

# The Everyday as Involved in War

By [Tammy M. Proctor](#)

**This essay examines how the "everyday" functions in war, not only for those on the home fronts, but for those in combat roles and for those living between the lines. Five important qualities, among others, shape the everyday in World War I: Waiting, Staying Connected, Food and Shelter, Managing Fear, and Camaraderie. Each of these themes plays out at the homes of those left behind, in the camps of civilian and military prisoners, in occupied zones, and at the fronts.**

## Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Waiting](#)
- [3 Staying Connected](#)
- [4 Food and Shelter](#)
- [5 Managing Fear](#)
- [6 Camaraderie](#)
- [7 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

## Introduction

Although war by definition constitutes an unusual, abnormal state, much of the work of war is mundane and ordinary. Everyday activities continue while soldiers, civilians, prisoners, and others caught up in war try to manage their wartime lives. Part of the disconcerting reality of war is this juxtaposition – danger and fear in the midst of the ordinary. War in its ugliness defies imagination, but it also produces a state of uncertainty that cannot be maintained through every moment of every day. Humans cling to their routines and create new everyday “normal” activities in the midst of war. In her memoir, *Testament of Youth*, [Vera Brittain \(1893-1970\)](#) captures the sense of everyday that triumphs when war arrives, wryly noting of English society in 1914:

Few of humanity's characteristics are more disconcerting than its ability to reduce world-events to its own level ...by the end of August [1914]...the ladies of the [...] elite had set to work to provincialise the War.<sup>[1]</sup>

This essay examines how the ‘everyday’ functions in war, not only for those at the home fronts, but for those in combat roles and for those living between the lines. While many themes mark the experience of the everyday in wartime, this essay will focus on five important qualities that shape the everyday in World War I: Waiting, Staying Connected, Food and Shelter, Managing Fear, and Camaraderie. Each of these themes plays out at the homes of those left behind, in the camps of civilian and military prisoners, in occupied zones, and at the fronts.

## Waiting

The First World War's rich archives of [wartime letters](#), [poetry](#), [journalism](#), and [fiction](#) provide ample evidence of the main work of war—waiting. Whether it be women's diaries documenting their lives far from the front or soldiers' letters home from the front, wartime writing emphasizes the endless waits for information, the boredom of inaction, and the focus on mundane tasks as distractions. Filling time became a major focus for men, women, and children in wartime. Some of this waiting could be quite charged with fear, for example when waiting for the end of an air raid or anticipating the moment when a whistle would signal the beginning of a battle. Time could be both enemy and savior in these situations, and the ordinary people caught up in war recognized this tension in their recording of experiences and thoughts.

As American [Alice Dunbar-Nelson \(1875-1935\)](#) wrote in her poem, "I Sit and Sew" everyday activities such as sewing might distract from the war, but they also served as a reminder of the futility of war and the distance between soldiers at war and those at home. Other women also wrote of their sense of helplessness in the face of larger forces. German artist [Käthe Kollwitz \(1867-1945\)](#) depicted the sense of helpless waiting in some of her lithographs, sculpture and poetry, and waiting was a central theme in much of her war [art](#).<sup>[2]</sup> Kollwitz and others, such as British artist [Christopher Nevinson \(1889-1946\)](#), captured the endless waiting of civilians, depicting their gray visages as they stood in yet another queue for food or supplies.

To distract themselves from the waiting, especially for news of loved ones, civilian women joined organizations to support the war effort or took wartime jobs. Many of these groups created boxes of comforts for soldiers or [prisoners](#), but the organizations also performed civic duties, helped with harvests, worked with [refugees](#), and provided [medical services](#). Keeping busy was a watchword for many women and feeling useful in "home" service was a vital factor in maintaining [morale](#). These organizations also allowed women to express patriotism and to feel a sense of belonging to the war effort or to associations promoting war causes.

