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# Fighting the Great War: Reconsidering the American Soldier Experience

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# Fighting the Great War: Reconsidering the American Soldier Experience

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the case with the First World War, which has served as a powerful testimony for anti-war advocates and indeed for critics of the old order. It has proved all too difficult for most commentators to distinguish between the horrors of suffering and loss (for example, the French corpses “glistening and rotting in the sun and smelling nauseous and vile” noted by Private Stanley Green in his grim memoirs housed at the London Metropolitan Archives) and the fact that the conflict was not a mindless slaughter. Indeed, the frequent failure to distinguish between the two means that the war can claim to be the most misunderstood major conflict in history.

The horror of what appeared to be military futility in the First World War has distracted attention from the important and worthwhile issues at stake. In the face of the German invasion of Belgium, and later of the German unwillingness to consider peace unless they made significant territorial gains, this was a war fought by the British on behalf of legal and civilized international conduct. These were themes understood at the time and in the 1920s, but largely lost sight of from the 1930s, as the impact of the war lessened and as the new crisis with Germany came to the fore.

The heavy casualties of the First World War reflected not so much the futility of war but rather the determination of the world's leading industrial powers to continue hostilities almost at any cost. More specifically, casualties were high because of the strength of counter-tactics: weapons technology

gave the defense an advantage. Yet it would be unwise to present the inability to end the war rapidly as a consequence of tactical stasis. The stalemate of the Western Front was due to a combination of factors. The firepower of the prewar armies was not

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understood in 1914, and the consequences of escalating that firepower as happened during 1915 and 1916 were not anticipated either. Tactics of maneuver and of attack did not initially take into account the effects of massed artillery or modern rifles.

But the stalemate was not stasis since tactics and munitions continually evolved. This process led not only to a number of expedients, but also to a rethinking of combined-arms operations. The emphasis on strong firepower led to technological innovations, particularly with regard to gas, aircraft, and tanks. The necessary coordination in time and space put a premium on command skills and practices, both of which advanced. The coordination of

maneuver with artillery was particularly important in carrying armies through enemy defenses.

Alongside innovation came decisiveness. The Western Front was not merely a site of stasis but also the stage for the decisive actions of the war. The blocking of German offensives in 1914, 1916, and 1918 was the essential precondition of Allied victory, and in 1918 the Germans were defeated and dramatically driven back in the theater of operations where their strength was concentrated.

The last was one of the most impressive victories of the 20th century, but one that is largely ignored. Instead, revulsion at the casualty figures combines with the laziness of moral relativism and the unwillingness to study what actually happened to sustain seriously misleading views. Historians have a civic and professional responsibility to the present, the future, and the past to try to explain and discuss the war without conforming to the ease of conventional platitude.

*Jeremy Black is the author of The Great War and the Making of the Modern World (Continuum, 2011) and Avoiding Armageddon: From the Great War to the Fall of France, 1918-1940 (Continuum, 2012).*

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## FIGHTING THE GREAT WAR: RECONSIDERING THE AMERICAN SOLDIER EXPERIENCE

Jennifer D. Keene

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Why men fight is a particularly apt question to ask about the American soldier in World War I. Unlike Europeans in 1914, Americans went to war with their eyes wide open. They had already seen the worst of industrial warfare both on the high seas when the 1915 *Lusitania* sinking illustrated the dangers of ocean travel and on the battlefield when the 1916 battles of the Somme and Verdun left no doubt about the staggering casualties trench warfare engendered. Nonetheless, Americans displayed a certain naive enthusiasm for war in 1917. When American soldiers arrived overseas, French soldiers noted how much the U.S. troops reminded them of themselves in 1914, filled as they were with energy and optimism for a quick, easy victory against Germany. The cheering crowds, the smiling doughboys, the ultra-patriot war bond posters: these are the images that create the portrait of a nation eagerly engaging in a war whose conclusion would

cruelly dash their expectations of it being “the war to end all wars.”

Scratch below the surface of these images, however, and a different portrait emerges. The problem, literary critic Susan Sontag suggests, is not that “people remember through photographs but that they remember only the photographs.” Viewing these images and celebrations not as spontaneous expressions of war enthusiasm but as carefully orchestrated events dramatically changes the meaning of these iconic images associated with World War I. Instead of Americans enthusiastically embracing war as a redemptive endeavor, we see the expectation or fear of resistance molding nearly every decision that the government made about raising, training, and fighting overseas.

After two and a half years of remaining neutral, the United States finally entered the war in April 1917. The road to war had been long and full of controversy, and President Woodrow Wil-

son was unsure how firmly committed the nation was to fighting. Wilson's own mixed feelings about declaring war perfectly mirrored the divided state of opinion within the country. Even the publication of the Zimmermann Telegram, in which Germany promised Mexico parts of the United States if it provoked a border war, failed to win over all skeptics. Indifferent acceptance by other Americans was better than active opposition, but in the long run even apathy would hurt the nation's ability (physically and emotionally) to fight what all expected to be a long war that might stretch into 1920.

