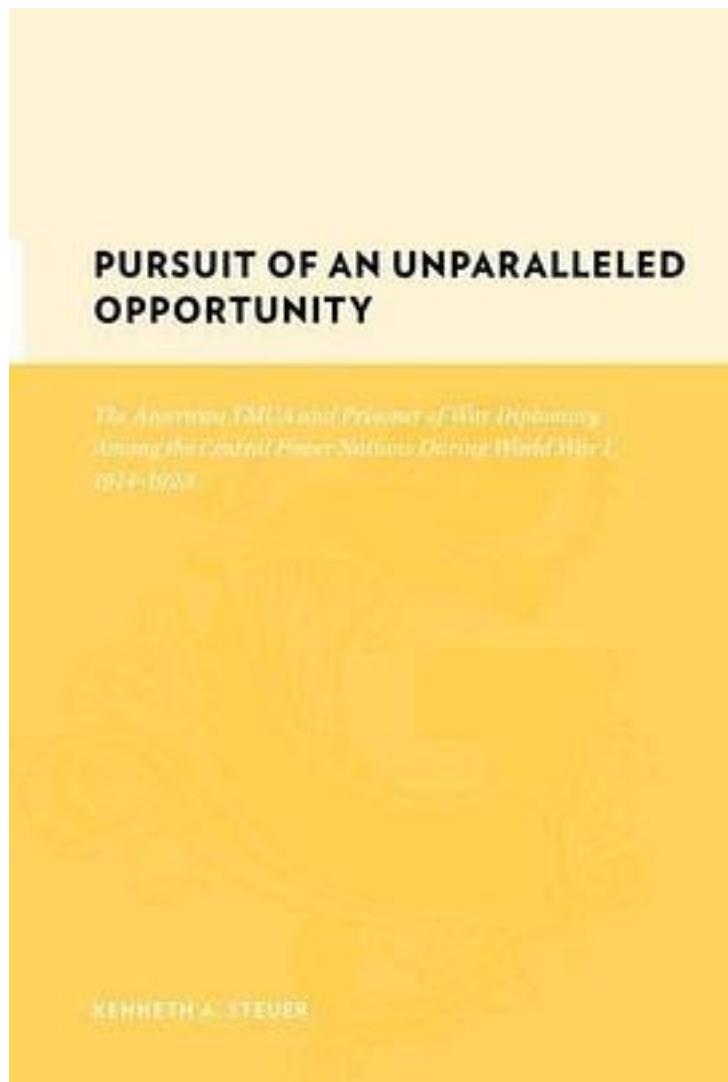


Pursuit of an Unparalleled Opportunity



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During World War I, over six million men became prisoners-of-war, a burden that overwhelmed the resources of the belligerent powers, which had a responsibility to care for these men. Becoming aware of the POWs' plight, the American YMCA was determined to provide welfare relief to these prisoners, and in early 1915, the Association sent two representatives to negotiate access to military prison camps in England, France, and Germany. Archibald Harte convinced the German government that the YMCA's assistance would benefit German POWs in Allied prison camps as well as Allied prisoners incarcerated in Germany. The Germans agreed to Harte's terms on the condition that the British, French, and Russians accept similar arrangements for prisoners under their care. This began a process of reciprocity that would yield the Association POW access agreements with the governments of Britain, France, Russia, Serbia, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania. After the Armistice was signed in 1918, the YMCA facilitated the return of Allied prisoners to their home countries and continued to provide relief to Russian POWs stranded in German prisons. The wartime activities of the YMCA have largely "fallen between the cracks" of history, and scant attention has been paid to the role of non-governmental organizations in contributing to American neutrality and foreign policymaking during World War I. Pursuit of an Unparalleled Opportunity addresses this lacuna with a remarkable study of the social, spiritual, and physical relief offered to POWs by these dedicated, apolitical groups.

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