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Propaganda and Dissent in British Popular Song during the Great War

John Mullen

Maître de Conférences, Laboratoire IMAGER, EA 3958, Université Paris-Est Créteil, 61, Avenue du Général de Gaulle, 94010 Créteil, john.mullen [at] wanadoo.fr

The need to gain and maintain general acceptance for the waging of a war in which casualties would reach unimaginable heights involved what was no doubt the most ambitious propaganda campaign in British history, mobilizing politicians, intellectuals, feminists, trade union leaders and popular heroes such as the music hall stars. It is the relation of popular song with the war propaganda which will be the main subject of our paper, through the study of a large corpus of contemporary songs.

We will argue that this form of propaganda through song was essential to the successful construction of a patriotic consensus, in particular because it could speak to a mass audience who were often wary of declarations coming directly from the moneyed classes. However, contrary to the standard image of music hall songs, jingoism disappeared rapidly once the war had become a war of attrition, to be replaced by hopes for the end of the war and a return to normal living.

The tradition of music hall had long included a capacity to deal with the everyday life and sufferings of ordinary people, and this is evident in some of the wartime songs, almost all of them forgotten today. Resistance to war priorities was possible because of the links of the singers with their audience, and the shared opposition to some of the ruling class's values. It was almost never direct resistance to the war project, but often to the price paid by ordinary people and the absolute lack of priority given to their needs.

These voices of dissent were strictly limited by the "respectability" of music hall theatre owners, and their need not to alienate sections of their audience, but were nevertheless present in music hall songs, though less prominent than in the "trench songs" written and sung by the soldiers themselves. In the last part of the paper we will look at the sarcastic and disillusioned dissent in soldiers' songs.

La Grande Guerre fut l'occasion de la plus grande campagne de propagande de l'histoire de la Grande-Bretagne, campagne qui mobilisa les hommes politiques, les intellectuels, les dirigeants syndicaux, les féministes, tout comme les héros populaires qu'étaient les vedettes du music-hall. Le lien du music-hall avec cette propagande constitue le thème majeur de notre contribution, à travers l'étude d'un grand corpus de chansons de l'époque.

Nous considérons que le rôle de cette propagande chantée fut primordial dans la construction d'un consensus patriotique, du fait qu'elle pouvait communiquer avec un public populaire souvent méfiant à l'égard des déclarations émanant des élites. Pourtant, et contrairement à ce que suggère l'image habituelle d'un music-hall va-t-en-guerre, les chansons guerrières disparurent rapidement, une

fois la guerre enlisée. Elles furent remplacées par des chansons qui rêvaient de la fin du conflit et du retour à la normale.

Le music-hall était un genre qui avait toujours su traiter de la vie quotidienne et des souffrances ordinaires du peuple, et ceci continua durant cette guerre. Une résistance aux priorités guerrières était possible car les chanteurs venaient du même milieu que leur public et partageaient une opposition à certaines des valeurs de l'élite. Il ne s'agit pas, en général, d'une opposition à la guerre en tant que telle, mais au prix excessif payé par les gens ordinaires.

Les espaces de contestation étaient toutefois fortement limités par le besoin de 'respectabilité' des gérants des théâtres et leur besoin de n'offenser personne, et bien moins manifestes que dans les chansons de soldat, inventées par les troupes dans les tranchées.

Première guerre mondiale ; Royaume-Uni ; musique populaire ; propagande ; culture populaire ; résistance

1. Introduction

When the First World War broke out, Britain was still far from democracy – around a third of men, and all women, were still excluded from the franchise. The House of Lords was very powerful and made up purely of hereditary Lords and of bishops. The war was declared by the UK government on behalf of an empire of which the majority of the inhabitants had no semblance of democratic rights. And yet the war in Britain was to be run on the basis of a consensus, of a shared conviction, in particular because conscription was alien to British tradition, and was not brought in until the beginning of 1916. The need to gain general acceptance for the waging of a war in which casualties would reach unimaginable heights involved what was no doubt the most ambitious propaganda campaign in British history, mobilizing politicians, intellectuals, trade union leaders, feminists, and popular heroes such as the music hall stars. It is the relation of the music hall with the war propaganda which will be the main subject of our paper, and we will follow that with an analysis of those voices of dissent or refusal which could make themselves heard in popular song in that most authoritarian of atmospheres, that of total war. We will see that the often-presented image of the “jingoistic music halls” in fact constitutes only a small and very much short-lived part of the reality. Most songs were not about the war, and as the reality of total war became clear, jingoistic songs to the glory of the imperial war effort all but disappeared to be replaced by songs of resignation and dreaming of the end of the conflict.

No history of British music hall during the Great War has yet been written. Our analysis of a large corpus of music hall songs can therefore, we hope, bring something new to a vision of how a particular form of propaganda affected masses of ordinary people. It allows us to approach a discourse which, unlike politicians' speeches or newspaper articles, is embraced enthusiastically by the working classes. These songs are sung in chorus, in hard-won leisure time and in a context partially freed of direct constraints by the elites, who were generally absent from the halls. We hope, then, that these texts can shed more light on popular attitudes than can many sources. Even though the dating of songs cannot be precise, (as it can be in later decades when songs are immediately known across the country on radio), since it takes months for a song to become known, we have nevertheless been able to suggest links between the progress of the war and the rise of certain themes in the songs. We will finish our paper by looking at soldiers' songs, composed and sung by soldiers on active service. In these songs, as we shall see, jingoism and even patriotism are absent; rebellious sarcasm and black humour are dominant.

