

“So much for men”: Conservative Women and National Defense in the 1920s and 1930s

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Best wishes for your Conference on National Defense. . . It will help counteract antipatriotic activities of sentimental pacifists who are now a menace to our national safety.¹

The conference “further illustrates the fact that the women of the nation are ‘on their toes’ to acquaint themselves with the condition and needs of the country. . . .”²

You, who by your devotion, heartaches and deprivation have proven your sincerity to the nation’s cause, are especially fitted to lead an effort to obtain for our country, adequate fulfillment of our plan for national defense. . . .³

Mrs. Claire Oliphant must have felt gratified when she read such comments in early 1925. The national president of the American Legion Auxiliary and the chairman of the first Women’s Patriotic Conference on National Defense had appealed to sixteen national women’s patriotic organizations to send delegates to Washington, D.C. for a four-day conference to “study the question” of national defense “in all of its varied aspects.” All sixteen groups, including the Daughters of the American Revolution, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and the

Service Star Legion, heeded Oliphant's call. For at least the next thirty-five years, up to forty women's patriotic organizations continued to meet annually at the nation's capital.

National defense was not a new issue for conservative women, many of whom became acquainted with the idea in the preparedness movement during World War I and the antisuffrage campaign, but it was only after the war and the passage of the nineteenth amendment that it emerged as a top priority.⁴ This study argues that during the 1920s and 1930s, conservative women redefined national defense as a female issue, stressing women's expertise in guarding the home, school, and church. Women's traditional role in protecting those institutions was further enhanced by a new obligation: championing the strength of the U.S. military. In the process, activists created a forum, embodied in the Women's Patriotic Conference on National Defense (WPCND), in which to address the responsibilities of patriotism and citizenship. Conservative women also sought to educate the public, especially youth, of the necessity, as they saw it, of a vigorous military and a watchful homefront. Finally, this study argues that conservative women desired to carve out a political space of their own, primarily to counter progressive women's efforts for disarmament in the growing peace movement, but also as a way to assert their authority in the public realm.⁵

Just what it meant to be a conservative or a patriot in the 1920s and 1930s requires some explanation since both terms have elicited different meanings over time. There may not have been an "articulate, coordinated, self-consciously conservative intellectual force" in the United States before World War II, as historian George Nash has noted, but elements of conservative thought certainly existed as seen in the many discussions over national defense.⁶ These included hostility toward concentrated power in government and toward radical ideologies, especially communism, as well as an uneasy sense that traditional moral and religious values were disintegrating.⁷ As used in this essay, conservatism and patriotism were not mutually exclusive; indeed, I adopt Oliphant's and others' connotation that patriotism meant embracing conservative ideas. Patriotism, however, came more from the heart than from the head. At a minimum it required devotion to one's country, to the WPCND, it demanded an active and uncompromising defense of cherished American institutions and ideas against hostile forces.⁸ Moreover, it was a job for women. If patriotism meant serving one's country, mused the national president of the American War Mothers, women could easily transfer their natural gift for unselfishness, this "God-given privilege," into political activism.⁹ Both conservative ideas and patriotic sentiment shaped women's conception of national defense in the inter-war period.

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The last frantic years of the antisuffrage campaign is where the story begins. By 1917 antisuffragists, or antis as they were called, were desperately hoping to discredit the suffragists' cause. They found what they thought was the perfect

solution: the (presumed) fusion of socialist and feminist agendas within the suffrage ranks. The antiradicalism of the antis was not simply a convenient ploy to gain momentum, many sincerely believed that woman suffrage would usher in a new social order, detrimental to the polity, families, and women. Yet it is also clear that antis became almost obsessed with linking radicalism to the suffrage movement. Their efforts included vindictive and personal attacks that challenged the loyalty of suffrage leaders.

In the meantime, the suffrage movement was undergoing a transition of its own. During World War I the two major suffrage organizations, the National Women’s Party (NWP), led by Alice Paul, and the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), led by Carrie Chapman Catt, parted company. Catt, concerned that the NWP’s radical and disruptive tactics would tarnish the respectability of the suffrage cause, edged out socialist speakers within NAWSA ranks, temporarily set aside her pacifist inclinations, and pledged NAWSA’s support for the war effort. At the same time, the NWP’s decision to take a neutral stance in World War I drew in dissident leftists and pacifists. As far as the antisuffragists were concerned, however, the NWP, with its feminist agenda, socialist sympathies, and irreverent behavior, represented the core of the suffrage movement. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution with its Bolshevik victory, the association between suffrage and radicalism appeared even more sinister.¹⁰

As antis searched for new ways to fight the suffragists, they were also coping with structural changes within the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage (NAOWS). Over the course of the summer and fall of 1917, the founding members of NAOWS disappeared from key positions and committees. Discouraged, perhaps, after a critical defeat in the once staunchly anti state of New York followed by President Woodrow Wilson’s announcement of his support for the Susan B. Anthony amendment, a number of moderate antisuffrage leaders and members drifted away from the movement. Some, ironically, defected to work in political parties that were beginning to vie for women’s attention. When the more moderate (and likely weary) antisuffragists deserted the cause, they left in place, according to sociologist Susan Marshall, “a more politically extremist group of leaders.”¹¹ The new president, Alice Wadsworth, wasted no time in launching a vicious smear campaign against Catt, Jane Addams, and other leading suffragists. By the end of 1917, in what would become an all too common rallying cry of patriots, a desperate NAOWS denounced suffragists, pacifists, socialists, and feminists of conspiring together to pass the suffrage bill in New York. Also suggestive of the new line of attack was the founding in 1918 of a new antisuffrage publication, *Woman Patriot*.¹² The paper’s subtitle, “Dedicated to the Defense of the Family and the State Against Feminism and Socialism,” aptly defined antis’ agenda for the rest of the suffrage campaign, through the Red Scare, and into the next decade.

