Recounting the Past

A Student Journal of Historical Studies

Department of History

At Illinois State University

Recounting the Past

Editors
Christine Varga-Harris
Georgia Tsouvala
Daniel Savell, Graduate Assistant

Associate Editors
Kyle Ciani
Ron Gifford
Kathryn Jasper
Katrin Paehler
Keith Pluymers

Note from the Editor

Through its journal *Recounting the Past*, the History Department is honored to recognize the research excellence of its undergraduate and graduate students, and the dedicated mentorship of its faculty. Alongside these students and faculty, many thanks go out to individuals who invested their time and effort at various stages of the production process. These include the team at University Marketing and Communication that guided the journal through the publication process, and Sharon Foiles, Administrative Aide in the History Department, who served as the liaison with Marketing and Communication, as well as provided her organizational expertise to realize the project.

Cover Image

The photograph on the cover of this issue depicts American delegates to the International Congress of Women, held in the Netherlands in 1915, aboard the Noordam. Among them are the feminist and peace activist Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, social activist and writer Jane Addams, and president of the Boston Telephone Operators Union Annie E. Malloy.

Source: George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Catalog, https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2014698779/

Table of Contents

Soldier-Engineers: Siege Warfare and *Virtus*
in *De Bello Gallico*

By John Kunst

Constant warfare and vast territorial expansion characterized the final two centuries of the Roman Republic. While the conquests of North Africa, Greece, and Spain involved multiple wars fought over several generations, the speed with which Julius Caesar conquered the various regions of Gaul remained unmatched by any other general in the Republic. Caesar managed to bring Gaul into the Roman imperium in less than a decade. In doing so, he not only annexed a huge territory into the Roman state, but also checked the specter of "Northern Barbarians" that had threatened Rome for centuries. The Gauls defended their homeland fiercely but were unable to decisively defeat Caesar on the battlefield and resist the Roman occupation. Several military imbalances accounted for this outcome but perhaps the greatest among them was the Roman superiority in siege warfare. Caesar's legionaries were skilled engineers, capable of manipulating the environment, constructing siege engines, and erecting fortifications at an astonishing pace. These soldiers were conditioned for the harsh realities of siege warfare, and better equipped than their Gaul counterparts to function within the difficult moral context of a siege. The Roman legions' capacity for engineering allowed Caesar to alter the circumstances in which his army was engaged and enabled him to surmount overwhelming Gallic resistance to his conquest. Caesar's success in the Gallic Wars, therefore, resulted from his ability to implement siege tactics and technologies in response to complex tactical situations, as well as the continued willingness of his soldiers to undergo especially harsh battlefield conditions.

Caesar himself remains the most complete and authoritative primary source for his wars in Gaul, which leaves good reason to be suspicious of his account of events. Doubt exists surrounding the nature of the composition of *De Bello Gallico*, particularly concerning whether the work was written as a single text at the conclusion of the Gallic Wars or whether it was composed in pieces annually, book by book, at the end of each campaigning season. Recent scholarship tends to favor the latter view, that each book was written separately.[1] Narrative inconsistencies between books suggest that they were likely not composed concurrently.[2] Annual composition would have allowed

---

[1] Kimberly Kagan, *The Eye of Command* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 111.
[2] Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar: Life of a Colossus* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 188.

Caesar to communicate his account of events quickly to the senate and people of Rome and frame the conflict in terms most beneficial to his political ends. These regular updates would help explain the consistent support Caesar is believed to have received from the Roman plebs prior to the onset of civil war.[3] Annual composition also lends credibility to the details of Caesar's narrative, as it would place less time between Caesar's recording of events and the events themselves.

This interpretation, however, raises concerns over what Caesar's motives might have been while composing the work, and the degree to which his recollection of events was skewed by contemporary politics. In any case, historians agree that while Caesar certainly attempted to portray himself as positively as possible, his narrative avoided blatant lies and outright fabrication. Instead, he emphasized and embellished the details that best suited his political agenda.[4] Adrian Goldsworthy points out that obvious lies would have been easily spotted by Caesar's audience. Rather, Goldsworthy argues, Caesar framed issues in a positive light by including details that were beneficial to him and ignoring the ones that were not.[5]

Questions remain, however, concerning which events Caesar recorded accurately and which were intentionally misrepresented. Kimberly Kagan argues that Caesar's battle narratives in *De Bello Gallico* reflected his legitimate understanding of events, relatively untarnished by political concerns. She identifies a trend in Caesar's writing wherein he described his earliest battles in simple terms, and he did not identify causal relationships between events on the battlefield.[6] Over time, however, Caesar's descriptions became more detailed, and he described the relationships between events with greater awareness and precision. This narrative development, Kagan argues, reflected Caesar's genuine improvement as a general.[7] As he fought more battles against the Gauls, he became more capable of recognizing and responding to important developments on the battlefield, which was reflected in his writing. Caesar's descriptions of battle in *De Bello Gallico*, therefore, can be accepted as reasonably accurate portrayals of events according to his understanding of which battlefield developments were most significant.

Caesar's commentary on the Gallic Wars is divided into eight books, with each describing a single year of campaigning in Gaul. Caesar composed the first seven books, but book eight was finished by his legate, Aulus Hirtius. Book seven, then, represents Caesar's final words on the Gallic Wars, and

---

[3] Christopher B. Krebs, "More than Words. The *Commentarii* in their Propagandistic Context," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Writings of Julius Caesar*, ed. Luca Grillo and Christopher B. Krebs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 41-42.
[4] Krebs, "More than Words," 30; Kagan, *The Eye of Command*, 109.
[5] Goldsworthy, *Caesar*, 190.
[6] Kagan, *The Eye of Command*, 124.
[7] Kagan, *The Eye of Command*, 136.

therefore served as his intended conclusion to the work. Accordingly, the Gallic revolt in book seven is described as the most significant and dramatic attempt made by the Gauls to repel the Roman advance. It was at this moment that the Gauls were most unified, under the leadership of Vercingetorix of the Avernii, and consequently, most dangerous. The Gauls enjoyed superior numbers and familiarity with their local terrain. As Caesar's military presence and influence in Gallic politics continued to grow, they became increasingly motivated by appeals to liberty and the desire to protect their homelands and families from foreign occupation.[8] They pushed Caesar and his legions to their absolute limits and forced the Romans to find creative tactical solutions to battlefield complications. In many cases, these solutions came as a result of the Roman advantage in siege warfare.

Caesar's narrative emphasis on the application of siege technology and the centrality of sieges within book seven of *De Bello Gallico* demonstrate how integral Caesar considered siege warfare to be towards his success. Amounting to more than forty out of the ninety chapters in book seven, the descriptions of Caesar's sieges of Avaricum, Gergovia, and Alesia in 52 BC account for nearly half of his narrative of the campaign against Vercingetorix.[9] In fact, the most significant non-siege battle in book seven was not led by Caesar himself, but by his lieutenant, Labienus. Labienus' confrontation with the Gallic general Camulogenus accounts for only six chapters.[10] The most consequential of book seven's conflicts, then, were fought under siege conditions. The scorched-earth policy implemented by Vercingetorix and the Gauls' refusal to confront the Romans in a decisive open-field battle necessitated this frequent use of siege tactics and technology.

Whether opposed to an enemy, who would not face them in open battle, or finding themselves in a position where fighting from behind fortifications was preferable, the legions had a number of engineering solutions available to them. Their ability to construct large siegeworks and fortifications allowed them to both invest in heavily fortified enemy positions and defend themselves against numerically superior foes. Artillery pieces such as *scorpiones* and *ballistae* were often mounted atop ramparts to defend important positions and could also be used offensively to clear a wall of defenders and protect siegeworks.[11] In order to assault enemy walls, the Romans often chose to construct an *agger*, which was a long ramp made of earth and timber. *Aggeres* could be built to allow access to the wall for an assault party, but more often were used to

---

[8] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.1.
[9] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.18-7.29, 7.37, 7.42, 7.44-7.52, 7.69-7.90.
[10] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.58-7.63.
[11] Konstantin Nossov, *Ancient and Medieval Siege Weapons: A Fully Illustrated Guide to Siege Weapons and Tactics* (Guildford: The Lyons Press, 2005), 48.

provide siege towers with a clear path to the enemy defenses.[12] Roman siege towers were large, rolling, wooden structures which sheltered soldiers approaching the enemy wall. Designed to surpass the height of the enemy fortifications, they were most often used as a vantage point to allow artillery and missile units to fire upon the defenders. Some towers housed battering rams as well.[13] Besieging soldiers used portable wooden sheds called *vineae* to protect themselves while constructing more substantial siegeworks and approaching the wall.[14] Large shields transported on wheels, known as *plutei*, protected soldiers while they hurled javelins and other projectiles upon the defending enemies.[15]

Among the most powerful tools available to the Romans in the capture of a city was the practice of circumvallation. Circumvallating a city involved the creation of a continuous linear barrier around the target. This generally consisted of ditches, ramparts and palisades, and could be further reinforced with towers and artillery as needed.[16] This barrier prevented the city's defenders from receiving supplies and reinforcements, while also protecting the besieging soldiers from assaults by relieving armies and the defending garrison. In this manner, Roman legions could capture even the most well-defended positions. Given sufficient time, the act of circumvallation placed the onus upon the defending garrison to either sally dangerously into Roman fortifications, or risk slowly being starved into submission. Isolating the defenders from the outside world would have also been a severe detriment to their morale. It signaled both that the Romans had no intention of desisting from the siege, and that there would be no escape should they succeed. The construction of such a large and extensive siegeworks, however, required a significant expenditure of time and energy on behalf of the besieging soldiers.[17] Consequently, circumvallation was generally employed when a direct assault of the target was deemed too difficult or costly.

The siege tactics and technologies available to Roman commanders presented them with solutions to difficulties encountered while on campaign. This afforded them a greater degree of flexibility in their tactics and allowed them to approach problems in a variety of ways. Despite this advantage, some historians have argued that Romans conceived of sieges as highly regular and predictable affairs. Josh Levithan asserts that "more than any other sort of ancient conflict, the siege followed a regular, predictable pattern – a

---

[12] Nossov, *Ancient and Medieval Siege Weapons*, 119; Duncan Campbell, *Siege Warfare in the Roman World 146 BC-AD 378* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2005), 20.
[13] Nossov, *Ancient and Medieval Siege Weapons*, 105.
[14] Nossov, *Ancient and Medieval Siege Weapons*, 84.
[15] Nossov, *Ancient and Medieval Siege Weapons*, 83.
[16] Gwyn Davies, *Roman Siege Works* (Stroud: Tempus, 2006), 68-69, 79.
[17] Joshua Levithan, *Roman Siege Warfare* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 63, 65.

progression that was in the mind of the commander as he began the siege and which informed the observations of eyewitnesses."[18] Beginning with a demand for surrender, each stage in Levithan's siege progression involves a greater escalation of violence and physical exertion on behalf of the besieging soldiers than the last. He asserts that the progression could only advance in one direction, and that stages could not be returned to once completed.[19] Surprisingly, the besieging commander is afforded relatively little agency in this conception of siege warfare. In this view, the only decisions left to the commander were predetermined and largely out of his control.

The formulaic nature of this progression, however, does not appear to be consistent with Caesar's conception of siege warfare in the Gallic Wars. Duncan Campbell rejects the notion that Caesar adhered to a regular pattern of stages while conducting a siege. He demonstrates that there are many sieges in *De Bello Gallico* that do not adhere to Levithan's siege progression and suggests that there may not be a single siege in Caesar's writing that does. Caesar often completed Levithan's stages out of order, or even skipped them entirely.[20] This suggests that he did not consider sieges as so rigid and predictable. Ancient sieges were often very irregular affairs. How a siege was conducted relied upon conditions specific to each siege. Often, local terrain had a significant impact on how a siege was approached and which tactics were most effective. At Avaricum, for example, Caesar explained that the city could not be circumvallated because of the nature of the geography, which included a large swamp surrounding most of the city. Meanwhile, at Gergovia, he explained how the steep ascent to the city made a direct assault impossible.[21] Siege conditions were also heavily influenced by the defending fortifications. According to Caesar, the way the Gauls typically constructed their walls prohibited the use of hooks and battering rams.[22] In addition, certain more dangerous or laborious tactics, such as an assault by escalade, were only available to a commander if his army possessed sufficient morale and combat motivation.[23] Caesar, then, conducted siege operations as a solution to the specific problems he encountered while on campaign, and did not impose a rigid progression of stages on siege warfare.

The regularity with which Romans constructed lines of circumvallation is a point of contention among historians. Josh Levithan includes the construction of circumvallation as a component of his siege progression and argues that it was a regular feature of Roman sieges regardless of the commander's

---

[18] Levithan, *Roman Siege Warfare*, 47.
[19] Levithan, *Roman Siege Warfare*, 48, 55.
[20] Duncan Campbell, "Siegecraft in Caesar," in *Brill's Companion to Sieges in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Jeremy Armstrong and Matthew Trundle (Boston: Brill, 2019), 254.
[21] Caes. *B. Gall*. 7.17, 7.36.
[22] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.23.
[23] Levithan, *Roman Siege Warfare*, 67.

assaulting strategy.[24] Gwyn Davies even suggests that it was the "standard Caesarian siege approach" to construct a line of circumvallation before making a direct assault on the target.[25] Campbell rejects these notions as well. He asserts that it was not in fact Caesar's regular practice to construct lines of circumvallation prior to assaulting a town. Rather, he argues, the construction of investment works was indicative of a particular strategy: a blockade, wherein no direct assault was intended to be made. Over the course of his military career, Caesar is known to have conducted at least nineteen sieges that involved a direct assault of enemy fortifications. Of these, only four were also accompanied by the construction of circumvallation. Alternatively, circumvallating works were used in eight out of ten sieges that featured a blockade strategy. A much stronger correlation exists, then, between the use of circumvallation and the implementation of a passive blockade. This reinforces the notion that Caesar was not simply going through the motions of a predetermined progression, but rather adapted his specific tactics according to the assaulting strategy best suited to the conditions of each siege.[26]

Throughout the Gallic Wars, engineering capability remained one of the primary advantages maintained by the Romans over the Gauls. Prior to Caesar's invasion, the Gauls had very little direct exposure to Roman methods of siege warfare, and Caesar's description painted a typical Gallic siege as extremely primitive.[27] Caesar's narrative, however, betrays a greater level of sophistication than he would have readily ascribed to the Gauls. During the siege of Avaricum, he went into detail describing the advantages behind the construction of the city's walls, which he claimed was typical of Gallic cities at that time.[28] Later during the same siege, Caesar explained how the Gauls managed to repel many of the Romans' engineered attempts to breach the walls.[29] Caesar hoped to portray the Gauls' engineering skills as a recent development as a result of frequent contact with the Romans. Modern excavations in the region of Berry, however, suggest that most *muri gallici*, the walls described by Caesar at Avaricum, were constructed between 100 and 80 BC, half a century prior to Caesar's invasion. These *muri gallici* often acted as the cores to even larger fortifications known as dump ramparts, which consisted of a huge bank of earth accompanied by a ditch.[30] The Gauls appear

---

[24] Levithan, *Roman Siege Warfare*, 59.
[25] Davies, *Roman Siege Works*, 65.
[26] Campbell, "Siegecraft in Caesar," 247, 250-251, 254.
[27] Andrew Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome: War in Words* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 76; Nossov, *Ancient and Medieval Siege Weapons*, 53.
[28] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.23
[29] Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome*, 74, 79; Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War: 100 BC-AD 200* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 58.; Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.22.
[30] Sophie Krausz, "Gauls under Siege: Defending against Rome," in *Julius Caesar's Battle for Gaul: New Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Andrew P. Fitzpatrick and Colin Haselgrove (Haverton: Oxbow Books, 2019), 167-168, 171, 172.

to have possessed a much greater defensive competency than Caesar gave them credit for. Sophie Krausz has argued that the Gauls may have been exposed to and taken advantage of the same Greek tradition in siege warfare that the Romans enjoyed.[31]

Whatever developments the Gauls may have employed from the Greek tradition in siege warfare, however, appear to have been primarily defensive in nature. There is no evidence in Caesar's narrative or the archaeological record that the Gauls at the time of Caesar's invasion were capable of constructing artillery or siege engines of the same nature as the Romans, and they showed a consistent inability to overcome Roman fortifications. During the siege of Gergovia, this enabled Caesar's legate Gaius Fabius to defend the Roman camp in Caesar's absence against what Caesar described as the "greatest forces" of the Gauls.[32] At the siege of Alesia, the Gauls failed to overcome the Roman circumvallation despite possessing a huge numerical advantage.[33] The Gauls' shocked reactions to Roman siege engines further suggests that they had little to no exposure to those methods of offensive siege warfare. The size of Roman siege engines and the speed with which they were constructed consistently awed Gallic observers and intimidated many towns into surrendering without the need for a battle or extended siege. The defenders of the Gallic town Vellaunodunum, for example, surrendered only two days after the Romans began to construct a line of circumvallation. When Caesar arrived at Noviodunum shortly afterwards, the townspeople surrendered immediately.[34] Although at times Caesar chose to exaggerate the Roman superiority in siege warfare, the engineering advantage was very real and played a significant role in the outcome of the Gallic Wars.

The first major battle in book seven of *De Bello Gallico* is the siege of Avaricum. At the onset of the siege, Caesar had found himself in a difficult position. The implementation of Vercingetorix's scorched earth policy had made it difficult for the Romans to forage, and Caesar's Gallic allies had provided him with none of the assistance he had requested.[35] Avaricum was the only city nearby which had not been burnt by the Gauls, and only because they believed it could be defended very easily.[36] Caesar decided to lay siege to the city by constructing towers and an *agger*, because a large swamp prevented the city from being circumvallated.[37] Although the Gauls repelled the besiegers for some time, a rainstorm and the cover of night eventually provided Caesar with a chance to take Avaricum by surprise. With this opportunity at hand, Roman

---

[31] Krausz, "Gauls under Siege," 160, 176.
[32] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.41.
[33] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.77.
[34] Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome*, 75; Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* 7.11-7.12.
[35] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.17, 7.32.
[36] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.15-7.16.
[37] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.17.

soldiers used their tunnels of *vineae* to approach the walls unseen and, after defeating the defenders, the legionaries took positions along the walls of the city. This prevented any of those inside from escaping, which caused panic to ensue. Most of the population was killed without having managed to organize a proper defense following the loss of the walls.[38] Caesar's creative use of the *vineae* allowed him to take the city even when other engineering solutions had been stalled by the defenders. His success in capturing Avaricum despite the significance of its defense allowed him to resupply his army, which had been suffering under a lack of provisions. In these ways, Roman engineering allowed Caesar to keep his army in the field for a greater period and created new opportunities for the army to take advantage of while on campaign.

Caesar's commentary directly credits his success at Avaricum to the Roman superiority in siege warfare. After his defeat, Vercingetorix explained to his soldiers that they had not been beaten on account of inferior courage, or *virtus*, but on account of inferior *artificio et scientia oppugnationis*: "the skill and knowledge of a siege."[39] Although this claim comes to us from the mouth of Caesar's opponent, it can be accepted as his legitimate assessment, given the similarity to the speech he makes to his own men after their defeat at Gergovia; here, he assured them that they had not been defeated because they lacked *virtus*, but because of *iniquitas loci*: "inequality of position."[40] If Caesar's audience were not meant to accept Vercingetorix's claim after his loss of Avaricum, neither is it likely they would be expected to accept Caesar's claim after his own defeat at Gergovia.

The siege of Gergovia occupies a somewhat unique position in Caesar's narrative, both because it is one of the few major instances of Roman defeat and also in that Caesar, who was so often sure to emphasize his personal agency in the outcome of events, presented the matter as largely out of his control. Shortly after establishing camp at Gergovia, Caesar became aware of growing dissension among the Aedui, one of Rome's most important Gallic allies. Caesar decided to depart from the city with a portion of his army to address his concerns with the Aedui and left his legate Gaius Fabius in command of two legions to maintain the siege and guard the Roman camp.[41] The defenders of Gergovia attacked Fabius and his legions upon Caesar's departure, but they were unable to overcome the Roman defenses before he could return. Caesar was sure to mention the usefulness of Roman artillery in the defense of the camp.[42]

---

[38] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.27-7.28.
[39] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.29.
[40] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.53.
[41] Caes. *B. Gall*. 7.40.
[42] Caes. *B. Gall*. 7.41.

After returning to Gergovia, Caesar found himself faced with a dilemma. His army did not have enough supplies to blockade the city, and Gergovia's position atop a small mountain would have made a direct assault extremely costly. Caesar feared, however, that if he desisted from the siege after establishing camp at Gergovia, it would be interpreted as a retreat by his Gallic allies, which could cause their already tenuous relationship to break down completely.[43] Caesar's solution was to make use of a second, smaller camp some distance from his primary one, connected by two lines of trenches. His soldiers used these trenches to travel safely and discreetly from one camp to the other. After Caesar launched a diversionary attack from the larger camp to draw the Gallic defenders to one side of the city, hidden legionaries stationed in the smaller camp attacked with the intention of capturing a minor position that the Gauls had been occupying outside the city. Caesar had hoped that after accomplishing this, he would be able to depart from Gergovia without appearing to be in flight to his allies.[44] The operation ended in disaster, however, when some of Caesar's centurions led their men beyond their intended target and into danger.[45] Despite the failure of this endeavor, Caesar was sure to place the blame with the overzealousness of his centurions, not with a failure of planning or technology. It is telling that when faced with a problem that had no easy solution, Caesar relied upon the army's engineering capability to create new opportunities for himself.

In book seven's conclusion, Caesar finally defeated Vercingetorix at the siege of Alesia. When he arrived at the city, Caesar determined that its geography and defenses would make Alesia too difficult to assault directly, and instead the Romans opted to construct a line of circumvallation. Realizing that Caesar's intention was to wait him out, Vercingetorix called for every available man in Gaul to form an army to come and lift the siege. In preparation for the impending relief army, the Romans reinforced their line of circumvallation with additional trenches, towers, and ramparts. They then created an obstacle field by scattering iron hooks and nails, as well as digging pits and trenches filled with sharpened stakes.[46] Next, the Romans added an identical line of defenses facing outward, opposite the original, to protect against any army that might come to lift the siege. Caesar explained that the defenses were designed in order that they could be protected by as few soldiers as possible.[47] These fortifications ultimately proved successful, and Caesar's army was victorious against simultaneous attacks from both the defenders of Alesia and a Gallic relief army, which Caesar claims to have totaled nearly 250,000 enemy

---

[43] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.43.
[44] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.43-7.45.
[45] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.47.
[46] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.69, 7.73-7.74.
[47] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.75.

soldiers.[48] The Roman circumvallation prevented Vercingetorix's army from communicating with those who had come to lift the Roman siege, which made coordinating efforts between forces very difficult.[49] Meanwhile, the Gauls suffered horrible casualties while treading through the obstacle field, particularly when attacking at night.[50] The Roman superiority in siege tactics and technology allowed them to defeat their enemy despite the extremely difficult position the army found itself in. Roman engineering prowess allowed legions to defend themselves from danger and neutralize enemy advantages on the battlefield.

Caesar was able to implement Roman engineering with great effectiveness in the Gallic Wars. Few of the engineering solutions found within Caesar's commentary, however, represent genuine invention on his behalf. Roman commanders looked to their predecessors and established Greek traditions when conducting a siege and made use of tactics and technologies that had been honed over centuries of ancient siege warfare.[51] Caesar was no different. Circumvallation, siege towers, *aggeres*, artillery, and *vineae* had all been in use by the Roman army for generations prior to the onset of the Gallic Wars.

Where Caesar clearly differed from previous Roman commanders, however, was the frequency with which he made use of engineering solutions and the degree to which siege warfare appears to have been a component of his strategy in the Gallic Wars. Gwyn Davies has argued that the siege capacity of different Roman armies was not uniform, and that the ability of an army to construct siegeworks depended on its level of preparation.[52] The legions' construction of siegeworks as large and complex as those featured in Caesar's commentary indicate that he had devoted significant attention to preparing his army for siege operations. For example, Caesar is thought to have been the first Roman general to include artillery as a regular part of his siege train, rather than constructing most of his *scorpiones* and *ballistae* on site as they were needed.[53] Caesar's preparations suggest that he had always intended to make greater use of engineering solutions than his predecessors and demonstrate how important he considered siege capability to be towards the successful occupation of Gaul.

