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Erin B. Blackledge

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The University of Southern Mississippi

“Patriotism is not enough”: Edith Cavell’s Life and Death in Anglo-American Context

by

Erin Blackledge

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Approved by

Allison Abra, Ph.D., Thesis Adviser
Assistant Professor of History

Kyle F. Zelner, Ph.D., Chair
Department of History

Ellen Weinauer, Ph.D., Dean
Honors College

Abstract

In October 1915, British nurse Edith Cavell was killed by the Germans for aiding in the illegal liberation of Allied soldiers. In the wake of her death, the British government created a propaganda firestorm to garner both domestic and foreign support for the war. In particular, the propaganda featuring Cavell was highly gendered and over the course of multiple generations has generated a diverse, and often polarized series of social and political responses in both Britain and the United States. Through the examination of government documents, newspapers, and popular culture, such as film and children's novels, this thesis examines the Anglo-American reaction to the Cavell case. Furthermore, it argues that Cavell's story served as an instrument through which to express varying gender tensions on both sides of the Atlantic for over a century.

Key words: Edith Cavell, gender, propaganda, popular culture, World War I, Great Britain, United States

Dedication

To my parents for supporting my academic goals, my friends for listening to my complaints, and The National Archives for enabling a happy accident: thank you.

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Introduction

If one were to stroll through London's Trafalgar Square, she would see Nelson's Column, the bronze lions, and various statues of monarchs and admirals. However, if one were to continue west, just off the square in St. Martin's Place, she would find a lone statue of a benevolent woman with the word "Humanity" emblazoned above her figure. This compassionate lady honored in stone is Edith Cavell, a British nurse, who because of her actions in 1915, inadvertently assumed a significant role in the events of World War I. Cavell's execution at German hands promoted indignation around the world early during the war. The British nurse who had been imprisoned in Brussels for smuggling Allied soldiers out of Belgium was executed by the Germans, making her an unintentional martyr and media sensation.

By the time of Cavell's death, the war in Europe, which its participants erroneously projected to be a short affair, dragged on with no end in sight.¹ As a consequence, recruitment became increasingly challenging for the British military. The British Propaganda Bureau capitalized on Cavell's death, specifically emphasizing the features that made her the exemplary British citizen, notably her race, gender, and profession. Propaganda featuring Cavell's likeness proved an overwhelming success, and military enlistments doubled during the eight weeks following her death.² Recognizing the propaganda's effectiveness as well as the need for military support, the British government also targeted the neutral United States. The British government flooded the United States with propaganda in hopes of changing the public's opinion on the war and fueling anti-German sentiments, yet these efforts resulted in unintended consequences. While the atrocity propaganda achieved its intended goal in Britain, the news of Edith Cavell's

¹ Michael Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 11.

² Diana Souhami, *Edith Cavell* (London: Quercus, 2010), 343.

death had an unexpected effect on the feminist discourse in the United States. The Cavell propaganda actually provided the United States with a new topic, further sparking the existing conversations regarding feminism and the role women were to assume in not only the war but also in society.

Altogether, the Edith Cavell saga was a source of intense interest on both sides of the Atlantic. However, through a comparison of British and American interpretations of Cavell over the last century – ranging from film, children’s books, and newspapers – this thesis will argue that Cavell is a figure who has sat at the center of varied and shifting gender tensions. For Britain in World War I, Cavell served as a rallying mechanism, as her death bolstered British men to enlist in the military to protect their nation’s womanhood. Not only did her image encourage the war effort, but it also subtly promoted the traditional gender roles of the time. For her patriotism and ultimate sacrifice, Cavell remains revered as one of the most well known British heroines of World War I. On the other hand, the United States’ portrayal of Cavell proved more complex. While Cavell’s death helped facilitate the feminist debate in the early twentieth century, after the war, Americans began producing fictional adaptations of Cavell’s life in films and novels that reverted to traditional gender stereotypes. Essentially, Cavell served as an effective instrument through which to express and process issues of gender both during and after the war.

The goal of this project is to analyze World War I propaganda with specific relation to Edith Cavell, a British nurse who was executed for helping soldiers escape from German occupied Belgium to neutral Holland. I sought to understand how her death affected public sentiment on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, as well as how it politically influenced the Allied powers in World War I. Unlike the significant cross section of work primarily devoted to the life and demise of Edith Cavell, I intend to highlight the influence her death had on both the British

and American perspective of World War I. Furthermore, this project uniquely explores the ways in which Cavell's propaganda shaped the American public. Not only do I examine the American shift in war sentiment, but I also explore the unintended influence that Cavell's death had on the feminist movement in the United States. Additionally, since the Foreign Office documents I used are relatively new to the public, many of the private government correspondence documents have never been fully explored and detailed in published research.

Following Cavell's death, the primary source of media in the early 20th century, newspapers, heavily propagated her story. They covered her death and the political ramifications following it. Most notably, many journalists used her story as an opportunity to write articles condemning German brutality. These were important, as newspapers were the medium in which Cavell achieved international fame. For the British perspective of this project, my principal source of information was the comprehensive compilation of archived 1915 International Foreign Office correspondence records. These records included a plethora of information, most notably written exchanges – some previously confidential – among diplomats from across the world. Included with these documents are the records of her arrest in Belgium, the calls for clemency by the American ambassador, and the consequences of her death. By far, some of my most notable discoveries were the exchanges written in the margins of either minutes of meetings or private letters shared among the British diplomats. In these secretive exchanges or musings, they discussed the importance of twisting Cavell's opportunely timed circumstances in their favor. These jottings represented evidence that the Foreign Office members were well aware of their actions. Another important set of sources for this project was the propaganda postcards and posters created with Cavell's likeness. Most of these images, found online, were representative of what the public was exposed to.

During my preliminary research, I was surprised to find numerous archived documents generated by the American ambassador to Belgium, Brand Whitlock. Even more so, I was astounded to find at least six U.S. newspaper article clippings referring to Cavell after her death in 1915 enclosed in the British Foreign Office files. These specific inclusions led me to infer that the British government was hyper-aware of how the propaganda they were sending to American newspapers was being utilized, as well as the fact they were interested in the American reaction. The U.S. interest and government participation in the events surrounding Edith Cavell's death led me to conclude that the Allies used her ordeal in a specific manner. Consequently, I became interested in exploring the influence of Cavell's death on not only the British, but also the effect of her death on the shifting American perspective of World War I.

While historians now acknowledge that the United States was not completely neutral in World War I, in 1915 the American public still valued isolationist ideals. The British and French, who had, by October 1915, been involved in the war for over a year, were becoming desperate for assistance. Their calls for help were aimed predominantly at the United States. Following the British reaction to Cavell's death, they capitalized on the story and sent it abroad. Furthermore, Cavell's case gained attention due to American ambassador Brand Whitlock's involvement.

Upon evaluation of correspondence letters, British Internal Foreign Office files, newspaper articles, propaganda images and supplemental websites, it became clear to me that Edith Cavell's murder was used to the advantage of the British government. Thanks to the tireless and sometimes duplicitous propaganda efforts, the world came to see her as a selfless humanitarian who was slaughtered for aiding the Allied cause, thereby provoking outrage that led to a proliferation of enlistment in the British armed forces as well as eventual Allied support. My research also confirmed data corroborating the enlistment rate increases that followed the

release of propaganda related to Cavell's death.

Her death at the hands of the Germans created public outrage and heightened British determination to succeed in the Great War. While Cavell's execution spurred British indignation, her death also became a stark example and reminder to the rest of Europe and the United States of the German's brutality. Due to recognition from many propagandists, she essentially skyrocketed from anonymity to a beloved martyr overnight. Her death stimulated a renewed movement of military enrollment in Britain and was an important factor in drawing the United States into World War I. Additionally, my research argues that her death provided both American feminists and anti-feminists a forum in which to express their beliefs. Altogether, Cavell's execution allowed a controversial, but meaningful, conversation about feminism to percolate in the American public's mind. Women in the United States, as well as Great Britain, seized this tragic but unique opportunity in history to bring their issues to the attention of the media. Nonetheless, Cavell's legacy goes beyond propaganda. Over the past century, her story and image have reinforced propaganda, feminism, and traditional gender roles. Overall, she allowed nations to understand their own gender relations and women's positions in society.