As women in the antisuffrage movement shifted gears after the passage of the nineteenth amendment, another manifestation of the “isms” tide demanded

their attention. Peace organizations, most headed by men, had multiplied in the United States before World War I.¹³ After the armistice however, progressive women struck out on their own. Concerned that another war would ruin women's chances for political advancement, tired of their secondary status within the male organizations, and confident in their own organizational and political skills, women formed a number of peace groups.¹⁴ The largest and the most reviled by patriotic organizations was the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, founded in 1919. Several other peace societies, including one headed by Catt, soon joined the ranks. Conflicts within the peace movement emerged, most centering on the degree of noncompliance with any war effort, but by the early 1920s pacifists agreed on a common goal: disarmament and the elimination of universal military training.

To conservative women, as well as the War Department, the peace movement represented the largest and most organized threat to America's safety.¹⁵ Pacifists were of two types, according to the Los Angeles-based American Women, Incorporated: "the pacifist who sincerely condemns the use of force at any time," and "the more prominent pacifist who works untiringly for a bloody class war."¹⁶ Such distinctions, however, rarely troubled most conservative women, who threw all dissenters into the communist camp. Radicals, according to conservative activists, ostensibly joined women's groups to promote the cause of "peace" but their real intent was much more deadly: to turn public opinion against a program of military defense that would leave the U.S. vulnerable to possible attack. As a conduit for anti-American propaganda, so patriots believed, the peace movement undermined the very security of the nation.

That a radical agenda infiltrated pacifist efforts seemed clear to conservatives when a new piece of "evidence" appeared in 1922: the Spider Web Chart. The Spider Web Chart was the creation of Lucia R. Maxwell, a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) who worked as a librarian at General Amos Fries' Chemical Warfare Service. With the vast resources of Fries' library at her disposal (Fries was a committed anti-radical and his wife was active in the DAR), Maxwell wove a frightening web of alliances between feminist, radical, and pacifist organizations and individuals. Undergoing several updates, the chart traveled through patriotic circles, including the *Woman Patriot*, Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent*, the American Defense Society, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.¹⁷ It joined other patriotic classics, such as the Lusk Report, a four-volume series published by a New York congressional committee in 1920 that outlined radical activities, and Calvin Coolidge's series of articles in 1921, which applauded women's preeminence in exposing subversion in schools. The Spider Web Chart was much more accessible than these efforts, however; in one glance, a patriot could conclude that a plot was brewing, and brewing quickly.

One of the most effective weapons conservative women chose to pierce the heart of the spider web and, in particular, to counter the surge of the peace

movement was the Women’s Patriotic Conference on National Defense (WPCND). The WPCND greatly strengthened the cause of women patriots, providing them with energy and cohesion. According to former antisuffragist and chairman Claire Oliphant, “the majority of American women” rejected the peace movement’s agenda and their voices deserved a respectful and national hearing. For several days every year between 1925 and at least through the 1950s, delegates from roughly twenty-five to forty organizations representing over one million women met in Washington, D.C. to discuss the perceived threat that pacifists posed to America. The most powerful group members, the American Legion Auxiliary and the DAR exchanged turns at heading the proceedings. The Auxiliary assumed full control in 1933, when the DAR withdrew from the conference.¹⁸

The WPCND was a festive affair. Amid much pomp and patriotic music, attendees sat through speeches (some of them exhaustingly long), participated in committee meetings, visited the White House to pose with the President, and, if so moved, journeyed to Arlington to pay homage to American war heroes and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. At the close of the conference, they could listen and nod approvingly at the resolutions committee’s declarations that advocated military preparedness, supported stricter immigration and deportation laws, protested the recognition of Soviet Russia, and opposed internationalism.

The resolutions reflected the WPCND’s most pressing concerns, and would appear, more often than not, in national newspapers and on politicians’ desks. But the annual gatherings of the WPCND offered more than official statements on the country’s welfare. They gave conservative women a place to express and share their ideas, learn organizational skills, showcase their patriotism, and congratulate their past, present, and future contributions to American society. They could network with other like-minded women, including prominent DAR officers who continued to participate in the annual conference and serve on critical committees despite their organization’s official absence. Leaders who attended the WPCND continually marveled at the valuable information and insights that delegates could take home to share with local chapters and, as a former DAR President General remarked, help “awaken . . . the public conscience” and battle “the onslaughts of organized radicalism.”¹⁹

Awakening the public conscience was at the top of Claire Oliphant’s list. The WPCND, she hoped, would inspire and enable women to launch an educational campaign about the necessity of a strong national defense. But to do this effectively, women needed to be armed with hard facts, measured reasoning, and a solid dose of determination.

First, conservative women had to learn about the actual condition of the U.S. military. Just how big was it? To what extent did the army and navy measure up with those of other countries? How well-prepared? In the larger sense, what were the causes of war and could war really be prevented? The answers to these questions, and others, were distressing. Disarmament was certainly out of the

question. Peace activists' call for nations to disarm, scoffed conservative women leaders and speakers at the WPCND, was a naïve and futile attempt to prevent war. Guarding America's interests at home and abroad would not be served by a reduction in military strength, which other nations would perceive as a weakness. Respect, and therefore a hesitation to wage war, could only come through the presence of military force and the willingness, if need be, to use it. WILPF and other peace organizations' argument that a reduction in arms would "inspire the confidence and strengthen the will to peace" fell on deaf ears.²⁰

Indeed, guest speakers ranging from top military personnel to prominent members of Congress, fretted over the relatively tiny size of the U.S. military. Even to meet the modest standards of the National Defense Act of 1920, which permitted the expansion of the regular army and established a National Guard and a Reserve Officers Training Corps, the United States would have to boost dramatically the number of men in the forces.²¹ Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, speakers charged that the federal government was not doing nearly enough to enforce the act's provisions.²²

The navy, the "first line of defense," was also in rough shape. By the mid-1920s, in part due to pressure from the peace movement and a strong isolationist sentiment in public and in Congress, the United States lagged behind Great Britain and Japan in the construction of cruisers.²³ Even after the London Naval Treaty of 1930 the United States could still build 73,000 tons of additional cruisers and keep within the treaty's limitations.²⁴ Yet, as with the National Defense Act, Congress and the President plodded along far too slowly for the WPCND's and the military's liking. Americans needed to understand, attendees were reminded, that preparedness was not the same thing as militarism. Military preparation was a defensive posture, not an offensive strike.

