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Poster 2 of 2: Beyond the question of morale: Popular song around the world during the First World War

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Beyond the question of morale: Popular song around the world during the First World War
 Poster 2 of 2, presented at the annual conference of the American Historical Association in
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Soldiers and singing

The US Army was exceptional in that it established compulsory group singing and hired song leaders.

Various armies, especially those from Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand developed repertoires of self-composed songs. These provided a supplementary repertoire to express sentiments not found either in commercial popular song or in religious hymns. In particular, vulgar and anti-militaristic sentiments were common (Examples include “Do Your Balls hang Low?”, “Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire”, “Why did I Join the Army?” and “That Shit Shute” (this last referring to General Shute).

German folk song collector John Meier worked at collecting soldier songs as early as 1914, sending out questionnaires to large numbers of soldiers, receiving 373 songs, and analyzing the different variants of the songs.

Soldier song repertoires were affected by musical tradition and by the nature of the army. The British army, a volunteer force until 1916 and there being no tradition of compulsory military service, sang very different songs from the French, who had had for many years quite a long military service and who had been singing anti-German songs since the French defeat in the 1871 war.

As the war continued, many armies organized officially supported amateur entertainment troupes. Canada’s Dumbells are perhaps the most celebrated (See Jason Wilson’s book).

Anti-war songs

Once a country was engaged in the war, commercial outlets would almost never produce directly anti-war songs. Anti-war songs were produced commercially in the US before its direct involvement, and commercial anti-war songs could be produced after the war, in Britain for example (including the 1920 hit “Pop Goes the Major” about the joys of... burning one’s previous superior officer to death as revenge!)

During the war, anti-war songs might be sung by conscientious objectors or at “Stop the War” meetings. British conscientious objectors printed a CO’s songbook to keep up their morale.

In France, one song, the *Chanson de Craonne*, stood out, sung in many units of the army and expressing the radical opinion that the men were being sacrificed for the sake of the “fat cats” back in Paris.

Irish nationalists produced many anti-war songs, most of which have yet to be studied.

More common, in several countries, were songs which expressed the harsh realities of soldiers lives. In Portugal was sung the fado “Of Bullets and Rats”, in Germany a song about losing a comrade: “Ich hatt’ ein Kamarade”.



Morale

“Morale” is often used as a “common-sense” expression in works of military history, but it has recently been questioned by some historians, such as André Loez, who have underlined that it is a concept which tends to eliminate the political aspect of soldier attitudes. Wanting the war to end at once is a political attitude, but, to the army hierarchy, can just be “a sign of low morale”. Army companies which had “excellent morale” were often sent to the most dangerous places. Having only average “morale” in your unit meant you were more likely to survive the war, as Tony Ashworth showed in his book *Trench Warfare 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System* (Pan, 2004).

What archives do we have?

In France, where pre-publication censorship existed, a comprehensive archive is kept in the police archives (40 000 songs).

In Britain, over 1 500 songs are in the British Library. The US Library of Congress has 14 000 songs from the war years.

In many countries, the songs have been lost, archives are not well-known, or are limited to morale songs about the war.

The trade press is, apart from the sheet music, the key source. Soldier-produced “trench newspapers” are also important.

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