2. A massive propaganda campaign

If the music hall milieu mobilized for the war with enthusiasm, they were far from being alone. Practically the entirety of civil society dedicated itself to the cause of the Empire. On behalf of the government, Lloyd

George spoke of “the great peaks we had forgotten, of Honour, Duty, Patriotism, and, clad in glittering white, the great pinnacle of Sacrifice, pointing like a rugged finger to Heaven” and he claimed the war would purify the country (quoted in *The Times* 20 September 1914). He was rapidly joined by leading voices from sometimes unexpected quarters.

Union leaders, such as Ben Tillett, a friend of Eleanor Marx who had led the great dockers’ strikes of 1889, threw themselves into the war effort. Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief of the British army at the beginning of the war, praised Tillett publicly for all he had done for the empire. Other union leaders such as Tom Mann took similar stands.

The young Labour party supported the war too, with very few exceptions such as Keir Hardie. Ramsay McDonald stated opposition to the war, but did not campaign against it; on the contrary, he visited the front and praised the courage of British troops (Elton 1939: 69).

The most prominent feminist leaders, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, who until then had been running radical campaigns of direct action for women's votes, declared an end to their campaign and swore loyalty to the Empire's cause. Suffragette prisoners were released, and the name of the newspaper of the Women’s Social and Political Union was changed from *The Suffragette* to *Britannia*. It went on to print fiercely xenophobic anti-German articles (Purvis 2002: 281). The more broadly-based suffragist organization, the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, also supported the war in its great majority, and hoped that this hour of imperial need would give women a chance to demonstrate their capability to contribute to the economy and society in new ways.

The leading intellectuals of the age lined up, almost to a man, to join the struggle. Rudyard Kipling had always been a passionate imperialist, and he was joined in the work of writing pro-war pamphlets for the government by, among others, G. K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle¹ and six professors of history from Oxford University. Even those writers who maintained a reputation as peace-lovers, and who criticized certain aspects of the war, such as H. G. Wells and G. B. Shaw, desired victory for the Empire (O Leary, Daniel and Wisenthal J L Eds. 2006: 5). In 1916, the only time when the anti-war movement in Britain gained significant public support, H G Wells denounced it fiercely in the national press (*The Herald* May 27 1916).

The established Church of England, for its part, saw the war as a sacred duty. The following comment by the Reverend Basil Bourchier was not exceptional: “This truly is a war of ideals; Odin is ranged against Christ, and Berlin is seeking to prove its supremacy over Bethlehem. Every shot that is fired, every bayonet thrust that gets home, every life that is sacrificed, is in very truth ‘for His Name’s sake’” (Quoted in Wilkinson 1996: 254). Anglican voices against the war proved to be exceedingly rare.

The stars of popular music, then, joined this patriotic movement with enthusiasm. Such well-known figures as Harry Lauder, Vesta Tilley and George Robey got involved at once. Lauder organized a tour of Britain with a military band in order to recruit volunteers for the army (Quigley 1916). Vesta Tilley was given the nickname “Britain’s best recruiting Sergeant”. The music hall trade paper, *The Encore* recommended in its editorial that singers and artistes refrain from criticizing the government in wartime. “Only the other day,” it wrote, “we heard an artiste sing a song which was a sort of chipping at the government. It was in bad taste and fell somewhat flat, as might be expected. It is not necessary to cram your patter with patriotic allusions. There are plenty of topics, but please, just now, leave politics alone...” (*The Encore* 1 October 1914).

Theatre managers joined in with gusto. Military bands or invited groups of wounded soldiers were ushered onto the music hall stage to reinforce the war messages (Macdonald 1993: 52)

2.1 Music hall songs as propaganda

The songs sung by the hundreds of music hall artistes in 1914 were frequently infused with war fever and patriotism. They make up a kind of Do-It-Yourself propaganda – not fabricated by some government

¹ “A bloody purging would be good for the country,” wrote Conan Doyle in 1914 (Morrow 2004 :15).

office, but born from imperial feeling, and commercial skill, in a patriotic milieu aiming at respectability. These songs and these stars played a particular role in the government's efforts to rally the nation. Music hall stars were adored by masses of working-class people, and their words could have a very different effect to those of political leaders, largely produced by a narrow social elite. Most of the big music hall stars came from poor backgrounds and spoke in working-class accents; they could communicate to working-class people much more effectively than ministers, generals or bishops.

The location of the music hall experience was also a key part of its efficiency as a propaganda vehicle. To hear the war message on a Saturday night among friends, in an atmosphere of relaxation and recuperation, could move people in a special way. Moreover, all messages transmitted through music appeal emotionally as well as rationally, and they can be repeated and remembered far more effectively than other kinds of messages. And the particularly active form of listening of the music hall audience, who would sing the choruses loudly and merrily at the end of each verse, made the songs tremendously potent. What then were the propaganda songs of the music hall? We need first to look briefly at what music hall was in 1914. It had grown up since the eighteen sixties to become the central form of entertainment for working people in the towns and cities, and a key place for hearing song, in a world where radio had not been dreamt of and gramophones were only for the wealthy. The halls had become giant "variety theatres" dominated by a small number of chains and employing some thousands of entertainers and singers continually touring the country. Determined efforts towards "respectability" had brought in a middle-class audience, and dearer seats, to supplement the core working-class audience, and the music hall had become a family outing.

