

America as a Transatlantic Nation: Henry Luce, *Life*, and the West in the 1940s

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Historians have widely explored the profoundly transformative effects of the 1940s on both the domestic outlook and the international role of the U.S. In fact, there seems to be a consensus that World War II and the early postwar years led the country to engage in an unprecedented way with the rest of the world. This in turn not only influenced specific aspects of American politics, society, and culture but also modified the prevailing view of the meaning and “mission” of America. In commenting on the context and legacy of Henry Luce’s famous essay “The American Century,” Alan Brinkley wrote that the 1940s witnessed American leaders like Luce making an effort “to redefine the nation’s relationship to the world and, in the process, to redefine America’s sense of itself.”¹ On the other hand, while it may be a truism to say that World War II and the early Cold War transformed the American identity to some extent, the contours of such a transformation are by and large taken for granted and seldom problematized as a specific object of historical research.

“National identity” is slippery terrain for historians, especially when it comes to the U.S., and it is best approached through the multidisciplinary effort characteristic of the so-called new cultural history. This study aims to investigate how the redefinition of America’s sense of self throughout the 1940s took shape on the pages of *Life* magazine, a specific and very influential sample of the American media industry. It is assumed that the picture magazine published by Time Inc. was a major vehicle for formulating a hegemonic discourse recasting America’s place in the world as not just *a* western nation but *the leading* western nation; one whose historical roots, founding values, and basic interests were situated within the larger framework of “western civilization” and, therefore, beyond strictly national boundaries. From this perspective, America was recast as a New Rome, rather than a New Israel. This new exceptionalist vision, based on the inevitable and necessary American leadership of a unified transatlantic “West,” both competed with

1. Alan Brinkley, “The Concept of an American Century,” in *The American Century in Europe*, eds. R. Laurence Moore, Maurizio Vaudagna (Ithaca, 2003), 13.

and merged with the traditional exceptionalist pattern that was based on a separation of the U.S. from the world and the duality between the Old World and the New within a divided West. By no means in decline, this sense of a distinctive Americanness even reached a new high in the 1940s. The difference is that it was now being forged by an unprecedented tension between what Ian Tyrrel has defined “insular impulses” and “forces of integration.” Indeed, it is argued here that such forces pushed the metahistorical and metageographic boundaries of the nation beyond the Atlantic.²

Finally, a caveat about what this study is not. It is not an investigation into the origins of the notion of “western civilization” in the U.S., which of course has deeper roots in American universities and specifically in the historical profession. Instead, this essay discusses how such a notion gained common currency in the public discourse at a time of dramatic, permanent changes in the attitudes of ordinary Americans towards the outside world.³ Neither is this a study of wartime or Cold War propaganda, since it focuses on a private medium that formulated and circulated its own view of the “American Century,” albeit with strong ties to U.S. government agencies and officials. Lastly, U.S. foreign policy and the outlook of policymakers on the place of the U.S. as the leader of the West are not of primary concern here since this author has already discussed them elsewhere.⁴

Life Magazine, Cultural Hegemony, and National Identity

In order to investigate how a hegemonic discourse on the domestic contours and international role of the U.S. was formulated and transmitted to the public at large we need an appropriated set of theoretical and methodological assumptions. In his work on national identity Benedict Anderson argues that print capitalism—the novel, the newspaper—“provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation.”⁵ His culturalist approach seems particularly apt in the case of the U.S., which lacks several of the traditional elements of nationality like linguistic and ethnic

2. Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation. United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (Basingstoke, 2007). For the polarity between America as the new Rome versus America as the New Israel, see Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny. American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York, 1995). On the West as metageography, see Karen Wigen and Martin Lewis, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, 1997). See also David Gress, *From Plato to Nato. The Idea of the West and its Opponents* (New York, 1998); *The Struggle for the West. A Divided and Contested Legacy*, eds. Christopher S. Browning, Marko Lehti (New York-London, 2010).

3. Eugen Weber, “Western Civilization,” in *Imagined Histories. American Historians Interpret the Past*, eds. Anthony Molho, Gordon S. Wood (Princeton, 1998), 206-21.

4. Marco Mariano, “Remapping America: Continentalism, Globalism, and the Rise of the Atlantic Community, 1939-1949,” in *Defining the Atlantic Community. Culture, Intellectuals, and Policies in the Mid-20th Century*, ed. Marco Mariano (New York, 2010), 71-87.

5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991), 25.

distinctiveness. If every nation is, to some extent, an “imagined community,” then the U.S. is the quintessence of this notion, that is, a nation whose identity heavily depends on practices of cultural representation.⁶ In Anderson’s view, national communities are defined by how they are represented, by “the style in which they are imagined,” rather than by a systematic ideology or worldview. Printed media are crucial to the extent that they allow readers to share in the nation’s cultural construction with thousands of other readers they will never meet, thus forging an artificial yet powerful sense of “community.”⁷

Several decades before Anderson, Antonio Gramsci had offered stimulating insights on how the printed media and especially magazines produce what he defined as “common sense,” i.e. “the prevailing notion of life and values” within a specific social group; a dynamic and flexible sedimentation of beliefs occupying a middle ground between (highbrow) “philosophy” and (lowbrow) “folklore.” In a segment on “typical magazines” in the first of his *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci argued that magazines try to “change the average opinion of a given society [...] by means of new commonplaces.” Furthermore, he argued, magazines should not appear highly ideological or partisan to their readers, since “they have to engage in the field of the ‘common sense’,”—crucial terrain in the fight for cultural hegemony. His focus on culture derived from the fact that in his view ideology was not simply a set of beliefs reflecting specific class interests but rather the combination of “language,” “common sense [conventional wisdom] and good sense [empirical knowledge],” and, finally, “popular religion,” i.e., the “entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which are collectively bundled together under the name of ‘folklore’.”⁸

