

John R. Mott, the American YMCA, and Revolutionary Russia: An Introduction

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Editor's Note: This article introduces documents published in a recent addition to the book series *Americans in Revolutionary Russia*. The title of the volume is *John R. Mott, the American YMCA, and Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington, Indiana: Slavica Publishers/Indiana University, 2020).

John R. Mott's *Recent Experiences and Impressions in Russia* presents a collection of public addresses and letters created during his participation in a United States diplomatic mission to Russia—sent by President Woodrow Wilson and led by Elihu Root—from May to August 1917. These historical documents (printed in 1917 but never published) describe this Root Mission and offer perspectives on several momentous events and leaders of the era: World War I, the February Revolution, members of the Provisional Government, and leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church. The documents include a proposal for the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to carry out a program of service among Russia's military. *Service with Fighting Men: An Account of the Work of the American Young Men's Christian Associations in the World War* (published in 1924) presents the YMCA's official description and evaluation of the work carried out in Russia in response to Mott's plans.¹

In order to provide context to the reader, this introduction provides key information on the work of the American YMCA in Russia, the role of Mott as a leader for this organization, and a survey of the association's work with soldiers during this time.² The goal of this introduction is to encourage analysis of the texts (keeping in mind that the events of November 1917 had not yet taken place by the time the first set of documents were written). Mott wrote with optimism, idealism,

¹ William Howard Taft, et al., eds., *Service with Fighting Men: An Account of the Work of the Young Men's Christian Associations in the World War*, vol. 2 (New York: Association Press, 1924), 270–82, 419–57.

² This introduction includes updated and revised material from the editor's *The American YMCA and Russian Culture: The Preservation and Expansion of Orthodox Christianity, 1900–1940* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013); and “The American YMCA and Russian Politics: Critics and Supporters of Socialism, 1900–1940,” in *New Perspectives on Russian-American Relations*, ed. William Benton Whisenhunt and Norman E. Saul (New York: Routledge, 2015), 161–77.

and self-confidence—but, of course, he did not know the future. The second set of documents demonstrates how quickly events in Russia shifted in this era.

The YMCA began its service among Russian workers and students in 1900. The *Mayak* (Lighthouse) program in St. Petersburg offered a wide range of athletic, social, educational, and religious opportunities for young men. These programs reflected those offered in the United Kingdom, the United States, and around the world since the middle of the nineteenth century. Following the outbreak of the First World War, many “Y” workers expanded these services in Russia to provide humanitarian assistance to soldiers and prisoners of war. These efforts were requested by the US and Russian governments. They set up libraries, promoted athletic competitions, and organized concerts and classes for men in uniform. During the war, the YMCA staff members, known as “secretaries,” formed the largest group of Americans living in Russia.

However, the revolutionary changes of 1917 sharply increased the political tensions experienced by the association. The links of this nongovernmental organization to the US government contributed to the closure of the association on Soviet territory. After the war, Y workers continued to serve among émigrés in creative ways. They supported the development of the Russian Student Christian Movement, which brought together many young Russians from across Europe. In Paris, the YMCA supported the Orthodox Theological Institute, later named the St. Sergius Theological Academy. This was the only Russian Orthodox educational program of its kind at that time. The most well-known contribution was the YMCA Press, which published a remarkable variety of literary, philosophical, and spiritual books in Russian. The YMCA’s service among Russians is a fascinating example of Russian-American cultural relations.

This introduction presents the YMCA’s work with Russian, Allied, and Central Power soldiers within the territory of Russia from 1914 to 1919. First, it looks at the needs which the association detected and the purposes established by the leaders. It examines key developments and explores the program’s finances. Then, it looks at a few controversial issues and attempts to evaluate the Y’s war-time programs in Russia, which leads to the primary point: the YMCA faced a complex challenge in conducting a global program of philanthropy, which was made possible by the support of the US government. YMCA staff members filled controversial public roles as Americans in Russia during a politically volatile period of world war and revolution.