Caesar's ability to rely on siege warfare to the extent that he did in Gaul was aided by cultural developments regarding the army's expression of *virtus*. Derived from the Latin word for a man, *vir*, and translated into English as

---

[48] Caes. *B. Gall*. 7.77.
[49] Caes. *B. Gall*. 7.78.
[50] Caes. *B. Gall*. 7.82.
[51] Josh Levithan, "Roman Siege Warfare: Moral and Morale," in *New Approaches to Greek and Roman Warfare*, ed. Lee L. Brice (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2020), 141.
[52] Davies, *Roman Siege Works*, 25.
[53] Paul Bentley Kern, *Ancient Siege Warfare* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 300.

courage, manliness, or virtue, *virtus* was a characteristic that represented the ideal way for a Roman man to act. It was therefore considered "unambiguously positive" and the most sought-after quality in a Roman soldier.[54] Commanders attempted to foster *virtus* within their soldiers and desensitize them to killing through regular drill and weapons training. Roman soldiers were highly motivated to make demonstrations of their *virtus* through personal prowess in battle.[55] Often, commanders took advantage of this by implementing tactics that facilitated opportunities to demonstrate *virtus*, such as attacking from an elevated position and allowing soldiers to charge downhill.[56] The Roman enthusiasm for *virtus* contributed significantly to the army's effectiveness by encouraging soldiers to willingly enter dangerous situations out of a sense of duty and in hopes of personal recognition.

The cultural significance of *virtus* was expressed at every level of the Roman army in the middle republic. Under the middle republic's maniple system, soldiers were organized according to their age, wealth, and status. The oldest and most experienced men fought in the rear amongst the *triarii*, while young and undistinguished men fought amongst the *velites* at the front of the battle-array, with *hastati* and *principes* constituting the middle ranks. The placement of soldiers in direct view of their betters and elders inspired them to fight more fiercely and courageously.[57] Meanwhile, young aristocrats, from whom legates and military tribunes were selected, often sought to aid their political ambitions through demonstrations of their *virtus* on the battlefield. In many instances these men hoped to find success in single combat and duels, which were both very dangerous and highly visible affairs.[58] The demand among both officers and the common soldiery for opportunities to demonstrate *virtus* strongly encouraged a direct and confrontational style of generalship. This came at the expense of the army's strategic choices and could lead to confrontations between Roman soldiers and commanders who hoped to implement more reserved strategies.

By 58 BC, when Caesar was waging war in Gaul, changes in the army's expression of *virtus* began to provide commanders a greater degree of control over the army's strategic conduct. The late republican practice of recruiting soldiers from the poorest parts of Roman society allowed commanders to assert much greater influence over their armies. Soldiers from the landless poor were in a weaker position to subvert the authority of their aristocratic commanders

---

[54] Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome*, 83.
[55] Sara Elise Phang, *Roman Military Service: Ideologies of Discipline in the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 40, 42, 47.
[56] Phang, *Roman Military Service*, 54.
[57] J.E. Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 190, 191.
[58] Lendon, 175.

than the landowning soldiers of the middle republic had been.[59] Without the prospect of political careers after their military service, landless men may have also felt less pressure to make public demonstrations of their *virtus* in battle. Caesar's officers also took on greater administrative and tactical functions during this time than had legates and military tribunes in the middle republic, who were often more concerned with their own prestige through combat prowess.[60] Increased support from legates and tribunes reinforced the commander's authority and allowed him to implement more complex tactics. This was particularly beneficial to siege warfare, which required a significant amount of labor and exposure to danger that was likely to be resisted by common soldiers.

Although Caesar was certainly eager to praise the *virtus* of his soldiers, his commentary also drew attention to its failings. After each of their respective defeats at Avaricum and Gergovia, Vercingetorix and Caesar delivered speeches to their men wherein they assured them that they had not been defeated on account of inferior *virtus*, but because of some other disadvantage. Although these speeches demonstrated the centrality of *virtus* in the psyche of their soldiers, they also revealed its limitations. Inherent in each commander's assertion that his troops had not been defeated on account of inferior *virtus* was the concession that *virtus* alone was insufficient for victory.[61] In fact, excessive *virtus* was portrayed as a detriment to armies in *De Bello Gallico*. For example, during the siege of Avaricum, Caesar's soldiers demanded that they be allowed to attack Vercingetorix's camp despite it being a very well defended position. He was only able to dissuade them from such a rash decision by explaining how deadly the foolhardy assault would really be.[62] Likewise, Vercingetorix was so concerned with the overzealousness of his men that he temporarily left them without a commander when leaving Avaricum, lest any man he appointed be goaded into a decisive confrontation.[63]

Caesar, despite his best efforts, failed to restrain his soldiers' eagerness at the battle of Gergovia, and many ambitious centurions led themselves and their men to their deaths. During the fighting, Caesar explained that the Gauls maintained a superior position and numbers, while the Romans could only rely on their *virtus*.[64] Following the Roman withdrawal, he reprehended his soldiers for their refusal to follow orders and explained that he did not desire modesty and restraint less than he did *virtus* and greatness of spirit."[65] As much as

---

[59] Lendon, 231.
[60] Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts*, 218-219.
[61] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.29, 7.53.
[62] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.19.
[63] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.20.
[64] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.50.
[65] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.52.

Caesar wanted his soldiers to be brave, he also needed to ensure that they followed his orders and did not put themselves in needless danger.

Despite the importance of siege engagements in book seven of *De Bello Gallico*, some historians have argued that Caesar's descriptions credit the Roman success to the superior *virtus* of his soldiers, rather than the Roman advantage in siege warfare. Josh Levithan has argued that for the Romans, siege technology served as a means of neutralizing enemy advantages and was not conceived of as a path to victory in and of itself. Rather, once technology had made all else equal, superior *virtus* allowed the Romans to claim victory.[66] Andrew Riggsby shares this sentiment, asserting that "the Romans often use technology just to level the playing field and win in a pitched battle." He argues that typically, Caesar described success in battle as the result of *virtus*.[67] Specifically, regarding the siege of Avaricum, Riggsby claims that the narrative emphasis did not focus on the technology, but "on actually fighting, first in defense of the new ramp, then inside Avaricum."[68] This, Riggsby argues, is demonstrative of the importance Caesar placed on the *virtus* of his soldiers in the Roman success.

In describing his soldiers' conduct during the siege of Avaricum, however, it would seem that Caesar was in fact contradicting the claim that siege technology was understood by the Romans as a path towards demonstrating *virtus*. Caesar's description of the events which took place after the Romans occupied the city walls was not one of a pitched battle wherein the Romans fought courageously against a dangerous enemy. Rather, Caesar made no effort to conceal what was the indiscriminate slaughter of noncombatants including old men, women, and children.[69] The massacre of the town's population, according to Josh Levithan, can be understood as an intense psychological release on behalf of the besieging soldiers, the result of pent-up stress and frustration built up over weeks of a grueling siege. This atrocity, considered the natural result of the Gauls' refusal to fight on what the Romans deemed honorable terms, was morally justified in the Roman conscience.[70] However, it remains a far cry from the courageous action traditionally associated with *virtus*. Instead, Caesar identified *virtus* in his soldiers' endurance during the conduct of the siege. He explained that the completion of the siegeworks came only because of the legions' spirited defense and incessant labor.[71] In the instance of Avaricum, then, it was the *virtus* of Caesar's soldiers that enabled the application of siege technology, rather than siege technology that allowed the soldiers to express their *virtus*.

---

[66] Levithan, *Roman Siege Warfare*, 122.
[67] Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome*, 73.
[68] Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and* Rome, 80.
[69] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.28.
[70] Levithan, "Roman Siege Warfare," 143.
[71] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.24.

Caesar's emphasis on the importance of his soldiers' effort in the completion of the siegeworks was in keeping with a tradition in the late republic that increasingly associated soldiers' *virtus* with their *labor*.[72] Commanders, through the construction of monuments such as canals, bridges, and roads, as well as the daily construction of marching camps, imposed discipline upon their soldiers and conditioned them to hard work.[73] Through this process, the ability to endure hard work and toil became associated with masculinity and *virtus*, which meant that Roman soldiers could "derive honor and esteem from their *labor* in defense of the republic."[74] This conception of *virtus* was particularly useful for siege warfare.

Sieges were especially grueling experiences for every party involved and could be very hard on even the besieging army's morale. Whereas in a traditional open-field battle soldiers needed to prepare for a single, short instance of intense violence, a siege meant prolonged exposure to attrition and danger, which weighed more heavily on soldiers' morale.[75] In order to implement a siege tactic, an army needed to possess sufficient morale and combat motivation to undergo the requisite level of danger they would be exposed to in that tactic.[76] Caesar was well aware of these concerns. When his soldiers were subjected to constant rain and frequent contact with the enemy at the siege of Avaricum, Caesar gave them the choice to desist from the siege should they have been unwilling to continue. His soldiers, however, conditioned by their labor to the hardships of siege warfare, considered the notion of abandoning the siege to be shameful.[77] Although Roman engineering was the critical component of Caesar's success at Avaricum, successful implementation of siege tactics would not have been possible without the obedience and willing participation of his soldiers.

This obedience was far from automatic, as Caesar discovered at Gergovia. Soldiers' loyalty was in constant negotiation, and commanders risked losing control if they subjected their soldiers to difficult conditions without the requisite level of recognition and reward.[78] In particular, siege assaults, which exposed a relatively small number of soldiers to extreme levels of danger while using ladders, towers, or other implements to bypass heavily defended fortifications, required an intense level of combat motivation. As a result, bands of volunteers were selected to lead siege assaults in exchange for exceptional

---

[72] Phang, *Roman Military Service*, 24.
[73] Phang, *Roman Military Service*, 245.
[74] Phang, *Roman Military Service*, 221, 242-243.
[75] Levithan, *Roman Siege Warfare*, 49.
[76] Levithan, *Roman Siege Warfare*, 128.
[77] Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.17.
[78] Phang, *Roman Military Service*, 26.

rewards, which included promotion, loot, and official recognition.[79] Caesar's army needed to have been highly motivated in order to have made use of tactics and technologies such as those described in the sieges of Avaricum, Alesia, and other battles throughout the Gallic Wars. The relationship between *virtus* and siege warfare should be understood as complementary, therefore, as neither would have been sufficient for victory in Gaul without the other.

Caesar's preparations and the readiness of his soldiers to be subjected to hard labor and endure extended sieges was a major boon to the Romans in the Gallic Wars. Siege warfare allowed the Romans to circumvent difficulties while in the field and pushed the limits of what the army could achieve. Unfamiliar with Roman siege practices, the Gauls frequently underestimated what the legions were capable of and struggled to find success despite advantageous conditions. Even at Alesia, where the Romans found themselves surrounded and outnumbered by a ratio as high as 5:1, engineering provided them with a winning solution. The effectiveness of siege tactics and technology positioned Caesar to occupy Gaul with incredible alacrity. Millions of people were brought directly into the Roman sphere of influence through his conquest, the effects of which are still clearly felt to this day. Caesar's rapid success also left him exceptionally wealthy and at the helm of a veteran army, setting the stage for the violence and political upheaval of the civil wars. The Roman capacity for siege warfare was critical to that success.

---

[79] Levithan, "Roman Siege Warfare," 144; Nossov, *Ancient and Medieval Siege Weapons*, 47.

"The War on Counterfeiting": Criminalizing Poverty in Early Modern London

By Josiah Matthews

In the middle of September 1790, one Miss Elizabeth Brown and Miss Sarah Kay were on trial for high treason. Their crime? Six weeks ago, they were out shopping. Miss Brown had just received some money, and was looking to spend it on some cloth. This was a very small transaction – she was not buying very much cloth, only 3p worth – but it was a significant one because cloth represented capital, both fiscal and social. However, when she tried to pay, she paid with a false coin, and this counterfeit was caught by the shopkeeper. Miss Brown's access to capital was denied; she was trading in false currency. Still, Brown continued on with her shopping, meeting up with her friend and landlord Miss Kay. Brown was again turned away at the next shop she visited, but this time a constable was called, who searched both women, finding six half crowns and some change in total, although only one half-crown was confirmed to be counterfeit. Both women were arrested, and, after weeks of waiting in prison, were allowed their trial. At the trial, the basic facts of the case were related. The case for the prosecution hinged on the fact that after the first encounter, Miss Brown knew that the money was bad, and was therefore knowingly attempting to pass off bad money at the second shop. Still, was it treason for a poor woman to try and make do with whatever she had?

This question was quickly sidelined, however, because during her defense, Miss Brown let it slip that she had received the money from "a man who slept with me." This inclusion of sexual promiscuity into the case immediately dragged principles and morality into the courtroom. Miss Brown, with no character witnesses and having already known that her money was bad, had a tough case already. But now, both women were implicated, since surely Miss Kay must have known about the goings-on under her own roof. So, even though only one counterfeit coin was found, both women were found guilty, but fortunately they escaped execution.[1]

This verdict seems particularly cruel and arbitrary, considering the pettiness of the crime, small denominations of currency, and the ubiquitous nature of counterfeit money. It is likely that if they were men, or had husbands in good social standing, they would have gotten away with the mishap.

---

[1] *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (hereafter OBP) (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 07 June 2021), September 15, 1790, Elizabeth Brown and Sarah Kay (t17900915-114).

However, because of their low social rank, and Miss Brown's nebulous relationship with this third man (Was she a prostitute, Miss Kay being her 'landlady'? Did she steal the money? Or was she otherwise virtuous but engaged in some salacious relationship with a dastardly counterfeiter?), they were convicted on the suspicion that they were intentionally putting-off bad money.

This case, and others like it, are important because they lay at the intersection of a few of the highest profile intellectual and political trends that occurred after the Glorious Revolution in England. Counterfeiting critically undermined central control over the value of the currency, which was central to 18th-century commerce and financial theory. Without control over the currency, who could issue it, and how, the state could not have cleared the way for the century's most significant financial innovations.[2] Counterfeiting inherently challenged both the authority of the government and the arguments put forward by England's most prominent public intellectuals and officials. This challenge opened public discourse to pamphleteers who debated the degree to which the government and king could or should exercise the powers delegated to them to address the counterfeiting issue.[3] The uncertainty created by the problem of counterfeiting (and also a few of its solutions) created opportunities for anyone with a taste for profit and a stomach for risk – due to the increasing financialization of the economy, the ranks of the upper classes were opened to a wider selection of wealthy individuals. Displaying ostentatious wealth through goods was an important class signifier, opening an opportunity for counterfeiters who could use their bad money to secure goods, and in turn, secure loans – in short, literally "faking it 'till they made it."[4]

While the significance of some of these trends only became apparent with hindsight, contemporaries saw counterfeiting as a serious threat to the economy, political system, and society as a whole, and this was reflected in the laws and courts. Counterfeiting had long been classified as high treason, drawing on a precedent in Roman law.[5] But beginning in the 1690s, English authorities became more aggressively concerned about it, claiming that it undermined the credibility of English merchants overseas.[6] The threat to trade, particularly in a country where trade was central to political, cultural, and economic identities, turned counterfeiting into a crisis.

---

[2] Carl Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy: The Practice and Punishment of Monetary Crime, 1690-1830," *History of Political Economy* 36, no. 1 (2004): 133-134.
[3] Ludovic Desmedt and Jerome Blanc, "Counteracting Counterfeiting? Bodin, Mariana, and Locke on False Money as a Multidimensional Issue," *History of Political Economy* 42, no. 2 (2010): 326.
[4] Craig Muldrew, "'Hard Food for Midas': Cash and Its Social Value in Early Modern England," *Past and Present* 170, No.1 (2001): 112-113; Alexandria Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status, and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 279.
[5] Desmedt and Blanc "Counteracting Counterfeiting," 331.
[6] Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy," 134.

This crisis precipitated the application of some of the most identifiable scientific and political minds of the age, including Sir Isaac Newton and John Locke, to the suppression of counterfeiting and the restoration of confidence in the English Pound.[5] Although reforms were enacted over the course of a decade that made counterfeiting more difficult and dangerous, problems stemming from financial policy continued to persist and counterfeiters continued to attract the ire of the state.[7] Many counterfeiters simply moved their business further underground, or outside London, and continued to thrive, especially in dispensing low-denomination coins, continuing to elude and frustrate the courts.[6] Despite the uphill battle and limited tactical successes this program enjoyed, curiously, the currency still stabilized.

Historians have explored counterfeiting as a social, economic, and political phenomena. Many have focused on the economic and ideological implications of counterfeiting, with more than a few lingering on the parallels between the figurative mutilation of a king when clipping a coin and the flaunting of royal authority inherent in the act.[8] Much has been written about the efforts to curb the problem of counterfeiting, the currency reforms of the 1690s, and the accompanying acts further criminalizing counterfeiting and the possession of counterfeiting paraphernalia.[9] Some historians have analyzed these acts by fitting them into an ideological pattern of increasing brutality that was used to shape and shore up the political and economic order of Britain.[7]

Despite the anxiety about state finances, crime generally, and this crime in particular, English courts do not appear to have prosecuted counterfeiters altogether with the anticipated vigor. Instead, judges in the Old Bailey court sometimes hesitated to convict defendants with strong evidence against them but good social standing, while individuals whose activities or presence were perceived as threatening to the stability of English society were much more likely to get convicted. This approach was even further exploited by the counterfeiters themselves, who used a double-layered structure to insulate themselves from prosecution.[10]

Courts generally did not seem (or seem to want) to understand this multilayer structure of counterfeiting rings, hampering their effectiveness at combating them. According to the thinkers of the time, this was because the amount of bad money in circulation did not *actually have to be reduced*; instead, the violence of carrying out the law stabilized both the value of the currency and, more abstractly, the power of the state. This particular

---

[7] Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy," 152-153; Bridget Millmore, "Funny Money: Eighteenth Century Humorous 'Evasions' – An Imaginative Way of Circumventing the Counterfeiting Laws," *Museological Review* 16 (2012): 51; Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Verso, 2003), 55.
[8] Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy," 140.
[9] Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy," 153-154; Desmedt and Blanc, "Counteracting Counterfeiting," 327.
[10] Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy," 153-154.

arrangement of political, legal, and social policy focused on using the death penalty to shore up state finances in the decades following the restoration of the monarchy, identified as a 'Thanatocracy' by historian Peter Linebaugh, is not unique to counterfeiting law.[11] British policy generally was being driven by the political classes of the time in a sterner, more appraising, more reactionary, and more bloody direction.[7]

These efforts deserve attention since they were the basis for the new and stable generation of currency, but not much is written about how these efforts were actually carried out on the ground. Some historians have even identified the government as having taken a more tolerant position on counterfeiting, especially regarding the regulation of low-denomination currency.[12] However, these phenomena seem to be contradictory. How and why could the state be both tougher on, but still more tolerant of, a crime like counterfeiting? This is because after the Glorious Revolution, the state was facing a set of problems that required contradictory solutions – the English government both needed a currency of unassailable value for international markets and was facing a bullion shortage at home.[13] The most dynamic response to the latter problem actually originated from outside the state: the people of England simply made their own money. This solution came in forms that could vary from tokens of store credit, goldsmith receipts, financial tickets, and tally sticks, to the more legally dubious 'evasions', and finally to outright counterfeits.[14] The state needed to tolerate these initiatives, even counterfeiting, to some extent, because without it, the economy could not function domestically, just as the economy could not compete abroad with blatantly debased bullion.[15] A subtle middle ground had to be cleared that allowed the government to appear to be in control of the currency, but that also left enough room along the margins for counterfeiters to stretch the bullion that remained to accommodate domestic needs. This space, who was tacitly permitted to counterfeit and where, was negotiated inside the courtroom of the Old Bailey. The fodder for these negotiations was status – not just if a given individual worked and where, or how much property they owned (though this was extremely important), but if they were a good neighbor, their relationship to the government and its officials, their personal morality, their religion, and their ethnicity. Examining trials at the Old Bailey allow us an inside look at how this toleration was carved out on a day-to-day basis, and how the government reminded the public of its control over currency by sending some subjects to the gallows.

---

[11] Linebaugh, *The London Hanged,* 50-2, 60.
[12] Millmore, "Funny Money," 51; Muldrow, "Hard Food for Midas," 108.
[13] Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy," 134, 139.
[14] Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy," 152; Millmore, "Funny Money," 56; Linebaugh, *The London Hanged,* 51-52.
[15] Muldrew, "Hard Food for Midas," 106.

The starting point for negotiation was the legal definition of coining, which was wide and sweeping in English law: it included everything from clipping, to counterfeiting banknotes and coins, to possessing molds that could be used for said counterfeiting, to simply possessing bad money.[16] Since bad money was almost ubiquitous, and necessarily had to be used to get by in day-to-day life, almost anyone could be arrested on coining charges.[17] This interpretation is borne out by evidence in the Old Bailey courthouse, since the most common type of coining case usually involved an individual caught with bad money at the wrong place being imprisoned and taken to court, and then being acquitted because there was no more evidence against them.[18]

Despite the tiresome pattern these cases presented, contemporaries believed that intercepting people using counterfeit money was the bread and butter of combatting counterfeiting. Once bad money was in circulation, it was nearly impossible to trace back to the producer; the only time to properly catch a counterfeiter was when they were first putting-off their money. The problem with this approach was that since bad money was so common, nearly anyone could be caught with counterfeit money that they came by legitimately. However, this "wide net" approach also presented opportunities. It allowed the justice system to "make an example" out of nearly anyone it wanted, in order to "deter" potential offenders. Many pamphleteers and public intellectuals, including Sir Isaac Newton, subscribed to the idea of deterrence specifically for counterfeiting.[19] This gave the courts a certain degree of license to exercise "overzealous" brutality when dealing with people accused of counterfeiting. The natural targets of this brutality were those who were already considered the dregs of society, the so-called "criminal class," composed of immigrants and the impoverished.

Stories like the above of Miss Brown and Miss Kay, which now seem like exceptional miscarriages of justice, are not uncommon in the Old Bailey proceedings and are not even unique to coining trials. However, because of the threat that they posed to the economic and social order, and the high stakes on either side of the issue, coining trials tended to be particularly decisive – capital convictions were common, and pardons were not offered frequently.[20] Considering how little evidence was required to be apprehended for coining, this made the possibility for false convictions, or at least convictions on scanty evidence (such as the Brown and Kay case), rather high. This wide-net deterrence strategy was both misdirected and cleverly devised. Because of how a counterfeiting ring was structured, the core of the ring, composed of skilled

---

[16] Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, "Crime and Justice – Crimes Tried at the Old Bailey," *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 07 June 2021).

[17] Millmore, "Funny Money," 46.

[18] See this case for an example: OBP, July 1721, Samuel Gould (t17210712-14).

[19] Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy," 148, 151.

[20] Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy," 154.

artisans, would go untouched, while the "expendable" outer layer of poor immigrants and women would be apprehended by authorities, rendering the authorities ineffective at actually stopping the manufacture of counterfeits.[21] However, it also allowed the government to very publicly prosecute a widespread "social ill" without disrupting the wider social fabric by going after the high-social status individuals involved in counterfeiting, giving the appearance of progress and stabilization.

Moral and personal judgements regularly crept into proceedings and decisions (especially in matters of credibility), and these judgments were not only based on a person's background, but also on their behavior and presentation.[22] A court's impression of character had a noticeable effect on verdict. People who were caught with lots of physical currency, but for whatever reason decided not to invest it in expensive clothing, furniture, or other typical indicators of status were also viewed with a high degree of suspicion. Thomas Panting was caught delivering one hundred "light" (filed) guineas mixed in with two hundred normal-weight guineas to a store.[23] When his home was investigated, it was found to be "an [sic] House of small Appearance" with sparse furnishings. In the house, they found a trunk with more guineas. Neighbors, who apparently disliked him, revealed that the man played off this poor appearance and had often asked for financial assistance or loans and was overall quite the miser. Panting called several witnesses that alleged he had come by some of this money via business activities, though they could produce no material evidence.