Besides, the audience learned, the military had tremendous "peacetime value."²⁵ Citizens' Military Camps, for example, took 30,000 recruits a year and instructed them on law, order, discipline, and "national unity."²⁶ The navy provided an excellent "training school" for young men who learned the virtues of "self-restraint," "clean-living," and the "principles of Americanism." On the international front, the navy played an important role in "fostering friendly relations" by bringing relief in times of natural disasters and visiting foreign ports on diplomatic missions.²⁷ Thus, a vigorous national defense meant not only strengthening the moral fiber of American youth but also creating a military that would command a world wide presence and signal to other countries that the United States would not be an easy target.

As the 1930s drew to a close and the rumblings of war grew louder, conservative women in the DAR and the WPCND became even more emphatic in harnessing U.S. military power to protect the nation. Although granting military aid to the allies was not out of the question, conservative women remained firmly opposed, as did the majority of Americans, to the idea of sending troops across the Atlantic.²⁸ Indeed, DAR leaders in early 1941 passed a resolution

that backed Lend Lease.²⁹ The WPCND was more reluctant and conceded that Great Britain could have the needed war materials, but only “in exchange for British possessions in the Western Hemisphere.”³⁰ Conservative women agreed, however, that bolstering defense at home remained the priority, despite “seductive voices” that said otherwise.³¹

A national defense that guarded against internal threats was the second lesson for attendees at the WPCND. Pacifist organizations deserved especially close scrutiny even as WPCND members noted that many of the women involved were “earnest” but “misguided” in their quest for world peace.³² Professional “experts” on the radical movement, including Fred Marvin, head of the American Coalition of Patriotic Societies and New York representative Hamilton Fish Jr., confirmed conservative women’s fears with stunning revelations of “parlor pinks and sobbing socialists” who were infesting schools, churches, and government.³³

Finally, Oliphant argued that women needed to learn about civic responsibility. This last lesson was likely a remnant from the antisuffragist campaign, which held that women simply did not have the time to study political issues, party platforms, and individual candidates necessary to make wise choices at the ballot box. Times had changed, however. Conscientious women, of which WPCND members most assuredly were, simply had to make the time to become politically informed and to place right-thinking men and women in political office—the stakes were far too high. Indeed, “voting intelligently” was a common plea among women’s patriotic organizations (as well as progressive women’s groups such as the League of Women Voters).³⁴ As Secretary of War John W. Weeks asserted in 1924, women’s “new public position and civic duties” gave women a wonderful opportunity to assist with “national progress and security.”³⁵ Patriotic women, Oliphant concurred, must help in “placing the great public questions” before American women “on a common sense basis.”³⁶

“Whether or not you approved the franchise,” noted Anne Rogers Minor, President General of the DAR in 1930, “it came to you and with it the solemn obligation to use it.”³⁷ This was easier said than done. One antisuffragist admitted soon after the nineteenth amendment passed in 1920 that she “dread[ed] the very thought of voting” and insisted that women could still exert more political influence raising children than exercising the ballot.³⁸ Recognizing that such women needed a gentle but firm push, patriotic women leaders urged their members to “accept the privilege” of the vote, as well as the responsibilities that went with it.³⁹ “If women attempt to shirk the obligations which the vote has given us,” one spokeswoman warned as late as 1936, “we are not only indifferent and apathetic, we are criminally careless.”⁴⁰

Persuading women to vote was a new challenge for conservative women’s organizations in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, some conservative women expressed great trepidation about operating in the same playing field as men. Politics was still a dirty business, and conservative women leaders had their hands full in trying to define appropriate male and female boundaries while at

the same time convince their constituents that some political action was vital to ensure the safety of home and country. Many activists tried to reassure themselves, and their husbands, that they were not abandoning their families for the unsavory business of politics. When one woman, for instance, asked her husband for permission to be an alternate delegate to the 1928 Republican Convention, he “gave his consent rather reluctantly” and asked if her “club work [was] leading [her] into politics.”⁴¹

Conservative women’s organizations acknowledged the hesitance that some women felt and tried to smooth over any misconceptions about their agenda.⁴² “Endorsing legislative safeguards in the interest of constitutional government is vastly different from plunging into politics,” DAR members were told.⁴³ The founders of the Investigating Committee of 500, a group created to investigate perceived corruption and immorality of public officials were also jockeying for an acceptable angle among conservative women. Even as they spelled out why women needed to form a political organization, they too, admitted that politics was a “man’s business, more than women’s.”⁴⁴

At the same time, conservative women believed that only they could rise above the partisan squabbles that had traditionally characterized male politics. In a view that harkened back to the nineteenth century, they relished the superior moral virtue of their sex. They also poked jabs at what they perceived as men’s negligent attitude about public responsibilities. For instance, according to the Speakers Institute, a female anti-New Deal organization, women, not men, were “destined” to shape the future path of American society and government. Not only were women “less bound than men by political dogma,” their interest in securing a safe future for their children made them less susceptible to “panaceas of a temporary nature.”⁴⁵

Their male counterparts, with whom conservative women often collaborated, agreed. The most prominent male-led group was the American Coalition of Patriotic Societies, a vast patriotic association founded by Fred Marvin in 1929, in which almost half of the organizations involved were female.⁴⁶ The American Legion, the Keymen (also founded by Marvin), and the Sons of the American Revolution were similar organizations with whom the DAR recommended members “cooperate” in promoting Americanism.⁴⁷ Certainly, both the WPCND and the DAR welcomed conservative male speakers and military personnel to their convention halls.

