The United States in the Great War: A Historiography

The subject of America's participation in World War I has generated a body of literature far too extensive for comprehensive treatment in an essay. This piece is particularly intended to provide some guidelines to English-language scholarship less likely to be familiar to non-specialist readers. It correspondingly emphasizes works published recently, preferably in the last twenty-five years. It focuses on monographs at the expense of general histories with some discussion of the war. And it avoids as far as possible citing familiar autobiographies and memoirs.

General Works


Policy and Diplomacy
The diplomacy of America's entry into the war is well covered by the still standard works by Link about Wilson and Ernest May's *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917* (1954), both of which affirm the strategic and moral desirability of United States participation. Writing in the 1970s, John Coogan, in *The End of Neutrality* (1981), and Patrick Devlin, in *Too Proud to Fight* (1974), were less certain. In *Heir to Empire* (1969), Carl Parrini links military power and economic aggrandizement in a global
context. Thomas Knock’s *To End All Wars* (1992) takes a positive view of Wilson’s search for a “new world order,” and Robert H. Ferrell’s *Woodrow Wilson and WWI, 1917-1921* (1985), the best recent analysis of Wilson as war leader and peacemaker, stresses the President’s commitment to ending what he considered militarism run mad. The essay cowritten by Link and Chambers in *The United States Military under the Constitution of the United States* (1991), edited by Richard H. Kohn, is excellent on Wilson as commander-in-chief. The generally dominant position of the executive branch is also suggested by the title of Seward Livermore’s volume on the wartime Congress: *Politics Is Adjourned* (1966).


**Domestic Mobilization**


An American people exhaled for years to be neutral in “thought, word, and deed” were not automatically brought to the trenches. Walton Rawls’s *Wake Up, America!* *World War I and the American Poster* (1988) deals with the new approaches of poster propaganda. John Thompson covers the mobilization of Progressive intellectuals in *Reformers and War: Progressive Publicists and the First World War* (1987); George T. Blakely does the same for the historians in *Historians on the Homefront* (1970). George Creel’s personal account, *How We Advertised America* (1920), and Vaughan’s monograph, *Holding Fast the Inner Lines* (1980), feature the primary umbrella organization, the Committee on Public Information.

**Citizens into Soldiers**

Suppose they gave a war and nobody came? John Whiteclay Chambers’s *To Raise an Army* (1987) is the definitive account of a conscription system that depended as much on persuasion as compulsion for its effectiveness (see his essay on pages 26-33). John P. Finnegnan’s *Against the Specter of a Dragon* (1974) deals with a peacetime preparedness movement oriented towards the middle
class and J. Garry Clifford focuses on the Plattsburgh camps in *The Citizen Soldiers* (1972). The National Guard, much maligned as politicized and ineffective, is rehabilitated by Jerry Cooper's general monograph, *The Rise of the National Guard* (1997), which stresses regular army neglect of the citizen soldiers who were supposed to be the nation's first line reserve.

National Guardsmen were not alone in suffering neglect. Arthur Barbeau's and Florette Henri's *The Unknown Soldier: Black American Troops in World War I* (1974) remains the best monograph on the second-class status of African American soldiers; Gerald Patton discusses the struggle to train African American officers in *War and Race* (1981). In *A Night of Violence* (1976), Robert Haynes presents the 1917 riot of ill-treated African American soldiers in Houston. Thomas Britten, in *American Indians in World War I* (1997), points out that American Indians, in contrast, were well regarded as "natural warriors." And immigrants took a long step towards full Americanization by service in an army that, as Nancy Ford shows in *Americans All!* (2001), became significantly multicultural in practice.

Organizing and training these men for war was a synergy of improvisations. The best accounts of stateside training are the unpublished dissertations of Douglas Johnson, "A Few 'Squads Left' and Off to France" (Temple University, 1992) and James Victory, "Soldier Making" (Kansas State University, 1990). They should be read alongside James W. Rainey's critiques of United States tactical doctrine and its origins in *Parameters*. John M. Lindley's *A Soldier is Also A Citizen* (1990) discusses the problems of applying military justice to citizen soldiers. Nancy Bristow's *Making Men Moral* (1996) focuses on the efforts of moralists to keep soldiers away from the pleasant vices. Stephen Pope discusses the role in that process the military gave to organized athletics in his essay "An Army of Athletes" in the *Journal of Military History*; Thomas Canfield describes troop morale programs designed to inculcate "the will to win" in *Military Affairs*. The whole process of "keeping the young ones moral after drill" sounds as ghastly now as it seemed to many of its involuntary beneficiaries then.

