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## The YMCA organisation and its physical education and sports activities in Europe during the First World War

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Tomáš TLUSTÝ\*

## **The YMCA organisation and its physical education and sports activities in Europe during the First World War**

### **Summary**

The paper discusses the history of the YMCA in Europe at the time of the First World War. During the period in question, this international organisation spent a large amount of money on voluntary aid for soldiers and prisoners of war. Of all National YMCA groups, most financial support for its activities came from the United States of America, where the organisation had also reached its peak in terms of physical education and sports development. Even before the United States of America had entered the First World War, American YMCA secretaries had been involved in European battlefields and prisoner of war camps, despite having first been rejected by local military leaders. These functionaries offered soldiers and prisoners of war a number of ways to spend their free time, including physical education and sport. The American YMCA's efforts were to increase significantly after the United States of America had entered the war. There followed a transfer of a huge amount of sports equipment and sports instructors from the United States of America to Europe. After the war had ended, the YMCA in France initiated the Inter-Allied Games and subsequently attempted to spread its program into other countries around the world.

**Keywords:** YMCA, First World War, prisoner-of-war camps, sport, officials.

### **Introduction**

The Young Men's Christian Association is an international religion-oriented youth organization, established in London by George Williams in 1844. The YMCA cannot be considered a sports club or sports organization. Physical education and sport have always formed only part of the whole association's program, which has always tried to encourage the all-round development of its members.

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Its symbol is a straight-sided red triangle which symbolizes the three main directions which it focuses on – balance of mind, soul and body. However, it must be emphasised that the various parts of the YMCA program had never been separate entities but coincided with each other. Hence, if we are to pinpoint the role physical education and sport has played within the YMCA, we should always consider relationships between the various parts of the overall program<sup>1</sup>.

In its first few years of existence, the YMCA restricted its activity to spiritual instruction for all its members. However, the organisation gained popularity in London and began to spread rapidly to other parts of England, Great Britain, France (1852), the Netherlands (1853), Germany (1883) or to the area now known as Hungary (1883). It became most widespread in the United States of America, though, with the first groups to appear in North America being established almost simultaneously in Boston and Montreal in 1851.

Associations were first housed in humble parts of churches, rented properties or other buildings designed for a completely different purpose. These cannot have been suitable for physical education and sport<sup>2</sup>. YMCA members and secretaries had been making efforts to get physical education included in the program of this organization as early as 1860. The first gyms and swimming pools began to appear in YMCA buildings in the United States of America in 1870<sup>3</sup>.

Physical education and sports spread extensively throughout the YMCA between 1880 and 1885, when the first “International Young Men’s Christian Association Training School” was established in Springfield, Massachusetts. Jacob I. Brown established this school, which later became known as “YMCA Training School” or “Springfield College”<sup>4</sup>.

The YMCA soon became very important for physical education in the United States of America. By 1904, it had significantly influenced the course of the first American Olympic Games and it gradually began to spread its sports program and ideals to other countries around the world<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, the American YMCA was soon to export its program to Europe, but on the brink of World War One, it was to be very different than their activity in South America or Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> “YMCA (Časopis sdružení YMCA v Československu)” 1925, no. 1, pp. 7–9.

<sup>2</sup> E.L. Johnson, *The History of YMCA Physical Education*, Chicago 1979, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> G. Constable, *The IV Olympiad (London 1908, the international YMCA)*, Los Angeles 1999, pp. 127–128.

<sup>4</sup> J.D.G. Wrathall, *Take the Young Stranger by the Hand (Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA)*, Chicago 1998, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> G.R. Matthews, *America’s First Olympics (The St. Louis Games Of 1904)*, Columbia 2005, p. 104.

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## **The American YMCA and its program at the time of the First World War**

The First World War broke out in Europe in 1914. It was triggered by the successful attempt to assassinate Franz Ferdinand of Austria, the Habsburg Archduke of Austria-Este and successor to the throne. This precipitated the Austro-Hungarian Empire's declaration of war against Serbia, causing a chain reactions that led to World War One. Within one month, almost the whole of Europe found itself mobilised to wage war.

Members of the World Alliance of YMCAs quickly reacted to the situation that had arisen. On 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, they met for the first time in London, where the YMCA established its voluntary war work policy. Geneva, Switzerland, became home to the Council of Voluntary War Work.

An act of great significance came on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1914 when all members of the World Alliance were sent letters from the Swiss headquarters urging for help in European battlefields. The International Committee of the YMCAs of North America in New York also received a telegraph from Switzerland, asking the American Association to send financial support and qualified secretaries to help with YMCA war work in Europe.