Since the 1980s the Gramscian concept of hegemony has attracted the attention of scholars of U.S. cultural history exploring the complex and dynamic relationship between power and culture. T.J. Jackson Lears has shown how “cultural hegemony,” thanks to its critique of economic determinism, might shed light not only on the experience of subaltern groups but also the so-called “consensus” of post-World War II American society: “One does not have to embrace the fantastic vision of a conflict-free American past to acknowledge the power of the currents in the American mainstream.” Finally, Lears stressed the importance of studying middlebrow texts to understand how hegemony is constructed, especially in the media.⁹ In fact, American middlebrow culture has come under closer scrutiny by historians and cultural studies scholars alike. Several studies on American public culture have investigated popular magazines as the arena where cultural hegemony and the national community are constructed. Some of them have also stressed

6. David Campbell, *Writing Security. United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis, 1992).

7. Wendy Kozol, *Life’s America. Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (Philadelphia, 1994), 55.

8. Quoted in T.J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony. Problems and Possibilities,” *American Historical Review*, 90, (June 1985), 570.

9. *Ivi*, 576, 589.

how the very issue of national identity was redefined during the prolonged, intense encounter with *other* nations, peoples, cultures, and ideas that took place during the 1940s.¹⁰ Indeed, notions of alterity have been crucial for defining the American experiment since its inception. In his study of the origins of the Monroe Doctrine, David Ryan argues that

The United States . . . had to express its sense of nationalism through statements of opposition, of what it was not. It created its identity against an “other.” Nationalistic sentiments that sprang from the positive domestic cultures were much more precarious, whereas its foreign policy was a great arena for social cohesion and national galvanization.¹¹

In the 1940s, when another binary, “two-sphere” division of the world came to inform the American worldview and U.S. foreign policy, notions of alterity were again instrumental for formulating a hegemonic discourse on Americanness, and middlebrow magazines like *Life* were powerful instruments in this process.

The 1940s represent a golden age for large-circulation magazines in America. World War II provided an unprecedented opportunity for photojournalists, whose ability to visually illustrate the war effort boosted the sales of weeklies nationwide. Indeed, this was crucial for the prestige of *Life*, which came to be branded as “America’s favorite magazine” and saw its circulation increase from 2.86 million in 1940 to 5.45 million in 1948. The increasing affluence, education levels, and amount of leisure time that came with the postwar boom further contributed to expanding the market share of magazines into the mid-1950s, after which time the spread of commercial television significantly altered the picture. In 1955 magazines garnered 725 million dollars in advertising revenues, almost twice as much as in 1946 and seven times more than during the Depression.¹² However, even during this golden age, influential news outlets like newspapers and the radio still challenged American magazines in a competitive media market.

Paul Lazarsfeld’s classic study on the media’s influence on public opinion during the 1940 presidential campaign revealed that magazines had an impact on a limited but influential segment of voters. Only about 20 percent of voters relied on either special interest or general interest magazines. The percentage of radio listeners was about double that. However, magazine readers were often among the more educated and affluent in their communities; Lazarsfeld defined them as “opinion leaders” who were politically active and likely to exert some influence. These findings led to the formulation of the

10. Jan Cohn, *Creating America. George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post* (Pittsburgh, 1990); Erika Doss, ed., *Looking at Life Magazine* (Washington, 2001); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism. Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley, 2003), chapter II; Kozol, *Life’s America*; Catherine A. Lutz, Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago, 1993); Joanne P. Sharp, *Condensing the Cold War. Reader’s Digest and American Identity* (Minneapolis, 2000).

11. David Ryan, *US Foreign Policy in World History* (London and New York, 2000), 44.

12. James L. Baughman, “Who Read *Life*? The Circulation of America’s Favorite Magazine” in Doss, *Looking at Life*, 44; John Tebbel, Mary Ellen Zuckerman, *The Magazine in America, 1741-1990* (New York, 1991) 243-5.

so-called two-step flow of communication theory, which posited that the media shapes public opinion indirectly through a network of personal relationships formed by “opinion leaders,” who in turn influence the wider public of “opinion followers.”¹³ Such a theory, which was further elaborated in the 1950s by Lazarsfeld together with Robert Merton and C. Wright Mills, is now challenged in media studies and public opinion research. Magazines are a peculiarly hybrid medium due to their blend of texts and images, the lowbrow and the highbrow, entertainment and political issues; their fruition is also fragmented, as they are often read or looked at forwards and backwards, with frequent interruptions. This is likely to lead to multiple responses among readers and somewhat undermine traditional, linear approaches to media reception.¹⁴