In a strictly "innocent until proven guilty" system, there did not seem to be strong enough evidence to convict Panting of either diminishing the guineas or receiving the guineas to put them off for some third party. This was not how the court saw the case. While in modern thinking it is generally reasonable that extreme thriftiness and exploitation of other people's goodwill, combined with some kind of labor, could accrue an individual a lot of money, in the mind of the court these things were contradictory. To them money was for display, not saving.[24] Additionally, because of this contradiction, it seems that to the court, convicting Panting was a win-win situation: if he had procured the guineas through nefarious means, he deserved the punishment according to the law, but if he had acquired the money through miserliness, thus innocent according to the law, he still deserved to be punished because hoarding disrupted the credit-based socio-economic system of England, and hence was socially frowned upon.[25]

---

[21] Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy," 153-154; Desmedt and Blanc, "Counteracting Counterfeiting," 332.
[22] Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, 10-11.
[23] OBP, September 11, 1717, Thomas Panting (t17170911-5).
[24] Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself*, 10-11, 28.
[25] Muldrew, "Hard Food for Midas," 98.

Perhaps the most important opportunity afforded by the wide-net approach is that in the event of catching the lower-ranking members of a counterfeiting ring, and threatening them with capital punishment, they might be enticed to turn over their other associates for a lighter sentence, a strategy pursued ruthlessly by Sir Isaac Newton.[26] To the institutions responsible for suppressing counterfeiting, these "discoveries" were invaluable, since they provided the opportunity to uproot an entire "ring" of counterfeiters instead of simply catching the expendable and misfortunate utterers (individuals circulating counterfeit). However, because of pre-existing ideas about criminality and society, discoveries were not always effective. Even as they were being implemented, discoveries and other programs designed to encourage informants and turncoats were criticized by contemporaries because the information acquired from them was not considered reliable.[27]

Discoveries were put to suspect use by unscrupulous individuals taking advantage of the court's aforementioned notions about criminality. In a series of dramatic cases involving a few inter-related Irish cliques, one 'counterfeiting ring' was taken down by a handful of informants. However, it is doubtful if the discoveries actually assisted the mint authorities in their stated goal of capturing the entire ring and not just the lower-tier utterers, who could be sacrificed by the wider clique in order to save their collective skin. Each of the members who were convicted conformed in one way or another to stereotypical conceptions of criminality, while those who did not, managed to escape conviction.

Each member of the ring brought a unique character to the set of cases; there was an Irishman who went by three names (we will call him simply John Brown), his "common-law wife" whose previous marriage's status is murky (Margaret Berry), their accomplice with only one eye (MacNelly), and a woman identified as "both Whore and Thief" (Ann St. Lawrence, Berry's sister), among others.[28] The trials began when MacNelly was apprehended for changing bad money. Being a good British subject, and knowing that the only way to save his skin was to turn in his friends, MacNelly hastily informed an officer of the mint of the whereabouts of his comrades, prompting the trial of John Brown and Margaret Berry.

MacNelly provided a credible account of Brown and Berry putting-off money, and his role in it. However, his account of the actual "coining" is suspect. He claimed that Brown and Berry coined sixpence pieces at their *fireplace* on every day except for Sunday, using only some pewter, a fire shovel, and (presumably, because he does not mention one explicitly) a mold.

---

[26] Wennerlind, "The Death Penalty as Monetary Policy," 147.
[27] Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*, 59.
[28] OBP, October 10th 1733, John Brown and Margaret Berry (t17331010-24); OBP, December 5th 1733, Elizabeth Wright, Mary Wright, and John Knight (t17331205-65); OBP, July 10th 1734, Elizabeth Tracey and Ann Knight (t17340710-18); and OBP, July 10th 1734, Catharine Bougle (t17340610-22).

Through this method, they were apparently able to produce *believable* counterfeits, which they managed to launder for good money for some time, without getting caught. MacNelly portrayed Brown, who had already been in jail for another crime, as the "criminal mastermind" behind the counterfeiting ring, and the court was willing to believe him.

Brown fit into the English conception of criminality like a glove: he was Catholic, he was Irish, he carried on extramarital relationships, he liked to drink, and he had already committed at least one other crime. Berry, on the other hand, did not have the "criminal credentials" of Brown, but in the words of the Court, "In High Treason 'tis no Excuse for a Woman, that she acts under the Direction of her Husband." The testimony of MacNelly seemed to make sense on paper, and so Brown was convicted and sentenced to death, and the accessory Berry managed to escape the death penalty by revealing she was pregnant. Taken in total, from the perspective of the court, it was a clean affair: a true "criminal" and threat to the social order was excised from society, and the unseemliness of a woman receiving the death sentence was avoided.

Subsequent cases involving this counterfeiting ring revealed that the story was not nearly so neat. A few months later, Ann St. Laurence, Margaret Berry's sister, informed on another branch of the counterfeiting ring, which was staffed by Elizabeth Tracey and Ann Knight.[29] The connection between this ring and the other ring was tenuous. St. Laurence claimed that John Brown had introduced her to them, but then he promptly disappeared from the story. This story raises questions on its own because it put Brown, MacNelly's criminal mastermind, in a larger scheme where he was not the center, but instead a connecting agent between two separate cells. How did Brown come into contact with this ring? What sort of business did he have with a "rival" center of counterfeit production? Why did Brown not inform on this ring to be spared from execution? St. Laurence went on to describe the "coining" process, which raises further issues with her testimony. St. Laurence claimed that Brown, Tracey and Knight made counterfeits with wooden tobacco pipes, which was different from how MacNelly described Brown's counterfeiting with Berry a few months prior.

St. Laurence's testimony deteriorated further once the prisoners called witnesses to their defense in the last portion of the trial. Details from St. Laurence's testimony become suspect, important facts such as time and place of the crime became muddled, and several witnesses claimed that both St. Laurence and Alice Dearing, another prosecuting witness, the landlady of the accused, blackmailed and threatened Knight and Tracey and attempted to bribe witnesses to testify against them. Moreover, both prisoners claimed that Dearing was the real coiner, and was framing them for her crime, and that the mint officer present, Mr. North, was in on it the whole time. Indeed, Tracey

---

[29] OBP, July 10th 1734, Elizabeth Tracey and Ann Knight (t17340710-18).

would maintain until her execution that Dearing discovered on herself and Knight to prevent them from informing on her. With these very serious claims, backed up with witnesses, springing forth at the end of the trial, some jurors might have given pause to the idea of executing these potentially innocent prisoners.

However, the idea of an Irish-Catholic underground coining conspiracy proved too tantalizing, and the idea of a landlady-coiner with the tacit acceptance of a mint officer proved too absurd for the sensibilities of the time, and both women were slated to be executed by being burned alive (Knight was later reprieved). When the Brown/Berry case and the Knight/Tracey case are taken together, they seem to be related in some way – they involve some of the same individuals, and they share a witness, but the exact nature of that relationship is unclear. Was it the same counterfeiting ring? Was it two different rings in alliance? Or was it really as it appears: a landlady and her friend informing on her tenants? Fortunately, Dearing and St. Laurence appear in two other cases, one against the extended family of Ann Knight, and another against a woman named Catharine Bougle, who was the sister of Elizabeth Tracey.

These cases share interesting similarities with the previous ones. St. Laurence and Dearing or MacNelly alleged that they had seen the accused make false six-pence using the same method as Knight and Tracey. The aforementioned mint officer Mr. North also made an appearance in these cases, having received the information from Dearing or St. Laurence. Due to their relationship to each another, pieces of information from these cases inform aspects of the Brown/Berry and Tracey/Knight ones.

In the case of Elizabeth Wright, Mary Wright, and John Knight (mother, sister-in-law, and nephew of Ann Knight respectively), Alice Dearing described the exact same tobacco pipe method that she claimed Ann Knight and Elizabeth Tracey had used.[30] Taking this detail on its own, this makes sense: they were ostensibly in the same group of counterfeiters, so they would use the same method. However, when scrutinized further, this testimony falls apart. Why would Ann Knight later use the exact same method that got two members of her close family caught and executed?[31] Why would she do so in the house of the very same person who was a key witness against her *own family* in their trial? These questions, combined with the accusations of blackmail, bribery, and perjury, invariably lead to the conclusion that the testimony given in the case, at least by Dearing, is not entirely reliable.

In the Bougle case, another important and compromising detail is alleged. Every trial except for the Knight/Tracey trial hinged upon the testimony of one particular mint officer, Mr. North. The credibility of the entire operation to uproot this counterfeiting "ring" was grounded on the reliability of North as a

---

[30] OBP, July 10th 1734, Elizabeth Tracey and Ann Knight (t17340710-18).
[31] OBP, December 5th 1733, Elizabeth Wright, Mary Wright, and John Knight (t17331205-65).

government official and representative of royal authority. In her defense, after enduring the same sort of testimony that had landed the three other cases on death row, Bougle made a salacious and damning accusation: "Jack North had her (St. Laurence) in his Company – Don't deny it, Jack."[32] This accusation, like the accounts of bribery and blackmail from the Knight/Tracey case, render the entire narrative up to this point questionable. Was North taking bad information from St. Laurence because he was in on the operation? Was he just a stooge? Or was Bougle just saying whatever she could think of to save her skin?

Despite the shabby accusations, allegedly bribed witnesses, and emotionally entangled government officials, it would be extremely difficult to argue that every individual convicted was completely innocent, since there are some facts that are hard explain otherwise. While Mr. North was the only one who received information from Dearing and St. Laurence, he was not the only one who made the arrest and subsequently gathered evidence. It also seems unlikely that John Brown, too, was framed for the original crime that landed him in jail. That said, it would be equally difficult to argue that everything with these four trials was above board, with no holes or contradictions, and that all the defendants were engaged in some kind of joint character-assassination strategy against the noble St. Laurence, Dearing, MacNelly and North.

Once the cases are all taken together, the impression they give is neither a stunning miscarriage of justice, nor a triumph for the forces of law and order. The conflict feels less like one large counterfeiting ring turning in on itself and more like a wider conflict involving multiple factions and cliques purging one another. Another explanation is that the trials captured a counterfeiting ring shedding its outer, expendable layer, with Dearing, St. Laurence, and North acting as agents to expedite this shedding. Notably, it seems like everyone involved, including the mint officer, could have been implicated in the counterfeiting one way or another – but the court turned a blind eye to the activities of landlords, government officials, and their attachés, while ruthlessly pursuing tenants, immigrants, and people already implicated in other crimes.

Though the actual fate of the counterfeiting ring might be somewhat ambiguous, the patterns exhibited in the judgements are not. This series of cases demonstrates the court's tendency to target those with certain characteristics already identified with criminality and untrustworthiness – notably sexual promiscuity, ethnicity, religious dissention, and poverty. However, courts also extended tolerance, advocacy, and sympathy when individuals displayed characteristics associated with credibility, virtue, and industry. Judges intervened when defendants could claim a trade, or other established means of maintaining themselves, and juries hesitated to convict people who could call upon a large number of reliable character witnesses.

---

[32] OBP, July 10th 1734, Catharine Bougle (t17340610-22).

The importance of social standing, trustworthiness, and the possession of a clear, legitimate source of maintenance became most apparent in cases in which someone caught counterfeiters in the act or with the necessary tools and materials present in large quantities.

One case that demonstrates the role that judges could play for the defense of a 'reputable' family caught in the act of making counterfeits is the case of the Field family, whose members were apprehended by officers of the mint inside their own home.[33] The mint officers had found out about the family through an anonymous informant, and when they broke into the building, they found the entire family, excepting James Field, at work making counterfeits. When the family saw the officers coming in, they immediately and conspicuously tried to dispose of their work, although without success. The officers collected their evidence, including unfinished coins, miscellaneous tools, and acid (for dying), which were all prepared to be shown in court.

Unlike the previous cases involving groups accused of counterfeiting, the Fields had acquired the goodwill of the judge, who, without letting the prosecuting witnesses finish their account of the apprehension, leapt to the defense of the family. The judge's defense of the Fields hinged on the type of acid used in coining – "aqua fortis," which emits a distinctive odor and is highly corrosive. The acid that the officers of the mint had found was "copperas," which was a different acid used as a dye in shoemaking. It just so happened that the Fields were engaged in the cobbling trade, which dispelled any suspicions that the acid and tools were for nefarious purposes. The fact that the Fields were engaged in a skilled trade also made a guilty verdict a much harder sell to the jury. Their secure employment and respectable status made finding a motive much more difficult, particularly for a typical jury composed of tradesmen and artisans, who might identify with the Field family.[34] Indeed, the Fields centered their defense strategy around calling attention to their social standing, and after summoning a half-dozen character witnesses, the Fields were acquitted without saying a word in their own defense.

The advantage that class and social status played in the proceedings of the Field family trial was supporting, but still decisive. If an immigrant, single woman, or other impoverished person was taken in with the same evidence against them, it is unlikely the trial would have proceeded as seamlessly. Difficult questions could have been asked by a painstakingly scrupulous judge, who focused on the presence of blank counterfeits rather than the absence of proper dye. It is sometimes difficult to determine the exact role social standings play in a court – maybe the judge was having a good day or was going for a coveted "maiden session." However, the effect was almost tangible in this case, in which the Fields, who in most other circumstances would have been facing

---

[33] OBP, February 27th 1788, James, Sarah, William, Thomas and Joseph Field (t17880227-92).

[34] Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, "Crime and Justice – Judges and Juries," *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 7.0, 10 June 2021).

an almost certain guilty verdict on a felony offence, were able to get acquitted relatively unscathed.

Although the Fields did not work in a trade directly related to metalworking, their artisan status identified them as potential members of the skilled, educated, and elusive core of a possible counterfeiting ring. Their engagement as cobblers might allow them to get certain materials that could facilitate counterfeiting, like the aforementioned acid dyes. However, trades dealing directly with metalworking, especially goldsmith and silversmiths, had especially easy access to the materials and skills necessary to counterfeit efficiently and undetected.[35] Despite their obvious "in" to the counterfeiting business, which might incline some to scrutinize them further, goldsmiths and other metalworkers benefitted from their status as artisans as well. Unlike immigrants, impoverished laborers, and others who could be figured as utterers, the class of people who had the most resources and opportunities to engage in counterfeiting had extensive social networks and protections.

In one case against an apprentice, John Taylor, his status as a goldsmith played heavily into his acquittal.[36] Taylor had been caught trying to use two counterfeit coins in a late-night gingerbread run, and was apprehended in a story not unlike the original case of MacNelly, which had caused *him* to discover on John Brown. At court, Taylor's defense was inadequate, to say the least: he claimed total innocence and that he had received the two bad coins in change from a local bar.

This was the same defense that John Brown briefly attempted to use to explain the counterfeit coins in his pocket when they were shown in court, a departure from trying to erode the credibility of the witnesses against him.[37] Buying inexpensive items in the dead of night was a common method of laundering money, and since Taylor was a goldsmith, it was not really a question of *if* the authorities could find tools that could be used for counterfeiting; it was a question of *how many*. In short, at this point in the trial, things were not looking good for John Taylor. Seeing this, the court decided to intervene. The justice took Taylor into a private room and "press'd him to discover the Truth there." It is not possible to say with any certainty what was said in the room, but when Taylor emerged from it, his entire strategy changed.

The new course that Taylor plotted was to confess to the crime, namely, that he had in fact made the coins, but not for spending. Taylor claimed that he had made the coins for a party trick based on a popular German story. Once Taylor had confessed, he called witnesses to his defense, starting with his master, who testified to his character, and backed up his party-trick story. Another character witness called said the same thing, and then another. This

---

[35] Desmedt and Blanc "Counteracting Counterfeiting," 332.
[36] OBP, December 8th 1731, John Taylor (T17311208-42).
[37] OBP, October 10th 1733, John Brown and Margaret Berry (t17331010-24).

process went on, and the proceeding sums up the remainder of the case like so: "Several others depos'd to the like Purpose, and it is appearing a silly boyish Trick, the Jury acquitted the Prisoner."

The charges against Taylor were some of the most serious anyone could possibly be charged with: *high treason.* Considering the basic facts of the case, and the sloppy defense, then *confession* of the defendant, the outcome stands out. It is possible the coins might have been such terrible counterfeits that it was obvious they were not intended for spending and that a tired or inebriated Taylor had mistakenly tried to spend them, but the counterfeits were not even presented during the trial to make such a determination! Without any physical evidence, and with the confession of the defendant, what should have happened was obvious. But what actually happened once John Taylor confessed seems straightforward: the jury took him at his word.

Despite Taylor's proximity to counterfeiting opportunities, and his outright confession to the crime, he was given many of the same powerful advantages that the Fields were given. He had an ally on the bench, credible character witnesses, and, most importantly, the benefit of the doubt and goodwill from the jury. These proved to be critical assets in the proceedings, and without them Taylor, the young, impressionable, and alleged practical jokester, probably would have been destined to join the Tyburn hanged. These decisive advantages were extended to a lucky few, and everyone else – all the "outsiders" – got the cold, contemptuous, and legalistic gaze of an English judge. The manner in which these cases were prosecuted is important – courts took a stoic, hard line towards trials with poor defendants, and were almost eager to hand down high-handed punishments, even in the face of evidence that might invalidate the judgements.

The differences in trial outcomes for different individuals accused of counterfeiting points to the complex relationship between criminal law and money during a period of dramatic changes in the English economy and financial system. Courts were responsible for identifying and punishing those who were trying to undermine the cornerstones of the realm: overseas trade, social hierarchy, and the authority of the king. At the same time, English authorities understood the need to negotiate toleration for some amount of counterfeiting to avoid the economic consequences of coin shortages, while still maintaining the face value of higher denomination coin and dodging accusations that the mint was complicit in the debasement of its own money. Harsh prosecutions directed at the most unfortunate of society accomplished this purpose. The middle-class core of counterfeiting rings used the courts' preference for exemplary punishment to structure their organizations, leaving the marginalized as an expendable shield.

This arrangement was useful for all sides of the counterfeiting world: the intellectual crusaders and pamphleteers advocating economic reform could revel in their sanguinary successes against the "criminal underworld," while the

many middle-class counterfeiters could ply their trades without worrying that the mint officials would have to start looking too hard for their next big break. However, from a wider perspective, only part of the program advocated for the wider application of state violence to exercise a greater degree of control over all aspects of the British economy. The courts were where this program had to be executed, where the case for this violence had to be made to the public, and so it was in the courts where compromises were made. Health of the economy required two contradictory policies: first and most prominently, a crackdown on all kinds of coining to ensure the reputation of the money abroad, but also the stretching of bullion as far as possible to ensure a sufficient supply of capital at home.

The courts fulfilled this mandate by negotiating a rubric of status, credibility, and reputation with the public to determine the boundaries of their prosecution, leaving enough victims for the program to appear successful, but enough security for counterfeiters of status to continue operating. The fact that many counterfeiters could continue to make money by exploiting the legal system's application of this rubric was almost negligible in the calculus of the value. The most important objective was to make anti-counterfeiting efforts *look like* they were working. The violence and hypocrisy operant in this two-faced policy was not lost on contemporaries. The gold Guinea was dubbed 'Old Mr. Gory' and pointing out the corruption and oversights of the government became so common as to be a trope in popular culture.[38] But who could argue with the results of the Tyburn hangman? Counterfeiters, coiners, and clippers were being hung around the clock, the mint was confidently playing out a program for stabilizing the money, and that was enough for the smooth operation of the financial apparatus.

---

[38] Linebaugh, *The London Hanged,* 40, 45 58.

Transcendental-Ish:
Change over Continuity Within Abolitionist Poetry Following the Compromise of 1850

By Zach Peterson

In 1838, prominent Quaker poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier published a collection of poems titled *Poems Written During the Progress of the Abolition Question in the United States*. For the introduction, he used a poem from the 18th century poet William Cowper – an early advocate against slavery himself:

> 'Twas in the glad season of spring,
> Asleep, at the dawn of the day,
> I dream'd what I cannot but sing,
> So pleasant it seem'd as I lay.
>
> I dream'd that on ocean afloat,
> Far hence to the westward I sail'd,
> While the billows high lifted the boat,
> And the fresh blowing breeze never fail'd.
>
> In the steerage a woman I saw –
> Such at least was the form that she wore –
> Whose beauty impressed me with awe,
> Ne'er taught me by woman before.
> She sat, and a shield at her side
> Shed light like a sun on the waves,
> And smiling divinely she cried,
> 'I go to make freemen of slaves.'[1]

Amid the eloquent and powerful oratory of those like Frederick Douglass and the heroic activism of those like Harriet Tubman, the genre of poetry may seem comparatively unimportant. How could this high-minded literature, this

---

[1] John Greenleaf Whittier, *Poems Written During the Progress of the Abolition Question in the United States,* Hein Online, Accessed December 6, 2021, https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=slavery&handle=hein.slavery/poeaqus0001&id=4&men_tab=srchresults.

graceful description of nature's pleasantries, have any effect on abolishing such a powerful and insidious institution as slavery? Just as we can gain new perspectives by reading one of Douglass' speeches or a first-hand account of Tubman's bravery, poetry offers a similar glimpse into the emotions of abolitionists, and the attitudes of the movement as a whole. Many historians have examined the purpose of poetry in the movement, but fewer have explored how the genre was used differently over time to reflect changing perspectives during the antebellum era. While the subject of this analysis will be those very changes, poetry was initially used as a tool to build community, to recruit more advocates and activists through the power of rhetoric.

Reliance on the written word to further the cause was not a new technique for abolitionists, nor for the black community in general during the later colonial period. Despite the fact that poetry could be found in the majority of antislavery newspapers at this time, contemporary historians have only recently begun to unpack its relationship with abolitionism as a whole. Perhaps the broadest analysis of this association to date is Dickson Bruce Jr.'s chapter in *Prophets of Protest,* a collection of essays that outlined the current historiography on abolitionism as well as its shortcomings. The final section of essays, titled "Representations," focused on the various forms of media used to discuss abolitionism, both at the time and in more contemporary history. In his chapter, Bruce asserted that abolitionist poetry had a distinct purpose of building community and growing the movement. Abolitionists chose poetry as their means to accomplish this goal because poetry had an already-established connection with the ideas of respectability and gentility, and was therefore thought to be more likely to garner support from the masses.[2] Another aspect of their approach that Bruce identified was poetry's connection to morality; in fact, according to Bruce "poetry was to be distinguished by its moral purpose."[3] More specifically, abolitionists recognized the established values of objective truth and humanism within poetry and adapted them to suit their cause.

These ideas are discussed in more detail in the article "Slavish Poses: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Aesthetics of Abolition," which was published in *Victorian Poetry.* John MacNeill Miller identified specific appeals to sympathy in Browning's poems as she illustrated the harsh treatment of slave women, as well as the impact of slavery on the traditional family.[4] Miller also noted that, as a white woman writing about the black experience,

---

[2] Dickson Bruce Jr., "Print Culture and the Antislavery Community: The Poetry of Abolitionism, 1831-1860," in *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism,* eds. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer (New York: New Press, 2006), 221.
[3] Bruce Jr., "Print Culture and the Antislavery Community," 223.
[4] John MacNeill Miller, "Slavish Poses: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Aesthetics of Abolition," *Victorian Poetry* 52, no. 4 (2014): 638-639.

Browning was not subject to the same skepticism that often presented itself in responses to black narratives at the time. He asserted that Browning benefitted from this perceived reliability, as it increased the amount of sympathy elicited by her work.[5] Despite the decidedly harsh and revealing themes of Browning's poems, Miller argued that her empathic appeals were consistent with the humanistic and community-oriented tone of other abolitionist poetry. Furthermore, Miller's analysis is similar to Bruce's and to Nilgun Anadolu-Okur's (discussed below) in that all three focused on how poetry was used as a tool to cultivate and grow the abolition movement as a whole.

Dickson Bruce Jr.'s account of black contributions to the body of abolitionist poetry, detailed in his book, *The Origins of African American Literature,* also fits within this historiographical framework. Although published before "Prophets of Protest" and therefore not focused as intimately on poetry, Bruce asserted that black voices were given credibility through their exposure in respected publications like William Llyod Garrison's *Liberator*, Arthur Tappan's *Emancipator*, or Frederick Douglass' *North Star*.[6] This applied to poetry within these publications as well as other types of written works, and overall, there is a conceptual relationship between this positive exposure and abolitionists' leanings toward poetry as a genre. Abolitionists' newspaper contributions – as well as their proclivity for poetry – relied upon the established reputation of their medium. Ultimately, community-building remained a consistently valuable method to chip away at the institution of slavery, and this sort of literary involvement was the way to achieve this. Bruce also mentioned that a notion of "black moral superiority" was quick to develop as black abolitionists began to publicize their rhetoric.[7] As they connected their work more closely to the transcendental idea of objective truth, which Bruce discussed in *Prophets* as well, abolitionists began to feel more and more confident in the moral and religious basis of their cause, which was continually reinforced by the societal connotations of poetry itself. Ultimately, Bruce's claim that black literature during this period used transcendental themes to foster unity is consistent with the prevailing historiographical narrative that focuses on poetry as a means to an end.