Funding from the YMCA World Alliance had not been particularly high as Great Britain waged war with Germany, so members of the National Councils of YMCAs in Great Britain and Germany took care of their own military troops. Furthermore, the YMCA World Alliance also wanted to look after soldiers in France and Austria-Hungary.

News of the Sarajevo assassination had not attracted much attention in America. However, an event that partly raised public awareness was the German invasion of Belgium. The day after, on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, President Wilson issued his Proclamation of Neutrality, urging Americans to be impartial in both thinking and actions.

Urged by the World Alliance after the war had broken out, General Secretary of the International Committee of the YMCAs of North America – John R. Mott<sup>6</sup> – visited Europe. He travelled through Great Britain and the Netherlands to Germany. There he met National Council representatives, visited local hospitals and witnessed Döberitz prisoner of war camp. One of the members of his escort was given £500 and ordered to employ three or four secretaries who would start work among prisoners of war in Austria-Hungary. He promised the same amount to support prisoners of war in France.

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<sup>6</sup> In 1912, John R. Mott and his colleague had both been offered free tickets for the first transatlantic voyage on the Titanic. But they both turned down the offer at the last moment and chose to sail on the more humble Lapland. On landing in New York and hearing of the sinking of the Titanic, John Mott remarked: "The Lord must have a lot more work ready for us!".

After returning to his homeland, he made efforts to urge the American YMCA to provide support for prisoners and hospital patients in Europe (see Figure 1.). He was well aware that there was no such well-equipped international organisation to help those people. Despite the United States of America being a neutral country, the American YMCA wanted to get involved in the war. But how could they do that whilst preserving the United States of America's neutrality? The only way was to help people on both sides of the conflict<sup>7</sup>.



**Figure 1.** Hospital athletics – The YMCA in Poland  
(source: <http://umedia.lib.umn.edu/node/68738?mode=basic> [date 1.4.2014]).

John R. Mott arranged with the General Secretaries of the English and German National Councils for American YMCA workers to be given the opportunity to enter local prisoner-of-war camps. In January 1915, J.R. Mott visited the White House, where he explained the purpose of his trip to Europe and the American YMCA's possible future activity in prisoner-of-war camps. President Wilson gave J.R. Mott his approval, which was important for the American YMCA as it could start work in Europe<sup>8</sup>.

The first voluntary work was to be with prisoners of war in Great Britain. Two men from the American YMCA, Archibald Clinton Harte and Carlisle V. Hibbard were soon waiting there for permission to enter local prisoner-of-war camps. After being granted the right to enter, they carried out their first inspection and proposed to introduce YMCA services for prisoners of war. However, British officers disapproved of this idea, finding no sense in a neutral American organization working with European prisoners of war.

<sup>7</sup> C.H. Hopkins, *John R. Mott (1865–1955, A Biography)*, Grand Rapids 1979, pp. 440–446.

<sup>8</sup> Yale School of Divinity Archives, Yale University, John R. Mott Papers, Box 39, Folder 702, Archibald C. Harte, "War prisoner's Aid", July 12, 1918.

However, the American YMCA got in touch with the English National Council and made efforts to promote its ideas and pressure it into cooperation. They did not succeed in doing so for a long time as British officers continuously refused to allow American citizens to work with their prisoners, not even in co-operation with the English YMCA.

A series of diplomatic negotiations between the American YMCA and the British government began. A.C Harte and C.V. Hibbard decided not to wait any longer for permission in England but to split up. Archibald Clinton Harte headed for Germany while Carlisle V. Hibbard set off for France. Permission was not received until early February 1915<sup>9</sup>.

After arriving in France, Carlisle V. Hibbard discovered that the French were just as unwilling to accept help from a foreign organisation as the British had been. Nevertheless, the French government was willing to consider his offer. As early as on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February, the Ministry of Defence presented Carlisle V. Hibbard with its decision and conditions for YMCA work with prisoners of war. However, an act of great importance was when France promised to grant the American YMCA further powers, but only provided it could agree on similar conditions in Germany<sup>10</sup>.

In February 1915, American A.C. Harte visited the German capital Berlin. He also put forward the idea of quickly introducing YMCA services into prisoner-of-war camps. Unlike the English officers he had visited, the Prussian Minister of Defence gave permission for help and support to be sent for prisoners of war but he categorically refused to permit everything Archibald Harte had had in mind. Its work was to be undertaken in as many prisoner-of-war camps as possible and there were indeed a lot.

Diversified groups of citizens of various nations were held in around 150 prisoner-of-war camps there. It was clear that members of the American YMCA would be unable to deal with such a large number of prisoner-of-war camps on their own, due to the fact that they still had only two secretaries in Germany at the end of 1915. Consequently, the German YMCA National Council and other local Christian groups had to be contacted and asked for help<sup>11</sup>. Despite a slow rise in the number of secretaries, there were still only 45 secretaries from the American YMCA working throughout Europe one year later<sup>12</sup>.

