

# Librarians and the WWII Home Front: Knowledge Preservation at Home and Abroad

## Question to Consider

How can you utilize your strengths to create change and spread knowledge that is at risk of loss?

During World War II, mobilization of the home front affected all communities. Many people participated in new careers and industries. Others adapted their current skills to help provide access to knowledge in the face of danger. American librarians played important roles in the fight against fascism, both at home and abroad. The librarians recruited as part of the newly founded [Office of Strategic Services](#) worked in major

institutes like the [Library of Congress](#) and [New York Public Library](#). Their skills at utilizing new technologies like microfilm made them powerful assets. Working undercover abroad, OSS agents preserved texts that Nazis and their allies wanted to keep secret or destroy.<sup>1</sup> At home, members of the American Library Association (ALA) continued efforts to make information accessible. Building from their work during WWI, ALA campaigned to provide books and materials to a wide range of new WWII communities, from army bases to POW camps. The ALA also published the Library Bill of Rights in 1939.<sup>2</sup>

By ensuring that libraries and written texts were available to all members of the WWII home front, the ALA provided access to continuing education, technical knowledge, and a connection to people and places outside of camps.

## The Library of Congress and the Office of Strategic Services

The 1930s and 1940s were a time for major technological developments in many fields. Microfilm was originally invented in the 1800s, but it only became available for commercial use in the 1930s. The ability to create miniature scans of documents revolutionized archival research and cataloguing. Storing and sharing texts was much easier than relying on the paper copies. While we rely on the internet today, microfilm is still used by many archivists and librarians. Microfilm is

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<sup>1</sup> Katie McBride Moench, "How American Librarians Helped Defeat the Nazis," *JSTOR Daily*, November 29, 2023, <https://daily.jstor.org/how-american-librarians-helped-defeat-the-nazis/>. Kathy Peiss, "Librarians at War," *American Heritage* 65, no. 4 (July/August 2020), <https://www.americanheritage.com/librarians-war>.

<sup>2</sup> Linton Weeks, "When America's Librarians Went to War," *NPR*, July 4, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-history-dept/2015/07/04/418840245/when-americas-librarians-went-to-war>.

highly valued for its lifespan: websites can change or be taken down, but microfilm's quality can last between 100 and 500 years.<sup>3</sup>

During the 1930s, the need to have safe copies of books and articles was increasingly urgent. Beginning in 1933, book burning became a practice throughout Nazi Germany. Student groups like the Nazi German Student Association created lists of authors whose work should be censored. The blacklisting and public burning of books was supported by the government. The Nazis sought to align art, literature, and other cultural practices with their ideology. Any “un-German” work was labeled as “degenerate.”<sup>4</sup> Book burning was one of Germany’s solutions to limiting differing belief systems.

The restricting of information happening overseas alarmed and concerned American librarians. In 1939, the American Library Association (ALA) passed the Library Bill of Rights as a response. The Bill of Rights encouraged libraries to serve as spaces for unbiased, accessible learning.

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*“Today indications in many parts of the world point to growing intolerance, suppression of free speech, and censorship, affecting the rights of minorities and individuals.... Resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people... and in no case should the selection be influenced by the race or nationality or political or religious views of the writer.”<sup>5</sup>*

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The United States government shared concerns that librarians had about censorship. Nazis and their allies did not only destroy existing texts. They also kept hidden new scientific developments and other Nazi publications. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt wanted the United States to remain ahead of its enemies. Knowledge on what they prioritized was an important way to do so. To collect and save non-secret documents, Roosevelt and William “Wild Bill” Donovan (a WWI veteran and lawyer) created the [Office of Strategic Services \(OSS\)](#).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “A Brief History of Preservation: Microfiche and Microfilm,” European Space Agency Archives Portal, August 2023, <https://historicalarchives.esa.int/brief-history-preservation-microfiche-and-microfilm>.

<sup>4</sup> “Book Burning,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last edited October 7, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/book-burning>.

<sup>5</sup> Madison Ingram, “How Librarians Became American Free Speech Heroes,” *Saturday Evening Post*, October 23, 2023, <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2023/10/how-librarians-became-american-free-speech-heroes/>. “The Library’s Bill of Rights,” American Library Association Institutional Repository, June 1939, <http://hdl.handle.net/11213/418>.

<sup>6</sup> Elyse Graham, “We Underfunded Our Libraries Once. It Almost Cost Us World War II,” *Time*, September 25, 2024, <https://time.com/7024056/libraries-funding-national-security-essay/>. Moench, “How American Librarians Helped Defeat the Nazis.” Peiss, “Librarians at War.”



