An Exhibition to Commemorate the 90th Anniversary of the World War I Armistice

At the outbreak of hostilities in Europe on August 4, 1914, public opinion about America’s possible involvement was sharply divided. While members of the intellectual elite along the East Coast supported the English, many Americans initially were not anti-German, for at the time approximately 40 percent of the American population was of German descent. Many Americans had immigrated only 30 to 40 years before and still had ties to Germany. With time, however, an aggressive and effective campaign of anti-German propaganda turned the cultured German into the barbaric, rapacious Hun. Once war had been declared against Germany (April 6, 1917), voices advocating moderation were accused of being seditious and were silenced.

Against this backdrop, thousands of pieces of sheet music came on the market. The great majority was produced in New York City in the area known as Tin Pan Alley, and at five cents apiece, they were affordable for the masses. While sometimes reflecting public opinion and at other times influencing it, these song sheets serve as examples of the fundamental shift in public opinion from the outbreak of the war to the return of the victorious veterans. Whereas pacifist songs and songs stressing moderation were common before 1917, these disappeared completely once America was in the war. The American authorities recognized the propagandist potential of songs, but Tin Pan Alley needed little encouragement to produce patriotic material. Song after song appeared that emphasized what the Americans were fighting for: mother, family, home, Old Glory, liberty, democracy, etc. They avoided realistic descriptions of the carnage on the Western Front, and as instruments of entertainment, they rejected virulent anti-German attacks, yet they contributed significantly to solidifying public opinion in favor of the “war to end war.”