

## AFD Ep 467 Links and Notes - Council on Books in Wartime [Bill/Rachel] - Recording Apr 23, 2023

[Rachel] The Council on Books in Wartime was a major nonprofit private-sector defense expenditure during World War II that single-handedly made a bunch of books like *The Great Gatsby* into major American texts. They did not receive US government funds, but they were government-approved. Primarily book publisher companies were involved in the project. Later as the war wrapped up they pivoted the project to American soft power projection by targeting the books to liberated or occupied civilian populations abroad. This strategy of influencing thinking at home and abroad is reflected in their motto, "Books are weapons in the war of ideas." [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council\\_on\\_Books\\_in\\_Wartime](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_on_Books_in_Wartime)

[Rachel] According to Andrew Brozyna's 2012-2015 blog "Books for Victory" dedicated to the history of the program:

*The aim of the CBW was to promote the reading of books as a way to increase morale, share information, and encourage critical thinking among Americans. The happy side-benefit to the publishing industry was more book sales. Early in the war the CBW held public lectures and hosted radio dramatizations of books, but its most influential programs were the nonprofit publication of millions of paperbacks. First published in 1943, the Armed Services Editions were miniature format paperbacks of best-sellers which were freely distributed to American troops. These boosted the morale of homesick soldiers and fostered their post-war habit of book reading. First published in 1944, the Overseas Editions were translations of American authors which were given to the newly-liberated people in Europe and Asia. [...]*

*The directors of the CBW included some of the most important American publishers of the decade. The men most recognizable today would be:*

*John Farrar, co-founder of Farrar & Rinehart (after WWII he founded Farrar, Straus and Giroux)*

*Donald S. Klopfer, co-founder of Random House*

*Alfred A. Knopf, founder of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.*

*Frederic G. Melcher, editor of Publishers Weekly (he helped found the children's book awards: Newbery Medal and Caldecott Medal)*

*William Warder Norton, founder of W. W. Norton & Company*

*Richard L. Simon, co-founder of Simon & Schuster*

<http://www.booksforvictory.com/2013/03/the-council-on-books-in-wartime-194146.html>

[Bill] [Smithsonian interview](#) with Molly Guptill Manning, author of "When Books Went to War" (December 2014):

### **What were the origins of the Victory Book Campaign?**

*The book burnings in Germany in the 1930s sparked discussion in America and around the world about why books were under attack and how Americans could counteract this purging of ideas. In every country Germany invaded, books containing viewpoints antagonistic to the Nazi platform were destroyed. American librarians decided that the best way to fight back was to encourage Americans to read more, making books weapons in the "war of ideas." So they began collecting books to distribute to service members, which would provide much-needed entertainment and morale-boosting in the bare-bones training camps.*

*What came to be known as the Victory Book Campaign mobilized American civilians to donate 18 million books between 1942 and 1943. The librarians waged publicity campaigns, hosted collection contests, worked with organizations like the Boy and Girl Scouts for door-to-door collections, pitched stories to newspapers, and scattered book donation receptacles across their towns and cities.*

### **Why did the donation campaign come to an end, to be replaced by the Armed Services Editions?**

*First, many of the donated books did not suit the reading tastes of young men (thousands of children's books were donated, for instance.) Librarians had to painstakingly sort the books they collected, in order to send only the best. And the donated books were primarily hardcovers, so as servicemen shipped out overseas, they proved too heavy and unwieldy to carry.*

*These problems exposed the need for paperback editions of books that young men would especially enjoy. American publishers banded together to form a group called the Council on Books in Wartime, and ultimately developed troop-friendly paperbacks called Armed Services Editions (ASEs), which were designed to fit in the hip or breast pocket of a military uniform and were printed in titles that soldiers eagerly snatched up.*

### **How were the ASE books chosen? Were there any that struck you as especially surprising?**

*Great care went into choosing the ASE titles. Publishers first put together lists of bestsellers and other appealing titles; then a group of hired readers went through each book and highlighted any passages that were offensive, discriminatory or might give comfort to the enemy. These were reviewed more closely, and the Army and Navy had the final say.*

*The publishers were surprisingly liberal-minded when it came to the titles they printed. Rather than avoid books about Hitler or Nazi Germany, the council published *Der Fuehrer: Hitler's Rise to Power*, a biography of the Nazi leader by German-Jewish journalist Konrad Heiden. They also printed books considered indecent in the United States: titles such as *Strange Fruit* and *Forever Amber* were both banned in some states and cities because they contained sex scenes. [*Strange Fruit*, the story of an interracial romance, was also briefly banned from being distributed through the U.S. Postal Service, until Eleanor Roosevelt urged her husband to intervene.] The council's hired readers urged against printing such "trashy" books, and the argument grew so heated that it was presented to the council's executive board, which ruled in favor of publishing them.*

