

# Women's Voluntary Organizations in World War I

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The outpouring of voluntary service by Britain's women during World War I was extraordinary, especially when seen from the vantage point of the contemporary western world in which we leave the particulars of war to the paid professionals. Our militaries have developed their capabilities to the point where volunteer help is rarely, if ever, needed. In contrast to our own contemporary situation, the flood of volunteers in 1914 to help with the war effort was immediate and necessary. Just hours after the official war declaration, social and civic organizations all across the land offered to help. Within days, dozens of new organizations appeared to fill the many gaps in the mobilization process. The Women at Work Collection in the Imperial War Museum offers researchers an abundance of materials on women's volunteer organizations and philanthropic activities during the war. While the sections on Belgium (1-16) and Benevolent Organisations (1-8) contain the most concentrated collection of materials, other relevant documents are scattered throughout. One might also wish to explore the materials relating to women's voluntary medical service in the sections on the British Red Cross (1-27), their efforts to maintain a healthy and well-fed home front in the section on Food (1-6), Land (1-9) and Local Records (1-460), as well as their voluntary military service, chronicled in the section on Munitions (I-VII).

The very act of preserving documents for the Women at Work Collection is evidence of the critical role of women's voluntarism during World War I. At the beginning of the war, with little government recognition of their potential for service, women enjoyed unprecedented freedom and scope for organizing. The ad hoc nature of most women's voluntary efforts is striking; women simply responded, out of a sense of duty to their country and communities, in the ways they were able, utilizing the skills they had acquired in peacetime, such as raising money, running charities, knitting, sewing, gardening, cooking. Gradually, as the contributions of these groups became essential, the government began to coordinate and regulate their efforts.

The mobilization of volunteers in Britain benefited from a pre-war membership boom in women's social, service and political organizations, which provided what sociologists today call the "social capital" necessary for winning war. Prior to the war, women donated their time and connected with their communities through their parish organizations, the Mother's Union, the Queen Mary's Needlework Guild, or one of the hundreds of other service organizations staffed and run by women. Thousands of girls and young women belonged to the Girl Guides, Girls' Friendly Society, and the YWCA, which imbued them with leadership skills, civic consciousness, and a commitment to service.

In addition, tens of thousands of members of the women's suffrage societies had developed during their years of campaigning a finely tuned sense of their place within the nation. For these women, the step to war service was relatively easy.

Scholars have focused less attention on women's voluntarism during World War I than they have on women's entrance into waged work, even though voluntary service was the main way (aside from sacrificing husbands and sons) in which middle and upper-class women contributed to the war effort. [Braybon, Grayzel, Gullace, Marwick, Wilson] Historians still debate the significance of women's voluntarism to the progress of women's emancipation from restricted Victorian roles. Some historians view women's service sceptically, pointing to their knitting and sewing as simply an extension of their traditionally subservient roles. Others argue that the leadership and ingenuity demonstrated by volunteers was personally liberating and contributed to women's newly recognized status within the nation at the war's end. Leaders of the women's movement at the time were certainly eager to connect women's war service with their emancipation. At the first outbreak of hostilities, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, President of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, urged suffragists to find positions of service in order to "Let us prove ourselves worthy of citizenship." Historians will certainly continue to debate the ways in which women's wartime voluntarism and philanthropy transformed or re-inscribed women's expected roles and behaviours. However, the importance of voluntary service to Britain's victory in 1918, as well as its personal significance to Britain's women, is plainly evident from this collection.

