

Le Point: The American Library, a Library Born of War

FOREIGN LIBRARIES 2/5. Near the Champ-de-Mars in Paris lies the largest library of English-language books on the continent. A century-old institution, born out of World War I.



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American soldiers leaf through books that will be sent to their compatriots in France during World War I. UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER/ARCHIVES OF THE AMERICAN LIBRARY IN PARIS/SP

War is the inspiration for many books. Whether during the conflict or after the guns fall silent, people write a great deal. But in the case of the American Library in Paris, the connection is somewhat different. After the United States entered the war in 1917, the U.S. War Department determined that every soldier should have at least one book—not just a weapon, but also a book.

Within the American Library Association, it immediately sparked a flurry of activity. *“Given the soldiers’ youth, it was a way to continue their education and prepare them for their return to professional life. Ultimately, reading was meant to keep their spirits up and, more importantly, keep them away from young French women,”* explains Mayanne Wright, a lecturer passionate about library history. Every Friday at 11 a.m., she recounts the history of the continent’s largest collection of English-language books—more than 100,000 volumes accessible on a street in the 7th arrondissement, just a stone’s throw from the Champ-de-Mars.

See also [“Wilson’s Entry into the War Was a godsend for France”](#)

The figures are as impressive as the speed of the American war effort, which mobilized nearly a million soldiers in just a few months. Thanks to donations from organizations and individuals, nearly 10 million books made their way to training camps, and some 2.5 million

crossed the Atlantic, distributed in France to the GIs in libraries and field hospitals.

An organization was established in Paris to centralize distribution and serve as a storage and shipping hub. The address was prestigious: 10 Rue de l'Élysée, the former headquarters of the papal nunciature. The American Library was indeed a child of war, but it grew up under the banner of peace.

Philanthropists and Book Lovers

After the war, Americans wondered about the fate of an institution where soldiers had made themselves at home. The plan was to transition it to civilian use. And for that, funds were needed. But philanthropy was no empty phrase in postwar America: John Davison Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie dug into their pockets, as did Charles Seeger—father of the poet Alan Seeger, who was killed in action in 1916 while serving in the Foreign Legion, and whose statue now stands in Place des États-Unis in Paris.

It was Charles Seeger who devised the library's motto, inspired by this peaceful context: "*After the darkness of war, the light of books.*" "

According to Mayanne Wright, "*the French phrase plays on the homophony with the verb 'délivrer' (to deliver).*" This enduring legacy is also part of the effort to maintain the presence of Americans on French soil, who were assisting with reconstruction. At the same time, the American Committee for the Devastated Regions of France opened five libraries

in the Aisne department. The central location, on Rue de l'Élysée, was officially inaugurated on May 9, 1920, in a splendid mansion that was later purchased by the Rothschild family after the library moved in 1936.

The library, which also serves as a memorial to the United States' war effort, features a plaque commemorating the American soldiers who fell during the war.



Myron T. Herrick (U.S. Ambassador to France, left) and Louis Barthou (former French Prime Minister, right) unveil a plaque honoring American soldiers in the French Foreign Legion, in 1921. A. HARLINGUE/AMERICAN LIBRARY IN PARIS INSTITUTIONAL ARCHIVES

The library is spacious and modern. “*Twelve rooms. Fireplaces to keep readers warm. A splendid view of the Élysée gardens,*” notes Mayanne Wright. So much so that the library, a pioneer in France, quickly became a hub for library science. It was among the first in France to offer free access to books. The cataloging system was also organized according to the Dewey Decimal Classification, a methodology unknown in France at the time—where books were arranged by date of acquisition—but universally adopted today.

A highly innovative institution

Finally, the American Library offered an entire section of children’s literature and a space dedicated to children—something unheard of. While the United States, during the 1920s, was heading down the path of isolationism, the American Library became a hub for cultural exchange in Europe. A university program was established from 1923 to 1929—the “Paris Library School”—which trained librarians from France and other countries. Prominent library directors such as Eugène Morel, Ernest Coyecque, and Gabriel Henriot engaged with these new ideas to, in turn, promote the modernization of the French system.

