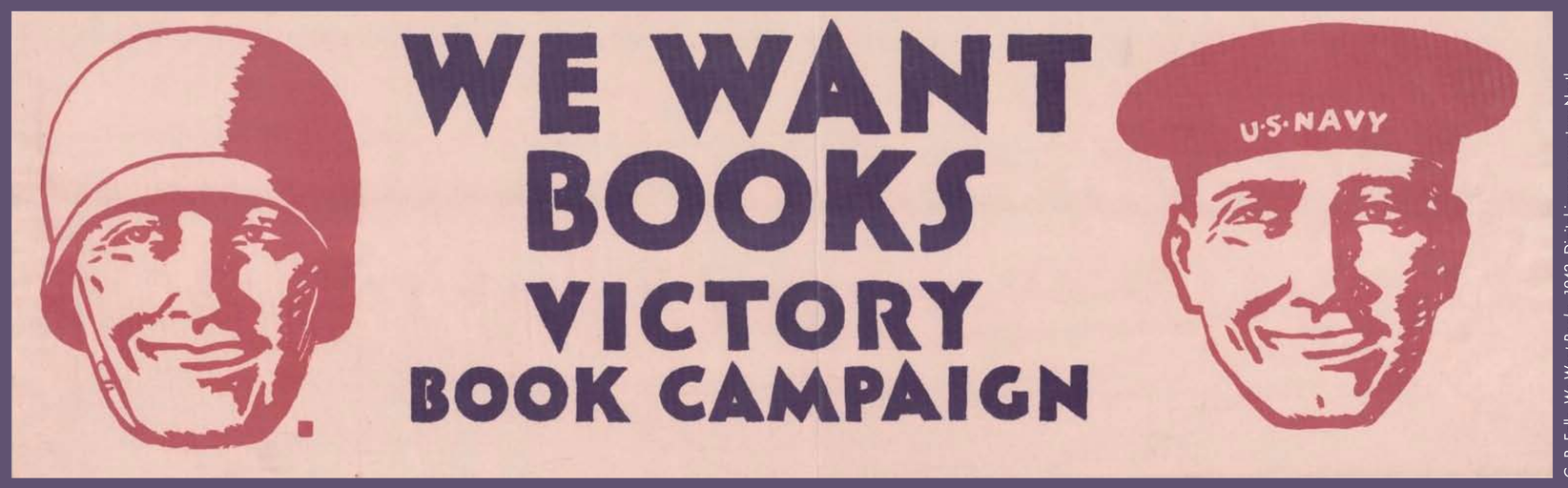


C. B. Falls, *We Want Books*, 1943. Digital image courtesy North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.

BOOKS FOR THE TROOPS
IN WORLD WAR TWO



Mobile library, Wetzlar, Germany, 1946. National Archives; digital image courtesy Andrew Brozyna/www.booksforvictory.com.

World War Two drew nearly 12 million Americans into military service, the largest number of people mobilized to fight in America's history. The vast productive capacity of the United States was marshaled to provide the necessities of war for the Allied forces – and a little known part of that mobilization was how books went to war in World War Two.

Books played both a practical and ideological role in America's war. Keeping the troops occupied and entertained during the periods of idleness that often characterized military life, even on the front lines, was a paramount concern for military and civilian leaders. Reading was one solution. But in World War Two, the images of mountains of books being burned in Nazi Germany compared to the image of millions of books being distributed to Allied troops symbolized a major difference between the Allied and Axis causes.



Victory Book Campaign, Buffalo, New York, 1942. Digital image courtesy Buffalo and Erie County Public Library.

The **Victory Book Campaign**, organized by the American Library Association in collaboration with the Library Section of the U.S. Army, set up massive book donation drives in 1942 and 1943, with a goal of gathering ten million books to rebuild the Army libraries that had fallen into neglect following a similar book drive during World War One. The Victory Book Campaign capitalized on the same patriotic sentiments appealed to by wartime bond drives, salvage drives, and other efforts to mobilize the civilian population in support of the armed forces.