For their part, male speakers at the WPCND wasted no time in singing high praises for the women attendees, remarking that it was “a great honor” and “a high privilege” to address them, and congratulating their “splendid and effective” efforts in promoting patriotism and a sound national defense.⁴⁸ Representative Hamilton Fish Jr. admitted, for example, that when he was appointed Chairman of the House Committee Investigating Soviet Russia Propaganda he “naturally” came first to the DAR for information but quickly “felt like a schoolboy” when the DAR’s president general chastised his ignorance of communist activities.⁴⁹

Other male supporters referred time and again to patriotic women's fierce motivation, courage, and drive.⁵⁰ Not only were women more capable, they were unafraid to act, while, sadly, most men "will rant and snort and spit fire" but "will not lift a finger" to stop the dissemination of radical propaganda.⁵¹

Conservative women were more than willing to pick up the slack. National defense, they asserted, began at home under mothers' watchful care. Home was a powerful symbol of patriotism, stability, virtue, and national strength. "If homes flourish, nations rise," a DAR spokeswoman asserted; "if homes degenerate, nations fall."⁵² The national welfare was "founded upon the welfare of each individual family," added another conservative activist.⁵³ Understanding the country's state of military preparedness fit in neatly with domestic concerns. As Oliphant smoothly suggested, "If [a mother] knows nothing of adequate national defense or its requirements, how can she teach her children the methods by which we can protect our nation[?]"⁵⁴

A patriot wove her new-found knowledge into the daily fabric of her life. The DAR was especially adamant in this regard and offered a multitude of helpful suggestions for the political novice. She could write persuasive letters to friends that stressed the need for a strong national defense and she could host lunches, dinners, and parties that incorporated patriotic concerns, such as military preparedness. If her female guests hesitated tackling such seemingly remote and inappropriate questions, a quick-thinking hostess could prompt an "informal conversation built around some cardinal points of protection of children or [a] similar theme close to the heart of womanhood."⁵⁵ Young people as well needed a firm and guiding hand. Conservative women should use their motherly influence to make certain that children, theirs and their neighbors', were "safely moored" in patriotic youth organizations, such as the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts.

If mothers did their job correctly, youth would not stray into temptations and become susceptible to "strange anti-American doctrines."⁵⁶ "It is none too early a period," advised one DAR spokeswoman, to instill into the "plastic mind" the love of country and a sense of personal responsibility for maintaining it.⁵⁷ The well-brought-up child embraced patriotism in heart and deed, was cheerfully obedient to authority, and was "well nurtured in the old-fashioned virtues of integrity, courage, loyalty and faith."⁵⁸ Clearly, this was an awesome responsibility but conservative women were up to the challenge. "Give me a child until he is seven," declared one leader of the DAR, "and I will make of him an *American*."⁵⁹

Conservative women's faith in their abilities bears resemblance to their republican mother predecessors who forged their way into the public sphere after the American Revolution.⁶⁰ What occurs in the home, both parties argued, has larger consequences for the state. To that end, women in both time periods insisted upon the critical role they played in training their children to become virtuous citizens who would uphold a republican form of government. So too, dual themes ignited republican mothers' and conservative women's desire to participate in a meaningful way in the public domain. One idea celebrated mothers

as a paragon of virtue, guardians of the home who were willing to sacrifice self-interest for the public good. The more radical idea laid a gendered claim to public space: for republican mothers, this meant gaining a right to an education while for conservative women, this meant asserting a political voice in what had always been a male province: national defense. Women, conservative activists further believed, with their natural desire to put others' welfare before their own, were particularly well-suited for shouldering the responsibility of guarding American interests. Not surprisingly, conservative women considered themselves as excellent models.

If America's integrity depended on a properly trained citizenry, then the role of the public schools became even more crucial. While mothers molded the character of the child in the home, qualified teachers in the schools would funnel children's intellect into one set of correct beliefs about America and its place in the world. But as conservative women gazed at the school system, they found a void that no educator cared to address—the inadequate coverage and celebration of America's heroic past. Instead, to the distress of conservative women, schools had swallowed the disturbing notion of "so-called" progressive education in the writing and teaching of the social sciences, especially history.

Progressive education, brooded conservative women, was simply a slick way of injecting anti-American ideas into the curriculum. One of the chief culprits was Harold O. Rugg of Columbia University, who wrote a series of social studies textbooks in 1929 that most school districts adopted the following year. Taking a vastly different approach toward American history than previous texts, Rugg's series argued that America was a land in transition—a country that had undergone tremendous political, social, and economic upheavals, both good and bad.⁶¹ Slavery, immigrant labor, the seamy underside of capitalism, the changing role of women, all were explored and exposed in Rugg's interpretation.

Rugg's social studies texts represented one problem; the report in 1934 of the American Historical Association's commission to study the teaching of social sciences in the public schools was another. The report urged American educators to recognize that American society was moving towards an integrated, cooperative, and global economy. "A new age of collectivism [was] emerging," one in which the U.S. played only a part and one that the social science curriculum should recognize.⁶² Teachers too, added the commission, should enjoy a freer and more independent hand in the classroom and not be constrained by rigid school boards.⁶³

Outspoken teachers contaminating children's minds with tales of an imperfect America was not what conservative women (and men) envisioned for the public school. Local patriotic groups as well as some school boards condemned Rugg as a villain who, without remorse, distributed his "shocking plan" to thousands of innocent school children.⁶⁴ Even more than the Rugg texts the findings of the AHA infuriated the DAR and other hostile reviewers, who interpreted the commission's recommendations as "a fine background" for indoctrinating youth in the tenets of socialism.⁶⁵

The schools’ blatant disregard for America’s patriotic heritage, as conservative women perceived it, was a call to arms. Since the proper education of children was a fundamental component of national defense, speakers at the WPCND urged mothers to examine texts closely and, if found wanting, toss them with a stern warning to school administrators. Concerned mothers should not hesitate to use their clout to influence school boards and school trustees.⁶⁶ In another example, American Women, Incorporated formed an education committee to scrutinize school textbooks, both required and optional, to scour public libraries for questionable reading material, and to determine the extent of “propaganda penetration” in day and night schools.⁶⁷

The DAR, not surprisingly, cast the widest net. As early as 1920, local chapters of the DAR were investigating public libraries and protesting the presence of radical books.⁶⁸ When the DAR created the National Defense Committee (NDC) in 1925, the drive to guide children’s education intensified. To assure that schools were amenable to “American” values and “the truth” the NDC investigated “every phase of education in public schools, private schools, and colleges.”⁶⁹ It placed patriotic materials “at strategic points” such as in libraries, schools, churches, and colleges; it also offered an immense archive for students and teachers to peruse at their leisure.⁷⁰ Textbooks and classroom teachings, noted the NDC, should glorify past deeds of the founding fathers and great military men, as well as inspire “devotion to God and country.”⁷¹

Devotion to a *Christian* nation was the operative phrase. God had singled out America as someplace special, agreed conservative women; to fulfill America’s destiny was to obey God’s will. Above all, they believed that communism was antithetical to Christianity and on a mission to destroy it.

