

## Introduction

In December 1916, in the winter snow of New York State, while Americans busied themselves with Christmas shopping and prepared festivities, a skinny twelve-year-old boy, poorly dressed and in ragged shoes, shouted at the top of his lungs: “Buy a Mirror fer a kid in France!”<sup>1</sup> Every evening after school, James Prendergast Jackson Jr. stood on a street corner and sold copies of the newspaper to earn enough money to sponsor a French child whose father had been killed in the war in France. One of six children in a working-class family, James was determined to assist a child across the ocean who, as he had learned in school, desperately needed food and clothing. Ten cents each day would secure those necessities, and James promised himself he would get those 10 cents selling newspapers. He sold seventy copies of the paper a day, for which he earned 35 cents. From Greenville, New York, James wrote to the secretary of the Junior Committee of the Fatherless Children of France Society (FCFS) – the Franco-American organization matching American “godparents” with French children whose fathers had been killed in the war – and announced his intention of “adopting” a brother in France. With candor and determination, James announced his choice of child to support with his earnings: “I wood like a boy between ten and twelve if it is the same to you.” Attached to the letter was 85 cents that he had been given for his birthday. James was assigned André Leblanc, aged eleven, rue Dautancourt, Paris.

The letter and the ensuing correspondence between a small-town American child and a middle-class Parisian orphan were created by Marguerite Bernard and Edith Serrell to further the cause of the FCFS.<sup>2</sup> The booklet was designed to boost “adoptions” of French war orphans – that

<sup>1</sup> Marguerite Bernard and Edith Serrell, *Deer Godchild* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919), 12 (originally published 1918).

<sup>2</sup> Constance Murray Greene, “Deer Godchild,” *The Sun* (New York), February 9, 1919.

is, sponsorships of children whose fathers had died in the war<sup>3</sup> – in the United States. The composite story depicted through the *Deer Godchild* offered a glimpse of everyday life on both sides of the Atlantic, the dynamics of the sponsor/sponsee relationship. It was designed to appeal to the altruism of the American sponsors, which the FCFS so effectively touched for seven years during and after World War I. In crafting the fictional correspondence between two children, FCFS members Bernard and Serrell neatly encompassed all the crucial aspects of sponsoring a child in wartime, from choosing the gender of the orphan to the cost of sponsorship (\$36.50 a year per child), and the inevitable cultural and linguistic gaps that would arise in the course of communication. Even the ardent altruism of the working-class American boy, with the caricature misspellings a foil for the impeccable French of the Parisian child, mirrored the phenomenon that Americans of modest means and children participated in this relief effort.

The booklet is much more than a clever marketing tool, however. *Deer Godchild* illustrates the role of children in mustering support for the French children and the deliberate use of them in the marketing machinery, much of which was designed and driven by women employed by or volunteering for this major Franco-American aid organization that between 1915 and 1921 supported more than 300,000 French orphans.<sup>4</sup>

### American Humanitarianism and France

The story of the FCFS has yet to be told. In 1915, Paris-based Émile Deutsch de la Meurthe, a Jewish industrialist and French citizen,

<sup>3</sup> I have not been able to find any specific reason why the fatherless children were considered orphans, but note that even in current practice, the UNICEF and other UN programs consider children who had lost at least one parent to be orphans. See, for example, *The Global HIV Challenge: 2008 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic* (Geneva: UNAIDS, 2008), 13n1, [www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media\\_asset/jc1510\\_2008globalreport\\_en\\_o.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/jc1510_2008globalreport_en_o.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> I found the figure of 300,000 fatherless French children sponsored by Americans between 1915 and 1921 in two different repositories in France. In his letter to the FCFS executive committee in New York (April 1921), Émile Deutsch de la Meurthe claims that the FCFS matched 300,000 French orphans with sponsors. Letter from Émile Deutsch de la Meurthe to the executive committee of the FCFS, April 10, 1921, Alvin M. Bentley Papers (1911–2007), Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. In addition, in a letter dated April 10, 1926, the general secretary of the Franco-American Fraternity also mentions the “adoptions” of 300,000 French orphans between 1915 and 1921. Jeanne Seligmann-Lui to Paul Painlevé, April 10, 1926, Papers of Paul Painlevé, Fraternité Franco-Américaine (1926), National Archives of France, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine. In fact, while it is almost impossible to determine the accuracy of such numbers, it must be remembered that throughout the war and beyond, the FCFS continued to take children of the war dead on sponsorship. However, some orphans were sponsored for a very short period, or a sponsorship would cease upon a widow’s remarriage, the child’s death, or on the child’s sixteenth birthday.