To raise an army, the government faced the choice of relying primarily on volunteers, instituting an immediate draft, or waiting until enlistments began to flag before turning to a draft to bring men into the army. When Congress authorized the draft, the legislators initially intended to maintain the traditional American practice of using con-

scription to spur enlistments. An expanded Regular Army and National Guard continued to accept volunteers, while a new yet-to-be-formed National Army was reserved for conscripts. Fully aware of the mass slaughter underway along the Western Front, Wilson took steps early on to prevent the inevitable sag in enlistments once long casualty lists became a reality. The primary innovation involved giving local communities the responsibility for registering, selecting, and inducting soldiers for military service. Under the watchful eyes of community leaders, many draft-age men were given little chance to wrestle with their consciences over going to war.

On June 5, 1917, ship horns, church bells, and factory whistles rang out in cities and towns to announce the start of registration for the draft, and many families accompanied their sons, husbands, and brothers to the designated registration sites. When the moment to depart for the training camps arrived, communities gathered once again. On August 31, 1917, designated the “day of the Selected Man,” recruits, many dressed in their best clothes, marched past their friends and neighbors to the trains that transported them to their new army lives. In Washington, D.C., President Wilson marched with local draftees, while in New York City, former president Theodore Roosevelt sat in the reviewing stand as 7,000 newly inducted soldiers paraded up Fifth Avenue.

Peaceful compliance with conscription reaped the government the images it wanted: neatly dressed men marching obediently off to war. But there was another side to this story that was less rosy, and also less visible to the public eye. Behind the scenes, army officials realized that stoic acceptance, rather than unfettered enthusiasm, characterized this conscripted force. They based this initial conclusion on the disappointing numbers who signed up for military service during the short window when men could volunteer for the army. The second significant figure involved applications for deferments. Millions of men understood the difference between registering for the draft and volunteering for service—directly contradicting the claim of one propaganda poster that local boards were selecting men from “a Nation which volunteers in mass.” Although 24 million men eventually registered for the draft without incident, millions then took advantage of their right to request a deferment because of their occupation or support of dependents. Eventually, over 65% of those who registered received deferments or exemptions from service.

There were also troubling episodes of outright resistance to the draft, especially in the southern communities that had vocally opposed entering the war. Overall, nearly 3 million, or 11%, of the draft-eligible male population refused to register or

report to induction centers once called into service. The most famous incident of mass protest took place during the Green Corn Rebellion in



A 1917 recruitment poster. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZC4-9450].

eastern Oklahoma when the police arrested 500 sharecroppers and day laborers for protesting their impending induction into “a rich man’s war, poor man’s fight.” Over 20,000 men donned the uniform as conscientious objectors, liable only for noncombatant service.

Policy makers privately acknowledged this unseen hesitancy or uncertainty among enlisted men, leading to several key innovations within the military aimed primarily at generating obedience and, eventually, true dedication to the cause. Close order drill taught recruits to follow orders unquestioningly, and molding training doctrine around a distinct American national identity became a way to imbue U.S. troops with a higher sense of purpose on the battlefield. American exceptionalism, the belief that Americans’ innately aggressive spirit would succeed in breaking the stalemate along the Western Front, gave troops faith that they would avoid the horrors of trench warfare and fight a more traditional war of movement. There was little need to dwell on the past slaughter of the Somme or Verdun as one’s likely future—these battles were safely in the past, illustrations of Eu-

rope’s inability to solve the dilemma of modern war without America’s help.

Propaganda permeated the training camp as well as the home front. Lectures, pamphlets, songs, and posters explaining the war’s purpose gave civilians and soldiers a shared language of patriotic sacrifice and hatred of the enemy that they used to communicate with one another. It took time for soldiers to deviate from the narrative put in place by others, which means scholars need to be cautious about relying exclusively on soldiers’ training camp letters as a source for understanding their motivation to fight. Written under the watchful eye of the YMCA secretaries providing the stationary and envelopes, officers censored each one before sending it off, postage-free, to loved ones at home. For the soldiers who wrote them (and about 20% of the army was functionally illiterate), the letters fulfilled their duty, explained to them by their officers, to keep morale high on the home front.