Half the acts were singing acts, the other half a heady mix of acrobats, short plays, ballet, jugglers, freak acts, faith healers and magicians. The songs, presented on stage and sold in their millions as sheet music, could be playful ditties, tongue-twisters, social satire or sentimental laments, but no doubt comic songs dominated the genre. Songs frequently spoke of everyday life and its difficulties, joys and dreams - alcohol, overcrowded housing, fleeing the rent collector, annoying relatives, bullying friends, dominant wives, dreams of home, of winning a fortune, or of perfect love. These themes were treated in a jaunty manner, as if to exorcise together on a Saturday night the demons which threatened one's world. A fair number of songs were somewhat racy (by contemporary standards). A song about a woman taking the train alone and meeting men with amorous intents, of which the chorus was "She'd never had her ticket punched before," gives something of the flavour. One analyst writes "The music hall was genuine popular culture. It registered the experience of the working class in an idiom that was at once realistic, sentimental, defiant, resigned and, above all, humorous" (Gary Day in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 24 June 2010).

The response of the industry to the outbreak of the war was immediate. Music hall acts liked to be bang up-to-date, and the first war songs appeared within hours. In the specialist press, the songwriters advertised that they would add "a war verse" to any given song for a small fee (*The Encore* August 13 1914). Hundreds of songwriters and thousands of singers set to work to make money from the new theme, while contributing to a patriotic cause they believed in.

As part of our more general study of popular song during the First World War we put together a corpus of just over a thousand songs². Around thirty per cent of the corpus are songs which deal with the war in one way or another. This includes pro-war songs, but also comic songs about rationing, moving songs about being apart, songs about the latest war news, and so on.

2.2 Recruiting

Looking first at those songs which aim at encouraging men to join up, or at justifying the war effort in traditional jingoistic manner, we find such titles as the following : "Three Cheers for the Red White and Blue", "Be a Soldier, Lad of Mine", "The Army of Today's All Right", "Won't you join the army?", "We

² 1 143 songs commercialized in the war years, not including non-commercial songs such as folk songs, activist songs or soldier songs. We believe our corpus represents between a third and a half of the total production, with a strong bias towards the more successful songs.

don't Want to Lose You (but We Think You Ought to Go)", "For the Honour of Dear Old England", "Boys in Khaki, Boys in Blue", "Men of England, You Have Got to Go", "You ought to join", "Our Country's Call", "Let 'em All Come, We're ready", and "March on to Berlin!". There were many more similar songs.

Although songs which celebrate and support the soldiers will continue throughout the war, the recruitment songs disappear rapidly and almost completely after December 1914. All of the above songs except one ("Be a soldier, Lad of Mine") are from 1914.

Indeed, the nature of the war in the popular imagination had changed. The initial impression of a war of movement "over by Christmas" faded. Casualty figures were mounting: in the six weeks after mid-October the first Battle of Ypres left 7 960 British dead, 17 830 missing and 29 562 wounded. The very visible arrival in England of batches of wounded soldiers, and the clear transformation of the war into a war of attrition at the end of 1914, poured considerable amounts of cold water on public, collective, jingoistic singing. The number of volunteers for the Army also fell rapidly, from around 350 000 in September 1914, to around 120 000 a month for most of 1915. The desire for victory remained strong, but getting an audience to sing enthusiastically together in favour of volunteering was much more difficult than before. Music hall artistes don't take risks with their audiences, since they need them to sing heartily along, so the recruitment songs declined immediately. In 1916, as conscription was introduced, recruitment songs were no longer relevant.

A number of early songs mobilize women's seductive discourses, as does this one: "Your King and Country wants you", set to a cheery melody³:

Oh, we don't want to lose you but we think you ought to go./ For your King and your
country both need you so./ We shall want you and miss you/ But with all our might and
main/ We shall cheer you, thank you, kiss you/ When you come home again.

The penultimate line was sometimes given as "bless you", rather than "kiss you", the latter being a risqué expression at this time. A similarly risqué song, successful enough to appear in a "Greatest Hits of 1914"⁴ album of sheet music produced by a major publisher, Francis and Day, was sung on stage by a seductive woman, promising her favours to those who joined the army ; here is the first verse and the chorus :

The Army and the Navy need attention, / The outlook isn't healthy you'll admit, / But
I've got a perfect dream of a new recruiting scheme, / Which I think is absolutely it. / If
only other girls would do as I do/ I believe that we could manage it alone./ For I turn all
suitors from me but the sailor and the Tommy./ I've an army and a navy of my own!
On Sunday I walked out with a soldier/ On Monday I'm taken by a tar/ On Tuesday I
choose a baby boy scout/ On Wednesday a hussar/ On Thursday I go out with a Scottie/
On Friday the Captain of the crew/ But on Saturday I'm willing, if you'll only take the
shilling⁵ / To make a man of any one of you!

The music hall is carrying on with its favourite mix of the comic and the risqué, while putting it at the service of the propaganda campaign.

A similar mix is in evidence in the even more popular 1915 hit by cockney singer Marie Lloyd, "I Do Like Yer, Cockie, Now You've Got Your Khaki on"⁶, which recounts the story of a young working-class man who was not taken seriously by the girl he fancied, but who, once he joined the army, found she wanted to become his wife at once. The audience sang along with the chorus: "Oh I do feel so proud of you / I do, honour bright!/ I'm going to give yer an extra cuddle tonight/ I didn't like you much before you joined the army, John/ But I do like yer, cockie, now you've got yer khaki on!"

³ This song can be heard online at <http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1914.htm>

⁴ At this time there was no "Top Fifty" as there is today to judge which songs were best-sellers. When we refer to a song as a "hit" or a "success", it is either because it appears in a Greatest Hits of the year collection, or we have other evidence for its success through trade newspapers etc.

⁵ To "take the shilling" was to join the army.