This historiography provides an analysis of the moralist origins of abolitionist poetry. Heavily influenced by the transcendental ideology of Ralph Waldo Emerson – who contributed directly to this body of poetry himself – abolitionists found poetry to be a useful method of garnering support for their cause. However, this decidedly high-minded idealism did not persist throughout the entirety of the abolitionism struggle. Following the Compromise

---

[5] Miller, "Slavish Poses," 638.
[6] Dickson D. Bruce Jr., *The Origins of African American Literature, 1680-1865* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2001), 237.
[7] Bruce Jr., *The Origins of African American Literature*, 233.

of 1850, which notably included the Fugitive Slave Law (a declaration that obligated citizens of free states to be vigilant and report on runaway slaves, despite not being in a slave state), the themes within abolitionist poetry experienced a subtle shift. Those involved with abolition saw the 1850 Compromise as a massive step backwards in the progression of the slavery question, and while poetry as a medium still persisted, it became a little less hopeful, a little more dark. The change in tone represented a more realistic outlook; progress had been made, but the Compromise of 1850 reaffirmed the influence of the "slave power" in American politics. It left abolitionists feeling dejected, somewhat hopeless, and the development of abolitionist poetry as a genre illuminated this broader ideological shift within the movement.

While the idea of such a shift is mentioned, it is not fully unpacked or specifically identified within the existing historiography concerning abolitionist poetry. For example, in *Angry Abolitionists and the Rhetoric of Slavery: Moral Emotions in Social Movements,* Benjamin Lamb-Books discussed "integrationist optimism of the 1830s [giving] way to increasingly separatist sentiments in the 1840s and 1850s."[8] However, he was focused on a different topic – mostly the shifting tides of unionization ideology across these decades – and therefore did not trace any of the rhetorical changes within poetry. Similarly, a journal article "Poetry's Place in the Crisis and Compromise of 1850," emphasized the "significance of the Compromise of 1850 as a turning point in the road to disunion."[9] This article did go further by saying, "Verse provided a critical space for addressing the moral and political dilemmas of the moment"; however, it did not go as far as to say how exactly it did so.[10]

Additional mentions of the importance of these events are found within *Dismantling Slavery*, where Nilgun Anadolu-Okur discussed "an inevitable climax in the early 1850s" that created a rift in the relationship between William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass.[11] She also noted that Douglass began to grow impatient with black disenfranchisement beginning in 1850, but neither of these references related to poetry specifically.[12] Finally, Dickson Bruce Jr. addressed this impactful moment in *The Origins of African American Literature* when he acknowledged that "Beginning in 1850 the developing political crisis in the United States over slavery had profound

---

[8] Benjamin Lamb-Books, *Angry Abolitionists and the Rhetoric of Slavery: Moral Emotions in Social Movements* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 76.
[9] John Frederick Bell, "Poetry's Place in the Crisis and Compromise of 1850," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 3 (September 2015): 414.
[10] Bell, "Poetry's Place," 414.
[11] Nilgun Anadolu-Okur, *Dismantling Slavery: Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Formation of the Abolitionist Discourse, 1841-1851* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2016), 7.
[12] Anadolu-Okur, *Dismantling Slavery*, 14.

effects on African American writers."[13] He took an additional step when he recognized that "Important continuities from the preceding decades still framed much that characterized African American literary forms" – a continuity re-emphasized in this analysis – but nevertheless, did not identify any specific shift.[14]

Overall, much of the existing historiography focuses on abolitionist literature as a whole, when it discusses a tonal shift, or it does not discuss one at all. The reflection of attitudes within the abolitionist movement through the medium of poetry has not yet been examined to its fullest extent. Instead of focusing on abolitionist poetry as a "means to an end" that served a uniform purpose for the movement, as the majority of historians to this point have done, this analysis will emphasize the changes in poetry's character throughout the antebellum era. Specifically, the worsening social and political conditions that began with the Compromise of 1850 – and the pessimism that followed – were reflected in the genre of poetry through ideological trends of negativity and rationality.

Like many other legislative actions during this period of American history, the Compromise of 1850 focused almost exclusively on slavery. The Mexican American War had just concluded, and the United States emerged from the conflict with sizable tracts of new land: 338,680,960 acres, according to the Federal Interagency Committee.[15] The big question was whether these new territories would be admitted to the Union as slave or free. Ultimately, Stephen Douglas' "popular sovereignty" – which allowed the inhabitants of those territories to decide for themselves – was the doctrine the government adopted. Abolitionists were not pleased with this result, but there was another aspect of the 1850 Compromise that caused them a bit more trouble. That was the Fugitive Slave Act.

This was a brutal and uncompromising measure that intended to decrease the number of runaway slaves, as well as escape attempts in general; it could be construed that this Act intended to reverse as much black progress as humanly possible. There was a fine imposed on law enforcement or judicial officers if they did not pursue a potential fugitive slave, as well as a fine on any citizen who was caught assisting any fugitives.[16] In addition, alleged slaves could not testify for themselves nor call anyone to testify on their behalf, thus hampering the rights of free blacks who did not have proof of their freedom. Finally, the federal commissioners who were appointed specifically to oversee these

---

[13] Bruce Jr., *African American Literature*, 257.
[14] Bruce Jr., *African American Literature*, 257.
[15] Karl S. Landstrom, "How We Acquired Our Landed Estate – Part 2," *Our Public Lands* 8, no. 4 (April 1959): 7.
[16] "Fugitive Slave Act 1850," The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy. Yale Law School, 2008. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/fugitive.asp.

fugitive slave hearings were paid $5 if they ruled an alleged slave was free, and $10 if they determined that the person was indeed a slave.[17] Abolitionists certainly recognized the unwelcome disparity created by this so-called "Compromise," and it was addressed in several abolitionist publications immediately following its enactment.

Among these publications was *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, in which Douglass himself wrote an editorial that denounced the grievous consequences of the Fugitive Slave Act. The consequences in question related to a conflict that had happened a month before in Christiana, Pennsylvania, where abolitionists confronted a slaveowner who attempted to re-capture two fugitives; this resulted in the death of the slaveowner, as well as one of the fugitives. This was known as the "Christiana Riot," which resulted in a series of trials and garnered national attention, most notably from those like Douglass who opposed the reason it occurred – the Fugitive Slave Act. Douglass claimed, "Every attempt to execute that law impresses more deeply on the public mind the conviction that it is an outrage upon every principle of justice and humanity."[18] While this article by Douglass did not feature any poetry, the magnitude of his sentiment here – that these broad principles of morality, and later the sanctity of our Constitution and country as a whole, were threatened by the Fugitive Slave Act – was captured in poetry as well. Although not as explicit as Douglass in most cases, there was a marked shift in the tone of abolitionist poetry following this legislation. One common way that this shift was displayed was through the use of storm-related imagery, specifically the word "tempest."

In a speech at the anniversary of the American Antislavery Society in New York, in 1856, John Mercer Langston discussed the progress of the antislavery movement but ultimately, focused the bulk of his time on what had not yet been accomplished. Within his speech was a poem, in which he described the state of the country as "thick and dark with loud winds swelling," and asserted that to make progress would require one to "rise through tempest-shrouded air."[19] Despite being five years after Douglass' editorial and six years after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act itself, Langston's attitude reflects a similar lack of trust in America's institutions. Langston is more explicit at a different point in his speech, where he asserted that "slavery is the great lord of this country, and there is no power in this nation today strong enough to withstand

---

[17] Catherine A. Paul, "Fugitive Slave Act of 1850," Social Welfare History Project, VCU Libraries, July 9, 2020. https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/federal/fugitive-slave-act-of-1850/.
[18] Frederick Douglass, "Fugitive Slave Law Illustrated," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, October 2, 1851, 1.
[19] John Mercer Langston, "Anti-Slavery," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. June 8, 1855, 1.

it."[20] Through his comparison of present circumstances to a dangerous storm, Langston attempted to convey his uncertainty and discontent.

This comparison can also be seen in a speech by William James Watkins, delivered at Columbus, Ohio in 1854. His speech also contained a poem, from which the following excerpts are taken. Watkins recognized the gravity of the current situation in an historical context, saying that "a fearful demon of destruction sits brooding on her dark horizon, and lightnings, red with uncommon wrath, are the executors of his dire vengeance."[21] Furthermore, Watkins referenced the original transcendental idea of "Truth" when he said, "You that have whispered Truth, Whisper no longer; Speak as the tempest does. Sterner and stronger."[22] By this, Watkins did not advocate for a departure from the truth; he believed that those who spoke the truth must now be louder than ever before in order to combat the increasing volume of the opposition.

What is most noteworthy about both Langston's and Watkins' rhetoric is not so much their difference from the traditions of abolitionist poetry, but their similarity. Abolitionist poets near the inception of its usage would use themes from nature because they drew inspiration from transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. This imagery was supposed to reflect a deeper connection with the world around them, an understanding that the beauty of nature represented the possibility of improvement. It was used almost exclusively in this manner. After the Compromise of 1850 and the discontent created by the Fugitive Slave Act, abolitionist poets continued to draw from nature to express their thoughts – except that now, they referenced it in a much more negative way. Imagery of lightning, earthquakes, and notably tempest, all contributed to reflecting a broader ideological shift. No longer was nature this pure and idealistic representation of what the world should be. Reeling from the erasure of decades of progress by the Fugitive Slave Act, abolitionist poets used the negative aspects of nature to demonstrate what they perceived to be an uncertain future.

This ideological variation was particularly evident in the writing of John Greenleaf Whittier. As one of the most prominent and principled abolitionist poets in the 1830s and 1840s, Whittier almost always included references to nature and other broad transcendental ideas in his poetry. His strong belief in the will of God, informed by his Quakerism, commonly appeared in his poetry as well. In a collection of poems published in 1853, all of these themes can still be seen, but they differ from his earlier work in that a clear antithesis to nature's optimism could now be identified. Whittier described "winds … raging o'er the upper ocean, And billows wild contend with angry roar," and

---

[20] Langston, "Anti-Slavery," 1.
[21] William James Watkins, "Speech of Wm. James Watkins," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* August 18, 1854, 6.
[22] Watkins, "Speech," 2.

while he finished the stanza on a positive note – "far down beneath the wild commotion, That peaceful stillness reigneth evermore" – the mere presence of nature's negative opposition is a departure from the original optimism of the genre.[23] It represented, like its usage in Langston's and Watkins' speeches, a recognition of the possibility that social and political progress may not be as certain as they had hoped.

These storm-related themes were a subtle variation of the previously positive, transcendentally informed nature imagery from which abolitionist poetry drew its inspiration. However, there was an even simpler change in emphasis within the genre that occurred around the same time – the focus on a conflict between light and dark. After the Compromise of 1850, abolitionist poets looked increasingly toward this fundamental opposition to describe the state of the nation from that point forward. Instead of focusing solely on the light as they had done in the past, the changing political and social climate introduced a new opposition, the darkness, in the rhetoric of abolitionist poetry. Similar to how references of the tempest were still accompanied by the positive portrayals of nature that characterized abolitionist poetry's origins, these references to darkness rarely appeared on their own, often side by side with more familiar themes of light. Nevertheless, their inclusion itself represented an increase in a begrudging sort of realism among abolitionist poets following the Compromise of 1850.

Among the first to utilize this juxtaposition was one of the most notable figures of transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson. In 1851, he was invited to give an address to the people of Concord on the topic of the Fugitive Slave Act, as it had been made into law only several months prior. It was still considered a hot topic of conversation. Emerson stated, "this last year has forced us all into politics."[24] Emerson spoke as though he could not get his mind off of this horrible legislation, describing waking up in pain and finding it hard to breathe because of the "infamy in the air."[25] The impact of the political climate on Emerson's attitude is clear, and he concluded this description by asserting that the Act "robs the landscape of its beauty, and takes the sunshine out of every hour."[26] This must have had a significant impact, given Emerson's status as a bastion, if not a founder of idealistic, nature-based transcendentalism. Through this rhetoric, Emerson indicated that all of those meanings and emotions were completely snuffed out by the Fugitive Slave Act. The landscape was no longer beautiful, the sun no longer shone; Emerson felt as though he was unable to appreciate those pleasures while such a terrible law existed.

---

[23] John Greenleaf Whittier, "Poems," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* May 20, 1853, 1.
[24] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Address to Citizens of Concord," transcript of speech delivered at Concord, MA, May 3, 1851, https://www.bartleby.com/90/1106.html.
[25] Emerson, "Address to Citizens of Concord."
[26] Emerson, "Address to Citizens of Concord."

A more literal application of darkness as it related to slavery comes from a poem called "What of The Night?" written by an unknown author and published in the *Liberator* in 1859. The opening two lines read, "What of the night, Watchman, what of the night – the black night of Slavery? Wanes it apace?"[27] It is clear that the "night" the author referred to is slavery itself, and the tone of the poem wondered, somewhat wistfully, if that night would end soon. The poem continued with a description of several positive features of nature – swelling seas, rustling trees, "the faint prelude of music to come" – but the darkness, the night of slavery, is presented as an obstacle in front of the positivity of nature. [28] While one existed, the other could not.

Within this same poem, a similar dichotomy is presented that pits the concepts of truth and darkness against each other. After having discussed the obstructive nature of slavery as represented by darkness, the author wondered, "Is there hope for the Truth – is there hope for the Right? Have Wrong and Oppression the victory won?"[29] It is evident that they intended to separate these groups of ideas here: Truth and Right on one side, Wrong and Oppression on the other. Having just talked about darkness too, however, the author encouraged the reader to add the ideas of Light and Dark to this framework of understanding. While in a different context, this maintained the importance of the conflict between Light and Dark – this time in a more abstract, conceptual sense as opposed to other literal mentions.

Equating these broad concepts of Truth, Right, and Light was consistent with the transcendental origins of abolitionist poetry as well, as these ideas were also linked with what was natural and typically, what was God's will. But this was not an assertion of Truth. This was a wonder about Truth, a question asked by someone who was not quite sure whether things would work out in the end. While this did not represent doubt of the existence of Truth, Right, or Light, and was instead a reflection of uncertainty at that moment, that is precisely the point. The political and social climate of the decade, the downward spiral which began with the Compromise of 1850, forced abolitionist poets to reckon with the possibility that Truth – to put a twist on the words of William Shakespeare – "may not out."

While several figurative descriptions are used to describe slavery, including Darkness, Opposition, and a "tempest," the core of the issue was often presented in a very zero-sum way: While this evil existed, the goodness of society – expressed in similarly figurative ways like Light and Truth – could not exist at the same time. This was emphasized very explicitly in Emerson's address at Concord but was evident in the following few writings as well,

---

[27] H.G.A., "What of the Night," *Liberator*, July 8, 1859, 108.
[28] H.G.A., "What of the Night," 108.
[29] H.G.A., "What of the Night," 108.

specifically as authors expressed their disillusionment with the character of the nation. Obviously, the institution of slavery had existed since the nation's founding; it was by no means a new development for abolitionists to be unhappy with the current state of affairs. But the Compromise of 1850 seemed to be the beginning of a cascade, one that forced a different feeling of awareness. A poem published in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* in 1855, entitled "Borroboola Gha: A Poem for the Times," captured this feeling.

The poem told a story of a man who listened to a sermon: "'Twas all about some heathens, Thousand of miles afar, who live in a land of darkness, Borroboola Gha."[30] The church raised many donations for this faraway place after describing the conditions there, but on the man's walk the next morning, he saw a family in need – hungry, without shelter, a mother unable to raise her children. The man then realized that, after hearing so much about the suffering in this unknown place, that a similar sort of suffering ran rampant in his own community. The poem read, "And I had passed them heedless/A thousand times before, Alas for the cold and hungry, That met me every day, While all my tears were given, To the suffering far away!"[31] The purpose of this poem was not to disregard the hardships of other places, but rather to draw attention to the hardships within America's own borders. The idea of Borroboola Gha as a "land of darkness" – as its meaning was expanded throughout the poem from a literal place to more of a condition of poverty – reflected the negativity surrounding the social circumstances of the time and utilizes the theme of darkness to convey that message.

Published in the *Liberator* in 1856, a poem titled "Abolition Lies" conveyed a similar message of negativity and uncertainty, this time through a combination of religious and nature-based imagery. Its beginning mentioned several key political themes from the 1850s, including the Kansas-Nebraska Act (which created two new territories and effectively repealed the Missouri Compromise) and popular sovereignty, which was the doctrine applied in this Act that allowed the residents of those territories to decide the all-important slavery question for themselves. This contributed to heightened tensions and created an atmosphere of relative chaos in these new territories, as well as across the nation as a whole. This emotion was expressed in the poem as the author stated: "For lasting execration/Shall the damning record stand, How the garden of our nation, The Eden of our land, Was cursed by wiles Satanic, By crimes of deepest dye."[32] This assessment related to the transcendental origins of abolitionist poetry in a religious way. The new territories in the West were a tremendous opportunity for the country – so much so that the author likens

---

[30] "Borroboola Gha, "A Poem for the Times," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* February 2, 1855, 1.
[31] "Borroboola Gha, "A Poem for the Times," 1.
[32] "Abolition Lies." *Liberator,* September 12, 1856, 152.

them to the Garden of Eden – and yet the assertion was that they were utterly ruined by the introduction of slavery. To describe nature as cursed by Satan himself was a very heavy determination, given the reputation of nature as one of the most beautiful and Godly parts of life in earlier works of abolitionist poetry. Needless to say, the tone of this poem offered a sharp contrast to the previous optimism of the genre and represented a more realistic, perhaps even pessimistic, outlook on the current state of America.

Further disdain with the state of the nation in the 1850s was expressed in a poem titled "Independence Day," written by someone known only as "Carrie," for the Anti-Slavery Celebration at Framingham on July 4, 1856. Independence Day is, of course, commonly known for celebration, but it was equally common in abolitionist literature for several decades to take that opportunity to reflect on the aspects of America that did not deserve celebration. This poem was no different, as Carrie writes: "We dare not speak of Lexington, or Bunker's Hill, today – Can we forget that slave-ships ride in the waters of our bay?"[33] Similar to Emerson, she continued with positive depictions of nature – "fair green fields" and "sunny plains" – before contrasting it with a harsher reality: "There is no spot where man is free – no refuge for the oppressed."[34] While this poem addressed slavery more broadly than just the Fugitive Slave Act, the sentiment paralleled Emerson's in that this author also identified a direct conflict between the beauty of nature and the institution of slavery.

This conflict, as well as an emphasis on its dichotomous, zero-sum nature, was considered once more in "Original Poem," written by Reverend James Freeman Clarke for the 25th Anniversary of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1857. Like many other abolitionist poems, Clarke's began by describing a rather tranquil landscape scene. The difference, and the indication that this poem breaks from the genre's transcendental traditions, is that Clarke's rhetoric quickly descended into something far less positive. He spoke in an almost satirical way about a "Freedom-loving race, Oh, patriot people," who emerge on the Fourth of July to "declare all men made equal, all men free as air."[35] And yet, when someone asked the question, "Are *negroes* men? If so, are they born free?" it was met with violence, both rhetorical and physical.[36] This is exemplified by Elijah Lovejoy's death, which Clarke mentioned next. Like the previous two poems, Clarke made the claim that there has not been, and cannot be, a true celebration of independence while the institution of slavery still exists.

---

[33] Carrie, "Independence Day," *Liberator*, July 11, 1856, 112.
[34] Carrie, "Independence Day," 112.
[35] James Freeman Clarke, "Original Poem," *Liberator,* January 8, 1857, 8.
[36] Clarke, "Original Poem," 8.

The following few stanzas of Clarke's poem offered somewhat of an ideological chronology, as they described the sentiment on both sides of the slavery question roughly since Lovejoy's death in 1837. He referenced the economic arguments of slaveholders, and stated, "Texas was annexed, I hear, to extend [the institution]."[37] When he arrived at the Compromise of 1850, his tone became considerably more somber. He wrote, "for a season Darkness fell around; the South had made our homes its hunting-ground."[38] He continued by declaring, "Darkness was on the State … Darkness was on the Church … Darkness was on the Courts."[39] A notable difference here is that instead of referencing darkness strictly in the context of what it took away from nature's beauty, as other poets like Emerson did, Clarke presented his idea of Darkness as its own concept entirely.

Every usage of the word "darkness" in Clarke's poem is spelled with a capital D, which separated it from the confining context of a simple state of nature. Instead, this bigger idea of Darkness was presented in direct conflict with the existing idea of Truth. Clarke referred to this a few lines later when discussing the Congressional suppression of the topic of slavery; he stated that "Truth was gagged."[40] In employing these two ideas of Truth and Darkness, Clarke created a dichotomy that can be used to interpret the evolution of abolitionist poetry as a whole. The genre began with these principled ideas of Truth and of Nature, which were themselves intimately connected in the transcendentalist school of thought. But this represented a shift within the genre – a response to shifting ideologies throughout the country – to a less hopeful, more realistic tone, one characterized by this idea of Darkness. Optimism was replaced with doubt, as evidenced by Clarke's assertion that Darkness had control over some of the country's most important institutions.

Another piece of evidence that could suggest an ideological shift in the genre is the intended audience of these poems. Whereas the majority of poems from the earlier days of the movement were published in newspapers, it is noteworthy that several of the poems in this analysis were read specifically for an antislavery society meeting. This is not to say that poems after 1850 were not published in newspapers at all, as the *Liberator*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and others still featured many. However, a more intimate audience indicated movement away from one of the original goals of abolitionist poetry: community-building. Instead of poems being published in newspapers whenever possible, so as to spread their message and recruit others to their

---

[37] Clarke, "Original Poem," 8.
[38] Clarke, "Original Poem," 8.
[39] Clarke, "Original Poem," 8.
[40] Clarke, "Original Poem," 8.

cause, poems after 1850 were increasingly read to smaller, already-committed groups. This is a function of the change in tone. Early abolitionist poetry was suited, and in fact specifically made for, garnering support for the abolitionist cause. It was optimistic, featuring bright depictions of nature and full of hope for a future without slavery. In contrast, abolitionist poetry after 1850 – as is the subject of this analysis – was considerably darker, more realistic, and often admitted doubt about the future of a nation that did not seem eager to rid itself of the "peculiar institution." Potentially, this proclivity for smaller audiences could suggest a recognition among abolitionists that their poetry was not of the community-building type anymore, and that it should now be somewhat sequestered among those who already understood the current position of the movement.

This exploration supports the claim that abolitionist poetry underwent an ideological shift following the Compromise of 1850. The vibrant optimism and high-minded moralism that characterized the origins of the genre – drawing from transcendental influences like Emerson and Thoreau – was altered after the Compromise to become a begrudging realism, and an understanding that the future of the country remained uncertain. This was not a zero-sum shift, as prominent themes like Nature and Truth remained focal points of the genre for its entire duration. Instead, a previously one-sided understanding of these ideas was changed through an introduction of their ideological opponents. Nature was still referenced, but poets' depictions came to include the negative aspects of our environment – namely tempests and storms – to describe their exasperation with the persistence of slavery and inequality. Truth was not counteracted with Lies but rather with Darkness, of the sort that had the potential to obscure the goals of abolitionists and the path they followed, which in their eyes, was God's. These and a few other themes were not replaced but augmented; in the face of the Compromise of 1850 and the harsh Fugitive Slave Act that accompanied it, abolitionists used these variations in their poetry to express the precariousness of a nation that clung tightly to the institution of slavery.

"No Time to Lose":

A Reevaluation of the Role of Petitioning in Political Abolitionism from 1842-1849

Jacob Kaminski

In an attempt to uncover the importance of antislavery petition campaigns sent to Congress in the 1840s and 1850s, political scientists Daniel Carpenter and Colin Moore set out to go through archival records to collect data on the content of the petitions. This soon proved to be more challenging than expected, as their search revealed that most of the petitions that had been submitted had either been lost or burned by erstwhile archive employees to heat their rooms during cold winters.[1] There is perhaps no better metaphor for the modern perception of abolitionists' petition campaigns, and political abolitionism at large, than two cold, suffering nineteenth-century archivists warming themselves by a fire fed with "useless" abolitionist petitions. The mistakes of past archival staff, however, should not dictate the way in which historians move forward with abolition studies. Recent shifts by historians that seek to embrace political activism as a legitimate means of abolitionism offer a new place for petitions to become part of the conversation that will facilitate greater appreciation for the ways in which political activism shaped the fight against slavery.

