Dwight Macdonald's Unlikely Dialogue: Soldiers Contribute to an Anti-War Critique 1944 –1945

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Dwight Macdonald's "Irritable" Readership: An Introduction to *Politics* Magazine

Dwight Macdonald received letters from soldiers all throughout World War II. As the editor and chief of *politics,* an outspoken anti-war magazine, Macdonald made an unlikely correspondent for American G.I.s. He founded *politics* as an outlet for radical anarchists, pacifists, and anti-war libertarians. Nonetheless, soldiers subscribed and submitted to *politics*, comprising 22% of the magazine's readership throughout the war. Macdonald enthusiastically published their perspectives, dedicating a regular "Soldier Reports" column to servicemen's submissions. Through these contributions, he came to consider soldiers' voices as an essential part of his criticism of the war.

For Macdonald, World War II was more than just a passing concern. The war defined his career as a critic and journalist. Before founding *politics,* Macdonald served as a writer and editor for *Partisan Review*, a "little magazine" that prided itself as a source of independent liberal thought. Originally founded in 1934 by the Communist Party of New York City, *Partisan Review* eventually rejected its communist roots and reemerged as the most important journal of literary and political criticism for the anti-Stalinist Left. Macdonald was part of the original group of intellectuals that reoriented the magazine in 1936. He had resigned from *Fortune* magazine, trading his career in popular cultural criticism to join *Partisan Review*. Under the leadership of Philip Rahv and William Phillips, Macdonald and the other editors set out to promote a new, autonomous form of criticism, resisting the "cultural regimentation" that occurred under Communism.

But this editorial alliance ended with the United States' entry into World War II. Although the editors of *Partisan Review* had once been united against U.S. participation in the war, the rise of Nazi Germany caused many of them to support American involvement as a "pre-condition of any progressive action." As the magazine embraced the war, Macdonald's colleagues became increasingly uncomfortable with his unrelenting pacifist position. Eventually, they stopped publishing his criticisms as part of a collective decision to prohibit further anti-war discussion in the pages of *Partisan Review*. Macdonald resigned in 1943.[1]

With this experience at *Partisan Review* fresh in his memory, Macdonald launched *politics* in February 1944 alongside his wife, Nancy Macdonald. Macdonald's marriage to Nancy

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[1] Gregory D. Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the Politics Circle,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 13, 6.

Rodman changed him personally and politically. Nancy grew up in a Christian home dedicated to service. Steeped in the social-gospel tradition, she spent her youth working with orphans in New York City and organizing relief efforts for war-torn nations. Nancy inspired Macdonald's moral impulse. In addition to her lifelong activism, she worked as a skilled businesswomen. After serving as *Partisan Review*'s business manager for six years, Nancy resigned with her husband to start *politics.* She did much more than manage *politics*'s finances and subscriptions, a demanding job in itself. She inspired the magazine's dedication to underserved communities.[2]

The Macdonalds sought to challenge the wartime consensus and "national unity" that had come to characterize liberal cultural criticism. They hoped to facilitate dialogue and to promote disagreement, inviting controversial figures and conflicting thinkers to contribute to *politics.* To achieve this diversity of thought, Macdonald knew he would have to expand the reach of left-wing political commentary. He set out on a quest to recruit lesser-known figures. Intellectuals like Mary McCarthy, Lionel Abel, and John Berryman all published some of their earliest work in *politics.*

In the first issue, Macdonald explained that *politics* would privilege unknown and underappreciated perspectives. He wanted to publish articles by émigrés, minorities, and contrarians — the "leftist refugees" with no platform for voicing their dissent. Macdonald himself was intellectually homeless. Thus, he sympathized deeply with these dissenting perspectives. He fit neither the communist nor anti-communist categories of the American left. A staunch individualist, Macdonald saw totalitarian tendencies in both Stalinism and Rooseveltian statism. As in the case of *Partisan Review,* he frequently found himself on the fringes of left-wing intellectual life. In the early months of the magazine, Macdonald consulted other young, "homeless radicals." These original members embodied the kind of community that he hoped to create.[3]

Macdonald consulted C. Wright Mills, Paul Goodman, and Lewis Coser before founding *politics.* A young professor of sociology then at the University of Maryland, Mills inspired many of the magazine's key concerns. In *politics* as well as in his own publications, Mills outlined the

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[2] Sumner, *Politics Circle,* 8-10.

[3] Sumner, *Politics Circle*, 13; Dwight Macdonald "What is *politics?*" *politics 1* (February 1944): 6 https://libcom.org/library/politics-february-1944. All further citations of *politics* magazine have also been taken from the digital archives of https://libcom.org/library/politics.; Dwight Macdonald, 1943 prospectus for magazine, Box 152, Folder 1, Macdonald Papers, Yale University Archives.

dangers of increasing bureaucratization and statism for participatory democracy. He feared that powerful elites and bureaucratic higher-ups would make average Americans distant from decision making, eventually degrading their sense of personal responsibility. Working closely with American intellectuals like Richard Hofstadter, Mills grew increasingly involved in American political criticism, publishing in many left-wing journals throughout the forties. When Mills moved to New York City to teach at Columbia University, he made *politics* his intellectual home. His ceaseless concern for individualism and responsibility captivated Macdonald and set the course for *politics's* early years.[4]

Goodman and Coser also represented two other key constituencies of the *politics* community. A City College graduate, Paul Goodman served as the New York intellectuals' most infamous symbol of counterculture. His anarchism, bisexuality, and staunch anti-war stance made him a left-wing exile. Like Macdonald, he left *Partisan Review* over his opposition to war. Calling for draft-resistance and wartime disruption, Goodman first articulated the anarcho-pacifism that Macdonald later embraced. He wrote extensively about wartime technocracy, advocating for small, decentralized communities as an alternative to large-scale industrial society. In *politics,* Goodman boldly articulated his ideas on communal living, free love, and pacifism — ideas that eventually evolved into his best selling, radical manifesto, *Growing Up Absurd.*[5]

Meanwhile, Lewis Coser helped Macdonald recruit new critics from across the Atlantic. Coser and Macdonald first met through the Workers Party of New York City. As a German-Jewish socialist, Coser had fled to New York to escape Nazism. Once in the city, he worked alongside other refugees as a translator for the Office of War Information. He smuggled classified information from the OWI, publishing it in *politics* under the pen name Lewis Clair. Coser helped *politics* extend its dialogue overseas with his "European Newsreel" column, which tracked left-wing activity abroad. [6]

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[4] Sumner, *Politics Circle,* 18-19.; C. Wright Mills, "The Powerless People," *politics* 1, (April 1944): 68-72; Mills to Macdonald, 10 October 1943, Box 34, Folder 855, Dwight Macdonald Papers, Yale University Archives.
[5] Sumner, *Politics Circle,* 27; For Goodman's contribution to *politics* see Paul Goodman, "The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud," *politics* 2 (July 1945): 197-203; Paul Goodman, "Revolution, Sociolatry, and War," *politics* 2 (December 1945): 376-80.
[6] Lewis Coser, "European Newsreel," *politics* 1 (November 1944): 308-310.

But the cornerstone of *politics'*s cosmopolitan community was Nicola Chiaromonte, Macdonald's mentor. An Italian journalist and anarchist, Chiaromonte fled from Italian fascism in 1934. He sought refuge in Paris where he met other radicals who, with their firsthand experiences of European totalitarianism, promoted new communitarian and libertarian social structures. The Nazi invasion of France forced Chiaromonte to flee once again. He travelled around Europe until he immigrated to New York City in 1941. Quickly becoming part of the New York Intellectual scene, Chiaromonte published works of literary and political criticism in *Partisan Review* and *The New Republic.*[7]

Macdonald's former colleagues at *Partisan Review* insisted that he meet Chiaromonte. Many remarked that the two men shared a "moral impulse," always raising ethical considerations in their political criticism. Chiaromonte quickly became Macdonald's mentor and close friend. With his extensive knowledge of ancient philosophy and European politics, Chiaromonte provided Macdonald's bohemian circle with a philosophical backbone. To Macdonald, Chiaromonte was more than an armchair intellectual. He had fought in the Spanish Civil War and led an underground resistance movement against Mussolini. Chiaromonte's career as an activist inspired the *politics* intellectuals, proving that there could be a positive vision for anarchism and pacifism. Macdonald later recalled that the two greatest influences on *politics* were Chiaromonte and the atom bomb. For Macdonald, who had previously rejected Trotskyism, Chiaromonte offered an unideological, post-Marxist political alternative.[8]

Alongside Macdonald's cast of misfit intellectuals, *politics'*s readers played an important part in the publication. The magazine maintained an intimate readership, comprised mostly of college-educated men with a socialist bent. It began with 2,000 subscribers and never rose above 5,000 in its five-year lifespan. Although *politics* had a small circulation, its readers proved active and argumentative. (Macdonald lovingly referred to them as "irritable"). The articles in *politics* demanded reading *and* responding. Macdonald eagerly shared readers' responses, publishing five to ten reader-reactions in the "Intelligence Office" column at the end of every issue. The column contained both criticism and praise. For example, in the July 1945 issue, one reader applauded *politics* while another begged Macdonald to unsubscribe him from the magazine. In addition to

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[7] Nicola Chiaromonte, *Worm of Consciousness, New Republic,* 1 May 1976, 26-27; Michael Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition,* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994) 212-13.
[8] Sumner, *Politics Circle,* 32.

regular readers, intellectuals like Max Eastman, Nathan Glazer, and Reinhold Niebuhr offered their opinions in the "Intelligence Office." Debates often spilled outside of the column as Macdonald eagerly published disagreeing articles alongside one another. When C. Wright Mills conducted a survey of the *politics* readership in 1947, he concluded that readers thought there was "too much arguing."[9]