Literature Review

Over the past century, extensive research has been conducted on Edith Cavell's contributions to World War I. Historians have examined her nursing career, her role in aiding Allied soldiers, her trial and subsequent execution, and the impact her death had on the home front in not just Britain, but other Allied nations. Historians such as Nicoletta Gullace have considered Cavell's impact on the British home front, examining gender relations and the role Cavell played on the British understanding of the war. Gullace maintains that Cavell was significant in that she represented the "embodiment of acceptable female patriotism." As a nurse,

she was performing the duties associated with traditional femininity, by caring for the men who were fighting the war. The war was, in a sense, changing the stereotypical Western view of women's roles. Nonetheless, while there were changing gender dynamics, there were still lines women were not expected to cross.³

When Edith Cavell was executed by the Germans in October of 1915, they did so with the intent of intimidating the Allies. However, they could not have anticipated both the diplomatic and military predicaments that ensued as a result of Cavell's death. From the British perspective, much has been written in terms of the successful propaganda Cavell generated in the immediate aftermath of her death. In fact, historians estimate that military enlistment doubled for eight weeks following the promulgation of Cavell atrocity propaganda in Britain.⁴

In general, historians have looked at Cavell's importance in the war from two perspectives: her life and death. While alive, she is documented as accomplished in the field of nursing, heading a nursing training school in Brussels, Belgium.⁵ When World War I broke out, the German army invaded Belgium and transformed the nurse training hospital Cavell oversaw into a Red Cross hospital. She soon became involved in an underground organization that over a period of approximately nine months smuggled an estimated two hundred Allied servicemen across the Belgian border into neutral Holland. The Germans, believing from the beginning she was involved in espionage, prepared to execute her from early in her incarceration. Nonetheless, after ten weeks of imprisonment, Cavell underwent a hurried, two-day trial, with poor representation. Cavell's willingness to admit her role in aiding the escape of Belgian, French,

³ Gullace, Nicoletta. *The Blood of Our Sons: Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

⁴ Diana Souhami, *Edith Cavell* (London: Quercus, 2010), 343.

⁵ Edith Luisa Cavell," *Canadian Orthopedic Nurses Association*, accessed September 18, 2015, <http://www.cona-nurse.org/History-EdithCavell.html>.

and British soldiers led to her swift condemnation. In the early hours of October 12, 1915, less than ten hours after her sentencing, Cavell was furtively executed for treason by a German firing squad.⁶

William Thomson Hill published one of the first books about Edith Cavell in 1915, *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell: the Life Story of the Victim of Germany's Most Barbarous Crime*. He provides biographical context on Edith Cavell's early life, offering information on Cavell's childhood and time at nursing school. He also gives an account of Cavell's arrest and imprisonment. He concludes that the best memorial to Cavell would be the determination of other British citizens to participate in the war effort. Overall, this book should be treated as a primary source. As it was written closer to the fact, it is one of the best sources of biographical information of Edith Cavell. This book was written before Cavell's image was totally altered by propaganda, so it gives a more true to life interpretation of her life and her role in World War I. But at the same time, his book could have a concerted bias against Germany as it was written during the war. However, it gives an excellent perspective of the consequences of Cavell's death, which is crucial for the historical study of Edith Cavell's role in World War I.

In "The Hun and Home: Gender, Sexuality, and Propaganda in First World War Europe" written by Lisa M. Todd, which is featured in the larger *History of Warfare*, it becomes clear that propaganda was ubiquitous in Europe during World War I.⁷ Both the Germans and the Allied armies employed heavy use of military propaganda as well as socially charged propaganda for the war effort. For the Germans to bolster support and strengthen morale, they often showed

⁶ Cynthia Cockburn, "Executed: what were the principles for which Edith Cavell lived and died?" *OpenDemocracy*, last modified August 4, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/cynthia-cockburn/executed-what-were-principles-for-which-edith-cavell-lived-and-died/>

⁷ Troy Paddock, ed. *History of Warfare, Volume 94 : World War I and Propaganda*. Leiden, NLD: BRILL, 2014. Accessed February 24, 2016. ProQuest ebrary.

Prisoner of War propaganda or distributed pictures of Allies surrendering to German troops. Another German tactic was to use enemy-civilians as an attempt to control or pacify the Allies. In this context, Todd argues that the execution of Edith Cavell was performed for shock value. After she aided in Allied soldiers escapes, her death was intended to serve as an example to the British. What the Germans did not expect was for her story to become a massive and highly successful propaganda campaign for the enemy. The British government needed a symbolic figure to help incite support for the war and Edith Cavell was the obvious choice. The British government soon capitalized on Cavell's death by creating atrocity propaganda with dramatized, fictionalized images of Cavell's death. Atrocity propaganda, which is used as a psychological warfare tactic and generally features women and children as victims of brutal rape or murder, became widely successful in World War I, especially the postcards and posters featuring Cavell.⁸

Initially, Cavell's death appeared to be only a British tragedy. However, historian Katie Pickles, in her monograph, *Transnational Outrage: The Death and Commemoration of Edith Cavell*, argues that the potent combination of Cavell's race, gender, nationality, and occupation transformed the executed spy into a martyr, resulting in a global firestorm.⁹ According to Pickles, Cavell was perceived as an innocent victim in not only Britain, but also throughout the Commonwealth and Allied nations. As the title implies, Cavell's execution spurred transnational outrage, producing new ideas regarding nursing, femininity, and the war itself. Pickles uses the aftermath of Cavell's death, most specifically the widespread commemorations and memorials dedicated in her honor, to discuss the influence her death had on both World War I and the world.

⁸ Gullace, 151.

⁹ Katie Pickles. *Transnational Outrage: The Death and Commemoration of Edith Cavell*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

Pickles concedes that extracting evidence from the period surrounding Cavell's death is problematic. First, the era's lack of technology and record keeping limit a researcher's ability to completely elucidate the motivations and objectives regarding the dissemination of information related to her death. In addition, the wartime era, in general, hinders one's ability to take at face value stories, such as the death of Edith Cavell, which had the potential to be politicized and sensationalized for gain. In particular, foreign officials in the British government sought to exploit the situation, potentially comprising government documents with extreme bias. Pickles introduces new source material reflecting upon the geographical significance of commemorations dedicated to Cavell. Pickles specifically analyzes memorials and commemorations to understand Cavell's impact and legacy, highlighting her ensuing, yet inadvertent, contributions to nursing and the first wave of feminism.

Pickles argues that Cavell represented the ultimate white, Christian, imperial woman and ultimately achieved martyrdom because of these characteristics. She exuded "Britishness" – making her the perfect figure to honor.¹⁰ As such, her murder was devastating, and Britons received the news more resentfully because of it. Cavell's actions ultimately became a promotion of humanity and consideration. Pickles contends that the numerous namesakes, statues, and children's literature purposefully glorified her morality and stressed her significance as a role model.

Furthermore, Pickles looks at Cavell's impact beyond Britain. She does this by documenting the countries where Cavell's death was mourned, proving that there was, indeed, widespread commemoration. Likewise, the numerous monuments sprinkled all around the world demonstrate evidence of Cavell's significance. There are testaments to Cavell such as plaques

¹⁰ Pickles, 9.

and busts, which celebrate her contributions to modern nursing. There is even a mountain named for her in Canada. Pickles states that Cavell's image "represented the construction of hegemonic colonial identities, with Cavell as a model example of British womanhood."¹¹

This book offers the most complete consideration of Cavell's relevance in not only early twentieth century Britain, but also her contributions to the world today. Unlike most traditional Cavell biographies, Pickles offers a historical investigation of not only the major events of her death and its subsequent use in wartime propaganda, but also the impact Cavell made to modern nursing and feminism. Pickles reads between the lines of what these memorials truly meant to individual villages and even entire nations, showing a comprehensive picture of the impression the death of a single woman has made on the world.

Just as Pickles understands that Cavell's legacy lives through these memorials, Shane Barney claims that if Cavell's relevance were tied only to propaganda, her fame would have expired at the end of the war.¹² Therefore, he looks into her legacy to see if myth has kept her story alive. He argues that the propagandists, in order to make use of Cavell's death in wartime, blew Cavell's image so out of proportion that, even when the war was over, her true persona was lost. He concludes that the idea of Edith Cavell that was promulgated was one that people want to identify with and emulate. He also concludes that Cavell's true identity is not really known at this point. Biographies, statues, and historical fiction have continued to morph her image into that of a poignant martyr.

¹¹ Pickles, 138.