For civilians on the home fronts, war brought periods of intense anxiety and excitement, which in some ways highlighted the problem of the silences and *ennui* of war. [Children](#), a focus of great official concern because of lack of supervision and disruptions to [education](#) during the war, found ways to amuse themselves with war games, service to the nation, and membership in societies and clubs. In the [United States](#), young Girl Scouts sold war bonds on city street corners and earned war service badges, while in Vienna, students joined volunteer corps to assist the war effort.<sup>[3]</sup> Children's curiosity with the strangeness of war could overcome boredom; in [Belgium](#), children interacted with soldiers and laborers from multiple countries, learning new words, songs, and games. Of course, orphans, refugee children or those living with the dangers of bombardment or malnutrition saw little to celebrate in the wartime environment.

Soldiers also took refuge from boredom and inactivity by engaging in little domestic activities, both to ease their daily lives and to fill time at the fronts. Countless soldier journals and letters speak of time spent mending, playing cards or other games, reading, writing, and facing an opposing team on the sporting fields. [Soldiers produced newspapers](#) and [art in the trenches](#), they visited local towns and historic sites or spent time at recreation huts (such as those staffed by the Salvation Army) and local canteens, and they sought sex, alcohol, and excitement. [David Woodward's](#) work provides one example of such temptations in his description of British soldiers in wartime [Egypt](#). He quotes A. W. Fletcher who saw Cairo as "a city blessed with grandeur unequalled in the world yet packed with all the lust and vice conceivable."<sup>[4]</sup> Little wonder that military planners sought tamer alternatives for soldiers' spare time, as in this example of [Chinese laborers](#) gaming in [France](#).

Prisoners of war, both military and civilian, certainly had time to kill during their enforced confinement. For instance, Ottoman officer [Mehmet Arif Ölçen \(1893-1958\)](#) befriended a local family during his time in Russian captivity, and this family helped him find supplies to make a lute, which he learned to play in his spare time.<sup>[5]</sup> For prisoners of war, ordinary soldiers or officers, the waiting and inactivity could bring madness, especially depending on their location and status. Many prisoners worked inside or outside the camp for pay or in a voluntary capacity, but periods of forced inactivity were the lot of most POWs during their captivities. Austrian artist and interned civilian, [Paul Cohen-Portheim \(1880-1932\)](#), described the "complete futility" of life behind wire, noting that time was an enemy to be fought with the tools at hand, namely reading, lectures, theatre, sports. Despite this burst of activities and the re-creation of as much of "everyday" life as possible, Cohen-Portheim wrote that the sameness, the caged quality of life, and the restrictions imposed were a burden that no amount of activity could banish. In fact, the little things became the points of contention: "It is not the men of bad character or morals you begin to hate, but the men who draw their soup through their teeth, clean their ears with their fingers at dinner. ..."<sup>[6]</sup>

Waiting was an aspect of the everyday life of war that permeated life in the combat zones and behind the lines, and filling this

time became not just a personal concern for individuals, but [governments](#) also sought to tame and fill free time. The degree to which people had to put their lives on hold varied considerably across national lines, class, gender, race lines, and even as the war progressed, making it difficult to generalize. What is clear during World War I is that morale depended upon citizens feeling a sense of purpose and meaning in their war service and sacrifice, so too much leisure time to think about the implications of the war could undermine the national effort.

## Staying Connected

Recent scholarship has demonstrated the importance of retaining civilian identities and connectedness for both combatants and their loved ones at home and in camps. [Martha Hanna's](#) study of [Marie Pireaud's \(1892-1978\)](#) and [Paul Pireaud's \(1890–1970\)](#) wartime correspondence is an excellent example of how letter-writing helped the young French married couple keep their relationship alive during separation. Each offered advice, shared news and fears, and longed for a time when they could be together, providing a sense of a shared life despite the war. As Hanna argues, their letters provided a link for both of them and a glimpse of the everyday normal life they might one day enjoy.<sup>[7]</sup> Other scholars such as [Helen McCartney](#) (United Kingdom) and [Christa Hämmerle](#) (Germany and Austria) have documented the detailed correspondence that moved between soldiers and their friends and families, demonstrating the joy that each got in hearing about their loved ones' daily interactions and activities but also the conflict and misunderstandings that absence could create.<sup>[8]</sup> Despite tension, descriptions of the mundane forged connections that made the distances, both physical and emotional, seem less insurmountable.