Life, however, is a particularly revealing source for a study based on the above methodological premises, not only for its impact on public opinion but also because it outlined and circulated a consistent view of America’s role in the world, specifically that of its publisher Henry Luce and his associates. The magazine was founded in 1936 as the third pillar of Time Inc., Henry Luce’s publishing empire. Unlike the classic newsmagazine *Time*, started in 1923, and the business monthly *Fortune*, started in 1930, it was meant to be an all-around popular magazine providing news and amusement, history and science, self-conscious editorials, and pictures of Hollywood starlets to a mostly middle-class and overwhelmingly white readership. Within just a few years it became by far the bestselling of the Time Inc. publications. By the late 1940s it was the leading American magazine, both in terms of circulation—the *Saturday Evening Post* was below the 4 million copies mark—and in terms of “pass-along factor.”¹⁵ It reached more than 22 million people—about 21 percent of the American population over ten years old. This remarkably popular following and widespread prestige was partly due to the magazine’s ability to combine “philosophy” and “folklore”—to use the Gramscian lexicon—that is, to stimulate and challenge its readership without sounding elitist or out of touch. In fact, Luce believed that “an editor’s job is to stay ahead of his readers by three weeks, not ten years,” as he told William Schlamm, one of his foreign policy advisers, in 1944 about the attitude of the U.S. towards the Soviet Union.¹⁶ The emphasis on pictures, which made *Life* an

13. Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People’s Choice. How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Election* (New York, 1944), 134-6, 150-2. Columbia University’s Office of Radio Research conducted the study by interviewing a sample of 2,400 voters in Erie County, Ohio. Interestingly, *Life* magazine was among the institutions that supported the study, along with the Rockefeller Foundation.

14. Doss, “Looking at *Life*: Rethinking America’s Favorite Magazine, 1936-1972” in *Looking at Life*, 7-8.

15. The pass-along rate indicates the number of people who browsed a single copy of the magazine in addition to the subscriber. See Doss, “Looking at *Life*,” 2-3. On *Life* readership, see James L. Baughman, “Who Read *Life*? The Circulation of America’s Favourite Magazine” in the same volume. See also Robert T. Elson, *The World of Time Inc. The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise. Vol. II 1941-1960* (New York, 1973), 182-3.

16. Quoted in James L. Baughman, *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American Newsmedia* (Baltimore, 1987), 146.

all-star showcase of the best photojournalism of the time, was due not only to Luce's conviction that "pictures sell" but also to the belief that images were especially effective for informing, entertaining, and teaching. According to Daniel Longwell, Luce's associate from 1934 onwards and chairman of the magazine's board of editors from 1946 to 1954, photographs were "the most effective and direct way of getting something from the printed page into the mind of a reader."¹⁷

Yet *Life's* remarkable numbers were hardly extraordinary. In the 1950s the circulation of competitors like *Collier's*, *Saturday Evening Post*, and especially *Reader's Digest* either equaled or surpassed that of *Life*. What set the magazine apart from most other media outlets of the time was the strength of the Time Inc. apparatus coupled with the influence of Luce's view of the current and future state of the nation, which he first articulated as an editorial in the magazine in February 1941. His call for an "American Century" was consistently advocated by his powerful media conglomerate, which boasted close ties with both the government and the armed forces in the field of wartime propaganda;¹⁸ invested heavily in international editions destined for Latin American and European markets; and even established a special department for studying key postwar domestic and international issues.¹⁹

Henry Luce, America, and the West

For all his belief in America's unique mission in the twentieth century, Luce advocated the idea that the nation was also the leader of a wider cultural-historical community of nations and peoples commonly referred to as "western civilization." In fact, in the 1930s he had started developing a profound interest in the discussion about the "crisis of the West" and works by authors like Josè Ortega y Gasset and Peter Drucker. Early criticism of the messianic and nationalistic overtones of his essay "The American Century" coupled with his encounter with the neo-orthodox theology of Reinhold Niebuhr soon led Luce to reassess his view of America's mission in more realistic terms.²⁰

Britain was obviously the major link between the U.S. and the Atlantic community. With Britain under siege by Nazi Germany and the very notion of "western civilization" undermined by total war, defining the U.S. attachment to and leadership of the West

17. Longwell to Luce, July 1, 1948, Daniel Longwell Papers, Butler Library, Columbia University, box 29.

18. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.*, 39, 173, 261. C.D. Jackson was the crucial liaison between Time Inc., the State Department, and U.S. intelligence agencies during World War II and the Cold War. On his activity as an expert in psychological warfare, see Blanche Wiesen Cook, "First Comes the Lie. C.D. Jackson and Political Warfare," *Radical History Review*, 31, (1984), 42-70.

19. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.*, 20. Time Inc.'s "Postwar Department" was directed by Raymond L. Buell, former president of the Foreign Policy Association (see Buell Papers, Rare and Manuscript Library, Columbia University). Some of the documents produced by the department were published as supplements to *Fortune*.

20. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.*, 19. Baughman, *Luce and the Rise of the American Newsmedia*, 111-2.

was especially urgent. “In addition to ideals and notions which are especially American,” Luce wrote in his notorious editorial, “we are the inheritors of all the great principles of western civilization—above all Justice, the love of Truth, the ideal of Charity.”²¹ It was now America’s mission to rescue and lead the West. In the process, American interests and the American model of free enterprise would expand overseas as never before. However, “despite the ostensible universalism of his global pronouncements, any reader during this period would have understood Luce’s [...] defense of the civilizing project of the ‘West’ as constituting a distinct political identity.”²²