There was reason for some concern. After a hiatus in the 1920s, the Social Gospel enjoyed a revival among many denominations during the Great Depression. Church leaders, especially Methodists, began to question the premise of capitalism and its ineffectiveness in staving off the blows of the economic crisis. Pointed discussions about the direction in which society seemed to be headed and what should be done about it occurred with greater regularity in religious writings and policy-making committees.⁷² At its first national convention in 1934, for example, the National Council of Methodist Youth advocated socialism and asked members to pledge their “life to Christ” and to “renounce the Capitalist system.” A number of Methodist clergy in New York publicly announced their approval of governmental control over the means of production and distribution, while contending that capitalism, with its emphasis on private ownership, had failed to keep the country out of the depression.⁷³ Another commentator suggested that organized Christianity cut its ties with capitalism instead of continually healing the wounds inflicted by its excesses.⁷⁴

Comments like these as well as corresponding behavior in churches and religious organizations incensed conservative women. Radicals hijacking Christ to gain legitimacy among unsuspecting Christian Americans was, in a word,

unacceptable. The “so-called” Christian organizations for youth, especially the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) were two of the worst offenders. Not only did both organizations welcome communist speakers into their halls, but also, and more threatening to conservative activists, they sponsored hundreds of conferences and camps for youth where children, far from the watchful eyes of their parents, were inundated with radical propaganda under the guise of “progressive” ideas.⁷⁵

Indeed, women could no longer be assured of where their clergy’s loyalty lay, noted one conservative spokeswoman, who also remarked that many concerned mothers were pulling their children out of their local churches to prevent “pink and yellow propaganda forced down their [children’s] throats every Sunday.”⁷⁶

One only had to look at the example of Soviet Russia for a frightening blueprint of what could happen in America. As Representative Hamilton Fish told a captive audience at the WPCND in 1931, the Soviet school system indoctrinated “millions upon millions of innocent children . . . not merely to be atheists, but to hate God and all religious beliefs” and to help eradicate those beliefs on a global scale.⁷⁷ The idea that the “revolutionary laughter” of atheistic communism, “a weapon more deadly than machine guns and torture,” could capture American children’s souls was a chilling thought to conservative women.⁷⁸ The DAR suggested that atheist societies were making frightening inroads into Sunday school attendance by offering classes in which all religious ceremonies and holidays were dismissed as unnecessary and children were “baptized” into communist organizations.⁷⁹

To protect children from atheistic communism mothers could take appropriate action such as “refus[ing] to sit under a red clergyman, or . . . help pay his salary.”⁸⁰ “The quietly spoken word” could also derail unpalatable socialist sermons in the church, a tactic reminiscent of the whispering campaigns conducted by Klanswomen in the 1920s.⁸¹ Of course, alert women could always launch a preemptive strike and distribute material provided by the DAR’s National Defense Committee in Sunday school classes, church organizations, and women’s clubs.⁸²

Parents, in particular, should show more concern about their children’s religious training and immerse their children in Christian truths at an early age. To help reassert parental authority in the home, families could read the Bible and other worthy tracts together to make the experience more meaningful for their children.⁸³

Being a patriot meant taking on certain responsibilities, conservative women leaders reminded their audiences. “Self-indulgent parents” who “golf or sleep Sunday mornings,” the chairman of the National Defense Committee acidly commented, neglected their children’s spiritual welfare to the nation’s peril.⁸⁴ Another activist chimed in with an unveiled hint of disgust that women must not waste their time playing bridge, gossiping, or “shop[ping] idly.”⁸⁵ Such statements

revealed both exasperation and concern that parents failed to understand the nature of the radical threat. Yet, that was the self-appointed task of the WPCND, the DAR, and other female patriotic organizations: to remind Americans that national defense involved military power as well as a larger responsibility of guarding the home, school, and church. Moreover, patriotic women leaders stressed that securing America’s greatness was a necessary—and an appropriate—job for right-thinking women.

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Conservative women’s involvement in national defense was significant in several respects. First, it demonstrated that women’s interest in national defense, military affairs, legislation concerning the military, and in the U.S. position internationally, had evolved from antisuffragist musings into a full-fledged campaign. There are two main reasons for this transition. One, conservative women were genuinely alarmed. The impending threat of communism with its alleged godlessness, lack of hierarchy, and foreign origins became a perfect issue against which to rally, especially since it was, they believed, so closely tied with the peace movement. That it threatened to turn children against American values via the home, school, and church was even more cause for anxiety. They worried about the human costs of another war, which they believed would surely come if pacifists had their way.

The second reason underlying this interest in national defense was that conservative women did not want to be left out of the loop. Irrate that progressive women in the peace movement were daring to speak out on America’s international responsibilities while presumably leaving the country vulnerable and frustrated that Carrie Chapman Catt, Jane Addams and others were just plain wrong about the “causes and cure” for war, conservative women wanted to challenge the pacifist agenda and at the same time be recognized as America’s most noble and patriotic defenders. They wanted to seize the issue of military preparedness and to declare that they were the true champions of peace because they “knew better than other women” the tragedy of war. That women in the peace movement also lost family and friends to war was a fact conveniently forgotten.