Mott’s convictions on the reasons why the American YMCA should serve soldiers in Russia developed well before 1917. All in all, more than six million soldiers and civilians were held in prison camps across Europe during the war. Russia held 1.5 million inside its borders, while 2.5 million Russians were held as prisoners of war or were missing in foreign countries. These numbers far exceeded the number expected by the participating countries and the resources available to provide the required services. The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 defined the responsibilities for governments holding captives during a war. Those held must receive “food, quarters, and clothing, on the same footing as the troops of the Government which has captured them.” The unexpectedly high number of captives forced the nations involved to find solutions—including the participa-

tion of neutral nations. By May 1915, the United States government emerged as the only body which was capable of providing aid to these prisoners. During the first months of the war, the US policy of neutrality was interpreted to exclude any involvement with POWs. However, appeals from Europe and political influence within the US led to a revision of this position. The Department of State agreed to provide relief services for prisoners under the direction of the American Consular Service. Along with other neutral nations, US representatives would inspect prison camps, supervise the provision of supplies, and distribute financial aid to prisoners. However, American embassies in Europe lacked the personnel, infrastructure, and experience required to carry out this large-scale commitment: “The American diplomatic corps had no experience providing social welfare assistance to foreign nationals.” The Wilson administration soon realized that non-governmental organizations must participate in the program if the United States was to fulfill its agreements. The American YMCA responded to the request of the government to provide physical, mental, and spiritual assistance for war prisoners. The YMCA launched the international War Prisoners Aid program to assist POWs of any nationality or religious belief. The American program functioned under the World’s Alliance of YMCAs (based in neutral Geneva, Switzerland) and worked with other national associations.³

John R. Mott was the primary catalyst for the expansion of the YMCA’s work with soldiers across Europe, and specifically in Russia. Mott grew up in Postville, Iowa, in a Methodist home. He joined the YMCA student ministry during his years at Cornell University. After graduating from Cornell in 1888, he embarked on a career with the YMCA. Initially he served as a recruiter of students, but by 1890, he became the director of the YMCA’s college and university ministry. In 1895, he coordinated the founding of the World Student Christian Federation. This organization attempted to support and unite student Christian movements throughout the world. For this and other cooperative Christian ventures, Mott later received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946.

Mott deeply influenced the Russian ministry of the YMCA. Although he participated in this work only intermittently, Mott contributed to the ministry throughout the first half of the twentieth century. His direct involvement began in 1899 when he encouraged the founding of the Russian Student Christian Movement, and in the following years, he provided guidance and financial sup-

³ Kenneth Andrew Steuer, “Pursuit of an ‘Unparalleled Opportunity’: The American Young Men’s Christian Association and Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy Among the Central Power Nations during World War I, 1914–1923” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1997), 1–4; and Paul B. Anderson to Eugene P. Trani, March 29, 1973, attachment to letter 1, 1966–84, Biographical Records, Paul B. Anderson, Kautz Family YMCA Archives [hereafter KFYA], University of Minnesota Libraries, Minneapolis. A general source is the archival document “Meeting of the War Historical Bureau of the Young Men’s Christian Association,” April 1, 1920, KFYA, Russian Work Restricted, Correspondence and Reports, 1918–1921, Correspondence and Reports, 1920. See also Paul B. Anderson, “Russian Prisoners of War” [no date], Paul B. Anderson Papers, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Archives [hereafter PBAP].

port for the ministry. However, Mott contributed most significantly through his indirect influence, for several of his priorities provided guidelines for the direction of the YMCA's ministry in Russia: coordinating world evangelization, encouraging ministry cooperation, motivating indigenous leadership, supporting Russian Orthodoxy, and providing leadership training.

Mott traveled with a group to Europe in September 1914 to inspect the situation and determine the possibilities of YMCA assistance. They witnessed overcrowded hospitals and the difficulties in communication between wounded soldiers and family members. Mott and other YMCA leaders were motivated to help and to visit those in prison, as taught in the gospel of Matthew. He decided to raise millions of dollars and recruit secretaries to address the needs they observed. He met with the International Committee of the YMCA in December 1914 and described the tragic impact of the war on soldiers and refugees. Mott recognized that the war was a disaster, but he expressed his usual optimism. He suggested that the war was an opportunity to serve an enormous number of people across Europe. The main issue was how to provide relief and maintain American neutrality.⁴ Mott met with President Woodrow Wilson at the White House in January 1915 to discuss his experiences in Europe. The two had met at Wesleyan University in Connecticut in 1889. Wilson had been a professor at the school, and Mott had been visiting as a representative of the Student Volunteer Movement. This YMCA-supported movement facilitated the service of US college graduates in Christian ministries around the world. Another example of the connection had been Wilson's offer to Mott of an honorary degree from Princeton in 1910. Mott and Wilson shared a similar optimistic Protestant worldview. At the 1915 meeting, they spoke about ways to develop YMCA service to POWs and maintain US neutrality. They agreed on a plan that would "extend relief to war prisoners in both Allied and Central Power countries" and "would meet a desperate need.... The American YMCA now had the President's support for an ambitious relief program in Europe."⁵