Soon after A. Harte had managed to get YMCA war help approved in Germany, the first two camps were chosen to get the whole effort under way. The first YMCA war hut was opened on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1915. It was situated near the

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<sup>9</sup> C. Shedd, *History of the World's Alliance of Y.M.C.A.*, London 1955, p. 547.

<sup>10</sup> K. A. Steuer, *Pursuit of an "Unparalleled Opportunity": The American Y.M.C.A. and Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy among the Central Power nations during World War I, 1914–1923, Volume I* (Dissertation thesis), St. Paul 1998, pp. 81–86.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185–186.

town of Göttingen in Lower Saxony. It consisted of a large hall, reading room, small hall and three classrooms<sup>13</sup>. At first, visiting the hut was free of charge but later a membership fee of 15 pfennigs a month was introduced<sup>14</sup>.

Work soon began in other prisoner-of-war camps, with YMCA huts beginning to appear in them. There were often sports going on next to them, as there were usually sports grounds for basketball, volleyball (see Figure 2.), football and baseball as well. There were even tennis courts in the Hannover-Münden prisoner-of-war camp or areas for boxing<sup>15</sup>.



**Figure 2.** Volleyball in the prison camp at Rastatt, Germany  
(source: <http://umedia.lib.umn.edu/node/68725?mode=basic> [date 20.2.2014]).

A. Harte went on to take the necessary steps that finally led to aid for German prisoners of war in England. Despite the American YMCA's success in France and Germany, the British authorities remained unwilling and refused to open their prisoner-of-war camps to American YMCA workers. It was not until spring 1915 that the American YMCA began to work in England. In Berlin, Archibald Harte had actually negotiated little perks for English prisoners of war held in Germany and this proved to be of great help to him in talks with the English. In late March 1915, the first three American YMCA secretaries were allowed to travel to English prisoner-of-war camps. Arthur Yapp, General Secretary of the English YMCA National Council, had asked for their help<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> M.M. Bartholomew, *A Visit to Prison Camps*, [in:] J.R. Mott (ed.), *For the millions of men now under arms (Number 5)*, New York 1915, pp. 44–45.

<sup>14</sup> C. Hoffman, *In the prison camps of Germany (a narrative of "Y" service among prisoners of war)*, New York 1920, p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> M.M. Bartholomew, *A Visit to Prison Camps*, [in:] J.R. Mott (ed.), *For the millions of men now under arms (Number 5)*, New York 1915, pp. 44–45.

<sup>16</sup> A.K. Yapp, *Urgent Needs*, [in:] J.R. Mott (ed.), *For the millions of men now under arms (Number 5)*, New York 1915, p. 5.

In May 1915, Italy joined the war against the Central Powers and the Italian front emerged. The American YMCA reacted to this news by sending a delegation to Rome to offer YMCA services, but this was initially rejected.

The YMCA did not give in, though, continuing its struggle to get its work acknowledged. Jean-Henri-Adolphe d'Espine, Vice-President of the International Red Cross helped their cause by writing a letter to the Italians asking them to support the American YMCA program. Yet, it still took a long time for the series of negotiations to lead to YMCA aid for prisoners of war in Italy. In late December 1915, a fund was established and \$5000 deposited into it by John Mott to help set off YMCA activity there<sup>17</sup>. This did not happen until June 1916.

During the spring of 1915, Archibald Harte also travelled to Russia. In early June 1915, he received permission to enter prisoner-of-war camps in Siberia<sup>18</sup>. At the end of June 1915, he returned to Germany, where he began to work on getting aid into other prisoner-of-war camps. The positive response to YMCA aid in German prisoner-of-war camps led him to the idea of continuing with the same kind of aid in Russia. For that reason, he made a second "trip" to Russia in October 1915. He travelled around, visiting prisoner-of-war camps there for six weeks. The German and Austro-Hungarian government and local authorities also provided him with large sums of money which he would use to improve prison conditions<sup>19</sup>.

Work in the prisoner-of-war camps was so highly regarded that Archibald Harte was asked to try to make the whole program more effective, both in Germany and in Russia. In May 1916, A. Harte arranged a special meeting, inviting German YMCA representatives who were in charge of prisoner-of-war aid in Germany. The program contained a number of points including aid for German prisoners in Russia, sports equipment for huts, medical supplies and libraries and canteens<sup>20</sup>.