Conservative women’s activism on behalf of a strong national defense also helped define their conception of citizenship in a post-suffrage world. While citizenship involves several meanings, the one emphasized here focuses on a sense of political identity and membership in a like-minded community united in a common purpose. The vote, of course, was part of that identity. While suffrage did not grant women full and equal citizenship to that of men, the nineteenth amendment was still, in political scientist Kristi Andersen’s words, “an important break with the past.”⁸⁶ How then did conservative women, especially those who were former antisuffragists, conceive of their new position? I suggest that embracing the issue of national defense was a way of dealing with

this new responsibility on their own terms. National defense neatly meshed with women's traditional role in guarding the private realm, as conservative women saw it, and their new obligations in the public.

Finally, women's activism on behalf of a strong national defense revealed the symbiotic relationship between conservative women and men in both patriotic and military circles, a connection first forged in the waning days of the antisuffrage campaign. Yet, while conservative men applauded women's efforts in the patriotic cause, the links between conservative men and women were troublesome to a number of female observers. According to some sources, men in the military and patriotic organizations were using the DAR for their own purposes.⁸⁷ One former DAR member contended that the DAR had "become a tool of mischief-makers," primarily Fred Marvin and Harry Jung, the president of the American Vigilant Association.⁸⁸ Another observer noted that several military personnel wished to confront the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom but felt they could not "attack a group of women," so they sought to "get other women" to do the job for them.⁸⁹ One prominent woman activist complained that Marvin and other male patriots planned to gain control over women's patriotic organizations "by having their wives join them and arrange programs" to suit their agenda.⁹⁰

Men on the right may or may not have been manipulating women's organizations for their own purposes. Yet a more interesting consideration is that conservative men recognized the potential political power of women's organizations and did not dismiss them out of hand, as was often the case with men on the left. Instead of charging that the "Blue Menace" (the DAR) was floundering in a pool of "senile decay," as one left-leaning journalist did, conservative men recognized that they were gaining valuable allies.⁹¹ Delegates to the WPCND represented more than one million women, which meant potential support at the polls, pressure on governmental officials for passing policies favorable to a strong national defense, and a medium for getting an important message out to the masses, not to mention press coverage for their ideas.

Moreover, there is the very real question of who was using whom? I suggest that the relationship was more of a two-way street. Conservative women may have made a strategic decision to use the networks and information provided by male patriots to buttress their own position. Politically savvy, women recognized that cooperation would aid their particular agenda without compromising either their convictions or their power that rested upon an all-female foundation. They gained influential allies in government, access to information, and, not least, increased visibility and prestige. At times, they asked for and received help from men, often inviting them to their conventions to comment on the necessity of military preparedness or the menace of communism, but when the inner doors closed, only women remained to make the important decisions.

Indeed, in many cases, they considered themselves to be made of sterner stuff than their male counterparts. As Grace Brosseau, former president general

of the DAR, editor of the *DAR Magazine*, and prominent figure at the WPCND noted to a friend in 1948,

Don't ask me what's the matter with the S.A.R. [Sons of the American Revolution]. Those men talk a lot and do nothing. . . . Looks to me as though they are 'fraid cats. We may be cats but we aren't afraid and that's one reason why we get the grilling but we manage to keep moving along. . . . So much for men!⁹²

Brousseau's statement revealed not only the persistence of conservative women's confidence in themselves and in their cause during the postwar years, but also it hinted at conservative women's responsibilities: to be a good citizen and patriot, you had to be willing to stand up for your beliefs and be willing to take the heat as a consequence. It was a role at least some conservative women relished. As one activist declared in 1937, "One woman can be forceful—one hundred women can be helpful—one thousand women can be powerful—but—one million women—*united*—are invincible!"⁹³ That affirmation characterized the spirit of conservative women activists during the interwar years.

Notes

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1. Telegram, Chas. P. Schouten, Sons of the American Revolution, Souvenir Edition, First Women's Patriotic Conference on National Defense, Washington, D.C., February 1925, presented by the American Legion Auxiliary in January 1935, 83. National Republic Magazine Collection (hereafter NRM), Box 15 (from Reel 362, Box 386, File 11). Hoover Institute, Stanford, California.

2. Frederick J. Haskin, "Women on National Defense," *Ibid.*, 84.

3. Letter, W. J. Patterson, American Legion, *Ibid.*, 83.

4. See Kathleen Kennedy *Disloyal Mothers and Scurrilous Citizens: Women and Subversion During World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) and Barbara Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War I* (New York: Garland, 1982) for insights on women in the preparedness movement.

5. This study focuses on the ideas of women, mostly leaders of the DAR and the WPCND, who were involved with issues concerning national defense. Further work needs to be done concerning their class and religious backgrounds, but it is safe to assume that they were white, mostly Protestant and from the middle to upper class.

6. George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America: Since 1945*, (2nd ed.; Wilmington, Del: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996; originally, 1976), xv.

7. For an excellent discussion of the evolution of conservative ideology, see Jerome L. Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

8. See John Bodnar's "The Attraction of Patriotism" and Stuart McConnell's "Reading the Flag: A Reconsideration of the Patriotic Cults of the 1890s" in John Bodnar, ed., *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

9. Mrs. Virgil McClure, Sixth Women's Patriotic Conference on National Defense, January 1931, NRM R362 B386 F11.

10. Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 60-61.