### **What was the lasting impact of the campaign?**

*The average WWII conscript had an 11th-grade education and did not read books. During the war, sometimes out of sheer desperation for something to do, the men would pick up books because they were the only entertainment around. Many service members came home with a love of books. Thanks to the popularity of the ASEs, publishers started to release cheap paperback editions for civilians, so veterans returned to a flourishing paperback trade.*

*The ASEs also motivated many GIs to go to college, having proven that they could enjoy reading and studying. Some two million veterans, who might never have enrolled in a university before the war, found themselves signing up for a free college education.*

The Smithsonian piece also notes, from the book, that the Council on Books in Wartime proved to be a powerful force for liberalism in 1944 when right-wing Senator Robert A. Taft tried to ban the distribution to service members of any written material that could be considered "propaganda" as an amendment to legislation to facilitate overseas voting in the 1944 presidential elections. They waged a successful media campaign against his effort and any similar non-security censorship. Journalists were keeping a close eye on Taft as the story grew

and eventually they caught him admitting out loud that his motivation was to stop a wave of troops in the field voting to re-elect FDR to a fourth term, which killed his amendment.

[Rachel] [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/War\\_Book\\_Panel](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_Book_Panel)

The Council on Books in Wartime created a War Book Panel specifically to choose books to recommend to the public that would aid in the goals of the war effort. These books would clarify why the US was at war, what values were at stake, and how the peace effort after the war might take shape. The panel periodically met to review and vote on titles. These titles would be republished and marked as “Imperative” War Book Panel selections on the front cover with a large I. Council members were obligated to advertise these titles, even if they were published by a competing publishing house. In the years that the Panel was active - 1942-1945 - they selected 6 titles for the “Imperative” designation.

W. L. White, *They Were Expendable*. November 1942

John Hersey, *Into the Valley*. March 1943

[1940 Republican presidential nominee] Wendell Willkie, *One World*. May 1943

Walter Lippmann, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic*. July 1943

John Hersey, *A Bell For Adano*.

Edgar Snow, *People on Our Side*. September 1944

A seventh book, Ralph Ingersoll's *The Battle Is the Payoff*, was voted on by the panel in the spring of 1945, but it was already selling well and the end of the war was in sight, so they declined to republish it with the Imperative badge.

These six books are a mix of fiction and non-fiction. Of note is the emphasis on the outcome of the fight for control of China between Communists and Nationalists. Willkie's *One World* prophesied that whoever came out on top in China would be a force to be reckoned with. He also stated that it was the duty of the Allies to ensure that the victors would be friendly to Allied interests, but also powerful enough to benefit the Chinese people. Edgar Snow's *People on Our Side* took a stand behind the Communists, depicting them as important in the fight against fascism. [Interesting side note, Snow was a contemporary of Agnes Smedley, whom we discussed in Jan 2022 on [Episode 409](#)]

[Rachel]

<https://blogs.loc.gov/catbird/2022/08/books-go-to-war-world-war-ii-armed-services-editions/>

The Library of Congress blog wrote about the project in August 2022:

*Booksellers, publishers, authors, librarians, and critics formed the Council on Books in Wartime to produce more than 122 million paperbacks for free distribution to U.S. Service Members from 1943-1947. These odd-shaped books were specifically designed to fit the pockets of the uniforms for all branches of service and to be easy to read in difficult conditions. While various attempts had been made previously to distribute books in wartime, and some paperbacks had been around prior to the ASEs, this program helped to transform the nature of publishing after the war.*

*A small committee selected the books with recreational reading as the first goal. It was hoped that a mixture of fiction and nonfiction titles would cater to all levels of taste. Contemporary fiction was most popular; service members could share their enjoyment with families back home who were reading the same books. Popular categories included historical novels, mysteries, books of humor, and westerns, but poetry and classics were included in the mix. In later years, nonfiction books designed to prepare soldiers for careers once they returned home were in demand.*

*Photos show the immensely popular books being read on the frontlines, on ships, in POW camps in Germany and Japan, in hospitals, while standing in any sort of line, and in camps and*

bases. They were reportedly as popular as pin-up girl illustrations and were "better than chocolate or cigarettes" for trading. General Eisenhower requested that a special set be reserved so that each service member was issued a book as they boarded the D-Day landing craft.

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[Bill] According to a September 2014 article in The Atlantic on the project: [by giving away millions of free copies to service members] "Some of the publishers think that their business is going to be ruined," the prominent broadcaster H. V. Kaltenborn told his audience in 1944. "But I make this prediction. America's publishers have cooperated in an experiment that will for the first time make us a nation of book readers."