The modest huts later became equipped as history, music, religious or science clubs, theatre groups and primitive schools. Activities like physical education, reading books, art or language teaching, Bible study and common prayer went on inside these huts, which were supplied with a wide range of books.

The situation with prisoners of war in Austria-Hungary was very similar to that in Germany. There were large numbers of prisoners who were scattered into

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<sup>17</sup> O.D. Wannamaker, *With Italy in Her Final War of Liberation (A Story of the "Y" on the Italian Front)*, New York 1923, p. 54.

<sup>18</sup> M.L. Miller, *The American YMCA and Russian Culture (The Preservation and Expansion of Orthodox Christianity, 1900–1940)*, Lanham 2012, p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> W. Taft, F. Kent, W. Newlin, F. Harris, *Service with fighting men (An Account of the Work of the American YMCA in the World War I), Volume II*, New York 1922, pp. 290–294.

<sup>20</sup> K.A. Steuer, *Pursuit of an "Unparalleled Opportunity": The American Y.M.C.A. and Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy among the Central Power nations during World War I, 1914–1923, Volume I* (Dissertation thesis), St. Paul 1998, pp. 177–178.

various camps. Most of them were of Russian, Serbian, Italian or Rumanian nationality. As a rule, the countries these men came from were too poor to send them support on a regular basis and, in addition, there were problems with distribution.

Christian Phildius of the YMCA World Alliance was initially responsible for this area of work. In May 1915, he received permission to enter two prisoner-of-war camps, but only for Austrian citizens. In autumn 1915, Archibald Harte travelled to Austria. He helped to arrange for the YMCA to develop its program there and build huts as they wished<sup>21</sup>. One of the first two American YMCA secretaries to work in Austria-Hungary was Theodore F. Schroeder, who began to work in Spratzern in Lower Austria in July 1915. He brought football as well as other things and the local prisoners could amuse themselves playing the first prison matches. The YMCA also sent him equipment for croquet, tossing rings, skittles and more.

During the period between December 1915 and October 1917, the American YMCA introduced its program into 37 of 50 prisoner-of-war camps in Austria-Hungary. However, only 14 American secretaries worked there during that period<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, the YMCA began to act and, as it had done several times in the past<sup>23</sup>, it made efforts to get involved in the war and bring benefit to French, British, German, Austro-Hungarian, Italian, Rumanian and Russian soldiers<sup>24</sup>.

The American YMCA were sure to have had several aims in mind, including gaining access to new parts of the world and spreading their operations and work after the First World War.

One of the first points of its war program was to take care of imprisoned soldiers' physical culture. Secretaries made efforts to keep prisoners in the best possible shape. To achieve this aim, physical exercise and sporting fixtures were introduced. The YMCA had the advantage of owning a relatively large amount of sports equipment. Volleyball became one of the most popular sports. Its secretaries had a number of balls for football, handball, basketball and volleyball, along with baseball and tennis equipment and boxing gloves. They began to organise matches, tournaments and even whole leagues. However, their equipment was also borrowed by camp commandants. Prisoners could also use showers or "spas".

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<sup>21</sup> W. Taft, F. Kent, W. Newlin, F. Harris, *Service with fighting men (An Account of the Work of the American YMCA in the World War I)*, Volume II, New York 1922, pp. 296–307.

<sup>22</sup> K. A. Steuer, *Pursuit of an "Unparalleled Opportunity": The American Y.M.C.A. and Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy among the Central Power nations during World War I, 1914–1923*, Volume I (Dissertation thesis), St. Paul 1998, p. 234.

<sup>23</sup> The first recorded YMCA war aid activity of all comes from the Battle of Solferino. In June 1859 the Franco-Sardinian Alliance defeated the Austrian Army.

<sup>24</sup> *Summary of world war work of the American YMCA (With the soldiers and sailors of America at home, on the sea, and overseas, With the men of the allied armies and with the prisoners of war in all parts of the world)*, New York 1920, pp. 3–4.

Special care was devoted to soldiers who had lost their limbs in battles. Special centres were set up for them to help soldiers overcome their traumas and prepare them for life after the war.

On 19<sup>th</sup> January 1917, British Secret Services intercepted a coded message sent by the German Foreign Minister of that time, Arthur Zimmermann. It had been sent to the German Embassy in the United States of America and subsequently forwarded to the Mexican government. They were informed of the planned launch of unrestricted submarine warfare and suggested the Mexicans cooperate with Germany in the war against the United States of America<sup>25</sup>.

Having deciphered the coded telegram, the British passed it on to the American government, hoping to increase the chance of the United States of America entering the war by following up on an earlier impulse – the sinking of the British steamship *Lusitania* by a German U-20 submarine in April 1915 and the deaths of 128 Americans on board at the time. These events led to the United States of America entering the war against the Central Powers on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1917.