Left to Right: Bowden Broadwater, Lionel Abel (standing), Elizabeth Hardwick, Miriam Chiaromonte, Nicola Chiaromonte, Mary McCarthy, John Berryman, Front: Dwight Macdonald and Kevin McCarthy.[10]
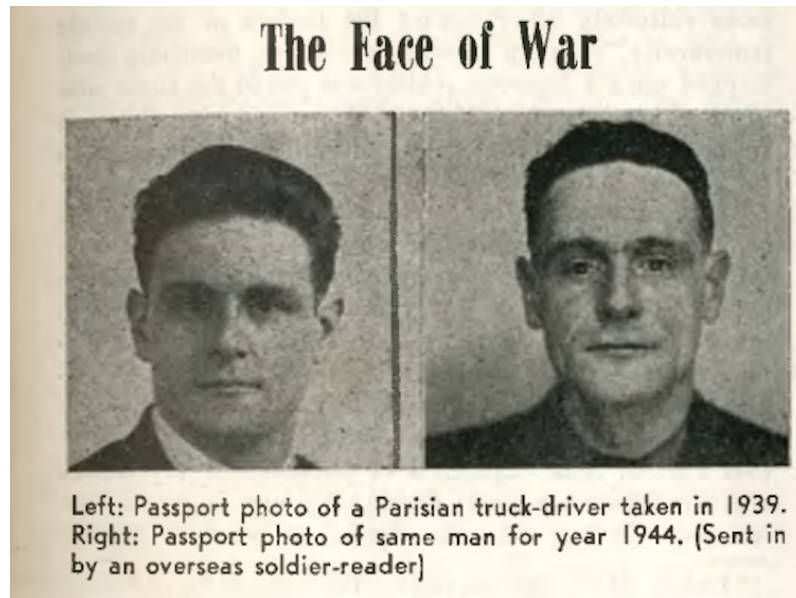
More than any other figure, Macdonald dominated the *politics* dialogue. He commented on everything from photo submissions to reader-responses with his "editor's notes." Hannah Arendt once remarked that Macdonald "regarded his readers as his intellectual equals." His relationship with servicemen-subscribers displayed this dynamic. Macdonald was eager to engage with men overseas, offering them a special, discounted subscription rate. Even before the formal launch of the "Soldier Reports" column in August 1945, "soldier-readers" partook in an

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[9] C. Wright Mills, "The Fascinated Readers," *politics 5,* (Winter 1948): 59-63. This exemplifies the diverse range of responses Macdonald printed in "The Intelligence Office;" PFC, "From A Soldier" and Anonymous, "Note From New Hampshire" in "The Intelligence Office," *politics* 2 (July 1945): 222-24.
[10] Reprinted in Sumner, *Politics Circle,* 143. Courtesy Vassar College.

ongoing conversation with Macdonald about the war. They wrote honestly and critically, covering topics like military bureaucracy, army propaganda, and Jim Crow policies overseas.[11]

Politics magazine covers from 1945.

Unsurprisingly, soldiers' letters never appeared as isolated accounts. Instead, they served as contributions to an ongoing conversation with Macdonald, who wrote tirelessly about the war throughout 1944 and 1945. Soldiers frequently responded to his articles, expressing approval or dissent. Especially in the case of articles criticizing the military, Macdonald privileged these soldiers' perspectives, often publishing their reactions directly after the articles themselves. In this back-and-forth, soldier and civilian complemented and challenged one another. The servicemen added concreteness and clarity to Macdonald's from-a-distance critique of the war. With their firsthand accounts, they offered real examples from their military experience, which brought to life his often-abstract theorizing about the war. Meanwhile, Macdonald provided soldiers with a theoretical framework within which to locate their individual stories. For many servicemen, his writings on militarism, mass violence, and collective responsibility put into words their experiences overseas.

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[11] 17% enlisted men, 5% officers

*Politics'*s soldier-readers contradicted the popular portrayal of the American G.I. Throughout World War II, American posters and advertisements presented the war as an anti-fascist crusade for democracy. The American G.I. stood at the center of this campaign. From war bond promotions to the pages of popular magazines, heroic portrayals of soldiers saturated the home front. Their stories captivated the American public, who eagerly consumed wartime radio and reporting with unprecedented interest. But this patriotic portrayal of "the boys overseas" was often marked by uniformity. The demands of military censorship and popular media meant that the complexities of military life remained underexplored and underappreciated. Among this wartime consensus, there was little room for dialogue and dissent. *Politics* provided a unique platform for both.

Macdonald and his soldier-readers maintained a dialogue that was both powerful and personal. In no other wartime publication does one see the vigorous back-and-forth that characterized *politics*'s "Soldier Reports." To be sure, there were other outlets for servicemen to publish wartime dissent. Little magazines like *Common Sense* included a regular "Soldiers Forum" section in which soldiers often shared complaints and criticisms about the military. Even popular magazines like *Time* included the occasional exposé. But, in these publications, servicemen spoke in monologues. Their experiences fascinated the American public but failed to elicit a response. Contrastingly, the dialogical dynamic of *politics* created a unique opportunity for American soldiers to contribute to a conversation about the war.

The Face of War

Left: Passport photo of a Parisian truck-driver taken in 1939.
Right: Passport photo of same man for year 1944. (Sent in
by an overseas soldier-reader)

This soldier-submission appeared on the June 1945 cover.[12]

To fully appreciate the relationship between Macdonald and American servicemen, one must first explore the soldiers' evolving contributions to *politics*. At first, soldiers' perspectives served to bolster Macdonald's critique of wartime America. To him, servicemen's experiences of military life were indicative of larger social ills. Thus, he integrated their complaints about military hierarchy, bureaucracy, and violence into his broader cultural criticism. Macdonald's dialogue with servicemen began upon this backdrop. But soldiers soon went beyond discussions of military life. As Macdonald grew increasingly concerned with the state of Germany, soldiers served as his eyes and ears, confirming and complicating his theories about the war. American servicemen were an essential part of Macdonald's wartime critique. Their perspectives offered concreteness and complexity, legitimizing Macdonald's anti-war writings. *Politics* welcomed these perspectives. With its openness to dissent and dialogue, the magazine provided a place for this unprecedented conversation.

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[12] Cover, *politics* 2 (June 1945): 1.

I. "Where Apathy Begins:" Authoritarianism in the American Armed Forces

While most Americans saw totalitarianism as a threat from abroad, Dwight Macdonald saw it closer to home. Throughout World War II, Macdonald dedicated himself to exposing the totalitarian tendencies of the American war effort. In *politics,* he criticized military life for its hierarchy, bureaucracy, and violence. But this criticism extended beyond the military itself. Macdonald's attack on the American war machine was part of a larger project to defend democratic participation and individual responsibility. For him, the most troubling features of mobilized America implicated the nation more generally. He saw the soldiers subject to unquestionable orders and the civilians subject to state control as casualties of the same democratic breakdown. Whether centralized in military authorities or government higher-ups, decision-making seemed similarly far from American soldiers and civilians. This remoteness of decision making had rendered both powerless. For Macdonald, wartime America showcased the most totalitarian parts of a totalitarian society. He mobilized *politics* magazine against the war in an effort to expose these totalitarian tendencies.

Macdonald found an unlikely ally in American servicemen. Their participation took him by surprise. He had launched the magazine with the hope of giving a voice to the voiceless. But servicemen were certainly not who he had in mind. They stood out against the avant-garde intellectuals and activists that *politics* tended to attract. Nonetheless, Macdonald moved quickly to accommodate their submissions. His eagerness proved that *politics*'s policy of openness was more than an ideal. Macdonald put his principles into action, creating a column to showcase soldiers' submissions. He welcomed their writings, inviting them to add their privileged perspectives on the war to *politics*' conversation about the conflict.[13]

What started as a correspondence soon became a crucial part of Macdonald's wartime critique. Coming from a New York intellectual far from any fighting, Macdonald's criticism of the war lacked a concreteness that only servicemen could provide. By publishing their firsthand experiences alongside official army leaflets and training manuals, he added tangibility to his theorizing. Weaving together the experiences of young soldiers with the theories New York intellectuals, Macdonald presented the military as a paradigmatic example of larger social ills: an

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[13] Dwight Macdonald, "The Soldier Reports," Editor's Note, *politics* 2 (August 1945): 244.

impersonal and automatized industrial system, a growing bureaucracy, and a decaying sense of democratic responsibility.

The first to articulate this perspective on democratic responsibility was not Macdonald but C. Wright Mills. In his article "The Powerless People," which appeared in one of the magazine's earliest issues, Mills argued for the importance of democratic responsibility—an issue that would go on to define the magazine. In the article, he traced the degradation of participatory democracy. With the rise of an increasingly centralized state through the New Deal and wartime mobilization, the means of political action seemed more and more distant from the majority of American people. Remote agencies and bureaucracies stood between the individual and his ability to enact change, creating a condition Mills called "organized irresponsibility."

Macdonald added moral implications to Mills's account. He diagnosed Americans with "bureaucratic tunnel vision," a condition in which the bigness of bureaucracy undermined the significance of individual action. The development of the atom bomb exemplified his diagnosis. He was struck by American workers' complicity in the creation of the bomb and other wartime weapons. Because of the bureaucratic and impersonal nature of American industry, thousands of ordinary civilians contributed to devastation without knowing it. Divorced from all major decision making, everyone from the man on the assembly line to the mechanic at the reactor had unconsciously contributed to mass violence. This "unconsciousness" confirmed for Macdonald that, in industry and politics alike, top-down control had created a complacent and morally compromised populace.[14]

In their critiques, Macdonald and Mills drew heavily on the philosophy of Albert Camus. The French existentialist corresponded with Macdonald and later published in *politics*. But before becoming a contributor, Camus' ideas on power influenced the *politics* circle. In his early essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus first linked powerlessness and apathy. He believed that when individuals lacked choice, they were less likely to view their actions as morally significant. For Camus as well as Macdonald and Mills, individuals needed to understand their actions as politically and morally impactful to feel responsibility toward their communities. If the military machine had always gone on "grinding on without human consciousness or control," why would

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[14] C. Wright Mills, "The Powerless People," 68-72; Sumner, *Politics Circle,* 19.

an individual try to resist it? Where this responsibility was missing, people were prone to callousness.[15]

Macdonald pointed to the culture of the U.S. military as an important example of this moral callousness. For him, the moral degradation of soldiers began long before any instance of violence. In his characterization of army life, Macdonald drew heavily upon Simone Weil, the French philosopher and mystic. A favorite of the *politics* intellectuals, Weil had travelled the world as a radical activist. Supporting communist opposition to Hitler in Germany as well as Republican anarchists in Spain, Weil wrote extensively about her experience of war, violence, and pacifism in Europe. In her essay, "*The Iliad* as a Poem of Force," she argued that acting under force modified the very morality of a soldier.