envisioned a society to support children whose fathers had been killed in the war currently engulfing Europe. By 1921, his binational humanitarian relief organization had provided financial and material support for some 300,000 French orphans. But even as local chapters multiplied across the United States, another prominent Franco-American humanitarian organization was already operating in France. In August 1914, as German armies penetrated France, a Paris-based American citizen, Frederic Coudert, founded the Committee Franco-American for the Protection of the Children of the Frontier (CFAPCF). Through a network of twenty-nine “colonies,” private homes and estates, religious houses, and other properties, groups of between 10 and 100 children lived and were cared for – Belgian and French children from invaded and occupied war zones were rescued and sheltered. Two different groups of French children affected by the war were thus cared for, thanks to the American people: first, the children of the invaded districts, who, through the CFAPCF, were cared for in colonies across France; and second, those whose fathers had died in service, whose mothers received stipends, clothing, and other forms of assistance through the FCFS.

Across the United States, local committees of the FCFS – each of which was charged with finding sponsors for every child on its list – multiplied: In October 1916, there were 40 local committees;<sup>5</sup> by 1917, 65 were scattered across the country;<sup>6</sup> by March 1918, 140 local communities were in operation across the United States.<sup>7</sup> It would be easy to conclude that this blossoming of local units was simply a result of the United States’ entry into the war. But the FCFS had a powerful communication machine and a well-connected leadership that reached far into states, cities, and towns.

And thus, across France, the wartime experience of these 300,000 children became part of the overall French national narrative of the war. At school, in the yard, “adopted” children could boast about an American woman, an American entrepreneur, or an older “big American brother.” In church pews during Mass, children whispered to their friends that they had just been “adopted” by an American family. The generosity of Americans significantly boosted their living situations and surely their morale and

<sup>5</sup> Report of the Operations of the Fatherless Children of France Society (October 1915–August 1916), Albert J. Earling Papers (1885–1948), Box 2, Folder 4, Wisconsin Historical Society Library and Archives, Milwaukee.

<sup>6</sup> The Fatherless Children of France, Alma A. Clarke Papers, 1914–1946, Series I. War Work, 1917–1919, Committee for the Protection of the Children of the Frontier, BMC-M84, Box 1, Folder 3, Form 26F, Bryn Mawr College.

<sup>7</sup> “Help Fatherless French Children,” *Pleasantville Press* (New Jersey), March 2, 1918.

quite possibly their imaginations. For, what was the United States? What did it represent? Who were these generous people who sent money to France's children? Sponsorships had the effect of arousing their curiosity to know more about the United States and Americans, which explains why children felt such an ardent need to greet US troops when they landed in France. In retrospect, the private correspondences between orphans and their "godparents" can be seen to mirror the nationalist and patriotic cultural messages of the time,<sup>8</sup> but in the moment, it was surely a solace for the children and their mothers, for the correspondence permitted widows to voice their pain and worries and find some comfort knowing that across the Atlantic Ocean someone cared for them.

In the Franco-American colonies of the CFAPCF, the responsibility for healing, education, socialization, and religious education (though strictly forbidden by the Third Republic) often fell to Catholic orders of nuns. Among many others, the Sisters of Notre-Dame de Sion, the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, and the Sisters of St. Joseph de Cluny offered their convents and houses to the CFAPCF and provided direct care and material assistance to displaced, traumatized, and, often, ill, injured, and orphaned children. Life in the Franco-American colonies differed significantly from that experienced by millions of children across France (and Europe). Shielded from poverty, famine, and destitution, the children played in the open air, received a comprehensive education, were provided apprenticeships, sat for state examinations, and benefited from US-style medical care and hygiene practices.

During the thirty months that the United States remained officially neutral, these two organizations galvanized the support of Americans. Indeed, despite US neutrality, supporting a French child in need came to be seen as a moral and patriotic duty. The reaction of Americans to the suffering of France's children, at the intersection between neutrality and engagement in peacetime, suggests that in the circumstances of the time, humanitarian aid may not always represent a strictly disinterested form of help. This is why the history of these organizations must be resituated in the context of US neutrality and transnational humanitarian cooperation.

