

Michelle Scheuter

ENGL 3373: World War I

Professor Drouin

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YWCA WWI Poster

During the First World War there were many different organizations that helped to support the war efforts and the men fighting in it. One of the popular uses for supporting the war and asking for help were through posters. These posters all stood for different obligations, some of those were for money through war bonds among other things and some were for physical help from women that remained at home. One poster in particular came from an organization called the YWCA or the Young Women Christian Association. This organization has supported women throughout the centuries in all areas and is still active today. However, the main focus for this particular piece is on what and who they supported during the war.

The focus for the YWCA, during the war, was empowering women and the best way to do that was to get women interested in volunteering to help the war effort. One of the many posters that the YWCA created during this time was of a woman in a white gown and oddly designed hat standing with her arms through an upside down blue triangle. There were many posters from the YWCA that shared this blue triangle, but in this specific poster the sign reads, "REMEMBER THE GIRL BEHIND THE MAN BEHIND THE GUN". This poster's publication is somewhere between 1910 and 1920, but I believe it is more accurately within the date of 1918. According to the YWCA's organization page, "the YWCA was the first organization to send professional workers overseas to provide administrative leadership and

support to the U.S. Armed Forces” (YWCA). This organization brought women jobs during the war while their men were off fighting and they also brought the women jobs overseas.

As the US enters the war there was a committee of organizations called the “Committee of Eleven” and the YWCA joined this committee making the War Work Campaign Inc. The only women’s organization in this group was the YWCA. The main purpose of the YWCA at this time was to meet the special needs of women and girls affected by the war. The War Work Council established war service centers called “blue triangle houses”. This is where the blue triangle came from for the YWCA’s posters. These houses were used for women working in the war industries where they could meet, eat food, relax and entertain guests. There were also hostess houses where servicemen could meet with their wives, mothers and friends. One of the issues that came up however with these houses was the question of appropriateness between the white and black workers and servicemen. The YWCA ended up creating separate houses in order to segregate the white women from providing services to the black servicemen. There was also a bureau within the YWCA that was created for women medical doctors to be trained to give sex education lectures. This was to protect the women, especially the women overseas, helping the war effort and working with servicemen.

This particular poster ties in very well with readings from Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth* as well as Claire Buck’s *British women’s writing of the Great War*. In *Testament of Youth* Vera Brittain joins the war effort while her boyfriend is off fighting. She leaves behind the things she knows to help out where she is needed, quitting school, at least for the time being, and volunteering as a nurse. Many women during this time followed suit. In *British women’s writing* Buck says, “Women’s mass entry into previously male jobs fundamentally challenged the period’s dominant assumptions about women’s capacities and proper role in the home” (85).

Women were leaving the homes to contribute to the war effort and help anywhere they could. They were leaving behind the things they knew to, at first thought; temporarily replace the men in the work force. Women began joining the military right alongside the men and worked in factories that helped to contribute, including places like plants where women inspected weaponry that was used in the war. This poster encouraged women to stand behind their men and work until they came home. What many people did not realize is that once the men did come home the women did not all want to leave their new positions. These efforts all contributed to the women's suffrage movement and the passing of the 19th amendment.

The YWCA among several others eventually led to the creation of the USO. This organization was and still is very involved in supporting the military services and the efforts of the war. As much as this poster along with others helped to get people motivated and involved in the war effort they were really helping women become more than themselves. The women changed gears and stepped outside of the boundaries that they always knew. Women started to work and started to realize that there were more things to life than just being a house wife and taking care of their children. As women continued to work throughout the war they realized they did not want to return to the life they always knew. Once they started working they did not want to stop and not only did they wish to keep their jobs, but they wanted the same treatment that men received. The YWCA helped to pass laws allowing for women to work eight hour work days, prohibition from night shifts and the right of labor to organize (History Museum).

Women were encouraged not to just step outside their homes and join the war effort through these posters. When reading the poster at face value it says to stand behind your men and help fight the war any way possible. If the poster is read more deeply it tells women that now is the time to leave home and do what you want to do. The men are not at home to hold you back

and it's time to work for yourselves. These posters gave women their own voices and allowed them to be more than they thought they could whether they knew right away or not. The YWCA did very well at supporting women throughout the war and continued to do it after. This poster, among many, put the fight into women to continue the ongoing women's suffrage movement allowing women to do things and be a part of a world that at one time belonged mostly to men, at least in the economic and political part of it. The YWCA continued to help women throughout the years including the civil rights' movement among many others and still helps women today in any situation they need. The organization has always been focused on women and their needs, starting even before the war, and the posters, especially this one helped women to realize what some of those needs were.

Work Cited

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