<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/09/publishers-gave-away-122951031-books-during-world-war-ii/379893/>

To some degree, the social transformation of paperbacks was already under way even without the war. In 1939, publishers began releasing serious paperback books for a quarter, and millions of copies were being sold in a rapidly increasing pace each year thereafter. But clearly the Council on Books in Wartime took things to a whole new level much faster.

*Sales of paperbacks did slump, precisely as feared, in 1946. Surprisingly, though, it was the lighter fare that failed to sell. More serious works held their ground. Publishers adjusted, and redoubled their efforts at marketing. They found thousands of new outlets, precisely as Jacobs envisioned. They expanded their selection of titles, offering up literary novels, histories, collections of poetry, and books about science alongside their mysteries and westerns. Sales picked up. By 1950, publishers sold 214 million copies of 642 separate paperback titles, enough for every adult in the country to have bought a couple books.*

The Atlantic piece also discusses process and results during the war: *the Council decided to use magazine presses, printing two copies on each page, and then slicing the book in half perpendicular to the binding. The result was a book wider than it was tall, featuring two columns of text for easier reading in low light. The real innovation, though, was less technological than ideological. The publishers proposed to take books available only in hardcover form, and produce them in this disposable format. The plan, breathtaking in its ambition, was sure to engender skepticism among publishers asked to donate the rights to some of their most valuable property. So the chair of the committee, W.W. Norton, took care to appeal not just to the patriotism of his fellow publishers, but also to their pursuit of profits. "The net result to the industry and to the future of book reading can only be helpful," he explained. "The very fact that millions of men will have the opportunity to learn what a book is and what it can mean is likely now and in postwar years to exert a tremendous influence on the postwar course of the industry."*

[...]

*The army and the navy endorsed the program, and in July of 1943, began shipping the books around the world. The Council aimed to produce one box of books for every 150 soldiers and sailors, and also sent boxes to smaller, isolated detachments. By the spring of 1945, the program shipped 155,000 crates of these Armed Services Editions each month, with 40 new books packed into each box. Wherever they arrived, soldiers tore them open, and began to read.*

*"Dog-eared and moldy and limp from the humidity those books go up the line," wrote a war reporter from the southwest Pacific. "Because they are what they are, because they can be*

*packed in a hip pocket or snuck into a shoulder pack, men are reading where men have never read before." A lieutenant in the Marshall Islands wrote of seeing men devour books "by a dim flashlight under a shelter half, even after the air-raid siren has already blown and they should be in a foxhole." Another soldier reported that "the books are read until they fall apart."*

*[...]*

*The box of 30 or 40 books shipped to thousands of units each month might include *This is Murder*, *Mr. Jones* or a Zane Grey western, but also Carl Sandburg's poems or *Tristram Shandy* or *The Making of Modern Britain*. Almost all were available only as expensive hardbacks on the civilian market, and a few were original compilations made exclusively for the program. The goal, as W. W. Norton explained, was to offer "new books and books of enduring value," that might keep soldiers and sailors "in touch with thought and currents of life in their country." The Council on Books aimed not merely to entertain, but also to educate and inspire.*

*[...]*

*Some of the selections were idiosyncratic. In 1945, Council picked out an older novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald that had never achieved popular success. It sold just 120 copies the previous year, and another 33 in 1945 before going out of print. The 155,000 copies of *The Great Gatsby* that they shipped out to the troops dwarfed all its previous print runs combined. Buoyed by that exposure, it would go on to become one of the great publishing successes of the 20th century.*

*[...]*

***One GI with an unusual vantage point was Joe Allen, who went from the Council directly into the ranks as a private soldier, and had a chance to see its impact first hand. "You are instilling in them, whether you are aware of it or not, a taste for good reading that will surely persist come victory," he reported . "I have seen many a man who never before had the patience or inclination to read a book, pick up one of the Council's and become absorbed and ask for more." Soldiers are "acquiring a new habit, that of reading," concurred a lieutenant in the Pacific, writing that it would "result in additional book sales in the future."***

[Rachel] In the post-9/11 era of global deployments, reading programs for the US service members regained prominence, but soon the technology was a bit more advanced than the modified paperbacks of the 1940s:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navy\\_eReader\\_Device](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navy_eReader_Device)

In 2014, the Navy released its Navy eReader Device, or NeRD. It has features similar to a Kindle - an e-ink display with adjustable fonts and typeface sizes - but it has no internet capabilities, removable storage, or ways to add or remove titles, to comply with security requirements. It comes pre-loaded with almost 300 books, including the Bible and the Quran, as well as popular fiction like Tom Clancy and James Patterson novels, classics, and plenty of naval history. Today, the Department of Defense Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Library has an OverDrive collection, so there is a way to access more books and other digital resources, just not when security is a concern.