

Jennifer Redmann

Girls Reading the Great War

German and Anglo-American Literature for Young Women,
1914 – 1920

Introduction

World War I ushered in a new form of industrialized warfare, one that erased distinctions between military and civilian spheres and transformed the homefront into a secondary battleground. As a result, World War I has been described as a “total war” in that it, as historian Roger Chickering writes, “encompassed the lives of every man, woman, and child in the belligerent states” (2007, 1). Even popular novels for teenaged girls in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States integrated wartime events into previously apolitical plots. By presenting young female readers with positive examples of fictional wartime girls ready to “do their bit” on behalf of their respective nations, this literature served as an instrument in the “mobilization of morale” (Chickering 2004, 46). In these books, for example, German girls “eagerly take up their knitting needles as weapons like never before” (Albert 1915, 69),¹ while British girls, “[l]ike the other soldiers of the Empire” (Marchant 1919, 101), step forward to work in munition factories or on the front lines as nurses. One American girls’ novel, Edna Brooks’ *The Khaki Girls of the Motor Corps* (1918), opens with a scene in which the protagonist plays the following song for her father in an effort to gain his permission to go abroad as an ambulance driver:

My heart is with our Allies
Fighting Huns in far off France,
And I’d surely join the Sammies
If I only had a chance;
Though I’m just one little home girl
Count me loyal to the core;
And watch me do my biggest bit
To help win the war. (9)

Beginning in 1914, this focus on war in the lives of fictional young women marked a shift in the well-established genre of popular novels for girls. The “girl” – both as reader and fictional character – is a figure on the threshold:

1 All translations from German into English are my own unless otherwise stated.