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WRITING THE GREAT WAR  
*The Historiography of World War I  
from 1918 to the Present*

Edited by  
Christoph Cornelissen and Arndt Weinrich



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*Chapter 13*

**FINDING A PLACE FOR WORLD WAR I  
IN AMERICAN HISTORY**

1914–2018

*Jennifer D. Keene*



World War I has occupied an uneasy place in the American public and political consciousness.<sup>1</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, controversies over the war permeated the nation’s cultural and political life, influencing memorial culture and governmental policy. Interest in the war, however, waned considerably after World War II, a much larger and longer war for the United States. Despite a plethora of scholarly works examining nearly every aspect of the war, interest in the war remains limited even among academic historians. In many respects, World War I became the “forgotten war” because Americans never developed a unifying collective memory about its meaning or the political lessons it offered. Americans remembered the Civil War as the war that ended slavery and saved the union, World War II as “the good war” that eliminated fascist threats in Europe and the Pacific, the Cold War as a struggle for survival against a communist foe, and Vietnam as an unpopular war. By comparison, World War I failed to find a stable place in the national narrative.

The 2014–18 global centennial commemoration created a cultural moment when it became almost mandatory for Americans to acknowledge the war. These remembrances occurred during an uneasy time in post-9/11

American society. The flawed military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, instability in the Middle East, worries that the “American Century” had ended, and concerns about maintaining civil liberties during an endless domestic “war on terror” prompted a myriad of articles and reflections in the popular press that drew parallels between the present and 1914–18. Public intellectuals used the exercise of centennial commemoration to interrogate the dilemmas plaguing the United States in the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the overtly nationalistic tone injected into the political arena during and after the 2016 presidential election reinforced the tendency in official commemorative events to emphasize American triumphalism. The American military victory was generally presented as the launching pad for the nation’s rise to superpower status, complimenting (perhaps unintentionally) the new Republican administration’s desire to resurrect pride in America’s past accomplishments and singular greatness.

At the same time, however, the centennial moment laid the foundation for a scholarly renaissance in World War I studies. The lectures, exhibits, and conferences organized by libraries, museums, and universities throughout the United States left a lingering footprint. Many archives took advantage of the sudden availability of funds to fully inventory, and sometimes even digitize, their World War I holdings. The Library of Congress, for instance, crafted a major exhibit, “Echoes of the Great War: The American Experiences of World War I,” accompanied by detailed summaries of World War I–related holdings and new online resources that included sheet music, photographs, maps, and manuscripts. Similarly, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts mounted a comprehensive art exhibit, “World War I and American Art,” that offered a major reinterpretation by challenging the traditional assumption that American artists barely noticed the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

Equally important, every public event prompted yet another American to delve into personal family history, and the material uncovered often found its way into the public domain through privately produced letter collections or as donations to local libraries and archives.<sup>4</sup> Andrew J. Huebner’s *Love and Death in the Great War* represented a scholarly take on this popular desire to evaluate the war’s impact on families.<sup>5</sup> The sudden sense that participation in the war was an important historical experience worthy of remembrance imbued letters and artifacts with new value to both families and professional archivists. Indeed, Huebner’s own family figures prominently in *Love and Death*.

The emphasis on local commemoration also received a boost when the National Endowment for the Humanities funded World War I lectures and exhibits in local public libraries across all fifty states.<sup>6</sup> Many towns “re-discovered” how World War I infused their own cultural landscape.

Art historian Mark Levitch initiated the World War I Memorial Inventory Project<sup>7</sup> and successfully relied on crowdsourcing to create a database of local monuments and memorials. Subsequently, the 100 Cities/100 Memorials project offered funds to restore these long-forgotten testimonies to American participation in the war. Interest in the local experience of war was mirrored in scholarly works that focused on particular cities or regions, such as Ross J. Wilson's *New York and the First World War: Shaping an American City*.<sup>8</sup>

The flip side of interest in the local were efforts to incorporate the American experience into the new scholarly turn toward examining the war as a global conflict. The 2014 three-volume anthology edited by Jay Winter, *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, fully incorporated the United States into the global history of the war.<sup>9</sup> The National World War I Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, also preferred events that helped educate the public about the entire war rather than just the U.S. experience.

The United States got a late start organizing for the centennial. Created in 2013, the twelve-member U.S. World War I Centennial Commission received minimal public funding (as opposed to the United Kingdom, which pledged £50 million to mark the occasion). A comprehensive website and podcast series publicized centennial-related news, but remembrance activities relied primarily on the ad hoc efforts of local museums, universities, state commissions, and dedicated individuals. The commission devoted considerable time trying to drum up support for the erection of a national World War I memorial in Washington, DC. To that end, the commission secured needed governmental approvals, held a competition to select a design, and even held a ground-breaking ceremony in Pershing Park—the site selected for the proposed monument. Nonetheless, as the centennial drew to a close, the monument remained unbuilt and underfunded. Frank Buckles, the last surviving American World War I veteran, had died in 2011.<sup>10</sup> Without any living veterans to honor, the commission lacked a compelling argument for creating the memorial beyond pointing out that World War I had been forgotten in the late twentieth-century monument-building frenzy that resulted in memorials to World War II, Korea, and Vietnam on the National Mall.

A hundred years earlier, the political imperative had been completely different. Initially, firsthand memories of the conflict dominated both fictional and historical interpretations of the American war effort as participants struggled to come to terms with the war. Scholars have been animated by a similar collective desire to recapture what the war meant to those who lived through it and its lasting legacy on the United States. Delving deeper into how cultural, diplomatic, military, political, and social

historians have examined the war reveals ongoing debates rather than firm answers to these two essential questions.

## World War I in American Popular Culture

Throughout the twentieth century, Americans' most sustained encounter with the war came through literature. Veteran novelists, including Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, wrote enduring classics that embraced themes of disillusionment, cynicism, absurdity, and sexual dysfunction.<sup>11</sup> These novels portrayed the war as a rite of passage for young men and women who lost their adolescent naiveté within the crucible of war. Classic American films also reinforced the prevailing portrait of senseless slaughter along the Western Front. *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Paths of Glory* condensed the war into the horror of trench warfare, corrupt officers, and disillusioned youth.<sup>12</sup> This emphasis on human carnage permeated the larger culture, setting a paradigm for understanding the war even among those who never actually read these books or watched these films. Novels and films that valorized the war's idealism and sacrifice, such as Willa Cather's *One of Ours*, Edith Wharton's *A Son at the Front*, and the Howard Hawks–directed *Sergeant York* had no lasting impact on popular memory.<sup>13</sup>