The association and the US government became increasingly interdependent: each side relied on the other to fulfill goals. YMCA secretaries counted on American ambassadors in Berlin, Paris, Rome, Vienna, and Petrograd to make successful contact with local officials. "The Association's standing was clearly bolstered by official American support." Wilson's diplomats provided channels of communication and political information to the YMCA as well. The Y provided a variety of specific aid for US diplomatic officials, who were overloaded with a number of international obligations. Secretaries submitted needed reports on POW camp locations and conditions—freeing officials from this responsibility. The YMCA also assisted the US government by distributing food and medical supplies to POWs. However, this was not the primary responsibility of the association. President Wilson's approach could be described as corporatism—achieving government goals by utilizing large nongovernmental organizations.⁶

⁴ Steuer, "Pursuit of an 'Unparalleled Opportunity,'" 45–47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48–50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 447–49.

The YMCA began working with soldiers in Russia in 1915. In June of that year, YMCA secretaries Archibald Harte and George Day visited several POW camps in Russia to gain information on conditions and opportunities. They were authorized by Russian General Mikhail Alekseevich Beliaev. Early in their trip, they met with the mayor of Moscow and shared about the YMCA's work with Russian prisoners in Germany. They visited POW camps and a hospital—where leaders requested books and athletic equipment. They examined facilities across Russia—including Omsk and Tomsk in Siberia. They reported good conditions, but the need for equipment for recreation.⁷ YMCA staffer Donald A. Lowrie soon began to work with POWs at a camp in Tomsk; he organized classes into twenty-three subjects, including French, commerce and trade, aeronautics, and geology. They also organized a library and weekly religious services for Protestants, Catholics, and Jews.⁸

YMCA secretary Jerome Davis led the first steps in work with Russian soldiers—in addition to POWs. In January 1917, Russian General Aleksei Nikolaevich Kuropatkin allowed the Y to work with one regiment in Turkestan in Central Asia. In February, the Y was permitted to work with all Russian troops in Turkestan. In July, the work expanded to the six regiments in Moscow. In August, the prime minister approved the YMCA to work with troops in Irkutsk, Tomsk, Kazan, Kiev, and Odessa—but Y secretaries were not allowed to work at the front. In September, the minister of war gave an official endorsement to the YMCA, and the prime minister allowed the Y to work on all fronts. This led to an accelerated deployment of Y secretaries and supplies throughout the country. The government provided a building in Moscow for the Y, and a general authorized forty buildings on the Western Front. A Moscow YMCA city council was formed, which included the mayor of Moscow, the minister of justice, the American consul, and other officials. A national YMCA office was organized in Moscow. Davis described the main goal of the wartime work to US readers in this way: “The central aim of the Association’s War Work is to serve Russia, her government and her soldiers with all the power at our command. We believe that our message will be carried not through our words but through our deeds. We feel that the closer we live up to the ideals of the Master in service the more we will demonstrate the ideal for which the Association stands.” Davis went on to explain, “During the two weeks that the soldier is back from the trenches there is little or nothing for him to do.... His main occupation is smoking ... sleeping or engaging in gambling or other harmful amusements.” YMCA leaders provided supplies and organization for reading, writing, games, and music.⁹

⁷ A. C. Harte, “Harte and Day to the Hospitals and German Prisoners’ Camps in Siberia, Petrograd, June 25, 1915,” KFYA, Russian Work Restricted, Correspondence and Reports, 1903–1917, Correspondence and Reports, 1915–1916, 1–4.

⁸ Donald A. Lowrie to John R. Mott, September 11 (24), 1916, KFYA, Russian Work Restricted, Correspondence and Reports, 1903–1917, Correspondence and Reports, 1915–1916, 1–2.