This “civilizational” outlook was very much at odds with other views of America’s place in the postwar world that were emerging in the early 1940s. On the one hand, from the 1930s on rumors of another world war originating in Europe had been fueling a revival of hemispheric and continentalist orientations based on the orthodoxy of the Monroe Doctrine and opposed to any entanglement with the Old World. On the other hand, the shrinking of the world at the time of the “air age” and the economic and strategic interdependence of the 1940s led to the rise of a globalist coalition. Indeed, free traders, business internationalists, and Wilsonian advocates of a “world government” gained influence both within the Roosevelt administration and among the public, as demonstrated by the extraordinary success of Wendell Willkie’s book *One World* (1943).²³ While President Roosevelt shared some of the mental maps and strategic convictions of the continentalists, he also embraced a global outlook that explicitly rejected the “western civilization” framework. In a 1942 address to the International Student Assembly, Roosevelt said “the term western civilization no longer applies. World events and the common needs of all humanity are joining the culture of Asia and the culture of Europe and of the Americas to form, for the first time, a real world civilization.”²⁴

Born in China in 1898, Luce grew up in the white, Christian enclaves of walled American and British missionary compounds, with virtually no contact with the Chinese people—an experience that arguably contributed to his view of the civilizing mission of the West. After leaving China he studied at Yale, where he was admitted to the exclusive Skull and Bones Club, and later at Oxford. While not a typical member of the patrician Northeastern elite, his mother Elizabeth Middleton Root was a descendant of Elihu Root, the revered mentor of the U.S. foreign policy establishment. In fact, Luce began voicing his support for an activist American foreign policy while still at Yale. While his personal contacts with the Orient—the “other” par excellence—helped structure his worldview according to a typical binary, East versus West framework, his familiarity with

21. “The American Century,” *Life* (February 17, 1941).

22. Nikhil Pal Singh, “Culture/Wars: Recoding Empire in a Age of Democracy,” *American Quarterly*, 50, (September 1998): 479-480. On contemporary critics of Luce as an Anglo-Saxonist and a nationalist, see W.A. Swamberg, *Luce and His Empire* (New York, 1972), 182.

23. Mariano, “Remapping America.”

24. Quoted in Singh, “Culture/Wars,” 480.

internationalist, pro-British circles shaped his foreign policy outlook and eventually led him to work with early advocates of lending aid to Britain like Walter Lippmann and the Century Group.²⁵

In a 1941 address that he gave at a Books and Authors Luncheon in New York, Luce developed his usual argument that China was the crucial battlefield of the war. In his view, China was a natural ally because it had been more open to the civilizing mission of the West, which he articulated with the jargon of modernization: “The thesis I would suggest [...] is simply that the colossal impact of the West upon Asia must necessarily, must absolutely bring about a fundamental revolution in every Asiatic country. China has in fact accomplished the fundamentals of her inevitable revolution while Japan has not.” China could modernize its culture and society. Japan, on the other hand, achieved a limited and partial “top-down” modernization with counterproductive effects: “the more she modernized, the more firmly she barred the door to the spirit of free inquiry, free discussion—to that search for truth which underlies the whole of Western civilization.”²⁶

Luce’s orientalist outlook was only reinforced by the Cold War, which turned out to be an apt scenario for his crusading inclinations. In 1962 he was invited to deliver a Green Lecture at Westminster College, Missouri where Winston Churchill had launched the “iron curtain” buzzword exactly sixteen years before. Speaking at the height of Cold War tensions, with Latin America and the Third World in turmoil, Luce offered a vast, typically ambitious overview of the past, present, and future prospects of “political freedom” in the world, which he singled out as the defining difference between “the West and Rest.” In his standard historical account, freedom had originally been confined to the Anglo-Saxon world and a few western European countries. Then, in the nineteenth century, it had spilled over to Germany and especially Italy, that is, “that part of Europe which had a long Graeco-Christian [sic] background for the advent of liberty.” However, “elsewhere, political liberty was largely unknown, even as an idea.” In Latin America it had fallen prey to military dictatorship, while “in the Orient, where ancient civilizations had risen and fallen, political liberty was unknown.”²⁷

Needless to say, Luce believed the U.S. enjoyed a special status within the community of western nations. However, its power did more to set it apart from the other members of the community than its virtue. In his lecture Luce mentioned an exchange he had had with Churchill in 1947, while the civil war in Greece was still unfolding. Apparently the former British prime minister—in his enthusiasm for the Truman Doctrine and America’s decision to intervene in Greece and Turkey, and aware of the American public’s

25. Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher. Henry Luce and His American Century* (New York, 2010). See also, Swamberg, *Luce and His Empire*; Baughman, *Luce and the Rise of the American News Media*; and Robert E. Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce. A Political Portrait of the Man Who Created the American Century* (New York, 1994).

26. Henry Luce Papers, Speech File, box 70, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

27. HRL Papers, Speech File, box 78.

widespread support—toasted America as “the new Rome,” i.e., the nation that had overcome its self-image as a “new Israel” and was powerful and confident enough to maintain western-style order in the world.

At a time when the East-West dichotomy had replaced the old one between the Old World and the New in the public discourse on the Cold War consensus, the U.S. and Western Europe were the two pillars of an extended West based on the “narrative of freedom and self-determination,” which “incorporated transatlantic disagreements and alliances with European colonial powers.” This extended West could be constructed within the public discourse by using “alterity” in different ways, including an all-out orientalist opposition between the “free world” and “totalitarianism” and an “encompassing” mechanism, which recognizes the difference between “self” and “other” yet also allows for the co-optation of selected elements of the “other.”²⁸ The latter privileged an American-made idea of the West that omitted potentially divisive elements of the European pillar (colonialism) and the American pillar (race relations).