For those without extensive families in certain countries, letters arrived from adopted "godmothers," known as [marraines de guerre](#). This formal arrangement between women at the home front and soldiers at the front was peculiarly French, although more informal or small-scale versions of organized letter-writing to adopted soldiers developed in other areas later in the war (in Germany, United States, etc.). The *marraines*, as [Margaret Darrow](#) argues, wrote to soldiers without family or those who were cut off from their families in occupied zones, and these godmothers of war saw this work as a Christian service and wartime mission. Godmothers not only reminded soldiers of what they were fighting for, but they provided a link to the everyday lives these men had left.<sup>[9]</sup>

Prisoners of war also craved long detailed letters about home life, and many chided relatives who did not keep up a frequent correspondence. [Henri Pirenne \(1862-1935\)](#), a middle-class Belgian history professor interned in Germany for opposing the [occupying regime](#), worried in his journal when letters from his wife did not arrive. He documented letters and postcards obsessively in the journal, often editorializing about what might have held up the post. When packages or letters did arrive for him, he was overjoyed, as on Monday, 3 April 1916, when he confided to his war diary: "I received from Jenny a large package...she has not forgotten me!" Not only was he glad to see this "touching" sign of his spouse's love, but the everyday, personal items she included made him feel at ease in the foreign world of a prison camp. He outlined the contents: "I found, along with food, linen, tobacco, my pipe, my work glasses (pince-nez) ..." With these signs of home and a photo of his wife now on his bedside table, his spirits lifted.<sup>[10]</sup>

In some cases, those separated from their homes attempted to recreate their prewar lives and surroundings. Alon Rachamimov's study of [Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war in Russia](#) demonstrates the multitude of ways that soldiers and officers tried to find normalcy in their daily lives, whether they were sent to do agricultural work or confined to military prisoner of war camps.<sup>[11]</sup> At [Ruhleben](#), a Berlin racetrack turned internment camp for mostly British civilians, the inmates created a whole street of shops named "Bond Street" around a muddy square they called Trafalgar. Here, printers, dentists, and other tradespeople worked to create a marketplace for the camp. Posters announced camp elections for local offices, upcoming theatrical and musical productions, and sporting events. For internees, having a sense of a community evoked the everyday and helped stave off the sense of isolation and restriction that inevitably marked their lives. At prison camps around the world, inmates sought to re-create the lives they had lost in order to regain their pre-war status or comfort in whatever way possible.<sup>[12]</sup>

For soldiers, the everyday comforts of home could provide a sense of connectedness that saw them through the boredom and the danger of life at the front. The letters of men from the 13<sup>th</sup> Australian Field Ambulance to entertainer Rita Squire demonstrate well the importance of emotional connections to home in fostering well-being. F. R. Foster penned a note to Squire in July 1918 asking for signed photographs for the men in the unit. He explained:

We have a number of your records out in our unit & we all know you well by voice & as your voice has been greatly admired by all the officers of our division, especially when you sing every evening at dinner for us.

Squire evidently complied with the request, because the unit's officers wrote a month later thanking her for the photos. Another member of the unit wrote again in September:

You have, as usual, risen to the occasion, and have just been soothing our troubled spirits by a couple of delightful songs. Our one trouble with regard to your songs is that so few of them seem to be obtainable on gramophone records, and this unfortunately is the only means we have, under existing circumstances, of hearing your voice.<sup>[13]</sup>

These letters beautifully evoke an image of the unit sitting around the gramophone after dinner imagining home and the woman behind the voice. It could be a scene in many households, an everyday pleasure of music and companionship, thus functioning in opposition to the wartime scenes surrounding them.

