



HAL
open science

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

John Mullen

► **To cite this version:**

John Mullen. Poster 2 of 2: Beyond the question of morale: Popular song around the world during the First World War. Annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Jan 2018, Washington, United States. hal-02882673

HAL Id: hal-02882673

<https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-02882673v1>

Submitted on 27 Jun 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

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
 January 2018

John Mullen Université de Rouen-Normandie, equipe ERIAC

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.

References

John Mullen, *The Show Must Go On: Popular Song in Britain during the First World War*, London, Routledge, 2015.

Anne Simon, *Chanter la grande guerre: “Les Poilus” et les femmes (1914-1919)*, Paris, Champ Vallon, 2014.

Christina Gier, *Singing, Soldiering, and Sheet Music in America during the First World War*, Lanham, Lexington 2016.

Chris Bourke, *Good-bye Maoriland: The Songs and Sounds of New Zealand's Great War*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 2017.

Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2008.

Regina Sweeney, *Singing our way to victory: French cultural politics and music during the Great War*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

Jason Wilson, *Soldiers of Song: The Dumbells and Other Canadian Concert Parties of the First World War*, Ontario, Wilfred Laurier, 2012.

Stefan Hanheide, *Claudia Glunz, et al. Musik bezieht Stellung: Funktionalisierungen der Musik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Göttingen, V&R unipress, 2013.

André Loez “Pour en finir avec le moral des combattants” in Jean-François Muracciole et al, *Combats : Hommage à Jules Maurin*, Paris, Michel Houdiard, 2010.

Clive Barrett, *Subversive Peacemakers: War-Resistance 1914-1918: An Anglican Perspective*, London, James Clarke and Co, 2014.

Forthcoming :

John Mullen (Ed.) *Beyond the Question of Morale: Popular Song on all sides during the First World War*, London, Routledge 2018.

Thanks to Amy Wells, Chris Bourke, Pedro Felix, Lidia Lopez, Guy Marival, Eric Fal’cher, Eric Sauda, Mélanie Schiller, Christina Gier, Benoît Roux, Andre Rottgeri, Anne Simon, Clive Barrett, Dragan Aleksić, Maja Vasiljević and Nataša Simeunović Bajić.