Unlike the American Red Cross and similar organizations around the world, the FCFS and CFAPCF did not exist prior to the outbreak of the war. They emerged in France's hour of need and told the people of the United States that in occupied and devastated regions of the country,

<sup>8</sup> Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 283.

children were suffering and their lives were in danger. Additionally, what characterized the FCFS and CFAPCF was their angle of action. Unlike international humanitarian organizations whose aims were to assist several categories of victims, the FCFS and CFAPCF focused solely on children, working from the belief that children were France's most precious resource. They also saw that France's future lay in the hands of Americans who had the ability and willingness to provide financial and material assistance and thus support France's fight against Germany.

### Children Matter

Despite the staggering number of French children sponsored by Americans, the seven-year campaign remains largely forgotten in the annals of early twentieth-century American history. This absence is not just glaring but also unfortunate: It prevents a full appreciation of a critical moment in the development of American humanitarianism, and it obscures a fascinating and fruitful angle of inquiry, analysis, and pedagogy.

At the center of the story of the CFAPCF, and the FCFS in particular, rests a core message: Children matter. In the history of American humanitarianism (and possibly that of global humanitarianism at large), children have been marginalized as actors of change. A key dimension of American civic and global engagement is therefore missing when the role of children is ignored. During World War I, children across the United States performed key functions as exemplars of American patriotism and as conduits for the nation's generosity. Amid the violence of World War I – the most critical period in the evolution of US humanitarian aid – American children not only provided inspiration for civic action at home and abroad but also helped facilitate aid to Europe's children through their classrooms, community organizations, and churches by saving their pennies to be sent to "their" orphans and urging their parents and other adults around them to do the same.

To date, scholarship has not yet fully recognized this point. The mobilization of adults to assist injured soldiers and needy civilian populations, including children, is well known. As civilians fled the northern regions of France and refugees from Belgium crowded the roads, news of atrocities committed by German troops spread.<sup>9</sup> Over a few weeks, 5,550

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Purseigle, "A Wave on to Our Shores': The Exile and Resettlement of Refugees from the Western Front, 1914–1918," *Contemporary European History* 16, no. 4 (2007): 427–44, at 429; Maartje Abbenhuis and Ismee Tames, *Global War, Global Catastrophe: Neutrals, Belligerents and the Transformation of the First World War* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 29–32.

Belgian civilians were murdered.<sup>10</sup> Rapes, deportations, and executions of locals multiplied, as a western front solidified in northern France.<sup>11</sup> The suffering of children was prominent in these accounts and proved decisive in fostering hatred against Germany.<sup>12</sup> Through the American Red Cross, millions of citizens devoted their energy to feed and clothe European refugees, both women and children.<sup>13</sup> Headed by Herbert Hoover, the Commission for Relief in Belgium and the American Red Cross tapped the country's willingness to aid European populations in need and positioned the United States as an "exceptionally altruistic nation."<sup>14</sup> Both organizations matched Woodrow Wilson's "spirit of absolute disinterestedness" and ensured providing help to Europe without reneging on US neutrality.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, in the aftermath of World War I, Americans' generosity toward foreign children reached all parts of the European continent. In Hungary, for instance, the suffering of Budapest's children was used to mobilize American (and European) humanitarian donors.<sup>16</sup> In Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Near East, American secular and religious organizations fed hungry civilians and implemented rehabilitation programs.<sup>17</sup> American churches played an important role in mobilizing American youth during and after 1918. In Bismarck, North Dakota, for instance, Sunday schools were organized to help Armenian children.<sup>18</sup>

Although scholars have long identified how the fate of foreign children affected "the geopolitics of compassion in the United States," studies tend to focus on children as victims – solely as recipients and never as agents of

<sup>10</sup> Abbenhuis and Tames, *Global War, Global Catastrophe*, 34.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6–8.

<sup>12</sup> John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2011), 175–226.

<sup>13</sup> Julia F. Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>14</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 153.

<sup>15</sup> Woodrow Wilson to the American Red Cross Society, December 9, 1914, in *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link, vol. 31, *September–December 1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 430.

<sup>16</sup> Friederike Kind-Kovács, *Budapest's Children: Humanitarian Relief in the Aftermath of the Great War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism*, 285; Davide Rodogno, *Night on Earth: A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 72–105.