Originally published in 1940 in *Les Cahiers du Sud*, a literary journal in the French free zone, the article traced how an individual under the power of force has no freedom to reflect, reconsider, or refuse. And "where there is no room for reflection," Weil concluded, "there is none either for justice or prudence." Reprinted in the November 1945 issue of *politics,* Weil presented *The Iliad* as a literary illustration of the effects of force on warriors. She showed how Homer likens warriors to fire, wood, and wild beasts, depicting the unthinking and inanimate state of the soldier under the influence of force. Weil's characterization of the soldier deeply shaped Macdonald. He upon from Weil's theory of passivity when he argued that the American soldier does not fight as an active agent but rather "is fought" by the military mechanism.[16]

In Macdonald's editorial, "The Responsibility of Peoples," his most thorough treatment the importance of individual responsibility, the words of a decorated Army Air Force lieutenant stood out against Macdonald's theorizing. "Whenever I get set to do what I want to do," the bomber pilot lamented to *The New Yorker,* "something a whole lot bigger than me comes along and shoves me back into place." The bomber pilot communicated Weil and Macdonald's concerns with more clarity than the critics themselves. He expressed his inability to act freely, reflectively, and responsibly within the demands of warfare. By entering into the world of the armed forces, whose totalitarian tendencies were more obvious than those of American society at

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[15] Sumner, *Politics Circle,* 180; Camus expands on this idea later in his career. See *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt;* Albert Camus, "The Human Crisis," *Twice a Year* 14-15 (Fall/Winter 1946-7): 19-33. Albert Camus, "Neither Victims Nor Executioners," *politics 4* (July/August 1947): 141.

[16] Simone Weil, "The Iliad as a Poem of Force," reprinted in *politics* 2 (November 1945): 321-331; Dwight Macdonald, "The Responsibility of Peoples," *politics* 2 (March 1945): 82-93.

large, Macdonald provided a tangible example of the effects of irresponsibility on the individual. Criticized for their abstraction, these intellectuals often failed to outline a clear course of action in their demands for democracy and participation. Lost in the language of "systems" and "machinery," readers likely found it difficult to envision this theory of irresponsibility in practice. But Macdonald's increased attention to the American armed forces from 1944 to 1945 served to clarify and confirm these theories. He acknowledged that his open invitation to servicemen was an effort to present "the reality of things all the more accurately," adding a human quality to the intellectuals' abstractions.[17]

Writing about his experience overseas, Ed Seldon concluded that "the man who enters the armed services of his country becomes the 'citizen' of a totalitarian society." Macdonald had asked Seldon to publish a full-length piece after months of correspondence. As an avid *politics* subscriber and a soldier with three years of service, Seldon was well suited to contribute his critique of military life. In the October 1945 issue of *politics,* he shared his firsthand experiences of latent totalitarianism in the American military. The scathing article appeared as the sixth installment of "War as an Institution," a column dedicated to the war and its social implications.

Seldon intentionally emphasized military life over actual warfare. While fighting occupies mere moments of a soldier's experience, he argued, the hierarchy of the military is constant. Reflecting on his years in the army, he remembered being taught never to ask for explanations or clarifications. The ability to comment and question seemed reserved for those at the top. Even his requests for information were met with the humorous response: "Why don't you write a letter to Mrs. Roosevelt?" In the pages of *Common Sense* magazine, a publication whose "Soldiers Forum" column Macdonald often praised, another serviceman agreed. He wrote that the U.S. military, which claimed to defend democracy, was laughably undemocratic in its leadership and organization. While military officials justified this hierarchical organization in the name of military necessity, Seldon contended that the soldier's experience as "the subject, not the object, of his society" had lasting effects. Like Macdonald, Seldon believed the remoteness

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[17] Macdonald, "The Responsibility of Peoples," 82-93; Sumner, *Politics Circle,* 38, 43; Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 103.

of decision making and understanding undermined the soldier's sense of participation and thus his responsibility.[18]

In addition to the hierarchy, Seldon condemned the "amorality" of the modern army. He lamented that soldiers were often advised against concerning themselves with moral and political questions. To many, the purpose of soldiering seemed to be the execution of "technical operations." Seldon recalled how orientation programs, commanding officers, and military propaganda all encouraged the soldier to focus on "the mission" or "the objective," leaving no time for him to reflect on the consequences his actions. The soldier's inability to reflect on questions of moral and political importance also left him prone to irresponsibility. Once again, Seldon's experiences confirmed Macdonald's own theorizing. Macdonald once asserted that "only among men like soldiers and scientists" could such "irresponsibility" be found. He argued that these men, trained to think in terms of objective processes and missions, saw their actions as morally void. For him, the presentation of soldiering as a mere mission to be completed resulted in a moral disorientation. Unable to see beyond the immediate task, the soldier could not comprehend the moral consequences of his actions. The same task-driven approach that promoted maximum efficiency also promoted maximum irresponsibility.

In "Military Society," a soldier's lived experience confirmed Macdonald's critique. But Macdonald did not recruit Seldon simply to strengthen his own agenda. Rather, he extended an open invitation, encouraging Seldon to cover a topic of his choosing. (Seldon initially planned to write a book review.) The article that emerged was the culmination of an ongoing correspondence. An educated New-Yorker, Seldon had written to Macdonald about everything from French politics to poetry before he submitted his article. Seldon was not the only soldier involved in the article. Another serviceman stationed in Staten Island worked alongside Macdonald to edit the piece and evade censorship. The soldiers worked closely with Macdonald to craft a critical account of army life, even visiting the *politics* editorial offices during their furloughs. Because of military censorship, Macdonald and Seldon could not always correspond freely about the article. Seldon permitted Macdonald to make any edits he saw fit so long as he maintained the overall message of the piece— a testimony to his trust in Macdonald's editorial

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[18] Ed Seldon, "War As An Institution VI: Military Society," *politics* 2 (October 1945): 290-93; Edwin Seldon to Dwight Macdonald, 12 July 1944, Box 45, Folder 1125, Dwight Macdonald Papers, Yale University Archives. "Officer and Enlisted Man," *Common Sense* (May 1945): 45.

integrity. After the article, Macdonald and Seldon maintained their friendship. Seldon even sold copies of *politics* to Parisian book stores while serving in France after the war, a flagrant violation of army regulations.[19]

While Seldon provided an origin story for irresponsibility, Macdonald sought to discern its effects. The clearest sign of irresponsibility is "apathy," asserted one *politics* contributor, the end product of rules, regulations, and unanswered questions. Not unlike the plutonium plant worker whose attention is acutely focused on the task at hand, the soldier is made to focus on "the mission" to the detriment of greater moral concerns. Macdonald saw this apathy on display in the distant attitude of soldiers. Unlike the heroic caricatures depicted in the *Stars and Stripes,* the average soldier did not seem to fight for any grand, democratic ideal. Even mainstream American publications covered this curious attitude.

In the *New York Times*, many servicemen deflated the notion of a fight for democracy when they wrote honestly about the ambiguity of war aims. Soldiers' submissions to the *Times* essay contest, "Why I fight," provided Macdonald with plenty of ammunition. In response to the question "Why do you fight?," one soldier replied "It beats the hell out of me." But the most recurring response was a simple desire to return home. In the April 1945 issue of *politics,* Macdonald quoted these submissions extensively to depict the state of the soldier. Upon reading the submissions, one soldier wrote to Macdonald that the words of his fellow servicemen served as a testimony to the "impenetrably mysterious way of the army," a system in which motives are often "muddled." Macdonald argued that soldiers, made to fight by state conscription and the orders of military authorities, could not help but feel distant from democratic ideals.[20]

The soldiers' political disconnectedness reflected this feeling of distance. According to the soldier submissions from both *politics* and *Common Sense*, army life left soldiers apathetic towards politics. Even issues directly affecting the armed forces, such as the soldiers' ability to vote, prompted minimal debate and discussion. In *politics,* soldiers described the political ignorance and apathy of their peers. Only a few connected this attitude to the feeling of powerlessness described by Macdonald. Writing from Camp Hood, Texas, one soldier admitted that the distant attitude was "entirely natural" given that political action had been of no use to the

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[19] Edwin Seldon to Dwight Macdonald, 12 July 1944; 28 November 1944; 17 February 1945; 25 February 1945; 23 November 1945, Box 45, Folder 1125, Dwight Macdonald Papers, Yale University Archives.

[20] Mark Elton, "Where Apathy Begins," *politics* 2 (August 1945): 232; Macdonald, "Why Am I Fighting?," *politics* 2 (April 1945): 102-105; Private Pete, "The First Bomb" *Common Sense,* July 1944, 250.

soldier in everyday army life. Another soldier, writing in *Common Sense,* concurred: "From the moment [the soldier] dons the uniform and becomes a cog in the military machine where all decisions come down from above, he loses all interest in the outside world except for occasional bursts." Even reporters of mainstream publications traced this trend. One *New York Times Magazine* editorial compared the American soldier's political interests to those of the "politically mature" British troops and the "politically fanatic" German troops. The author reported that American soldiers seemed more interested in comic strips than current events.[21]

For the soldiers who reported this disconnectedness from democratic war aims and domestic politics, these observations constituted a commentary on the lack of intellectual life in the army. As readers of fringe left-wing magazines like *politics* and *Common Sense,* these servicemen were more likely than most to notice the lack of substantive discourse among soldiers. Macdonald incorporated their anecdotes into his own account of army life, which was both more comprehensive and more conspiratorial than that of soldiers themselves. For Macdonald, the structure of the armed forces *deliberately* depoliticized its soldiers.