Over time, Lost Generation novels and films served less as indictments of World War I and more as universal statements on the shock of confronting the reality of war. The themes of disillusionment highlighted in these artistic works struck a nerve during the Vietnam War era when Americans began once again to question the efficacy of using war to spread democratic values. Stanley Cooperman's *World War I and the American Novel* drew parallels between the sentiments expressed in antiwar fiction of the 1920s and street protests against the Vietnam War. In *The Gun and the Pen: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and the Fiction of Mobilization*, Keith Gandal rejects the antiwar label attached to Lost Generation fiction.<sup>14</sup> Gandal instead argues that the root of postwar disillusionment came not from having experienced fighting firsthand but rather from Hemingway and Fitzgerald having failed to reach the Western Front as officers. In a subsequent book, *War Isn't the Only Hell: A New Reading of World War I American Literature*, Gandal reinterprets a broader range of veteran-authored fiction, viewing these works as uneasy mediations on how military mobilization challenged existing hierarchies of class, ethnicity, and gender.<sup>15</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the war, official committees mobilized to commemorate a war that they believed Americans would long regard

as a seminal event in the nation's history. Veterans' organizations and local communities mobilized to erect monuments throughout the nation. The American Battle Monuments Commission undertook the massive task of compiling a comprehensive battlefield guidebook. The commission expected tourists and pilgrims to retrace the steps of American soldiers as they paid their respects to the dead. Originally published in 1938, the guide instead became obsolete almost immediately, collecting dust on library shelves. Similarly, by the time the fundraising and construction of monuments had concluded in the late 1920s and early 1930s, public interest in the war had waned.<sup>16</sup> More recently, the World War I Centennial Commission and American Battlefield Monuments Commission tried to renew interest in the war by opening visitor centers and organizing official commemorative events to mark key battles, including simultaneous ceremonies at all official World War I overseas cemeteries on 11 November 2018.

Few Americans bought or read the slew of participant memoirs that appeared in the interwar period. Some were poorly written, while others appeared after the reading public had tired of rehashing the war. Many memoir writers also found that their accounts differed too dramatically with the now-accepted paradigm established by the Lost Generation novelists. Steven Trout notes, for instance, that the combat memoir of John Lewis Barkley, a highly decorated U.S. soldier, "did not line up with accepted wisdom (at least among artists and intellectuals) about how soldiers of the Great War were *supposed* to remember their experiences."<sup>17</sup> Barkley championed camaraderie and individual resilience. Something of a "war lover," he relished the excitement of battle and killing enemy soldiers. Out of step with the times, Barkley's memoir failed to find an audience.

Unlike the Somme for the British or Verdun for the French, the 1918 Meuse-Argonne campaign (the culminating U.S. battle in World War I) found no lasting place in American memory. The high death toll did not result in an indictment of American military leadership (as it did in Vietnam), nor did the victory cause subsequent generations of Americans to relish their role in defeating Germany (as in World War II). Other wars, historian Edward Lengel contends, simply offer Americans better stories—ones with a clear beginning and end, with easily identifiable heroes and villains who serve as mirrors that allow Americans to see their values, their strengths, and their flaws more clearly.<sup>18</sup> The memory of World War I, by contrast, focuses nearly exclusively on the universal horrors of war, and therefore offers no such prism for championing American exceptionalism.

Steven Trout offers a different argument for the indifference and ignorance that pervades American society about World War I.<sup>19</sup> Rather than



willfully purging the war from the national consciousness, Trout believes that Americans remembered the war in too many diverse ways. What exactly should the nation recall about the war? The failure of neutrality? The bravery of the combat soldier? The futility of trench warfare? The racial discrimination that permeated the ranks? The domestic attacks on German Americans? The botched peace processes? These competing memories reflected existing political and social divisions within American society during the twenties and thirties, preventing Americans from forming a sustainable, collective memory about the war.

Nonetheless, from 1918 through 1945, the war was anything but forgotten, suggesting that “forgetting” is a more recent phenomenon. America grappled with the loss of 120,000 soldiers (half of these in combat, the rest mostly as a result of the influenza epidemic), and the reintegration of nearly 200,000 wounded men. Historian G. Kurt Piehler has traced the physical presence of World War I in towns and cities where Americans drove their cars on Pershing Drives, attended meetings in Memorial Halls, and watched football games on Soldiers’ Fields.<sup>20</sup> Critical of the plethora of mass-produced statues erected after the Civil War that lionized leaders and foot soldiers, memorialization in the 1920s took a utilitarian turn, honoring servicemen through the creation of community structures that improved civic life. In 1921, the remains of an unidentified soldier were buried in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington Cemetery, a noteworthy alteration of the nation’s commemorative landscape. At a time when no wars had national monuments (the present structures dedicated to World War II, the Korean War, and Vietnam War appeared toward the end of the twentieth century), the creation of a national site of mourning and remembrance explicitly for World War I represented a unique commemorative practice.

Almost immediately, however, Americans splintered in the meaning they attached to the Unknown Soldier. Americans debated whether the tomb represented victory, peace, or valor (the sarcophagus erected in 1932 over the grave included allegorical figures for all three). African American civil rights activists adopted the trope of the Unknown Soldier to highlight the nation’s refusal to adequately recognize the contributions of black soldiers.<sup>21</sup> Town monuments also reflected this ambiguity over whether the nation was commemorating victory or mourning loss in the statues they erected with plaques listing the community’s war dead.

Over time, townsfolk added the names of fallen soldiers from other wars to these plaques, weakening their symbolic link to World War I. A similar dilution occurred when the remains of unidentified soldiers from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam were buried in the Tomb of the

Unknown Soldier.<sup>22</sup> The same fate befell the annual Armistice Day commemorations that began on 11 November 1919 to remember the fallen in World War I. In 1954 Armistice Day became Veterans Day, a holiday dedicated to honoring all living and deceased members of the armed forces. Such transformations were not unique to American remembrance of World War I. The passage of time had weakened ties between the Civil War and Decoration Days—originally two separate days when relatives in the North and South decorated the graves of fallen soldiers. By the twentieth century, as the divisions between North and South healed, the term Memorial Day came into vogue with commemorations now honoring the fallen of all wars on the same day in May. Memorial Day became an official federal holiday in 1971.

In the interwar period, the government erected eight national overseas military cemeteries in France and Belgium, placing the gravesites of individual soldiers in the shadows of massive memorials recalling the scope and complexity of American combat operations.<sup>23</sup> Lisa M. Budreau argues that the government constructed overseas memorials and cemeteries to underscore the emergence of the United States as a major world power during the war, but burying fallen American soldiers overseas proved domestically contentious.<sup>24</sup> In 1917, Secretary of War Newton Baker had promised to return the bodies of war dead to their families for burial in local communities. In 1919, however, the government reversed course and began pressuring families to keep their loved ones near the field of honor where they fell. The specter of thousands of coffins arriving home presented the worrisome prospect that grief might become the predominant memory of the war. Equally disturbing, the possibility that bringing home all war dead would allow France and Britain to downplay the American contribution to the overall victory. In the end, nearly 70 percent of families demanded that the government repatriate the bodies of their loved ones. With fewer bodies available to offer visual evidence of America's contribution to the victory, the American Battlefields Monument Commission designed the official overseas cemeteries with ample space between gravestones to camouflage the fact that so few American soldiers were buried in them.

The distinctly American way of mourning privileged some forms of remembrance over others. In *Of Little Comfort: War Widows, Fallen Soldiers, and the Remaking of the Nation after the Great War*, Erika Kuhlman argues that war widows became public symbols through which American society could grieve for the war dead, but only if they exhibited stoic acceptance of their loss.<sup>25</sup> Nancy K. Bristow, in *American Pandemic: The Lost Worlds of the 1918 Influenza Epidemic*, argues that over time stories of loss from

influenza or combat became private rather than public stories.<sup>26</sup> Sustained despair and grief were culturally unacceptable within the United States, a society that privileged optimism and progress.