In Luce’s commencement address at Arizona State University in 1966—as modernization theories that had recast the traditional civilizational approach as the guiding paradigm to define “the West” versus “the Rest” were unraveling in Vietnam—he reiterated the old dichotomic, Monrovia worldview by opening with Kipling’s famous line: “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” What followed was a candid formulation of his orientalist assumptions: “the Orient helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.”²⁹ Luce saw “the Orient and the Occident” as “the two great halves into which mankind is really divided by reason of thousands of years of quite separate history, resulting in profoundly different intellectual, ethical, and political patterns of thought and feeling [...] Science and technology and democracy are both profoundly Occidental and profoundly non-Oriental,” and the same was true for “liberty under law.” In essence, “there is almost nothing in Oriental philosophy or in Oriental experience that corresponds to this credo of the West.” Within this framework, the mission and the very identity of the U.S. was tied to the notion of western civilization: “In the first half of the twentieth century we rejoined Europe, rescued it from its civil wars and became the leader of the West,”³⁰ Luce concluded.

Life’s Transnational, Extended West

This characterization of the American experience—as a set of values that was both compatible with a traditional definition of Americanness and also selectively “encompassed”

28. Gerd Baumann, “Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach,” in *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach*, eds. Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich (New York, 2004).

29. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), 1-2.

30. HRL Papers, Speech Files, box 81.

elements “beyond the nation”—was widely shared within the Time Inc. machine. In fact, it informed the Time Inc. “philosophy,” especially during wartime and the early Cold War years when Luce’s direct intervention in the day-to-day management of the magazines increased, sometimes to the frustration of his editors, and his approach to news-making became more partisan. To be sure, Luce had originally envisioned the magazine as a collective effort. “*Life* is the true product of group journalism,” he wrote in one of his memos. “Everyone from researcher, office boy, photographer, out-of-town correspondent, to writer and layout man is supposed to play whatever part he or she can in the stories that go into each issue of *Life*.” At the same time, however, he saw journalism as a calling and was animated by a sense of mission that soon informed all the Time Inc. publications, even if this caused some friction with more objectively oriented journalists like John Billings, the first editor of *Life*. Luce’s advocacy is best illustrated by his early, vocal pro-war stance, but it had deeper roots. He believed that journalism should contribute to the creation of an organic national community and saw his magazines as instruments of “national bonding” that reinforced a belief in shared values.³¹ Through the 1940s, this cultural nation-building relied heavily on materials from the tradition of western civilization, which was located beyond traditional, narrowly defined national boundaries.

Luce often inundated his staff with long memoranda ranging from general overviews of the Time Inc. machine to very specific remarks on single issues or stories that often reflected both his worldview and his idea of America as the leading nation of a unified, Christian West in a divided world. Consequently, his magazines were enlisted in a deliberate effort to adapt the old notion of “western civilization” to the transformation of transatlantic relations in the 1940s. Since the U.S. was playing an increasingly influential and hegemonic role, the West was being re-conceptualized as a transnational identity; a cultural, political, and economic space that selectively encompassed a common ground between the New World and the Old and expunged potential sources of conflict between the “two Wests.” Christianity was emphasized for example, while potentially divisive issues like race and colonialism were ignored. David Ryan has stressed how the construction of the notion of the “extended West” in the 1940s responded to multiple needs:

[It] was indispensable to mobilise Congress with their fiscal prerogatives. The Western Hemisphere, once that geographical and ideological territory west of the Atlantic, now transcended the ocean in the new West. The expanded West would encompass these colonial powers and maintain the narrative of freedom and self-determination [...] The metaphor of the West, the new west, encompassing colonial Europe while simultaneously projecting that colonial identity onto the Soviets, re-created and perpetuated the identity and notion of U.S. benevolence.³²

31. Baughman, *Luce and the Rise of the American News Media*, 96-7, 104-7, 119-20. Brinkley, *The Publisher*, 282-312.

32. David Ryan, “US Foreign Policy and the Hierarchy of Alterity: The Decolonization Dilemma,” unpublished manuscript (quoted with the permission of the author).

A study of *Life* shows how circulating such a notion within a popular medium helped reframe the American identity in transnational terms while also reinforcing its exceptionalist underpinning. The United States was now defined as the leader of a community of nations as well as peoples and cultures, a synthesis of both quintessentially American elements and selected elements originating outside the nation. In a 1946 memo to *Life* editor Andrew Heiskell devoted to strengthening the “philosophical unity” of the magazine, Luce wrote:

We might have a program to show the development of Western Civilization beginning with the Renaissance in the time of Dante to 1914. This could be done in about 8 chapters. This ties in with the course in world history which is more and more being required of all college freshmen. In 1948 we might do the same for Asia. And in 1949 we could attempt [...] a series showing how Asiatic and Western civilization may find reconciliation in higher syntheses.³³

Only the first of these planned series actually made it to the pages of the magazine. A few days before the announcement of the Truman Doctrine in March 1947, *Life* launched a lavishly illustrated series on “The History of Western Culture” carried out under the supervision of Columbia historian Jacques Barzun. As stated in the introduction:

The spirit of this series will be the spirit which has moved American universities more and more to teach history not in narrow courses but in comprehensive surveys of civilization [...]. Our modern civilization, which owes much to classical Greece and Rome, had its roots in the Middle Ages and grew most directly out of the Renaissance [...]. In this way *Life* will try to give Americans a perspective on History. Americans need perspective on *their* past so that they can determine their future.³⁴