11. Susan E. Marshall, *Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign against Woman Suffrage* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 206.
12. Jane Jerome Camhi, *Women Against Women: American Anti-Suffragism, 1880-1920* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994), 91; Marshall, *Splintered Sisterhood*, 206.
13. Carrie A. Foster, *The Women and the Warriors: The U.S. Section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915-1946* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 2.
14. Foster, *The Women and the Warriors*, 2.
15. *Ibid.*, 46-48.
16. "To the membership of American Women, Inc.," Margaret Kerr Collection, Box 2, F1, "American Women, Inc." Hoover Institute, Stanford, California.
17. Cott, *Grounding*, 247-250; Margaret Gibbs, *The DAR* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 109-110. Also, see Kim E. Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Antifeminism, and the First Red Scare* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2001).
18. Gibbs, *The DAR*, 144. President General Mrs. Russell William Magna's decision likely upset some of the more militant members of the DAR, but they did not challenge her. Officially, Magna claimed that the DAR could no longer afford to co-sponsor the conference, but unofficially, she wanted to steer the DAR in a more moderate direction.
19. Anne Rogers Minor, "Why I Am a Daughter of the American Revolution," June 12, 1930, NRMCM R140 B125 F9.
20. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, "Manifesto on Disarmament," 1921. Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Jane Addams Papers, Series 1 (Jane Addams Papers Microfilm, reel 14, #243-244, #125). Women's Social Movements in the United States, 1775-2000, <<http://www.alexanderstreet6.com/wasm/wasmopen/milit/intro.htm>>
21. Major General John L. Hines, "Causes and Prevention of War" First WPCND, 29.
22. See Mrs. William Sherman Walker, chairman, Report of the National Defense Committee, 1930, NRMCM R140 B125 F9. Even with the passage of the Vinson Naval Parity Act in 1934, which demanded the upgrading of the Navy to meet the provisions of the London Naval Treaty, patriotic organizations and their supporters rested uneasily because Congress had failed to appropriate the necessary funding. Chairman Becker, Report National Defense Through Patriotic Education, 43rd Continental Congress, 1934, NRMCM R140 B125 F9; Richard B. Morris, *Encyclopedia of American History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), 347. Congress granted appropriate funding in 1938.
23. Ernest Andrade, Jr., "The Cruiser Controversy in Naval Limitations Negotiations, 1922-1936," *Military Affairs* 48 (July 1984): 114.
24. The London Naval Treaty of 1930 established limits on total tonnage of all auxiliary warships.
25. Secretary of the Navy, Curtis D. Wilbur, "The United States Navy," First WPCND, 50.
26. Major General Hansom E. Ely, "Preparedness" First WPCND, 38; Senator David I. Walsh, "What National Defense Means," Sixth Women's Patriotic Conference on National Defense, January 1931, 9, NRMCM R362 B386 F11.
27. Admiral E. W. Eberle, "The Nation and the Navy," First WPCND, 55.
28. *National Defense News* 5 (November-December, 1940), 6; David Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 427.
29. *National Defense News* 5 (January-February 1941), 3.
30. *National Defense News* 5 (March-April, 1941), 16.
31. *National Defense News* 5 (September-October 1940), 21.
32. Quoted in Claire Oliphant, "National Defense Peace Insurance," *North American Review* 221 (March 1925): 396.
33. "Patriotic Organizations," [n.d.] NRMCM R262 B264 F8; Fred W. Marvin, "Propaganda," First WPCND, 76; Hamilton Fish, Jr., "Communist Activities in the United States," Sixth WPCND, 12.
34. Gretchen Ritter, "Gender and Citizenship after the Nineteenth Amendment," *Polity* 33 (Spring 2000): 358; Kristi Andersen, *After Suffrage: Women in Partisan and Electoral Politics before the New Deal* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35-36.
35. Major General John L. Hines, "Causes and Prevention of War," First WPCND, 30.
36. Opening Address by Oliphant, First WPCND, 22.
37. Anne Rogers Minor, "Why I Am a Daughter of the American Revolution."
38. Frances Parkinson Keyes, "On the Fence," *Atlantic Monthly* 125 (February 1920): 278.
39. Address of President General Mrs. Lowell Fletcher Hobart, Thirty-Ninth Continental Congress, April 14, 1930, NRMCM R140 B125 F9.
40. Mrs. Henry R. Caraway, "Calling America," *The Awakener* (March 15, 1936), University of Iowa, Microfilm Collection on the Right, Reel 12, A68.

41. Madie Brown Emparan Collection, B1, first folder, Hoover Institution, Stanford, California. Brown was a southern woman who switched from the Democratic to the Republican party.

42. Mrs. William Sherman Walker, Report of the National Defense Committee, 1930, NRMCM 140 B125 F9. President General Mrs. Russell William Magna contended that the "strength" of the DAR was that it was "non-partisan and non-political." Address of President General, DAR, Forty-Third Continental Congress, April 16, 1934, NRMCM 140 B125 F9.

43. Mrs. William Sherman Walker, chairman. Report of the National Defense Committee, 1931, NRMCM 140 B125 F9.

44. "Female Vigilantes in Arizona," *Washington Herald* April 25, 1937, NRMCM R360 B384 F17.

45. The Speakers Institute, "America's Future: A Study of Fundamental Issues, A Challenge to the Thinking Women of America." n.d. [1936?] Dilling Papers, Christian Liberty Academy, Arlington Heights, Illinois.

46. Numbers of women's organizations are drawn from programs of the WPCND, lists of organizations associated with the American Coalition, and miscellaneous organizations archived in the Hoover Institute. January 24, 1934, NRMCM, R262 B264 F8. The American Coalition listed the Executive and Representative of each organization and I assume that the all-female organizations had both female executives and representatives. 49/100 organizations were so listed.

47. Gibbs, *The DAR*, 116, 138; Cott, *Grounding*, 255; DAR National Defense Committee "Suggestions for Study and Work, 1932-1933" NRMCM B125 F9.

48. Rear Admiral W. A. Moffett of the U.S. Navy, "Aviation and the Navy Building Program" Proceedings, Sixth WPCND.

49. Hamilton Fish, Jr., Sixth WPCND, 12.

50. See for instance, Henry B. Joy to Mrs. Harry E. Bodman, June 19, 1936, file: June 13-30, 1936; Joy to Mr. Charles [McC. Clark], St. Louis, Missouri, [grandson?] July 15, 1936, file: July 12-22, 1936 and letter from Joy to Elizabeth Dilling, Aug 31, 1936 (dictated Aug 27, 1936), file: Aug 26-Sept 3, 1936, Henry B. Joy Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

51. Henry B. Joy to Elizabeth Dilling, August 31, 1936, File: August 26-September 3, 1936, Henry B. Joy Collection.

52. Walker, National Defense Chairman, DAR, "Chapter Programs on National Defense 1928-1929," NRMCM 140 B125 F9.

53. Elizabeth Dilling, "The 'Broadminded' Pink," in "Red Revolution, Do We Want It?" Kenilworth, Illinois, 1932, 14, NRMCM B129 F ED.