Early works on the role of politics in the abolitionist movement were rooted in Civil War revisionism of the 1930s and 1940s. Ironically, historians of this era viewed politics as a widespread means of engagement, but saw political abolitionists as dangerous and disturbed extremists whose provocation escalated to needless fratricidal warfare.[2] This type of revisionism was not isolated to the topic of political abolitionism, but rather is indicative of how they viewed abolitionists in general. It is fitting, as from the start they tried to mischaracterize and misrepresent the political engagement of abolitionists during the fight against slavey. This revisionist scholarship persisted until the 1960s and 1970s, when the Civil Rights Movement began to influence modern historians of abolitionism. These historians established that abolitionists and antislavery activists had clear commitments to both the fight against slavery

---

[1] Daniel Carpenter and Colin D. Moore, "When Canvassers Became Activists: Antislavery Petitioning and the Political Mobilization of American Women," *The American Political Science Review* 108, no. 3 (August 2014): 483.

[2] Corey M. Brooks, "Reconsidering Politics in the Study of American Abolitionists," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 8, no. 2 (June 2018): 292–93.

and the promotion of a greater degree of racial equality, with a consistent focus on individual reformers and their moral purity.[3] This shift saw political action only based on individual activism, mostly focused on white men, and did not see it connected to abolitionists' use of formal politics: voting, lobbying and the creation of political parties.

It was not until the 21st century that historians began to develop a more inclusive view of the abolitionist movement, one that had clear policy-oriented goals that were undertaken by men and women of different backgrounds and ethnicities.[4] Recent works place particular emphasis on the role that the African American community had in the fight against slavery, as their role had been one of the most excluded from the existing historiography.[5] Absent from most of these works, however, is a clear focus on the political activism that drove abolitionists in their fight against slavery. In one of the most recent efforts to create a more representative historiography for abolitionism, Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer failed to mention political abolitionism. While on the one hand they pointed out that most abolition historians have traditionally focused on questions regarding the origins, means and ends, or character of abolition, it appears their primary interest was expanding racial and gender representation in the character question alone. The absence of work discussing political abolitionism illustrates how few scholars, even recently, have begun to analyze the way in which abolitionists and politics intersected. So, how should we understand political abolitionism? Political abolitionism can be best understood as engagement and activism that utilized political channels to help advance the antislavery cause. It is not separate from the abolitionism movement, but rather a specific form of engagement that abolitionists purposefully took to achieve various sets of goals.

While several different political tactics were employed across the United States, petition campaigns were one of the most frequently used tactics by abolitionists. Historians have long recognized their usefulness in shaping politics and achieving real legislative victories. Richard S. Newman's work, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism,* traced the origin of petition campaigns by organizations such as the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society (PAS), which began petitioning local and state governments as early as 1790.[6] Newman's focus on the PAS effectively illustrates the long and deeply rooted legacy that petition campaigns have had in shaping grass roots abolitionism. Corey M. Brooks' *Liberty Power* picked up where Newman's analysis ended.

---

[3] Brooks, "Reconsidering Politics," 293.
[4] Brooks, "Reconsidering Politics," 294.
[5] For more, see Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer, eds., *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (The New Press, 2006), and Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (Yale University Press, 2017).
[6] Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in The Early Republic* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 25, 39.

Brooks attempted to explore the role of political abolitionism in the rise of antislavery politics, showing the evolution of the transition from localized grassroots movements to the rise of the Republican Party and the embracing of antislavery political leaders.[7] While the scope of *Liberty Power* covered far more than petition campaigns, its analysis of northern-led petition campaigns illustrated their importance. Brooks used petitions to illustrate the ways in which a voter coalition was created in the north in the 1830s; however, petition campaigns that occurred after the Congressional gag rules of the late 1830s received none of Brooks' attention. Instead, he noted that the gag rule was critical in ending the wave of petition campaigns and forced political abolitionists to adopt new strategies, such as lobbying, in order to achieve legislative victories.[8] Thus, despite a near consensus on both the importance and deeply rooted legacy that petition campaigns had in political abolitionism, historians only seem to be interested in them until the late 1830s, as they quickly turn their attention to alternative forms of political activism with the emergence of antislavery political parties.

Even the most recent and detailed historical analysis of northern petition campaigns, Stanley Harrold's *American Abolitionism,* seems to move past petitioning campaigns by 1840. In his work, Harrold noted that previous historians had primarily viewed petition campaigns as designed to shape public opinion and to build community support rather than to achieve any material legislative victories.[9] Harrold placed far greater emphasis on the petition campaigns of the 1830s, specifically regarding the attempts to end slavery in Washington D.C., demonstrating how petition efforts had material political consequences, especially in ensuring that slavery remained in political discourse and the national spotlight.[10]

This focus on early petition campaigns, in part, may stem from the fact that early petition campaigns are far easier to analyze since they were often direct political acts that achieved a great deal of legislative success. An example can be seen within the Chester County Committee of Correspondence, which began a petition campaign that was sent to the Pennsylvania state assembly. The campaign aimed to achieve gradual abolition laws that passed the assembly by a vote of 34:21 in 1780.[11] In Massachusetts, black abolitionist Prince Hall continued a petition campaign with the goal of passing a gradual abolition law, one that had previously failed twice. Through his continued pressure and discussion of black rights, the Massachusetts constitutional convention inserted

---

[7] Corey M. Brooks, *Liberty Power: Antislavery Third Parties and The Transformation of American Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[8] Brooks, *Liberty Power*, 9.

[9] Stanley Harrold, *American Abolitionism: Its Direct Political Impact from Colonial Times into Reconstruction* (University of Virginia Press, 2019), 54.

[10] Harrold, *American Abolitionism*, 55–65.

[11] Harrold, *American Abolitionism*, 20–21.

a declaration of rights, the same declaration that was the legal foundation for the later state supreme court decision to abolish slavery in 1783.[12] In Connecticut, from 1777-1779, multiple petition campaigns were conducted to pressure the state legislature to enact gradual abolition laws. Despite most of them being unsuccessful, their popularity gained the support of several white ministers whose work to support the campaigns ultimately led to Connecticut passing a gradual emancipation act in 1784.[13]

These are just three of the numerous northern petition campaigns in the late 1700s that set a precedent for abolitionists in the 19th century. There is little to no debate over the interpretation of these campaigns, as historians seem to recognize their direct political effects. Their ability to achieve legislative victories encouraged historians to focus solely on the end results instead of analyzing the processes in which political abolitionists engaged; however, focusing solely on petitions that resulted in laws being passed has led historians to neglect later campaigns that might not have generated similar legislative changes and, thereby, to exclude them from our current understanding of abolition's complexity. This ends oriented focus has created a divide in how historians determine what is or is not political. For some historians, the lack of legislative success is an indication that abolitionists did not spend much time focusing on political activism, instead seeking to shape public opinion and build community support in other ways. Others assert that political activism did occur, just not with the use of petitioning campaigns, insisting that we ought to look to lobbying efforts and party creation for evidence of political activism. Yet, when we exclusively look at the end result of the activism, we are unable to understand the process and the justifications that motivated abolitionists to pursue those ends in the first place. This dilemma can best be resolved by expanding our understanding of what political activism is to include actions and efforts that, while not achieving the same degree of material success as other efforts, still engaged with political channels with clear long-term goals.

Harrold, Brooks, and Newman, among other historians, all viewed the emergence of gag rules as the end of petition campaigns and focused their analyses on alternative means of political engagement after 1840. Yet, despite the public effort to silence abolitionists, petition campaigns existed well into the 1850s. This all begs the following question: if Congressional gag rules really did end the petitioning campaigns, why did abolitionists continue to invest time and effort in them?

This paper seeks to answer that question by analyzing the use of petition campaigns in immediate response to Congressional gag rules, as well as the campaigns that were generated in the years that followed. It will demonstrate how, between 1842-1849, abolitionists used petitions to achieve three

---

[12] Harrold, *American Abolitionism*, 21.
[13] Harrold, *American Abolitionism*, 21–22.

overarching goals: to fight for representation, to make slavery relevant, and to create community. These goals, while initially in direct response to Congressional gag rules, continued long after their repeal. Thus, it becomes clear that post-gag rule petition campaigns were still deeply political acts, as abolitionists continued to petition both state and federal legislators to mobilize grassroots political support, with the goal of expanding the white northern antislavery coalition. Petitions also continued to be a means of political resistance as abolitionist societies across the nation used them to demonstrate a commitment and resolve to a Congress that sought to silence their efforts. Through this expansion, abolitionists were able to demonstrate the power of the antislavery coalition to elected officials, ensuring that the issue of slavery remained in the mainstream political spotlight.

Even the earliest petition campaigns experienced more failure than success, but political engagement is more than achieving legislative victories. While accomplishing political progress is certainly important, applying pressure to legislative bodies, to keep the issue of slavery alive in political discourse, was equally critical. Abolitionists used petition campaigns for the vital work of building coalitions and gathering support from various groups to expand the abolitionist movement. Simply the act of petitioning, a right protected by the 1st amendment of the Constitution, is an act of political engagement, no matter what the outcome. Regardless of whether petition campaigns resulted in legislative victories, shaping public opinion, or building community support, the act of petitioning was a deeply political act with wide ranging political implications, all of which are worthy of acknowledgement and analysis. By shifting the focus away from an end- to a means-driven approach, we can best understand the way in which abolitionists conceptualized their own political engagement.

With this new lens, petition campaigns of 1842 reveal a great deal about the ways in which abolitionist groups navigated political channels in response to Congressional gag rules. On October 24, 1842, the Ohio American Anti-Slavery Society established the need for a heightened petitioning campaign. In a petition to the House of Representatives, the committee made the declaration that "…the 21st rule (gag order) … is a violation of the principles of republicanism, a trampling of the right to petition, and a complete abrogation of a sacred right guaranteed by the constitution and we therefore earnestly request you rescind or repeal it."[14] The gag rule had far-reaching implications beyond the abolition movement. Groups like the Ohio American Anti-Slavery Society recognized that the rule, on its face, lessened their ability to be heard and

---

[14] A. Brooke et al., "Communications: Convention of the Ohio American Anti-Slavery Society," *Philanthropist (1836-1843)* 7, no. 14 (November 12, 1842), https://www.proquest.com/docview/89841287/fulltextPDF/21F31479243746B1PQ/1?accountid=1 1578.

represented in Congress. In its implementation, it was not just an avoidance of dealing with the question of slavery, but rather an exertion of congressional power that took away a constitutional right given to all citizens. This became a way to unify northern communities into the existing abolitionist coalition by making the gag rule relevant to northern whites. In many ways, the willingness for Congress to take away a constitutional right to avoid debates over slavery illustrated the power that the institution of slavery had over national politics, posing a threat to a great number of northern people. By framing petitions on the shaky constitutionality of the gag rule, abolitionists were able to make the issue of slavery more relevant and meaningful to northern communities, expanding their base and gaining political support.

This strategy is prevalent in several petitions sent to Congress in 1842. The American Anti-Slavery Society released a few different petitions during 1842, all of which had significant political implications for abolitionist societies across the nation. In one petition, it expressed explicit anger over the gag rule, seeing it as a complete violation of the right of free speech and the right of petitioning, both of which proved without question that the public opinion of the nation was under "absolute and supreme control" of southern overseers.[15] This petition, while sent to Congress, had a clear goal of instilling a sense of fear in the public over the government's willingness to disregard constitutional rights.

The rhetoric utilized is equally revealing. Sectional tensions were ever-increasing as slavery became a more polarizing issue, which was reflected in the call to action over disproportionate southern influence. The gag rule was a symbolic representation of the perceived insignificance of northern interests, as its passage and implementation were evidence that the popular consensus of the south mattered more than the constitutional rights of the north. Its publication in the *Liberator* also reveals that the Society not only wanted to send petitions, but also wanted people to know the justification for the campaigns. This had clear political implications; the fight against slavery could be rebranded to ensure that a national government was not rooted in Slave Power nor dominated by the political ideals of one geographic region. This had several effects, including the creation of a larger voting coalition highlighted in the emergence of the Liberty Party, increased participation in antislavery movements, and a greater sense of urgency to apply political pressure to elected representatives to remind them of the popular desire to deal directly with the question of slavery. In essence, petitions were used to give northern whites a reason to care about slavery.

---

[15] "Petitions, Thursday Morning, Nov 19, Constitution of the Western New York American A.S. Society Constitution," *Liberator (1831-1865),* January 6, 1843, 13, 1, p. 2, https://www.proquest.com/magazines/american-anti-slavery-society/docview/91175589/se-2?accountid=11578.

This political effort to expand the antislavery cause in the north is consistently reflected in the numerous petition campaigns that occurred between 1842 and 1843. This consistency, in part, can be credited to one of the other petitions circulated in the *Liberator* after the American Anti-Slavery Society convention in 1842. In it, the authors made clear their desire to "… solicit the friends of human freedom in every city, town, village, district, and parish in the United States to unite their efforts to secure an extensive circulation of the annexed petition, by December of 1842, to be joined together in one big petition and presented in hopes of obtaining a restoration of an inalienable right."[16] These campaigns, while geographically isolated, were not isolated in their messages. The phrase "friends of human freedom," while not mentioning slavery directly, implies the need for all people to unify in their efforts to restore their inalienable right to petition. These petitions demonstrated the commitment towards expanding and unifying the abolition community, by encouraging both the widespread circulation of petitions and the unification of these efforts across geographic boundaries.

The work of the American Anti-Slavery Society to apply political pressure on Congress also inspired local communities to increase their circulation of petitions. The Stark County Anti-Slavery Society, during its 8th annual meeting in 1842, elected to create committees to draw up petitions to Congress and the state legislature with the goal of circulating them in their respective neighborhoods, in part motivated by their anger towards the Fugitive Slave Acts.[17] The Ohio American Anti-Slavery Society, in addition to petitioning the national government, also sent a petition to the Ohio legislature to seek the repeal of the Black Laws of 1804, 1807, and 1839, all of which barred black persons from emigrating into the state and, under certain circumstances, applied certain "grievous restrictions and penalties."[18] The Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society took a similar course of action when it urged members to volunteer and distribute petitions within their communities.[19]

Regardless of the material effects of any of the above campaigns, their clear political nature led to mobilization at the local, state, and national levels. For Stark County, creating community-based groups to organize in grass roots efforts in response to the Fugitive Slave Act was a means to address an issue that the local community was upset about. This is reaffirmed by the fact that petitions were not just sent to the U.S. Congress, but also to the Ohio State

---

[16] "Petitions, Thursday Morning, Nov 19, Constitution of the Western New York American A.S. Society Constitution."

[17] Edward Brooke and Joseph Luxens, "Communications: Annual Meeting of the Stark County Anti-Slavery Society," *Philanthropist (1836-1843)* 7, no. 13 (October 22, 1842), https://www.proquest.com/docview/89832598?accountid=11578.

[18] Brooke et al., "Communications."

[19] "Tenth Annual Meeting of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society: Money Received, Money Expended, Counsellors," *Liberator (1831-1865)*, October 20, 1843, https://www.proquest.com/docview/91176169/97C4CCCA850411CPQ/13?accountid=11578.

Legislature, suggesting that this was an issue that demanded localized solutions. In Ohio, political engagement was directed at the state level as committees decided to focus on localized laws that were antithetical to their antislavery views, also indicating that these petitions were tailored to address contested issues in their state. In Boston, petitions became a means of political engagement for women, providing them a channel to increase their own agency and an ability to help generate community-based change.

The ability for petitions to be accessible to more diverse groups of people was a powerful reflection of their aim to facilitate political engagement. To be clear, the differences in the petitions' content is not evidence of fragmentation or inconsistency within the abolitionist movement, but rather reaffirms the idea that political abolitionists had clear goals of expanding their antislavery coalitions. The content of petitions could not all be the same as the demands and views of local communities were not the same across the nation. As such, petitions had to reflect issues and ideologies that were embedded in the communities where they were circulated. These differences in approaches demonstrate that abolitionists knew their communities and circulated petitions that were responsive to those communities' ideals.

If abolitionist groups knew that petitions were unlikely to achieve legislative success due to the gag rules passed by Congress, then what can explain their continued efforts in organizing petition campaigns across the nation? As mentioned previously, one of the most apparent desires of many abolitionist groups was to create a greater sense of unity and expand the population of those sympathetic to the antislavery cause. Another aim was to create a larger voter base to combat the perceived dominance of southern Slave Power in Congress. Two major clauses within the American Anti-Slavery Society's 1842 petition directly attacked the emergence of political affiliations of abolitionists, claiming that Whigs, Democrats, and Tylerites were all subservient to the slaveholding power and a barrier to the path towards human liberty, thus unworthy of any level of support from abolitionists. They further warned abolitionists not to join specific political parties to ensure antislavery voters retained a balance of power between leading political parties to deter them from nominating proslavery candidates to public office.[20] Historians have previously been inclined to view the lack of support of traditional political parties as evidence of the need for third-party platforms, such as the Liberty Party, but this was not necessarily the case. The 1842 petition indicated that, while no political party was fully advocating for emancipation, it was necessary of all abolitionists to avoid having party allegiances in order to hold political leaders accountable for considering abolitionist voters. By refusing to endorse a specific party, especially parties that had not demonstrated any initiative to

---

[20] "Petitions, Thursday Morning, Nov 19, Constitution of the Western New York American A.S. Society Constitution."

advocate on behalf of abolitionism, the abolitionist community could use its votes more influentially. As such, politicians that wanted to get their vote would have to be understanding and responsive to their long-term goals of emancipation.

Political abolitionists continued to apply pressure to political leaders well into the 1840s. Throughout the decade, political organizing and grassroots mobilization continued at both the state and national levels as abolitionists continued to generate petitions. By 1844, abolitionist societies began to see the benefits of their ongoing efforts to expand the antislavery voting coalition and to apply pressure to elected officials to face the issue of slavery directly. The South Division of the Worcester County Anti-Slavery Society, during their annual meeting in January of 1844, reflected on the efforts of the previous four years in the following petition:

> events in Congress do most conclusively prove, that the efforts of abolitionists in past years, in petitioning Congress, have not been thrown away. They have gradually, but certainly, accomplished a most valuable work; they have convinced the slaveholding power and interest, that abolitionists are in earnest; and have made an opening for the fullest national discussion of slavery, of which all, who are worthy of the name of freeman, will be earnest to avail themselves.[21]

While legislative victories may have been few and far between, abolitionist societies like the South Division of the Worcester County Anti-Slavery Society still viewed petition campaigns as largely successful. While slow and gradual in nature, the true goal or expectation was never to achieve the end of slavery through the legislation. Instead, it was a coordinated political effort to make the issue of slavery relevant to more people, and as such, create a stronger voter coalition that demanded the attention of elected representatives. Petitions were one of the most accessible and available means of spreading information and collecting support, which is why so many societies across the nation continued to pursue them despite the passing of congressional gags.

Despite not reaching the floor of either chamber of Congress, petition circulation demanded national attention. Given the great number of petitions that were in circulation, more and more people took stances on the issue of slavery. This served as a constant reminder for national leaders that the debate over slavery could be avoided in the short term, but it was not going to go away. Worcester County, in an effort to increase the petitioning effort of the

---

[21] Charles White, "Worcester County (South Division) Anti-Slavery Society: Afternoon Session, Evening Session," *Liberator (1831-1865)*, January 26, 1844, https://www.proquest.com/magazines/worcester-county-south-division-anti-slavery/docview/91178674/se-2?accountid=11578.

latter 1840s, recommended the creation of an antislavery committee in each of their towns, each of which would be dedicated towards creating and circulating petitions to continue its effort to target both the state and national legislatures with is antislavery demands.[22] The creation of a dedicated committee to operate at the local level had strong similarities to the types of organizations created in Stark County in 1842. Both reflected a commitment towards community organizing and activism, seeing petitioning as a means of creating coalitions and community support for antislavery goals. The creation of local committees also allowed for more opportunities for community leaders to engage in activism, creating petitions that would be tailored to the beliefs and values of local areas. This allowed antislavery advocates to be more targeted with their petitioning efforts while also creating a systematic approach towards their grassroots engagement. The same emphasis on voting coalitions and political pressure were the guiding goals of decisions to increase community-based petitioning efforts.

By December of 1844, the gag rules that had prohibited petition campaigns from reaching the floor of either chamber of Congress were repealed.[23] While this did revive hopes of petitions being recognized, it also took away one of the major examples that abolitionists relied upon to expand their popular support. Thus, abolitionists needed to find a new way to convince northern whites to join the antislavery movement. It remained clear that their goals had not changed in any significant way, as political abolitionists were still deeply committed to expanding their voter coalition and applying political pressure to elected officials. Their messages would simply have to change and move past the gag rule, at least in some capacity, to continue to generate a sense of urgency in their activism. As such, these localized efforts continued into 1845 as abolitionist organizations focused their efforts on coordinating a national framework to guide petitioning efforts. As noted previously, the *Liberator* became a prominent way to display the resolutions and petitions adopted by abolitionist societies across the nation to gain national support. This developed into a means for abolitionist societies to communicate their activism with one another.

By 1846 the *Liberator*'s purpose evolved: instead of abolitionist societies communicating with individual readers, the readers began to communicate with the abolitionist societies. The entirety of the editorial was dedicated to the topic of petitions, with the goal of reaffirming their importance and ensuring national commitment to the petitioning effort. The unnamed author affirmed the idea

---

[22] White, "Worcester County."
[23] U.S. House of Representatives, "The House 'Gag Rule'" (Office of the Historian and the Clerk of the House of Representatives Office of Art and Archives, December 2021), https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1800-1850/The-House-of-Representatives-instituted-the-%E2%80%9Cgag-rule%E2%80%9D/.

that petitions circulated ought to represent the mode of abolition that is most preferred by the masses so that the whole amount of public sentiment favorable to emancipation may be laid before Congress and the people.[24] Without the gag rule, the primary purpose evolved towards a goal of demonstrating the power and size of the antislavery movement. While this is a divergence from the localized strategies that emerged in 1844, this editorial returned to a call to national action, similar to the advocacy from the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1842. The deference given to petitions in favor of the greatest number of abolitionists is indicative of the desire to illustrate the power and unification of abolitionists across the nation. Uniformity was critical to ensuring that citizens, especially northern white communities, would be willing to continue the petitioning effort in the wake of the repeal of the gag rules.

The commitment toward coalition-building is referenced again later in the 1846 abolitionist's editorial. The author reflected on how there was no strategy more effective in reaching those who do not read antislavery newspapers or attend antislavery meetings than the act of calling upon them to sign petitions. Petitioning demanded attention toward the subject of slavery and forced people to think about the matter frequently with each petition that they were exposed to.[25] Throughout the 1840s, abolitionists continuously reaffirmed the ability for petitions to shape public opinion and to expand public support. In this vein, the aforementioned abolitionist author noted how petitions could expand the abolitionist community to those who do not traditionally seek out activism. It was through petitioning that the issue of slavery could be made relevant to those who did not seek out ways to combat the institution. There was also acknowledgment that the more and longer people thought about a given issue, the greater the likelihood that they would come to a morally just conclusion. Petitions, therefore, could force a moral reckoning of sorts. People asked to sign a petition would have to take a stance on the issue, with the hope that most would align themselves with the belief that human bondage is morally undefendable. This helps to explain why slow progress was seen as evidence of petitioning campaigns working.

The author of the 1846 editorial believed there to be an ignorance among politicians and the populace at large, including anti-slavery societies, about the real extent of antislavery sentiment in the nation. The following excerpt reflects how petitioning campaigns were central to dispelling this perceived ignorance:

> I am confident, that with proper effort, the signatures of a majority of the people might be obtained in support of the extinction of slavery; and that if even one half of those which might be obtained, were procured and laid

---

[24] "Petitions to Congress," *Liberator (1831-1865)*, February 13, 1846, https://www.proquest.com/docview/91178004?accountid=11578.
[25] "Petitions to Congress."

before Congress, at the present session, the members would go home with the conviction that emancipation must speedily come, and the politicians themselves would agitate the question in reference to elections, so as to save the anti-slavery men much of their labor in that department.[26]

Publications like this demonstrate the reasoning as to why coalition-building continued throughout the 1840s. A common and reoccurring belief among abolitionists was that the majority of the population, while not actively seeking the immediate end of slavery, had more sympathy towards the antislavery message, which could be demonstrated via the submission of petitions. The process of petitioning, while not creating any significant legislative changes, was done with the clear and consistent hope of applying political pressure to elected officials. The abolitionist author cited believed that the continued expansion of the abolitionist voter base would place sufficient pressure on politicians to address the issue of slavery in order to remain in public office. As such, after years of petitioning campaigns were silenced by congressional gags, the prospect of petitions impacting the political platforms of elected officials did not seem all that improbable. This was only possible through a long-term, coordinated effort towards applying political pressure over the issue of slavery. By using petitions to represent the size of the voter base aligned with antislavery values, it was only a matter of time before political leaders had no choice but to represent their concerns. And that time was fast approaching.