<sup>18</sup> "North Dakota Sunday Schools Help Armenia," *Bismarck Tribune* (North Dakota), October 21, 1918, 8.

humanitarian action.<sup>19</sup> American adults are the rescuers, and foreign children are the victims. “It is as if human experience,” Brian Rouleau deplores, “only begins with the age of majority.”<sup>20</sup> Rouleau has provocatively opined that children are hiding “in plain sight” in the history of US foreign relations, urging historians of US politics, diplomacy, and international relations to reorient their treatment of American history and include the nation’s youth. Children, he argues, must be regarded not simply as passive characters of American society “but rather as actors themselves.”<sup>21</sup> Rouleau is right: Any rendering of modern US history that does not center children’s participation in humanitarian action is seriously flawed. The mobilization of children was of crucial importance to the multiyear national campaign to aid France’s children during World War I, which strategy was also used by other organizations such as the American Red Cross. With *America’s French Orphans*, I bring to light the contributions made by American children to France’s fatherless children in need during World War I, as well as the role of women in aid mobilization.

The Junior Committee of the FCFS was established in October 1916. American children answered the humanitarian call. The leaders of the FCFS understood that sponsorship could be presented as a moral duty. Even before America’s young men went across the ocean to combat, American children knew the war through correspondences with French children that the FCFS sponsored, along with advertising, press releases, public lectures, and appeals from the organization. In April 1917, as the United States entered the war, Henry P. Davison, chair of the Red Cross War Council, announced in Washington, DC, the launch of a Junior Red Cross.<sup>22</sup> President Woodrow Wilson’s administration knew that propaganda directed at children would tug at young hearts and thus garner more support from adults. The administration’s larger political interest was to educate children and thus foster in future generations the notion of American exceptionalism. Wilson hoped to target the nation’s schools and turn the nation’s 22 million schoolchildren into humanitarian actors,

<sup>19</sup> Anita Casavantes Bradford, *Suffer the Little Children: Child Migration and the Geopolitics of Compassion in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Rouleau, “Children Are Hiding in Plain Sight in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations,” *Modern American History* 2, no. 3 (October 2019): 367–87, at 367.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>22</sup> “Junior Red Cross Now Organizing,” *Omaha Daily Bee* (Nebraska), September 4, 1917; Julia F. Irwin, “Teaching Americanism with World Perspective: The Junior Red Cross in the U.S. Schools from 1917 to the 1920s,” *History of Education Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (August 2013): 255–79, at 255.

who would eventually join the newly organized Junior Red Cross.<sup>23</sup> Its establishment spoke for Wilson's need to ensure that American children would play their part in the nation's humanitarian action. Through public calls from high-ranking leaders and ongoing school-based activities, children were invited to raise money and produce relief supplies for the Allied nations. Involving children – and thus the adults around them – in aid efforts helped mobilize the entire population behind a shared cause, which also brought about a change in the population's isolationist stance.

However, months before the foundation of the attention-grabbing Junior Red Cross, the Junior Committee of the FCFS had already been established, specifically targeting the American boys and girls. In New York, for instance, eight-year-old Lillian Davis Emerson had already “adopted” a French “brother” in May 1916.<sup>24</sup> By the end of the war, as the *New York Tribune* pointed out, the FCFS had turned into a symbol of American humanitarianism. “No war work tugged more appealingly or more justly at the heartstrings of Americans,” wrote the reporter, “than the task intelligently and efficiently carried on by the organization known as the Fatherless Children of France.”<sup>25</sup> Targeting and getting the American children involved in the rescue of needy French orphans was an effective means in both combating indifference and monopolizing their parents' attention. In addition, once sponsored, a child's survival depended entirely on their “godparent,” which further strengthened a sense of moral duty. Arguably, sponsoring a French orphan introduced American children to a new way of thinking and acting that stayed with them for a lifetime, creating a generation of humanitarians. American children participated in the long-established tradition of American humanitarianism.

### Women Get the Job Done

Men might have founded the aid organizations, but legions of skilled, energetic women made them work. Mobilizing American children and adults to become sponsors and sustaining that effort over seven years was an enormous feat, involving not only staff and volunteers in the organization's New York headquarters but also thousands of volunteers across the United States, most of them women. In addition to the nuns who staffed

<sup>23</sup> Julia F. Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 77–78.

<sup>24</sup> “Would Adopt War Orphan,” *Kadoka Press and Kadoka Reporter* (South Dakota), May 5, 1916.

<sup>25</sup> “For the Children of France,” *New York Tribune*, February 28, 1921.



the network of CFAPCF colonies across France, American women served as fieldworkers for the colonies.

