BRIAN ALTOBELLO

WHISKEY WOMEN AND WAR

HOW THE GREAT WAR SHAPED JIM CROW NEW ORLEANS

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INTRODUCTION

New Orleans, wrote Tennessee Williams in his play "A Streetcar Named Desire," was "a little piece of eternity dropping into your hands." As a resident of the city, he recognized that it was suspicious of post-Victorian America and, like Blanche DuBois, felt ill-suited for it. Like the conflicted protagonist in his play, the city viewed itself as a bit too genteel, too charming for an American society unabsorbed by its history. New Orleans, still proud of its French culture, was disconnected from the hum of progress embracing other cities and remained tenaciously provincial in its outlook. Much of this was a function of its geographic predicament, founded on an inhospitable marsh trapped between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River. But it was also a cultural island in the South with a profoundly Roman Catholic population surrounded by a vast sea of Protestant disdain and imprinted with a colonial legacy unknown to most others. This isolation allowed it to develop an original culture. Jazz, celebratory funerals, and a permissiveness toward alcohol were all byproducts, as was its easy blissfulness about life, almost an apathy—all of which collided with the nation's Puritan ethic. New Orleans would welcome progress, but it would do so without deserting its soul. "The past doesn't pass away so quickly here," wrote Bob Dylan. "You could be dead for a long time."

Historian Gary Krist understood. New Orleans, he reflected, was the first to build an opera house but also the last to create a sewage system. Fifteen years into the twentieth century, automobiles, airplanes, electricity, telephones, movies, and other inventions taught New Orleanians to acknowledge the modern age, but many remained ambivalent about these transformative achievements. There was uncertainty as well about how Jim Crow laws would be enforced, the races continuing to mingle in parks, saloons, and, most notoriously, in the city's healthy sex industry. The nation's Progressive reform movement would be embraced by its municipal leaders, but only if the reforms did not dilute the sanctity of white supremacy or machine politics. Even the tumult of the First World War failed to leave its signature.

Governing New Orleans during the war was Mayor Martin Behrman, the man who helped to steer his city's narrative into the new century. Behrman boasted an impressive dossier of urban improvements, placing him among the leading Progressives of the South. Under his regime, port facilities were modernized, marshlands were drained, construction began on the Industrial Canal connecting the Mississippi River with Lake Pontchartrain, dozens of city services were updated or replaced, and infrastructure was revamped to accommodate a rude newcomer to New Orleans—automobiles. In the years prior to the war, New Orleans was becoming a much more livable place. But this does not tell the entire story, for the mayor was also a living tutorial for machine politics. As the franchise quarterback of the New Orleans Old Regulars—a cartel of elected officials and appointees who did his bidding—Behrman excelled at the sport, using strong-arm threats and election manipulation as well as anyone.

One wonders how Jean and Kate Gordon, the sisters who devoted their years to improving conditions for the citizens of their native town, go so unnoticed today. Educated, elitist, and privileged, they nevertheless despised the arrogance often associated with that privilege. There were plenty of moving parts in their lives. Sedentary they were not. Coy? Never. They were both hardwired to the Progressives' Social Gospel—applying Christian morality to society's miseries. Acting as an army of two, they were successful in struggles to bring attention to animal-cruelty issues, to ensure that child-labor laws were enforced, to open the doors of Tulane Medical School to women, and to advance public health. In between these battles, the Gordons became the leading evangelists for women's suffrage in the state. Like other Progressive reformers, they too were fluent in their attack on machine government and the numbing regularity of graft associated with the city's substantial vice industry, and it is in this arena where they clashed publicly with their boss-mayor again and again. It was the big stage that Kate in particular relished. No behind-the-curtain work for her. No boilerplate clichés. And she did not care who liked her and who did not.

It is difficult to identify three people in the long history of New Orleans who are more deserving of acclaim, yet each of them had their dark sides. Behrman's years in office were framed by classic boss-rule techniques—patronage and widespread graft. But he played the political game deftly, with humor and without the brashness of a demagogue, entirely visible and untiring in his efforts to coax New Orleans deeper into the new century. The Gordons, in spite of their years of personal self-sacrifice and unflinching altruism, were unapologetic racists, believers in the science of eugenics as the salve for many of society's ills. Contradictions abounded.

While the reach of these three extraordinary people was quite long and enduring, the war was paramount, prevailing over every facet of life in the two-hundred-year-old city between 1917 and 1918. And its Gallic heritage connected *La Nouvelle-Orléans* to its cousins overseas from the war's beginning in 1914.[1] But the stimulus of war could change only so much. Racial segregation had been institutionalized since the late 1800s with the enactment of Jim Crow laws. When war came, African American participation in the military, their leaders hoped, would spike the "racial uplift" movement and mitigate the demons of Jim Crow. That did not happen. The war brought no relief to the toxic climate of racial bigotry. The sturdy edifice of white superiority remained embedded in the New Orleans panorama.