Democratic ideals were intentionally absent from military norms such as stark hierarchy and task-driven warfare. Military officials feared that the incorporation of these ideals would only "unsettle the minds of the troops," Macdonald argued, "making them argumentative, opinionated, perhaps even stimulating them to apply democratic ideas inside the totalitarian military world they live in." To Macdonald, the efficiency of the armed forces required passive participants. By distancing soldiers from decision making and discourse, the military machinery could move along smoothly.[22]

Even more than distance and depoliticization, violence stood out to Macdonald as the most palpable consequence of irresponsibility. To Macdonald, the mechanized weaponry of the Allied forces bore witness to the apathy and irresponsibility instilled in army life. With the rise of aerial and artillery bombardment, soldiers unleashed violence at such a long range that they did not have to witness its physical effects. In his article, "The Psychology of Killing," Macdonald outlined three stages of warfare: bombings, artillery fire, and close combat. In the most intimate cases, occurring in close physical proximity, the fighters experience the true horror

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[21]Macdonald, "Why Am I Fighting?," 102-5. Anonymous, "London, March 1945" in "The Intelligence Office," *politics* 2 (June 1945): 187; PFC, "From a Soldier," 223; "The Soldier Vote," *Common Sense,* November 1944, 401.
[22] "Why Am I Fighting?" 101.

of war, Macdonald argued. With blood quite literally on his hands, the soldier is forced to face the consequences of his actions. Macdonald argued that the active participation of close combat rendered the soldier more likely to reflect on his actions. But long-distance killing denied this possibility.

With more powerful weapons, destruction increased while the soldier's consciousness of it decreased. Through the use of bombs, mines, and booby traps, "time as well as space draws a curtain between killer and victim." Nobody had to bear witness to the bloodshed that followed the modern bullet or bomb. Writing to *politics,* one soldier, who described himself as an "unwilling part" of the battalion headquarters company in Germany, affirmed Macdonald's article. He described how the marching-fire technique felt like an "assault by machines" rather than by men. The soldiers "blast away at a general target," he admitted, completely unsure of the individuals on the other side of the fire. The soldier concluded by confessing that many American soldiers have never seen any of the Germans they have killed.[23]

At the time Macdonald published "The Psychology of Killing," the United States had yet to drop atom bombs on Japan. In the following months, this destruction confirmed for Macdonald the extent to which "killing by remote control" defined modern warfare. The bomb forced Macdonald to reimagine and revamp his theory of unconscious warfare and the soldier's role in this system. As soldiers' letters increasingly flooded the magazine, Macdonald published new perspectives on mass violence and —his new favorite topic—mass guilt. In the aftermath of the bomb, the soldiers' letters took on a new function. While the military still served as a metonym for totalitarianism at home, the soldiers now became Macdonald's eyes and ears abroad. Primarily concerned with American troops' treatment of enemy civilians, Macdonald published first-hand accounts from the front in an attempt to make sense of mass violence. How did soldiers' conception of enemy civilians contribute to the military's willingness to bomb entire cities and towns? To answer this question, Macdonald turned to the soldiers themselves, whose complicated and often conflicting accounts of interactions with civilians served as the cornerstone of Macdonald's argument against collective war guilt.

Soldiers' participation in this conversation best exemplifies their crucial contribution to *politics.* By responding to Macdonald's criticism of collective war guilt, soldiers moved beyond

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[23] Dwight Macdonald, "War As An Institution I: Notes On The Psychology of Killing," *politics* 1 (September 1944): 239-243; "Some Letters From Soldier-Readers," *politics* 2, (June 1945): 172.

discussing their experiences of military life and army authoritarianism. They informed and influenced one of Macdonald's most central wartime critiques. Soldiers did not simply share their experiences. They oriented these experiences within Macdonald's writing, confirming and challenging his theories based on their own interactions with enemy civilians. And Macdonald treated these experiences as serious contributions to his wartime cultural criticism. While the soldiers gave Macdonald's writings a new concreteness, they received something in return. Besides providing a platform for dissent and dialogue, *politics* also provided soldiers with a contextualization of their personal experience. In a letter thanking Macdonald for the publication of "Military Society," Ed Seldon expressed the influence the magazine had provided: "I have been a garrison soldier for nearly three years now, and have got to where I can combine my own experience with what I have learned of it, and am beginning to relate it more and more with the context of contemporary history…thanks not a little to Politics."[24]

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[24] Edwin Seldon to Dwight Macdonald, 28 November 1944, Dwight Macdonald Papers, Yale University Archives.

II. Soldiers Speak Out: An Unlikely Dialogue in the Pages of *Politics*

Never have people been so powerless to control their national collectives but also
so blamed for their national collectives
- Dwight Macdonald, "The Responsibility of Peoples"

The printing of the August 1945 issue of *politics* was already underway when news of the bombing of Hiroshima reached the American public. Dwight Macdonald hastily halted the presses. In a matter of hours he had restructured the issue to include an editorial on the atomic atrocity. The magazine cover featured the bomb, declaring in capital letters that "atomic bombs are the natural product of the kind of society we have created." To Macdonald, the bomb revealed the worst parts of wartime logic. Killing hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians without warning, the atomic bomb "underlined...the crazy and murderous nature" of the war. In the months that followed, the bomb provided Macdonald with a platform to discuss everything from the dangers of technological progress to the faceless violence of modern warfare.

Macdonald kept returning to the topic of responsibility. He argued that, in order to employ mass violence against the enemy, one must first accept the mass responsibility of the enemy. Macdonald mobilized *politics* against this notion of mass responsibility, criticizing the military for classifying entire "peoples" and "nations" as guilty. He believed that this conception of collective guilt, propagated among American soldiers and civilians alike, led to the indiscriminate mistreatment and murder of enemy civilians.

More than ever before, Macdonald's critique depended on soldiers' contributions. While Macdonald theorized about interactions overseas, soldiers experienced them. Thus, he privileged their perspectives on enemy civilians, treating them as expert witnesses for his wartime writings. The role of the soldier-readers took on a new function. Instead of simply sharing their experiences, servicemen entered into a dialogue with Macdonald about mass guilt and mass violence. This back-and-forth established servicemen as active contributors whose experience among enemy civilians confirmed and complicated Macdonald's warnings against "collective responsibility."

Macdonald emphasized the concept of collective responsibility in his initial comments on the bomb. He encouraged his readers to think about their own role in the atomic atrocity, asking

them to consider what responsibility they bore if they knew nothing of the development of the weapon and had no say in its detonation. Unable to provide any concrete answer, he concluded that the American people were just as responsible for this horror "as 'they,' the German people" are for Nazi crimes. This controversial comparison captivated Macdonald throughout the war. His most thorough treatment appeared in his "Responsibility of Peoples" editorial, a twelve-page treatise printed in the March 1945 issue of *politics*.[25]

In "The Responsibility of Peoples," Macdonald disputed the German people's collective responsibility for Nazism. He contended that German anti-semitism was not a "people's action," deriving from popular mores and sentiments, but rather the belief of a sharply separated subgroup. Citing the lack of mob violence against Jews in Germany, Macdonald sought to show that anti-Jewish violence arose as an imposition of the German state. He claimed that, unlike racial violence in America, which took place in opposition to the state and its police, German violence took place *through* the state and *against* the folkways. To further absolve German civilians, Macdonald scrupulously outlined the special training of the Nazis' SS squadrons. He noted that the Nazi regime chose its executioners selectively and scientifically, not permitting regular German Army units to manage death camps. By detailing the horrifying demands of Nazism, Macdonald sought to distinguish between the mass-executioners and the passive public. He also included tales of German resistance throughout the article, reporting on the persecution of anti-fascist German students as well as anti-fascist efforts to aid Jews. He listed these daring acts of German anti-Nazism to prove that Germany was not, as the popular media had, portrayed, "one big concentration camp."[26]

Politics presented a more complex picture of German civilians. Macdonald challenged the American press and government pronouncements that presented all Germans as thoroughly conditioned by Nazism. Wartime advertisements warned the American people against the murderous "Huns," portraying Germans as monsters. Meanwhile, public intellectuals like Rex Stout, the popular novelist, propagated theories of inherent German barbarism, arguing that the German people had been warlike and cruel throughout European history. Macdonald frequently criticized figures like Stout, whose conceptions of German guilt he found simplistic and

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[25] Dwight Macdonald, "The Bomb." *politics* 2 (September 1945): 260; Dwight Macdonald, Cover page, *politics* 2 (August 1945): 1.
[26] Dwight Macdonald, "The Responsibility of Peoples." *politics* 2 (March 1945): 85.

offensive. To be sure, Macdonald did not see German civilians as innocent victims. While Macdonald maintained that most Germans did not commit or condone Nazi crimes, he believed they permitted the violence with their passivity. But he did not see this passivity as indicative of inherent German barbarism.[27]

Macdonald saw the German people's passivity as another symptom of the concentration of power and the bigness of modern bureaucracy. He reminded his readers that in modern society, "things happen TO people." Once again, he encouraged Americans to apply the concept of collective responsibility to themselves. From the saturation bombing of cities to the internment of Japanese-Americans, America's policies too seemed far from public control. Macdonald concluded that "we, the American people, are just as much and as little responsible" for these atrocities "as they, the German people" are for Majdanek. He reminded readers that although "we, the people" did not do these things, we failed to overthrow or vote against the politicians who did. If such passivity prevailed in America, he asked, how much worse would it be in a nation where resistance resulted in death? Macdonald declared that, if all Germans are guilty, then all Americans are guilty too.[28]

Macdonald contended that this belief in the collective guilt of the enemy would lead to confusion and cruelty. Under this conception of guilt, "the hands that strangle are no more guilty than the belly which nourishes them." He feared that this failure to distinguish between specialized executioners and German civilians would result in indiscriminate harshness at the hands of Allied troops. Macdonald believed that many soldiers saw "the enemy population as a homogenous single block, all of them equally wicked and detestable." Servicemen quickly confirmed Macdonald's account. Comprising a third of all published responses, soldiers eagerly addressed the article.[29]

One of the most controversial pieces ever printed in *politics,* "The Responsibility of Peoples" received responses from public intellectuals like Reinhold Niebuhr and regular

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[27] Macdonald, "The Responsibility of Peoples," 86; Dwight Macdonald, "Is Thomas Mann a German?," *politics* 2 (April 1945): 103; In response to criticism, Macdonald distinguished between moral responsibility and political responsibility, arguing that the German people should be held accountable for the latter. Many argued that this alteration made his original argument more confusing and complex. Despite the alteration, the theory is best known in its original iteration. For more on this see "The Responsibility of Peoples: Further Discussion," *politics 2* (July 1945): 203-207.