## World War I in American Political Culture

The war exerted its greatest impact on American domestic political culture during the 1930s. Two singular events in American history, the Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages and 1932 Bonus March by World War I veterans, revealed the resonance of the war's legacy during the Great Depression. These two staged events highlighted the emotional and financial cost of the war to average citizens, underscoring the government's responsibility to mitigate that suffering.

Between 1930 and 1933, the government funded twenty Gold Star Mother voyages for the mothers and widows of fallen soldiers to visit overseas gravesites. Gold Star Mothers derived their name from the flag embossed with a gold star that many families of fallen soldiers hung in their windows. The government had encouraged the families of servicemen to display flags with a blue star to advertise their support of the war. Once soldiers began dying, officials urged families to grieve discretely by changing the star from blue to gold instead of draping their doors and porches in traditional black crepe.

Effective lobbying by the Gold Star Mothers Association portrayed the trip as fulfilling a debt to the women who had first suffered the death of their loved ones and then lost a site of mourning once they agreed to let the government bury their soldier overseas.<sup>27</sup> Much like the impulse to create overseas cemeteries, government officials expected the Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages to advance broader diplomatic goals. The trips occurred in the wake of renewed cultural and diplomatic interactions with France including Charles Lindbergh's historic New York–Paris flight and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, an international agreement that outlawed wars of aggression. The pilgrimages served as visible illustrations of wartime sacrifice ushering in a peaceful future of international understanding and cooperation. The voyages were not without controversy, however. African American women traveled separately, received inferior accommodations, and faced pressure from civil rights organizations to boycott the pilgrimages to protest racial discrimination.

During the most severe years of the Great Depression, the nation proved willing to expend \$5 million to send 6,685 mothers and widows to visit graves overseas. The demand by living veterans in the early thirties that the government pay them their promised bonus proved much more

contentious. Controversy over the soldiers' bonus extended back to 1920. In *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America* I argued that conscription created a social compact between the state and conscripted soldiers that endured well after they returned home.<sup>28</sup> In veterans' eyes, if the state had the power to draft men, it also had the ability and responsibility to prevent war from financially ruining the lives of those it conscripted.

In 1924, Congress awarded World War I veterans a monetary bonus in the form of a bond that matured in 1945. Once the Depression hit, however, veterans began agitating for early payment of the bond. This grassroots movement culminated in the 1932 Bonus March when thirty thousand World War I veterans marched on Washington, DC, and set up an encampment that lasted for six weeks until the army violently evicted the protesters from the capital. Veterans ultimately received their bonus payment in 1936, by which time they had become an influential part of the left-leaning political coalition pushing President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) to embrace liberal social welfare policies aimed at redistributing wealth more equitably throughout American society.

The climax of World War I veterans' influence over American politics came in the final years of World War II, when the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars steered the GI Bill of Rights through the legislative process. World War I veterans had created the American Legion in 1919 to form a veterans' organization that all servicemen could join, regardless of where they served. In contrast, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (established in 1899 after the Spanish American War) only admitted those who had served overseas. Recent scholarship reveals how these veterans' organizations helped erect the modern social-welfare state. The GI Bill, for instance, granted returning World War II veterans comprehensive benefits, including unemployment compensation, college tuition, healthcare, and low-interest housing loans.<sup>29</sup> In *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill: How Veteran Politics Shaped the New Deal Era*, Stephen Ortiz suggests that veterans, as New Deal dissidents, helped convince FDR to champion social justice measures such as the creation of the social security system.<sup>30</sup> Jessica Adler's *Burdens of War: Creating the United States Veteran Health System* examines how World War I veterans' claim that they had "earned" the right to life-long, federally subsidized medical care eventually resulted in the creation of a universal healthcare system for only one segment of the American population.<sup>31</sup> Other scholars, however, put more emphasis on the legion's reactionary rather than progressive impulses, detailing their active participation in the First Red Scare and pursuit of restrictive immigration laws and isolationist foreign policies.<sup>32</sup>

As these studies suggest, the political fallout from World War I affected more than veterans' benefits. In the 1930s, politicians also drew lessons

from the war to shape American foreign policy. The U.S. Senate's Nye Committee investigation accused bankers and arms dealers of working behind the scenes to convince President Woodrow Wilson to abandon neutrality and declare war. In this formulation, fears that an Allied loss would preclude repayment of war loans eventually prompted the United States to abandon its long-standing, self-imposed prohibition on overseas foreign entanglements. Distrust of financial elites as single-mindedly pursuing their own profits at the expense of the public good, irresponsibility that many Americans felt had caused the Great Depression, accounted for the popularity of this view. Economist John Maurice Clark's *The Cost of the World War to the American People*, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, reflected this popular concern with the ongoing financial burdens of a war estimated to have cost \$32 billion.<sup>33</sup> The charge that the financial and business elite had callously sacrificed American youth to boost their own profits gained scholarly credence from works such as Helmut C. Engelbrecht and Frank C. Hanighen's *The Merchants of Death: A Study of the International Armament Industry*.<sup>34</sup> When Britain and France defaulted on war loans owed to the U.S. government in the 1930s, a consensus developed that the nation had been duped into fighting and financing a meaningless war that now threatened to bankrupt the country. In the end, the Nye Committee only proved that munitions dealers quickly took advantage of the new markets that the outbreak of war created. But this conspiracy theory nonetheless proved satisfying during a time when many Americans worried about the disproportionate influence the rich exerted over the national economy.

The merchants-of-death argument resonated powerfully enough to spur Congress to adopt a series of neutrality laws from 1935 to 1939 that sought to limit American economic ties to belligerent nations as war clouds gathered once again in Europe. These laws restricted arms sales, loans, and transport of goods with nations at war, encapsulating the widespread view that actions by financial elites had forced the nation to fight an unpopular war that ultimately harmed the nation. Even after Adolf Hitler began his wars of conquest throughout Western Europe, the merchant-of-death argument held sway and slowed the sending of aid to Great Britain. Before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into the war in 1941, FDR had to work around the edges of the politically popular neutrality laws through programs like lend-lease, which claimed that the United States was "lending" rather than "selling" arms to Great Britain.

The last overt influence of the war on American political culture came when FDR and his advisors tried to "learn lessons" from Wilson's bungled management of the peace process. After World War I, the United States rejected the controversial Versailles peace treaty and refused to join the

League of Nations. To develop a strong relationship with the Senate (the body that ratifies treaties), Roosevelt chose Missouri senator Harry S. Truman as his running mate in 1944 and enlisted early support from prominent Republicans for his plans. The popular view that America's interwar isolationism had emboldened imperial militarism worldwide also convinced Americans that the United States needed to take a leading role in creating and maintaining the United Nations.

### Beginning and Ending the War

Political and diplomatic historians have focused on two essential questions: Why did the United States enter World War I, and why, having won the war, did the United States lose the peace? Over the decades, historians have disagreed over whether financial ties to the Allies, concerns about German aggression, or a desire to shape the peace ultimately prompted President Woodrow Wilson to abandon neutrality for belligerency. Historians have also continually debated how the new vision of American world leadership articulated by Wilson through his peace platform shaped the "American Century."