Far from being just the object of American tourists’ gaze, (western) European history is presented here, as in several other editorials and articles in the magazine, as a pillar of a new, transatlantic national identity. European history now belonged to the Americans. The reference to the teaching of history in higher education, transferred almost word-for-word from Luce’s memo, is significant. These were the years when the idea of the Atlantic Community became, as Peter Novick put it, “the appropriate framework for both North American and Western European history.”³⁵ However, *Life* was careful to stimulate and challenge its readers with new cultural trends while still avoiding an academic, highbrow style that was seen as counterproductive at the newsstand and harmful to Time Inc.’s efforts to address the general public. The goal, as Luce said, was to reach out to “the common man” and cover “ordinary things.” At the same time, he added, “I think *Life* should pay

33. Luce to Heiskell, September 25 1946, DL, box 29.

34. “Life Announces a Series of Articles on the History of Western Culture,” *Life* (March 3, 1947) (emphasis added).

35. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream. The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 311.

more attention to the better-than-average (man, thing) than to the average. Briefly, the Common Man is a little bored with his common-ness. He (she) wants, I think, to see reflected that which represents his better or aspiring self.”³⁶

Life's series often featured religious themes, which were part of the magazine's overall view of America's relationship with the world. The second installment of the “Western Civilization” series was devoted to the Middle Ages and opened with a picture of Mont Saint-Michel, defined as “a great medieval citadel of God.”³⁷ The emphasis on religion as a defining element of western culture was announced by the full-page subtitle: “Out of violence and chaos the Christian mind and spirit created a glowing era when men knew that all things were possible to faith.”

An important contributor to the series was Whittaker Chambers, *Time's* foreign news editor, whose anticommunist views caused a stir among members of the magazine's editorial board but were consistently backed by Luce. A former Communist Party member and soviet spy, Chambers rose to national prominence in 1948 as the accuser of Alger Hiss and later came to be a significant figure in postwar American conservatism along with other ex-communists like Max Eastman, James Burnham, John Dos Passos, and Will Herzberg. While not a Catholic, he considered Catholicism a crucial bulwark of western civilization and in his bestselling autobiography *Witness* (1952) he envisioned the forthcoming struggle between western civilization and communism in apocalyptic terms.³⁸ During and after World War II the coverage of religious matters acquired a tangible political connotation and helped determine the contours of such a struggle. Christianity was frequently associated with patriotism and singled out as the moral foundation of America and the extended West. Protestantism was mostly treated in a national context, while Catholicism was usually framed in an international setting as a force opposing nazi-fascism and communism in Europe.³⁹

Life was a strong advocate of Christian unity against “the scandal of divided Christendom” vis-à-vis the threat posed by Nazi atheism to western civilization. In an editorial for the Christmas issue of 1943, Luce stated that “of all the institutions of Europe, [the Catholic and Protestant Churches] alone have survived unamended and uncompromised.” A reassertion of Christian values based on “a Christian community existing as the nucleus, or heart, of the world community, organically related to it” was allegedly underway. While its core was in the West, its reach extended to contested world regions like eastern Europe and the Far East:

The Christian world [...] includes most of the present Hebrew world, which is within the Christian world. It includes all of Europe, all of North and South America. The Eastern

36. Luce to Heiskell, September 25, 1946, DL, box 29.

37. “The Middle Ages” *Life*, April 7, 1947.

38. Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985* (Ithaca, 1993) 4, 26.

39. David Morgan, “The Image of Religion in American *Life*, 1936-1951” in Doss, *Looking at Life*, 147.

orthodox world of Russia and the Balkans is an important element of the Christian world. Even China [...] has a share in it. Many Chinese leaders are Christians; and many of their recent pronouncements about the future of civilization have been more sincerely Christian in spirit than the pronouncements of the Christian world itself.⁴⁰

While the emphasis on China closely reflected Luce's personal views, the metageography of the Christian world that he outlined in this editorial exemplifies a larger trend in wartime America. In his widely read columns and pamphlets, Walter Lippmann, who was close to Luce and a frequent *Life* contributor, identified the boundaries of the U.S.-led extended West with "Christendom."⁴¹ Another influential contributor to the magazine was John Foster Dulles, the chairman of the Commission to Study the Bases of a Just and Durable Peace set up by the Federal Council of Churches, a Protestant umbrella organization. In 1941 Dulles, like Luce, was a fervent Presbyterian, a Republican internationalist, and a strong advocate for an American spiritual revival. Notwithstanding his exceptionalist faith in America's peculiar political and moral mission, during the war he came to see Christianity from a transatlantic perspective as the ultimate foundation of the international leadership exerted by France, Britain, and later the U.S. from the eighteenth century onwards: "We were great because our three peoples were imbued with and radiated great faiths," he wrote in an essay for the Christmas issue of 1942. In his view, the mission of the great nations of the West was rooted in the Christian values shared by their peoples. Christianity was a transnational historical and moral force that stretched from the principles of the French revolution ("[the French] belief in the rights of the individual partook of a religious fervor, and so contagious was their faith that it changed the face of the Western world"); to the virtuous example of the British empire bearing "the white man's burden" ("today we laugh at that phrase, but under its influence hundreds of thousands of Britain's best youth went forth to do what they believed to be in the general welfare"); and finally to "Manifest Destiny" and the "American Dream."⁴²

Life's religious revival took place at a time when religious institutions were being enlisted in the war effort both at home and abroad. The appointment in 1939 of Myron Taylor as Roosevelt's "personal representative" at the Vatican had prompted an unprecedented shift in the relationship between America and the Catholic Church. In the following years *Life* often portrayed Pope Pius XII as a spokesperson for traditional values and an ally in world politics. The pompous ceremonies in St. Peter's were featured in photo-essays that magnified the Vatican's grandeur, not to mention its increasing openness to America and the Anglo-Saxon world. Star photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White was assigned to cover the 1944 Christmas Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, for example; and in March 1946 a story

40. "Christmas," *Life*, December 27, 1943.