¹² Shane M Barney. 2005. "The Mythic Matters of Edith Cavell: Propaganda, Legend, Myth and Memory". *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 31 (2). Berghahn Books: 217–33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41299337>.

Moreover, with regards to the propaganda's effect on the United States, research is lacking. By 1915, Britain was already desperate for support. Consequently, they aimed their propaganda efforts at the Allied nations. Unapologetically, they pursued American support, sending the Cavell story and images to newspapers in the United States. By closely examining the American perspective, this historical angle seeks to determine the influence of the American-aimed British propaganda, as there are few written accounts related to American's understanding of the Cavell propaganda. It would appear from frequent mentions of Cavell in newspaper articles that the American people did indeed become engrossed in Cavell's story. Even after the war was over, there were Cavell biographies published in the United States, children's novels, and even films. It is well documented that British propaganda targeted the then-neutral United States, but there is less credit given to how big a role Cavell's death played in swaying the American public's opinion on the war.

Methodology

My research methodology included a qualitative assessment of the role that propaganda featuring Edith Cavell had on the British and American perspectives of World War I. By performing historical analysis of both primary and secondary sources, I studied Cavell's legacy both during and after World War I to understand two nation's interpretations of the same event and its aftermath. Furthermore, I viewed many aspects of this project through a gender lens to explore feminist interpretations as well.

I completed the bulk of my current research at the National Archives in the United Kingdom. In the archives, I examined over 250 documents from the Foreign Office compilation of October 1915. I photographed the pages of all relevant source materials and made detailed source notes while in the U.K. After returning to the U.S., I began supplementing my research

with additional online resources to assist in defining Edith Cavell's early life, professional training, and contributions to the field of nursing. This background information assisted me in better understanding Cavell's character and the motivations for her actions that led to her death. I also began to look at American newspapers to try to understand the American reaction to the story of an unknown foreign nurse's murder.

My research contains dozens of newspaper articles from 1915-1922 obtained from the Library of Congress' Chronicling America project, which has digitized American newspapers from fifteen cities from the years 1836-1922. These newspaper articles provided the American perspective on Cavell's death and the American reaction to Cavell propaganda. The articles featuring Cavell range from indignation of American journalists to feminist arguments developed around the case. There are even advertisements and plot summaries for American-made films featuring Cavell. Since these films have since been lost, these plot summaries are significant in explaining the types of Cavell films that were created for entertainment. It is necessary to understand how the average American understood Cavell's death in order to argue that it had any impact on the American opinion of the war. In addition, I included British newspapers from the British Newspaper Archive from the British Library from 1915 to compare the two nation's interpretations of the event by paralleling the type of language employed and the diversity of quotes from the public.

I also studied children's books relating to Edith Cavell, which are located in the de Grummond Books Collection at the McCain Library and Archives at the University of Southern Mississippi. As the authors of these novels were American and the novels were generally published decades after Cavell was executed, they represent an interesting perspective of the situation. While the content of these novels was analyzed for historical accuracy, the intentions

were not to research these works as biographical resources. Rather, I examined them for their cultural context, looking for themes among the works that might suggest how Cavell's life and death may have been fictionalized over time in the American public opinion. The author's interpretations represent the American perception of Cavell's life and eventual execution and legacy.

This research draws a potential correlation between the Cavell propaganda and the shift in public war sentiment in both the Britain and the United States. This project creates a historical narrative that explains the influence and cultural implications of Cavell's death and story in both Allied nations. My research suggests that Cavell's impact reaches the United States to a greater degree than the current scholarship suggests. This project contributes to existing scholarships by illuminating the extent to which Cavell's death had on the American's war opinion as well as other cultural impacts on the United States.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is organized into three chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on Edith Cavell's death and its implications in the United Kingdom. It includes brief historical background information involving Cavell's early life as well as her nursing career in both the United Kingdom and Belgium. The chapter also reviews the events surrounding Cavell's death, such as the actions that led to her death, the subsequent military court trial, and her eventual execution. Furthermore, it discusses the immediate diplomatic and governmental impact of Cavell's death, and examines the massive and successive propaganda campaign. This information is captured from the British perspective, analyzing how the British government and public reacted, specifically the role her gender played in the success of propaganda.

Chapter 2 focuses on the American perspective of the Cavell case. It includes the British government attempts to draw the United States into the war by disseminating Cavell propaganda abroad. Furthermore, it examines the American ambassador to Belgium, Brand Whitlock's, struggles to commute Cavell's sentence, which ultimately brought significant attention to the case within the United States. This chapter also assesses the ways in which the public accepted the news. While at first they were outraged by this act of German barbarism, this chapter also looks at the ways in which both the feminist and anti-feminist movement used Cavell's story as a way to argue their points regarding the condition of women.

Finally, Chapter 3 examines the Anglo-American memory and legacy of Cavell. In this chapter, I explore how Cavell's memory diverges among the Allied nations, specifically comparing Britain and the United States. By looking at her representation in popular culture such as film and children's novels, I determine the considerable role her gender played on the themes of the works she is featured in. This chapter surveys the American children's novels such as Adele De Leeuw's *Edith Cavell: Nurse, Spy, Heroine* and Juliette Hamelecourt Elkon's *Edith Cavell, Heroic Nurse*, to explore how the authors perceived Cavell's femininity. The chapter also explores both British and American films such as *Dawn* and *The Cavell Case* to see how Cavell's legacy was interpreted over the past century.

Chapter One: The Death of a British Nurse and the Birth of a Transnational Martyr

In a note to his colleague, Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, was gleefully confident that the news of the execution of a “noble Englishwoman will be received with horror and disgust not only in the Allied States but throughout the civilized world.”¹³ By October of 1915, over a year after entering World War I, the people of Great Britain were becoming increasingly disillusioned with the war. However, in the early morning of October 12, 1915, the British government received an answer to their prayers. Unexpectedly, this aid came in the form of the death of a woman: Edith Cavell. Cavell, a British nurse, had been imprisoned in Brussels for assisting in the illegal smuggling of Allied soldiers across the border to neutral Holland. Not long after her arrest, Cavell was tried in front of a military tribunal and brutally executed by the Germans. The news of her inhuman death made her an unintentional martyr and media sensation. Consequently, Grey’s prediction proved true, as the death of the Englishwoman in question shocked the world, and allowed the British Foreign Office to generate an immensely effective gendered propaganda campaign that renewed both British and Allied support for the war effort.

Edith Cavell was born on December 4, 1865, in a village near Norwich, England. Her father, a vicar in the Anglican Church, provided Cavell and her family with a fervent religious upbringing. This dedication to Christianity monumentally influenced her early life and instilled a passion for service that she carried with her for the rest of her life.¹⁴ Cavell’s early adult years

¹³ Edith Cavell Papers. 383/15. *The National Archives, United Kingdom*. (TNA): Foreign Office (FO).

¹⁴ William Hill, *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell: the Life Story of the Victim of Germany's Most Barbarous Crime* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1915), 5-8.

were spent training to become a nurse at the Royal London Hospital. In 1907, Antoine Depage, the Belgian royal surgeon, recruited Cavell to help him establish the first school of nursing in Belgium, the L'École Belge d'Infirmières Diplômées. Consequently, she moved to Brussels, where for over a decade, she was instrumental in transforming the concepts of nursing and medical care in Belgium.¹⁵

In June of 1914, the brewing tensions in Europe finally came to a head with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo and the subsequent Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia.¹⁶ With Germany's military support, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia; thus, triggering the outbreak of World War I. Soon after the beginning of the war, in August 1914, German troops, in a maneuver to take France, enacted the Schlieffen Plan, invaded, and subsequently occupied Belgium. The German violation of Belgian neutrality caused Great Britain to officially declare war on Germany.¹⁷

In response, Cavell, who at this time was visiting her mother in England, promptly returned to her hospital in Belgium, which soon afterward was taken over by the Red Cross. Although she was aware of the potential danger involved, she insisted, "At a time like this, I am needed more than ever."¹⁸ Despite multiple opportunities to return to England, Cavell's concerns rested with her life's work; therefore, she remained in Brussels.

Under German control, the hospitals were given a comprehensive set of statutes governing the treatment of soldiers. Despite the various laws that prohibited for the care of

¹⁵ "Edith Luisa Cavell," *Canadian Orthopedic Nurses Association*, accessed September 18, 2015, <http://www.cona-nurse.org/History-EdithCavell.html>.

¹⁶ Neiberg, 3.