⁹ Jerome Davis, “Association History in the Making in Russia,” October 22 (November 4), 1917, KFYA, Russian Work Restricted, Correspondence and Reports, 1903–1917, Correspondence and Reports, 1917, 1–2.

Mott served as the catalyst for YMCA expansion of work among soldiers, but the implementation of his plans in Russia was carried out by a series of leaders. Archibald Harte supervised the War Prisoners' Aid in Russia and other countries in Europe—and he was originally responsible for the Russian army work. He left Russia in the summer of 1917, delegating his authority to acting senior secretary Jerome Davis. Harte planned to return in October 1917, but he was not able to do so. Davis was criticized for weak administrative skills, so Y secretaries formed a War Work Council in November 1917. His successor, Ethan Colton, was appointed in December 1917, but he was not able to arrive in Russia until March 1918. Therefore, as one YMCA report explained, “During this entire critical period the administration was in the hands of men whose tenure of office was temporary and who did not feel themselves in a position to make decisions of the most vital importance.”¹⁰ When new YMCA recruits arrived in Russia, they were often frustrated by a lack of organization and direction.

The service of the American YMCA among soldiers shifted significantly as it adjusted to Russia's dramatic political changes. Over three hundred Americans gathered together for this service and worked among many levels of Russian society in many regions.¹¹ This included all YMCA workers with prisoners, soldiers, and civilians during the war. The work can be examined in three periods. The first period stretched from June 1915 to March 1918. This period included the abdication of Emperor Nicholas II and the Bolshevik Revolution. It ended with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, ending Russia's participation in the war. The second period, March 1918 to August 1918, was a transitional one, which included the rise of the Soviet government. The third period, from August 1918 until 1919, included the Russian Civil War¹² and Allied intervention in Russia.

The focus of the first period was the Russian army. The United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, so this ended the US position of neutrality. This necessitated the withdrawal of American secretaries working with Russian POWs in several camps in Germany and Austria-Hungary. In June 1917, the United States recognized the Provisional Government, which had been set up after the abdication of Emperor Nicholas II on March 15, 1917. This led to the formation of a diplomatic mission to Russia from the US government, led by Elihu Root, which included Mott. The Root Mission attempted to evaluate how to assist the new Provisional Government and to encourage continued Russian participation in the war. While in Petrograd, Mott initiated a variety of discussions with many influential Orthodox leaders.¹³ Mott supported the Russian Orthodox Church as the primary spiritual expression of the Russian people. He had accepted a negative evaluation of the

¹⁰ Taft, et al., *Service with Fighting Men*, 427; Donald E. Davis and Eugene P. Trani, “The American YMCA and the Russian Revolution,” *Slavic Review* 33, no. 3 (1974): 475.

¹¹ Memorandum from Crawford Wheeler to John R. Mott and E. T. Colton, “Report on War time Activities in Russia,” November 22, 1919, KFYA, Russia, Colton E. T., Reports, Addresses, and Papers, WWI Field Reports, binder 2, 3–5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7–9.

¹³ See John W. Long and C. Howard Hopkins, “The Church and the Russian Revolution: Conversations of John R. Mott with Orthodox Church Leaders, June–July 1917,” *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (1976): 161–80.

church during his years at Cornell, but rejected this evaluation after extensive contact with Eastern Christians. Over the years he established a network of friendships within the worldwide community and frequently expressed his admiration of the church. Mott emphasized that the YMCA supported the Orthodox community due to its doctrinal foundations, rich liturgy, and perseverance. On this trip, Mott secured permission to expand welfare work with Russian troops, so he began to personally recruit workers after his return to the US. He recruited college students and graduates who had experience with YMCA programs in the US. In October 1917, just before the Bolshevik uprising, the Provisional Government unanimously adopted a resolution which formally approved the work of the YMCA among troops of the Russian army. This approval granted railroad transportation, customs clearance, and postal delivery to the association at no charge.¹⁴ Approximately fifty new YMCA recruits arrived soon after the October Revolution. They soon learned that the new Soviet government planned to negotiate a peace settlement. Russian soldiers were leaving the front, and it became impossible to continue formal work with the troops.¹⁵ Soon after the October Revolution, YMCA work with Russian soldiers ended at the fronts. By March 1918, all work with the Russian army dissolved. The Soviet government signed the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with Germany on March 3, 1918. The YMCA soon adjusted its goals, programs, and policies for the new situation at a conference in the Russian city of Samara in March 1918. Many secretaries ended their YMCA service, but others adopted new responsibilities serving Russian civilians and returning prisoners of war.¹⁶

The second period of YMCA work with soldiers continued from March to August 1918. New civilian programs were organized in central Russian cities, and a YMCA agricultural exhibition traveled along the Volga River.¹⁷ Limited work with Russian soldiers continued.