41. Walter Lippmann, *U.S. War Aims* (Boston, 1944) 86-7. On Lippmann and Luce, see Brinkley, *The Publisher*, 265-6.

42. "A Righteous Faith," *Life*, December 28, 1942. On Luce and Dulles, see Swamberg, *Luce and His Empire*, 316-8.

on the creation of new cardinals opened with a picture of Pius XII hearing “the pleas to canonize new saints, including Mother Cabrini of Chicago,” with the accompanying text explaining that the ceremony “was given modern staging amid Renaissance grandeur” using a “triple microphone” and a “dazzling floodlight.” *Life* stories also often featured Cardinal Spellman of New York, a key figure in the shaping of an ethnic-ideological Cold War coalition in postwar America.⁴³

The Roman Catholic Church was emerging in *Life* as one of the pillars of both the emerging Atlantic coalition and the internationalist, anticommunist consensus at home. Catholicism’s role in forging an extended West after the war was based on its transnational appeal, cutting as it did across national boundaries and linking significant areas of Europe, the U.S., and Latin America at a time when the domestic influence of American Catholics was on the rise and their inclusion in mainstream American politics was sealed by the Cold War consensus.

In September 1944 Luce’s picture magazine published “The World from Rome,” a long article by William Bullitt, a former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union and France and a longtime critic of U.S. cooperation with Stalin. The article purportedly outlined the unofficial views of the Catholic hierarchy—whom Bullitt referred to as “the Romans”—on the unfolding war. It was also a major attack on Roosevelt, since it denounced American *naïveté* regarding soviet expansionism. Pius XII was presented as the only leader Italians could count on to help them escape the fate of soviet domination, the same domination that would extend to eastern Europe if the U.S. continued to be soft with Moscow. Appealing to deep-rooted western fears regarding the barbarous Orient, Bullitt wrote that “today, when the moral unity of Western civilization has been shattered by the crimes of the Germans [...] Rome sees again approaching from the East a wave of conquerors.”⁴⁴ The influence of the Catholic Church was crucial in the Italian context, though clearly not just limited to the battlefield of Italy. As the Cold War reconfigured and dramatized the centuries-old East-West divide, “Rome” was hailed again as a constitutive element of “the West,” only now the latter was a transatlantic entity under American leadership.

Bullitt’s article was one of the first to openly challenge the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union and caused a huge uproar both in the American press and within Time Inc. Luce, who strongly backed it, took the controversy it had stirred as an opportunity to impose a stronger crusading spirit on his writers, eradicate what he defined “the domination of left-wing thought and left-wing terminology,” and strengthen his hold over Time

43. “Papal Christmas,” *Life*, January 15, 1945; “The Pope Creates New Cardinals,” March 11, 1946. On Spellman, see, “Archibishop’s Travels,” September 20, 1943; “The Concistory,” May 13, 1946. On Bourke-White’s experience on the Italian front, see, Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography* (Reading, 1987), chapter 24.

44. “The World from Rome,” *Life*, September 4, 1944.

Inc. publications.⁴⁵ Christianity thus became a powerful force of transnational integration between the U.S. and selected parts of the outside world, since it came to overlap with democracy and individualism. A 1946 feature article on “Why Men Pray” argued that it was no accident that “democracy, which can work only when free individuals are morally responsible, has flourished best in Christian lands.” At the same time, *Life’s* coverage of non-Christian religions emphasized exotic traits and impersonal crowds. Islam, for example, was described as “totalitarian.”⁴⁶ Religion was relevant for defining a western identity in positive terms, by linking the Old World and the New, as well as in negative terms through alterity.

Finally, other factors of integration were at play. As the war unfolded in Europe, Luce made it clear that covering foreign news was especially important in the effort to prepare and “educate” readers on foreign policy issues.⁴⁷ More importantly, during the war, it started becoming apparent to Time Inc. that Americans, and not just America as a nation, would be increasingly engaged in the postwar world. Far from being a threat to America’s exceptional status, such engagement would now be the key to America’s greatness, and it would be *Life’s* role to “bring the people of the world to America.”

Life started out with a phrase “to see the world.” [...] Yes, it must bring the great new events – the Gandhi’s, the Italian elections, the troubles of China – to America, but again its interests go to far greater lengths than straight news [...] If the U.S.A is going to play the great part we think it is in the world, we must bring the people of the world, their homes, their lives, their interests, yes even their miseries to America.⁴⁸

Similarly, a few years earlier Luce had envisioned the challenges that the growing integration between America and the world would pose to his picture magazine after the war. As Luce wrote in a confidential memo:

American interest in foreign countries after the war seems certain to be intense. Americans will be closely involved with the rest of the world, both politically and physically, due to the prospective growth of air transport, a probable travel boom etc. *Life* will want a much better and more complete picture coverage of foreign countries than we had before the war. This applies to both news and feature stories.⁴⁹

45. Baughman, *Luce and the Rise of the American News Media*, 144-5; Elson, *The World of Time Inc.*, 97-101; John L. Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War 1941-1947* (New York, 1972), 54-5. On Bullitt as an early advocate of anti-soviet containment, see, John L. Harper, *American Visions of Europe* (Cambridge, 1996) 51-4.