African Americans were not alone in their despair. When war first broke out, people of German extraction were much more readily received than were the town's Sicilians, Chinese, or Irish. But as graphic news reports of atrocities committed by the Kaiser's forces in Belgium filtered into the press, sentiments shifted rapidly. Already characterized as a militaristic *Kultur*, German citizens began to be unfairly associated with these crimes. In New Orleans and across the nation, a fever pitch of fear of often ridiculous proportions mushroomed—Germanophobia. Germans who were not US citizens were officially labeled by the government as enemy aliens. It was hardly an endearing term, inviting harassment and worse. People with German surnames, even those that had been citizens of the US for decades, would be taunted, spurned, or at least carefully monitored.

Fear morphed into hysteria, and when mysterious bombs exploded at manufacturing plants and shipyards in parts of the US, tens of thousands of willing citizens ineligible for what was to shortly become a draft volunteered for an organization meant to assist the Justice Department in identifying German spies and subversives. The local office in New Orleans was swamped by people eager to contribute to the war effort. It was called the American Protective League, an ad hoc organization of well-intentioned individuals who would often violate the most basic of one's civil rights. It did not take much for an APL report to be typed up and sent to Bureau of Intelligence agents. Someone may have been overheard criticizing the president. Another might simply be seen "acting suspiciously" and be brought in for questioning. Patriotic fervor disguised a litany of injustices. Questioning the practices of the APL cast doubt onto the accuser. Three decades later, a new word would be coined for this phenomenon—McCarthyism. The emotional sweep was identical. Only the targets changed.

When it became apparent that the League was engaging in overkill, it turned its attention to far less interesting work like identifying violations of

the government's food- and fuel-conservation regulations. When a "Work or Fight" order was issued, meant to cleanse the streets and pool halls of "slackers," the League was asked to assist in this campaign. The mission broadened still further—suppression of all forms of vice near military installations. Working in dialogue with local law enforcement, the federal government's Committee on Training Camp Activities, and the New Orleans Civic League, the APL became a hyperactive arm of the moral police. Agents assisted in the identification of sporting houses, where prostitution flourished and saloon owners sold intoxicating beverages to anyone in uniform. An inebriated or diseased soldier or sailor directly affected military readiness. Decontamination of the city's vices became not only a Progressive goal, but also a patriotic endeavor as well.

The groundwork had already been laid for the Prohibition Amendment, beginning decades before with the Women's Christian Temperance Movement and especially the more recent Anti-Saloon League. During the war years, momentum had swung heavily in the direction of the "dries." Many breweries throughout the nation were German-owned, and the "Kaiser's brew" that they produced, along with the people who drank it, were guilty by association with the vilified Hun leader. Moreover, the nation's allies were already on board with various bans on alcohol, creating a reflex in America that emboldened the forces against Demon Rum.

Local-option laws allowed states to choose to be "dry." Louisiana, however, was not one of them, and liquor distributors there were able to profit from this by supplying neighboring dry states with all the booze they could consume. But when the Supreme Court ruled early in 1917 that crossing state lines with the liquid contraband was illegal, prohibition forces rejoiced. Now supporters of the Anti-Saloon League possessed a precedent for national action. In spite of strong opposition from Louisiana, dry states, already numbering more than a third of the total, would become "bone dry."

The judgement was also a blow against "states' rights." For many, prohibition was an intrusion into the bailiwick of a state's authority, one in which the federal government should not trespass. Others simply viewed it as a violation of a basic recreational male ritual. Nevertheless, it surprised no one when the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified, especially since the War Department had previously set the table with a wartime prohibition edict, never mind that it was intended as a food-conservation measure. Supporting the amendment, like purging the city of its immorality, became synonymous with supporting the war.

Venereal disease was an odious companion to the sex trade, and the city's infamous, twenty-year-old red-light district, called Storyville, was in the

government's bombsight. Not only did gonorrhea and syphilis take a toll on a military unit's readiness, it also was an indication of the degradation of a young man's character. Washington welcomed the responsibility to build solid citizens in its ranks. It was not enough to teach good soldiering skills. After their release from service, soldiers must be ready to become solid husbands and fathers as well. Such was the magic of the Progressives, showering even the military with its high-minded ideals. What bolted the doors of the infamous district in 1917 was the War Department, not the Anti-Saloon League.