In assessing the causes of the war, the economic argument dominated in the 1920s and 1930s. Leading historians in the 1930s rejected the conspiratorial overtones of the merchant-of-death theorists but nonetheless linked the decision for war to economics. In their view, Wilson's desire to protect the overall health of the U.S. economy gradually eroded his commitment to neutrality. Certain that economics directly affected political decisions, historians Charles Beard, Clinton Grattan, and Charles Tansill noted that the entire American economy benefited from the increase in trade with the Allied nations.<sup>35</sup> This economic dependence made it difficult, if not impossible, for Wilson to risk a rupture with Britain over its blockade policies or accept Germany's attempt to curtail war-related trade with a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. Rather than blaming special interests for pushing the nation into war, this perspective tended to sympathize with the difficult choices facing Wilson. By 1917, "the alternative policy of strict adherence to its earlier standards of neutrality meant economic depression on a national scale," Paul Birdsall argued.<sup>36</sup>

In subsequent decades, the economic argument continued to persuade some, albeit in more nuanced form. Ross Gregory, in *The Origins of American Intervention in the First World War*, noted that disproportionate trading and lending to the Allies increasingly tied American economic prosperity to an Allied victory, while negative publicity surrounding the *Lusitania* sinking and Zimmermann Telegram hardened American views against

Germany.<sup>37</sup> More recently, Benjamin O. Fordham argued for a reconsideration of economic causes to explain American entry into World War I by disaggregating national economic figures to reveal the correlation between regions that benefited from the wartime export boom and voting patterns by their congressional representatives.<sup>38</sup>

In the wake of World War II and at the height of the Cold War, the idea that the United States went to war primarily to protect its economic interests fell out of favor. The muting of class conflict in the booming post-World War II economy and America's ideological and strategic battle with the Soviet Union influenced the scholarly debate. Throughout the rest of the twentieth century historians placed increased emphasis on Wilson's ideological desire to spread democratic values and how German aggression threatened national security.

Two influential Wilson biographers, John Milton Cooper Jr. and Lloyd E. Ambrosius, agreed that Wilson's desire to spread American-style democracy and capitalism was the catalyst that drew the United States into war.<sup>39</sup> Others like Arthur Link argued that the resumption of aggressive unrestricted submarine warfare gave Wilson no choice but to enter the war.<sup>40</sup> "The weakness of Link's argument is that it accepts too easily Wilson's contention that there was no other way to protect American interests than to go to war," Kendrick Clements countered.<sup>41</sup> Clements believed that Wilson painted himself into a corner by not thinking through the potential ramifications of taking a hard line with Germany in 1915 and 1916 concerning unrestricted submarine warfare. He concluded that the administration's inexperience with foreign policy reflected the nation's growing pains as it sought to assert itself as a world power, resulting in an unnecessary war.

Some national-security-based arguments have focused on the Zimmermann Telegram as the *deus ex machina* that brought the United States into the war.<sup>42</sup> Barbara Tuchman and Frederick Katz viewed the telegram as the culmination of a long, secretive German campaign to incite a border war between the United States and Mexico.<sup>43</sup> Taking advantage of newly released German records, Thomas Boghardt reevaluates the telegram as a spontaneous German decision, unconnected to any coordinated strategic plan.<sup>44</sup> The German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare, Boghardt concludes, proved more influential than the telegram in bringing about a U.S. declaration of war.

Ross A. Kennedy emphasizes that as the European war spread throughout the globe, especially to the high seas, Wilson came to believe that the physical barriers of two oceans were no longer enough to protect the United States. By the time he asked Congress to declare war, Wilson thought that "if Germany won the war, power politics would persist,

and America would continue to be ensnared in its destructive dynamics,” Kennedy writes.<sup>45</sup> In Kennedy’s interpretation, Wilson’s desire to rebuild the international political system to safeguard American sovereignty mattered more than spreading democracy or protecting the economy when it came to declaring war.

More recently, scholars have turned the spotlight away from Wilson to better gauge Americans’ reactions to the European war. John Branden Little chides historians for overlooking the massive American humanitarian relief effort, totaling more than \$6 billion (\$120 billion in 2009 dollars), undertaken to alleviate civilian suffering in Europe, the Soviet Union, and the Near East between 1914 and 1924.<sup>46</sup> According to Little, through their donations of money, goods, and time, Americans developed faith that they could positively impact the direction of world affairs and therefore had their own reasons for embracing Wilson’s broader war goals. Julia F. Irwin’s *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation’s Humanitarian Awakening* further underscores how voluntary humanitarian work during World War I created the twentieth-century belief that foreign aid benefited both the world and the United States.<sup>47</sup> By contrast, Michael S. Neiberg believes that most Americans shared Wilson’s concerns about the nation’s growing vulnerability to German expansionism by April 1917, and therefore fought primarily to protect America’s borders rather than to advance Wilson’s broader peace scheme. Neiberg sees a consensus for war taking shape. Michael Kazin, however, believes that Wilson’s hesitancy reflected the strength of the peace movement, whose members continued to doubt the wisdom of war even after the United States entered the conflict.<sup>48</sup>

The nature of Wilson’s peace platform, especially its long-term influence, has generated scholarly debate as well. “Wilsonianism should be seen not as a transient phenomenon, a reflection of some abstract idealism, but a potent definer of contemporary history” because it established the ideological framework motivating the United States to become a global power, Akira Iriye wrote in 1993.<sup>49</sup> Cooper Jr. saw Wilson establishing a framework of fundamentally sound democratic values (self-determination, open trade, and collective security) that guided future foreign policy. Ambrosius, among others, lamented the birth of a destructive messianic impulse that would justify countless, and often unnecessary, American interventions throughout the world in the twentieth century.<sup>50</sup>

Scholars have also differed over whether the president was idealistic or pragmatic in pursuing his peace proposals. In *Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement*, Wilson’s press secretary Ray Stannard Baker presented Wilson as an idealist whose Progressive reformer background and Christian faith encouraged him to foster a new international role for the United States,



helping peoples elsewhere obtain the right to self-government.<sup>51</sup> This idealistic interpretation of Wilson's principles and motivations held sway, even among the "realist" school of thought that criticized the president as too inexperienced to enact this vision.