To a certain extent, attention focused on combatants has clouded the extensive mobilization of women during the global war. Though military and political history has long dominated the historiography of World War I, even when historians have tracked the place of women during the global catastrophe, they tended to portray the mothers, sisters, and daughters of frontline soldiers either as victims of the occupying enemy or as displaced, traumatized, emaciated bodies desperately surviving.<sup>26</sup> Cultural historians equally crystalized the image of the female victims of the sexual brutality of enemy violence in the aftermath of the invasion of Belgium and France.<sup>27</sup> Any military action, however, largely mobilized women to ensure victory to fighting husbands, brothers, and sons. Women worked as camp followers, cooks, and nurses centuries before the outbreak of World War I.<sup>28</sup> In the Civil War, American women even served as soldiers and shed blood on the battlefields alongside their male brothers-in-arms.<sup>29</sup>

During World War I, approximately 25,000 American women set sails to Europe.<sup>30</sup> In the course of the war, more than 11,000 Red Cross nurses served with the Army and Navy Nurse Corps. By November 1918, 90,000 American women had traveled to France to support their country's participation in the war. Whether spurred by a thirst for adventure or a deep commitment to contribute to the war effort, wealthy ex-patriates, daughters of businessmen, leisured wives of diplomats, and middle-class women crossed the Atlantic Ocean for the Western Front. Generally, women typically operated within medical units, helping to care for wounded

<sup>26</sup> Peggy Bette, "Veuves et veuvages de la première guerre mondiale. Lyon (1914–1924)," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 98, no. 2 (2008): 191–202, at 196–97; Peggy Bette, "Des œuvres de guerre aux offices nationaux: l'évolution de la prise en charge des veuves de guerre (France, 1914–1924)," *Revue d'histoire de la protection sociale* 9, no. 1 (2016): 68–87; Françoise Thébaud, *La Femme au temps de la guerre de 1914* (Paris: Payot, 1987); Philippe Nivet, *La France occupée, 1914–1918* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Ruth Harris, "The Child of the Barbarian: Rape, Race and Nationalism in France during the First World War," *Past and Present* no. 141 (1993): 170–206; Stéphane Audouin-Rouzeau, *L'Enfant de l'ennemi, 1914–1918. Viol, avortement, infanticide pendant la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Aubier, 2009); John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2001), 175–226; Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6–8.

<sup>28</sup> Lynn Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War I* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 34.

<sup>29</sup> DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2022), 1–24.

<sup>30</sup> Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense*, 175.

soldiers and destitute civilians.<sup>31</sup> During the entire course of the war, 10,000 nurses served with the military abroad and another 10,000 were stationed in the United States.<sup>32</sup> In 1917, the Women's Overseas Hospitals was established along with the American Women's Hospitals.<sup>33</sup> Some women set up schools for children, while others helped reconstruct devastated villages in France. Not only did women serve as nurses and teachers, but they also performed military tasks. Trained women such as physicians and stenographers brought valuable skills to the front and helped the US military in a variety of domains.<sup>34</sup> In 1918, for instance, the US Army Signal Corps sent 223 women to France to take over from inexperienced dough-boys who could not keep General Headquarters connected with the troops under fire.<sup>35</sup> The National American Woman Suffrage Association disseminated a new face of the American woman engaged in wartime activities, supporting the war effort, demonstrating American patriotism, and serving abroad as medical professionals, canteen workers, drivers, and humanitarians. Many of the American women seeking meaningful wartime jobs in France were highly educated; many were from socially prominent families; and many "hoped that the war would prove the forcing house in which long-standing feminine aspirations for the vote and economic equality would finally mature."<sup>36</sup>

When the United States entered the war, 4 million men were mobilized.<sup>37</sup> Of vital importance was the ability to replace them instantly. As everywhere else in the warring European societies, American women put on trousers and boots.<sup>38</sup> To alleviate the shortage of manpower, American women occupied positions in munition industry and railroads; they

<sup>31</sup> Susan Zeigler, *In Uncle Sam's Service: Women Workers with the American Expeditionary Force, 1917–1919* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 104–36; Kimberly Jensen, *Mobilizing Minerva: American Women in the First World War* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 98–115.

<sup>32</sup> Zeigler, *In Uncle Sam's Service*, 108. <sup>33</sup> Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense*, 217.

<sup>34</sup> Jensen, *Mobilizing Minerva*, 77–97; Lettie Gavin, *American Women in World War I: They Also Served* (Denver: University of Colorado Press, 1997), 157–78; Zeigler, *In Uncle Sam's Service*, 77–103.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Cobbs, *The Hello Girls: America's First Women Soldiers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 265.

<sup>36</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 395.