This fact was encouraging for the American YMCA, who initially ended up on the border with Mexico, where its secretaries provided soldiers with huts, tents and equipment needed for the transfer of soldiers and material<sup>26</sup>.

As soon as the United States of America entered the war, Germany insisted on expelling all American workers from all of its prisoner-of-war camps. A similar situation occurred in Austria-Hungary. Despite having spent the last three years working actively with prisoners from a wide variety of armed forces, costing them a great deal of money, the American YMCA became perceived by the general public as a great benefit to the U.S. Armed Forces<sup>27</sup>.

YMCA's unique chance of replacing American secretaries in Germany and Austria-Hungary was to make use of the abilities of YMCA secretaries from neutral countries. Therefore, the National Councils in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Sweden were contacted<sup>28</sup>. Sports equipment continued to be sent to prisoner-of-war camps, where the wide variety of matches, tournaments and leagues were not greatly hindered<sup>29</sup>.

At that time, John R. Mott was the General Secretary of the YMCA International Committee. He did not hesitate to call a meeting, sending President Wil-

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<sup>25</sup> S. Pincock, M. Frarys, *Geheime Codes Die berühmtesten Verschlüsselungstechniken und ihre Geschichte*, Bergisch Gladbach 2007, p. 93.

<sup>26</sup> *Summary of world war work of the American YMCA (With the soldiers and sailors of America at home, on the sea, and overseas, With the men of the allied armies and with the prisoners of war in all parts of the world)*, New York 1920, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> W. Taft, F. Kent, W. Newlin, F. Harris, *Service with fighting men (An Account of the Work of the American YMCA in the World War I)*, Volume II, New York 1922, pp. 302–299.

<sup>28</sup> K. A. Steuer, *Pursuit of an "Unparalleled Opportunity": The American Y.M.C.A. and Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy among the Central Power nations during World War I, 1914–1923, Volume II* (Dissertation thesis), St. Paul 1998, p. 307.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 328–336.

son a telegram offering him the services of the YMCA and claiming they could again prove very useful in the war. A meeting of American YMCA representatives followed in Garden City, New York on 10<sup>th</sup> April 1917. Negotiations lasted the whole day and establishment of the YMCA War Work Council was approved. The YMCA was later allowed to get involved in aid for both ground forces and the navy.

A special fund was subsequently set up for the War Work Council, allowing it to finance its work. Whole associations, organizations and individuals could contribute to this fund. Only in 1917, more than 3 million American dollars were released from it<sup>30</sup>.

However, at the first War Work Council meeting, it was agreed that the allocated money would be used by the YMCA to relieve the monotony of American military exercises. Hence, the first proposal concerned YMCA military activity, which was to be carried out exclusively in the United States of America. There was a sharp rise in the number of places where the YMCA served during the war, its various military headquarters stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific and in 1918 even reaching Alaska.

This meant that the YMCA in Europe was deprived of a significant amount of support from the United States of America. Indeed, the American YMCA was no longer keen on continuing war work in Europe. Despite that, a visit by YMCA secretaries to the “old continent” was being prepared. The first large delegation of American YMCA members (27 secretaries) set sail for France on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1917. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of June 1918, further funding for YMCA activity in England and France was approved by the War Work Council<sup>31</sup>.

In early August 1917, a special “Recreation” department was set up for soldiers in France, mainly thanks to a teacher from YMCA Springfield College called John H. McCurdy, who had visited the field artillery training centre at Camp Valdahon. During the first year of his work there, more than 1300 recreation centres were established. John H. McCurdy was a very capable person with a good knowledge of sports training. In France, he became the first director of the Physical Education Department of the American YMCA. In August 1917, he was also named director of the “Department of Health, Hygiene and Athletics”.

One of his first achievements while travelling around France was to organize a special football match, in which around 175 men took part on each side. He used four footballs at once for their game. At half time, he and his co-worker, J. Naismith, gave them health and morale instruction.

Here, John H. McCurdy also met a large group of soldiers who completely lacked agility and other motoric abilities. This led him to the idea of setting up

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<sup>30</sup> W. Taft, F. Kent, W. Newlin, F. Harris, *Service with fighting men (An Account of the Work of the American YMCA in the World War I), Volume I*, New York 1922, pp. 212–213.

<sup>31</sup> A.C. Venzon, P.L. Miles, *The United States in the First World War (An Encyclopedia)*, New York 1999, p. 810.

an Athletics Department within the Physical Education Department run by them. He was also instrumental in establishing a Health Department. John H. McCurdy also wanted to find out what physical condition ordinary soldiers were in. So he dedicated one afternoon to testing 1600 men from the 1<sup>st</sup> Division Artillery Brigade in Saint-Nazaire in September 1917.