"Realist" studies written in the shadow of World War II by Walter Lippmann (*U.S. War Aims*, 1944) and George F. Kennan censored Wilson for failing to understand the mechanics of international politics and the value of balance of power alliances to stop aggressive dictators.<sup>52</sup> Arthur Link challenged this depiction of Wilson as an unrealistic idealist animated by his Christian faith and scholarly study of American government. Wilson's notion "that an enduring peace could come only through a 'peace without victory,' a 'peace between equals,'" was more realistic than "the European leaders who thought that they could win decisive victories on the battlefields and on or under the seas, and who thought that they could impose their nations' wills upon other great peoples," Link argued.<sup>53</sup> At the height of the Cold War, Arno J. Mayer added a new dimension to the idealist/realist debate by highlighting Wilson's faith in capitalism.<sup>54</sup> Mayer argued that Wilson's Fourteen Points had a pragmatic purpose: to stop the momentum gathering in favor of communism as the political system of the future. Mayer, and other revisionist accounts in the 1960s, portrayed Wilson as successfully positioning the United States to emerge as a global economic hegemon in the twentieth century.<sup>55</sup>

Other historians took on the realists' characterization of Wilson as an inept diplomat. David F. Trask concluded that Wilson appropriately focused diplomatic discussions in 1917 on coordinating the Allied war effort rather than insisting on Allied support for his peace proposals as a condition for U.S. aid.<sup>56</sup> Maintaining American independence of action by fighting as an Associate Power, sending a large army overseas, and resisting pressures to amalgamate American armed forces into the British and French armies were all decisions that Wilson made with an eye on maximizing his influence over the eventual peace conference, according to David M. Esposito.<sup>57</sup> John Thompson noted that Wilson was savvy enough to prepare for the anticipated diplomatic showdown with the Allies at the peace conference by creating The Inquiry, whose multiple teams of specialists developed position papers for all the global trouble spots likely to require attention during the treaty negotiations.<sup>58</sup>

Once containing communism waned as the central issue dominating U.S. foreign policy, another major shift in the debate over Wilson's diplomatic acumen occurred. Thomas J. Knock and Ross A. Kennedy saw Wilson taking national security issues and domestic politics into account in crafting his peace plan.<sup>59</sup> In their view, Wilson linked America's national security to promoting friendly, stable, constitutional governments

overseas and then had to negotiate domestic support for his ideas among competing liberal, Progressive factions that disagreed over how to secure these goals. John Thompson furthered this view of Wilson as an agile politician by arguing that prosecuting the war caused Wilson to modify his overall peace plan as his views of Germany changed.

Erez Manela shifted the debate over Wilson's legacy away from American shores altogether. Instead, Manela focused on how colonized peoples around the world responded to Wilsonian ideals. Those leading postwar uprisings in Egypt, India, China, and Korea interpreted Wilson's words as a support for anticolonial independence movements, a meaning than Wilson never intended. Manela highlights the ways that Wilson tried, and failed, to contain the global appeal of his ideas by embracing the mandate system and downplaying use of the term "self-determination."

Debates over the lasting impact of Wilsonianism continued into the twenty-first century. Was the 2003 American invasion of Iraq a logical consequence or perversion of Wilsonianism?<sup>60</sup> Is American security linked to establishing and defending friendly, stable, constitutional governments overseas? Scholars' ongoing interest in debating these questions demonstrates the continued relevance of Wilsonian internationalism.

Regardless of what Wilson thought or intended, he ultimately failed to shepherd the Versailles peace treaty through the ratification process. Explaining this turn of events has fascinated generations of historians. After the Senate rejected the treaty, Senator Gilbert M. Hitchcock (Democratic minority leader) argued that Wilson's 1919 stroke had impaired his political acumen. Edward Weinstein, Arthur Link, and John M. Cooper Jr. subsequently embraced the theory that Wilson's illness prevented him from compromising to secure ratification of the treaty.<sup>61</sup> Thomas Bailey, the first historian to work with records of the peace proceedings, along with the papers of Wilson's presidency, expressed mixed feelings about this interpretation. Bailey instead faulted Wilson for caving into Allied demands to exclude Germany from the peace process and for signing onto an unpopular treaty that punished Germany severely. Wilson compounded these mistakes by adopting a self-righteous refusal to compromise with Senate Republicans to ensure the treaty's ratification.<sup>62</sup>

Arno J. Mayer and N. Gordon Levin Jr. offered global-political explanations for the treaty's failure, shifting the emphasis from Wilson's political skills, psychological makeup, and health. Arguing from a Marxist framework, they shared the view expressed earlier by Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Lenin that Wilson primarily wanted to use the peace proceedings to build an international coalition to halt the spread of communism in war-torn Europe. He thus accepted Allied demands as the price he had to pay to create this unified anticommunist front.<sup>63</sup> Arthur Link

and Arthur Walworth maintained that Wilson's compromises on the Versailles treaty reflected the political strength that Wilson's political adversaries (both overseas and at home) wielded.<sup>64</sup> To Klaus Schwabe, in *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking, 1918–1919*, Wilson's key mistake was failing to explain adequately to the American public why geopolitical realities caused him to support the controversial reparations treaty clause.<sup>65</sup>

The figure of Woodrow Wilson thus dominates the scholarly debate over why America entered the war, how the nation defined its war goals, and why the Senate refused to ratify the Versailles peace treaty. These questions have remained the nearly exclusive domain of political and diplomatic historians. The histories of how average Americans affected these governmental and diplomatic decisions have yet to be written.

## The Home Front

The home-front experience has drawn attention from economic, political, and, more recently, social historians who seek to understand how the United States mobilized, and the subsequent consequences for the economy, regulatory reform movements, and civil liberties. Examining how the government utilized its new wartime powers provides a common thread to home-front studies. Scholarly interpretations also reflect the ongoing debate within American society over what role the federal government should play in managing the economy and safeguarding civil liberties.

Economic historians have evaluated the efficacy of wartime economic mobilization and assessed its legacy. In the immediate postwar period, the firsthand accounts of wartime administrators tended to reinforce the comforting narrative of Americans pulling together voluntarily to win the war, downplaying problems of war profiteering or business intransigence.<sup>66</sup> Studies in the 1940s and 1950s repeated this narrative of initial chaos giving way to eventual success, while acknowledging the increased influence of businessmen in governmental affairs. These conclusions mirrored generally accepted truths about how the United States fought and won World War II, while simultaneously recognizing growing concerns over the emergence of the Cold War–era military-industrial complex.

Scholars writing in the sixties offered a dramatically different characterization of wartime economic mobilization. New Left historians writing in the Vietnam era focused more fully on what they saw as the co-option of the war effort by business elites who wanted to derail the momentum of prewar regulatory reform movements. Gabriel Kolko, James Weinstein, and Melvyn Urofsky portrayed business as emerging triumphant from

the war, with the government now a willing partner advancing their interests.<sup>67</sup> David Kennedy, author of the widely read *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*, agreed that the war essentially re-empowered conservative and reactionary elements, preventing the decade-long Progressive reform movement from making any further regulatory gains.<sup>68</sup> William Leuchtenburg, however, urged historians to take a longer view in assessing the war's legacy.<sup>69</sup> Leuchtenburg saw continuity between the methods employed by wartime economic mobilization agencies and early New Deal approaches to stabilizing wages and prices during the Depression. Ellis Hawley continued this line of analysis, arguing that the cooperative wartime relationship between business and the federal government created a permanent role for the liberal state in the American economy.<sup>70</sup>

The decision to rely on conscription to raise a mass army also granted new powers to the state. In *To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America*, John Whiteclay Chambers II argued that federal management of the selective service system contributed to the twentieth-century trend of transferring power from the local and state level to the national government.<sup>71</sup> Christopher Capozzola's *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* employed Kennedy's concept of "coercive voluntarism" to describe the phenomenon of local civic groups policing their communities to ensure 100 percent "voluntary" compliance with wartime edicts.<sup>72</sup> Capozzola believes that the increased willingness of localities to cede authority to the federal government resulted in a new national security state with vast investigative and policing powers.