Organizations around the world sent packages to soldiers and prisoners with everything from food to reading material to clothing. For those preparing the packages, the assembly of ordinary items into a package showed love, care, and commitment, but it could also give these civilians a sense of service in the cause. The packages themselves provided necessities of everyday life, often suited to particular groups or climates. For instance, the Indian Soldiers' Fund sent items to soldiers and laborers in France, Palestine, Mesopotamia, [East Africa](#), and other theaters of war. Comforts included hair oil, pencils, matches, condensed milk, cigarettes, and gramophones. Soldiers wrote to the Fund to thank their benefactors for particular items; one Labour company showed special appreciation in May 1918 for "before all the Hockey Sticks and balls" which "have been most thoroughly appreciated and have given real pleasure."<sup>[14]</sup>

Other groups, including many religious groups and social clubs, targeted the dispossessed for help with the everyday necessities of life. For example, the Society of Friends (Quakers), a pacifist organization primarily located in the United Kingdom and the United States, developed multiple missions in Europe to help those displaced by war. Some of the Friends worked in devastated regions of France to help rebuild villages, build furniture, and clothe/house refugees. Others paired with counterparts in enemy countries to relieve the distress of "alien" women and children stranded behind enemy lines, and English Quakers developed *Liebesgaben* (love gifts) as small comforts packets for victims of war in enemy countries. In one such arrangement, [Elisabeth Rotten \(1882-1964\)](#) worked in Germany with British women whose husbands had been interned, while her counterpart in [Britain](#) helped German women in similar situations.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Food and Shelter

There is little more important to daily life than food and shelter, and war only made these necessities more central to everyday activity. Long-held routines of food preparation fell apart with shortages in basic necessities, and by the end of the war, most of the belligerents had intervened to a greater or lesser degree in the lives of citizens to meet the voracious needs of the wartime state. Officials sought to rationalize foodstuffs, heat, clothing, conservation, and energy use, and they relied on both [propaganda](#) and legislation to meet these goals. Sometimes this intervention had tragic costs, as in Nyasaland, where the British occupying army requisitioned rice and cattle, creating famine conditions for civilians in the area.<sup>[16]</sup> In fact the needs of daily life for those in occupied or combat zones often were reshaped by the wartime requirements - billeting, requisitions, and restrictions on movements meant changed routines and disrupted livelihoods. This was particularly true for refugees, who lost homes, jobs, and familiarity when they fled the violence of war.

[Rationing](#) and food-related propaganda featured in the war programs of virtually every belligerent nation. Civilian and military officials worried about harvests, shipping, food distribution, shortages, and prices, and whole government departments arose to manage the food politics of the war. Rationing, when managed well, could ease tensions, but many states had trouble creating effective flows of supplies while keeping prices under control. Food riots were not uncommon occurrences in major [urban centers](#), and strikes over food became particularly acute as the war entered its third and fourth years. Vienna, Paris, Berlin and Turin, for example, all experienced demonstrations, while in Russia, food scarcity contributed to the revolutionary atmosphere in the streets.

Urban, working-class women proved particularly important in the food battles of the wartime years. As the main breadwinners during the war and as those responsible for waiting in queues, doing without basic necessities, and stretching budgets to make

ends meet, women lost patience with inefficiencies of state rationing and price controls. For those living behind the [Allied blockade](#), especially in German and Austrian cities, shortages became acute by the end of the war, sparking multiple demonstrations, attacks on shops, and protests of all kinds.<sup>[17]</sup> Russia, too, experienced a breakdown of the social fabric with the mounting losses of wartime and the poor management of the economy, and working-class female consumers particularly played a role in the emerging street unrest that framed the revolutionary upheaval of 1917.<sup>[18]</sup>

In addition to feeding their own citizens, some countries also contributed to upkeep of victims of war through humanitarian aid organizations. The [International Red Cross](#) and national governments shipped packages to prisoners of war with basic foodstuffs and clothing, while local communities and religious organizations organized food and clothing drives. One such organized aid organization was the [Commission for Relief in Belgium](#), a project to relieve food shortages in [Belgium](#) using personnel from [neutral](#) nations such as the United States (until 1917), [the Netherlands](#), and [Spain](#). Food and clothing aid took many forms during the war and helped ease the disruption of everyday life for some war victims.