<sup>37</sup> Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense*, 21.

<sup>38</sup> Margaret Darrow, *French Women and the First World War: War Stories of the Home Front* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 53–97; Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 86–120; Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914–1918* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 40–75.

worked as streetcar conductors, elevator operators, and telephone operators. Additionally, given that the United States was shipping vast amounts of food to Europe by 1917, agricultural production needed to be sustained and heavy manufacturing ought to keep running. Women filled positions vacated by men in these domains. They transferred to positions traditionally reserved to men and testified to the ability of a woman to endorse full responsibilities in the socioeconomic fabric of the state. As was the case in Europe, American women challenged the traditional patterns of labor. Warring states momentarily permitted women to climb the social ladder, which drastically strengthened the suffrage movement while boosting women's confidence in their capacity to act as full citizens. Overnight, women peopled ammunition factories, industries, telephone operators, department stores, and "invaded what was then the masculine space of the office."<sup>39</sup> American women saw in the war an opportunity to further their political agenda and strengthen their claim for full citizenship.

While women replaced husbands, brothers, and sons in factories, others from more comfortable backgrounds devoted their energies to humanitarian organizations. A socioeconomic component nonetheless conditioned the participation of American women in wartime-related activities. Indeed, "voluntarism was of course constrained by and even defined by class."<sup>40</sup> Middle-class and elite women disseminated propaganda, organized fund-raising, and coordinated the shipping of clothes and other equipment to the home front. Wealthy leisured women knitted socks, shipped parcels abroad, and toured the districts drumming up support from France's orphans. The humanitarian central office and networks of the CFAPCF and FCFS were dominated by women. Wives of wealthy entrepreneurs, financiers, and philanthropists petitioned, gave speeches, issued appeals published in local newspapers, and organized social and civic activities for the benefit of France's children. They deftly documented the living conditions of children to reach out to the American public.<sup>41</sup> Women (and women's voices) appear to have (mostly) comprised the organizations' leadership class, rank and file, and donor base. Although the New York-based executive committee of the FCFS had a greater number of men on its roster, in the field it was women who spearheaded the work and administered local committees. At the local level, women coordinated sponsorships, gathered information on sponsors, and liaised with national headquarters. Through the CFAPCF, American women visited children in

<sup>39</sup> Dumenil, *The Second Line of Defense*, 27. <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>41</sup> Katherine Brewster, "Letters from the Grateful Children of France," *Fashion Art* (1917): 14–15.

colonies, during and after the war. They protected terrified children in underground shelters and traveled through war-torn country to visit traumatized children given refuge in the colonies.

All could not, however, afford to give unpaid work to the FCFS. Working-class women could not afford to go to France to care for orphans in the colonies established by the CFAPCF. However, through the workplace, clubs, and community organizations, American working-class women (and men) pooled resources to contribute to the protection of France's orphans. This is telling given that working-class families tended to have a more "instrumental" (as opposed to sentimental) view of children. The economic necessity – among poorer families – of putting one's children to work often required as much. Many, like the fictional James P. Jackson, Jr. not only sold newspapers to sponsor a "kid in France" but also needed to work to help their own families. For working-class groups, feeding an additional mouth in France entailed an even greater sacrifice. Consequently, the history of French orphans adopted by American "god-parents" challenges the traditional patterns of humanitarian-based interventions. While prominent members of American society and local communities may have coordinated humanitarian action at the state and federal levels, working-class men, women, and children did their part (certainly to a lesser extent) in sponsoring starving orphans in France. American women (and men) from all social backgrounds built the FCFS and CFAPCF into viable, visible nationwide relief organizations.

### **Writing with Ashes, Thoughts, and an Inevitably Incomplete Body of Material**

In writing this book, I do not presume to offer an exhaustive history of American humanitarian relief for France and its children during the Great War (if such thing could even be done). My focuses are on (1) the plight of the children in France and Belgium affected by and displaced during World War I and (2) the response of two private Franco-American humanitarian organizations that sought to care for them. However, my focus is not on the personal association between young French children and their American benefactors. In charting how these two transnational organizations developed and operated in wartime, both in France and in the United States, I argue that they offered Americans a means to demonstrate their patriotism and honor their long-established humanitarian culture. More importantly, they paved the way for a new form of American humanitarian culture. Indeed, the FCFS and CFAPCF and organizations