Figure 1: This 1942 poster printed by the US Government Printing Office includes a quote from President Roosevelt. The caption, “Books are Weapons in the War of Ideas,” emphasizes Americans’ belief that the war was one focused on defeating principles of fascism, not just the countries that made up the Axis Powers. Credit: Washington State University

Donovan and Roosevelt created the Interdepartmental Committee for the Acquisition of Foreign Publications (IDC) as part of the OSS. To do so, Donovan worked with Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish. MacLeish and Donovan knew librarians' research abilities could help find useful information. The IDC recruited its librarians from major institutions across the US. Beginning in 1942, these librarian-spies traveled abroad to establish outposts. IDC librarians worked across [Europe, Africa, and Asia](#).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Peiss, “Librarians at War.” See also “OSS in Action in the Mediterranean and European Theaters,” National Park Service, last modified August 7, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/oss-in-action-the-mediterranean-and-european-theaters.htm>.

The IDC relied on librarians' technical skills and their social skills. Adele Kibre was a medieval scholar and the only woman to serve as an agent in the field. Before recruitment, Kibre studied and taught at the [University of California, Berkeley](#). When the OSS recruited Kibre, she had completed her PhD in medieval linguistics at the [University of Chicago](#).<sup>8</sup> Kibre was a skilled scholar, but she was denied entry into academia because she was a woman. Because of this, she developed technical skills to support independent research. By "visiting the photographic studio in order to observe philologists, paleographers, and art historians rapidly filming their research materials with miniature cameras," she learned microfilm skills. Her self-taught microphotography and frequent traveling to Europe for her studies made Kibre an ideal recruit.<sup>9</sup>

Adele Kibre developed a variety of contacts to source books and articles for microfilm archiving. The Danish Resistance, booksellers and academics in Stockholm, and the British government were all vital resources. With their help, she was able to smuggle technical manuals and enemy publications from Germany into Sweden. There, she produced over 3,000 microfilm reels along with the books. Kibre was the most effective OSS agent in their acquisitions program.<sup>10</sup>



*Figure 2 :As part of a 1946 mission to Europe, OSS agents sorted the remains of collections hidden across Europe and archived them for redistribution. Here, a Librarian of Congress sorts through the remains of a collection of documents held in the basement of a Munich Beerhall. Credit: Library of Congress*

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<sup>8</sup> Peiss, "Librarians at War." Elyse Graham, "The Spy Who Came in From the Carrel," *Public Books*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.publicbooks.org/the-spy-who-came-in-from-the-carrel/>.

<sup>9</sup> Moench, "How American Librarians Helped Defeat the Nazis."

<sup>10</sup> Graham, "The Spy Who Came in From the Carrel." Peiss, "Librarians at War." Moench, "How American Libraries Helped Defeat the Nazis."

By the end of 1942, IDC agents microphotographed and distributed a total of 1.2 million pages of books to US agencies. In 1944 and throughout 1945, OSS and the IDC's mission shifted. The war caused shortages of ink, paper, and printing presses in Nazi Germany. This meant that information gathering targeted living intelligence and archives of older texts. OSS agents and British intelligence services formed T-Forces. They interviewed Prisoners of War and Allied sympathizers. In countries liberated from Nazi occupation, the T-Forces helped preserve cultural heritage. Bombed bookstores and hiding places held documents and artwork that Nazis stole from their original owners. The OSS identified over 800 sites in 1945. The OSS and T-Forces sought to return looted books and documents to Jewish individuals and institutions.

Jewish American military officer and archivist Seymour Pomrenze and chemist and veteran Isaac Bencowitz developed a processing system for the recovered books. Between 1945 and 1947, the OSS returned 3.2 million books to their original owners. The remaining 360,000 unidentified works were given to Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc., a US-based international organization that redistributed the works to Jewish communities.<sup>11</sup>

## ALA's Library War Service and WWI

Librarians across the United States also completed important wartime work by sharing knowledge. The ALA has a history of ensuring access to libraries dating back to 1917. During World War I, the Association formed the Library War Service. Fundraisers and book donations formed new libraries for military personnel. Between 1917 and 1920, five million dollars and seven to ten million books went towards establishing 36 camp libraries. 500 other locations that had existing libraries, like military hospitals, received collections. Nearly 1,200 ALA librarians worked at these sites during WWI.<sup>12</sup>

## WWII and the Victory Book Campaigns, 1941-1943

When WWII began, the ALA's past experience in mobilizing to collect and distribute knowledge was helpful. Between 1942 and 1943, the Victory Book campaign received over 17 million books from libraries around the country. The headquarters of the ALA's Victory Book campaign was located in the Empire State Building. The campaign was launched on the steps of the New York Public Library, and celebrities and public figures all contributed to raising awareness of the fundraiser. In 1941, for example, Benny Goodman and his band played in front of the library's two

