics of Marginality. Thoughts on the Jewish Situation during the Years 1914–1921, in: id. et al. (eds.), *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. 4: *The Jews and the European Crisis, 1914–1921*, Oxford 1988, pp. 3–21, here p. 9.

56 An Open Letter from Mr. Felix M. Warburg, Chairman of the Funds for Jewish War Sufferers, to all Jews of America, in: *Jewish Criterion*, 7. 7. 1916, p. 7 f.

57 Mary Antin, *Close Your Eyes and Repeat the Word “Goluth”*, in: *Jewish Criterion*, 17. 12. 1915, p. 4.

Jews like Antin celebrated their ability to assimilate into American society. Demonstrating assimilation by sharing the same relief goals as the rest of the country was thus very much in evidence within the Reformed Jewish press. In Pittsburgh, the *Jewish Criterion* advertised the efforts of the Belgium Commission of Western Pennsylvania to raise money. “We trust that every man and woman in our community will do their duty in responding to their appeal for starving mothers and children,” the paper urged readers.⁵⁸ Yet even the most assimilated Jewish Americans grew frustrated with the American fixation on Belgium civilians. In her address Antin proclaimed:

If the object of American charity is to relieve the most bitter need, then the main stream of our benevolence should be turned into those countries where the Jews are the most numerous, for there is where the specter of war takes on his most horrid shape.⁵⁹

“We have heard of Belgian atrocities and of Belgian sufferings. [...] But what has been told of the sufferings of the Jews is not one-hundredth part of the calamity that has befallen them,” Herman Bernstein told a mass gathering of his personal tour of war-devastated Eastern Europe.⁶⁰

One exception occurred when President Wilson, as a result of CRC lobbying, declared January 27, 1916 as Jewish Sufferers Relief Day which spurred nearly one million US-dollars in donations.⁶¹ For the most part, however, the general American public thought little about the plight of Jewish refugees. This disinterest meant that American Jews had to shoulder the burden of Jewish relief, argued *Der fraynd*, the Yiddish-language newspaper of the socialist and labor-oriented Workmen’s Circle (*Arbeter Ring*). “Jewish help for Jewish victims,” the paper declared.⁶²

Selling self-taxation stamps was one innovative method that the CRC employed to raise funds. Contributors bought stamps (sold in one, five, ten, and 25 cent denominations) to advertise their support. Children pasted one cent stamps into donation books, and then exchanged full books for a certificate stating how much they had donated. Rabbis placed 25 cent stamps on marriage certificates, and workers formed “enlistment clubs” that vowed to purchase a ten cent stamp a week.⁶³ The CRC often took the initiative, mailing sheets of stamps to members of Jewish groups with a request that they make a donation

58 Belgium Relief, in: *Jewish Criterion*, 21. 5. 1915, p. 1.

59 Antin, *Close Your Eyes*.

60 Bernstein, *The Tragedy of the Jews in this War*.

61 Relief Day for Jews, in: *New York Times*, 13. 1. 1916, p. 5. Bauer, *My Brother’s Keeper*, p. 8. Roger S. Kohn et al., *Inventory to the Records of the Central Relief Committee*, vol. 1: 1914–1918, New York 1986, p. 2.

62 Quoted in: Mary McCune, *The Whole Wide World, Without Limits. International Relief, Gender Politics, and American Jewish Women, 1893–1930*, Detroit, MI 2005, pp. 48 f.

63 Stamp Tax for Jewish Relief, in: *New York Times*, 22. 11. 1914, p. C4.

and affix the stamps to their correspondence to spread awareness of the Jewish refugee crisis.

“I feel that when these stamps were sent to me, the party sending same was ignorant of the conditions surrounding me at present,” wrote Leo Frank from his jail cell to Harry Fischel, the CRC treasurer.⁶⁴ Fischel apologized, noting that no one had vetted the lists of subscribers to Jewish charities to cross off his name. In 1915, Leo Frank was a household name throughout the United States. His plight captivated the American Jewish community every bit as much as the war. In 1913 Frank was convicted of murdering a young girl in Atlanta after a one-day trial during which the jury accepted the testimony of a southern-born black watchman (whom many suspected of committing the murder). Frank’s ongoing appeals kept the case in the press, and his northern-based supporters (Jewish and Christian) mounted letter-writing campaigns, staged protests, and raised funds for his defense.