¹⁷ Neiberg, 11.

¹⁸ Cynthia Cockburn, "Executed: what were the principles for which Edith Cavell lived and died?" *OpenDemocracy*, last modified August 4, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/cynthia-cockburn/executed-what-were-principles-for-which-edith-cavell-lived-and-died/>

soldiers who were enemies of the German cause, Cavell, a consummate nurse and devout Christian, concluded her primary responsibility was to her patients, regardless of their nationality. Consequently, she extended the best possible care to not only German soldiers but to Allied soldiers as well.¹⁹

In addition to assisting the injured, Cavell soon decided it was her duty to aid in the liberation of Allied soldiers from occupied Belgium, which was illegal during the German occupation. She became involved in an underground organization and over a period of approximately nine months helped smuggle approximately two hundred Allied servicemen across the Belgian border into neutral Holland.²⁰ Despite the clandestine nature of her actions, the German secret police began to suspect that Cavell and her colleagues were concealing fugitives and helping them escape. Still, at that moment, they had no evidence to sustain their claims. However, on July 31, 1915, Phillip Baucq and other affiliates of an escape route group that Cavell assisted were captured. Upon a German inspection of Baucq's home, they found incriminating letters that linked Cavell to the escape organization. Consequently, Cavell was arrested five days later on August 5th and taken to the prison of St. Gilles in Brussels.²¹

The only evidence implicating her involvement in the escape organization was a tattered postcard from an English soldier, whom Cavell concealed and helped return to Britain, and who only wanted to express his gratitude. Unfortunately, his gesture of gratitude led to German confirmation of her involvement. The Germans were convinced of her guilt and were prepared to execute her from the beginning of her incarceration; nonetheless, Cavell was given a trial, albeit

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Cavell's arrest record found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

²¹ Foreign Office briefing document found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

with poor representation.²² In addition, Cavell's willingness to admit her role in aiding the escape of Belgian, French, and British soldiers led to her swift condemnation. After being imprisoned for ten weeks, she was subjected to a speedy court-martial trial that lasted only two days. In the early hours of October 12, 1915, less than ten hours after her sentencing, Cavell was executed for treason by a German firing squad. It was conjectured that her killing was performed in secret at two o'clock in the morning to ensure that no action could be taken to help her.²³

However, while Cavell sat in St. Gilles awaiting her trial, diplomats from the neutral governments of both the United States and Spain fought to commute her sentence. According to the correspondence between the British Internal Foreign Office and the Belgian government, many efforts were taken to ensure Cavell's survival. Interestingly enough, it was not the British who labored the most to save her, but rather the American minister in Brussels, Brand Whitlock. Internal Foreign Office memos note one executive assuring his colleagues that the "US minister will see that she has a fair trial." The British placed substantial faith in his efforts. Both Whitlock and the Spanish Minister endorsed all calls for clemency; however, both their attempts were futile.²⁴

While the British government did expend a reasonable amount of effort in attempting to secure a commutation of her sentence, they seemed doubtful of their ability to influence and facilitate any change with the Germans. An official admitted to being unsure of Cavell's fate. He wrote, "I am afraid that Miss Cavell will get a heavy sentence. There seems nothing to do." Sir Horace Rowland, the Foreign Office's top official, concurred. "I am afraid that it is likely to go

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Correspondence between Brand Whitlock and the Foreign Office found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

hard with Miss Cavell,” he wrote. “I am afraid we are powerless.” Lord Robert Cecil, Undersecretary for State of Foreign Affairs, reiterated this feeling, when he observed, “Any representation by us will do her more harm than good.”²⁵

It is clear from the sources that almost immediately after the word of Cavell’s death spread, the British government sought to exploit her demise. In a time when recruitment for the war was becoming more problematic, her execution was widely advertised throughout Britain by the British War Propaganda Bureau, also called the Wellington House. Seeing the potential to sensationalize Cavell's story to draw in both British military recruits, as well as attention from Allied nations, the War Propaganda Bureau began to quickly disseminate news stories about Cavell’s tragic death. Therefore, almost immediately following the confirmation of her execution, the British Foreign Office gave the media permission to release details surrounding Cavell's death. As a result, the British government began spending the equivalent of nearly 120,000 pounds a year to promote propaganda featuring Cavell.²⁶ By 1914, the British had established an imperial press system among the Commonwealth nations. Starting on October 18, 1915, the execution of Edith Cavell became the headline in British newspapers such as *The Times*, *Daily Mail*, and *Evening Post*.²⁷ Therefore, not only Britain received the flood of Cavell propaganda, but also Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.²⁸

The British also took a number of steps to include civilians in the dissemination of propaganda. For instance, Lord Robert Cecil, in response to James M. Beck’s, *The Killing of Miss Cavell*, suggested that Beck should modify his article to create a pamphlet for easy

²⁵ Notes exchanged between Horace Rowland and Robert Cecil found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

²⁶ Diana Souhami, *Edith Cavell* (London: Quercus, 2010), 344.

²⁷ Souhami, 339.

²⁸ Pickles, 63.

international distribution. Yet, he reminds himself, “Such a suggestion could not, of course, be made officially.”²⁹ Cecil is additionally mentioned in a note circulated around the Internal Foreign Office. An office worker sent his coworker an extract from the *New York Tribune*, which featured a piece discussing Cavell. In this note, he reveals that Cecil thought it would be a good idea to have the English press draw attention to the Cavell case and that it would be most desirable to have it reproduced abroad.³⁰ These notes and requests demonstrate the sometimes-devilish tactics the British considered using to their advantage.

Although the British government praised a woman for her war efforts, historian Susan Grayzel acknowledges Britain’s desperation to maintain “traditional notions of gender despite the arrival of war.”³¹ As historian Nicoletta Gullace puts it: Cavell, in particular, was the “embodiment of acceptable female patriotism.”³² With that in mind, the British astutely understood that the world would be outraged by the murder of a woman, especially a nurse. As a nurse, she served her country and contributed to the war in a role uniquely associated with women. Therefore, propagandists heavily highlighted her respected status as a nurse. For instance, accounts of her trial were distorted with witnesses claiming Cavell wore her nursing uniform despite photo evidence to the contrary. Even the Germans noted the celebratory status of nurses. In fact, it is believed that the Germans confiscated her uniform in an attempt to “remove the natural superiority she felt when wearing it, causing her to weaken in her will to fight.”³³ Therefore, a nurse such as Cavell was seen as a heroic figure, and as a result, her death was

²⁹ Lord Cecil’s inquiry about James Beck’s article found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

³⁰ Foreign Office worker note found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

³¹ Susan R. Grayzel, *Women’s Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 28.

³² Gullace, 156.

³³ Pickles, 31.

considered a devastating loss.³⁴

One of the more prominent propaganda tools used by the British was the display of Cavell's likeness throughout the country. For example, Cavell's picture was conspicuously displayed in army recruitment appeals. One such poster displayed by the Essex County Recruiting Committee featured Cavell's picture and a bold headline that exclaimed: "Murdered by the Huns." Below her portrait read, "Enlist in the 99th and help stop such atrocities."³⁵ As expected, recruitment increased, and even doubled for eight weeks after her death.³⁶ Furthermore, Mr. William Hill of the National Liberal Club proposed a National "'Cavell' Day to assist recruiting." He included a copy of the poem, "Edith Cavell," published in the *Daily Chronicle* and further suggested that the poem should be introduced at solemn public meetings to additionally help inspire recruitment.³⁷ The British government and citizens like Mr. Hill ardently believed bringing attention to Cavell's execution would convince men to enlist for the war and honor her memory.

The propaganda surrounding Cavell was full of extreme rhetoric. When discussing her execution, the British tended to only employ words such as "murder" and "slaughter" and often described it as "savage" or "inhumane." In addition, they produced somewhat morbid postcards depicting fictional settings of her execution.³⁸ Rather than displaying images of the strong professional woman she was, the artwork depicted Cavell as an elderly, defenseless lady. One of

³⁴ Notes exchanged between an unnamed colleague and Edward Grey found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

³⁵ Essex County Recruiting Committee, "Edith Cavell," *National Archives*, accessed September 19, 2014, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/spotlights/p_cavell.htm.

³⁶ Cockburn, "Executed: what were the principles," *OpenDemocracy*.

