"Knit a Bit for Our First Line of Defense": Emotional Labor, Knitters, and Comforts for Soldiers during the First World War

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"Knit a Bit for Our First Line of Defense":
Emotional Labor, Knitters, and Comforts for Soldiers during the First World War

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Abstract
During the First World War, American women were encouraged to support national defense by conserving food, sewing clothes for refugees, and knitting comforts for servicemen sent abroad to fight. Groups like the Navy League and the Red Cross promoted knitting for the troops as a necessity for the security of the home front, and for the comfort of servicemen abroad. By the end of the war, knitters had hand-knit millions of garments to send to servicemen, an act of compliance that supported an overseas war--one that had aroused bitter resistance only a few years before.

Defense knitters knit in private, in semi-public spaces, and in very public spaces. The half finished garments traveled with the knitter as she visited friends and Red Cross work rooms. Once completed they traveled across the ocean to clothe servicemen fighting on ships and in the trenches. The creation of these garments required the physical and emotional labor of the maker and the coordination of charitable organizations, yarn producers, and publishers. Knitters had to acquire specific materials, follow a written pattern exactly, and then return the finish garments to an organization like the Red Cross. The investment of time, money, and materials was substantial, and wool rationing and labor concerns at times made knitting controversial.

Through images of war posters, knitting patterns, and magazine covers, this poster presentation will discuss the importance of the physical and emotional labor of knitting for servicemen, and the role of women in the effort for national defense. As these garments traveled from the states to the trenches, the emotional labor invested into each stitch by anxious knitters hoping to “do their bit” was a personal symbol of the national defense program, and a way to remind servicemen abroad that they were remembered.

Link to hosted version of interactive digital poster (including hyperlinks to references):
https://indd.adobe.com/view/b12eb7f4-1daf-4913-a3e2-eb7249e0f039

Works Cited
Selected Bibliography


MacDonald, Anne L. No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting. New York, New


Images:


Other Primary Sources


This illustration entitled, “The New American Industry,” by cartoonist Clifford Berryman, which appeared in the Washington Evening Star on November 27, 1914, defines making clothing to supply the need for those in the war zones of Europe as “The New American Industry.” https://research.archives.gov/id/6011088
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"Knit a Bit for Our First Line of Defense"

American Red Cross

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Estimated cost of yarn for a "full kit of knitted goods" for each sailor

17¢-32¢

Average hourly wage for hand sewers in the men's clothing industry between 1914-1919

$0.21 to $0.32

Value of each hour of hand knitting, as determined by the Red Cross

15¢

Number of finished articles completed for servicemen by American Red Cross Volunteers

14,782

Estimated value of Red Cross donations calculated using the estimated hourly wage and cost of materials

$41,858,274.72

The Work of The American Red Cross During The War: A Statement of Finances and Accomplishments For The Period July 1, 1917, to February 28, 1919

* signifies an estimated figure

As these garments traveled from the states to the trenches, the emotional labor supported soldiers and sailors sent abroad. The work of women's hands and the comfort they provided was deeply meaningful to those being sent abroad.

Women's Home Companion, The Modern Priscilla, Woman's Home Companion, and the Comforts Committee, as well as large department stores and yarn manufacturers, published knitting patterns. Magazines like The Christian Century, and the Comforts Committee, as well as large department stores and yarn manufacturers, published knitting patterns. Magazines like The Christian Century, the Woman's Home Companion, and even at church, one sees the deft, swift gestures of allegiance." —Edward Scribner Ames, "In addition to the practical value of knitting, there is its very great symbolic value. There are no better advertisements of our national defense than the hands that knit for the Army and the Navy."

Knitting for Victory, rebeccakeyel.com

The pamphlet on the left was published by the A. G. Pollard de-partment store, and is only one example of the array of knitting pamphlets and books published between 1914 and 1918 to support American servicemen. Even though these patterns were published in many sources, they were for the same handful of garments, including the sleeveless sweater on the right. Patterns were expected to follow detailed directions to make their garments. Manufacturers specified navy, khaki, or gray yarn, depending on availability and service branch, and recom-mended different needle sizes depending on the manufacturer. Despite these differences, sweat-er designs provided this service until September 1917, when a feud between the Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels and the Red Cross executive director, Mrs. Josephus Daniels, caused the Red Cross to discontinue taking orders for war knitting. Standardized materials allowed the Red Cross to provide uniformly made garments to servicemen.

The Navy League’s publication "What Volunteers Can Do for the United States Navy" listed only one thing that women could do for sailors: knit. The pamphlet asked women to knit garments for men "engaged in exposed work" like mine laying and submarine service. The pamphlet also listed how many items were needed per sailor. "The Navy League will forward to the Comforts Committee the number of knitted garments that are required, and the Comforts Committee will forward to the Red Cross the number of knitted garments that are actually being made."

The Comforts Committee of the Navy League was the channel for donations to the Red Cross, and the Red Cross valued this labor highly, without it they could not provide the material items that went to soldiers and sailors on the home front. The Comforts Committee, and the American Red Cross, were an integral part of the war effort, providing material and emotional support to American soldiers and sailors.

The Red Cross chapters organized Work Rooms, staffed by volunteers, and provided a list of six much needed garments. The volunteers would knit the garments, sew them together, and prepare them for shipment. They also provided bandages, hospital garments, and comfort kits. The Red Cross valued this labor highly, without it they could not provide the material items that went to soldiers and sailors on the home front.

Garments were produced at the local level by Red Cross chapters, and then sent to the National Headquarters for distribution. The Comforts Committee then made the decision of which items to ship, and the Red Cross volunteered and provided a list of six much needed garments. The volunteers would knit the garments, sew them together, and prepare them for shipment. They also provided bandages, hospital garments, and comfort kits. The Red Cross valued this labor highly, without it they could not provide the material items that went to soldiers and sailors on the home front.

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Knitting Production by the Numbers

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