Apparently surprised at receiving a request to purchase CRC stamps for Jewish relief, Frank nonetheless sent in a donation for five dollars and then used the occasion to garner a bit more publicity for his case. In his reply, which was subsequently released to the press, he wrote:

Knowing what it is to suffer unjustly, and having a deep sense of sympathy for our coreligionists who are innocent sufferers because of the European war, it gave me especial pleasure to be of assistance to them, and to collect among my friends who called to see me the money for these stamps.⁶⁵

The mob that lynched Frank in August 1915 in Marietta, Georgia, underscored a different sort of parallel between events overseas and within the United States. Prejudice against Jews as an “enemy within” was not contained solely to Russia. A New York Jew who had only recently moved to Atlanta to work as a supervisor in his uncle’s pencil factory, Frank perfectly embodied the “Jew as outsider” stereotype. At first, it seemed that Frank’s life would be spared when Georgia’s governor commuted Frank’s sentence to life imprisonment in 1915. A group of law enforcement and former office-holders, however, resolved to take matters into their own hands by planning and orchestrating Frank’s kidnapping from prison and the lynching. Allan Davis wrote in the *Jewish Criterion*:

If never before, now at least we see that there was some force in the Russian reply to American protests at the time of the Jewish massacres: that America could urge her point of view with greater effect if there were no lynchings within her own territory.⁶⁶

The Frank case had already spurred the creation of the Anti-Defamation League in 1913 to combat anti-Semitism in American society. In the aftermath

64 Leo Frank Aids War Fund, in: *Jewish Criterion*, 16. 4. 1915, p. 11.

65 Ibid.

66 Allan Davis, The Death of Leo Frank, in: *Jewish Criterion*, 20. 8. 1915, p. 3.

of Frank's lynching, renewed calls came to hold a Jewish Congress that brought together representatives from across the religious spectrum to devise ways to combat global anti-Semitism. "We have to protest not alone against the outrages against the Jews in Europe, but also against the murdering of Leo Frank here in America," one activist declared at a mass meeting championing the creation of a Jewish Congress.⁶⁷ The desire to use the lynching to galvanize a broader movement cut both ways, however. The publicity surrounding Frank's lynching, along with the film "Birth of a Nation," also led to renewed vigor to protect the ethos of Protestant white supremacy under the auspices of a revived Ku Klux Klan that targeted both blacks and Jews for persecution.⁶⁸ The Frank trial and lynching also raised the question of just how "Jewish" one could be in the United States. In the wake of Frank's lynching many Atlanta Jews "were scared to death and kept a low profile," one resident recalled decades later.⁶⁹ Had emigration to the United States freed Jews from persecution, or just brought them to a place where they needed to discard or disguise their Jewishness to survive? In 1906 the American Jewish Committee had formed to encourage Eastern European Jews to immigrate. Once they arrived, the same group then tutored them on assimilating into American society for "our own safety [and] our own good name," noted one US-born rabbi.⁷⁰

To members of Hadassah, a Zionist organization for American Jewish women, the only safeguard against the global reach of anti-Semitism lay in the creation of Jewish homeland in Palestine. Concern over the war-fueled refugee crisis in Palestine helped the Federation of American Zionists grow from 7,000 to 150,000 between 1914 and 1918. "It all depends upon us now whether the Jews shall remain a gypsy nomad people, in spite of the fact that four hundred thousand of us are fighting at the front, or whether we shall become a nation in every sense of the word," wrote Hadassah leader Henrietta Szold in a letter to a Cleveland supporter in 1914.⁷¹ The Jewish Congress finally convened a month after the signing of the armistice, and subsequently sent representatives to the Paris peace talks to seek international recognition of the rights of Jewish peoples and a homeland in Palestine. Many American Jews nonetheless remained convinced that Palestine offered a potential refuge for Europe's Jews, not them.