In September 1915, thousands of voluntary associations were drawn together under the office of the Director General of Voluntary Organizations (DGVO), which provided coordination and guidelines to local groups. Exact instructions were provided, for example, to the nearly 100 branches of the Queen Mary's Needlework Guild for knitting socks and sewing nightshirts according to military standards (supposedly bringing an end to mismatched regiments.) [[Benevolent Organisations, 2.2](#)] As each organization was officially recognized, they were invited to submit documents to the Imperial War Museum for the sake of later researchers. A year after the establishment of the DGVO, further regulation became necessary when scam artists and swindlers began to prey upon the generosity of Britons. After August 1916, all charities engaged in war fund-raising (with the exception of religious institutions taking collections during regular services) had to register under the War Charities Act. The result for researchers is a marvellously detailed list by region and town of all organizations in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales that applied for a license. ([Benevolent Organisations, 1/1](#))

Women's voluntary organizations met needs both at home and at the war front. Medical supplies were a top priority. Prior to August 1914, the government had made few plans for supplying hospitals with basic necessities and providing comforts to soldiers. The Regimental Association, British Red Cross and Order of St. John performed some of these services but were soon overwhelmed by the level of

need. The section on “Benevolent Organisations” provides a wealth of information about the voluntary organizations that sprang up or retooled to meet these needs. Women were the main volunteers in hundreds of supply depots, which served as collection and distribution centres for donations of clothes, bandages, medicines and other comforts. Each regiment – from the Welsh Troops to the Royal Scottish Fusiliers – had its own fundraising association, staffed predominantly by women. Colonial troops were not neglected either. Even British women living as far away as Peru, Chile and Mexico sent donations gathered from their communities abroad. [[Benevolent Organisations, 2/14](#)] Adventurous women could travel to the frontlines to distribute the donations. On behalf of Lady Hamilton’s Dardanelles Fund, for example, Mrs Vans Agnew and Miss Phyllis Keyes opened a depot at Mudros on the Island of Lemnos in September 1915, remaining through December when the island was evacuated. They distributed cigarettes, towels, handkerchiefs, soap, stationery and candles, in addition to basic food and clothing [[Benevolent Organisations, 2/12](#)]

Whole towns mobilized to support their local regiments and area hospitals. The section on “Local Records” reveals with great detail the contributions made by thousands of women from communities large and small. In the tiny but prosperous Cheshire town of Alderley Edge, for example, women quickly organized new groups like the Surgical Requisite Guild [[Local records 10/5](#)] which began to raise money and sew items necessary for soldiers in hospital. Like volunteer groups elsewhere, the Alderley Edge women formed unexpected partnerships, teaming up with the boys at the nearby Royal School for Deaf and Dumb to supply more than 90 hospitals with splints. And elsewhere in the town of Alderley Edge, Girl Guides ran a laundry and raised vegetables for the local Red Cross hospital. Women’s ingenuity and initiative are abundantly evident in these records.

Through their volunteerism and philanthropy, women attempted to bring colour and comfort to the grim reality of soldiers’ lives. Volunteers for Lady Smith-Dorrien’s Hospital Bag Fund, sewed between 40,000 and 60,000 small, colourful bags a month to hold the valuables of wounded soldiers while they were in hospital. [[Benevolent Organisations, 2/19/36](#)] Board members of the Princess Mary’s Soldiers and Sailors Christmas Fund, including the Duke of Devonshire and numerous titled women, donated great sums of money and deliberated for weeks over the choice of Christmas gifts to send to all men in active service, including Britain’s colonial troops. [[Benevolent Organisations, 2/1/7](#)] Funds were raised to send books and newspapers to Australian, Indian and Canadian troops stationed overseas. Even such organizations as the Ladies Alpine Club, which before the war was a social club for women mountaineers, undertook war service. [[Benevolent Organisations, 2/21/5](#)] Mrs Aubrey Le Blond, perhaps its most celebrated member, volunteered as an orderly in Dieppe and raised money for an “Alpine Motor Kitchen” to serve meals on wheels to soldiers stationed in the Vosges. Those on the home front whose livelihoods and living situations had been affected by the war were also the recipients of women’s aid work. The Plum Pudding Fund in Aberdeen was just one of many

organizations that distributed food, clothing and gifts to the families of soldiers and sailors, as well as to women displaced from their homes by wartime service.