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Weeks, "When America's Librarians Went to War." Angela Jordan, "The ALA and World War II," American Library Association Archives at the University of Illinois, November 26, 2012, <https://www.library.illinois.edu/ala/2012/11/26/the-ala-and-world-war-ii/>.

lion statues. The New York Public Library became a monument to the importance of knowledge, particularly to aid those who did not have access to it because of the war.<sup>13</sup>



*Figure 3: "Miss Edith Woodburn, Executive Secretary of the Cleveland Public Library system, and Miss Mary Curtis, a staff member, help load 5,000 books for soldiers at Camp Perry, Ohio as part of the Victory Book Campaign in Greater Cleveland. Credit: University of Illinois Library/ALA Archives*

Thousands of volunteer librarians helped to catalogue and send texts to various locations. Their work helped bolster libraries that were being established or expanded. Military camps and hospitals once again received books. So did Civilian Public Service camps, Prisoner of War camps, and even bombed and looted libraries in Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Existing libraries also made themselves more accessible to military servicemen in WWII. The [Chicago Public Library](#), for example, created a Serviceman's Center specifically for troops. Volunteer librarians managed over 5,000 books set aside for military visitors.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Weeks, "When America's Librarians Went to War." Jordan, "The ALA and World War II." Valerie Wingfield, "The Victory Book Campaign and the New York Public Library," New York Public Library, July 25, 2012, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2012/07/25/victory-book-campaign-and-nypl>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Jordan, "The ALA and World War II."

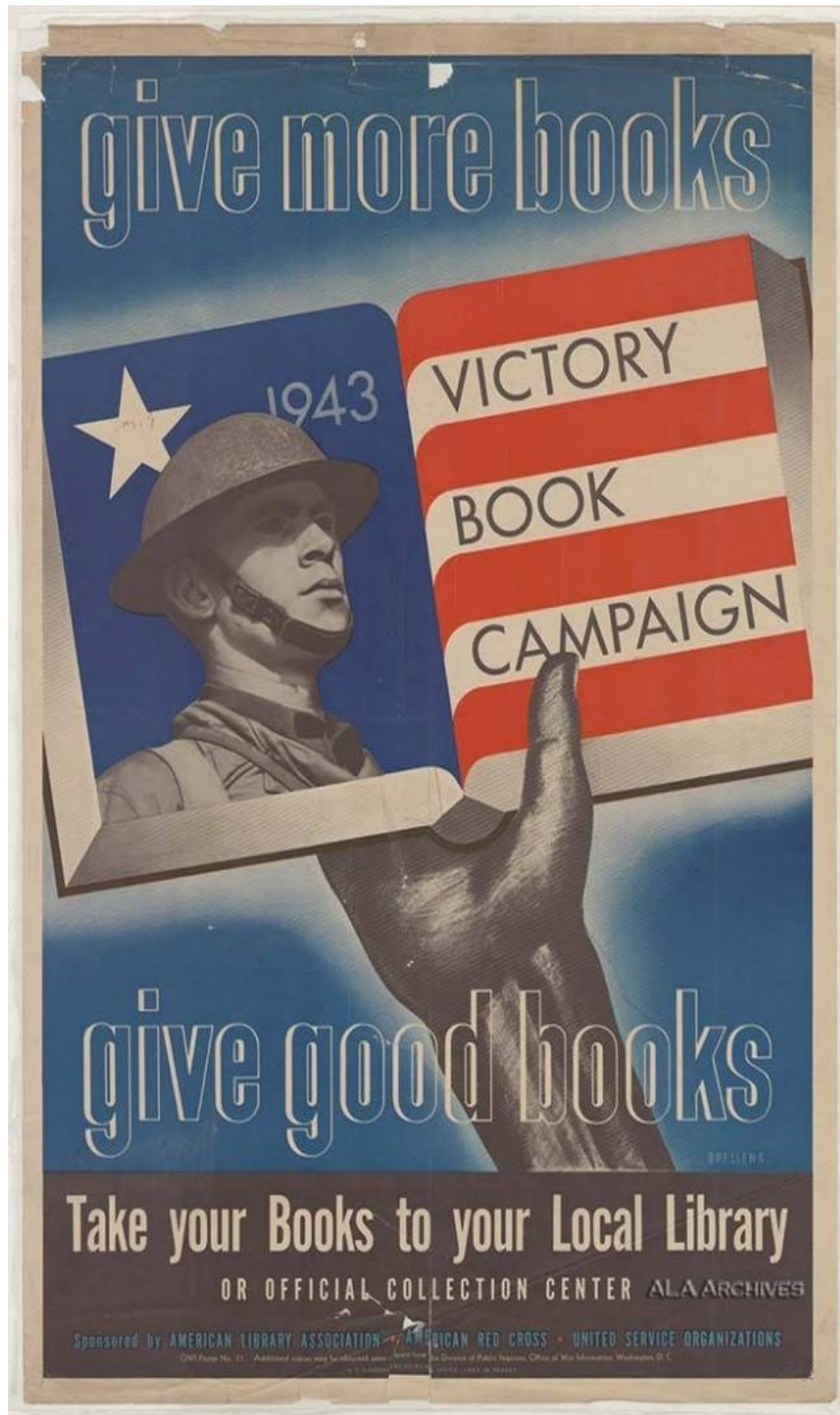
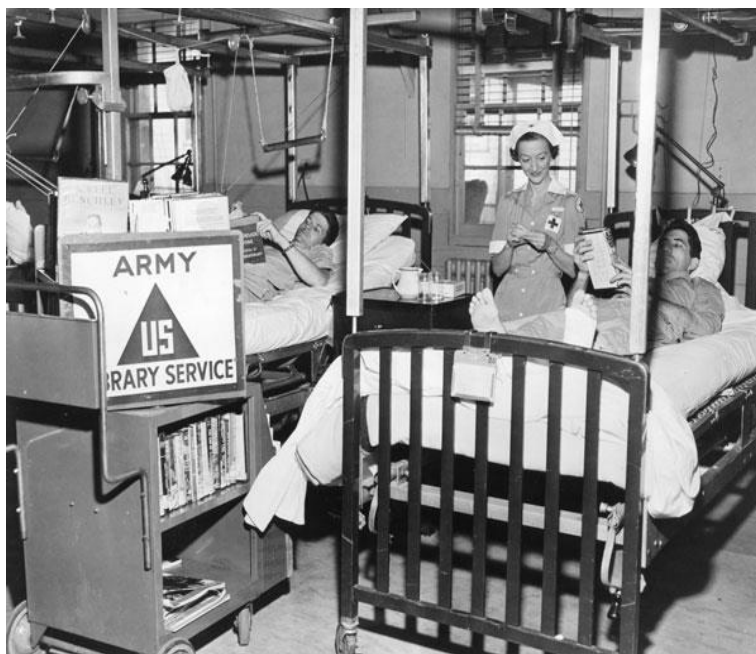