³⁷ William Hill's proposal to the Foreign Office found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

³⁸ Tony Allen, "Edith Cavell on Postcards," *Picture Postcards from the Great War*, accessed September 19, 2014, <http://www.worldwar1postcards.com/edith-cavell.php>.

the most famous postcards that was circulated illustrated Cavell dressed in her nursing uniform, lying on the ground after fainting at the sight of the firing squad. This same postcard shows a broad, foreboding German soldier standing over her prostrate form, prepared to fire directly at her head at close range. Over the picture in large, bold type is the title “Remember!” positioned to remind the public of Cavell’s sacrifice and to deliberately amplify the pathos to incite shock and anger.³⁹

Unlike the events the postcard propaganda suggest, these accounts, according to eyewitnesses, could not be further from the truth. For example, it was reported that Cavell fainted from fear of the firing squad. Another common story recounts that because the German firing squad refused to execute Cavell when she collapsed, she was summarily shot in the head at close range by a German officer. All of these stories seem to have been conceived for the sake of gendered propaganda.⁴⁰ These stories reminded the British public of the defenselessness of women. However, the German military chaplain, who was with her at the execution, claims she was “bright and brave until the last,” and died “like a heroine.”⁴¹ Yet, this is not the Edith Cavell the world was introduced to. The Allies took complete advantage of her victimization. In fact, most of the propaganda, which often exaggerated German brutality, knowingly misrepresented the execution to be more brutal and salacious than what really happened. More importantly, it all played into the resentment the public felt regarding Cavell’s untimely death.⁴²

³⁹ Watson, "World War One: Edith," *BBC News*.

⁴⁰ Richard Hogsflesh, "The Death of Edith Cavell and Its Effect on the British Public in 1915," *Humanities 360*, last modified August 4, 2013, <http://www.humanities360.com/index.php/the-death-of-edith-cavell-and-its-effect-on-the-british-public-in-1915-446/>.

⁴¹ Chaplain’s report found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

⁴² Hogsflesh, "The Death of Edith," *Humanities 360*.

Nonetheless, no matter the nation or what form of propaganda, it quickly became clear that despite any wrongdoing on Cavell's part, German actions were so reprehensible to citizens worldwide that action had to be taken. In private correspondence, Sir J. D. Rees argued that Miss Cavell's offense, under Belgian rather than German laws, was illegal. However, Edward Grey retorts that it seemed unnecessary to go into technicalities, because the "reprobation of it, which I believe is widespread in the world, rests upon higher considerations which arouse deeper feelings than mere illegality." He writes that Cavell's name would be a "banner of deep and inextinguishable hatred." While the Germans sought to put her to death, they inadvertently immortalized her.⁴³

One of the most important factors that made the propaganda so important and ultimately successful was the actual image of Cavell. Her gender was a significant factor in the exploitation of her death. At the time, the Victorian era's legacies still lingered heavily in Britain. Society operated according to a belief in "separate spheres" for men and women. While men dominated the public sphere, women, because of their perceived fragility and biological inferiority, were expected to be domestic, confined to the private sphere, the house.⁴⁴ However, portions of both traditional masculinity and femininity were slowly changing in Britain. Particularly, the idea of the "New Woman" was becoming more prominent by the late nineteenth century. These New Women were gradually trying to emancipate themselves and achieve more equality when it came to rights. The militant actions of the British suffragette movement with the Women's Social and Political Union, led by the Pankhurst family, were receiving traction in Britain. Unfortunately, the onset of the First World War stalled any major Parliamentary actions relating to women

⁴³ Notes between J.D. Rees and Sir Edward Grey found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

⁴⁴ Susie Steinbach. *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture, and Society in Nineteenth-century Britain*. (London: Routledge, 2012), 141.

winning the vote. Furthermore, problems arose as the advocates' interests diverged between those who were opposed to the war and those who supported it.⁴⁵

On one hand, while Cavell's legacy was emboldening men to go to war to protect women such as her, her role as a nurse was also encouraging women to do their duty for the war, but in a noncombat or threatening way. The German military chaplain is quoted saying that Cavell "died like a heroine."⁴⁶ While Cavell represented the New Woman, perhaps unconsciously, she still considered her actions as both her Christian and womanly duties. In a letter that never made it home to her family in Norfolk, Cavell announces, "you may be sure we shall do our duty here and die as women of our race should die."⁴⁷

The war did not disintegrate these gendered roles between men and women. Men were still expected to be the providers and the protectors. It was the more traditional view of femininity that was exploited by propagandists representing the Cavell case. Clearly, Cavell's case only gained such fame because she was a woman and propagandists were able to use her gender to their advantage. In one way, she was portrayed as a vulnerable woman. By depicting her in this manner, it was believed that it would persuade men to join the war to avenge her despicable death. There were intense concerns over what "would befall our womanhood if the German invasion triumphed over our resistance."⁴⁸ Likewise, on October 27, 1915, a foreign office operative wrote to Sir Grey suggesting "this latest crime will extricate our government from its embarrassment with regard to compulsory service; there cannot be many young Englishmen who will refuse to come forward to avenge our womanhood."⁴⁹ Consequently, the

⁴⁵ Steinbach, 56.

⁴⁶ Pickles, 48.

⁴⁷ Ryder, 83.

⁴⁸ Souhami, 339.

⁴⁹ (TNA): FO 383/15.

British employed additional propaganda tactics to spin gender against the Germans. For propagandists, their main defense in the press against the Germans was to emphasize the German inhumanity and callousness. As one paper put it, [Cavell's] sex did not give her the privileges of women in other civilized countries."⁵⁰ Since Germans were capable of killing a woman, they were vulgar, and therefore, a threat to the idea of civilization.

While emboldening men to enter combat, the gendered nature of the Cavell propaganda ensured that the traditional gender roles remained paramount despite the uncertainties of wartime. Altogether, propaganda featuring Cavell's likeness proved an overwhelming success in Britain, and military enlistments actually doubled in the eight weeks following her death.⁵¹ Not only was the propaganda effective insofar as increasing domestic military support, Cavell's death initiated an international controversy. Despite the success of the Cavell propaganda in the Empire, the war effort remained increasingly difficult, and the British government was in desperate need of increased assistance. Recognizing the propaganda's effectiveness at home, the British government turned its attentions to the isolationist United States, sending Cavell propaganda abroad in hopes of ensuring a military alliance.

⁵⁰ Pickles, 65.

⁵¹ Souhami, 343.

Chapter Two: Edith Cavell and American Feminism

On May 7, 1915, the RMS *Lusitania* became a casualty of German submarine warfare, killing a total of 1,198 people, including 128 Americans.⁵² The Germans, countering the United Kingdom's naval blockade of Germany, sank the ocean liner on the justification that it transported contraband cargo. However, the German argument did not assuage the neutral American public. In the early twentieth century, the United States emerged as a burgeoning superpower. Although the mid-nineteenth century was rife with internal conflict, by the end of the 1800's, industrialization and the Progressive Era of politics created a new vision of America. These advancements fostered the beginning of rampant isolationist tendencies that defined pre-World War I American politics. While still involved in the trading of goods with the Allied powers of Britain and France, by the midst of World War I, Americans were still very much attached to President Woodrow Wilson's idea of isolationism.⁵³ In this context, the *Lusitania* incident did not persuade the United States to enter the war in a more formal capacity, but the American fatalities instigated a fault line in the American neutrality. Taking advantage of the American's shift in position with regards to the war, the British Propaganda Bureau, following Edith Cavell's death, began forwarding propaganda to the United States. However, the British

⁵² Neiberg, 133.

⁵³ Neiberg, 131.

could not completely control the propaganda's function. While they aimed to pull the United States into the war, the American people, particularly those involved in the women's suffrage movement, created a different type of conversation regarding Cavell: feminism.

By October of 1915, Great Britain regarded the United States as an excellent potential ally. Historian Stephen Badsey explains that after Cavell's death, which came within mere months of the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the United States became an obvious target for British propaganda. He states, "A lot of the British propaganda work was aimed at the then-neutral United States."⁵⁴ Specifically, the propaganda that British Propaganda Bureau was able to manufacture from Cavell's execution, other than successfully encouraging British military recruitment, seemed to have been a significant factor in swaying American public opinion to support the United States entering the war – a move that ultimately ensured a victory for the Allies.