54. Oliphant, First WPCND, 24.

55. Mrs. William Sherman Walker, chairman, National Defense Committee, D.A.R., "How is Propaganda?" Fifth Women's Patriotic Conference on National Defense, 1930, NRMCM R362 B386 F11.

56. Mrs. Lowell F. Hobart, president general, DAR, Proceedings, Sixth WPCND.

57. Mrs. William A. Becker, chairman, National Defense Committee, DAR September 1, 1932, NRMCM 140 B125 F9.

58. Mrs. William A. Becker, chairman, National Defense Committee, 1934, NRMCM 140 B125 F9; Address of Mrs. William A. Becker, president general, 45th Congress, *DAR Magazine* 70 (June 1936): 475.

59. Mrs. William A. Becker, chairman, National Defense Committee, DAR, September 1, 1932, NRMCM 140 B125 F9.

60. Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980).

61. Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893-1958* (2nd ed.; New York: Routledge, 1995), 175. For more on Harold Rugg, see Peter F. Carbone, *The Social and Educational Thought of Harold Rugg*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1977) and Harold R. McKinnon, *Changing Our Children: Harold Rugg's Crusade to Remodel America* (Berkeley: The Gillick Press, 1943).

62. The American Historical Association, *Investigation of the Social Studies in the Schools: Conclusions and Recommendations of the Commission* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 16.

63. *Ibid.*, 16, 27.

64. The Guardians of Education, "Undermining Our Republic." [n.d.], 3-4, Dilling Papers. Rugg's antipathy toward capitalism eventually killed the series after 1940. See Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*, 176-178.

65. Mrs. Imogen B. Emery, Committee on National Defense Through Patriotic Education, DAR, Handbook 1938-1939, p 33, NRMCM 140 B125 F9.

66. Walker, address at the Fourth Women's Patriotic Conference on National Defense [1929?], NRMCM 140 B125 F9.

67. See, for instance, Mrs. B. L. Robinson, president of the Massachusetts Public Interest League, "The Responsibility of Being Led," WPCND, February 10, 1927, NRM C R362 B386 F11; American Women Incorporated, By Laws, [n.d.] Margaret Kerr Collection, Hoover Institution, Stanford, California, B2 F: American Women, Inc.; "To the Women of America," [n.d.] American Women Against Communism, NRM C R47 B42 F7, Mrs. J. L. Buel, "Visions and Values," National Society of Daughters of Founders and Patriots of America, 32nd General Court, April 10, 1930, NRM C R263 B264 F8.

68. Becker, chairman, National Defense Committee, 1932-1933, Report, NRM C R140 B125 F9. M. B. Schnapper, "D.A.R. in the Schoolroom," *The Nation* (September 18, 1937): 289.

69. National Defense Committee, DAR, "Suggestions for Study and Work 1932-33," NRM C R140 B125 F9; Becker, Report of the National Defense Committee, 1932-33, NRM C R140 B125 F9.

70. *Ibid.*

71. Walker, Address at the Fourth WPCND.

72. Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 921-922.

73. Editorial, *Christian Century* 49 (April 13, 1932): 467.

74. Harry F. Ward, "Religion Confronts a New World," *Christian Century* 49 (February 3, 1932): 146-7.

75. Robinson, "The Responsibility of Being Led," 4-5.

76. *Ibid.*, 5.

77. Proceedings, Sixth WPCND.

78. Mrs. John Laidlaw Buel, National President National Society of Daughters of Founders and Patriots of America, "Visions and Values," 32nd General Court, April 10, 1930, NRM C R263 B264 F8.

79. Address of Mrs. William Sherman Walker, Fourth WPCND.

80. Robinson, "The Responsibility of Being Led," 14.

81. Mrs. William A. Becker, chairman, National Defense Committee, 1934, NRM C R140 B125 F9; Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Ku Klux Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1991), 147-149. As far as my research shows, there was no overlap between the Klanswomen of the 1920s and the WPCND and DAR. I strongly suspect that women in this study would dismiss the WKKK (and the men's Klan) as organizations that catered to the "lower classes" (although research on the Klan shows that prominent members from the community often joined, at least in the early years). The Klan's association with violence also would not have gone over well. Certainly, however, women in both groups shared varying degrees of nativist sentiment, most prominently shown in the call for immigration restriction.

82. Mrs. William Sherman Walker, National Defense Committee, 1931, NRM C R140 B125 F9.

83. Mrs. William A. Becker, chairman, National Defense Committee, DAR September 1, 1932; National Defense Committee Suggestions for Study and Work 1932-1933, NRM C R140 B125 F9.

84. *Ibid.*

85. Mrs. Henry R. Caraway, "Calling America," *The Awakener* March 15, 1936, University of Iowa, Microfilm Collection on the Right, Reel 12, A68.

86. Andersen, *After Suffrage*, 2-3. See also Ritter, "Gender and Citizenship after the Nineteenth Amendment," and Nancy F. Cott, "Marriage and Women's Citizenship in the United States, 1830-1934," *American Historical Review* 103:5 (December 1998): 1440-1474.

87. Helena Huntington Smith, "Mrs. Brosseau and the D.A.R.," *Outlook* 151 (March 20, 1929); Margaret Payne Dutton, "The D.A.R. Sees Red," *Forum* 97 (April 1937): 239.

88. Helen Tufts Bailie, "Dishonoring the D.A.R.," *The Nation* 129 (September 25, 1929): 323; Gibbs, *The DAR*, 122.

89. Smith, "Mrs. Brosseau and the D.A.R." 46.

90. Mrs. Lund to Mr. William Astor Chanler, April 12, 1926, NRM C R648 B11 F4.

91. Oswald Garrison Villard, "What the Blue Menace Means," *Harper's Magazine* 157 (October 1928): 534-535.

92. Grace Brosseau to Herbert Moore, n.d. [October 1948], NRM C B733 F7 R671.

93. Cathrine Curtis, Women's National Committee "Hands Off the Supreme Court" n.d. [February 1937]. NRM C R362 B386 F7. Also, see Glen Jeanson's chapter on Cathrine Curtis in *Women of the Far Right: The Mothers' Movement and World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 57-72.