Figure 4: "Give More Books, Give Good Books" poster from the 1942-1943 Victory Book campaign. The ALA utilized librarians' skills in cataloguing and establishing libraries. Ordinary Americans' books went to military camps, hospitals, CPS camps, and even POW camps across the country and abroad. Credit: University of Illinois Library/ALA Archives.

## Taking Action

During World War II, American librarians utilized their strengths at home and abroad. Their work made sure that knowledge remained accessible to groups across the United States involved in the war, from POW camps to Army hospitals. Librarians also helped fight the censorship key to fascism in Europe. Microphotography and film helped preserve key texts, and archival skills helped to return information and valued documents to their original owners and institutions.

Like other community efforts throughout the World War II home front, librarians' efforts required collaboration. While librarians relied on their technical skills to preserve and share knowledge, they also relied on the relationships they built. Academics, government officials, booksellers, archivists, and citizens with knowledge all helped librarians identify what needed to be saved.



*Figure 5: Soldiers in a US Army Hospital Ward in Fort Dix, New Jersey, reading books as they are cared for. Credit: U.S. Army Signal Corps*

The librarians who collected, catalogued, archived, and distributed texts for many communities during WWII loved their work. Eugene Power, a microfilm expert who had recommended Adele Kibre to the OSS, had described her as having a passion for her work and an idea of the larger uses for it: “I recalled that she liked to talk about international intrigue and espionage.... She was a real Mata Hari type.”<sup>16</sup> Local librarians who participated in the ALA’s campaign also balanced care with the impact of their work.

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<sup>16</sup> Graham, “The Spy Who Came in From the Carrel.”

Think about a current issue you can use your skills to solve. It can be related to knowledge preservation. What communities do you know who can help? What is your unique action step?

## Additional Resources

The ALA Victory Book campaign was a nationwide effort. Libraries, civic buildings, and important town sites like pharmacies and movie theaters all served as drop-off centers for donated books. To learn more about how local communities participated in the Victory Book campaign, see these World War II Heritage City Lesson Plans:

- [East Hartford, Connecticut \(Lesson 3, Reading 1:C\)](#)
- [Bedford County, Virginia \(Lesson 3, Reading 1\)](#)

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