⁶ The song can be heard at <http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/1916.htm>

Diverse variants of this sentiment were used to encourage young soldiers. “All the Boys in Khaki Get the Nice Girls” was a great success in 1915, and this theme could still work several years into the war – in January 1918, the trade press reports that the hit song “There’s a Girl for Every Soldier” was being sung by eighteen different artistes in musical shows around the country (*The Era* 2 January 1918)

The famous recruitment poster “What Did You do in the Great War Daddy” played on the guilt that would supposedly be felt in the future by men who did not join the army, and this mobilization of children’s feelings could be used in songs too – “Sergeant Daddy, VC” (1916), “Daddy’s Going to Fight for England” (1914) and “For the Sake of the Motherland, Goodbye Daddy” (1914) were the most notable examples. “Our Khaki Daddy – a War Action Song for Infants” (1915) is a song title which shows that war propaganda was aimed at all ages.

2.3 Uniting the nation and its allies

Several songs aimed at cementing the unity of the UK nation, or of the Empire and its allies. The song “Then They All Sang ‘God Save the King’”, (1914) for instance, presents an Englishman, an Irishman, a Welshman and a Scot, who each sing proudly a song of their own country before joining together to sing the anthem of the Empire.

This ideological work was very necessary: recruiting was difficult in Wales, especially in the Left-wing mining areas (Roynon 2006: 25). Likewise it was very slow in the industrial parts of Scotland, where revolutionary syndicalism had considerable influence (McShane 1978), and in Ireland, where English domination had long been resented.

Other songs emphasize inclusion too, such as “When an Irishman Goes Fighting” (1914), “Michael O’Leary VC” (1915) or “Cockney in Khaki” (1915), whereas some songs of regional identity serve a similar purpose. “Remember Where you Come from, Good Old Lancashire!” (1915) presents Lancashire men as better fighters for the empire than others.

The song “Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein” (1916), as well as being anti-Semitic, underlined the call for Jews to be integrated into the war effort. The sing-along chorus invites the audience to celebrate the Jewish soldiers’ participation:

Sergeant Solomon Isaacstein/ He’s the pet of the fighting line/ Oy, Oy, Oy! / Give three
hearty cheers! / For the only Jewish Scotsman in the Irish Fusiliers!

The verses play on hostile stereotypes of Jews – Solomon sets up a pawn shop in the trenches “with money lent at ninety per cent”, and, when the three unexploded German bombs he is using as a sign explode, he is almost killed, an event presented as outrageously funny. The widespread anti-Semitism of the time is clearly visible (see Dickason and Cervantes 2002: 181), at the same time as the desire for Jewish participation in the national effort.

Praise for British allies inspired a series of songs. “Our Brave Colonials” (1914) recalled the importance of Canadian, Indian and Australian troops in the war, while “America Answers the Call” (1917) reacted to the entry of the USA into the war in January 1917. Continental allies also had a few (sometimes patronizing) songs dedicated to them. The first months of the war, when Germany invaded Belgium and the Belgian government decided to fight rather than capitulate, produced a series of songs which worked in parallel with the propaganda campaign about “the rape of Belgium” run by the press. Here are some titles: “Bravo, Little Belgium”, “Belgium Put the Kibosh up the Kaiser”, “Three Cheers for Little Belgium”, “Well Done, Little Ones, Bravo! Belgian boys”.

No later songs mentioned Belgium, but France figured in a few pieces, such as the following:

“We’ll Fight for the King and France” (1914), “Good Luck, Little French Soldier Man” (1914), “France is Growing Bigger Every Day”, (1917) “America and Good Old France, You’re Standing Side by Side” (1918). Titles such as “Good Luck, Little French Soldier Man” do seem to show the automatic paternalism of British sentiment towards other countries’ soldiers.

One 1915 number reacts to presence of black regiments fighting alongside British ones. Black battalions from the Gold Coast, the West Indies and South Africa fought on the Western Front, in addition to troops from India. In this song, the black troops are congratulated for their fighting spirit, but all with a heavy dose of patronizing racism. The narrator in this case is a black South African soldier, who insists that:

“Germany has found that the colours won't run/ No matter how you shoot/ We always stand our ground/
And John Bull's very proud of his little khaki coon!⁷”

The sing-along chorus continues : “I'm not a common darkie/ That's why I'm dressed in khaki/ One of the boys that helped to bear the brunt/ We've been very busy at the front (...) / I'm an absent minded beggar/
But everybody's proud of/ John Bull's little khaki coon!”

If all these songs work hard at selling an inclusive vision of the imperial community, a few work at constructing the denigrated Other, who does not deserve to belong. So, as well as portraying the volunteer or conscript soldier as a hero, it was naturally found useful to portray the conscientious objector as an object of vilification. In 1916, military conscription was brought in. Unlike in many countries, the concept of conscientious objection was recognized, and sixteen thousand men registered as conscientious objectors (Goodall 2010: 1). Their ideological position was little understood – the portrayal of them as simply “slackers” – those who refused to do their share in the unquestionably necessary work of defeating Germany – was generally accepted. “The Conscientious Objector's Lament”, a 1916 hit, presents, in a comic tone, the conscientious objector/narrator as an effeminate, probably homosexual, coward (“I don't object to fighting Hun but should hate them fighting me”), and a couple of other songs, as well as a number of music hall sketches repeat this message.

2.4 Cheer up songs

Even after the disastrous Dardanelles campaign in 1915 and the terrible numbers of dead at the Somme in the summer of 1916, acceptance of the war remained general – there was “a job to do”, and to consider the war as wrong or unimportant might make it feel that “our boys” had died in vain. Songs to help people keep going despite the hardships, the absence of loved ones and the worry this engendered, came to the fore. Already in 1914, two of the most successful hit songs – “It's a Long Way to Tipperary” and “Pack Up Your Troubles” – had been such generic cheer-up songs:

Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile/ While you've a Lucifer
to light your fag; smile boys, that's the style/ What's the use of worrying? It never was
worthwhile – so/ Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile.