The results were not particularly good, despite having carried out standard tests for thirteen-year-old students of American schools and it was clear that a physical education program would either have to be brought in or made stricter.

By early December 1917, McCurdy had organised a sufficient number of teams to play in a football competition. One month later, a much larger number of teams took part in a basketball tournament. Regular matches were played in the close vicinity of YMCA huts. There were regular Monday boxing and wrestling matches and baseball was played too. The YMCA arranged these activities in many places but mainly around strategic bases. Sport also took place on the front line, although getting sports items to these places was a matter of personal initiative.

With regards to physical education and sport for soldiers the most important action was a request sent to New York stating the need to allocate one YMCA Director of Physical Education per 2500 soldiers in France. According to available sources, 170 Directors of Physical Education were requested along with material worth 1.8 million American dollars, to be shared among 40 divisions<sup>32</sup>.

Ordering such a large amount of sports materials from the United States of America and distributing them in France was indeed very complicated. This had been one of the largest orders of sports items ever. It took quite a long time for the sports equipment to reach the designated place. The items were delivered in batches, the first batch worth 300 000 US dollars being delivered in the summer of 1918. The last batch arrived in January 1919. It contained more than 270 000 baseball balls, 45 000 baseball bats, 40 000 baseball gloves, basketballs, volleyballs and nets, equipment for indoor baseball kits, boxing gloves, tennis rackets and various things for athletics<sup>33</sup>.

Thanks to YMCA secretaries, military units had a wide range of sports equipment at their disposal in the base camps. If anything happened to break, they usually had to start improvising and make do without it. As units advanced towards German positions, soldiers needed to be entertained, to have their morale kept up and to stay in shape. Sport was an ideal means for that.

In addition, officers knew well that skills acquired from sport could be of use to soldiers in battle. Soldiers' boxing habits were very useful in bayonet fights<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> W. Taft, F. Kent, W. Newlin, F. Harris, *Service with fighting men (An Account of the Work of the American YMCA in the World War I)*, Volume II, New York 1922, pp. 26–27.

<sup>33</sup> *Summary of world war work of the American YMCA (With the soldiers and sailors of America at home, on the sea, and overseas, With the men of the allied armies and with the prisoners of war in all parts of the world)*, New York 1920, pp. 135–137.

<sup>34</sup> E.L. Johnson, *The History of YMCA Physical Education*, Chicago 1979, pp. 188–189.

Almost all bayonet attacks ended in a struggle where neither individual would know what to do if they lost their bayonet. They could very effectively put what they had learnt from boxing lessons into practice there. A.E. Marriott wrote a book called *Suggested Athletics for Army Camps*. It was written for YMCA Physical Education Secretaries working in army camps and describes individual exercises and sports as means that can be made good use of in battle<sup>35</sup>.

In mid August 1917, John R. Mott returned from Russia to the United States of America. At the War Work Council meeting in mid August, he proposed that the YMCA should spread its services into that country as well. His proposal was approved and the YMCA could start work in Russia. In late August 1918, the YMCA was asked by the Italian government to commence activity in Italy as well.

Huts were still being built, mainly near towns and cities, both in the USA and, on a much smaller scale, in Europe. They were equipped with tables, benches, pots and a piano. Baseball (see Figure 3.) or boxing equipment could often be borrowed from here. Flour, sugar, tinned food, jam and hairbrushes or toothpaste were to be found in these buildings too. There was also demand for cigars, cigarettes and matches<sup>36</sup>.



**Figure 3.** The postcard which shows WWI era soldiers playing baseball undoubtedly marked with the distinctive red YMCA logo (source: <http://www.dugouttreasures.com/productDetail.cfm?sID=5&prodID=546> [date 5.3.2015]).

However, the transfer of all materials to Europe still posed a big problem. Despite that, huge amounts were transported from America to Europe. YMCA needs were covered by total deliveries of almost 42 000 tonnes of various items. Most of them carried essential materials for preparing meals (flour, sugar...), weighing more than 21 500 tonnes, followed by tobacco products (11 000 ton-

<sup>35</sup> A.E. Marriott, *Suggested Athletics for Army Camps*, New York 1918, pp. 6–7.

<sup>36</sup> W. Taft, F. Kent, W. Newlin, F. Harris, *Service with fighting men (An Account of the Work of the American YMCA in the World War I)*, Volume I, New York 1922, pp. 218–221.

nes). Deliveries also contained sports items but on a much smaller scale. All in all, the YMCA sent Europe a total of almost 760 tonnes of sports materials worth more than 1.5 million American dollars.