These historians see World War I as a key transitional moment in state-building within the United States. Robert Cuff, however, examined "the gap between the rhetoric and reality" and concluded that administrators in charge of wartime economic agencies tended to exaggerate their influence in managing the wartime economy.<sup>73</sup> He drew a portrait of complex economic relationships between individual industries and government officials that defied easy categorization. Some were harmonious, others contentious, and in his view, all were temporary, casting doubt on the notion that the war represented a critical turning point in capitalist-state relations. Others carried Cuff's interpretative thread forward by examining the ideological objections among high-level federal administrators to monopolistic business practices, tensions between the civilian-led War Industries Board and the War Department's procurement bureaus, and the government takeover of the railroads during the war.<sup>74</sup> These studies suggest that the semiautonomous power wielded by individuals and agencies within the Wilson administration resulted in an array of priorities and strategies, preventing any one single wartime relationship with business from taking root. These scholars offered a more

nuanced view of government-business relations during the war years than New Left historians, but all agreed on the postwar resurgence of business in American politics.

More recent scholarship shifts the moment when the demands and desires of business prevailed from the period of mobilization to demobilization. Joseph McCartin and Robert H. Zieger analyzed the process of economic mobilization from the perspective of labor unions.<sup>75</sup> They agreed that federal agencies abetted the growth of moderate labor unions despite objections from business, prefiguring the labor-friendly policies of the 1930s New Deal. Unsurprisingly studies focusing on the fate of radical labor groups, who often opposed the war, told a dramatically different story of state suppression and harassment.<sup>76</sup> More recently, Carl R. Weinberg's *Labor, Loyalty, and Rebellion: Southwestern Illinois Coal Miners and World War I* challenged the notion that labor benefited from the war by focusing on how hyper-patriotism bred divisiveness within the ranks of labor unions.<sup>77</sup> The resulting disunity and distrust hampered efforts to mount effective strikes in 1919, Weinberg maintains.

Egregious violations of Americans' civil liberties occurred during World War I. The government gained significant power to limit free expression when the 1917 Espionage Act made interference with the draft illegal and gave the postmaster general the right to withhold materials deemed treasonous from the mail. The 1918 Sedition Act enlarged these prohibitions by outlawing abusive language about the government. Paul L. Murphy linked the arrests of dissidents and subsequent court challenges by socialists, radicals, and pacifists to the birth of a new postwar political movement dedicated to protecting civil liberties. Geoffrey Stone points out that court challenges forced the Supreme Court to define the right to free speech for the first time and concludes that Americans generally accepted the argument that civil liberties were a luxury the nation could not afford in wartime.<sup>78</sup>

Theodore Kornweibel's books tracing the federal surveillance of black civil rights organizations during and after the war, "*Seeing Red*": *Federal Campaigns against Black Militancy, 1919–1925* and *Investigate Everything: Federal Efforts to Compel Black Loyalty during World War I*, reveal the government's determination to use the war as an opportunity to cripple the civil rights movement.<sup>79</sup> The Justice Department justified this suppression by claiming that civil rights organizations were infested with German spies trying to incite racial violence. German communities came under attack as the federal government demanded that German immigrants register with the police as enemy aliens, states passed laws banning the teaching of German, symphonies stopped playing German music, and people changed their names to avoid mob attacks. Vigilante

violence against Germans or German Americans suspected as disloyal became a mainstay of wartime America. As a result, Frederick Luebke argues in *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I*, people of German ancestry rushed to demonstrate their “Americanness” by assimilating as completely as possible.<sup>80</sup> Almost overnight, the nation’s largest and most influential immigrant culture disappeared and was never resurrected.

Jeannette Keith’s study of draft resistance throughout the rural South offers a counternarrative that demonstrates the possibility for some human agency in this police state environment. At a time when openly criticizing governmental policy became practically impossible, the surprise, she suggests, was not that the new selective service system operated with a minimum of protest but rather that there was any successful draft dodging at all.<sup>81</sup> As conscientious objectors discovered, outright evasion often worked better than trying to gain an official exemption based on religious or pacifist beliefs.

## Commanders, Strategy, and Operations

General John J. Pershing, the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), took the lead in establishing one major interpretative school of thought among military historians with his two-volume autobiography, *My Experiences in the World War*.<sup>82</sup> This memoir championed Pershing’s tenacity in overcoming a series of obstacles, including Allied demands that the Americans amalgamate their troops into preexisting French and British armies. After a few trials by fire, the independent American army evolved into a first-rate fighting force that played a critical role in winning the war. In his autobiography, Pershing ignored the contributions of his chief of staff Peyton March, who established a second major interpretative thread by severely criticizing Pershing’s command in his memoir, *The Nation at War*.<sup>83</sup>

Harvey A. DeWeerd, in *President Wilson Fights His War: World War I and the American Intervention*, and Edward Coffman, in *The War to End All Wars: The American Military Experience in World War I*, added some qualifications to Pershing’s tale of glowing success but overall saw the AEF as eventually overcoming its “growing pains” to fight successfully on the Western Front.<sup>84</sup> In *Learning Lessons in the American Expeditionary Forces*, Kenneth Hamburger focused on how the AEF studied its mistakes and corrected them in time to win the war.<sup>85</sup> Subsequent scholarly biographies of Pershing and his commanders generally depicted Pershing as a wartime commander who chose his staff well, did not shy away from making

difficult decisions, and successfully created the organizational structure needed to fight a modern, industrial war.<sup>86</sup>

In the 1980s, a revisionist school went on the offensive and questioned the accuracy of the Pershing narrative. They portrayed the high U.S. casualty rate as avoidable rather than a necessary part of the army's growing pains. James W. Rainey, Timothy K. Nenninger, and Paul Braim characterized the AEF as a poorly trained, led, supplied, and deployed force whose slow improvements over time did not excuse the significant mistakes made by AEF commanders.<sup>87</sup> Rainey was perhaps the most severe critic, attacking AEF doctrine, training, and combat performance. "In having to grope its way to victory, the AEF succeeded not because of imaginative operations and tactics nor because of qualitative superiority in open warfare, but rather by smothering German machine guns with American flesh," Rainey wrote.<sup>88</sup> Revisionist scholars took particular issue with Pershing's insistence on undertaking the pre-planned attack in September 1918 on the Saint-Mihiel salient, even after Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the supreme commander of the Allied Forces, made it clear that the Americans would have to participate in a coordinated Allied attack two weeks later. The AEF consequently began the Meuse-Argonne offensive with its best divisions recovering in the rear and the logistical network in disarray.