Later cheer-up songs included “Are We Downhearted? No!” (1914), “We've Got to Put up with it Now” (1916), “Slog on, Slog on, for 1917” (1917), “On the Other Side of a Big, Black Cloud” (1917), “We Must Keep on Keeping on”(1918), “It's No Use Worrying over Yesterday” (1918), and “Every Day is One Day Nearer”(1918). It is immediately noticeable that many of these songs recognize the heavy weight of the temptation to despair and hope to guard against it with resigned but cheerful defiance – we are far from gung-ho, warmongering songs here. War is not celebrated, but is treated as music hall songs had previously treated other catastrophes of working-class life. Other songs underline the duty of civilians to be cheerful to in order to “support our troops”, such as “Send the Boys a Little Snapshot of the Ones They've Left Behind” (1916) or “Send Him a Cheerful Letter” (1917).

2.5 Dreaming of coming home

Moving a little further away again from enthusiasm for the war, we come to what is no doubt the largest single category of wartime songs: songs dreaming of home. The displacement of millions of people for war purposes was absolutely unique in British history up to that time, and “home” and “regional” songs were understandably legion. Indeed, as the following table shows, “home” was by far the most common word appearing in song titles over the whole of the war period.

Presence of certain key words in the title of songs produced between 1914 and 1918 (Base: 1 143 song titles)	
Home 57 + “Blighty” ⁸	69
12	

⁷ “Coon” is an offensive slang word for a black person.

Girl 62 + lass 6	68
Boy 31 + lad 26	57
Love	44
Soldier 33+ Tommy 9	42
Song 28+sing 13	41
Ireland 6 + Irish 30	36
War	18
Mother	18
King	10
Kaiser	8
Empire	6
Hun ⁹	2
Lancashire	6
God	4
Victory	3

The “dream of home” songs had titles such as the following : “When Tommy Comes Marching Home” (1914), “The Homes they Leave Behind” (1914), “It’s a Long Way to Go Home” (1914), “Save Your Kisses till the Boys Come Home” (1915), “Tell My Daddy to Come Home Again” (1915), “On his First Day Home on Leave”(1916), “Blighty, the Soldiers’ Home Sweet Home”(1916), “The Road Back Home” (1916), “When You’re a Long Way from Home” (1916), “Back to my Home Once More” (1917), “I Love That Dear Old Home of mine” (1917), “It’s the Welcome Home that Makes it Home” (1918).

The most successful song of the last two years of the war – “Keep the homes fires burning” – is a notable example. The sing-along chorus goes:

Keep the home fires burning/ Though your hearts are yearning/ Though the boys are far
away / They dream of you/ There's a silver lining/ In the dark clouds shining/ Turn the
dark clouds inside out/ Till the boys come home.

Unfortunately, the limited space of this article does not allow us to analyse in more detail this table of key words.

2.6 Notable absences in the songs

What is not mentioned in popular culture is often as interesting as what is mentioned. Notably absent in the wartime music hall songs is expression of anti-German feeling. There are a few songs of insult against the Kaiser, or ridicule of his institutions. “My Old Iron Cross” (1916) mocks the German bravery medal, saying “Over there in Germany they’re giving them away/ You can have a dozen if you shout ‘hurray’”. “Hoch, Hoch the Kaiser” (1914) mocks German jingoism. There are however very few xenophobic songs against Germans as such. This is certainly not because the music hall was impervious to xenophobic sentiment – quite the contrary. And indeed, in the same music halls, one could see theatre sketches of a clearly xenophobic anti-German nature. But it is one thing to watch an anti-German sketch and another, to sing along with an anti-German chorus. This second would require a real emotional commitment from the whole of the audience present; singers preferred to propose for sing-along more consensual messages unlikely to attract any opposition. Certainly none present would object to singing of hope for the end of the war or of defiance in adversity, but direct hatred of the “enemy” might not go down so well. This is despite the fact that there certainly existed a vocal and active group who had extremely strong feelings against Germans as individuals, as the anti-German riots, in 1914 and in 1917, demonstrate (Van Emden and Humphries 2003: 61).

⁸ The word “Blighty” is used for “England” only in an affectionate context where it is equivalent to “home”.

⁹ “Hun” is an insult word for “German”.

One or two songs do attack the Germans. One from 1914 accuses them of deliberately targeting Red Cross ambulances, and goes on to explain that the soldiers “Have gone to teach the vulture that murder isn’t culture.” Another, entitled “The Khaki Tramp” (1915) enjoins soldiers to “Stick to your guns/ Wipe out those Huns/ Remember we’re proud of the empire’s brave sons/ Make no mistake/ The Germans will quake/ Kaiser and Moltke their armies you’ll break!”

Another major absence in the music hall songs is that of death and killing. Music hall songs have as their primary purpose to comfort the audience on a Saturday night. So, whereas war poets such as Wilfred Owen, Edmund Blunden or Siegfried Sassoon give graphic or poetic details of death, music hall does not. Just occasionally, a song will talk about a glorious death. The singing star Harry Lauder, whose enthusiasm for the war was unflinching even after the loss of his own son, (See Lauder 1918) did not hesitate to glorify dying as a martyr for one’s country. “Men don’t cry here when they die, they smile,” he recited in his 1918 piece “Granny’s Laddie”, and he insisted on the importance of how proud a recruit’s future children would be of his actions in the war. Another 1898 song “Break the News to Mother” which told of a young lad who died to save his country’s flag on the battlefield, was revived for the purposes of the war.

3 Resistance to war priorities

Let us now move on to the question of dissent. The major events of the war from the point of view of the working class audiences – the introduction of conscription, the massive wave of casualties on the Somme, the glimpsed possibilities of peace in 1916, the introduction of rationing in February 1918, and the rollercoaster of military fortunes in the Spring and Summer of that year – will sometimes produce songs which reflect dissenting opinions on these events.