[28] Macdonald, "The Responsibility of Peoples," 86.

[29] Macdonald, "The Responsibility of Peoples," 90.

contributors like Louis Clair. While Niebuhr praised the article as "one of the sanest and profoundest analyses of the problem of individual and collective guilt," Clair identified it as his first ever instance of disagreement with Macdonald. Over the months that followed, Macdonald published fifteen full-length response articles in *politics*. (He even published some responses to to responses!) When readers continued to send submissions, he created a "Further Discussion" forum in the July 1945 issue.[30]

Throughout summer 1945, Macdonald scattered the experiences of servicemen-subscribers among the responses of intellectuals and journalists. Meanwhile, the "Soldier Reports" column too turned into a forum for discussing collective responsibility. It is unsurprising that, after publishing "The Responsibility of Peoples," Macdonald gave special attention to soldiers stationed in Germany. Many of these servicemen experienced firsthand the consequences of collective guilt as the Allied Military Government occupied German territories and instated a strict non-fraternization policy. Dedicating an entire article in the July 1945 issue to soldier reports from occupied Germany, Macdonald sought to corroborate his critique of collective responsibility with the experiences and interactions of U.S. servicemen abroad. These experiences made Macdonald's "collective responsibility" more than a concept. For soldiers, this unindividuated treatment was tangible — it tainted their interactions with enemy civilians.

As Germany surrendered and the Allied troops began to govern occupied territories, General Eisenhower promulgated a strict non-fraternization policy, which prohibited all U.S. troops from socializing with German civilians and military personnel. Although many soldiers ignored the policy, a violation could result in six month's confinement and loss of pay. As early as October 1944, Eisenhower warned against any form of socialization outside of "necessary official relationships." From the signs scattered around Allied-occupied Germany to warnings written in the pages *The Stars and Stripes,* constant reminders cautioned soldiers against fraternization. For Macdonald as well as many of the soldiers who wrote to *politics* magazine, this policy confirmed the U.S. military's belief in the collective guilt of the German population.[31]

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[30] Reinhold Niebuhr, Review in "The Intelligence Office," *politics* 2 (May 1945): 160; Louis Clair, "The Responsibility of Peoples: Further Discussion," *politics 2* (July 1945): 206.

[31] Perry Biddiscombe, "Dangerous Liaisons: The Anti-Fraternization Movement in the U.S. Occupation Zones of Germany and Austria, 1945-1948." *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 3 (2001): 619, http://www.jstor.org; Photos 1-3 were not printed in *politics*. While Macdonald and soldier-subscribers make frequent reference to this kind of military material, only one example was every printed in *politics* 4). Nonetheless, these posters give us a clearer picture of the propaganda that soldiers saw in Germany: Eddie Worth, *Untitled,* 1946, digital, 3,000 px x

"Lest we forget this is Germany. Don't fraternize"

"It's the same hand at a different angle"

"Remember This! Don't Fraternize!"

"You are entering Germany, an enemy country, keep on the alert"

The non-fraternization policy stood out to soldiers as the clearest indication of the military's belief in collective guilt. Experiencing the policy on a daily basis, soldiers could articulate the consequences of collective guilt much more vividly than Macdonald himself. One American sergeant described non-fraternization as the awkward feeling of "staring past passers-by" and "coldly ignoring the smiles of old folk." A submission to the *Stars and Stripes* letter

2,309 px http://www.thememoryproject.com; Ralph Morse, *Fraternization,* BW negative, TimeLife, https://artsandculture.google.com; Arnold E. Samuelson, *Remember This! Don't Fraternize!,* 1945, in *Tacoma Sunday News Tribune;* Press Association, *Untitled,* 1945, cover image of *politics* 2 (March 1945): 1.

column told a similar story. In the letter, a man who identified himself as "A Worried Soldier," described his efforts to prove to the German civilians that American troops "are human." Despite distrusting the Germans, he admitted that he found it difficult and uncomfortable to "resist the temptation to speak to them." Anxious to follow both his conscience and the orders of his general, he concluded his letter with a question: "What can I do?"[32]

Given this inhuman experience, it is unsurprising that few soldiers followed the policy. From the anecdotes of soldiers to statistics and surveys, reports reflected that the troops neither followed nor enforced the policy even though the majority stood in favor of it. In April 1945, *politics* reprinted an Associated Press interview with Sergeant Francis W. Mitchell, a soldier known to disobey the policy. Mitchell admitted to accepting beer and bread from German children and to "respecting old folk" even though soldiers were "supposed to hate people." He reported that soldiers only enforced non-fraternization in the presence of the military police since it was "hard to keep that icy front when people acted friendly." According to Mitchell, American soldiers were not scared of a 65 dollar fine.[33]

In these anecdotes, servicemen confirmed and clarified key parts of "The Responsibility of Peoples." For example, they confirmed that military personnel and publications bombarded them with propaganda about the savagery of the German civilians. One soldier recalled warnings against tossing candy to German children. His superiors had warned him that Germans children "hate your guts." Soldiers also pointed to *The Stars and Stripes* and *Yank, the Army Weekly,* the most popular publications among servicemen, as platforms that promoted this idea of civilian guilt.[34]

In one extensive editorial about the Allied Military Government, *The Stars and Stripes* staff writers praised American troops. Reporting unanimous satisfaction from German villagers, the article reminded readers that the "Germans expected barbarism" so "fair treatment surprised them." After an extensive account of American troops' success in managing the backwards villagers, the article concluded with a section entitled "Germans Remain Enemies," which

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[32] "Letter from a Sergeant," *politics* 2 (May 1945): 131; "Fraternization: One Soldier's Query," *politics 2* (March 1945): 96.

[33] Macdonald bases his belief that the majority of soldiers approved the policy on a report from the editors of *Yank, Army Weekly*. "Mail Call" section in which the overwhelming majority of soldiers (75%) responded positively. See "Mail Call," *Yank, Army Weekly,* October 19, 1945, 16 cited in "The Soldier Reports: Dusseldorf, Germany," *politics* 2 (August 1945): 245; Dwight Macdonald, "The Sergeant Saves Our Honor," *politics,* (April 1945): 103.

[34] "The Soldier Reports: Somewhere in Belgium," *politics* 2 (September 1945): 264; "Dusseldorf, Germany," 245.

warned soldiers against any softness towards civilians. "A German civilian is an unimpressive sight," the author admitted, "but he is the enemy and what he says about his feeling is merely a ruse to make you feel sorry for him and forget to *punish him for his crime*." Reporting from Roetgen, the reporters explicitly stated that most of the villagers seemed entirely ignorant of Nazi concentration camps. Yet they still emphasized their *personal* guilt and warned against befriending the seemingly forlorn peasants.[35]

An anonymous soldier wrote to Macdonald about this notion of collective guilt: "The 'all Germans are guilty' line brought rather funny consequences...funny is perhaps the wrong word," he added, "tragic might be better." Affirming Macdonald's account, soldiers showed *how* the widespread belief in collective guilt resulted in coldness and cruelty towards civilians. In their letters to Macdonald, soldiers reported that American troops often burned and buried extra cigarettes and food so that German civilians would not be able to have them. After praising the accuracy of Macdonald's account of collective guilt, one soldier recalled the shock he felt upon realizing how normal the German civilians appeared. After months of imagining the Germans as cruel Nazis or backwards savages, he was disturbed by how "like Americans" they seemed.[36]

Another soldier shared a particularly striking experience with Macdonald in the June 1945 issue of *politics*. Drawn to pity for a group of Germans whose town had been bombed by Allied forces, the soldier expressed his sadness to his fellow servicemen. "They should have thought about that when they started bombing England," the others promptly replied. The soldier cited this response as the epitome of Allied attitudes towards German civilians. Whom do the troops mean by "they," the soldier wondered in his letter. He concluded that, with such a widespread and abstract conception of guilt, even German children playing in the rubble were implicated in the crimes of their countrymen.[37]

A more humorous illustration of American attitudes towards Germans appeared in *Common Sense*'s "Soldier's Forum," a column that Macdonald read regularly. In a letter entitled "Hollywood Meets the Hun," a serviceman wrote about a fellow U.S. soldier and former actor who arrived in Germany eager to meet one of the savage "Huns." A group of Americans dressed

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[35] Ed Wilcox, "Proving Ground for Allied Military Government: Germans Expected Barbarism Fair Treatment Surprised Them," *The Stars and Stripes,* February 4, 1945, 3. Italics mine.
[36] "The Soldier Reports: American Zone, Germany," *politics* 2, (September 1945): 264; "Somewhere in Germany," *politics* 2, (June 1945): 172; "The Soldier Reports: Luxembourg," 295.
[37] "Somewhere in Germany," 172.

one of their own men in German clothing to trick the new soldier. To the amusement of his fellow troops, the new soldier proudly declared that he could detect "a murderous look" in the eyes of the German only to find out he was really a disguised American. Although comical, the interaction showcased the extent of the unindividuated treatment, wherein any German was guilty independent of his actions.[38]

These soldiers' submissions to *politics* provided an alternative to the popular presses' account of the Allied Military Government. Although most major newspapers presented the American troops as benevolent liberators, popular presses occasionally alluded to the problems plaguing the AMG. In response to a soldier who complained that American misconduct had been kept out of print, Macdonald compiled a list of published instances of misconduct. Here too Macdonald prioritized the words of soldiers themselves. He cited two letters from U.S. sergeants printed in *Time* as well as a dispatch printed in the *New York Times*. One letter described the rampant looting and raping done by U.S. troops in Germany. The sergeant reported that he had seen entire towns picked clean by soldiers as Americans quickly became persona non grata. The other letters echoed this report as sergeants expressed their concern over the conduct of American G.I.s in Germany. Letters from British and Canadian officers in *Common Wealth Review* described similar behavior from the Allied troops.[39]

Politics was not the only publication that printed letters reporting misconduct at the hands of American troops. But *politics* made a unique contribution by linking these instances to larger issues, such as the widespread belief in the collective guilt of Germans. Thus, Soldiers contributed more than isolated experiences. They served as interlocutors weighing in on a wider intellectual dilemma. As Macdonald integrated their experiences into his wartime writings, he invited them to contribute to his critique of the war.