Another body of work challenged the tendency to judge American success by how well Pershing realized his goal of creating an independent army. David Trask, Robert Bruce, and Mitchell Yockelson instead identified American participation in coalition warfare as the real reason the Allies prevailed.<sup>89</sup> Michael S. Neiberg makes an equally strong case for a coalition, rather than American, victory in the first monograph-length study of the Second Battle of the Marne, a pivotal battle and the only one where British, French, and American forces fought together during the entire war.<sup>90</sup>

Other historians have analyzed organizational structures and modes of command, not just personalities, to examine American combat effectiveness. Following in the footsteps of Tim Travers, who identified a "laissez-faire" system of command within British commander Douglas Haig's headquarters that made Haig resistant to change, Nenninger concluded that "most of the problems of American command in World War I concerned execution."<sup>91</sup> Nenninger argued that battlefield conditions hampered the flow of information between the front lines and headquarters, while poor map-reading skills prevented unit commanders from enacting carefully designed battle plans. Brian Neumann analyzed how ambiguity over the chain of authority caused nearly nonstop friction between the newly created, Washington-based, General Staff and Pershing's overseas

AEF headquarters. Neumann faulted Wilson and Secretary of War Newton D. Baker for not exercising civilian control over the military to clarify the lines of authority.<sup>92</sup>

Redressing the surprising lack of scholarly interest in American operational history, Mark E. Grotelueschen and Edward G. Lengel focused on the learning curve underway within divisions and companies directly involved in the fighting.<sup>93</sup> Their work followed the example set by historians who have studied the British Expeditionary Force. Travers, Robin Prior, Trevor Wilson, and Gary Sheffield argued that British field commanders had developed effective methods of attack by 1918.<sup>94</sup> Grotelueschen's *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I* and Lengel's *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918* struck a middle ground between the Pershing narrative and revisionist accounts.<sup>95</sup> In their view, the most substantial and effective learning occurred from the bottom up. Pershing's training doctrine emphasized "open warfare," a set of ideas that privileged infantry manpower, the rifle and bayonet, simple attack plans, and maximizing maneuver with the hope of making a decisive breakthrough. Through coalition warfare and their own combat experience, Americans developed a better appreciation for "trench warfare," which was not strictly defensive as they originally thought, but instead integrated cutting-edge technology, employed detailed attack plans, maximized firepower, and relied on methodical attacks to achieve smaller, incremental gains. "Despite Pershing's hopes of driving the Germans out of their trenches and defeating them in 'open warfare' with 'self-reliant infantry,'" Groteleuschen writes, the men fighting the war "increasingly saw machines, and especially those technologies that maximized firepower, rather than flesh, as the proper means of waging war in the modern era."<sup>96</sup>

The most controversial issue surrounding the performance of the American military involves deciding whether the United States deserves all, some, or none of the credit for winning the war. John Mosier and Geoffrey Wawro carried into the present-day Pershing's claim that the Americans were responsible for the Allies' decisive win.<sup>97</sup> On the other side of the pendulum, World War I historians Gary Sheffield, Robin Prior, Trevor Wilson, and Tim Travers (whose works are cited above) viewed the American military contribution as negligible. Most American scholars of the AEF are more circumspect than Mosier, but not quite ready to grant the Allies exclusive credit for the ultimate victory. The consensus view contends that the Americans most certainly prevented the Allies from losing the war. Mainstream accounts emphasize the infusion of American troops that helped stem the 1918 German spring offensives and fueled the overall Allied counterattack and advance, German demoralization when faced with the prospect of millions more Americans arriving in 1919, the



effectiveness of the convoy system, and the importance of ongoing American financial support as critical contributions that the United States and its armed forces made to the Allied victory.

### The Doughboys' War

It took until 1963 for a soldier's memoir to become a bestseller. In *The Doughboys*, Laurence Stallings, a Marine who lost a leg in the Battle of Belleau Wood and later became a famous playwright, peppered his narrative with a nostalgic collection of vignettes that took stock of the hardships encountered by brave American fighting men on the road to victory.<sup>98</sup> Stallings essentially told the traditional Pershing story of tribulation ending with success through the eyes of average soldiers rather than military commanders.

The pathbreaking book by literary critic Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, showed social and cultural historians how they could make the war their own.<sup>99</sup> Fussell took readers on a tour of the trenches, entering the fighting men's secret world of combat, rituals, myths, superstitions, and rumors. The war, Fussell asserted, ushered in a new way of understanding the world as Europeans abandoned romanticism and embraced irony. Fussell relied heavily on writings from famous British literary figures who served along the Western Front to support his conclusions, leading to accusations that he had extrapolated vast cultural trends from a small sampling of sources. Despite his shortcomings as an historian, Fussell revolutionized World War I studies by demonstrating the validity of using a cultural and social history approach to understand the fighting man's experience.<sup>100</sup>

American social and cultural historians have subsequently offered new insights into the doughboy experience. Mark Meigs, in *Optimism at Armageddon: Voices of American Participants in the First World War*, juxtaposed the "official" culture created in top echelons with the "unofficial" cultural practices initiated by troops to trace the evolution of a military mass culture during the war.<sup>101</sup> In *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America*, I examined the internal strife over training, combat, discipline, race relations, and demobilization and argued that civilian soldiers exerted tremendous power in shaping the policies and behavior of the wartime military.<sup>102</sup> Richard Schweitzer and Jonathan Ebel have examined religiosity in the trenches.<sup>103</sup>

Foreign-born and second-generation Americans formed a significant proportion of the wartime force, but to date these experiences have received limited scholarly attention. Christopher Sterba's *Good Americans*:

*Italian and Jewish Immigrants during the First World War* analyzed how Jewish and Italian soldiers imbued their military service with meanings that strengthened their distinct ethnic identities while also offering new opportunities to demonstrate their “Americanness.”<sup>104</sup> Historians of the Mexican American experience have also examined how wartime mobilization accelerated assimilation in the Southwest, undertaking labor-intensive research to uncover the “hidden history” of Spanish-speaking soldiers in the official records.<sup>105</sup> Richard Slotkin interwove the experiences of foreign-born soldiers and African Americans to examine the war’s place in America’s ongoing struggle to create a multicultural and multiracial democracy.<sup>106</sup>

Progressive reformers more interested in social than economic reform found a ready laboratory in the wartime military. In *Americans All! Foreign-Born Soldiers in World War I*, Nancy Gentile Ford argues against the dominant idea that Progressivism fell on hard times during the war.<sup>107</sup> Ford examined the culturally sensitive training and recreational programs for foreign-born soldiers (20 percent of the total force) developed by a cadre of Progressive settlement house workers, reform-minded army officers, and civilian ethnic leaders. Similarly, Beth Linker traces how a Progressive health ethos that put a premium on rehabilitating wounded soldiers into productive citizens and workers shaped military rehabilitation programs.<sup>108</sup> These publications demonstrate that by working for wartime effort, Progressive reformers tried to advance their broader goals of enlarging state power through expertly designed and administered public policies.

Overall, social and cultural studies of the American fighting man have not kept pace with the proliferation of studies on combat, morale, and war culture for European soldiers. Social historians have tended to shy away from studying the military experience, not just of World War I but of all wars. The recent proliferation of studies devoted to the African American soldier experience offers one important exception, an area where the social history approach is thriving.

### **Struggles for Social Justice: African Americans and Women**

Works devoted to African Americans and women tend to examine how participation in the war effort ignited or transformed struggles for social justice. The rhetorical link between citizenship and wartime service created openings for blacks and women to demand equitable treatment. Nonetheless, ingrained racial and gender hierarchies remained remarkably resilient in the face of war-generated social upheaval. Scholarly

works on African Americans and women also underscore that routine violence was a fact of life for civilians and soldiers alike.