3.1 The expression of dissent

Open opposition to stated empire war aims was very much marginalized in Britain, and particularly so before 1916. The actual empire war aims as revealed in the Treaty of Versailles were little known and little discussed¹⁰. This situation was caused by the fact that practically all the established organizations one might have expected to produce a structured anti-war discourse (political parties, trade unions, feminist organizations) were in favour of the war and not inclined to contest the official discourse which claimed the war was for freedom and democracy against tyranny and barbarism.

Dissent was visible however, concerning the distribution of sacrifice within British society. In particular, the campaign against conscription slowly gained significant support and in September 1915 the Trades Union Congress voted against the introduction of conscription. A campaign to stop the war also rose up in 1916 and was powerful enough for meetings to be held in most towns, big or small, across the country. But such a movement remained a minority one, and its existence, if no doubt it could help to reduce the presence of warlike songs on the music hall stage, could not give rise to a wave of anti-war songs. Nevertheless, as André Loez (Loez 2010) points out for the case of France, there are very many forms of refusal of war apart from open political opposition to war aims. It has been noted that around half of all the British soldiers who fought in the Great War refused to join the army until obliged to do so by the conscription laws of 1916 (Bet-El 2009). They refused in the face of probably the greatest propaganda campaign in the history of Britain, and this no doubt reflects a certain lack of adhesion to the imperial project despite the rarity of articulated opposition.

Much resistance was evident against the effect on working class living standards of the war. Although unemployment fell, and women in particular had more employment opportunities, inflation was high and profiteering rampant, especially before the very late introduction of rationing. Hence, for example, there were 3 227 strikes between 1915 and 1918, making a total of 18 million strike days. The most significant conflicts were the 1915 dockers’ strike, and the engineering strikes of March 1916, April 1917 and April 1918. The number of trade unionists rose from 4.1 million in 1913 to 6.5 million in 1918, despite the fact

¹⁰ At the Treaty of Versailles 4 600 000 square kilometres and 13 million new subjects were added to the British Empire. These aims were clearly understood in elite circles (Roynon 2006:14).

that over five million men were in the army and therefore not able to join trade unions. The strikers and trade unionists were not generally opposed to winning the war, but their actions represent a resistance to war priorities.

3.2 Dissent at the music hall

How was dissent visible in the songs? The music hall did not easily allow protest songs to filter through. In later decades, when the production and selling of records is at the centre of the music industry, it will be possible to produce protest songs for a niche market : if five or ten per cent of the potential audience buy a record, that is easily enough for the record to be something of a success. In the music hall, where filling the huge theatres, in order to pay off the massive investments tied up in them, is the priority of the theatre managers, there is little incentive to take political risks. Upsetting a section of their audience, perhaps even risking losing a music hall licence which must be regularly renewed, was anathema to the music hall managers and theatre chains, and they generally kept carefully to consensual politics. This is why, even in years like 1910-1914 when massive and popular strikes occurred, one did not see an emergence of any significant number of pro-strike songs in the halls.

These economic and social forces which militate against the expression of dissent in music halls mean that such radical opinions as are expressed in the music hall can be taken to be particularly notable and significant, and cannot be dismissed as anecdotal.

3.3 Anti-war songs

For this reason we find practically no anti-war songs in the British music hall after August 1914. There were however one or two such songs just before the outbreak of war. A socialist activist in Glasgow, Harry McShane, writes in his memoirs:

We felt that we were speaking for the masses in our opposition to the war. Just prior to the outbreak there was a music-hall song which really caught on – You could hear it sung everywhere, in the workshops and on the streets. It went : “Little man, little man/ You want to be a soldier/ You are your mother’s only son/ Never mind about the gun/ Stay at home/ Fight for her all you can.” In the socialist movement we were surprised and delighted by the song’s popularity. But the day war was declared that song just died; it was amazing the way that nobody was whistling it (McShane 1978:61).

Another anti-war song, which was a success in the United States before their involvement in the war, became well known in England in 1915. This is “I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier”, whose haunting sing-along chorus goes as follows:

I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier/ I brought him up to be my pride and joy/ Who dares to put a musket on his shoulder/ To shoot some other mother's darling boy? / Let nations arbitrate their future problems/ It's time to lay the sword and gun away/ There'd be no war today/ If mothers all would say/ “I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier”¹¹.

This song is listed by one of the chroniclers of British music hall in his list of the 38 songs which had marked the industry in Britain in 1915 (Kilgarriff 1999:587). This song became the theme song of anti-war movements around the world. In Australia, it was sung at anti-war meetings organized by Adela Pankhurst, a daughter of Emmeline who had broken with her mother's defence of the British Empire (Purvis 2002: 277)¹².

¹¹ Other American anti-war popular songs include “Are You Going to Shoot Some Other Girlie’s Daddy? – A Child’s Plea for Peace”, which was issued in 1915.

¹² Two years later, two counter-versions of this song were put into circulation by supporters of the war - one was entitled “I'm Glad I Raised My Boy to Be a Soldier” and the other “I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Slacker”.

3.4 Mocking or criticizing war priorities

The music hall songs of dissent concentrate mainly on criticizing governmental or other excesses. A few criticized directly patriotic warmongering fervour. The 1917 song “We Don't Want a Lot of Flags a-Flying When We Come Marching Home” declares:

We don't want a lot of flags a-flying when we come marching home/ We don't want
your big brass bands!/ We don't want a lot of speechifying/ And we don't want a lot of
waving hands!/ We don't want a lot of interfering/ But we do want to find the girls we
left behind.