The substantial majority of the material ended up in France, where the YMCA had been cooperating with the French army and taking care of prisoners of war for several years. In total, materials worth more than 25 million American dollars was transported to France to cover YMCA needs. It had built up a very successful, prosperous system of canteens where you could get hold of a wide variety of things. With a little exaggeration, it could have been marked as one of the largest retail food chains of the time<sup>37</sup>. Interestingly, the Siberian region received the second largest number of items from America, having been distributed materials worth more than a million US dollars<sup>38</sup>.

Despite the YMCA not transporting such a large amount of sports material, its work in the field of physical education and sport in Europe was not negligible, as in America. It continuously made efforts to offer soldiers in training or prisoner-of-war camps the possibility of enjoying sport. This task was not easy, though. From the very beginning, its Physical Education Leaders were confronted by officers who immediately made it clear that they did not require any help of that kind. The YMCA stood up to them, though, promoting their sports and games. Unlike army officers, they did not lack sports equipment of any kind and that kept them one step ahead.

Sport was nothing new for American soldiers, who often spent their free time boxing or playing baseball or football. These sports also gave them the necessary self confidence. This led to a kind of collision of two physical education directions. The YMCA could not omit “its” sports. Its Physical Education Functionaries often promoted volleyball and basketball but boxing, wrestling, baseball, handball or games like quoits or cage ball were also given regard to. Sportsmen in the American army gave British and French officers their first chance to see these sports, which were relatively unknown in Europe<sup>39</sup>.

The YMCA also began to help the American army with soldiers’ physical preparation. Through its sports and athletics coaching, it tried to develop their agility, strength, speed and stamina. During the course of the First World War, the YMCA organised a wide range of sports activities for soldiers. It helped tens of millions of soldiers to get involved in sport directly or become spectators at regular sports matches. Its slogan was: “Every man in the game”.

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<sup>37</sup> *Summary of world war work of the American YMCA (With the soldiers and sailors of America at home, on the sea, and overseas, With the men of the allied armies and with the prisoners of war in all parts of the world)*, New York 1920, pp. 26–27.

<sup>38</sup> W. Taft, F. Kent, W. Newlin, F. Harris, *Service with fighting men (An Account of the Work of the American YMCA in the World War I)*, Volume I, New York 1922, pp. 290–292.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 316–317.

## The American YMCA and its activity in Europe just after the war

In November 1918, almost a week after the truce, the Americans began to march east from France to Germany. They were joined by the YMCA, which went on to cooperate with the American army in Germany and became a highly developed part of it<sup>40</sup>.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 1919, the Paris Peace Conference opened and statesmen and diplomats from the participating countries faced difficult tasks. They tried to couple the vision of peace with the many clashing interests and to establish a new international European order, essential for the existence of the successor states<sup>41</sup>. Besides reparations being imposed on the defeated states and the collapse of Austria-Hungary, Central Europe was completely reorganised and divided into defeated nations – Germany and Hungary (one of the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) and victorious nations – Czechoslovakia and Poland.

The highlight of the negotiations was the Peace Treaty with Germany, head of the defeated nations. Its aim was to remove any further threat and prevent its imperialist aggression.

After the First World War, the YMCA was instrumental in organising the Inter-Allied Games which were held in Paris in 1919 in honour of the victorious nations. One YMCA worker, Elwood Brown, is particularly credited for this.

This sporting event took place at the Pershing Stadium, whose design and construction had been financed by the YMCA. The French government provided the premises and the American army did most of the building work. The Inter-Allied Games were a huge success<sup>42</sup>.

Pierre de Coubertin was so delighted with their organisation that he sent their program to the organisers of the first post-war Olympic Games, which were held in Antwerp in 1920<sup>43</sup>.

By November 1919, most of the YMCA books and sports materials had found their way back from Europe to the United States of America. Most of these things ended up in New York, where it was not difficult to sell the books at low prices. The same cannot be said of the sports items, which were no longer suitable for the local sportsmen and took quite a long time to sell even at low prices. Some of these items were donated to national YMCA groups in Europe<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>41</sup> J. Křen, *Dvě století střední Evropy*, Prague 2005, p. 377.

<sup>42</sup> *Summary of world war work of the American YMCA (With the soldiers and sailors of America at home, on the sea, and overseas, With the men of the allied armies and with the prisoners of war in all parts of the world)*, New York 1920, pp. 132–134.

<sup>43</sup> G. Constable, *The IV Olympiad (London 1908, the international YMCA)*, Los Angeles 1999, pp. 147–148.