Obtaining food, especially in countries experiencing the Allied blockade, became an all-consuming task as the war proceeded. [Caroline Ethel Cooper \(1871-1961\)](#), living in Leipzig during the war, confided to her sister in a 1917 letter:

It is no exaggeration to say that the whole day goes in the search for what is necessary to live on just for that day. You have literally to go three times for every article of food. On a certain day, for instance, your egg, or ounce of butter, or 1/3 lb of meat for the week has to be ordered by taking your card and having it stamped. Then on the next day you have to go and get that egg or whatever it is, and then you are inevitably told that they are not yet delivered, and that you must come again at 6 or whenever the time may be!<sup>[19]</sup>

In [occupied zones](#), scarcity was particularly acute when large numbers of forces were billeted in towns and villages. In her diary of life in wartime Ghent, Belgian writer [Virginie Loveling \(1836-1923\)](#) chronicles the frustrations of fluctuating prices, shortages of food and fuel, and the hassles of billeting soldiers. In August 1916, she complained about the quality of the bread, formerly a staple of her diet:

The bread is so brittle, that it falls into pieces on the board. The best slices are eaten with a spoon, otherwise one must pick them up between thumb and fingers, piece by piece, just like a bird with its beak.<sup>[20]</sup>

Another woman living in [Brussels](#) wrote of similar problems with basic necessities, noting in the summer of 1916: "It is incredible to see how thin so many people are getting...I have lost 10 kilos ½ in weight since the end of 1915..."<sup>[21]</sup>

Other war zones suffered not only the loss of their everyday lives during war, but they faced continuing deprivation as civil war and wartime damage continued to devastate their livelihoods and threaten their lives. In [Poland](#), American [Chauncey McCormick \(1884-1954\)](#) described conditions he found in January 1919 as conflict continued with [Polish-Soviet war](#) of 1919-1921:

With the aid of an armoured train I got into [Lwow](#) (Lemberg or Leopold) with a carload of condensed milk. The children are literally dying and the town is under constant bombardment. School boys and women are armed and defending the city. It is quite the most awful sight I ever saw.<sup>[22]</sup>

Other observers in Poland, Lithuania, [Serbia](#), [Italy](#) and other zones of conflict describe the attempts of ordinary people to continue with their everyday lives in the midst of bombed-out homes, food shortages, vicious cold, and violence. In fact, the disruption of everyday life continued long into the "peace" in some countries. A January 1920 report from [Austria](#) describes food queues reminiscent of wartime:

The women coming for food to our depots are marvelously patient and would wait for hours without a murmur. But when one knows that they spend half their days standing in queues, coals queues, food queues, soup-kitchen queues, one does not wish to keep them a minute longer than is necessary.<sup>[23]</sup>

Food and shelter also became everyday concerns for the men at the fronts. Virgilio Bonamore, an Italian soldier fighting in the [Julian Alps](#), describes his preoccupation with life's necessities in July 1915:

Today I was a laundryman, a cobbler and a tailor. Now my things are all in order. In the evening we were finally given some hot food, pasta in soup, fairly good. It's incredible how important food is here, it's the main topic of conversation.<sup>[24]</sup>

Many men decried the poor food and shelter of the trenches on the [Western Front](#), while others described the experience as a prolonged camping trip. Location mattered, as did the local arrangements for shelter and provisions, and at various points in the war demands for more concern about soldiers' everyday needs arose. In armies that did a poor job of caring for the wellbeing of soldiers, desertion rates were high. [Erik Jan Zürcher's](#) work, for example, demonstrates that the Ottoman army's poor nutrition, sanitation and equipment (especially footwear) led to terrible conditions for soldiers and led to a loss of nearly 500,000 men to desertion by war's end.<sup>[25]</sup>