67 Sentiment for a Congress, in: *Jewish Criterion*, 27. 8. 1915, p. 7. For an overview of Jewish political organizations and their activities during this period, see Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, Berkeley 2004, pp. 179–182 and pp. 189–199.

68 Leonard Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case*, Athens, GA 1987, pp. 148–150.

69 Steve Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise. The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank*, New York 2003, p. 616.

70 Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case*, p. 63.

71 Henrietta Szold, 9. 11. 1914, quoted in: McCune, *The Whole Wide World*, p. 51.

IV. Conclusion

Unrestrained by official policy American communities developed strong ties to Belgian civilians, African soldiers, and Jewish refugees during the so-called period of neutrality, engaging directly with the global war on their own terms. Blending domestic and international activism to save the Jewish people from destruction, American Jews joined Progressive reformers and African Americans in crafting their community's distinct response to the global war. Progressives, Jews, and African Americans did not coordinate their efforts, yet patterns nonetheless emerge when considered collectively.

Rather than remaining neutral in thought as well as deed, these communities engaged intellectually, politically, and financially with the wars' multiple fronts throughout the so-called period of neutrality. Content with America's nonbelligerent status, they nonetheless hoped to mitigate the negative consequences of the war both abroad and at home. These communities cared deeply about events in far-flung geographical regions, not simply for humanitarian reasons, but because they linked their own lives and identities as Americans to the fates of Belgian civilians, African soldiers, and Russian Jews. Progressive reformers saw an opportunity to define a new global role for themselves as world citizens by arguing that America had an international responsibility to safeguard the health and welfare of the world's less fortunate. By appreciating the war's imperial and colonial dimensions, African Americans believed that the war illustrated the striking connection between the marginalized position that African Americans occupied at home and the world problem of colonialism. Jewish Americans worried about the fates of relatives caught up in the mayhem along the Eastern Front, but took care to demonstrate their own assimilation into American civic society as they organized political and philanthropic organizations to address the crisis.

American Jews' concerns were global, but "how they fulfilled that responsibility revealed much about them as Americans," noted historian Hasia Diner.⁷² This statement is equally true of Americans caught up in the cause of helping Belgian refugees or those trying to erase the world's color line from 1914 to 1917. The fact that Americans chose disparate global causes to support revealed much about the demographic diversity of the American population. At the same time, however, their organizational, fundraising, and publicity techniques echoed one another, fitting perfectly into the fabric of American political culture.

Once the United States declared war, the government would follow in the footsteps of these earlier citizen efforts by employing similar techniques to publicize the war cause, raise funds, and guarantee compliance with wartime edicts concerning conscription and food conservation. Even the message –

72 Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, p. 200.

that it was the responsibility of average Americans to act on the international stage – would be the same. The key difference was coercion, as voluntarism turned into “coercive voluntarism.”⁷³ What had begun as an appeal to volunteer to advance one’s race, ethnicity, or political ideology evolved into an obligation that all Americans owed the nation. The wartime ethos of mandatory voluntarism transformed national pride into patriotic obligation. Despite the emphasis on nationalism, dedicated citizen activists prevented the state from completely co-opting these prewar endeavors. In opposition to official wartime goals and policies, Jewish activists continued to agitate for a Palestinian homeland, African Americans continued to laud France’s treatment of its colonial troops while criticizing racial discrimination at home, and humanitarian workers broadened their relief efforts into areas with no immediate strategic significance to the United States. Understanding the US response to global war, therefore, both during the period of neutrality and belligerency, requires going beyond the words and deeds of government officials.

Prof. Dr. Jennifer D. Keene, Chapman University, Department of History, One University Drive, Orange, CA 92866, USA
E-Mail: keene@chapman.edu

73 “Coercive voluntarism” is a phrase coined by Capozzola to describe the “obligation to volunteer” during the war. Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You*, pp. 83–116.