By 1848, Congress had no choice but to begin to acknowledge, at least in a limited capacity, the continued petitioning efforts. Organizations such as the Weymouth and Braintree Female Anti-Slavery Society sent petitions to the federal government, questioning why it was willing to remain part of a proslavery government and a proslavery religion.[27] Others, including a publication by T.B. Hudson, voiced even more support for petitioning, seeing it as a cost-effective way of bringing the issue of slavery home to the northern masses, the result of which was felt powerfully through all legislative bodies.[28] While this was not the national campaign that was called for in the *Liberator*, there was still a great sense of urgency around the nation to petition Congress to show the power and influence of the antislavery cause. As such, with the gag rule not strictly enforced in 1848, political abolitionists had new opportunities to get petitions read on the floor of Congress.

---

[26] "Petitions to Congress."

[27] "Weymouth and Braintree Female Anti-Slavery Society: Annual Report of the Weymouth and Braintree Female Anti-Slavery Society, Account of Receipts and Disbursements," *Liberator (1831-1865)*, October 20, 1848, https://www.proquest.com/docview/91197964?accountid=11578. L=

[28] "Anti-Slavery Petitions," *National Era (1847-1860)* 2, no. 59 (February 17, 1848), https://www.proquest.com/docview/137512599?accountid=11578.

David T. Burr, along with sixty-nine other signatories from the state of Pennsylvania, was among those to have their antislavery petition presented in the Senate on January 15, 1848. Senator Josh P. Hale, in his effort to have the petition read, spoke on the floor of the Senate in defense of abolitionists, believing that they had a "peculiar right" to come and ask the body for a respectful hearing on the subject of slavery.[29] This peculiar right, the right of speech and to petition, was a special one for Hale, deserving of greater protection and recognition by the Senate. Despite Hale's effort, the petition ended up getting tabled by a vote of 32:9. However, its introduction and minimal support on the floor of the Senate spoke volumes to the evolving perception of northern petitioning campaigns. Five years prior, no petition had any chance of being acknowledged by Congress, let alone read on the floor of the senate. This marks a significant turning point in the politization of the issue of slavery within domestic politics. The decade-long effort to expand the antislavery voting base and create sufficient political pressure to keep slavery in the public spotlight began to have small, but meaningful, impacts within Washington D.C. The growing willingness for Senators like Hale to come out in clear and adamant support of the petitioning rights of abolitionists reveals how slavery was becoming a growing political issue that was no longer possible to avoid.

While historians have attributed this development to the shifting of political parties, the emergence of third parties, and the successful lobbying efforts of abolitionists, petitioning remained the most significant commonality among the political activism taken on in the 1840s. Petitioning laid the groundwork for many of the most significant political developments of the decade. The creation of third parties was a direct response to the growing voter coalition that was created through petitioning efforts. This suggests that later political abolitionists were able to succeed, in part, from the work of petitioning campaigns in expanding the antislavery voter base – a trend that can only be discerned by changing our understanding of political abolition. Petitions are not isolated events that fit into a binary of success or failure. Instead, petitioning is a process, one that can span years and can evolve over time. In the 1840s, it was a process that responded to the ideology of people and the political climate, all the while working towards consistent and well-established goals of expanding the voter base of northern white communities and applying political pressure on elected officials.

Petitioning was a process and a movement, one that had implications extending well beyond abolitionism. Remarkably, the shifting political climate was not defined by geographic borders. In 1848, the effects of the petitioning movement continued to evolve into a strategy of political engagement within

---

[29] "Anti-Slavery Petitions," *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture (1842-1906)*, January 15, 1848, https://www.proquest.com/docview/136801482?accountid=11578.

both the north and the south. This was primarily shaped through increased public attention directed toward petitions as they maintained a prominent role in national discourse. As the movement continued to grow, the effects of petitioning were felt within border states like Kentucky. Here, *The Examiner* played a powerful role in shaping the image of slavery within the state. As commentary about this publication noted, there was "much hopefulness and practicalness about the antislavery papers in the slave holding states … *The Examiner*, of Louisville, (KY) is pre-eminent in these respects. We cannot see how slaveholders, disposed to reason the question, can resist the force of arguments so cogent, appeals as kind and earnest, as *The Examiner* presents."[30]

Striking similarities emerge between the type of rhetoric employed in the *Examiner* and the messages in the *Liberator* about the need for frequent exposure to antislavery messages. Both papers noted the need for continued exposure and confrontation with ideas to generate popular support, a strategy that was best achieved using petitions. Newspapers, the spreading of information, and the continued effort to expose greater numbers of communities to antislavery messages all stemmed from the same ideological underpinnings of petitioning campaigns. In addition, with petitioning beginning to generate political shifts at the national level, it became viewed as a viable means of creating change anywhere in the country.

To illustrate, the aforementioned commentary on *The Examiner* referred to a prominent politician in Kentucky who, just two years prior, would have been a vocal supporter of lynching antislavery men, but now would sign a petition to the state legislature to prohibit the separation of slave families. He went on to say that if public sentiment continued to grow, then the state could get five hundred votes and a flood of petitions sent to the state legislature.[31] The dramatic shift in the politician's views was a very significant one, as was his commentary on evolving public perception. Although the petition at issue was not one that advanced traditional antislavery goals, this case demonstrates the effects of petitioning efforts in border states divided on the issue of slavey. While not generating any widespread movement towards abolition, continued efforts to shape public perception in states like Kentucky could lead to advocating for policies to end some of the cruelty that slavery caused.

While disallowing the separation of slave families may seem insignificant, *where* the idea became popular is significant. Petitions, even in the south, became a way to achieve political mobilization and support, even if they were significantly detached from the abolition movement. The potential for change even of petitions advocating for the removal of harmful and emotionally traumatizing practices like family separation should be explored further. For

---

[30] "Slavery: Anti-Slavery in Slave States," *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal (1842-1867)*, June 28, 1848.
[31] "Slavery: Anti-Slavery in Slave States."

one, petitioning campaigns had the potential to force a moral reckoning of slave-related practices in border states like Kentucky. Given how effective petitions were at shaping public perception and national sentiment in the north, such campaigns could force areas that were more divided by the issue of slavery to question practices associated with it, and to create some small-scale change. Again, even if detached from the larger movement of political abolitionism, the effects of petitioning had the potential to increase and spread across borders.

Petitioning efforts represented a coordinated, strategic, and committed effort by abolitionists to engage with political channels to organize support for abolitionism. Historians have long acknowledged their existence, writing extensively on them from as early as 1770 into the 1830s. Yet, with the emergence of the gag rule by Congress, historians have viewed the 1840s as the unfortunate end of petitioning efforts. This view fundamentally misconstrues the way in which abolitionists understood their petitioning efforts.

Demanding political or legislative success for petitions to be considered meaningful mischaracterizes them, as well as ignores a decade of activism. Abolitionists certainly did not view the gag rule as the end of petitioning; in fact, they used the gag rule to their advantage to generate more support for the abolitionist movement. Driven by a fear of southern power in Congress, abolitionists used petitions to expand the northern white voter base that was sympathetic to antislavery goals. In doing so, petitioning became a movement, one that not only sought to generate legislative victories, but was also committed to displaying the power and size of the antislavery movement in a way that forced politicians to recognize it. This ensured that the national conversation about slavery remained in the public eye, despite Congress' best efforts to avoid and silence it. Petitioning was fundamental to this effort. As one abolitionist noted, "No time is to be lost; and more is probably to be gained in proportion to the effort and cost, by petitioning, than by any other species of agitation."[32] There is immense value in reconsidering our understanding of political abolitionism, especially in the 1840s. While we no longer have to fear that petitions will be used as fuel to keep archives warm during the winter, there is still much to learn about the political efforts of abolitionists. A movement that was defined by inclusivity and persistence is worthy of our attention.

---

[32] "Anti-Slavery Petitions," *National Era*.

A World Without War: The Woman's Peace Party of New York City, 1915-1919

By Tressa Macaluso

On January 10, 1915, over three thousand women flocked to Washington D.C. for the founding convention of the Woman's Peace Party (WPP). The women represented a score of activist groups, including suffragist, temperance, labor union, and social work. The conference laid out a feminist-pacifist platform through its assertion that as "the mother half of humanity" women "feel a particular moral passion of revolt against the cruelty and the waste of war."[1] Echoing the party platform, co-founder of the WPP and prominent suffragist leader, Carrie Chapman Catt, clarified the connection women felt toward war. She explained how "when war murders the husbands and sons of women, destroys their homes, desolates their country, and makes them refugees and paupers, it becomes the undeniable business of women."[2] The feminist pacifists of this new U.S.-based organization had bold visions for a world without war and hoped that despite being denied a political voice at home, they might be able to reduce suffering around the world. These women argued that they were particularly qualified to work for peace as they were the ones to suffer the most from the destructive effects of war. While the WPP was not the first peace organization founded by women, the public felt the impact of its creation almost immediately. The *Washington Post* issued an article after the convention proclaiming that "war was officially declared on war."[3]

Studies of women's peace activism in the early twentieth century traditionally focused on the personalities and activism of key WPP leaders. Such works also highlight ways in which women's role of mother influenced their pacifist ideology. These maternalistic interpretations underscore ways that a woman's perceived innate role as a nurturer inspired female activists to

---

[1] "Address given at the Organizational Conference of the Woman's Peace Party, Washington D.C, January 10, 1915," in *The Eagle and The Dove: The American Peace Movement and United States Foreign Policy, 1900-1922*, ed. John Whiteclay Chambers (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 50.

[2] Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women's Rights* (New York, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 61.

[3] Michael Kazin, *War against War: The American Fight for Peace, 1914-1918* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 39.

challenge the war to protect their sons, husbands, and fathers.[4] Yet the WPP was a multifaceted organization. Individual branches took stances that challenged the notion of war but with varying levels of fervor.[5]

Other historians have studied how the national WPP relates to the larger peace movement of this period, including overlap between WPP activism and that of socialists, communists, and other peace groups. A key finding is that most members were white and middle class. However, Melinda Plastas has found connections between black women's clubs and the peace movement that lay the groundwork for her assertion of a "long civil rights movement" that can be traced back to the early twentieth century.[6] There is also a growing collection of WWI literature that focuses on the limitation of civil liberties during this period. Concerning the WPP, more recent historians highlight the nuanced views of WPP members that center on the dangers of militarism, imperialism, and burgeoning government encroachment on civil liberties.[7] Most recent scholarship concerning the WPP links gender to war using either the maternalistic line of thought or a social perspective.[8]

This article will focus on the activities and ideology of the New York City Branch of the WPP (NYC-WPP). Compared to the national WPP and other state and city branches, the NYC-WPP developed a distinct brand of pacifism which was more radical, confrontational, and vocal than its counterparts. Relying on the branch's newsletter, *Four Lights: An Adventure in Internationalism,* this work will focus on the NYC-WPP's arguments against the dangers that growing U.S militarism had on gender inequality and personal liberty at home. It seeks to examine the ways in which women expanded the

---

[4] Marie Louise Degen, *The History of the Woman's Peace Party* (New York, NY: B. Franklin Reprints, 1939); Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue;* Barbara J. Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War I* (Garland Publishing, 1982).

[5] Jennifer Curran, "To Make War Unthinkable: The Woman's Peace Party of New York, 1914-1919" (MA Thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1997); Erika Kuhlman, "'Women's Ways in War': The Feminist Pacifism of the New York City Woman's Peace Party," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 18, no. 1 (1997): 80–100; Rachel Schrieber, "A Women's War against War: The Socialist-Feminist Pacifism of Four Lights: An Adventure in Internationalism," *Radical Americas* 3, no. 1 (2018), https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ra.2018.v3.1.017.

[6] Melinda Plastas, *A Band of Noble Women: Racial Politics in the Women's Peace Movement* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011); Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War I;* Kazin, *War against War.*

[7] Kazin, *War Against War;* John Braeman, "World War One and the Crisis of American Liberty," *American Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (1964): 104–12; Shirley J. Burton, "The Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 and 1918: Sectional Interpretations in the United States District Courts of Illinois," *Illinois Historical Journal* 87, no. 1 (1994): 41–50; Christy Jo Snider, "Patriots and Pacifists: The Rhetorical Debate about Peace, Patriotism, and Internationalism, 1914-1930," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8, no. 1 (2005): 59–83.

[8] The maternalistic line of thought focuses on how women's role as mother is used as justification for women's political activities, actions, and policy beliefs. L. Leitz, & D.S. Meyer, "Gendered Activism and Outcomes: Women in the Peace Movement," in *The Oxford Handbook of U. S. Women's Social Movement Activism*, eds. H. J. McCannon, V. Taylor, J. Reger, & R. L. Einwohner (New York: Oxford University Press).

goals of peace activism beyond "nurturing" and to highlight how the women of the NYC-WPP viewed militarism as a cause of greater social ills.

In the early twentieth century, industrial advances, international expansionism, and progressive-era activism defined much of the U.S. experience. The outbreak of war across the Atlantic in 1914 sparked a fiery debate at home about what role the U.S should have in the foreign conflict. Despite initial pledges to remain neutral, within three years, the United States had entered the bloodshed. The peace movement emerged as a vibrant alternative to war and gained immense publicity as it absorbed key leaders from other progressive reform organizations.

Directly after its creation, the Woman's Peace Party gained immense traction and public attention. Within a year of its founding, the WPP reported a membership of four thousand.[9] In their 1915 party platform, activists demanded "that our right to be consulted in the settlement of questions concerning not alone the life of individuals but of nations be recognized and respected."[10] The WPP attracted individuals from diverse organizations. These activists' tenacity for reform in a period when they had limited political options, is monumental as they joined forces to argue that they be given a voice in the decision of war.

The national WPP's membership card declared that its overarching mission was to "arouse the nations to respect the sacredness of human life and to devise means other than war for settling international disputes."[11] With its mission solidified, the next step was to discern how their organization would be run. The official Constitution adopted at the 1916 convention clarified the responsibilities of the national board and local branches. The WPP national board elected women known throughout the world in reform circles. Jane Addams was chosen as the president of the organization while Mrs. Anna Garlin Spencer, Mrs. Henry Villard, Mrs. Louis F. Post, and Mrs. John Jay White served as prominent members of the executive board.[12] The women also decided that the national headquarters would be in Chicago.[13] The national board was given the power to appoint leaders of new branches and heads of national committees, call the conventions, issue party literature, represent the

---

[9] Kazin, *War Against War*, 47.

[10] "Address given at the Organizational Conference of the Woman's Peace Party, Washington D.C, January 10, 1915," in *The Eagle and The Dove*, 50.

[11] Kazin, *War Against War*, 85.

[12] The women of the WPP executive board were prominent activists in suffrage, social reform, and labor organizations. In addition to her role as president of the national WPP, Addams served as Vice President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and was the founder of Chicago's Hull House. Anna Garlin Spencer was a minister, the first woman in Rhode Island to be ordained, and a leader in the Rhode Island Suffrage Association. Daughter of William Lloyd Garrison, Henry Frances 'Fanny' Villard was a women's suffrage campaigner, pacifist, and racial activist. Villard co-founded the NAACP and was a prominent member of the American Woman Suffrage Association. While the executive board was comprised of prominent activists from a diverse number of organizations, most members were also white and middle-class.

[13] Degen, *The History of the Woman's Peace Party*, 51.

organization in emergencies, and conduct all WPP international activities. While the national board also had the initial power to appoint state officers, the branches had their own power to form auxiliaries, use emblems, appoint committees and congressional chairmen, adopt their own fee structure, and elect their own leaders after their first year.[14]

The most populous branches were often in urban areas such as San Francisco, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Washington D.C., and Boston. Small towns and rural areas had difficulty creating chapters as distance made it difficult for prospective women to organize and communicate.[15] As part of their constitution, the national WPP allowed the branches to have a great deal of autonomy in how they conducted their activism. Each local branch utilized its independence differently. Of all the state and local branches of the WPP, the New York branch exercised its freedom the most. In fact, the NYC branch was so active that by end the of 1915, the national chapter accepted its request to be awarded representation equal to that of the state branches.[16] Overall, the Massachusetts and New York City branches were the largest and most vocal branches. They also represented the conservative and radical extremes of the organization.

Aspects that set the New York women apart from the rest of the WPP was their age and leadership in racial equality. Most of the editors and writers of *Four Lights* were born in the 1870s and 1880s; the youngest editor was Freda Kirchwey, at twenty-four, and the eldest was co-founder of the NAACP, Mary White Ovington, at fifty-two. By contrast, the average age of national WPP members was fifty-nine.[17]

While age was one aspect that contributed to the radicalism of the NYC branch, the leadership of each branch largely influenced how each organization ran. The Massachusetts branch was headed by Lucia Ames Mead and the New York City branch was chaired by Crystal Eastman. Mead represented the conservative faction of the WPP as she was frequently more cautious about the actions of the organization.[18] Prior to Eastman's appointment as head of the NYC branch, members of the National WPP were worried about what her leadership might bring to the branch. Executive board members argued that Eastman was "too youthful" to chair the branch even though she had emerged as a leader in the peace movement in New York. Mead had further asserted that Eastman was "an extreme socialist" who would harm the peace movement.[19]

---

[14] Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War I,* 137.
[15] Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War I,* 120.
[16] Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue,* 66.
[17] Kuhlman, "Women's Ways in War," 81.
[18] Mead was active in a variety of suffragist and pacifist organizations. She served as Vice President on the National Council for Prevention of War in addition to her position within the WPP. In terms of suffragist activism, Mead was a member of the National American Suffrage Association and was President of the Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Association.
[19] Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War I,* 125.

Freda Kirchwey, a member of the NYC branch, defended Eastman and described her as "a symbol of what the free woman might be."[20] Mead often expressed her irritation toward the NYC-WPP and the publicity its activism attracted. In a letter to Jane Addams, she expressed how she "[wished] that the New York Branch would choose a new name."[21] In another letter she expressed her fears of the New York branch gaining "any more influence and seem to represent us."[22] Mead worried that with the public attention the radical NYC branch was attracting – largely due to its newsletter – its voice would grow to overshadow that of the other WPP branches.

Labor organizer Crystal Eastman was the chair of the NYC branch from 1915-1919, and was the Executive Director of the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM) from 1915-1917.[23] The NYC branch, under Eastman's watch, formed an ideology different, and more radical, than that of its parent organization. The NYC-WPP focused on the structural issues of war and was overall keener in responding to the specific progression of the war. While other branches abandoned their strict anti-war stance following U.S. formal entrance into the war, the NYC-WPP doubled down on its opposition to the conflict. The women of the New York branch continued to assert their view of absolute pacifism and champion their socialist, antimilitarist, and internationalist perspective.

The ideas embraced by the NYC-WPP were highly influenced by the backgrounds of the editorial crew. Most of the editors and writers of *Four Lights* were young, progressive, and educated activists. All the editors of *Four Lights* had attended college or university. Katharine Anthony, Jessie Wallace Hughan, Edna Kenton, Sarah Cleghorn, Zoe Beckley, Margaret Lane, Madeline Doty, Crystal Eastman, Tracy Mygatt, Frances Witherspoon, and Mary White Ovington were all published writers and editors in addition to their contributions to the newsletter.[24] Two of the women, Doty and Eastman, were lawyers. Eastman, Ovington, Hughan, and Kirchwey were all socialists. Ovington was also a prominent activist in the field of racial politics. Katharine Anthony and Elisabeth Irwin, and Tracy Mygatt and Frances Witherspoon, were lesbian couples. The writers of *Four Lights* were primarily white, middle-class, and educated women. Half of the members were eligible for membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution; membership required women to prove lineal, bloodline descent from an ancestor who aided the Revolutionary

---

[20] Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War I,* 125.

[21] Lucia Ames Mead to Jane Addams, November 12, 1917, Jane Addams Digital Collection, https://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/16195.

[22] Lucia Ames Mead to Jane Addams, Nov 5, 1917, Jane Addams Digital Collection, https://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/16076.

[23] In addition to her roles in the WPP and AUAM, Eastman co-founded and co-edited *The Liberator*, a monthly socialist magazine, with the help of her brother Max Eastman. Eastman was also a lawyer and co-founded the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in 1920.

[24] Kuhlman, "Women's Ways in War," 81.

War.[25] The NYC-WPP members were aware of their narrow demographic makeup and issued a statement noting "we have been most provincial in our choice of a crew. Instead of drawing from the 4 winds of the Earth we have lazily accepted the assistance of a few Mayflower descendants." The women promised they would open the paper to "any race under the sun, black, white, and yellow."[26]

The message of the *Four Lights* echoed that of other progressive pacifists, but their commitment to an explicitly uncompromising message aligned them with left-wing socialists. The NYC-WPP was the only branch that produced and published a regular journal. Most branches issued press releases, hosted speakers' bureaus, and encouraged their members to write to elected officials. The NYC-WPP carried out similar activities, but also utilized more confrontational methods such as public displays and *Four Lights.*[27] NYC-WPP members were not only interested in appealing to national leaders to influence policy decisions; they also had more broad goals that consisted of seeking societal changes that would end the causes of war.

Initial activism of the WPP was directed at efforts to slow down or stop the preparedness movement. The preparedness campaign that began prior to the April 1917 U.S. entry was a systematic buildup of military resources and a first step in preparing the national conscious for the possibility of war. It also was the first test of the hostility and criticism that the women of the WPP would face. Following the May 1915 sinking of the Lusitania by German U-boats, pro-military organizations, military leaders, and military expansionists – including former president Theodore Roosevelt – spearheaded the preparedness movement in seeking to increase military capabilities. These individuals saw military strength as a means to pursuing economic, diplomatic, and ideological goals in which the U.S. could reaffirm its global position and amplify its international influence.

In response to the growing pacifist movement, Roosevelt saw the WPP as influential enough to be deserving of his criticism. He blasted the party for being "influenced by physical cowardice."[28] He noted: "I speak with scientific accuracy when I speak of this movement as both silly and base ... there is nothing more repulsive than to see people agitating for general righteousness in the abstract when they dare not stand up against wickedness in the concrete."[29] It is not clear exactly what reputable science these claims were based upon, but he attempted to give his arguments further backing as he compared the WPP to the earlier Copperhead movement, declaring them both as completely

---

[25] Kuhlman, "Women's Ways in War," 81.
[26] Kuhlman, "Woman's Ways in War," 82.
[27] Schreiber, "A Woman's War against War," 4.
[28] Theodore Roosevelt to Juliet Barrett Rublee, February 9, 1915, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Library of Congress Manuscript Division,
https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o211660.
[29] Theodore Roosevelt to Juliet Barrett Rublee, February 9, 1915.

"futile."[30] Critics commonly described the peace movement in a similar fashion to Roosevelt. The women of New York frequently received criticism of their newsletter, often embracing it, and even reprinted it in one issue. A reprinted letter read: "Your publication … is a foolish, dangerous, unthinking, un-American, and disreputable paper. It ought not to be tolerated in any self-respecting community."[31] Perhaps the critics were right, and the peace movement was a naïve, farfetched, and idealistic dream. However, at the movement's root lay the goal to eliminate, or at the very least, reduce human suffering across the globe – a commendable and, more so, innately American goal.

In 1916, the NYC-WPP joined forces with the Anti-Preparedness Committee – another organization headed by Crystal Eastman and later renamed the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM) – to sponsor a "War Against War" exhibit in New York in the spring of 1916. The exhibit opened in downtown Brooklyn in April and moved to lower Manhattan a few weeks later. During the summer it moved to Philadelphia and then onto nine other cities.[32] The exhibit consisted of twenty-three panels and seven cartoons that depicted the futility of the entire war system. The display was a staunch criticism of the entire war machine and the notion that preparedness does not necessarily lead to war. The exhibit attracted monumental public attention receiving around five to ten thousand visitors a day. It gained mixed reception as some viewed the exhibit as a correct depiction of the foolishness of war, while others dubbed it as seditious or treasonous.[33] While the Massachusetts branch was busy sending telegrams to President Wilson, urging him to tone down preparedness policies, the NYC branch was turning to public demonstrations that were gripping the public's attention.