The American foreign minister Brand Whitlock's struggles to save Cavell's life were another reason Cavell's death received so much press coverage in the United States. In the weeks following Cavell's death, Horace Rowland, the Foreign Office's top official, forwarded to Lord Robert Cecil the American minister's report on the Cavell case. His note accompanying the report cajoled Cecil to agree with his sentiment that the bad faith of the Germans was "beyond belief." He also stated that the Americans had worked tirelessly to save Miss Cavell but were thwarted by the bad faith of the Germans. In his note, he further speculated on the possibility that the Americans would publish Whitlock's report to demonstrate the German's treachery.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Greig Watson, "World War One: Edith Cavell and Charles Fryatt 'martyred'," *BBC News*, last modified February 26, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-25244361>.

⁵⁵ Notes exchanged between Horace Rowland and Robert Cecil found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

While Cavell was arrested on the August 5th, the Americans did not learn about her incarceration until August 31st. Furthermore, according to Whitlock's report, which included all correspondence exchanged between the American and German authorities, the Americans, from the date they first learned of Cavell's imprisonment, exhausted all possible resources to either free or have her sentence commuted. Whitlock further claimed that the German authorities, despite their obligations to do so, did not inform him of Cavell's sentencing. Rather, they claimed the sentence had not yet been pronounced, and then executed her in secret. Whitlock explains that through an unofficial source, he discovered that she had been executed in the middle of the night.

Discouraged by the German's disregard for Whitlock's efforts, the Americans took her death as a severe blow.⁵⁶ In addition to their astonishment that the Germans murdered an elderly nurse, Americans were infuriated that their ambassador had worked so diligently to save Cavell, only to be ignored as well as deceived by the Germans. The questionable procedure and flagrant disregard of Whitlock's call for clemency was a considerable motivation for why Americans became engrossed with Cavell's story.⁵⁷ Moreover, the Cavell propaganda exposure helped shape the American public opinion and anti-German sentiment. While acknowledging that Cavell committed a crime, American people rejected the idea that she deserved to die. It was further proof that the Germans were unwilling to cooperate with the neutral United States, slowly disintegrating the American isolationist ideals.

In addition, thanks to the efforts of the Foreign Office, Cavell's story became a major headline not only in Britain, but also the United States. The American isolationist attitude had

⁵⁶ Brand Whitlock's report on Cavell's case found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

shielded the public from many of the realities of the war in Europe. Cavell's death was one of the first in-depth tragedies they consumed in the daily papers and eventually became engrossed with. For weeks, Cavell's name appeared in the headlines as the doomed protagonist in a tragic episode of German barbarism. Following the news of Cavell's death, American indignation was palpable. This fury can most easily be observed in a number of newspaper articles published throughout the country. The *New York Tribune* reported American reactions that ranged from one professional's claim that the "killing of Edith Cavell is just a part of the general horror and may be classed with the invasion of Belgium and the sinking of the Lusitania" to worries that "her death is a romantic incident of the war."⁵⁸

On October 23, 1915, the *New York World* distributed an article titled, "Worse than a Crime." Therein an American journalist discussed the repercussions of Cavell's murder. He claimed that the Americans were now involved because of the deception the Germans employed upon Whitlock, who desperately tried to save her life. He reiterated that the Germans had made a colossal error martyring Cavell: "What everybody who is not a German knows is that the Germans might better have lost an army corps than to have shot this woman for the comparatively trivial offense she committed."⁵⁹ This article reveals an American perspective that was quickly becoming more polarized and shifting away from neutrality.

Also published on the same day was *New York Tribune's* "One Woman." This article was essentially a scathing review of the actions of the German authorities. The author made the point that the Germans had made a massive blunder killing Cavell. Whilst alive she was merely a

⁵⁸ *New-York tribune*. (New York [N.Y.]), 31 Oct. 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1915-10-31/ed-1/seq-33/>

⁵⁹ "Worse than a Crime," *New York World*, found in TNA FO 383/15.

delinquent, but dead, she became a martyr. He reported that she inspired a new type of patriotic devotion for the Englishmen. Furthermore, he added that the “Americans will feel a deeper sympathy for Miss Cavell because an American Minister’s own words certify to the enormity of German inhumanity. For us there is a plain case, testified but one of our own countrymen. The facts lie clear, the facts be it said again, not of illegality, but of inhumanity, surpassing brutality, unbelievable stupidity.”⁶⁰

Despite the indignation regarding Cavell’s execution, the United States did not join the war until 1917. Nonetheless, the Cavell propaganda resonated with the American public and had unintended effects. Geographically distant from the war, this time of peace throughout the United States led to new social movements within the country. Notably, the early twentieth century saw the re-establishment and rise of the feminist movement in the United States. In 1915, the year Cavell was killed, and only five years before the achievement of women’s suffrage in the United States, feminism remained a potent issue and soon became entangled in the Cavell case.

The United States feminist movement had actually originated in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1848, suffragettes such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, held the Seneca Falls Convention in New York. This convention, which was held to “discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman,” helped bring women’s rights to the forefront of American advocacy movements.⁶¹ However, the movement was overshadowed and decelerated by both the devastating events and the aftermath associated with the four-year Civil War that began in 1861. During this tumultuous period, many advocates departed the women’s suffrage

⁶⁰ “One Woman,” *New York Tribune*, found in TNA FO 383/15.

⁶¹ “Women’s History in the U.S.” SewallBelmont House Museum. Accessed November 21, 2015. <http://www.sewallbelmont.org/learn/womens-history-in-the-u-s/>.

movement in support of the abolitionist movement that was sweeping the nation. Nonetheless, in the early twentieth century, there was a resurgence of the movement lead by an innovative generation of suffragists. This new generation became progressively impatient with the dormancy of the movement and sought new and imaginative ways to achieve suffrage for women. During this same period, the feminist movements taking place in Britain inspired American women, such as Harriet Stanton Blatch (the daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton) and Alice Paul. Particularly, the militant aspect of the British women's movement enlightened them. Both Blatch and Paul spent time in Britain, seeing the work of the Pankhurst family. As a consequence of seeing the militant actions of the suffragettes in Britain, they began to adopt a more public approach to the United States movement, such as openly discussing their issues in newspapers.⁶²

Therefore, unlike the British who took advantage of Cavell's death to reinforce traditional gender roles, in the United States, Cavell's death sparked a public discussion about feminism and women's suffrage, a topic more frequently deliberated in the Progressive Era of politics. As a journalist for the *Washington Herald* proclaimed, "The Cavell case has added new fuel to the flames that have so long been raging about feminism."⁶³ There were soon two vocal sides split over their stances on Cavell's execution: self-proclaimed feminists and suffragists versus anti-suffragists.

Some Americans who read about Cavell's story sought to disregard her gender completely. They acknowledged that Cavell broke the laws that had been implemented in

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ *The Washington herald*. (Washington, D.C.), 05 Dec. 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.
<<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045433/1915-12-05/ed-1/seq-36/>>

Belgium by the Germans, but they claimed that the only reason there was public outcry was entirely because she was a woman.⁶⁴ On the other hand, others viewed her death as inalienable proof that there was an inherent need for men to protect the women. One article, published in the *Washington Herald*, dedicated an entire page to the debate over whether Cavell's gender played a role in the atrocity of her death. The headline read "American Men Say Edith Cavell, Regardless of Question of Guilt, Should Not Have Been Executed Because She Was A Woman – Women Declare Sex Should Not Be Considered." The author acknowledged the shift in the conventional perspective of women, stating, "the women in America have done the unexpected and maintain[ed] that sex even in a case of this sort, should not make a difference."⁶⁵ Similarly, Chicago women lamented Cavell's death but still argued that she deserved the equivalent treatment as a man. In a quote for the *Harrisburg Telegraph*, the president of the Illinois Equal Suffrage Association stipulated, "If Miss Cavell was convicted of helping prisoners to escape, she ought to be dealt with exactly as a man would be under similar conditions."⁶⁶ When referring to the Cavell case, the president of the Woman Lawyers' Association in Oregon concurred, "If we had separate laws for men and women we would soon have anarchy."⁶⁷

Most suffragists made the argument that the public would not have been as upset if Cavell had been a man. On the other hand, anti-suffragists were concerned with preserving the

⁶⁴ *New-York tribune*. (New York [N.Y.]), 31 Oct. 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1915-10-31/ed-1/seq-33/>>

⁶⁵ *The Washington herald*.