Perhaps the place where food security mattered the most to everyday life was in prisoner of war camps, both military and civilian, during the war. At the mercy of local guards, civilian and military prisoners had little control over the very basic needs they might have – beds, food, clothing, bathing, water. Camp conditions varied greatly over the course of the war and from site to site and by nation, military rank and social class, but in places where prisoner care was poor, daily life could be a misery. Ukrainian civilian internees in western [Canada](#) found themselves living in inadequate tents in winter, hiking miles to a work site in snow, while internees from the [SMS Emden](#) found themselves living a privileged life in Berrima, [Australia](#). However, even in areas where conditions were more favorable, the strain of living in confinement led to riots over food and housing.<sup>[26]</sup>

## Managing Fear

If food and housing were important matters to those caught up in war, another everyday occurrence was learning to live with fear. For many, the fear was a personal one – "will I live or die?" For others, fear was a nagging worry about a loved one far away or a vague threat of an attack close to home. Such concerns led to a renegotiation of daily routines, with the need for news being paramount. Fear led to shifts in religious practice, daily rituals, and family life. In some cases, those involved in war lost faith in God and lost trust in their political and community leaders. War dissolved social and community ties, and it disrupted family life in unprecedented ways.

Because of the new threat of air raids in World War I, nations policed cities to protect them from the threat of death from the air. In London, tunnels became air raid shelters, windows were blacked out, and civilians were asked to memorize charts showing aircraft, so they could identify enemy planes. Mrs. E. Fernside described in a letter the effect of such aerial terror on life in the city:

(30 January 1917) Fritz served old "John Bull" a dirty trick. His place in Longacre had an aerial torpedo & 2 bombs on it, the heavy printing machinery was loosened from the walls & fell into the basement (a raid shelter) & we are wondering where his next number will be published & what sort of a head line we shall get after that...Vauxhall Gas works & places surrounding were badly hit. Many houses had neither gas nor water yesterday, & Camden Town also had a doing...They have done in the Star & Garter Hotel in Kew (that one at the foot of Kew Bridge) & the damage is around Chiswick & that way. Shall have to go to Gunnersbury this afternoon, as I expect grandmother will feel a bit shaky.<sup>[27]</sup>

As air raids demonstrate, even those far from the battlefields could experience the dislocations and shortages of war as disruptions of everyday life. In South American port cities, Britain and Germany's trade wars left families unemployed and sometimes led to violence against people and property. German immigrants in countries such as [Argentina](#), [Chile](#), [Guatemala](#), and [Brazil](#), [German immigrants](#) faced restriction of their livelihoods through blacklists established by Allied governments and destruction of their educational and cultural institutions. Likewise, in the United States, state governments abolished German-language teaching in large parts of the country. For minorities, [enemy aliens](#), or recent immigrants, war spelled a new everyday reality for them that marked them as outsiders and sometimes as dangers to the communities. The institutions that had hitherto provided a sense of belonging and safety became taboo in a transformed wartime climate of fear and suspicion of foreigners.

For inhabitants of combat and occupation zones, fear could become an integral part of daily life. [Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau](#) and [Annette Becker](#) document the terror of deportation, [atrocities](#) by invading armies, and deliberate campaigns of terror in their work *14-18: Understanding the Great War*. They quote [Claude Debussy's](#) (1862-1918) ditty, set to music:

We no longer have a house,

The enemies took everything, everything, down to our little bed,

They burned the school and Monsieur Jesus-Christ



And the poor old man who couldn't get a way...

Of course, daddy is at war, poor mother is dead, and they didn't have to see all this...<sup>[28]</sup>

Audoine-Rouzeau and Becker argue that the violence of war is not confined to war, but instead it shapes the post-war everyday realities of life for former soldiers and for the civilians who suffered pain, [bereavement](#), and separation. The brutal nature of wartime violence, they claim, became "lodged at the heart of Western society."<sup>[29]</sup> This culture of violence created the violence of the [Freikorps](#) in Eastern Europe and set the stage for [fascist](#) thugs in Europe, but more importantly, it reshaped households and nations around the world.