Our Men Want Books, 1943. Digital image courtesy Hennepin County Public Library Special Collections, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

While the VBC gathered more than its goal of ten million books, the quality of the books collected was uneven, often outdated or not tailored to the reading tastes of the broad swath of servicemen. The bulky hard-bound editions, typical of American books published in the 1930s and 1940s, were generally too large and heavy to be carried in the field. Facing these problems and bureaucratic infighting with various arms of the U.S. government, the VBC was discontinued after the 1943 drive.

It was superseded by the **Armed Services Editions** program of the Council on Books in Wartime. The Council, formed in 1942, was a publishing industry organization that included some of the most prominent publishing houses in the country. It took as its motto "Books Are Weapons in the War of Ideas," and sought various ways to promote reading and books during the war as tools to build morale on the front lines and the home front. Its best-known effort was the Armed Services Editions, an innovative program that produced millions of miniature paperback editions of popular contemporary books that were purchased by the military and distributed for free to the members of the armed forces. The ASE program was wildly popular; the program's ability to offer recent bestsellers in an easy-to-carry format made it an instant and huge success. Over 123 million copies of 1,227 unique books were ultimately published by the program before it ended in 1947. The program not only served a critical role in morale for the armed services, but it also boosted the nascent paperback publishing market into a post-war bonanza for publishers by developing an audience of paperback readers among the millions in the service.

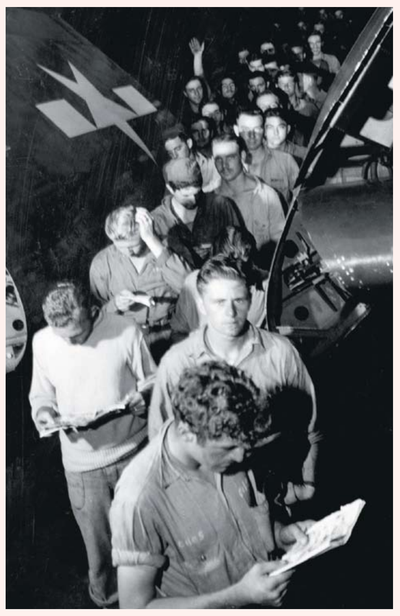


Cover of Max Brand, *The Iron Trail*, Armed Services Edition N-15, October 1944. Rare Books and Special Collections, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester.



Sorting Armed Services Editions for distribution, 1950. National Archives; digital image courtesy Bridgett Henwood/*World War II Magazine*.

The **U.S. Armed Forces Institute** publications explicitly emphasized self improvement for their readers. Based in Madison, Wisconsin, the USAFI was created in 1942 as a joint venture between the U.S. War Department and the U.S. Navy Department "with the purpose of helping servicemen turn to profit their leisure hours," as one contemporary commentator put it. The Institute's publications provided self-guided technical and general education material for soldiers and sailors, along with, in many cases, companion correspondence courses, some of which were used for placement in colleges following the war—USAFI courses were a direct forerunner of the General Education Diploma (GED) that became commonplace after World War Two.



In mess line on *U.S.S. Yorktown*, June 1945. National Archives; digital image courtesy Bridgett Henwood/*World War II Magazine*.

The USAFI also collaborated with the Army's Morale Division and the American Historical Association to produce the **G.I. Roundtable** series. Opinion research among servicemen, done by the Morale Division, revealed that many servicemen were worried about their prospects in the postwar economy and society at large, and had muddled, if not negative, views of America's wartime allies. The G.I. Roundtable series pamphlets were a not-so-subtle effort of positive propaganda intended to reassure the members of the armed forces about their place in postwar America and to encourage positive views of the countries America was fighting for and with.

The books, images and documents on display give us insights into the promotion of reading in wartime America – the issues of concern on the front lines and the home front, the types of books sought out for and by the troops, the ingenious public-private partnerships set up to advance these programs, and the value placed on literacy and education during and after the war.