

Kabir Daniel

Mr. Rutherford

Oxford Scholars

10 October 2018

Oxford Scholars WWI Essay

Cultural Change on the Home Front during WWI

with a Focus on Film, Fashion, Music and Dance

Change is always a constituent of war. World War I, thought of as the “War to End All Wars,” was undoubtedly a keystone among the building blocks of history. The war was a bloody hell, full of enough war stories to fill libraries, amongst stories of sentiment— such as the first Christmas at war, when the opposing sides played soccer and smoked cigarettes instead of spraying bullets at one another. Also, the Great War tends to trudge up thoughts of the profound global political change heralded by it, such as the precedent of the League of Nations that was before the establishment of the United Nations, or the mistreatment of Germany that in part led to WWII, alongside many others. However, the Great War time period was not only rife with violence and political change, but vast cultural change as well, and the impact of the war itself is reflected in the evolution of homefront culture throughout the era.

Before the war was a time of cultural transition from the 19th century. In the early years of the 1900’s, ragtime reigned supreme, and fashion was prominent as the years prior. Ragtime— a particular genre heavily derived from African American culture— was the jive in every bustling center for R&R. Everybody loved to dance the foxtrot, or take the floor by storm with a tango. Ragtime held heavy focus on partners dancing as (often African American) musicians played charming rhythmic bops in the background. Drifting away from music, another focal point of cultural change in the time was fashion. Closing in towards the 1910’s, women’s fashion began to leave the look of the 19th century behind, as the unnatural, protruding S-curved figure slowly slipped as dressed became more straight-fitted, more boyish and linear. While dresses slimmed down, riffled and often multilayered fabrics remained as rich colours took the fashion world by storm. Yet another hub of culture at the time was film. The feature film was a fascinating development of the time, as the film industry was in its earliest stages at the time.

Feature films were 10 cent films about 10 minutes in length that could be watched at the nearest nickelodeon. In addition to feature films, longer films were in the works, among which was the infamous *Birth of a Nation*, which displayed the KKK in a holy light. Film plots varied from romance to action, with the introduction to comedy coming with Charlie Chaplin around when WWI kicked off.

World War I had a mighty effect on all of the aforementioned cultural hubs. During the war, when all the men went overseas, partner dances became less feasible. This contributed to the disposal of ragtime, as wartime songs shanties came along to take their place. The war songs were nearly all patriotic, and they took various perspectives when singing of romance, military life, and more. These war songs went overseas alongside the soldiers and were showcased in vaudeville, which were quite the grand ordeal for soldiers. Performers would go abroad put on shows for the soldiers—the opening of *White Christmas*, though a post-WWII era film, shows just this. Popular dance culture diminished out, as did the exuberance of fashion. The fancy flowy fabric faded into more utilitarian fashions. With most of the men gone to war, the women had less need to dress up flashily, as they felt it as inappropriate due to the global circumstance. Additionally, women began dressing more practically as they became employees working at factories to help the war effort. The slowed output from France—the fashion capital of the world at the time—only added to the decline of flamboyant fashion. Perhaps the most profoundly impacted cultural hub, however, was the film industry. As it contributed little to the war effort, domestic filmmaking diminished, and whatever focus existed on film was mostly directed overseas. In America, Germans were portrayed as dolts in mostly lighthearted war films, while the free open space of Hollywoodland was discovered by filmmakers. Internationally,

filmmaking took a dark turn. The German government took control of domestic film studios and distributors, under an organization called the UFA, and focused filmmaking towards heavy propaganda. Due to this, German filmmaking soared. Meanwhile, in Russia, the film industry nearly came to a complete stop, as stock ran low. When the war came to a close, however, much stood to change.

After the war was over, life was restored to the American homefront. Women's fashion took off, maintaining the slimmer look yet adopting voluptuous fashion styles, as the timeframe roamed into the roaring '20s, and the Jazz age shone brightly. Dance returned as a dearly loved pastime, though ragtime had transitioned into Jazz, eventually with musicians like Fats Waller leading the way. Meanwhile, the film scene underwent some interesting changes. The "Hollywoodland" sign was erected 5 years after the war had ended (though the "land" part soon fell off). Internationally, the prospering German film industry transitioned away from propaganda and took an even darker twist. The Weimar Period was full of disturbing psychological filmmaking, which often held reference to the war. Meanwhile, the Bolshevik party, while conspiring to control the film industry as the Germans had to popularize communist propaganda, created the first film studies university. Evidently, the beginning of the Great War acted as a stopper in some ways to the various cultural hubs— not only in America, but the world as well— and the end of WWI served as a revitalizer, which set the stage for cultural evolution to come.