For years, Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri's *The Unknown Soldiers: African-American Soldiers in World War I* (1974; reprint 1996) served as the stand-alone study of African American soldiers.<sup>109</sup> Heavily influenced by academic currents in the 1970s critical of the white-male-dominated narrative of American history, the book fit into a larger scholarly drive to "rediscover" the diversity of experiences that collectively made up the nation's historical past. The idea that one book would suffice to interpret this experience, however, also revealed the separate scholarly agendas of military and African American historians throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The former had yet to embrace social history, while the latter remained largely uninterested in the topic of military service.

In what is now a crowded field, recent studies of African American soldiers interpret the war as a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement. Scholars attribute this shift to the war's heightened democratic rhetoric, the emergence of more militant civil rights leaders, worsening racial violence, and black soldiers' experiences in France. *Harlem Rattlers and the Great War: The Undaunted 369th Regiment and the African American Quest for Equality*, a magisterial work by Jeffrey T. Sammons and John H. Morrow Jr., examines the war's most famous African American unit through the lens of local, national, and international politics to reveal just how many hurdles stood in the way of its eventual success.<sup>110</sup> Chad L. Williams provides the most extensive investigation to date of postwar veteran political activism within the African American community, albeit through often short-lived veterans' movements.<sup>111</sup> Adrienne Lentz-Smith primarily examines the experience of noncombatants, exploring how their daily encounters with unrelenting racism gave birth to a new political consciousness.<sup>112</sup> The resulting activism, not all of it successful, laid the groundwork for how activists would respond to the next world war. Collectively, these works demonstrate how wartime mobilization gave African Americans the opportunity and motivation to experiment with new methods and strategies for challenging white supremacy. Interestingly, these works also rely heavily on French archival material, a relatively new development in studies of the American war experience.

The 1920 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granting women the right to vote occupies a central place in the political historical narrative of equal rights.<sup>113</sup> Most histories devoted to the suffrage movement credit female mobilization during World War I as an important, but not decisive, factor in securing women the right to

vote. More recently, historians have begun to consider other aspects of American women's wartime experiences.

One strand of inquiry investigates how the wartime mobilization of women fits into the history of working women. Susan Zeiger analyzes the experiences of the 16,500 working women who donned uniforms for the AEF and concludes that little changed.<sup>114</sup> The government mobilized working women out of necessity but tried to avoid any redefinition of societal gender roles by placing these women under male supervision. Lynn Dumenil's *The Second Line of Defense: American Women and World War I* argues that the American proclivity to forget—this time about how vital women's labor (both paid and voluntary) was to winning the war—meant that achieving “liberation through war work” remained little more than wishful thinking.<sup>115</sup> Another line of inquiry examines the leadership roles that middle-class women, who had the leisure time to belong to an array of social clubs, assumed as grassroots organizers who effectively mobilized white and black communities across the nation.<sup>116</sup> Kimberly Jensen, by contrast, explores how violence against women was accepted as a legitimate method of controlling unruly women (suffragists and striking workers) and ignored when U.S. soldiers assaulted female nurses and military workers.<sup>117</sup> Recovering this history of violence against women, Jensen sees the fight for full-fledged citizenship as a struggle to protect the female body, not just a campaign to acquire the right to vote.

## Conclusion

Over the last hundred years, scholars have debated multiple aspects of the war experience, and the centennial generated increased interest and attention in World War I. Nonetheless, the number of dedicated World War I historians remains quite small within the United States. Many of the historians included here would be surprised to see themselves identified as World War I historians. Instead, they position their scholarship within the historiographical debates of subfields such as labor-capital relations, domestic reform movements, women's history, African American history, and civil liberties. After writing their World War I-related books, many go on to publish books on other topics of greater appeal within their subfields. World War I does not hold their interest for very long. The challenge for scholars in the twenty-first century thus remains what it has been since 1945: finding a way to weave the war indelibly into the national historical narrative. Completing the proposed World War I Memorial in Washington, DC, would be a good start.

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## Notes

1. This chapter is a revised version of a previously published article: Jennifer D. Keene, "Remembering the 'Forgotten War': American Historiography on World War I," in *Historian* 78 (Fall 2016): 439–68.
2. Just one example of "lessons-from-the-past" scholar commentary occurred when the United States marked the one hundredth anniversary of the Fourteen Points. See, for instance, Stewart Patrick, "Trump and Wilson's Ghost: The Fourteen Points turn 100 Years," *The Hill*, 8 January 2018, <http://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/367837-trump-and-wilsons-ghost-the-fourteen-points-turn-100-years>; Daniel Fried, "100 Years Later, Wilson's Fourteen Points Deserve Another Look," *Atlantic Council*, 1 January 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/100-years-later-wilson-s-fourteen-points-deserve-another-look>; Anthony Gaughan, "Donald Trump and the Ghost of Woodrow Wilson," *Faculty Lounge*, 10 March 2018, <http://www.thefacultyounge.org/2018/03/donald-trump-and-the-ghost-of-woodrow-wilson.html>.
3. "A Guide to World War I Materials," Library of Congress, 1 April 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/wwi/wwi.html>; Robert Cozzolino, Anne Classen Knutson, and David M. Lubin, eds., *World War I and American Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).
4. The United States World War One Centennial Commission website included advice on researching ancestors and created a "stories of service" web page where the public could upload stories of family members: <https://www.worldwar1centennial.org/com-memorate/family-ties/stories-of-service.html>.
5. Andrew J. Huebner, *Love and Death in the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
6. The Library of America won this funding for local events that utilized its anthology; A. Scott Berg, ed., *World War I and America: Told By the Americans Who Lived It* (New York: Library of America, 2017).
7. World War I Memorial Inventory Project, <http://ww1project.org>.
8. Ross J. Wilson, *New York and the First World War: Shaping an American City* (London: Routledge, 2016).
9. Jay M. Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
10. In 2003 Richard Rubin had begun interviewing the few surviving World War I veter-

- ans, aged 101 to 113, to write *The Last of the Doughboys: The Forgotten Generation and Their Forgotten World War* (2013). These men, all since deceased, had a chance to tell their stories before they died.
11. Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929); John Dos Passos, *Three Soldiers* (New York: Doran, 1921); F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1920); F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 1925).
  12. Kelly Andrew, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (London: Tauris 1998); Stanley Kubrick/Humphrey Cobb, *Paths of Glory* (2010).
  13. Willa Cather, *One of Ours* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922); Edith Wharton, *A Son at the Front* (New York: Scribner, 1923); Howard Hawks, *Sergeant York* (1941).
  14. Stanley Cooperman, *World War I and the American Novel* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins Press, 1967); Keith Gandal, *The Gun and the Pen: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and the Fiction of Mobilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
  15. Keith Gandal, *War Isn't the Only Hell: A New Reading of World War I American Literature* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2018).
  16. *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe* has been republished several times, most recently in 2016. Renewed interest in visiting the battlefields during the centennial years spurred the creation of updated travel guides, rendered necessary by modern improvements to roads and villages. Richard Rubin, *Back Over There: One American Time-Traveler, 100 Years since the Great War, 500 Miles of Battle-Scarred French Countryside, and Too Many Trenches, Shells, Legends, and Ghosts to Count* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017).
  17. John Lewis Barkley, *Scarlet Fields: The Combat Memoir of a World War I Medal of Honor Hero*, ed. Steven Trout (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2012), 2–3.
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