like them allowed people to choose what initiatives they wished to fund. They gave Americans a choice on how to spend their money. Further, while organizations like the American Red Cross collected money to engage in a wide range of humanitarian operations, people rarely knew exactly how their contributions were being used. Conversely, the FCFS and CFAPCF connected American families with specific French children and families with whom they could correspond. They gave contributors an opportunity to hear about the impact their dollars were making on individual lives, which was an effective way to encourage still more contributions. Additionally, understanding the FCFS and CFAPCF in the context of US neutrality and transnational humanitarian cooperation further challenges the idea of humanitarian assistance as a politically neutral form of aid. In helping to financially support France's beleaguered children, Americans (before 1917) could (if they wanted to) evade their country's official policy of neutrality and express a political preference for a French victory over Germany. Though the stated political neutrality of 1914 never implied a categorical rejection of US involvement in the war, American humanitarian assistance did in effect disregard issues of citizenship, borders, and nationalities.<sup>42</sup> The American Red Cross, for instance, initially vowed to assist the sick and wounded soldiers of *all* nations, refusing to have anything to do with noncombatant relief.<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, in deliberately assisting noncombatant, and especially fatherless children of a single country, the FCFS and CFAPCF dissociated humanitarian relief and neutrality, as it clearly attested the choice on the part of those Americans who funded or contributed to the action of the relief committees to help what, by April 1917, would be an Allied nation. Never did the FCFS and CFAPCF position themselves as champions of international humanitarianism. They tasked themselves with securing France's future generations. Americans were certainly interested in a new form of humanitarianism centered on the adoption of children. And this certainly explained, to a certain extent, the success of these two private organizations.

And yet, why would a single American child break open their piggybank to assist another child in France, and not somewhere else in Europe? Why would tens of thousands of Americans finance the FCFS instead of taking part in the American Red Cross's global relief mission? Americans who

<sup>42</sup> Tucker, *Woodrow Wilson and the Great War*, 17–71; Ross A. Kennedy, *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2009), 65–103.

<sup>43</sup> Irwin, *Making the World Safe*, 56.

dedicated financial assistance exclusively to France's children applauded their nation's siding with the Allies. Indeed, voluntary sacrifices in favor of the FCFS not only testified to an American humanitarian culture but also voiced America's political and wartime goals after 1917. More than an altruistic act, supporting a child in France could become a political statement about sympathy for France. Months before the arrival of Pershing's troops in France, American men and women of all social classes had been fighting against infant mortality, famine, destitution, and despair endured by French noncombatants. With this book, I hope to do justice to their contributions to protecting France in its hour of need and in ensuring the survival of the country's future generations.

I also suggest that the generally acknowledged phenomenon of donor fatigue can be countered by restrictions and selectivity that tie donors more closely to the recipients of aid. Similar initiatives would develop in the 1920s, when specific nationalities became the focus of attention in Eastern Europe and Russia. *America's French Orphans* reveals how the gradual incorporation of American children in the national humanitarian effort participated in the development of international initiatives in the 1920s aimed at protecting the health, safety, and protection of youth. Additionally, in providing Americans with a choice on how to spend their money and allowing them to hear about the impact of individual recipients, the FCFS spearheaded a new form of humanitarian assistance that would develop globally in the aftermath of the war. The wave of humanitarian assistance for the war-displaced children of the occupied zones in France shaped both an American entry into a European imperial war in 1917 and an American self-image of American military might and American wealth, to be comprehended, justified, and deployed as a self-evident force of good, thus sustaining a self-image through much of the twentieth century.

To tell this story, in Chapter 1, I focus on the foundation of the CFAPCF and reveal the crucial role of French nuns and American women in rescuing, sheltering, and feeding children from the war zones. Chapter 2 charts the different strategies the FCFS used to engage the American public in sponsoring French orphans and, in particular, the strategy of targeting the nation's youth via the Junior Committee. Chapter 3 studies the transatlantic relationships between American donors and France's orphans: Beyond the genuine interest and financial aspect pertaining to the letters, correspondence in wartime compels historians to engage with the question of translation and writing. Humanitarian action paralleled medical concerns for Americans, as Chapter 4 demonstrates. Pragmatic and political

expectations spearheaded a new form of American intervention in France (and later on in Europe) to try to bar diseases from reaching the American soil. As the global war ended, renewed attention was given to the plight of France's orphans, and Chapter 5 illustrates how "adoptions" turned into a moral pact. Finally, Chapter 6 follows the initiatives of American women working hand in hand with French authorities and engaging in a "new war" against child mortality.