The third period began in August 1918 and included the Russian Civil War. At this time, Allied forces, including American troops, were deployed to Murmansk and Archangelsk on the Arctic coastline, as well as Vladivostok on the Pacific. This intervention during the Russian Civil War was part of the Allied strategy for the World War. US troops were sent to Archangelsk and Vladivostok to prevent German seizure of Allied military equipment. However, what began as a pragmatic military operation evolved into an indecisive struggle against the Bolsheviks. Allied troops gave “half-hearted” support to White armies opposing the Red Army. For Soviet leaders and historians, this intervention functioned for many years as key evidence of a Western plan to strangle Soviet Russia.¹⁸ The participation of the YMCA in the Allied intervention was one of the most controversial aspects of the association’s work. US military intervention led to the end of YMCA work in territory controlled by the Soviet government. Intervention required the evacuation

¹⁴ Taft, et al., *Service with Fighting Men*, 428–29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 419.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 427, 430–31.

¹⁷ Wheeler, “Report on War time Activities in Russia,” 8.

¹⁸ Robert C. Grogin, *Natural Enemies: The United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War 1917–1991* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), 16–17.

of the American embassy and all official representatives of the US from Soviet Russia. The US government could provide no protection, so virtually all Y staff members left Soviet-controlled territory. Therefore, the new focus of work became various Allied units and Russian civilians in northern Russia and Siberia.¹⁹

The YMCA served a variety of people during this period in areas not controlled by the Soviet government. The YMCA program of service to Allied soldiers began in Archangelsk during the first half of 1918. Approximately five thousand American troops arrived in the fall, and twenty-five American secretaries came in October. YMCA secretaries followed the deployment of the troops. Eventually, YMCA personnel included nearly a hundred American, Canadian, and British secretaries, plus Russian assistants. Four American Y secretaries were captured while working near the front with Allied soldiers. Two were released in Moscow with the help of the YMCA representative in Copenhagen, who traveled into the country to negotiate their release. In August 1919, the US embassy instructed all Americans to withdraw, so the American YMCA program ended. The American Y men left northern Russia by September 1919. The association operated work for Allied troops in the Russian Far East and Siberia as well. By February 1919, five association huts were operating for Allied soldiers near Vladivostok. The program ended with the Soviet advances in fall 1919.²⁰

Individual American YMCA staff members experienced their service in Russia in a wide variety of ways. As mentioned earlier, Jerome Davis was one of the first American YMCA secretaries to work with soldiers in Russia. He was recruited personally by John R. Mott, who spoke with him at Oberlin College. Davis did not want to interrupt his studies, but Mott told him, "The instruments of destruction in war today are so terrible that the war cannot last more than a few months." Davis began his work with little knowledge of Russian, so he studied on the ship while crossing the Atlantic. Soon after his arrival, he made a seven-day train trip to Turkestan to begin working with POWs. This quick initiation into work seemed to be motivated by the YMCA agreement made with German authorities. They agreed to allow Y men to assist Allied prisoners if the YMCA served the German, Austrian, and Turkish prisoners in Russia. Davis later went to the capital city and met with Alexander Kerensky for negotiations on the YMCA's work. Davis was in Moscow during the Bolshevik takeover in 1917, along with a number of other secretaries. He then took the train to Petrograd to obtain permission from the new Soviet government to continue the YMCA's work with soldiers. The work was welcomed by a Soviet official who provided a note authorizing the withdrawal of YMCA funds from the state bank. However, the bank cashier refused to provide the funds and demanded a letter from either Leon Trotsky or Vladimir Lenin. Davis then managed to meet with Trotsky and explain the YMCA's work. Trotsky provided a note for the bank, and Davis had no more problems. Later, Davis was strongly opposed to US intervention: "I was astound-