In addition to their public demonstrations, the NYC-WPP utilized its publication *Four Lights* as one of its main forms of communicating its views. *Four Lights* was confrontational, controversial, and experimental. The first article relayed its mission: "*Four Lights* will attempt to voice the young, uncompromising woman's peace movement in America, whose aims are daring and immediate – to stop the war in Europe, to federate the nations for organized peace at the close of the war, and meanwhile to guard democracy from the subtle dangers of militarism."[34]

The newsletter functioned as an editorial publication in which the articles were written by a rotating cast of editors. For some issues, the editors would often reprint articles from foreign countries alongside commentary or U.S. articles. Among the twenty-one issues published between January and October

---

[30] Theodore Roosevelt to Juliet Barrett Rublee, February 9, 1915.
[31] "Hit and Miss," *Four Lights,* June 16, 1917.
[32] Kazin, *War Against War,* 82.
[33] Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War,* 72; Kazin, *War Against War,* 72.
[34] *Four Lights,* January 27, 1917.

1917, thirty-one different women were listed as editors; only four edited more than one issue.[35] True to the newsletter's overarching mission, the editors made sure no single voice dominated their journal. The women of the New York branch were keenly aware of the controversial nature of their publication as they ended their first issue with this closing statement: "*Four Lights* will not owe any of its lusters to the jewel of consistency. Each fortnightly issue will express the internationalist hopes of a new board of three volunteer editors who assume full responsibility for its contents. If you do not like this number, be sure to get the next!"[36]

In the spring of 1917, editors of *Four Lights* (who were men) began publishing harsh criticism of measures being taken by the U.S. in the name of preparedness. Editors Howard Brubaker and Henry Neumann were journalists who regularly contributed social commentary through magazines like the *New Yorker, Collier's, and the Saturday Evening Post.* These editorials regularly emphasized the way in which political and diplomatic rhetoric led to international incidents. Speaking out against preparedness, the April 21, 1917 issue offered a harsh criticism and a foreboding warning:

> It is evident that for the masses the day of the old American ideal is gone, the day of the initiative, self-government, individual freedom, which made America what it is … It is taking on the marks of the older, congested, fixed civilization against which it revolted in 1776. What is wanted now is an America subservient, made docile in the name of efficiency, submissive in the name of preparedness, drilled into automatic obedience to an upper class in the name of patriotism.[37]

Authored by Neumann, this article compared the U.S. wartime measures to those of despotic late eighteenth-century Great Britain. To the pacifists, to advocate for peace was synonymous with fulfilling their American duty. Serving as a rebuttal against the rhetoric of their critics and the increasingly 'pro-American' propaganda gripping the nation, *Four Lights* sought to point out the absurd and harmful nature of the values these 'patriots' preached. The New Yorkers viewed pacifism as a duty most patriotic. After all, they were the ones standing up for equality, freedom, and democracy.

One day after Wilson announced the declaration against Germany, former president Theodore Roosevelt again chose this opportunity to throw spikes at the pacifists. In his April 1917 speech at New York, he asserted "The American who is not now heart and soul against her and her heart and soul in favor of fighting this war through a victorious conclusion … is a traitor to this country and a traitor to mankind. He is unfit to live in America. He is unfit to be a free

---

[35] Schrieber, "A Women's War against War," 13.
[36] *Four Lights*, January 27, 1917.
[37] Henry Neumann, "Compulsory Military Training," *Four Lights,* April 21, 1917.

man, for his soul is the soul of a slave … If he plays the part of sedition in this country, he should be shot."[38] *The New York Herald* expressed similar views in a June article that read, "It may not be cowardice for an American to oppose a war in which the United States is engaged, but it is infinitely sometimes more despicable … it is bordering on treason…. [if] America is fighting because she was forced to fight."[39] While public opinion had never truly been on the side of the pacifists, the arrival of the United States into the war only increased national hostility toward pacifists.

United States entry into the war furthered the hostilities within the WPP as a whole organization. After April 6, 1917, WPP members had to decide whether to remain loyal to their anti-war stance, or whether the changing demands of a wartime nation would incite their support. American involvement necessitated that pacifists reexamine their wartime priorities. The NYC-WPP continued to remain steadfast in its opposition to the war while the Massachusetts branch worried about being dubbed disloyal. The key issue over which the branches were staunchly opposed was that of relief work. The New York members were adamantly opposed to relief work because they detested any action that aided the war effort. The national WPP, an entire year after U.S. entry, issued guidance in May 1917 suggesting that the pacifists observe food conservation policies, urging women to form a connection with the Red Cross and to continue to advocate for raising the age and pay of soldiers.[40] The national WPP and the Massachusetts branch both participated in relief work once the United States had joined the war.

Seemingly calling out the other branches, the NYC-WPP attacked the notion of relief work in several issues of *Four Lights.* In a July 1917 article, it argued "The American Red Cross is the big brother of the army and the navy."[41] In the same article it published an article titled "Sister Susie's Peril" that attacked the notion of relief work and those who participated in it. "Sister Susie" was meant as indirect criticism of the national WPP board and the Massachusetts branch, which both participated in relief work. Editor Katharine Anthony noted how this relief work disrupted the economy, harmed women workers, and was counterproductive in the peace effort. Anthony argued that relief work harmed workers, stating that "the peculiarly infantile form of patriotism of those who have been dubbed 'Sister Susies' … now threaten to dump their unskill and inexperience on the disturbed labor market of this country." Anthony issued a message to women saying that "it may help them to think twice before launching projects which must finally result in throwing other women out of work." She also pointed out the irony of knitting as a form

---

[38] Theodore Roosevelt, "The Duty of Every American Speech" at Oyster Bay, Long Island, New York, (April 1917), in *The Eagle and The Dove,* 126.
[39] Degen, *The History of the Woman's Peace Party,* 200.
[40] Woman's Peace Party, Chicago Branch, "Suggestions for Work in War Time," May 1917, https://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/21680.
[41] "We Thought it was a Girl," *Four Lights,* July 14, 1917.

of relief work, noting "the common report that the sailors use the knitted garments for cleaning guns and swabbing decks."[42] The declaration of war, and the question of whether to participate in relief work, marked the most severe break in the WPP as a whole organization. If its pacifism was truly rooted in a sole desire to protect its sons, fathers, and husbands, did this mean its new highest priority ought to be supporting the war in order to help bring men home safe? Was relief work incompatible with pacifism? For some women, perhaps, U.S. entry only confirmed their fears that the harshest dangers of war were now just yet to come.

The early months of 1917 for the pacifists felt as if these fears were practically a reality. Once the United States had formally declared war on Germany, the opportunities for peace activists to protest, and the forms of protest available, were transformed. While the national WPP continued to participate in relief work and urge the government to work toward an early peace, the NYC-WPP opted for a different course of action. Although early disputes between the branches were over the ethics of relief work, as the war progressed, conscription proved itself to be another divisive issue that altered the trajectory of the WPP. In April 1917, *Four Lights* explained its stance on conscription and offered a warning to readers:

> America is the only great nation left in the world in which militarism is not enthroned and the principal of conscription established … Upon the outcome of the great debate on 'Conscription vs. Democracy' depends the question of whether the last fortress of democracy in the world and the greatest adventure in human history shall go down in failure. All patriotic Americans who believe that America has a mission and a great message of democracy to give to the world should enroll themselves in defense of America's freedom and democratic institutions presenting a united front against this attempt to militarize the whole American people.[43]

In May, no less than one month after the women of New York published this article, President Wilson signed the Selective Service Act (SSA). The Act authorized the Federal Government to expand the military through conscription. All men between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five were required to register for military service. President Wilson defended the act noting that "it is in no sense a conscription of the unwilling, it is rather selection from a nation which has volunteered its masses." Wilson spoke optimistically and described the draft as "a new thing in our history, and a

---

[42] Katharine Anthony, "The 'Sister Susie' Peril," Four Lights, July 14, 1917.
[43] *Four Lights*, April 7, 1917.

landmark in our progress."[44] The women of the New York branch did not share the president's view of the draft. In their July 28 issue, using Wilson's very own words, the editors of *Four Lights* displayed their opposition to the draft with an article titled "In no Sense a Conscription of the Unwilling." Under the heading were two reprinted articles from *The New York Call*.[45] One of the news clippings read as follows:

> Rochester, July 23. —Under circumstances which give ground for the belief that they feared forced military service in the trenches of France to fight against fellow countrymen, two young men, both holding draft numbers, which were among the first drawn on Friday, committed suicide near here today.[46]

The NYC-WPP saw the draft as a violation of civil liberties that was directly responsible for the suffering and death of the nation and its people. The movement against compulsory military service was one rooted in the preservation of basic freedoms, which the NYC-WPP broadly defined as the civil liberties movement.

Conscription had changed the trajectory of WPP activism. During the summer and fall of 1917, the national board and WPP branches were at odds between those who believed dissent was counterproductive and those who considered it essential for preserving democracy at home. The New York branch thought that the continuation of dissent was not only essential, but also increasingly necessary. Conscription was yet another step that the nation was taking toward militarism. The NYC-WPP saw it as its responsibility to protest conscription and the restrictions of freedom the draft entailed. During the middle months of 1917, protesting conscription would be the most pressing issue for the New York branch.

The implementation of compulsory military service in America targeted the very core of the NYC-WPP definition of peace: the primary value of human life over the political or economic disputes of nations.[47] Opposition to compulsory military service took many forms. The NYC-WPP lobbied congressmen to oppose legislation, organized public protests, spearheaded organizations to help Conscientious Objectors (COs), and continued to remain ardent in its *Four Lights* publication. Margaret Lane, a member of the NYC

---

[44] Woodrow Wilson, "Message Regarding Military Draft," May 19, 1917, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/may-19-1917-message-regarding-military-draft.

[45] *The New York Call* was a socialist daily newspaper published in New York City from 1908 through 1923. The paper was the second of three English-language dailies affiliated with the Socialist Party of America, following the *Chicago Daily Socialist* (1906-1912) and preceding the *Milwaukee Leader* (1911-1938).

[46] "In No Sense A Conscription Of The Unwilling," *Four Lights*, July 28, 1917.

[47] Curran, "To Make War Unthinkable," 145.

branch, published a statement that encouraged women to write to their congressman and "tell him that although you are not yet a voter, you consider compulsory military service unnecessary and contrary to American Principals." Lane further wrote to William Calder, a congressman from New York State, urging him to oppose conscription legislation because "compulsory service is militarism and contrary to American traditions."[48] The activists recognized how compulsory military service would inflict major social, economic, and emotional consequences on women, soldiers, and the nation. These activists argued that compulsory service was completely incompatible with the freedoms and ideals that America stands for.

Although conscription had not formally been law until spring of 1917, the NYC-WPP had expressed opposition to similar ideas a year prior. In May 1916, New York passed the Welsh and Slater Bill. The Welsh Bill called for compulsory physical education for all children eight years and older to be planned in consultation with a military commission. The Slater Bill made three hours of weekly drill and two to four weeks of summer camp mandatory for all boys between sixteen and nineteen who did not have a work excuse. The New York branch did not oppose physical education but feared that the military feature of the Welsh bill had dangerous implications for expanding militarism.[49] In response to these bills, the NYC-WPP launched a state-wide campaign for their repeal. During spring 1916, the NYC-WPP also turned to public demonstrations to express its opposition. In one demonstration, branch members assembled on one truck bed a group of young boys playing with toys, and on a second, boys armed with guns and swords. Displayed on the truck beds were signs protesting that in European countries boys "were still boys," but boys in New York "where there was no war, were forced by the legislative acts to be soldiers."[50] This demonstration illustrated their opposition to policies which mandated military participation. The women of the New York branch saw these policies as a dangerous expansion of militarism, and they were adamantly opposed to how these policies introduced the youth into the military.

The tone of the NYC-WPP protest remained firm – always embracing its confrontational and direct message – throughout each issue. While most issues were titled "An Adventure in Internationalism," the first issue of *Four Lights* published after the passage of the SSA was uniquely titled the "Special Atrocity Number."[51] This issue was directed at women who were remaining neutral or were supporting the government's war effort. One article was titled "Thoughts For Bandage Rollers" and was authored by Anne Herendeen and Ada Chase Dudley. The piece asked women to reflect on their wartime actions: "Are you shouldering your responsibility in this crisis? Think straight! Are you

---

[48] Curran, "To Make War Unthinkable," 146.
[49] Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War I,* 146.
[50] Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War I,* 146.
[51] *Four Lights*, June 2, 1917.

a slacker?"[52] The articles in the "Special Atrocity Number" called out women who were not actively working for peace. An article by Mary Hopkins titled "Woman's Way in War" offered its own form of sardonic advice to the women that Dudley branded as "slackers." Hopkins noted, "Women must not feel that because they work in the narrow confines of the home, they cannot help in the great work of destruction … accustom your children gradually to the sight of blood."[53] This issue asserted the women of the New York branch's devotion to feminist pacifism. The editors of this issue proclaimed, "It is a slogan as proud as any battle cry; war against war."[54] The "Special Atrocity Number" was a criticism of the SSA and a call to action for women to join the peace movement.

The NYC-WPP opposed conscription on the basis of militarism and its violation of civil liberties. Recognizing the need to address individuals affected by this wartime legislation, from pacifist writers to COs, the NYC-WPP became directly involved in the defense of civil liberties. Members of the NYC-WPP encouraged members Frances Witherspoon and Tracy Mygatt to devise a way to provide legal assistance to people being harassed for their political beliefs or those being charged under wartime legislation. With initial funding of one hundred dollars from the NYC branch, Witherspoon created the Bureau of Legal Advice which gave council for draft-age men and contentious objectors.[55] The National Civil Liberties Bureau (NCLB), the precursor to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), was founded under similar ideals the same year by AUAM leaders Crystal Eastman and Roger Nash Baldwin. In the June 16, 1917 issue of *Four Lights,* the editors included a column titled "Advice to Conscientious Objectors," which advertised the Bureau of Legal First Aid of New York. The column offered advice for individuals filling out their registration cards and urged each CO to "avail himself of this offer at the earliest possible moment."[56] While the NYC branch was working to offer aid to COs in response to the draft, the national board remained quiet and did not take an official stance on conscientious objection during the war.[57]

Four Lights was a way in which the NYC-WPP set itself apart from the other WPP branches. The biweekly publication allowed the women to quickly respond to current events and to the progression of the war. As the only branch to produce a newsletter of its own, this publication attracted significant attention within the WPP and with the public. The New York City branch came into conflict over *Four Lights* with the national WPP and the U.S. government during the spring and summer of 1917.

---

[52] Ada Chase Dudley and Anne Herendeen, "Thoughts for Bandage Rollers," *Four Lights*, June 2, 1917.

[53] Mary Hopkins, "Woman's Way in War," *Four Lights*, June 2, 1917.

[54] Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, "Militarism – A Microbe," *Four Lights*, June 2, 1917.

[55] Curran, "To Make War Unthinkable," 151; Plastas, *A Band of Noble Women,* 7.

[56] "Advice to Conscientious Objectors," *Four Lights,* June 16, 1917.

[57] Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue*, 76.

Despite the growing conflict between themselves and the national WPP, the New York branch considered the continuation of dissent essential for preserving democracy at home. In a January issue of *Four Lights*, Zoe Beckley reaffirmed the NYC-WPP's overarching message: "war is brought by the pressure of a few minds upon the fear and ignorance of the many … the bravery of refusal is finer than the blindness of obedience."[58] The executive board did not share this same perspective and was concerned about the NYC-WPP's actions. In an effort to remedy this conflict, in a letter addressing responses she had received from several WPP branch and board members, Addams wrote to Eastman in January 1917 suggesting, "I think the difficulty might be avoided if you signed yourself the New York Branch of the Woman's Peace Party, rather than the Woman's Peace Party, New York Branch"[59] The issue continued into mid-1917 as the national WPP considered restructuring the organization due to the lack of consensus within the organization. In a November 1917 letter to Mead, Anna Garlin Spencer, a member of the national executive board, argued that "I am … more than ever convinced that we must disentangle the National Board from any responsibility for Branch action."[60] On the same topic, Alice Thatcher Post revealed fears of this disintegration asking, "If we disintegrated why might not the New York Branch immediately write to Amsterdam that as the strongest and most active of the Branches they now claimed to be the nucleus of the American Section?"[61] The Massachusetts branch chimed in arguing that the WPP should remain a national organization but each branch should adopt a new name.[62] A month later, the Indiana Branch publicly renounced its connection to the WPP – due to the activism of the NYC branch – asserting that it refused to be associated with "pro-German propaganda."[63] Although there was disagreement about the future of the organization, there was no question that by mid-1917, the NYC-WPP had solidified its position as the strongest, most vocal, and most radical branch.

The NYC-WPP received pushback from the federal government as well. The passage of the Espionage Bill in June called for up to ten thousand dollars in fines and twenty years in prison for disloyalty, refusal to serve in the armed forces, and interfering with the recruitment or enlistment of soldiers. The Bill also allowed the Postmaster General to ban from circulation in the mail newspapers, magazines or other materials considered treasonable or seditious.[64] In addition to the pressures faced from public opinion and disapproval from its

[58] Zoe Beckley, "Advice to Washington Shoppers," Four Lights, January 27, 1917.
[59] Curran, "To Make War Unthinkable," 120.
[60] Anna Garlin Spencer to Lucia Ames Mead, November 1917, Jane Addams Digital Collection, https://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/23151.
[61] Alice Thatcher Post to Lucia Ames Mead and Anna Garlin Spencer, November 1917, Jane Addams Digital Collection, http://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/16296.
[62] Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War I*, 288.
[63] Steinson, *American Women's Activism in World War I*, 291.
[64] Espionage Act of 1917, June 15, 1917, https://iowaculture.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/americas-involvement-world-war-i/espionage.

own national organization, this act made it more difficult to carry on draft resistance or to publish peace materials. In their first issue published after the Act went into effect, the editors reprinted letters they had received from readers. One letter read, "Please send me no more of your lying and treasonable '*Four Lights.*' I mailed your last number to the U.S. Attorney."[65] Whether or not this angry reader forwarded the issue to the U.S. Attorney is uncertain. However, the Department of Justice already had its watchful eyes on the NYC-WPP before the bill had even passed.

The editors ended the May 5, 1917 issue by reporting, "One of the editors of this issue felt obligated to withdraw her name and assistance as she is under bond for six months to 'keep the peace.' Her offense against the peace was expressing the sentiment, 'No Conscription. Thou Shalt not Kill.' This, in April 1917, is called 'disorderly conduct.'"[66] Opposition to World War I – whether based on moral, political, or ethical reasons – was increasingly branded as disloyalty as the war progressed. The WPP and its branches frequently came under fire for seditious or treasonous behavior. What set these branches apart was how they opted to respond to the progression of the war and wartime obstacles. The NYC-WPP was quick and determined in how it responded to the unfolding events of the war. As the only branch producing a newsletter, this method of communication allowed it to respond quickly to current issues or events and represent the voices of many members.

In July 1917 an agent from the Department of Justice (DOJ) paid the NYC-WPP headquarters a visit. In their July 28, 1917, issue of *Four Lights,* the editors recounted the two interactions they had with the department that month. The editors explained, "Two issues of *Four Lights* have been refused the privilege of transmission presumably under the Espionage Act, although the first issue to be suppressed met its fate nine days before the bill became a law." The editors added that "in neither case were we notified by the Post Office authorities and only the insistent complaints of subscribers made us realize what had happened." In the same closing message, the editors retold what occurred during their visit from the DOJ agent. They reported that the agent came to "inquire how many of our editors are Germans" and to argue "we are wasting our time and might better be rolling bandages, [and] growing potatoes."[67] In addition to the retelling of events published in *Four Lights,* the NYC-WPP issued a press release in August of 1917 titled "Who's Who Among the Editors of *Four Lights*." The statement was a survey of the editors' backgrounds. It affirmed that fourteen of the twenty-nine members were eligible for membership into the Daughters of the American Revolution, six

---

[65] "Hit and Miss," *Four Lights*, June 16, 1917.
[66] *Four Lights,* May 5, 1917.
[67] *Four Lights*, July 28, 1917.

had English heritage, one French, one Irish, one Scottish, one Scandinavian, three had ancestors from the central powers, and one had a grandfather that came from Germany.[68]

The press release also included a section comprised of autobiographies submitted by branch members, many of whom wrote theirs in an offhand or humorous manner.[69] Jessie Ashley wrote "my great-grandfather fought in the Battle of Bennington. My father was a Colonel in the Civil War. Many revolutionary fighters – members of congress and all the rest of it." Zoe Beckley noted that a family member "fought Indians and has some lakes named after him for service rendered in the Mexican wars or something."[70] In spite of the increasing opposition from both the national board and the Department of Justice, the NYC-WPP continued to remain steadfast in its anti-conscription and anti-war work. Rather than tone down their opposition, the editors reaffirmed their pacifist and internationalist views: "As children of people who lived and died for Liberty, we resent the assumption that no outspoken lovers of Liberty and Peace are to be found among 'free-born Americans.'"[71] In their dedication to pacifism, these women were redefining conceptions of feminism, liberty, and patriotism.

Taking a different direction than its confrontational New York counterpart, during 1917, the national board took cautious actions to avoid criticism from the public and the government. Between the spring and fall of 1917, the national board did not make any public policy statements as a national organization.[72] Additionally, it held its October national meeting in a house in the suburbs of Philadelphia, rather than its headquarters in Chicago, to remain out of the public eye. The national and branch officers in attendance took up the appearance of guests at a house party to evade public awareness of the meeting.[73] Following their meeting, the national board issued a statement that began by noting that though the party had continued to work toward peace during the war, they had "avoided all criticism of our Government as to the declaration of war, and all activities that could be considered as obstructive in respect to the conduct of the war, and this not as a counsel of prudence, but as a matter of principal."[74] While the national party adopted a cautious and conciliatory tone as 1917 progressed, the NYC-WPP maintained its confrontational and controversial message. In their October 20th issue, the editors doubled down on their opposition, including a large page header that

---

[68] Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue,* 81.
[69] Curran, "To Make War Unthinkable," 162.
[70] Curran, "To Make War Unthinkable," 162.
[71] *Four Lights,* July 28, 1917.
[72] Degen, *The History of the Woman's Peace Party,* 203.
[73] Degen, *The History of the Woman's Peace Party,* 204.
[74] Degen, *The History of the Woman's Peace Party,* 204.

read "POSTMASTER BURLESON SAYS WE MAY NOT CALL THIS A
CAPITALIST WAR, BUT THAT WE MAY CRITICIZE HIM. ALL
RIGHT!"[75] The issue included a large political cartoon below the header which
criticized the Postmaster for suppression of the press. During 1917 the pacifists
were divided into those who viewed dissent as counterproductive and those,
such as the NYC-WPP, who viewed opposition as a necessity.