⁶⁶ *Harrisburg telegraph*. (Harrisburg, Pa.), 25 Oct. 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85038411/1915-10-25/ed-1/seq-8/>>

⁶⁷ *The Washington herald*. See also *The Bridgeport evening farmer*. (Bridgeport, Conn.), 13 Nov. 1916. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84022472/1916-11-13/ed-1/seq-16/>>.

traditional ideals of femininity, asking what would keep a woman from becoming too masculine if they started to engage regularly in men's rights and duties.⁶⁸ Even the psychologists who were interviewed attested that men simply had more sentimentality than women, and it was their chivalry that allowed them to empathize more with Cavell. However, eminent suffragist Harriet Stanton Blatch understood the Cavell case as another argument for equal rights. "The furor of men over the Cavell case is pure hysteria ... [when it comes to women] they are always willing to share their sufferings, but never their powers."⁶⁹ The argument became: why do men want to deny women privileges such as voting, yet women, like Cavell, deserve the special entitlement to live after breaking the law simply because she was a woman?⁷⁰ For that question, men did not have an answer.

Although the Cavell case aided the existing feminist conversation, the propaganda did, to some extent, achieve the British objective. As intended, the United States was disturbed by the perceived reprehensible actions of the Germans. The death of Edith Cavell combined with the sinking of the *Lusitania* began a notable shift in the American neutrality regarding the First World War. While both the war and American insistence on neutrality continued, considering the United States did not enter the war until 1917, public discourse related to the Cavell tragedy never fully subsided. Both the pro- and anti- feminists used her as a case in which to debate the rights of women. In fact, while the propaganda did not result in immediate action from the United States, Cavell's chronicle found fame in another source: popular culture.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ *The Washington herald*.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Chapter Three: Edith Cavell's Anglo-American Memory and Legacy

The feminist debate over Edith Cavell's death prevalent in the American newspapers during the war did not survive into the post-war decades in the United States. Interest in the case endured, but the image of it gradually transformed. Almost immediately after the war, Americans began producing film adaptations of Cavell's story. Furthermore, Edith Cavell soon became a subject of interest in American children's literature. Although Cavell died in 1915, the American published novels featuring Cavell did not gain popularity until the mid-twentieth century. While the waning interest in Cavell could potentially be attributed to the onset of World War II, it seems like no accident that the resurgence of interest in Cavell's story coincided with the reinforcement of traditional gender roles associated with the Cold War.

In her lifetime, Cavell herself defied many societal expectations. Yet, propaganda reshaped her story according to traditional gender norms. Artists and authors portrayed her as an archetypal woman rather than the independent woman she was. In reality, Cavell accomplished many impressive feats in her life. Despite the fact she was an unmarried woman, an undesirable trait for women of the time, Cavell made a happy life for herself, doing what she loved: caring

for others. She moved to Belgium on her own, leaving her life in England. In the years before her death, she made remarkable changes in the field of nursing. In fact, she was even a war correspondent to the magazine *Nursing Mirror* in 1914.⁷¹ Her actions during the war are a testament to her bravery and compassion, yet they have often been overshadowed by the mythologized interpretation of her life created by wartime propaganda. It was this version of Cavell's story that continued to be disseminated in popular culture after the war.

The majority of the American novels about Cavell, marketed as biographies for children, did not focus on the details of her death. Rather, the plots of the novels concentrated on the more unknown aspects of Cavell's life featuring events such as her childhood, her stint as a governess, and her time in nursing school. In the existing historical scholarship, a great deal remains unknown of the specifics about the Cavell's childhood and young adulthood. To compensate for the vague and incomplete details of Cavell's life, the authors concocted details and dialogue to fill in the gaps. For instance, the author of *Edith Cavell: Heroic Nurse*, Juliette Elkon, acknowledged the lack of sources pertaining to Cavell's childhood and fully admitted to fabricating facets of her story. In her author's note Elkon concedes, "The facts of Edith Cavell's role in this war are well-known and are related in detail in this story. Less is known about her early years. By piecing together the scraps of available information I have here tried to recreate the scenes of her childhood ... though certain details are imaginary, the circumstances upon which they are based are a matter of record."⁷² Similarly, Elizabeth Grey, author of *Friend Within the Gates: The Story of Nurse Edith Cavell*, noted that, "In writing this book I have tried to tell the truth, in spirit if not always in precise detail, for naturally no notes were taken at the

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Juliette Hamelecourt Elkon. *Edith Cavell, Heroic Nurse*. (New York: J. Messner, 1956), 4.

time of her conversations and thoughts, and I have, from time to time, had to deduce such things from the evidence available, and the knowledge of her character.”⁷³

Likewise, many authors of the American novels took various liberties with her story with wildly dramatized descriptions of Cavell’s early life. Generally, they added superfluous details to ordinary events in Cavell’s life, such as contrived romances, and attempted to explain alternative, romanticized reasons behind her actions in 1915. For example, Elkon’s book, *Edith Cavell: Heroic Nurse*, which was published in the United States in 1956, heavily focused on her adolescent relationship with her cousin Eddy, implying that the only reason she remained unmarried was that he would not marry her. Likewise, it is ultimately Eddy’s rejection that leads her to pursue a career in nursing. The novel strongly suggests that Cavell pursues nursing only to compensate for a broken heart.⁷⁴ In addition, in *Edith Cavell: Nurse, Spy, Heroine* which was published in the United States in 1968, author Adele Dee Leeuw almost singlehandedly undermines Cavell’s nursing career. Despite all historical acknowledgment that Cavell was revered for her contributions to the field of nursing, De Leeuw created an alternative narrative wherein the depicted Cavell struggled to get through nursing school. In De Leeuw’s story, it is by sheer dumb luck that Cavell is approached to work at the nursing school in Brussels. Similarly, De Leeuw’s portrayal of Cavell’s involvement in the smuggling of prisoners out of Belgium seems purely by happenstance, as opposed to Cavell’s deliberate choice to participate in the endeavor. With an anti-feminist twist, De Leeuw also depicts Cavell as a character that

⁷³ Elizabeth Grey. *Friend Within the Gates: The Story of Nurse Edith Cavell*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 2.

⁷⁴ Juilette Hamelecourt Elkon, 42.

seemingly regrets risking her life instead of pursuing a domestic life and becoming a grandmother.⁷⁵

These interpretations, which gained popularity decades after Cavell's death, undermined her accomplishments as a nurse and overshadowed her bravery in challenging German opposition. It is significant to note that while the Americans were the first to use Cavell's death to construct and pursue a feminist argument, it was also later the American publishers who produced the majority of the fictionalized adaptations of these stories that presented largely anti-feminist messages. While perhaps not a direct pushback against the fluctuating gender roles arising with the second wave of feminism, they certainly epitomize the gender tensions prevalent in the 1950's and 60's. The second wave of feminism, which gained traction in the 1960's, grew as a response to the emerging American civil rights and social movements. This women's movement focused on all aspects of the women's experience, such as family and work.⁷⁶ While some women were advocating for radical changes with regards to gender equality, other women were pursuing less drastic approaches. Furthermore, these depictions of Cavell in children's literature align with the "girl next door" ideology promoted in the wake of the Vietnam War. According to historian Heather Stur, the girl next door became the "symbol of ideal womanhood."⁷⁷ These women were white, virginal, and nurturing, a non-threatening woman who did her duty for the sake of a man.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Adele De Leeuw. *Edith Cavell: Heroic Nurse*. (New York: Putnam, 1968), 70.

⁷⁶ Martha Rampton. "Four Waves of Feminism." Pacific University, October 25, 2015, Accessed April 20, 2017, <https://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism>.

⁷⁷ Heather Marie Stur. *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 79.

⁷⁸ Heather Stur, 69.

Furthermore, the American-produced children's novels have actually become the canon for Cavell's early life. Ironically, despite the fact that these authors acknowledged that their books were fictitious, authors of British nursing journals and other pseudo-scholarly works such as *Wikipedia* cite these books as legitimate sources for her early childhood.⁷⁹ Moreover, these American novels control the modern narrative of the famous British nurse's popular image. However, it seems possible that the misconstruction of Cavell's image could directly result from the British propaganda itself. Britain expended a great deal of time and money pushing heavily fictionalized propaganda at the United States. It seems plausible that the novels were not intended to digress from reality into fictional adaptations. Instead, American authors intended on creating biographical works about Cavell, but they were ultimately misguided by the mythologized images of Cavell they had been exposed to. Likewise, it would seem that over time Britain and the United States shaped each other's understandings of Cavell, creating new ideas, especially those regarding gender.