¹⁹ Taft, et al., *Service with Fighting Men*, 420, 433–35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 435–37, 441, 445; G. S. Phelps, "Siberian Expedition Report," November 3, 1920, KFYA, Siberia, Russian Work Restricted, North Russia: Archangel, Murmansk, Siberia, 38.

ed to learn that the United States was planning to help overthrow the Bolshevik regime.” He agreed to begin working in Archangelsk only if the Bolshevik regime collapsed in two months, as predicted by the US ambassador. However, this diplomat’s prediction proved to be inaccurate, so Davis departed.²¹

Davis’s opposition to the US government’s actions stood in sharp contrast to the views of Mott, who strongly supported President Wilson and his political philosophy. Mott supported US entry into the war and opposed the Bolshevik regime. His Christian vision became closely tied to America’s political agendas and national ambitions. Ironically, his identification with US government interests contributed to the continuing ban on the YMCA’s work in the USSR.²²

Paul B. Anderson, a key secretary for outreach to soldiers, worked to serve the Russian people from his first trip in 1917 until his death in 1985. He had a long-term, in-depth involvement with Russian life and made a serious attempt to understand its language, history, and culture. He provided leadership or support for almost every aspect of the YMCA’s Russian ministry. He grew up in Madrid, Iowa, and studied at the University of Iowa. In 1917, he was invited to serve as personal assistant to John R. Mott for the US diplomatic Root Mission to Russia. Mott, the leader of the American YMCA’s global ministry, served as a mentor to Anderson throughout his life. Anderson arrived in Petrograd on June 12, 1917, and remained in the city after the Root Mission returned to America. Initially, he focused on assisting with the administration of YMCA service to prisoners of war. The Bolshevik uprising in 1917 disrupted the work, yet Anderson continued with his duties until September 1918, when he was arrested in Moscow. Suspected of “counter-revolutionary” activity, he was taken by a government security officer to the Lubyanka prison. He was released, but shortly thereafter the YMCA ended its full-scale service in Soviet Russia. From 1920 to 1924, Anderson lived in Berlin and participated in a variety of creative service programs. During these years in Berlin and then in Paris, Anderson’s understanding of Russian culture grew. He emerged as one of the first Western experts on religion in the Soviet Union.

The YMCA’s service to soldiers and prisoners of war was initially funded by several wealthy philanthropists in response to Mott’s requests. However, rising costs led to a broader fundraising approach. The YMCA worked with several other American international social welfare organizations in promoting the United War Work Campaign. This campaign eventually gathered 203 million dollars, the largest amount gathered for a voluntary program on record. The share for the American YMCA amounted to nearly sixty percent—over 100 million dollars.²³ The American Y spent nearly eight million dollars for wartime work in Russia.²⁴

²¹ Jerome Davis, *A Life Adventure for Peace: An Autobiography* (New York: Citadel, 1967), 43–49.

²² M. Craig Barnes, “John R. Mott: A Conversionist in a Pluralist World” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1992), 222–24.

²³ Steuer, “Pursuit of an ‘Unparalleled Opportunity,’” 456.

²⁴ Taft, et al., *Service with Fighting Men*, 456 [no details provided with these statistics]; “Recapitulation of Budget for Russian Army Work,” KFYA, Russian Work Restricted, Correspondence and Reports, 1918–1921, Correspondence and Reports, 1919.

YMCA leaders viewed the rise of socialism and the Bolshevik Revolution with a diversity of perspectives. As leaders of a prominent international program of philanthropy, the work and relationships of secretaries brought them into direct contact with Emperor Nicholas II, Vladimir Lenin, and Leon Trotsky. They also met a wide variety of workers, peasants, and soldiers. YMCA secretaries were reflective writers in their reports and letters about their experiences. Some condemned the political changes, a few championed the revolution, but most expressed ambivalence as they watched chaos unfold and stretch into civil war. None were monarchists, and none were communists, but the YMCA staff included secretaries holding political views from right to center to left. The February Revolution was welcomed by the majority, but most Y men responded with uncertainty to the October Revolution, since they did not understand even the basics of the Bolsheviks' approach. Eventually, the clear majority of secretaries expressed a negative view about the October events. The two primary leaders of all YMCA service among Russians were John R. Mott and Paul B. Anderson. These men attempted to understand Marxism and concluded that it was fundamentally alien to Russian culture. They did not use liberal democracy as an exclusive standard for political ideology, but they argued that Russian Marxists should respect a diversity of political opinion. Mott and Anderson were very influential within the YMCA's Russian program and voiced the majority opinion against socialism.