When Congress declared war in the spring of 1917, New Orleans was eager to answer Behrman's appeal for unanimity with the president. The mayor addressed an anxious audience as "fellow Americans, fellow patriots," challenging them with a question: "What will you people of New Orleans do?" The answer would not be long in coming. The city assembled its resources promptly and spectacularly.

The immediate urgency was the mobilization of men. Almost four hundred thousand registered for military service in Louisiana, and 46 percent of those were classified as Class I, fit for service. Only Wyoming had a higher percentage. New Orleans contributed 84,905 to the total, including hundreds of professionals who relinquished their incomes to volunteer.[2] The Allies also depended on the city's port for shipment of military supplies overseas, its workers able to turn around a fully stocked ship in nineteen hours. And its four shipbuilding and repair plants did much to bolster the nation's ability to provide material support for the troops in France.

The common New Orleanian, however, was an active participant as well, and there is no better example of the willingness of the citizenry to contribute to the enemy's defeat than the five Liberty Loan drives and the twelve other fund drives conducted to raise money for the war. Over $114 million was collected in a span of just nineteen months, $23 million over the city's quotas. That is roughly $68 for every man, woman, and child in the city, or about $1,200 adjusted for inflation. Extraordinary. The people responded to their mayor's appeal. They could indeed claim a share of the victory. Much of the credit for this success goes to the dozens of civic, social, religious, and benevolent societies, including the Red Cross and the Elks, who committed themselves fully to Behrman's call. So too did the commercial community, which helped to publicize the drives by cleverly transforming their stores, hotels, and businesses into repositories for donations and providing lavish publicity for them with no thought of reimbursement for the expenses.

So what did this two-hundred-year-old city inherit from the war? Because of their service in the ranks of the military, African American leaders hoped

that the Great War would hasten racial uplift and help to derail Jim Crow. It did not. In fact, seeing Blacks in the uniform of their white friends and relatives merely served to heighten fears among many whites that their own place in society was vulnerable. Segregation's bondage remained uninterrupted.

The Old Regular machine maintained its stranglehold on the city's political landscape in spite of Progressive opposition, and Behrman and his cronies would be reelected in 1924. The city's German citizens were slowly able to shed their tainted reputation, but wartime vigilantism against the Hun would transmute during the decade of the Red Scare into an equally vicious pursuit of similar "threats" to America's values.

The war did indeed arouse support for the Eighteenth Amendment, yet the reformers' romance with prohibition turned out to be little more than a troubled thirteen-year affair, ill-considered and untenable. Progressives claimed that the order to liquidate the city's notorious rectangle of sin, Storyville, was a significant consequence of the war. But it was clear that its closing did not exterminate prostitution in New Orleans. It merely repositioned the working girls to other places in town.

For women, the war begat job opportunities—and not just as nurses overseas or as Red Cross volunteers. They sought and eagerly filled available positions as store managers, automobile drivers, and even mechanics. Dozens joined the Navy to become yeomen or to work as telephone operators, stenographers, or messengers. And the leadership women displayed during the massive Liberty Loan and food- and fuel-conservation campaigns did not go unnoticed. They attended to dependents while wage-earning women were away from home. Others volunteered their time packing supplies for shipment to camps, provided recreational opportunities for soldiers and sailors stationed in the city's military facilities, nursed them when they were ill, and chauffeured officers and dignitaries around town in their personal automobiles. These high-profile activities helped to smuggle in new attitudes, delivering the necessary accelerant in the long struggle for women's suffrage. The Nineteenth Amendment left a permanent mark, albeit an incomplete one, as Black women in New Orleans were still deprived of the vote, and local white women did not register in proportional numbers until the 1930s. Much like the Armistice itself, which brought about only a specious peace, the Great War left New Orleans still toiling with unfinished issues, which would be left to settle in later decades.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

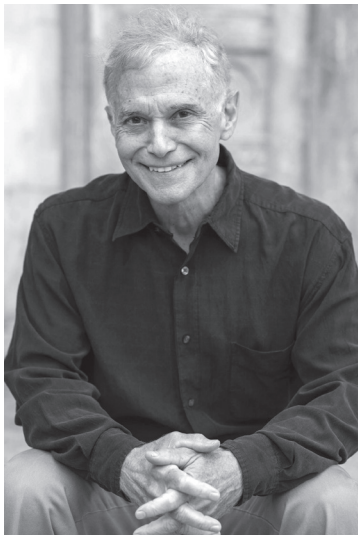

Photo by Helen Reed

Brian Altobello received his undergraduate and master's degrees in US history from LSU. He concluded his career as a high school teacher to work for the Louisiana Department of Education and was named a Distinguished Educator. Altobello is the author of *Into the Shadows Furious: The Brutal Battle for New Georgia* and is an educational consultant in New Orleans, where he lives with his wife, Denise.