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### Cartoons and the Great War

During World War I, the United States fought a war of ideas with unprecedented political support and inestimable creativity. This began when President Woodrow Wilson established the Committee on Public Information which was tasked with creating various propaganda materials to advance widespread support for WWI. The committee created many diverse films, pamphlets, speeches and cartoons, however, it was the cartoons that were of paramount importance to the committee – so much so that they created the Bureau of Cartoons to boost national support of the war overseas and to promote purchase of the Liberty Bond. The bureau urged editorial cartoonists all across America to create images that would promote the national agenda and frequently issued bulletins to those cartoonists to ask for specific items to be included in their images (Wells).

Now, while creating a bureau devoted to facilitating patriotic cartoons may seem to be a poor appropriation of governmental funds, the impact made by the cartoonists during the war should not be diminished. The economy of the genre – a limited amount of space and the essential inclusion of a visual metaphor to communicate multidimensional information succinctly – forced the cartoonist to summarize their point of view or message without any redundancy. This, coupled with the ability of wartime

cartoonists to gauge public interest in the message of the day, created a powerful platform to either denounce perceived wrongs or further a passionately supported cause. Consequently, governmental influence over these editorial cartoons was important – not because they wanted to win public approval, but because they wanted to change it. Cartoons offered a pathway to spread propaganda to the American people that no other medium could and the cartoonists of the time were, in a sense, some of the most dominant sources of propaganda during WWI.

One cartoonist in particular, John Francis Knott, created thousands of cartoons during WWI and the post-war years for the *Dallas Morning News*. These images became a staple of the newspaper and although satirical, were always grounded in patriotism and fervent support for the American troops fighting overseas. Many of the images created by Knott feature dramatic, heroic representations of American and British troops while either demonizing the Kaiser or portraying German soldiers as bumbling, inept ne'er-do-wells. The cartoons reportedly helped to generate support for the Liberty Loan campaigns and were later published by Knott in a book called "War Cartoons" (Knott).

However, although the majority of Knott's cartoons were ardently patriotic, there is one image in his book "War Cartoons" that is thematically removed from the others. The image features a soldier running away from an entanglement with German soldiers as a woman armed with a bayonet attacks the Germans. They appear to be in the middle of a battleground, complete with barbed wire, smoke clouds and blackened skies. The woman is wearing a sash that reads "Legion of Death" and is advancing on the Germans while the fleeing soldier looks behind at his fallen weapon but fails to

retrieve it. The cartoon then becomes even stranger when one sees the caption below the image that reads “the girl he left behind”.



That particular caption was a stereotypical propaganda or recruitment poster slogan used during WWI which was intended to create empathy in its viewers in order to easily manipulate them into doing whatever the poster advocated. In Knott's cartoon however, the slogan is ironically distorted to contrast the deserting soldier with the patriotic urgings of a propaganda poster. This cartoon become far more interesting however, when the viewer realizes that Knott created this image in response to a specific event. Although it is not immediately apparent, the deserting soldier in the image is wearing a Russian military uniform and because this cartoon was drawn in

1917, it is not presumptuous to assume that the deserting Russian soldier is intended to reference the massive defeat of the Russians on the Western Front during the Kerensky offensive.



This theory can be tentatively confirmed by the inclusion of the woman wearing the sash. She is most likely a reference to the infamous Legion of Death – or Legion of Women – which was the only group of Russian soldiers who made a strong showing during the offensive (Eger). The offensive lasted from July 1<sup>st</sup> until the 19<sup>th</sup> during 1917 and was the last Russian offensive during the war. In fact, it was such a failure that the British, French and American forces were left to fight on the Western Front with almost no Russian support and the Russian army lost all semblance of morale (Kerensky). This

cartoon was probably intended to mock the Russian failure by its depiction of the fleeing officer and the dropped weapon. However, the cartoon goes even farther by showing a member of the “Legion of Death”, who is still fighting German soldiers. By seeing a woman doing what was considered to be a male task and depicting the man as a deserter, Knott undoubtedly wanted to emphasize the Russian desertion of the Allied cause. Also, by including a popular American propaganda slogan, he further mocks the Russian army by insinuating that while the American idea of supporting “the girl he left behind” was to join the army, the Russian idea was to simply run away.

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