"Over There"


The study of America's place in Allied strategic councils has been dominated by the work of David Trask, with perceptive volumes on Anglo-American naval relations in *Captains and Cabinets: Anglo-American Naval Relations, 1917-1918* (1972), and the United States role in the Supreme War Council, established in the wake of the German victories in the spring of 1918, in *The United States in the Supreme War Council* (1961). Trask admires cooperation even when it approaches deference, and his third major work, on the AEF's approach to coalition war, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking, 1917-1918* (1993), is sharply critical of its nationalist orientation. Allan Millett's *Over Where? The AEF and the American Strategy for Victory, 1917-1918*, in *Against All Enemies* takes a more balanced view of the United States military and political problems. David Woodward's analysis of Anglo-American military relations in *Trial by Friendship* (1993) is sympathetic to the Americans' insistence on maintaining an independent military identity, and an important article by Robert Doughty, "More than Numbers: Americans and the Revival of French Morale in the Great War" in *Army History* reinforces the case by establishing the central role of America's military presence in sustaining French morale.


OAH MAGAZINE OF HISTORY • OCTOBER 2002 7

**Operations**

The best case study of an AEF battle is Millett's detailed, warts-and-all account of Cantigny in America's First Battles 1776-1965 (1986). Robert Asprey's At Belleau Wood (1965) remains a standard on Belleau Wood; Soissons 1918 (1999) by Douglas V. Johnson II and Rolfe L. Hillman is particularly useful for its treatment of the tensions at command levels between the French and the AEF in the summer of 1918. In Squandered Victory (1995), James Hallas argues that the Battle of St. Mihiel could have been a springboard to greater things. Donald Smythe's essay, "St. Mihiel: The Birth of an American Army" in Parameters is more skeptical. The second edition of Paul Braim's study of the Meuse-Argonne, The Test of Battle (1998), is more sympathetic to the AEF's problems than the first version.

An alternative perspective on AEF performance is provided by a number of recent, well-done unit histories. George Clark's history of Pershing's Marines, Devil Dogs: Fighting Marines of World War I (1999), tells the story of an elite fighting force with a corresponding flair for public relations. James Cooke has done the 42nd Division in The Rainbow Division in the Great War, 1917-1919 (1994), and the All-Americans of the 82nd in The All-Americans At War (1999). Lonnie White covers two southwestern divisions, the National Guard 36th and the 90th, originally composed primarily of Texas and Oklahoma draftees in Panthers to Arrowheads (1984) and The 90th Division in World War I (1996). Stephen L. Harris's Duty, Honor, Privilege: New York's Silk Stocking Regiment and the Breaking of the Hindenburg Line (2001) is one of the very few modern regimental histories of the 107th Infantry, formed from the New York National guard. Chester Heywood, in Negro Combat Troops in the World War: The Story of the 371st Infantry (1969), and Arthur Little, in From Harlem to the Rhine: The Story of New York's Colored Volunteers (1936), tell the stories of African American regiments, unwanted by the AEF, who compiled distinguished records under French command.


Argonne (2000), and Joseph D. Lawrence's Fighting Soldier (1985) merit particular mention.

Air and Sea


Domestic Dissent

As the war progressed, the nation's wartime coalition was increasingly tested and found increasingly wanting. Harry N. Scheibler surveys the general question of wartime civil liberties in The Wilson Administration and Civil Liberties, 1917-1921 (1960). William Preston, Jr.'s Aliens and Dissenters (1963) is strong on the general aspects of control and repression. In World War I and the Origin of Civil Liberties in the United States (1979), Paul Murphy describes the Great War as generating the modern institutionalized concern for civil liberties. His argument is supported by Donald Johnson's work, The Challenge to American Freedoms (1963), on the wartime origins of the ACLU, and from a feminist perspective by Carrie Foster in The Woman and the Warriors (1995) on the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. In A World Without War: How U.S. Feminists and Pacifists Resisted World War I (1997), Francis H. Early discusses the Bureau of Legal Advice, formed to provide assistance to the war's critics. Richard Polenberg presents the Supreme Court's treatment of a landmark free speech case in Fighting Faiths: The Abrams Case, the Supreme Court, and Free Speech (1987).


Peacemaking and Aftermath


Arno Mayer's Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking (1967) and N. Gordon Levin, Jr.'s Woodrow Wilson and World Politics (1968) take an alternative position, describing Wilson's principal immediate objective as checking the threat of Bolshevism, and its Communist development, a central result of which was United States intervention in Russia. George Schild's monograph, balances Between Ideology and Realpolitik in his work by that title (1995). David W. McFadden, in Alternative Paths: Soviets and Americans, 1917-1920 (1993) and David S. Fogle's, in America's Secret War Against Bolshevism (1995), however, more or less trace the Cold War to Wilson's ill-advised meddling. On the other hand
Victor Fic's *The Collapse of American Policy in Russia and Siberia, 1918* (1995) criticizes the President for not doing enough to destroy the Bolshevik menace. Benjamin Rhodes demonstrates the military difficulties of doing anything at all under the conditions prevailing in both Russia and America in *The Anglo-American Winter War With Russia, 1918-1919* (1988).


**Bibliography**


