YOUNG PATRIOTS ABROAD: A GLOBAL HISTORY OF THE BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA, 1910-1960

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My research project probes the transnational exchanges and global engagement of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) from the Progressive era to the early Cold War. The idea of scouting, first implemented by the British officer Robert Baden-Powell in 1908, appealed to adolescents in diverse societies, yet nowhere did it gain greater traction than in the United States. Founded in 1910, the BSA grew rapidly to become one of the largest American youth organizations of the twentieth century. Its emphasis on character-building, patriotism, and faith in God, coupled with the goal of training boys in outdoor skills and responsible citizenship, made the organization extremely popular, especially among white middle-class Americans.

However typically American it might appear, the BSA has always interacted with the wider world. Boy Scouts corresponded with international pen pals, participated in foreign aid, went on overseas expeditions, launched troops in Europe and Asia, and traveled to international scout festivals. Shortly after its incorporation, the organization branched out into the country’s extraterritorial possessions. Overseas councils were established in the Panama Canal Zone, the Philippines, and Guam. In the interwar period, the BSA joined the transnational bodies of global scouting, the Boy Scouts’ International Conference and the World Scout Bureau, and sent delegations to the World Scout Jamborees, the large rallies of Boy Scouts of various nationalities that have been held almost every four years since 1920. After World War II, the BSA supported the United Nations and launched the Transatlantic and Far East Councils to make boy scouting available to U.S. citizens and their allies living on the front lines of the Cold War.

I am interested in studying how the BSA molded young male identities at home and abroad, and how these identities enabled American boys and men to accept, support, and critique their nation’s global presence in the twentieth century. Their participation in a movement that extended beyond national borders not only highlights the role of youth in widening America’s “external footprint,” to borrow a phrase from Ian Tyrrell. It also demonstrates that U.S. global expansion
was tied to articulations of new cultural ideals of boyhood and manhood. As gender uncertainties caused by the disruptive forces of modernization made proving manhood increasingly difficult, the international arena came into view as one of the last sanctuaries of male authority, one well suited to creating American men for an American century. By sending boys and men abroad, the BSA revived the equation of masculinity with national strength while at the same time adapting it to the needs of a nascent world power. I am interested, in short, in the correlation of youth, hegemonic manhood, and America’s democratic empire.

My project joins a new generation of scholars who have begun to write the history of “global America.” The BSA’s transnational encounters reveal how young American males left their imprint upon changing conceptions of their nation’s place in the world. These encounters were conditioned by region, race, ethnicity, class, and age – power structures that shaped the ways in which American boys gained access to identity-forming global experiences. Because there is always a tension between cultural norms and individual biographies, I need to be aware of how adolescents struck their own paths to manhood within the ideological constraints of scouting. Overall, though, the BSA crafted a highly gendered and racialized understanding of citizenship that transcended the domestic-foreign binary and constituted a significant auxiliary of U.S. expansion. Advertising overseas adventure and border-crossing adolescent friendship, boy scouting invited young American males to grapple with urgent questions about their country’s relationship to a wider world of political and cultural affairs - questions that were worked out on the edges of American society as well as at its center.