To be sure, not all soldiers' letters aligned with Macdonald's argument. He welcomed dissenting opinions, publishing soldiers' perspectives that disagreed with his own. While Macdonald saw the mistreatment of Germans civilians as a clear moral failing, some soldiers saw it as a misguided moral impulse. People reacted with shock and disgust as news of the concentration camps reached the public. Allied troops in Germany who saw this carnage in

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[38]"Hollywood meets the Hun," *Common Sense* (May 1945): 45.

[39] Sergeant Bundenthal Demurs and Anonymous "Letter to the Editor," *TIME Magazine,* September 17, 1945, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu; Cited in Dwight Macdonald, "The Soldier Reports: Editor's Note," *politics* 2*,* (October 1945): 295.

person felt the horror all the more viscerally. "It is hard to be forgiving," one soldier admitted in a letter to Macdonald. After seeing Buchenwald, the soldier had to quell his rage towards the Germans by telling himself over and over again that Germans had also died there. Still, the soldier admitted to Macdonald, he could not help but blame the German people. After all the horrible things the soldier had seen, he could not help but "laugh with delight" as Allied troops forced the "master race [to] scurry for cover." Published in the August 1945 issue of *politics,* this letter complicated Macdonald's perspective on the conduct of American troops. To be sure, the soldier did not attempt to justify or excuse the mistreatment of innocent civilians. Yet he saw the soldiers' impulsive anger toward the German population as an ethical expression gone wrong.[40]

The soldiers' interactions with Germans showcased the complicated nature of wartime guilt. Never one to shy away from nuance, Macdonald too conceived of war guilt as complex. He concluded "The Responsibility of Peoples" with a call to action. Instead of simplifying guilt by accusing entire nations, he declared, we ought to painstakingly evaluate individual actions. Instead of attributing the horrors of Nazism to inherent backwardness or barbarism, we ought to study the social and political circumstances that led to such evil. Macdonald saw collective guilt as a misguided attempt to "reduce mysterious and uncontrollable forces to a level where they may be dealt with."[41] According to him, such a simplistic conception of guilt allowed nations to more comfortably deploy a "collective punch in the nose" — an act of indiscriminate violence and destruction.

While the Allied Military Government worked to uncover the inner-workings of Nazism in Germany, soldiers increasingly came into contact with civilians. As they interrogated civilians and criminals alike, soldiers confirmed the complexity that Macdonald described. One soldier, identifying himself as "PFC," wrote to *politics* to discuss the difficulties of distinguishing Nazi sympathizers from innocent Germans. "The picture is too complex," he lamented, "there is too much variance among the people." In the midst of this confusion, soldiers still wrote to *politics* to confirm Macdonald's distinction between German civilians and Nazis.[42]

A letter in the September 1945 issue echoed Macdonald's claim that the majority of Germans had little knowledge of the concentration camps. The soldier, who made an effort to

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[40] "Germany, April 30" and "Austria, May 23," *politics* 2, (August 1945): 244.
[41] Macdonald, "The Responsibility of Peoples," 88.
[42] PFC, "Letter from Belgium," *politics* 2, (March 1945): 96.

speak to civilians in violation of the non-fraternization policy, described his shock at the utter ignorance of the German people. In one instance, the soldier showed letters from a concentration camp inmate to a group of Germans to observe their reactions. He recalled his surprise when they cried in horror. In another issue, a soldier corroborated this account. After a lengthy affirmation of Macdonald's "Responsibility of Peoples" article, the soldier recalled how, without exception, every German civilian he encountered claimed to be anti-Nazi. Yet he remained doubtful of their complete innocence. He asked Macdonald, are these not the same Germans who "heiled and shrieked themselves hoarse over German victories?" The soldier remained unsure of how to treat the German civilians who greeted him.[43]

Macdonald's approach to the German population may seem soft. But he believed that it supported a harsher treatment for the individuals who truly deserved it. Macdonald noted with disgust that low-level Nazis often acquired positions of power in the new Allied Military Government. Many wondered how the Allies could allow criminals to work for the AMG. Macdonald answered: "If everybody is guilty, nobody is guilty." Because the Allies' conception of guilt convicted the entire populace, it did little to distinguish between cruel criminals and compliant civilians. In light of this watered-down conception of guilt, Macdonald found it unsurprising that the Allies permitted Nazis to participate in government. He saw that, when the Allies abandoned the distinction between Germans and Nazis, Nazis benefited.[44]

Though he recognized the unprecedented scale and brutality of Nazi crimes, Macdonald saw civilian ignorance and inaction as the products of state control and widespread powerlessness. In Germany, "irresponsibility" had grown to such an extent that even those directly involved in Nazi operations denied their roles. In the May issue of *politics,* one soldier recounted his experience helping an Inspector-General to conduct interviews for a war-crimes investigation. They interviewed dozens of people who had worked at or witnessed a Nazi "horror hospital." The soldier described the I.G.'s perplexity and frustration as he struggled to establish the responsibility of any individual:

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[43] "American Zone, Germany," 264. See also "Somewhere in Germany," 172.
[44] Macdonald, "The Responsibility of Peoples," 91.

> In modern war there are crimes and not criminals…Here, as in many other cases, the guilt belonged to the machine. Somewhere in the apparatus of bureaucracy, memoranda, and clean efficient directives, a crime had been committed. Men died in a hospital…But the witnesses were very "unsatisfactory" – *who* was responsible, the IG would never discover. *What* was responsible could, I think, be established.

After conducting the interviews, it became clear to the soldier that he would have trouble finding an individual suspect to sit down in a witness chair and cross examine. He concluded that "the chair will remain empty, and the crimes will go on."[45]

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[45] "Letter from a Sergeant," 131-32.

III. Declaring Independence: Discourse and Dissent in a Time of Consensus

As the war came to a close, not everyone celebrated. "I'm sorry that now the war is over," wrote one soldier to *politics*. "Mr. Macdonald won't have a chance to enter the army. It would do him some good." Comments like these punctuated the pages of *politics* as servicemen reacted to Macdonald's critique of the war. Although they appeared much less frequently than the many letters of support from soldiers, these expressions of disagreement played an important role in the publication. Proving Macdonald's commitment to genuine discourse and debate, the published dissent legitimized the dialogue as a whole. Macdonald's willingness to give a platform to deep disagreements demonstrated that the soldiers' perspective was not a mere prop for manipulation, placed into the magazine to confirm Macdonald's condemnation of the war. Instead, the soldiers served as valuable dialogue partners whose closeness to the conflict could confirm *or* challenge the narrative that Macdonald created.[46]

The debate surrounding Macdonald's condemnation of General George Patton displayed this dynamic. Macdonald's most controversial article among servicemen, "Atrocities of the Mind," presented Patton as a personification of the war's brutality and injustice. Nicknamed "Old Blood and Guts," Patton was known for his aggressive offensive action and vulgar pre-battle speeches. Despite controversy surrounding his crudity, Patton remained well respected for his military success and ability to inspire soldiers. But Macdonald refused to wave away his brutal remarks as mere military speak. Instead, he performed a textual analysis of Patton's rhetoric, accusing the general of promoting moral degradation among Americans.

In the article, Macdonald recalled the shock he felt when Franco's planes bombed Barcelona for the first time. The news of hundreds of civilians being killed had once roused an unbelieving terror in him. He lamented that the nation had now "grown calloused to massacre." Listing cities in which thousands had been killed, Macdonald solemnly inventoried death tolls: tens of thousands in Cologne, hundreds of thousands in Dresden, and millions in Tokyo. He reported that the majority of Americans expressed little horror or indignation at this unprecedented bloodshed, growing more callous with each instance of mass violence. Scattering

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[46] Joseph Minsky, "In Defense of Patton-Halsey 2," *politics* 2, (October 1945): 317.

quotes from Patton and other generals throughout his article, Macdonald sought to show how the war had "immunized [Americans] against human sympathy."[47]

Macdonald began by quoting Patton's speech at the Los Angeles Stadium shortly after his return to the United States. The general described flying over Germany and observing the unprecedented destruction. He jokingly recalled that once the plane reached the ocean, he felt disappointed since "there were no Germans to kill down there." The crowd of civilians erupted in laughter and cheering. But the centerpiece of Macdonald's article was Patton's address to the Third Army before the Normandy landing. Although the Office of War Information (OWI) recorded the speech, they had never released it to the public. Filled with four-letter words and other obscenities, the "D-Day-Minus-One" speech was deemed unfit for the American people. Nonetheless, Macdonald found out about the colorful speech through a friend who worked in the OWI.[48] Piecing together a facsimile from his friend's notes, Macdonald printed parts of the address in the August 1945 issue of *politics*.[49]

In the speech, Patton encouraged his troops to embrace the "sting and clash of battle." He argued that soldiers should never fear violence, but should relish the opportunity to brutalize the German and Japanese populations. The general charged that those who could not harness this kind of enthusiasm for battle "should be killed off like flies" so that they could never "go back home and breed more cowards." He went on to describe his personal excitement at the opportunity to make the Germans "howl" in horror and to wipe out the Japanese entirely.

