Beyond the Question of Morale: Popular Song around the World during World War I

“Popular song is not an illustration of real history which takes place elsewhere, in muddy trenches or oak-panelled offices, it is a series of mass activities which are themselves part of the history of society.”

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What creates the audiences?

Urbanization: masses of people moving to the city (in Germany, Spain or elsewhere), wanting “modern”, daring and cheap entertainment in variety theatres, café concert etc.

Pianos: massive production. In the US, 300,000 are sold every year, in Britain there are three million pianos at the start of the war, a piano for every 15 inhabitants, children and infants included. This is not an elite instrument.

Sheet music publishers rush to meet the demand.

What influences the song repertoire?

Technology
There are no microphones on stage, so it is very hard to sing with an intimate voice in a large theatre. For the same reason, getting the audience to sing along is crucial to the entertainment. Singalong imposes consensual themes. If only half the audience sing along, the singer might think they have no work the following week!

Genre traditions and constraints
Simplicity is almost obligatory (so no songs about hating Germans, for example). Melodramatic, tragic songs have become rarer since 1900.

In Paris, a singer often stays in one venue of café concert, and so can develop a repertoire which keeps their specific audience happy. The tradition of chanson réaliste is strong.

What influences the industries?

Concentration of capital
In highly urbanized Britain, theatre chains swallow up independent music halls and build three-thousand seat halls, with lavish decoration and special effects. They are highly profitable, quoted on the stock market, and are present in dozens of towns.

In Paris, café concerts with a couple of hundred seats predominate. Across France only a small number of towns have a few big variety theatres.

In Portugal, a far more rural country still, we see “a business without an industry” (Pedro Felix).

What about the rest of the world?

Recently, First World War historians have been moving towards a global understanding of the conflict, beyond the half a dozen European and Atlantic powers involved. This initial exploration has been based on established Western academic networks. We will need information about popular song in the countries of Africa and Asia, Japan, India, China, Russia and elsewhere if we are to build a truly global view. Email us if you have contacts or ideas!

What effect do the songs have?

“…music in wartime produces a complex web of pleasure, power, and identity.” Christina Gier

How was music consumed?

This is the last period when live performance is at the centre of the popular music industry. Although the future belongs to the gramophone, (and its use in military hospitals is for many wounded soldiers the first time they have seen one), for the moment it is not a mass market. In 1916, in Britain, for the price of the cheapest gramophone, you can buy 220 cheap tickets to go to the music hall. A hit in the US could sell over a million copies in sheet music. Sheet music and theatre tickets are at the centre of a web of consumption which includes thousands of street singers, millions of home pianos, middle-class musical evenings and working-class family sing-songs.

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