<sup>44</sup> W. Taft, F. Kent, W. Newlin, F. Harris, *Service with fighting men (An Account of the Work of the American YMCA in the World War I), Volume I*, New York 1922, p. 292.

The First World War having ended, prisoners of war could start looking forward to returning home. Prisoner-of-war camps in defeated Germany held large numbers of Russian soldiers, who still had to wait some time to be freed. It was not until autumn 1920 that most of them had returned home. Sporting fixtures with the Americans were relatively common during this period. They played many baseball or football matches against each other and clashed in the boxing ring too, using sports equipment that was still available thanks to the YMCA<sup>45</sup>.

After the First World War and the Paris Peace Conference, the United States of America was generally expected to remain active in Europe. Many American politicians spoke of the need for American participation in the economic and political reconstruction of “the Old Continent”. That was understood as a specific mission that had to be completed. As the Americans had everything that Europe destroyed by war and despair needed, expectations were even higher.

This mainly concerned Central and Eastern Europe, particularly the newly established nations like Czechoslovakia and Poland, where, in 1919, another era of great American YMCA work was about to begin<sup>46</sup>.

## Conclusion

The American YMCA intervened in a significant way in the course of events in Europe during the First World War. It may have been the greatest volunteer service (apart from the Red Cross) to be provided at the time. YMCA secretaries had realised the lack of such a developed and prosperous organisation that could help those fighting in the First World War.

Despite Geneva being chosen the YMCA War Prisoners Aid Headquarters, a large amount of financial and material support flowed to soldiers and prisoners of war from a very different place – the United States of America. The YMCA had developed there in a rather different way to that in Europe. Its physical education program had flourished there and this was not forgotten in European battlefields and prisoner-of-war camps. The YMCA was instrumental in developing, spreading and promoting a whole range of new sports in Europe. This was supported by repeated supplies of large amounts of sports materials.

It is admirable that the American YMCA had begun to work in Europe several years before the United States of America entered the First World War, not long after President Wilson had issued his Proclamation of Neutrality, calling on Americans to remain impartial both in their thinking and actions.

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<sup>45</sup> K.A. Steuer, *Pursuit of an “Unparalleled Opportunity”: The American Y.M.C.A. and Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy among the Central Power nations during World War I, 1914–1923, Volume II* (Dissertation thesis), St. Paul 1998, pp. 408–409.

<sup>46</sup> J. Křen, *Dvě století střední Evropy*, Prague 2005, pp. 362–368.

However, the American YMCA knew that if it did want to work in Europe and remain impartial, it had to begin offering its services to soldiers and prisoners on either side of the war. Despite teething problems, it did manage to have its program acknowledged and there followed the transfer of a huge amount of sports and other material from the USA to Europe.

After the war, the YMCA in Paris was instrumental in organising the Inter-Allied Games, held there in honour of the victorious nations. For the Games to take place, the YMCA built a stadium and provided the necessary sports equipment.

Later, the YMCA began to send their sports materials back from Europe to America, where it was gradually sold off. However, some of it was donated to national European YMCA groups to develop their physical education program.

This brought an end to the American YMCA's First World War mission in Europe. However, the American YMCA did not abandon Europe completely, as it attempted to spread its influence into other countries. New local groups were established and material and financial support again came from the United States of America.

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## **Organizacja YMCA i jej działalność poświęcona kulturze fizycznej i sportowi w Europie w okresie I wojny światowej**

### **Streszczenie**

W pracy przedstawiono historię YMCA w Europie w czasie I wojny światowej. Ta międzynarodowa organizacja w omawianym okresie wyasygnowała bardzo duże środki finansowe na pomoc żołnierzom i jeńcom wojennym. Ze wszystkich narodowych oddziałów YMCA największe wsparcie finansowe przekazała YMCA ze Stanów Zjednoczonych, gdzie w rozwoju kultury fizycznej i sportu organizacja osiągnęła najwyższy poziom. Jeszcze przed przystąpieniem Stanów Zjednoczonych do I wojny światowej wolontariusze YMCA pracowali na polach europejskich bitew i w obozach jenieckich. Wolontariusze ci oferowali żołnierzom i więźniom wiele różnych sposobów spędzania wolnego czasu, wśród których były kultura fizyczna i sport. Po przystąpieniu Stanów Zjednoczonych do wojny działania amerykańskiej YMCA przybrały na sile. Ze Stanów Zjednoczonych do Europy przetransportowano ogromną ilość sprzętu sportowego i sprowadzono instruktorów sportowych. Po wojnie francuska YMCA zainicjowała Inter-Allied Games, a program tej imprezy starała się rozpropagować w innych krajach.

**Słowa kluczowe:** YMCA, I wojna światowa, obozy jenieckie, sport, urzędnicy.