To be sure, Macdonald's condemnation of Patton was not entirely unique. He frequently cited official army literature and signage as examples of military cruelty. In one issue, he published excerpts from a twenty-page Army pamphlet that, in all capital letters, encouraged soldiers to "strike with the spirit of hate" and to "kill the killer." In another issue, he included a picture of a sign overlooking Tulagi Harbor which reminded soldiers that "Admiral Halsey sa[id]" to "Kill japs, kill japs, kill more japs!" Macdonald seemed to collect tokens of military brutality, curating them into a vivid condemnation. To him, the cruel, theatrical language of the

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[47] Dwight Macdonald, "Atrocities of the Mind," *politics* 2 (August 1945): 227.

[48] Likely Lewis Coser, who worked in the OWI and frequently leaked information to *politics*.

[49] The OWI frequently disowned Patton's rhetoric. "Patton Speech Disowned by War Department." *Los Angeles Times,* Apr 27, 1944 http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu

war revealed "the maximum of physical devastation accompanied by the minimum of human meaning."[50]

His condemnation of violent rhetoric quickly received responses from soldier-readers. Macdonald published three of these responses in the months following his piece. In a short letter, a self-identified "disgusted member of the armed forces" reminded Macdonald that the speeches he so frequently quoted were never meant for the people back home. In a few short sentences, the sailor suggested a massive separation between servicemen and civilians. A lieutenant expanded on this point. He angrily demanded that Macdonald consider the intended audience of Patton's speeches. Patton "wasn't talking to the graduating class at the University of Chicago," the soldier snarkily remarked, "but to men whose chief desire was to be back home out of this damn mess."

The lieutenant claimed that wartime circumstances justified Patton's violent language. He maintained that men who would be "killing Jerries and getting killed themselves" needed this kind of fierce rhetoric to give their best effort in combat. Besides creating a clear dichotomy between military and civilian life, both servicemen cast Patton's speeches in terms of necessity. While Macdonald saw the general's approach as indulgent, these men believed that their fellow soldiers depended on this rhetoric for strength. They argued that American soldiers were far from enthusiastic to enter into a bloody battle. Instead, they were exhausted and eager to go home. Thus, the servicemen criticized Macdonald for characterizing Patton's speeches as senseless cruelty and callousness. They fervently believed that Patton's language had a legitimate purpose. "Patton was talking the language of the GIs," one soldier concluded, "or doesn't Macdonald know many GIs?"[51]

Macdonald's rigorous response to these criticisms illustrates the seriousness with which he treated servicemen. He included his lengthy response alongside the letters themselves in the October 1945 issue of *politics*. Macdonald presented a counterargument, calling into question the dichotomy that the servicemen had constructed. He noted that both men justified Patton's behavior by creating a wide chasm between army life and civilian life. Because of this chasm, the servicemen concluded that "it [was] foolish to criticize [army] values from a civilian

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[50]Dwight Macdonald, "Atrocities of the Mind," 226; Dwight Macdonald, "Why Am I Fighting?" 97.
[51]"In Defense of Patton-Halsey I," *politics* 2 (October 1945): 317; Joseph Minsky, "In Defense of Patton-Halsey II," *politics* 2 (October 1945): 317.

standpoint." Macdonald questioned the acceptance of this dichotomy as "a law of nature." He recognized that the life of a soldier was much more brutal than that of a civilian, but failed to see why this contextual difference changed the moral standing of any given act. To him, the inhumanity of army life ought to elicit criticism and calls for change — not apathetic acceptance.[52]

Thus, Macdonald asked that the soldiers defend the dichotomy upon which their arguments depended. Casting doubt on the age-old distinction between soldier and civilian, Macdonald challenged these servicemen-submissions, engaging his critics in a debate. He addressed particular points that the servicemen had cited in their arguments. For example, he questioned their perception of the military-civilian divide on a practical level. According to Macdonald, military rhetoric increasingly seeped into civilian life. He reminded servicemen that, in one of the Patton speeches in question, the general spoke before a crowd of thousands of *civilians*. Between the violent wartime propaganda and the public victory speeches, the soldiers' suggestion to "wall off military society from civilian society" seemed to come too late.

"What is actually taking place is something worse than" a stark military-civilian divide, Macdonald contended. It is "a breaking down of the wall between military and civil society, but in the sense that the former is reshaping the latter." Macdonald lamented that the two spheres were not as starkly separated as the soldiers seemed to believe. To illustrate his point, he featured a photograph of General Patton speaking to a Sunday school class on the cover of the August issue. The photograph portrayed the cross-contamination that Macdonald described. "You are the soldiers and the nurses of the next war," the general told the children while standing before the flag. Macdonald concluded his response by encouraging the soldiers to reply. "May I add that I do know quite a few members of the armed forces," he noted at the end of his article, "a remarkably large number of our subscribers are in this category." At the time of this remark, servicemen made up 22% of *politics*'s subscribers.[53]

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[52] Dwight Macdonald, "Response to Defense of Patton-Halsey," *politics* 2, (October 1945): 317.

[53] Macdonald, "Response to Defense of Patton-Halsey," 317.

ATROCITIES OF THE MIND

THIS is an atrocity picture. It shows General George S. Patton, Jr., talking to a Sunday School class in the Church of Our Savior, San Gabriel, California, on June 10 last.

"You are the soldiers and the nurses of the next war," the general told the kids. "There will be another war. There always has been. Sunday School will make you good soldiers."

Every one knows about General Patton, of the pearl-handled revolvers, the blood and guts, the wounded-soldier-slapping, and the foul mouth. I recently saw a newsreel of Patton's speech in the Los Angeles Stadium shortly after his return from Europe. Grey-haired and erect, he had a fine presence: paternal, gruff, a bit diffident, with

Credit: International
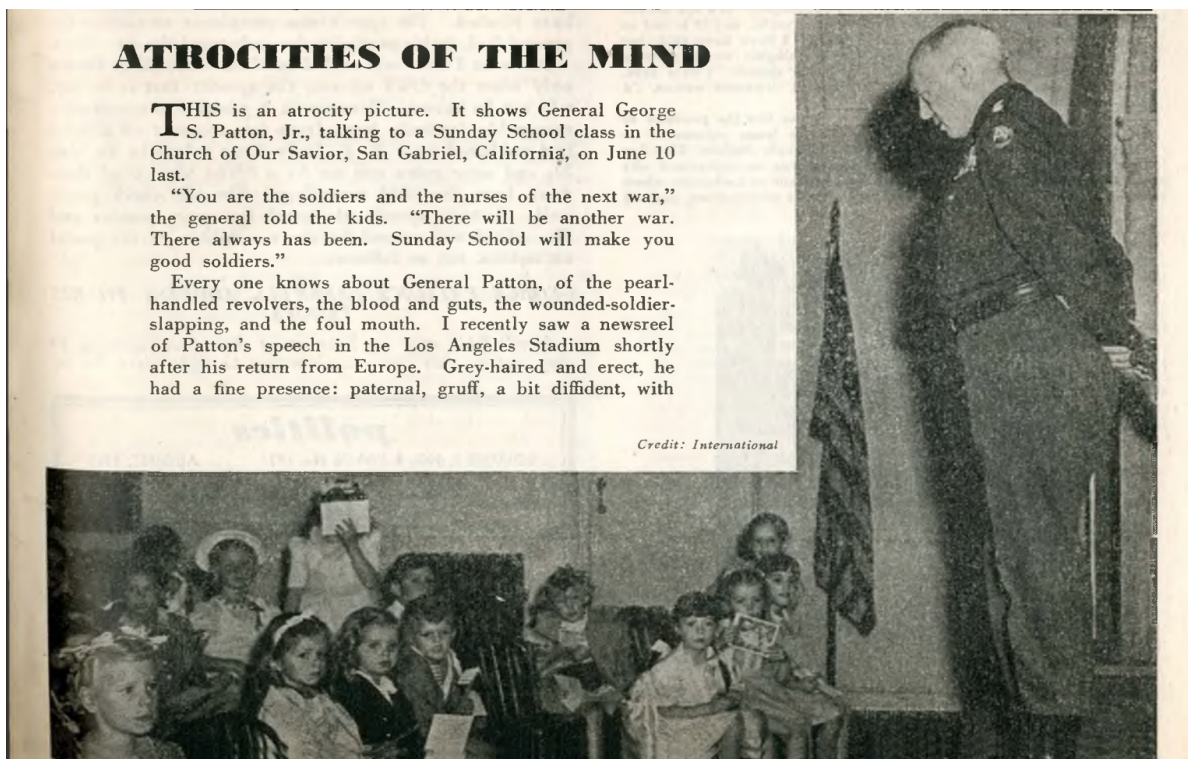
This picture of General Patton speaking to Sunday school children appeared on the cover of the August 1945 *politics*.[54]

To truly appreciate Macdonald's relationship with servicemen, one must locate this dialogue within the war reporting of the time. More than ever before, military correspondents and journalists comprised a critical part of the war effort. During World War II, war reporting experienced a revolution. Instead of treating reporters as a liability, American officials now saw them a valuable source of propaganda. Reporters' stories became "powerful weapons of war" used to promote public support. But this new status came with new expectations. After fully incorporating journalists into the war effort, military officials expected them to promote a positive image of the Allied powers.