One of the most pressing issues in the early months of the war was the housing and feeding of more than 200,000 Belgian refugees displaced by the German invasion of their country. The section on “Belgium” [[Belgium, 1-16](#)] documents Britons’ voluntary responses, both large and small. In mid-August 1914, two eminent women – Lady Lugard and the Hon. Mrs Alfred Lyttelton – helped to form the War Refugees Committee (WRC) based in Aldwych, London, to co-ordinate the relief efforts. Thousands of individual volunteers, as well as numerous private organizations, lent time, space and money. Even organizations as disparate as the Women’s Tariff Reform League and the Ladies Automobile Club offered to help. While the Local Government Boards later assumed much of the work of coordination, Lady Lugard continued to donate her time to the Belgian Hospitality Committee, which met 6 days a week throughout 1915 and 1916 to distribute financial relief to thousands of individual refugees. [[Belgium 3/12](#)]

Hundreds of communities across Britain established committees or funds to address the refugee problem. Records from individual municipalities, like the city of Folkestone in the south of England, provide a glimpse of the scope of the effort. [[Belgium 1/5/2](#)] Swamped with refugees first, and then later with wounded soldiers, volunteers put in 14 hours per day, seven days a week, providing beds and meals for the needy. Local branches of the Salvation Army, Friends’ Meeting House, and a local Catholic mission, pitched in to provide beds for nearly 9,000 refugees and serve almost 71,000 meals in the six-week period between December 20, 1914, and February 6, 1915. Local branches of other organizations, such as the Girls Friendly Society, helped by raising vegetables and providing wholesome activities for young refugee women. By the war’s end, this small city had served 500,000 meals to 120,000 Belgian refugees and 420,000 wounded soldiers. The collection’s materials reveal similar efforts in many other municipalities, from Bristol to Ely, Falmouth to Glasgow. Letters, organizational records, news clippings, and other official documents reveal this often-neglected story of World War I.

The unity of community efforts during this crisis is indeed remarkable, but researchers will also notice the persistence of old class, religious and ethnic prejudices at work in these documents. Canteens and kitchens served different menus to wounded soldiers and refugees of different class backgrounds. Indian troops were deemed less likely to appreciate certain Christmas gifts and were given a paired-down version of the packages distributed to British troops by Princess Mary’s Christmas Fund. Yet, despite the continuation of social differentiation, World War I is often characterized as a turning point in class relations and a catalyst to the decline of aristocratic privilege. With its focus on women, this collection offers a unique insight on this process. Upper-class women, for example, took a front-line

role in the organization of war relief. Examples abound of aristocratic women who turned their social position and wealth toward war service. The Duchesses of Westminster and Sutherland set up hospitals abroad, and Lady Hamilton (wife of General Sir Ian Hamilton, Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean) coordinated specific funds and relief efforts in support of her husbands' troops (in her case, the Dardanelles Fund) [[Benevolent Organisations 2.12/3](#)]. Analysis of these women's war service and its reception will help illuminate the social changes emanating from the war.

Finally, while the collection is heavily focused on organizational records, numerous stories of individual women also emerge. Diaries, memoirs, speeches and news clippings help to reconstruct biographical portraits of forgotten heroes. Moved by the sight of refugee children at Tilbury Docks, for example, Mrs. J. S. (Alexander) Henry of Gravesend distributed 1,000 scones per day for the first 18 months of the war, along with hot chocolate, coffee, clothes and blankets. Sometimes she invited into her home the most destitute refugee families. Widely recognized by local authorities, her work was later assumed by the YWCA. [[Belgium. 1/9/3](#)]

The overwhelming response of Britain's voluntary organizations proved critical to the war effort, since despite years of planning, the British Army was quite unprepared for the strain on resources that quickly ensued in 1914. Britain's wars in the prior half-century had been relatively short in duration and contained in scope, but, in stark contrast, the swiftness of mobilization and the brutality of tactics in August 1914 required new responses. At a time when government resources were fewer than they are today, Britain relied on its civilians as much as its soldiers to win the first "total war" in history.

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