46. “Why Men Pray,” *Life*, April 22, 1946, quoted in Morgan, “The Image of Religion in American *Life*,” 141, 150.

47. “Memo to Senior Group,” July 17, 1940 DL, box 29.

48. Longwell to Luce, July 1, 1948, DL, box 29.

49. “*Life* Plans”, DL, undated, box 26.

In fact, transport, travel, and tourism were among the “forces of integration” that helped make America more transnational, more “western,” after the war. On the one hand, postwar international travel for tourism purposes was bound mostly to Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean; mass tourism to Europe developed after the mid-1950s when commercial passenger aviation provided cheaper flights.⁵⁰ However, the early postwar flow of American tourists enjoying their abridged, standardized version of the Grand Tour through the shrines of Europe was heavily charged symbolically, and was covered by the American media as a defining moment of the American leadership in the new transatlantic West.

Life had started featuring articles on Americans travelling to Europe in the summer of 1948 when a photo-essay on “Americans abroad” showed tourists in Stratford on Avon, Paris, Chartres, Venice, Florence, and Rome; with a full-page picture in which American “college students on bicycle tour rest at Rome’s ancient colosseum.”⁵¹ A year later Luce wrote a note to *Life*’s staff with a *New York Times* article attached: “Here is a map and some statistics on American tourists in Europe. I still want to see a good, well rounded essay in *Life* on the subject.”⁵² Meanwhile photographer John Phillips sent the magazine’s editors some “picture story suggestions,” including one on landmarks and traditions of the Mediterranean that he described as “not only a logical sequel to that on Western culture but I should say almost an inevitable one, as it is [...] the cradle of our civilization.” Florence in particular was singled out as the Mediterranean world’s crucial contribution to “Western civilization.”⁵³

As America’s global influence grew in the 1940s, Americans also began travelling abroad for other purposes. Hundreds of thousands of military personnel were stationed in Europe and other continents. At times, this experience reinforced racial prejudice and a stereotyped view of the “other,” as in the case of U.S. troops in Japan.⁵⁴ The presence of Americans overseas also brought more than 150,000 war brides to the U.S. during and especially after the war. Again, *Life* coverage took on a peculiar tinge where encounters between Americans and Europeans were concerned. A January 1945 photo-essay featured an “Anglo American Romance,” in which the story of an American soldier and a young British woman was reenacted for photographer Ralph Morse. The first, full-page photograph shows the couple holding hands and walking through a park, with the man in uniform. The caption provided American readers with more information: “Hand in hand America’s Sgt. Kenneth Nahan and Scotland’s Jean Angus stroll down the famed 2 ¾ mile ‘long walk’ at Windsor castle on their honeymoon.”⁵⁵ Stories appealing to

50. Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation*, 192-3.

51. “Americans Abroad,” *Life* (August 16, 1948).

52. DL, box 26.

53. “Picture Story Suggestions,” February 18, 1949, DL, box 26.

54. Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation*, 191.

55. “*Life* Records an Anglo American Romance,” *Life*, January 1, 1945.

readers' interest in aspirational romance were a fixture of picture magazines in general. In wartime, however, the private sphere of sentiments merged easily with the public sphere of international politics, and photos made this interaction even more instrumental for constructing America as a "western" national community. On the one hand, the Anglo-American romance featured in *Life* reinforced the discourse on the "natural" link between "English-speaking peoples;" on the other hand, it alleviated fears among the—mostly white, middle-class—readership that a stronger integration with the world could endanger the social and racial outlook of the nation.⁵⁶

Life has been considered here as a relevant source for studying public discourse in 1940s America. Unlike other media outlets of the time, the picture magazine published by Henry Luce served as the vehicle for a deliberate and powerful attempt to formulate a hegemonic narrative of an American "imagined community" at a time of unprecedented engagement with other nations and people. Luce and his editors were extremely confident in their efforts to mold a Gramscian "common sense." Not only did they believe they had the power and the technical skills to do so but they also believed the national crisis made it their responsibility. In 1946, during one of their periodical reassessments of the magazine's "philosophy," managing editor Joseph Thorndike argued that it should embody the "*Zeitgeist*." Luce replied that "A *Zeitgeist* is not something 'accepted.' On the contrary. It may be said that History usually moves *upstream*."⁵⁷ In his view of journalism, reflecting the common sense was clearly too passive an attitude, and his preference for advocacy over objectivity was shared among Time Inc. executives. "We live in a revolutionary age. *Life* must therefore be a crusader," as Daniel Longwell wrote Luce in 1948.⁵⁸

While nationalism was triumphant, such a narrative recast the exceptionalist self-image of America through a revised version of the ideological framework of "western civilization," which was more attuned to the imperial role the U.S. was about to play in the international arena. Various grammars of alterity and images of the "other" were instrumental in this process, which cannot be understood without considering what lay beyond the boundaries of the nation.

56. Wendy Kozol, "Gazing at Race in the Pages of *Life*: Picturing Segregation through Theory and History," in Doss, *Looking at Life*, 159-77.

57. Elson, *The World of Time Inc.*, 188.

58. Longwell to Luce, July 1, 1948, DL, box 29.