See also: [World War I: The Birth of the American Superpower](#)

The American Library also played a major role in the 1924 opening of *L'Heure Joyeuse*, France's first library dedicated to children's books. Finally, the venue served as a hub for the "Lost Generation ." Among its regulars were Gertrude Stein, Henry Miller, and Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway even tried, unsuccessfully, to secure a secretarial position for one of his friends.

The 1929 crisis and budget cuts forced the organization to relocate to 9 Rue de Téhéran in 1936. But an exceptional woman took the helm of the institution: Dorothy Reeder, a former employee of the Library of Congress in Washington. In 1939, she first organized the shipment of books to British and French soldiers on the front lines (Soldier's Service).

See also: [Dad Will Never Grow Old](#)

In the spring of 1940, as the Wehrmacht advanced, the staff was evacuated to Angoulême. But after the exodus, her team returned to Rue de Téhéran. Like the American Hospital in Neuilly, the American Library remained open throughout the war.

An Armed Truce with the Nazis

For Dorothy Reeder, leaving was out of the question. Hermann Fuchs, the librarian in charge of enforcing the Otto List—which targeted

titles banned by the occupying forces—showed up on Rue de Téhéran but reassured Reeder: *“Remove 40 titles from circulation, and you won’t have to close.”* The American Library was also protected by Hugo Andres Krüss, former director of the National Library in Berlin, who had been appointed to head the libraries in the occupied countries. *“Reeder and Krüss had known each other since international librarians’ conferences dating back to before the war. He was a very late convert to Nazism. A document has been found proving that he kept a watchful eye on the institution.”* But the decisive help came from elsewhere.



The staff of the American Library during the war. Bottom right: Dorothy Reeder. STUDIO HARCOUT/AMERICAN LIBRARY IN PARIS/SP

Among the members of the library's board of directors was a figure close to the Vichy regime: Clara Longworth de Chambrun. This Shakespeare scholar and translator married General Aldebert de Chambrun—a descendant of Lafayette and former French military attaché in Washington, D.C., who was related to President Theodore Roosevelt. Promoted to general in 1927, he was a close associate of Pétain. While he oversaw the American Hospital, his wife managed the American Library, becoming its director after Dorothy Reeder's departure in late 1941.

The couple had another asset on their side: their son, René, had married Josée Laval, the daughter of Pierre Laval... Nevertheless, several library employees joined the Resistance; books were smuggled to Jewish readers who could no longer leave their homes. The Chambrun couple was arrested at the Liberation but released on September 11, 1944, on the orders of General de Gaulle.

See also: [The Little-Known Story of the Armenian Library Saved Twice](#)

While the American Library suffered from postwar restrictions, it expanded to about ten cities in France: a “cultural” program steeped in anti-communism. Books were also weapons in the ideological struggle; the circulation in Eastern Europe at that time of **Animal Farm** by

George Orwell's **Animal Farm** in Eastern Europe at the time being the prime example. Roubaix, a working-class stronghold, thus hosted a library of American books, which also established itself in major university towns. The last one closed in 2003.

A single closure

But the Paris branch, which moved in 1964 to part of the warehouses of the former Magasins du Louvre on Rue du Général-Camou, remains the largest foreign library in Paris—in addition to the usual 100,000 books, 44,000 audiobooks are available—and it boasts 5,000 members, 40% of whom are American. Literary events and writers-in-residence also make it a true cultural haven, sheltered from the vagaries of politics and Franco-American relations, as it is financially independent of both governments.

In the end, the American Library closed only once, during the COVID-19 pandemic. But the Americans very quickly set up a “click-and-collect” service, while complying with the government-mandated quarantine period for returned books. This proves, once again, that books can triumph over any war, including health crises.