Cavell also became a prominent figure in cinema after the war. Although the first film portrayals of Cavell's story, *Nurse Cavell* and *The Martyrdom of Nurse Cavell*, was produced in 1916 in Australia, the United States created a film as early as 1918. Like many of the popular cultural creations about Cavell, the 1918 film, *The Cavell Case*, also known as *The Woman the Germans Shot*, completely manipulated Cavell's life story. The synopsis printed in a 1919 Minnesota newspaper describes an unsuccessful love story between Cavell and a man named George Brooks. Brooks and Cavell were in love; however, when Brooks discovered that Cavell's mission was to dedicate her life as a nurse to tend to the sick rather than be married, he joined the

⁷⁹ "Edith Cavell." Wikipedia. November 15, 2016. Accessed November 22, 2016. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edith_Cavell. See "References."

army. The main plot of the film depicts a tale in which years later, immediately following the outbreak of the war, Cavell rushes to save her former sweetheart's son, who after being captured, conveniently finds himself in the same Belgian town her hospital is located. As the ultimate expression of love, she sacrifices herself to aid in his escape. While totally fictionalized, the romantic aspect of the story made her more interesting to the public, while at the same time negating the feminist aspect of her actions, ultimately transforming her story to one that revolved around a man. Advertisements for the film pronounced, "To miss this picture is to miss a story that women are vitally interested in."⁸⁰ Presumably, the advertisements were predominately promoting the film for women.

The next well-known film produced about Cavell was the contentious 1928 British film, *Dawn*. In 1928, British director Herbert Wilcox created a suspense film based on the execution of Cavell.⁸¹ What is particularly interesting about *Dawn* was the controversy surrounding it. The film initially encountered censorship issues as the film allegedly depicted violent warfare and anti-German sentiments. The British Board of Film Censors refused to give the film certification, stating that the scene featuring Cavell's execution diverged from the German record. The film was eventually authorized after the London County Council requested edits to the final scenes.⁸²

Nonetheless, Herbert Wilcox found more success in the United States. Eleven years later, he produced another film about Cavell, *Nurse Edith Cavell* for American audiences. Possibly as the result of the controversy of his first Cavell film, the beginning of the film presented a specific

⁸⁰ *The Bemidji daily pioneer*. (Bemidji, Minn.), 17 Jan. 1919. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.
<<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86063381/1919-01-17/ed-1/seq-3/>>

⁸¹ *Dawn*. Directed by Herbert Wilcox, 1928.

⁸² Michael Brooke. "Dawn 1928 Synopsis." BFI Screenonline: Dawn (1928) Synopsis. 2014. Accessed November 20, 2016.
<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/516610/synopsis.html>.

disclaimer, “This is a tale, based on an act, of heroic life, and a conflict of loyalties told in reverence and without bitterness.”⁸³ In this depiction, the beautiful English actress Anna Neagle portrays Cavell as a calm, soft-spoken nurse. Neagle’s depiction of Cavell paralleled the British propaganda images perfectly. She was an angelic and altruistic figure. Similar to most of the popular cultural depictions of Cavell, Wilcox created his film as historical fiction. While many of the big-picture details of the film, especially the governmental reaction, as well as Cavell’s involvement in an underground smuggling organization, eventual arrest, and execution are accurate, it does take liberties with the actual facts of the case. Wilcox created characters and altered motivations behind Cavell’s ultimate decision to participate in the liberation of Belgian soldiers. However, there seems to be no nefarious purpose behind the alterations of her story. Rather, he amplifies the drama of the story to produce a more interesting and watchable film.

The Germans intended to make an example of Edith Cavell; instead, they created a martyr and a transnational media sensation. Since her death in 1915, Cavell’s image and persona have greatly vacillated in both Britain and the United States. While Cavell became a subject of interest in both Allied nations, Britain and the United States managed Cavell’s image differently. While the British initially fictionalized Cavell’s image, in recent years, there have been fewer fictional works created in the United Kingdom. In fact, following the centennial anniversary of her death, there has been a rise in the production of historically accurate works and biographies. Furthermore, the British nursing communities are working to recognize Cavell for her notable contributions to the field of nursing and value her for her feminist actions. On the other hand, it would seem that American popular culture drew on the more outlandish angles of the story. It seems possible that the United States was so inundated with propaganda stories and images of

⁸³ *Nurse Edith Cavell*. Directed by Herbert Wilcox, 1939.

Cavell, that her true image became inadvertently distorted. Moreover, with no personal ties to Cavell, it would seem the Americans were able to create and enjoy the fictional stories more so than the British public.

At the end of her life, Cavell certainly had not intentions of her death inciting her immortality. She had no desire for martyrdom. In fact, she expressed, “Don’t think of me like that, think of me as a nurse who tried to do her duty.”⁸⁴ However, the impact Cavell had on the world at the time was astounding. Following the news of her execution, there was an outpouring of empathy from other nations. Countries like Italy, France, and Algiers christened streets with her namesake.⁸⁵ Many individuals contributed funds for her memorial. Canada even named a mountain after her.⁸⁶ Even today some consider her the most renowned female of the Great War, associated with the causes of patriotism, humanity, and righteousness.⁸⁷ At the time of her death, for Britain, her story was manipulated to serve as the paragon of patriotism and womanhood. She became celebrated as a heroine, but ultimately categorized as a victim. On the other hand, the United States initially created a feminist discussion, but then exploited her story to promote traditional gender roles for women, specifically to young girls via children’s novels. Over time, both nations continued to alter their perspective on Cavell’s story, using her to understand the underlying gender tensions of the time.

⁸⁴ Account of Chaplain found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

⁸⁵ Documents containing proof of donations made by foreign countries found in TNA FO 383/15.

⁸⁶ “Edith Louisa Cavell,” *Canadian Orthopedic Nurses Association*.

⁸⁷ Watson, “World War One: Edith,” *BBC News*.

Conclusion

“Patriotism is not enough.”⁸⁸ This poignant proclamation by Edith Cavell mere days before her execution not only helped procure her status and lasting legacy as a martyr, but also became an aphorism that drastically motivated change during World War I. While in the present, Cavell is undoubtedly considered a twentieth century heroine, prior to her execution, she was relatively unknown. Even now her life’s work and accomplishments are eclipsed by her posthumous significance. Her death at the hands of the Germans created public outrage and heightened British determination to succeed in the Great War. While Cavell’s execution spurred British indignation, her death became a stark example and reminder to the rest of Europe and the United States of the German’s brutality. Due to recognition from many propagandists, she essentially skyrocketed from anonymity to a beloved martyr overnight. Her death stimulated military enrollment in Britain and was exceedingly instrumental in drawing the United States into World War I. The argument stands that if it were not for the worldwide recognition and

⁸⁸ Account of Belgian Chaplain found in (TNA): FO 383/15.

subsequent outrage of the death of this beloved nurse, World War I might have concluded differently.

Furthermore, Cavell's execution brought the controversial, but meaningful conversation of feminism back into the forefront of the American public's mind. Women in the United States, as well as Great Britain, seized this tragic, but unique opportunity in history to bring their issues to the attention of the media through discussions of the events surrounding the life and death of this remarkable woman. Because of the circumstances surrounding her death, Cavell's name and story are attributed to not only literary works, but to motion picture films as well. A few of these works, such as *The Cavell Case* film, were created and distributed as a part of a concerted effort by the propagandists to sway public opinion. However, many of the works created using her story and likeness, such as the children's books published in the United States, had nothing to gain by publishing such inaccuracies. This leads one to conclude that while Cavell's participation in the war was indeed fascinating, her contributions to nursing, feminism, and women's independence were simply not interesting enough to sell books without amplified drama. Although most of her contributions to the schools of nursing have been overshadowed by her depictions in propaganda, her occupation as a nurse inspired other women to participate in the war effort.

Nonetheless, through Cavell's story, both nations were able to express their beliefs and trepidations regarding gender. In the aftermath of her death, Britain was able to use Cavell's character to promote the war while simultaneously encouraging traditional gender roles on the home front. In the United States, Cavell's story helped facilitate feminist conversation. Essentially, her image served as a vehicle through which to express the gender tensions of the time, and continued to do so on both sides of the Atlantic over the course of the last century.

Whether her story functioned as propaganda, feminist-rallying cry, or a justification to reinforce traditional gender roles, Cavell's life and death provided a way for two nations to come to terms with women's positions in society.

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