In this way, patriotic expression perceived as excessive was opposed; others criticized the excesses of the recruitment machine, or mocked some of the “heroes” who volunteered.

A 1915 song, “A Soldier's Reminiscences”, laughed at soldiers who joined the army when they were really too old to be of much use: “I am an old Soldier with hair iron grey/ My mem'ry's not bad tho' I'm sixty today/ Or else sixty two; I can't be sixty four, / Well, maybe I am, but I'm not a day more./ I can reckon it out, I was born in – dear me!/ Why at that rate I must be turned seventy-three!”. Another piece, “Forty Nine and in the Army” (1916), takes up a similar theme.

Conscription, brought in from 1916, gave rise to some bitter songs, since the extreme difficulty of being exempted military service, for any reason whatsoever, was a cause of discontent (Bet-El 2009: 44). It was up to local civilian tribunals to decide whether or not men could be excused, and within six months, 750 000 men had applied for exemption (Ellsworth-Jones 2008: 64). These tribunals were of widely varying composition across the country, but each had to include one military representative, whose opinion was crucial. A very popular song from 1917 attacked this system. Entitled “The Military Representative” its farcical story line shows the tribunal approving for active service a series of ever more unsuitable candidates, due to the intervention of the Military representative. Here is an extract:

The Muckemdyke Tribunal sat in state the other day/ To give or else refuse exemptions
in the usual way/ The first case was a man who'd had a wooden leg from birth/ The
chairman said “Exempted, now hop home for all you're worth!”/ But the military
representative got up and shouted “Bosch/ a wooden leg - By Gosh! / Such tales will
never wash!

They called upon the next case/ Then a woman rose and said/ I'm very sorry gentleman/
But my poor husband is dead/ The chairman said “Well he's exempted, he needn't come
again.”/ “Oh, thank you.” said the widow as she ran to catch a train/ But the military
representative got up and shouted “Hi!!/ How dare your husband die! / He was A1 in
July/ What say ma'am? He's in heaven now? / Well you just let him know/ I'm sending a
Sergeant to fetch him back/ For of course he's got to go!”

They called on Rip van Winkle next and smiling all serene/ He mumbled “Gents, I'm 91,
you've got me down 19!”/ (...) but the military representative got up and shouted “Say!”/
Don't let him run away, though he's 91 today!/ There are men down at the War office as
old as he I know!/ And I'm sure they're a damn site sillier/ So of course he's got to go!”

The song, sung by Ernest Hastings, was extremely well received. At the Coliseum in London, it took three curtain calls (*The Encore* 27 September 1917).

It is far from simple to find out exactly what popular songs meant to the people who were singing along with them at the time, and a number of humorous songs seem to have something of an ambiguous nature. They punctured, with heavy irony, official myths about smoothly-running national effort leading to inevitable victory, but without directly attacking the government or the war priorities. The well-known 1917 hit “Oh It's a Lovely War” is a famous example. The narrators are soldiers:

Up to your waist in water,/ Up to your eyes in slush,/ Using the kind of language/ That
makes the sergeant blush./ Who wouldn't join the army?/ That's what we all inquire/
Don't we pity the poor civilian,/ Sitting beside the fire ?/ Oh, oh, oh, it's a lovely war,/ Who
wouldn't be a soldier, eh?/ Oh, it's a shame to take the pay/ As soon as reveille is
gone,/ We feel just as heavy as lead,/ But we never get up till the sergeant/ Brings our
breakfast up to bed !

Vesta Tilley's 1916 hit "A bit of a Blighty One" shows a refusal to resonate with official war discourses. The narrator is a wounded soldier, delighted to be living in luxury in a hospital and to have escaped from the war (a "blighty one", in soldiers' slang is a wound serious enough to get one out of the war, but from which one will fully recover). An extract: "When I think about my dugout/ Where I dare not stick my mug out/ I'm glad I've got a bit of a Blighty One/ (...) When they wipe my brow with sponges/ and they feed me with blancmanges/ I'm glad I've got a bit of a Blighty One." The soldier is not accused of having inflicted the wound on himself, but it was known that such things were commonplace. Almost four thousand British soldiers were court-martialled for self-inflicted wounds during the war, and in battle conditions it was often not too difficult to get away without detection. Calculations about how to get wounded were a part of everyday reflection for a large number of soldiers (Macdonald 1993: 97). A song like "Lloyd George's Beer" (1917), which on the surface protests about a new law limiting the alcohol content of different drinks, may have acted as a stand-in for general discontent with government priorities. Singing a lusty chorus criticizing Lloyd George by name could please the working class audience; nevertheless, the songwriter is careful to begin his song with a patriotic guarantee: "We shall win the war/ We shall win the war/ As I've said before/ We shall win the war." The case reminds us that the reception of songs can be complex and they cannot be reduced to their surface message. There are quite a number of other songs which could be analysed which reflect a similar phenomenon: without opposing the war or the need for victory, they sharply distance themselves from war propaganda and take up, in one way or another, the defence of the "little man" caught up in the dreadful war machine.

3.5 A freer tone after the war

Once the armistice was signed, quite naturally, the authoritarian atmosphere and the force of propaganda wound down. A few songs then attacked the myth of national heroic unity in the war effort. Tom Clare's successful song, recorded in 1919 and entitled "What Did You Do in the Great War, Daddy" presents a series of characters who explain their role in the ironically named "Great, great war". One was a young grocer who had been exempted from conscription by "taking no [rationing] coupons from the woman next door, whose husband was on the tribunal"; a second had taken a home defence job of no importance: "I guarded the local reservoir and saw that no-one drank it"; while the munitions worker is presented as having made a good living out of rising wages: "Me and my missus went in shops and bought each thing they showed us/ I changed my shirt each week and bought two pianos with my bonus/ And that's what I did in the Great War, Daddy".