The October 20, 1917 issue of *Four Lights* was the NYC-WPP's last issue
until its June 12, 1919 special edition piece covering the resolutions passed by
the International Congress of Women at Zurich in May of 1919.[76] The editors
suspended publication of *Four Lights* between October 1917 and June 1919. In
January 1918, Eastman released a pamphlet titled 'Our War Record: A Plea for
Tolerance.' In the publication Eastman restated the aims of the NYC-WPP and
affirmed its patriotism:

> After war had become a fact, we further urged that conscription was no fit
> weapon for a democracy to fight its war with, that forcing men to kill and
> to be killed against their will does violence to the vital spirit and essence of
> democracy… we have insisted not merely upon this right, but upon the
> need for a full, free and continuous discussion in the press and on the
> platform of America's war aims and peace terms. We have urged this that
> the militarists and imperialists might be exposed, that ignorance might be
> destroyed, that we might be faithful to the declared ideals for which our
> armed forces are fighting…This is our war record. We hold that there is
> nothing unpatriotic or even emotional about it. On the basis of that record,
> we ask protection from the government for our propaganda no matter how
> unpopular it may become.[77]

Its plea for tolerance was followed by a name change for the NYC-WPP.[78]
In June 1918 the NYC-WPP voted in favor of changing its name to the
Women's International League (WIL). Members of the executive board
believed that their old name limited the growth and effectiveness of the

---

[75] *Four Lights*, October 20, 1917.
[76] *Four Lights*, June 12, 1919.
[77] "Woman's Peace Party of New York City," *Our War Record: A Plea for Tolerance* pamphlet,
January 1, 1918," in *The Eagle and The Dove,* 128.
[78] In late 1917 the Massachusetts branch also underwent a name change. The new name was the
League for Permanent Peace. The Massachusetts name change was made in order to break ties with
the national Woman's Peace Party; Alonso, *Peace as a Women's Issue,* 81.

organization. The new name, argued nine members of the New York executive board, more accurately indicated the internationalist portion of their peace message.[79]

The battle between the pacifist and war perspectives became one rooted in the debate over American ideals itself. It was a question of how citizens should express their patriotism. The NYC-WPP viewed opposition as the truest form of patriotism. Protest of militarism was a necessity in order to chip at the structural causes of gender-inequality and suppressed civil liberties. While the national board and other branches pursued a more cautious form of activism because of the increasing demands of the wartime nation, the NYC women continued to assert their moral, ethical, and feminist opposition. *Four Lights* allowed the NYC branch to showcase a wide variety of editor voices and to quickly respond to the ever-evolving issues of the war. The NYC-WPP stands out in relation to the other branches of the WPP through its firm devotion to the cause. Between 1915 and 1918, the progression of the war necessitated activists to reexamine their wartime priorities. Despite the challenges faced from public opinion, tensions within the whole organization, and pushback from the federal government, the women of the New York branch did not waver in their devotion to their cause. The women imagined one day they might achieve a world without war, one where rationality and compassion would triumph over futility and aggression.

---

[79] There were nine members of the NYC-WPP executive board that voted in favor of changing the organization's name: Emily Greene Balch, Katharine Blake, Dorothy Dana, Mary Ware Dennett, Madeleine Doty, Crystal Eastman, Emily Eaton, Agnes Leach, and Florence Tuttle. Curran, "To Make War Unthinkable," 198.

Absence of Privilege: The Polish Jewish Refugee Experience in World War II Shanghai

By Brianne Bittenbinder

Over a thousand Polish Jewish refugees were stranded in Shanghai from 1941 to 1945. For most Polish refugees, arriving in China at all had not been a true choice. Fleeing the terror of Nazi persecution, many sought transit to any possible destination outside of Europe, anywhere Hitler's influence could not reach. For the German, Austrian and Czech Jewish refugees which had begun to arrive in 1938, Shanghai was regarded as a pitstop on the way to more favorable countries. Most had been trying to reach Israel, the United States, Canada, or the Dutch-controlled Curaçao and Suriname.

The Polish refugees sailed from Vladivostok in the Soviet Union to Kobe, Japan after first crossing the Soviet Union via the Trans-Siberian Railway, a network of railroads spanning the region to Russia's Pacific coast. Most remained for six months, overextending their original two-week transit visa allowance while living in housing provided by aid organizations such as the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Committee in Kobe.[1] In autumn of 1940, the Japanese government discontinued visa extensions and ordered all European refugees to leave the country by September 15th.[2] Shanghai was the nearest and most convenient option; no visas or other documentation were required to enter the already incredibly diverse city. A century of Western imperialism and trade agreements had opened the city on the sea to extraordinary wealth and established foreign settlement zones or concessions – one for the Americans, one for the British, and another for the French.[3] None of the locals would think twice about yet another settlement of Europeans.

When the first wave of German and Austrian refugees arrived in 1939, Shanghai was already under Japanese occupation. Tensions between China and Japan culminated in the Second Sino-Japanese war, beginning in 1937 and

---

[1] Meri Nowogrodzki, "Flight and Rescue," interview by Firstlight Pictures, *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,* 1999. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508232

[2] Andrew Jakubowicz, "Stopped in Flight: Shanghai and the Polish Jewish Refugees of 1941," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 24, no. 3, (2017): 293.

[3] Irene Eber, *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 9.

ending with Japan's surrender of WWII in 1945. Quickly after hostilities began, the Japanese established a puppet regime in the Chinese-controlled areas of Shanghai, headed by mayor Fu Xiaoan.[4]

Polish Jews arrived in Shanghai throughout 1941, finding shelter in Joint-provided group housing that German refugees called *heime*.[5] Many began preparing to depart from China in the autumn of 1941, eager to reach their intended destinations in the United States, Canada, Australia and Curaçao. These hopes were dashed on December 7th of the same year; the attack on Pearl Harbor ignited conflict in the Pacific and launched Japan into war with the United States. Allied ships could not dock in Axis-occupied ports. The European refugees of Shanghai were stranded.

As 1942 came to a close, Nazi Germany began mounting pressure on its allies to exact the Final Solution on Jews living in their territories, Japan included. Having no intention of exterminating the Jewish population in China, the Japanese government issued the Proclamation of February 1943; all European refugees who had arrived in Shanghai after 1937 were declared "stateless" and ghettoized in Hongkew, a suburb of the city in the former American and British concession. Twenty thousand European Jewish refugees and thousands of Chinese natives would share this 1.2 square mile area until the end of the war in Asia in August 1945.[6]

Prior to WWII, Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews had already established roots in Shanghai. Marica Ristaino, author of *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai*, cites the existence of these communities as the main factor for the lack of anti-Semitism in Shanghai leading up to the 1930s. Sephardi Jews had come from Baghdad in the mid 19th century and rather successfully integrated into the local economy, trading in opium, silk, tea, cotton, and other valuable products.

By the time Central European Jews began arriving in Shanghai in 1938, the Sephardic community had established great wealth and prestige; however, the Russian Ashkenazi population arrived in Shanghai under much different circumstances.[7] Fleeing persecution in the aftermath of the Russian revolutions and ensuing civil war, these Ashkenazi were able to find safety and religious freedom in Shanghai, eventually opening their own social clubs, businesses, schools and synagogues.[8] While no major conflicts occurred between the Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities, socioeconomic and cultural differences divided them past the point of integration. The Ashkenazi had a distaste for the

---

[4] Eber, *Wartime Shanghai*, 31.
[5] Péter Vámos, "Home Afar: The Life of Central European Refugees in Shanghai During World War II," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hung* 57, no. 1, (2004): 64.
[6] Eber, *Wartime Shanghai,* 3, 97.
[7] Marcia Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 22.
[8] Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 26.

seemingly "...ostentatious Sephardic wealth and aloofness during spiritual events" and often kept their practices separate; the few attempts to bridge the gaps between the two communities ultimately failed.[9]

In his article "Stopped in Flight: Shanghai and the Polish Jewish Refugees of 1941," Andrew Jakubowicz states that the "emphasis of public memory has fallen on the German and Austrian residents of Hongkew."[10] Most literature on the Shanghai ghetto and the journey of European Jewish refugees to arrive there glosses over or completely omits the Polish Jewish experience. Ristaino's book, which offers an abundance of information on the existing Jewish communities and the changes occurring within Shanghai upon the arrival of German and Austrian Jews, does not specifically mention Polish refugees either. Irene Eber's book *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe* is similar. Her analysis of European Jewish emigration to Shanghai cites the 1938 November pogrom as the catalyst for most German and Austrian emigration, resulting in a "flood" of refugees arriving in Shanghai by early 1940.[11] Polish refugees, arriving the following year, are referred to as a non-specified "smaller group."[12]

The little research focusing on the Polish refugee experience emphasizes the differences between the Polish Jewish community and the German and Austrian Jews. Joseph Fiszman, author of "The Quest for Status: Polish Jewish Refugees in Shanghai, 1941-1949," argues that the Polish Jews in Shanghai were unique in their undying nationalism and deep religious devotion, which caused them to resist any affiliation with other refugee communities. The desire to maintain Polish nationalism manifested itself economically, culturally, and socially. Unlike the previously established refugee communities, the Polish arrivals had no intentions to "…plant economic roots…" by starting businesses or finding trades. Planning for the long term, Fiszman states, would have created a sense of permanence in Shanghai, when most Polish refugees had the end goal of leaving as soon as possible and even returning to Poland.[13] Fiszman also states that the Polish population in Shanghai had a particular issue with receiving aid, as it would "…reduce them to the status of handout recipients, and perpetuate the notion of their 'statelessness.'" This implies a much larger belief; their Polish citizenship set them apart from the German Jewish refugees who had been persecuted by their own government and truly had no nation to return to.[14]

---

[9] Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 21, 24.
[10] Jakubowicz, "Stopped in Flight," 3.
[11] The November pogrom refers to *Kristallnacht*.
[12] Eber, *Wartime Shanghai*, 76.
[13] Joseph R. Fiszman, "The Quest for Status: Polish Jewish Refugees in Shanghai, 1941-1949," *The Polish Review* 43, no. 3, (1998): 447.
[14] Fiszman, "The Quest for Status," 448.

Culturally, Fiszman argues that Yiddish fluency was another way in which Polish Jews maintained their pride, often at the expense of German and Austrian Jews. To the Poles, Western European Jews knew only fragments of archaic Yiddish, most of which no longer had a place in everyday conversation, symbolizing their distance from traditional Jewish customs. This is reiterated in Fiszman's examination of social dynamics between the refugee communities in Hongkew; Polish Jews believed themselves to be more Jewish, wiser, and more adaptable than the Germans or Austrians.[15]

While Jakubowicz supports Fiszman's argument of the importance of Polish nationality and culture in the refugee experience, it is without an implied sense of superiority. He points out that even the Shanghai Municipal Police took notice of the distinction between the Polish and German refugees, and insisted that Polish aid organizations such as the East-Jewish Committee (East-JewCom) should have complete autonomy over Polish aid allocation due to cultural tensions and misunderstandings that could arise should German aid organizations step in.[16] However, Jakubowicz does not come to the same conclusion as Fiszman regarding Polish Jewish resistance to aid, instead describing a mad fight between various Polish aid groups for autonomy in order to push their religious or political agendas, which made it difficult for Polish refugees to find a reliable aid source. That said, Fiszman's stance is undisputed in Jakubowicz and Aleksandra Hadzelek's 2015 article "The Polish Jews of Shanghai and the Political Sociology of Historical Memory."[17]

"The Polish Jews of Shanghai and the Political Sociology of Historical Memory" centers around Jakubowicz and Hadzelek's argument that the Polish refugees were able to survive in part because the Polish government in exile was willing to protect them. This was a situation unique to the Polish Jews, as the German and Austrian Jews did not have a government recognizing them as citizens. The Polish Consular Commission, established by the Polish Ambassador to Japan, Tadeusz Romer, is cited as one of the main protective bodies for Polish refugees in both Japan and Shanghai; a Polish passport was all that was needed in order to obtain this protection from consular authorities.[18] The measures the Polish Consular Commission took to ensure the safety or wellbeing of Polish refugees while in Kobe or Shanghai, aside from the fact that Romer was intent on maintaining the "Polish citizenship status of the refugees…" are, however, not specifically stated.[19] The Polish government in exile in London also readily financed aid efforts for the Jewish refugees

---

[15] Fiszman, "The Quest for Status," 456.
[16] Jakubowicz, "Stopped in Flight," 8.
[17] Jakubowicz, "Stopped in Flight," 7.
[18] Andrew Jakubowicz and Aleksandra Hadzelek, "The Polish Jews of Shanghai and the Political Sociology of Historical Memory," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 19, no. 2, (2015): 31.
[19] Jakubowicz, "Stopped in Flight," 3.

through the International Red Cross; such direct governmental support was not offered to the German and Austrian Jewish communities.[20]

   "Stopped in Flight" also emphasizes Polish governmental involvement as a defining distinction in the experiences of Polish Jews, supplementing a broader statement on the differences between Jewish refugee communities in Shanghai. Jakubowicz claims that Polish Jewish refugees were supplied with more aid through the Joint than the Germans or Austrians; Polish Jewish refugees also had more aid organizations specific to their community.[21] The final distinction in the Polish experience was the ability to resist ghettoization in Hongkew longer than the German or Austrian communities, which Jakubowicz attributes to Romer's citizenship efforts. Polish refugees also organized public protests against the stateless title given to European Jews in Shanghai, allowing the Polish community to prolong their forced relocation.[22]

   Fiszman, Jakubowicz and Hadzelek's emphasis on the distinctive qualities of the Polish Jewish refugee community in Shanghai implies not only a unique experience, but also an experience better than that of the German and Austrian Jews. Where Fiszman takes up the position of the internalized superiority of the Polish Jews, Jakubowicz and Hadzelek cite specific events which in theory would have created privileged circumstances for the Poles in Shanghai. Increased monetary support from the Joint and other Polish aid organizations would have provided the Polish Jews with greater access to food and improved living conditions than the other Jewish refugees in Hongkew. Protection and aid from both the Polish government in exile as well as bodies of Polish authority in Japan and Shanghai would have done the same.

   Did these circumstances of the Polish Jewish community in Shanghai truly create privilege? Because of these alleged privileges, did Polish Jewish refugees have a better or easier time in Shanghai than did German and Austrian Jews? If not, did their Shanghai experience differ?

   In 1999, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum began conducting interviews for a project titled "Flight and Rescue," which detailed the journey of Central European Jewish refugees who escaped to Kobe, Japan before once again relocating to Shanghai in 1940-1941. These testimonies show that despite the efforts of the Polish government and other aid organizations to improve the lives of Polish Jewish refugees in Shanghai, no differences were achieved in food access or the living conditions of Polish refugees. Many of those interviewed were Polish survivors who first crossed the Polish-Lithuanian border to reach Vilna, now the capital of Lithuania, before embarking on the journey across the Soviet Union. These accounts are supplemented by survivor interviews from the Visual History Archive of the Shoah Foundation,

---

[20] Jakubowicz and Hadzelek, "The Polish Jews of Shanghai," 39.
[21] Jakubowicz, "Stopped in Flight," 14.
[22] Jakubowicz, "Stopped in Flight," 14.

established by Steven Spielberg in 1994 with the purpose of preserving the stories of Holocaust victims globally; the archive has nearly fifty-two thousand recorded interviews in over thirty-two languages.[23] Despite the subjectivity of individual circumstances and the effects of time on memory recollection, these statements piece together a common experience of Polish Jewish refugee life in Shanghai.[24] As found in the survivor testimonies of Polish Jewish refugees, Polish Jews in Shanghai did not have privileged circumstances before or during ghettoization in Hongkew.

Polish refugees did not have increased food access compared to German and Austrian refugees. Hunger and scarce food access are universally mentioned across survivor interviews, regardless of amount of aid allocation. The Mir yeshiva, which had escaped from Poland to Kobe in 1940 and then to Shanghai in September of 1941, received more aid than other yeshivas in Shanghai.[25] A yeshiva is an Orthodox Jewish educational institution that focuses on the study of traditional Jewish texts; the Mir yeshiva is a specific community in which all members were able to escape to Kobe.[26] Moshe Zupnik, a member of the Mir yeshiva, was a teenager when Germany invaded Poland in September of 1939. He and the other boys in the yeshiva were sent to Vilna soon after the invasion in order to keep them safe and obtain visas out of Europe. His departure was encouraged by his parents, who corresponded frequently with him while the yeshiva was located in Kobe, though communication was cut off at the start of the war in the Pacific. In 1945 he discovered that his parents had been murdered in Treblinka, an extermination camp near Warsaw, three years prior.[27]

Zupnik recalls that throughout the Mir yeshiva's stay in Shanghai, there was never enough food. A small bowl of rice was given to its members for every meal, and the lack of options made it near impossible to keep kosher.[28] Rabbi Chaim Bukiet, a member of a smaller Polish yeshiva in Hongkew, faced similar circumstances. Claiming that his yeshiva received less aid than the Mir yeshiva, the only way to ensure that they could afford to eat was by selling cooking oil, a rare commodity in Shanghai.[29]

---

[23] Visual History Archive, *University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Testimonies*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, https://www.ushmm.org/collections/ask-a-research-question/tools-for-research/shoah-foundation [accessed December 2, 2021]

[24] Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Memory and History: Liturgical Time and Historical Time," *History and Theory* 41, no. 2, (2002): 6.

[25] Jakubowicz and Hadzelek, "The Polish Jews of Shanghai," 40.

[26] The testimonies are unclear on the exact number of students and instructors within the Mir yeshiva.

[27] Moshe Zupnik, "Flight and Rescue," interview by Firstlight Pictures, *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 1999. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508238

[28] Zupnik, "Flight and Rescue."

[29] Chaim Bukiet, "Visual History Archive," interview by Stella Eliezrie, *Shoah Foundation*, 1996. https://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=11135&returnIndex=0#

Norbert Swislocki, only three years old when the war began, describes the sacrifices of his parents in order for him to receive regular meals. During their early weeks in China, in November of 1941, his parents actively worked to obtain visas to Australia, Palestine or the United States. After Pearl Harbor, food became extremely scarce for both the refugee and local populations; Swislocki recalls that when going to the local grocery store with his father, butter was only available in half ounce quantities. Sugar and salt required ration coupons to buy. Only years after the war did his parents share the fact that they often had one meal a day or less to ensure that he was taken care of. The sacrifices and determination of his parents to protect him are present throughout Swislocki's testimony. Fleeing Warsaw after the Nazis had destroyed their home, he and his mother escaped to Vilna, where his father had been working as a journalist for a small Jewish weekly publication. When taking moments to rest during the walk across the Lithuanian border, she would lay him on top of her to protect him from the snow. On one occasion she bribed the Soviet soldiers at a border checkpoint with her wedding ring.[30]

Hildegard Fabian and her family also faced severe hunger and poverty while in Shanghai. Born in Poland as the youngest of three children, she was only four when Hitler came to power and was nine when *Kristallnacht* shattered her family's belief of their safety in Germany after they had emigrated to Hamburg in the early 1930s. Fearing that her older brothers would be arrested and taken to labor camps, her father arranged transport for them to Shanghai. Fabian followed with her parents soon after, embarking on a six-week voyage, five weeks of which she was severely seasick. She remembers the collective dread of the passengers just from being aboard a German ship, where the fear of being sent back to Europe was a constant presence. Arriving in Shanghai in 1940, she remembers almost constant hunger and disease plaguing not only her family but all European Jewish refugees, describing their living situation as primitive.[31]

Despite the difficulties, leaving Europe offered a clear improvement over what refugees had left behind. When describing her personal feelings of their situation in Shanghai, Fabian states that nothing could have been worse than Germany: "When I remember Germany, I associate my remembrances with terror and brutality. When I think of Shanghai, there were depravations. We went hungry, we lived very primitively, but that's not terror."[32]

Polish Refugees did not have better living conditions than German and Austrian refugees. Conditions in the *heime,* or group homes, were often

---

[30] Norbert Swislocki, "Flight and Rescue," interview by Firstlight Pictures, *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 1999. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508242
[31] Hildegard Fabian, "Visual History Archive," interview by Joyce Tapper*, Shoah Foundation,* 1995. https://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=4141&returnIndex=0#
[32] Fabian, "Visual History Archive," *Shoah Foundation*.

unsanitary and crowded, with any available resources spread thin. The transition was too much for some to bear. Shanghai's population density had disastrous effects on public sanitation, and lack of privacy in the *heime* was humiliating for European Jews, for whom "discreteness equated respectability."[33] Susan Bluman was fifteen years old when she arrived in Kobe, having fled Warsaw to Lithuania to be reunited with her fiancé in the Lithuanian city of Vilna in 1939.[34] The *heime* they lived in during their early days in Shanghai housed 30 people at a time, in a space meant for a single family.[35]

Fabian had similar experiences, recalling rampant leprosy in the native Chinese population living alongside the European refugees. Other diseases spread quickly within the community, and Fabian herself fell severely ill, so much so that her kosher-keeping-family bought pork to feed her, as it was the only protein they could find. Every morning bodies would be collected from the streets of people who had died of starvation or sickness; while horrifying initially, Fabian states that over time she became desensitized to her surroundings.[36] Moshe Zupnik had similar experiences; outside of the dwellings of the Mir yeshiva, one could not walk outside without witnessing starvation and disease among the local population.[37]

Fiszman's argument that social, cultural and religious differences between the Polish and German refugees existed are, on the other hand, supported by the sources. Once interned in Hongkew, European Jewish refugees had to receive permission from Kanoh Ghoya, the Japanese official in Shanghai responsible for issuing passports out of the ghetto. Any movement outside Hongkew required Ghoya's approval. He was, as described in every testimony, a very short man with a large inferiority complex and psychopathic tendencies. In order to procure permission to leave, one often had to lie or sweet talk one's way through conversations with Ghoya and other Japanese authorities, which Motl Goldberg, a survivor originally from Janów, Poland, claims the German refugees did very badly. His reasoning was that the German refugee population was made up of professionals, such as doctors or lawyers, who had little experience in having to talk their way out of situations and who emphasized going about situations through official channels. Polish Jews, by contrast, understood how to approach conversations with authorities, and were "better at

---

[33] Sarah Halpern, "The Integration of Refugees from Shanghai into Post-WWII San Francisco," *American Jewish History* 104, no. 1, (2020): 93.
[34] Bluman and her fiancé were married in Vilna prior to the voyage to Kobe in order to more easily procure passports to Japan.
[35] Susan Bluman, "Flight and Rescue," interview by Firstlight Productions, *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 1999. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508247
[36] Fabian, "Visual History Archive," *Shoah Foundation*.
[37] Zupnik, "Flight and Rescue."

telling the Japanese what they wanted to hear…" Polish Jews also, according to Goldberg, understood when to avoid official channels altogether.[38]

In the same interview, Goldberg cites the professional status of German Jews as the cause of another social phenomena: the suicide rate in Hongkew. He explains his belief that those who had had much better lives before fleeing Europe could not adjust to the struggles and poverty they had to endure once in Shanghai. On average, the Germans had lived more affluent lifestyles than the Polish Jews in Shanghai and were thus more easily driven to despair. Even after the war, when news of the atrocities in Europe began to break in international circles, he emphasizes that there were still no suicides among the Polish Jews, because they could now move on from the war period. After the war, Goldberg himself discovered that his parents and younger siblings had been murdered by Nazis in the forests near his home in 1942.[39]

Rabbi Bukiet cites religious reasons for the suicide rate in Hongkew, arguing that the German and Austrian refugees lacked religious faith, and an understanding that Jews were the chosen people of God and that their situation would only be temporary. Furthermore, this lack of religiosity from the Germans and their separation from Jewish tradition had made them closer to gentiles. The Polish Jews by contrast, he held, had deep faith in God and hope that the war would come to an end and felt no cause for despair or desperation.[40] These sentiments are found solely in Rabbi Bukiet's testimony, though; Moshe Zupnik of the Mir yeshiva does not go into detail on the religious intricacies of the Shanghai Jewish communities, apart from the generosity of the Sephardic community in allowing the yeshiva to be housed in its synagogue before its ghettoization in Hongkew.[41]

Social and cultural differences did exist among the European Jewish refugees; there is, however, there is no evidence in the testimonies that these differences created a sense of superiority among the Polish Jewish community. It must be said, though, that the interview format of the testimony often only allows the survivor to speak on the topics of interest to the interviewer, and that few testimonies specifically make space for the speaker to elaborate on the social dynamics between the groups of Hongkew. Only Hildegard Fabian was pointedly asked about the social patterns of different ethnic groups within the ghetto, to which she answered that there was no cultural or geographic separation between Jewish refugees in Hongkew. Polish families were not concerned with isolating themselves within their own community; instead,

---

[38] Motl Goldberg, "Flight and Rescue," interview by Firstlight Pictures, *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,* 1999. https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508249
[39] Goldberg, "Flight and Rescue."
[40] Bukiet, "Visual History Archive."
[41] Zupnik, "Flight and Rescue."

the focus was the Jewish community as a whole. She concluded her statement by emphasizing that nationality "didn't matter, we all came from the same roots."[42]

The Polish Jewish refugees, despite having a government, even in exile, attempting to aid them, did not change the fact that they lived in unsanitary conditions with insufficient food. It also did not change the fact that Polish Jews were expelled from Japan alongside German and Austrian Jews. Though Polish Jews resisted their internment in Hongkew, they were still ghettoized alongside the German and Austrian refugees. The religious and social differences that separated the Poles from Germans and Austrians did not have lasting effects on the social dynamics within the ghetto; the Jewish community itself was much more important than any dividing factor.

---

[42] Fabian, "Visual History Archive."