The thousands of official and private letters sent in both directions across the Atlantic Ocean during this period could not possibly be integrated within a single monograph. In a way, there is an analogy between the inevitable selectivity and arbitrary limit governing the mining of archives and the limits that are subsequently in the performance of humanitarian concern and assistance, which must be situated in its specific context of possibilities at the time. On this point, I consulted a hundred archival collections in France and the United States during the course of my research. A nine-month search across France and the United States has not, however, yielded the location of the purported "10 tons of archives" compiled by the Franco-American Fraternity in the aftermath of the global war.<sup>44</sup> As nongovernmental organizations operating from Paris and New York, both the FCFS and CFAPCF kept their own archives, and a simple look at the primary sources consulted for this research will be sufficient to show that the majority of collections are located in the United States, not France.

Difficulties in tracking information in France were also compounded by the very nature of the sources: They were mostly private papers. As such, nothing except perhaps a mere photograph or the letter of the *préfet* authorizing a congregation to shelter children could be found in the archives of the local and departmental authorities (such as the *conseil départemental* and the *mairie*) where Franco-American colonies were established. In Montpellier, for instance, the regional archives do mention the selling of a mansion to the CFAPCF in August 1920, confirming the existence of a colony in Bédarieux (Hérault). Further investigation, however, did not yield any additional material. Similarly, in Tours, the regional archives of Indre-et-Loire conserved a mere photograph of the "Colonie de la Cour," despite the fact that during the entire war Cheillé was one of the most active and important Franco-American colonies for children. Even

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Jeanne Seligmann-Lui (general secretary of the Franco-American Fraternity) to Paul Painlevé, January 22, 1926, Paul Painlevé Papers, 313AP/224/487, Fraternité Franco-Américaine (1926), National Archives of France.



private papers from the congregations involved in the process of rescuing orphans offered limited information. Catholic nuns reported on the everyday activities of their orders throughout the war, but the nature of the information primarily focused on religious activities, prayers, and the internal organization of the sisterhood. As surprising as it may appear, whenever the journals of the orders do mention any activity related to the CFAPCF, it is merely to inform of the departure or arrival of a child and the assistance of American medical experts and volunteers. Most importantly, apart from the archives of the Sisters of Notre-Dame de Sion (Paris), where minutely detailed files could be examined, the records of other Catholic orders failed to yield anything relative to their participation in the rescue of orphans. In Paris, the archives of the Daughters of Charity have information related to the order's orphanages, but nothing in relation to the CFAPCF was evident. In order to recreate the environment within the Franco-American colonies, I instead relied on the correspondence of American fieldworkers such as Erika Thorp and the administrative reports of the organization.

Necessarily this is an American story, not a French story, written through sources in English from an American perspective. Without the abundant material written in English and preserved in the United States, this book could not have been written. Americans controlled the administration and running of colonies and supervised adoptions. French authorities merely intervened save to thank, praise, and facilitate the work of these two private humanitarian organizations. This needs to be acknowledged as the general responses from France that resonated in the American press may well have been fabricated to ensure more support for children. This must equally compel historians to think about the very same nature of writing and translating in wartime. Children and their mothers did not always have the means, time, and linguistic skills to write. Women working for the FCFS, therefore, got involved in translating, even writing directly to American benefactors. Letters may say more about adults' representations of foreign children than about the way French orphans saw their own experiences of the war. But whether genuine or "fabricated," letters were essential to reassuring American donors and thus ensuring ongoing financial support.

The magnitude and large-scale implantation of the FCFS campaign across the United States has left remains in all state repositories. From Alaska to Hawai'i, from Massachusetts to California, Americans preserved the letters written by their French "godchildren." The local presence of the FCFS in the press and the personal donations to American archives have



kept their stories from sinking into oblivion. I hope this book will encourage American schools, colleges and universities, libraries, local archives, and private citizens to dig further into their special collections and dusty attics in search of missing letters penned by French children and their mothers. With so many individual narratives inevitably missing, it is my hope that by uncovering a largely forgotten chapter of the shared history of France and the United States during the Great War, I am paving the way for further research on American humanitarianism – in France and elsewhere – during the global war. I have endeavored to call upon different witnesses to give a voice to those who were involved in rescuing France's children while dwelling on their motivations and expectations, their doubts and anxieties. I have tried to avoid extrapolation and psychological generalizations. Instead, by mining cultural, political, and diplomatic history, I have sought to bring to light the unparalleled contribution made by American adults and children in support of France's children in wartime.