Some songs demanded revenge on profiteers, who had made a fortune from the war while so many young men had given their lives. "The profiteering profiteers" in 1920, is one example, and the more explicitly titled song from the same year, "What shall we do with the profiteers? Shoot them all!".

More notable still is a song from 1920 which sold well enough to be reprinted in the annual collection of best sellers of one of Francis and Day. The song is called "Pop Goes the Major!" and explains the intention of the narrator to find his wartime military superior in order to kill him, providing that someone else has not got there first.

When the first the Armistice was signed/ We took an oath, made up our mind/ When we
got home we'd try to find/ Our Late S.M. or bust.
He thinks he's been forgotten quite/ We'll soon see him in a different light/ We're going
to set fire to his house tonight/ Pop goes the major!
Some chaps we knew spent two weeks leave/ In hunting Sergeant Major Reeve/ They all
had something up their sleeve/ - a bayonet or gun!

4. Soldier songs

We will finish by looking at a completely different genre of music, but one which, just like the music hall, belonged above all to the working-classes: this is the genre of "soldier songs". These songs, written and sung by soldiers on active service, and of which only a few filtered through to the music halls, contained

many more elements of resistance to war ideology. Several collections of these songs, made at the time, or after the war, exist (Nettleingham 1917, Brophy and Partridge 1965 and Arthur 2001, to cite three).

As part of our wider project on wartime popular song, we have constituted a corpus of 168 soldiers' songs, though many are only a few lines long. They are normally set to well-known traditional tunes or hymn tunes. Army discipline, inefficiency, and traditional patriotic values, were mercilessly lampooned in these songs, and protest against superiors was one of the most common themes. The British Army was extremely hierarchical, and the experience of officers was very different from that of "other ranks". Much better food, much more leave, no marching with packs, separate hospital facilities if wounded, different types of punishment for desertion: everything about the life of an officer differed from that of the ranks. Although lower-level officers risked death at least as much as ordinary soldiers, and soldiers generally distinguished between Staff Officers a long way behind the lines, and those officers who lived in danger, the soldiers' songs attack both equally.

In the songs, officers are generally presented as incompetent, cowardly, intellectually limited and cruel. There are dozens of songs along the lines of this one: "We've got a sergeant major/ Who's never seen a gun/ He's mentioned in dispatches/ For drinking privates' rum/ But when he sees old Jerry¹³/ You should see the bugger run!" Titles include "Ode to Corporal", "If the Sergeant Steals Your Rum", and "Now I'm a General at the Ministry

One well-known ditty wished that a particularly unpopular general, Cameron Shute would get shot: "For shit may be shot at odd corners/ And paper supplied there to suit/ But a shit would be shot without mourners/ If someone shot that shit Shute."

Many other songs complained about the treatment of the soldiers. A parody on God Save the King protested about being underfed, a not infrequent situation (Bet-El 2009: 53): "Happy and glorious/ One slice between the four of us/ Thank God there's no more of us/ God Save the King!" Another, entitled "Medicine and Duty" ironized about how difficult it was to get sick leave in the army. Otherwise more general protest about army values and pride was prevalent: "We are Fred Karno's army/ The ragtime infantry/ We cannot fight, we cannot shoot/ No bloody use are we" commented one favourite. A few of the songs are still well known today, like this one, which is sung to the hymn tune "What a Friend I Have in Jesus":

When this bloody war is over/No more soldiering for me/ When I get my civvie clothes on/ Oh how happy I will be!/ No more church parade on Sundays/ No more asking for a pass/ You can tell the Sergeant Major/ To stick his passes up his arse.

Other titles include "Where are Our Uniforms?", "I've Lost My Rifle and My Bayonet", "My Tunic is Out at the Elbows", "I don't Want to Be a Soldier", "Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire" and "We are the Ragtime Flying Corps".

Several soldier songs defend the idea of getting wounded deliberately so as to escape the war, or celebrate the fact that a superior officer has been killed, while one or two sympathize with the ordinary German soldier on the other side of No Man's Land:

Keep your head down, Alleyman/ Keep your head down, Alleyman/ Last night in the pale moonlight/ I saw you, I saw you/ You were mending broken wire,/ When we opened rapid fire/ If you want to see your father in the fatherland/ Keep your head down, Alleyman!

This rapid look over soldiers' song purposes only to underline the fact that conditions of production and reception of songs, commercial or otherwise, is a major determinant of their content. If music hall songs could reflect some dissent, soldiers' songs could go considerably further.

5. Conclusion

Our use of a large corpus of songs has allowed us to evaluate and contextualize music hall themes in a way that has rarely been done, and enables us to see which songs are typical and which exceptional, something which in analysis of popular cultural production seems to us to be indispensable. To sum up, it

¹³ That is, the German army.

seems that the music hall mobilized seriously for the war but that the priorities of its working-class audience had to be taken into account: the majority of music hall songs from 1914 to 1918 were not about the war, and the majority of the songs about the war were not warmongering songs, but dealt with the hardships and pain, or the comic sides of the war experience. “Home” rapidly and thoroughly overtook “empire” or even “victory” as a priority value. Once again, music hall demonstrated that, in the words of Colin MacInnes (1967: 177): “The music hall was an art not of social protest – that would be claiming far too much for it – but it was an art of working-class self-assertion.” It was left to other genres, less influenced by worried theatre managers with one eye on the balance sheet and the other on the licensing authorities, to produce more angry rebellion against the damage wrought by the war effort on ordinary people: the soldiers’ songs are the principal example.

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