Three staff members, Jerome Davis, Sherwood Eddy, and Julius Hecker, emphasized the visions of Russian socialists. They encouraged their American readers to consider the progress made by these radicals in bringing justice to oppressed workers and peasants. These views were based on their own dissatisfaction with Western democracy and traditional Protestant religion. This vocal minority of the YMCA's Russian work staff was sympathetic to many aspects of the Bolsheviks' program. They did not support the use of violence or the Soviet stance on atheism. However, they envisioned a future peaceful, socialist Russia with a philosophy which combined Marxist and Christian aspects.

The YMCA faced a complex challenge in conducting a global program of philanthropy, which was made possible by the support of the US government. YMCA staff members filled controversial public roles as Americans in Russia during a politically volatile period of world war and revolution. Most steered clear of any political action. However, the variety of political opinions and agendas held by YMCA representatives demonstrates that the Y was not a government tool with a program dictated by Washington.

The YMCA's work with soldiers raised heated controversies. After the October Revolution, a variety of critics from all sides in the US and Russia denounced the Y for several reasons. Soviet leaders suspected that secretaries were meddling Allied supporters, but they accepted material aid for Russians returning from POW camps. Opponents of the Bolsheviks often assumed that they were Marxist sympathizers. The Bolsheviks saw the Y as a tool of Washington, since

the Y frequently assisted their enemies—especially in North Russia and Siberia.²⁵ The Y faced a difficult dilemma: it attempted to support the Allied cause *and* also support any troops that needed assistance. The concluding YMCA report summarized, “This very non-partisanship made all partisans suspicious.”²⁶ In the US, Mott’s wartime alignment of American and Christian goals was popular with many mainline Protestants. Other Christian groups rejected his approach.²⁷

In spite of the widespread YMCA optimism, World War I undermined the YMCA’s worldwide advance rather than expanding its influence. Before the war, the American, British, and German associations worked closely as partners in the World Alliance of YMCAs. The war broke the cohesion of this arrangement. Members of the alliance did not come together for a meeting between 1914 and 1920.²⁸ In addition, the global Protestant movement was weakened by the close connection between the churches and the war effort. As one scholar explained, “The identification of the missionary and national causes in wartime led to a serious loss of credibility for missions in the decade after the war.” The American entry into the war reflected the experience of many European nations with an enthusiasm for a holy war. Most Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leaders supported the war effort. The opposition of Quakers and Mennonites was not politely received.²⁹

Evaluating the YMCA’s service among soldiers is not a simple task. In spite of these suspicions and many limitations, the YMCA significantly improved prisoner conditions in the locations where it was able to operate. The results of the YMCA POW relief program may have matched the goals in quality, but not in quantity. The secretaries simply could not serve the vast number of prisoners, and made contact with only a small percentage of them. As mentioned earlier, Russia held 1.5 million inside its borders; 2.5 million Russians were held as prisoners of war or missing in foreign countries. One historian summarized, “The suffering of the POW in the Great War may have been too great a challenge, especially for just one social welfare organization.”³⁰ The YMCA’s own evaluations of this work in Russia express ambivalence and identify both failures and successes. In conclusion, the American YMCA’s attempts to serve soldiers raised more controversy from more critics than any other aspect of the Russian service. This criticism should be evaluated in light of the wider long-term goal of the organization to provide religious, physical, and social support to all groups of Russian youth.

²⁵ Davis and Trani, “The American YMCA and the Russian Revolution,” 479, 483.

²⁶ Taft, et al., *Service with Fighting Men*, 420.

²⁷ See clipping from “The Gospel Message,” published by the Gospel Union Publishing Company, Kansas City, MO, KFYA, Russian Work Restricted, Correspondence and Reports, 1903–1917, Correspondence and Reports, 1915–1916, 11–12.

²⁸ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 41.

²⁹ Nathan D. Showalter, “The End of a Crusade: The Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions and the Great War” (ThD diss., Harvard University, 1990), abstract [no page number], 12–13, 261.

³⁰ Steuer, “Pursuit of an ‘Unparalleled Opportunity,’” 454–55, 458, 473.

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