Even without the lingering terrors of war and loss, the [influenza epidemic](#) would have been a major trauma for families, but as an ending to the war, flu added to the misery. John Berry, in his book on this modern plague, estimates that approximately 5 percent of the world's population perished from flu in a two-year period.<sup>[30]</sup> Added to wartime deaths and influenza were outbreaks of typhus, cholera, and tuberculosis in areas that had been devastated by war, such as Austria and Serbia. In the decade following the war, famine also struck in areas such as [Persia](#) and the Soviet Union. All this led to a post-war world that approached the idea of everyday normalcy in a much different way.

## Camaraderie

One way that civilians and soldiers alike sought to cope with fear and the tedium of a long war was through the companionship of other like-minded people. Emotional bonds are important for humans to maintain if they are to have a sense of safety in the midst of chaos, and many organizations developed to create bonds of emotion and intellect in wartime. Because of the organization of war, social networks developed among soldiers at the fronts, and camaraderie is an important reason men chose to continue as soldiers.<sup>[31]</sup> In memoirs and letters, men describe their obligations to other men, and they develop close emotional attachments to the other soldiers in their units. Such attachments continued into the post-war world, with the developed of veterans' organizations to foster those ties and commitments.

Trench newspapers and magazines filled a certain need, too, for news, gossip and insider humor at the front. Likewise, underground postal services and newspapers strengthened resistance and provided information to occupied populations, despite the danger. At home, newsreels, radio, newspapers, and letters became vital lifelines during the war, providing real information about loved ones but also an imaginative connection between home and front. Even in prison camps, inmates developed newspapers to entertain themselves and create bonds within this accidental society. In addition to printed and oral news, gossip and rumor tied people together in wartime. When information was such an important part of personal safety at the front or in a prison camp, rumors could be life-saving. Knowing the inside gossip fostered a sense of belonging as well.

A multitude of organizations developed at home fronts that were designed to harness the energy and fears of the local population. Civilians joined charities to provide goods for soldiers and prisoners, for feeding and housing refugee populations, and for caring for the victims of war at home. From national [Red Cross](#) groups to international food aid charities, people lined up to volunteer their time and to interact with others in service. For women, the sense of purpose that war work provided them could be exciting and fulfilling, and it could take their minds off the absence of their loved ones. In Richmond, Virginia, women war workers banded together to try to create a Service Legion for civilians that would parallel the newly emergent veterans organizations for men. Women sent in detailed descriptions of their war service in order to gain membership and legitimacy.<sup>[32]</sup>

Perhaps nowhere were the distractions of group organization more important than in internment and prisoner of war camps, where inactivity and isolation could be dangerous. In the camps of World War I, camaraderie provided an antidote to depression and boredom, but it also created alliances within the prison societies that evolved. Historian Henri Pirenne, interned first as a civilian in a military officers' camp and then in the Holzminden civilian internment camp, found a joy in offering university classes for his fellow inmates and in taking language classes from a Russian prisoner in the camp.<sup>[33]</sup> Other military and civilian prisoners joined theatrical societies, debating clubs, sports teams, and other leisure-oriented organizations. At prison camps around the world, the trappings of everyday life reappeared.

## Conclusion

Everyday life goes on, even in the midst of madness, and humans sought ways to cling to the ordinary pleasures of daily existence even as the extraordinary events of war intervened. Photos from the period often show juxtapositions that illustrate this contradiction between the odd circumstance of war and the ordinary lives of those caught up in it. An American soldier doing his laundry next to a French washerwoman or a mother holding a baby, who in turn clasps a piece of ammunition - war creates these moments of ordinariness in the midst of chaos.

The bigger question this essay raises is how the war generation translated and adjusted their war routines to peacetime. What does the new post-war "everyday" life look like? For many, waiting is again a feature of post-war life as demobilization proceeds at a snail's pace for many soldiers and prisoners of war were not immediately released. Others face dislocation, stress, unemployment, and physical or emotional ill health. In wartime, people tried to build a new everyday mentality in order to cope with war, but after the conflict ends, the easy normalcy that many expected never materialized.

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## Notes

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11. ↑ See, in particular, Rachamimov, Alon: *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front*, Oxford 2002.
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