The press' treatment of Patton was a product of this propagandistic relationship. In August 1943, the general fell under scrutiny when he slapped two American soldiers in Sicily. When Patton visited evacuation hospitals in Italy, he had encountered men suffering from battle fatigue.[55] On two separate occasions, Patton ridiculed and slapped soldiers suffering from the

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[54] Cover, *politics* 2 (August 1945): 1.
[55] What is now known as PTSD.

condition, calling both men cowards. When Eisenhower, Patton's superior, heard about the incidents, he sharply reprimanded the general and required that he apologize for his behavior. Yet Eisenhower refused to investigate further and demanded that the war correspondents, who quickly heard about the outburst, suppress the story for the good of the war effort. The journalists initially complied, abandoning all stories and interviews at Eisenhower's request. Over three months later, the story broke to the American public when a popular radio program revealed inside knowledge.[56]

More journalists came forward with their reports. From senators to blue star mothers, Americans expressed outrage at Patton's cruel treatment of the suffering soldiers. But many people felt that they did not have the authority to judge the successful general. They qualified their condemnations, believing that the war necessitated Patton's brutality. In popular magazines across the country, readers introduced their opinions on the incident with the same incantation: "I am merely a civilian."[57]

It is telling that Ernie Pyle, "the war's truth teller," kept quiet about Patton's violent outburst. Known for his reporting on the everyday lives of soldiers overseas, Pyle shaped the public perception of the American G.I. throughout the war. Widely-read among soldiers and civilians alike, his columns were more personal than patriotic. Yet even here, in the case of the correspondent whom Americans trusted more than anyone else, censorship ran rampant. Not unlike Macdonald, Pyle hated Patton. But at Eisenhower's request, he directed his attention away from the controversy in Sicily. When Pyle attempted to return to the topic of battle fatigue, the disorder that had solicited Patton's outburst in the first place, the American censors rejected his pieces.[58]

Left-wing publications were not immune to this censorship. The November 1945 issue of *politics* included an exposé, condescendingly called "Liberals and the Military," that criticized progressive publications like *The New Republic* and *Common Sense* for their compliance with military censorship. In the article, Macdonald reported on the case of Conrad Lynn, a black soldier who submitted an article to *The New Republic* describing his experience of Jim Crow policies overseas. When Lynn received his submission back from the editors, it was marked with

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[56] James Tobin, *Ernie Pyle's War,* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1997), 110-113; Alan Axelrod, *Patton: A Biography*, (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 115-117.
[57] "More Readers Discuss General Patton." *New York Herald Tribune*. 29 November 1943.
[58] Tobin, *Ernie Pyle's War,* 91, 110, 132.

a large rubber stamp which read: "Publication is objected to on grounds of Military Security or Policy." Macdonald revealed that *The New Republic* submitted all military-related articles to the War Department's Bureau of Public Relations. Yet the magazine's readers had never been informed of this policy. Macdonald noted that the soldier's article did not pose a threat to military security. "All the army had to do was simply to object" and the editors quickly complied.

In their response to Macdonald, *The New Republic*'s editors claimed that they viewed bad publicity for racial relationships as a legitimate threat to military security. Additionally, they argued that any soldier-author should submit his writing to his superior officer before publication. The editors maintained that "any loyal citizen must during the war consult military authorities." A month later, Macdonald published the piece that *The New Republic* had rejected. In *politics,* the silenced soldier could finally share his experience. "*Politics,* I am afraid, is forcing some liberals to stand up and be counted," Conrad Lynn concluded, "it's amazing, sometimes, what sides they choose!"[59]

Macdonald criticized a similar instance that occurred in *Common Sense* magazine, a publication that he had once praised for its inclusion of soldiers' perspectives. He reported that a lieutenant visited *Common Sense*'s editorial offices after regular contributor Kurt List submitted an article criticizing the army's Special Services Division. Following a meeting with the lieutenant, the editor, who had previously approved List's piece and scheduled it to print, suddenly claimed that he came to see the article as "unsound." How odd is it, Macdonald asked, that an experienced editor should have to depend on an army lieutenant to point out a "fundamental flaw" from one of his regular contributors? Macdonald concluded his article by scorning the liberal weekly, which he had once considered to be one of the best sources of independent and critical thought on the war.[60]

It was against the backdrop of this new journalistic consensus that Macdonald mounted his wartime critique. Despite the censorship and compliance that characterized other publications, *politics* preserved its independence. It is easy to attribute this independence to *politics*'s position on the outskirts of left-wing thought. Far outside the arena of public opinion

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[59] Dwight Macdonald, "Liberals and the Military 1," *politics* 2, (November 1945): 350; Conrad Lynn, "No Help Wanted," *politics 2,* (December 1945): 282.
[60] Dwight Macdonald, "Liberals and the Military 2," *politics* 2, (November 1945): 351.

and government censorship, Macdonald had the freedom to say what others could not. But *politics'*s independence was also a conscious decision maintained by Macdonald's uncompromising dedication to dialogue and dissent. In *politics'*s editorial policy, he vowed that the magazine would be staunchly "anti-establishment," actively resisting the perverting influence of wartime politicians. In the first issue, Macdonald refused to "pay lip service" to "national unity," the untouchable "ideal of United States at war." Thus, Macdonald criticized Patton without concessions and, perhaps even more impressively, corresponded with servicemen in the process.

One lieutenant thanked Macdonald for his uncensored treatment of Patton. Stationed in the Philippines, the soldier appreciated that *politics* published the speech so that far-off servicemen could witness the "fascistic" rhetoric of their leaders. He concluded by praising *politics'*s editorial integrity:

> In a periodical such as yours, the reader cannot always be in complete agreement. Being in the Army (though not, I trust, influenced too much by it) I am somewhat unsympathetic to CO's...But I respect you for expressing unpopular attitudes and for upholding the rights of minorities. If there ever was a time for such championship, it is today.[61]

Macdonald founded the magazine with the mission of giving a voice to the voiceless. *Politics* published subversive ideas, radically broadening the scope of political commentary. From homosexuality to anti-war anarchism, the topics most neglected by American intellectuals appeared in *politics* magazine. Alongside political revolutionaries and sexual radicals, the American G.I. received a unique platform to speak out. Writing about everything from collective guilt to wartime rhetoric, soldiers had the opportunity to comment on some of *politics'*s most pressing issues, conversing with Macdonald along the way.[62]

This back-and-forth displayed not only Macdonald's openness to dissent, but also his dependence on dialogue. From popular publications like *Life* and *The New York Times* to little magazines like *Common Sense,* the American press filled pages with letters from soldiers. Every

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[61] "More Readers Discuss General Patton," *New York Herald Tribune*, Nov 29, 1943; "Patton Again," *politics* 2 (December 1945): 382.

[62] Dwight Macdonald "What is *politics?*" *politics 1,* (February 1944): 6. *Politics* was one of the first publications in America to print demands for the fair treatment of homosexuals.

day, Americans eagerly poured over the words of servicemen who vividly described events oversees. The accounts of soldiers varied in tone and topic. Sometimes soldiers wrote personally, sharing their eagerness to reunite with loved ones and to enjoy their favorite foods once again. On other occasions, soldiers wrote politically, weighing in on important issues, such as soldiers' voting rights and segregation in the army. Despite the diversity of soldiers' accounts, nowhere does one see the kind of dialogue that defined *politics*'s "Soldier Reports" column. Here, the soldier's perspective was not simply a static glimpse into the life of the G.I. Macdonald treated soldiers as worthy participants in a dynamic discourse. In his eyes, their writings warranted engagement. Sometimes, the soldiers served as expert witnesses, confirming Macdonald's critique of the war. Other times, they served as his harshest and most nuanced critics.

Conclusion: "Here's ONE Thing We Can Do!"

> What "our" Government will not do, we can do. What the state will not do, the
> individual can do. What will not be done on a big, organized scale, can be done
> on a small, personal scale. Not so effectively, more wastefully — but still, to
> some extent, done. - Dwight Macdonald, "An Appeal to *Politics* Readers"

Politics contributors called Nancy Macdonald "the soul of the magazine." A lifelong
activist, she encouraged intellectuals to practice their principles beyond the pages of *politics*. She
encouraged them to "do something" about the problems they identified. While *politics*'s writers
frequently criticized America's efforts in postwar Europe, they also did something to help.
Nancy Macdonald led *politics*'s "Packages Abroad" program, which paired American readers
with suffering European families. Nancy oversaw the relief program as readers sent food and
clothing abroad regularly. During its three-year lifespan, the program raised over $23,000 and
distributed over 20,000 packages.[63]

Throughout his marriage to Nancy, Dwight Macdonald grew to share his wife's
dedication to action. Thanks to her, he understood his responsibility to act on the ideas in his
anti-war articles. For Macdonald, World War II was not just a conceptual conflict to criticize. He
considered how he could personally contribute to the anti-war cause — how he could make
America less violent, bureaucratic, and "irresponsible." His correspondence with soldiers stands
out as an example of this active contribution. While he criticized military life for being
impersonal and unthinking, he prompted personal and thoughtful conversations among American
servicemen. He created opportunities to combat the very culture that he criticized.

Macdonald took to heart the words of one soldier who called on civilians to "trust ...the
experience of those who really fought in this war even if they are not intellectuals." By treating
servicemen as serious contributors, Macdonald added concreteness and complexity to his
account of the war. From anecdotes to articles, soldier-submissions added color to the conflict,
allowing readers to evaluate the war free from the influence of press-secretaries and propaganda.

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[63]Dwight Macdonald, "Here's ONE Thing We Can Do: An Appeal to *Politics* Readers," *politics* 2 (October 1945):
1; Sumner, 188

More importantly, by entering into a conversation with servicemen, Macdonald called across the chasm separating soldier and civilian. This dialogue offered an alternative to an amoral and apathetic military life. Macdonald invited servicemen to contribute, criticize, and converse among radical intellectual and activists. And servicemen accepted the invitation. One soldier expressed his gratitude to the magazine: "In an intellectual desert, *politics* is indeed a cause that refreshes."[64]

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[64] PFC, "From A Soldier," *politics* 2 (July 1945): 223.

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