Other innovations within the wartime military revealed that the battle to win over the hearts and minds of the troops went far beyond training doctrine and letter writing. The two most critical institutional innovations centered on solving the same problem: finding out what men were thinking and then molding that thinking to serve the army’s purpose. The Morale Division, created in 1918 to create political education programs in the camps, represented the more benign attempt to instill fighting men with higher political principles. The internal spying undertaken by the Military Intelligence Division relied on soldiers within units informing on their colleagues who expressed disloyal or defeatist attitudes, an illustration of the willingness of the wartime state to squash any hint of dissent before it could grow into organized resistance to either the war or military authority. Containing the simmering anger of African-American soldiers who resented the bigotry and discrimination that marred their daily lives proved the biggest challenge for Military Intelligence operatives throughout the war.

Once a man was under fire, he got some new reasons to fight. “I was hesitating,” one private admitted, the first time he was in combat “because I didn’t really know if I wanted to kill someone. Then I heard a bullet whistle by my head.” Nonetheless, investigators behind the lines routinely questioned wounded and ill soldiers on their feelings about the war and the Allies, information they intended to use to assess the state of morale and identify potential areas of concern. Interviews with recovered soldiers revealed a wide range of feelings about their imminent return to the front. Some, an investigator reported, wanted to go back because “they have personal scores to settle with the Germans now that they have been wounded

or gassed, while others want to go back on general principles and still others because they feel they have greater liberty and more privileges at the front than they have enjoyed behind the lines." The desire to prove one's bravery or not let down comrades in arms also became strong inducements to fight. Going into combat for the first time, one private looked around and decided that "since the other fellows were not showing yellow" he would stick together with them. "All of us were afraid in a sort of way, in that we didn't know what we were getting into and didn't know what to expect. But in order to keep our personal reputation up . . . we were more afraid to go to the rear than to the front." The line of military police following men into battle, which rounded up nearly 100,000 stragglers during the 47-day Meuse-Argonne campaign in the fall of 1918, provided an additional incentive for soldiers to continue pressing forward.

The American army never suffered any crisis of morale that caused soldiers uniformly to question the purpose of the war. After a hesitant beginning with compliant rather than overly-enthusiastic troops, soldiers' support grew rather than lessened over the course of the war. The short duration of the war, with the United States involved in only six months of active fighting, does not offer a fully satisfying explanation for this turn of events. After all, these were six very bloody months in which the U.S. army sustained

over 50,000 battlefield deaths. Instead, it was the sustained effort to manufacture a shared sense of purpose that ultimately proved successful. At the front, soldiers proved capable of absorbing the personal trauma of participating in combat without losing faith in their leaders or the justness of the war. As Donald Kyler recalled, "I had seen mercy killings, both of our hopelessly wounded and those of the enemy. I had seen the murder of prisoners of war, singly and as many as several at one time. I had seen men rob the dead of money and valuables, and had seen men cut off the fingers of corpses to get rings. Those things I had seen, but they did not affect me much. I was too numb, [but nonetheless] I had the determination to go on performing as I had been trained to do, to be a good soldier." Indeed, the truly disgruntled soldiers within the American army were not men at the front, but those assigned to labor at specialist tasks behind the line. The crisis of morale in the American army took place in the training camps and dock facilities where noncombatants labored to unload boxes, build roads, or transport supplies. More than seeking a chance to die for their country, these troops craved the recognition and respect that naturally went to combatants.

Adam Hochschild demonstrates one way to recapture the ambiguity with which participants went to war in 1914-1918 in his new book on British peace activists *To End All Wars: How the First World*

*War Divided Britain*, featured in this issue of *Historically Speaking*. This brief essay offers another by tracing the concerted and ultimately successful effort of the U.S. government to create a culture of consent that sustained the will to fight. The traditional narrative depicts an idealistic and enthusiastic America marching off to war and suffering disillusionment when encountering the reality of fighting along the Western Front. Americans instead began the war divided and uncertain, and ended it with a unity of purpose that government coercion and persuasion combined to create.

*Jennifer D. Keene is professor of history and chair of the history department at Chapman University. She has written extensively on American involvement in World War I, including most recently World War I: The American Soldier Experience (University of Nebraska Press, 2011), from which this essay is drawn.*

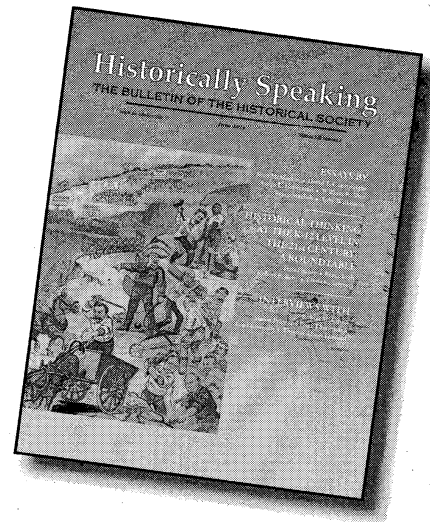
<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 89.



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