



Footnotes

The Newsletter of FPRI's [Wachman Center](#) **What Students Need to Know about World War I**

by Michael Neiberg

August 2008
Vol. 13, No. 19

Michael Neiberg is co-director of the Center for the Study of War and Society at University of Southern Mississippi. This essay is based on his presentation at the FPRI [Wachman Center](#)'s July 26-27 history institute, [What Students Need To Know About America's Wars, Part I: 1622–1919](#). The Institute was co-sponsored and hosted by the Cantigny First Division Foundation of the McCormick Tribune Foundation in Wheaton, Ill. It was webcast to registrants worldwide. For videocasts and texts of lectures, see www.fpri.org/education/americaswars1. Core support for the History Institute is provided by the Annenberg Foundation. Funding for the military history program is provided by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. The next history weekend is [Teaching the History of Innovation](#), October 18-19, 2008, in Kansas City.

Ask any British student about the Somme or any French or German student about Verdun and you are likely to get a quick response. It may be a response about an ancestor who fought in one of the war's titanic battles or it might be a response influenced by a work of fiction like *Blackadder, Oh! What a Lovely War*, or *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It might even be the now fashionable response of dismissing the war as a fratricidal relic of Europe's "old" age of nationalism and rivalry. These responses might well be slightly inaccurate or even wildly so, but the war remains enough of a part of the living memory for Europeans to elicit certain emotional and historical triggers. This continued sense of relevance for Europeans is, of course, entirely natural given the great destruction the war brought and the impact the war had on European history.

American students, by contrast, are unlikely to have such close associations to World War I. The war for Americans was a brief event, and a relatively small proportion of Americans saw any sustained military action. The United States was never attacked and there is no single moment associated with the war in American memory as the Somme is in British memory. The war, moreover, falls in between two much larger and more emotive events in American history, the Civil War and World War II. American students might thus be forgiven for not responding to Belleau Wood or the Meuse-Argonne in the same ways they might react to Gettysburg or Pearl Harbor.

That contrast is the first point I always make to my students. Whereas for the United States, World War I is a little-known and arcane period in history, for Europeans it is absolutely formative. For France and Great Britain especially, World War I (known as the Great War or *La Grande Guerre* for a good reason) remains *the* war both in the popular imagination and among scholars. While one compares humanitarian catastrophes at one's own peril, a few numbers may make the case. The British Empire suffered an estimated 908,000 deaths in World War I, or more than twice the number of World War II. Put another way, the British had more men killed on one day of World War I (July 1, 1916, still the bloodiest single day in the history of the British Army) than it suffered in the first month of operations on and subsequent to D-Day. For France, of course, the contrast is even more stark: an estimated 1,300,000 Frenchmen died in World War I compared to 567,000 in World War II.

A simple car ride along any of World War I's many battlefields will prove the point to those less statistically inclined. On many battlefields, such as Verdun, Champagne, and the Somme, the war still speaks through the massive shell holes and mine craters that continue to scar the landscape 90 years later. An observant tourist can also see signs reading *village détruit* (destroyed village), marking a place that was quite literally pulverized during the war and never rebuilt. The French burial custom has been to build massive cemeteries such as the ones at Verdun, Les Islettes, or Notre Dame de Lorette that impress by their sheer size. Ossuaries containing the remains of thousands of *inconnus* (unknown soldiers) stand as silent witnesses to the awesome power of modern weapons, most importantly artillery, to kill men

without leaving sufficient remains to allow for identification or burial. The British have preferred to build smaller, more numerous cemeteries with the unique touch of including a personal statement from the family on the headstones. The Germans, too, built cemeteries with black, solemn crosses that stand in stark contrast to the gleaming white marble to be found in the American ones.

Driving away from the battlefield, a traveler might stop at any of a number of appealing French or Belgian towns to have a coffee or meal and try to get the horrors of what they have just seen out of their minds. But it will not take much imagination to see the impacts of the war in any town near the western front. Some, like Arras or Ypres, will have post cards for sale showing the astonishing destruction and devastation that left them mere piles of rubble. Others will have place names like Place Foch or Avenue Joffre named to honor the heroes of the war. One might even see an Avenue Haig or a Rue Pershing thrown in. Every French town, no matter how small or how far from the western front, will have a statue near the town hall commemorating the young men who died *pour la patrie* from 1914-1918. If one looks very closely, one will see a tragic recurrence of family names on such statues and, often on the back, the addition of a smaller number of names from the war of 1939-1945, seemingly added as an afterthought.

For Europeans, the war is the epochal event of the century. Without it, there would have been no great depression, no fascism, no Second World War, and no concentration camps. We will never know, of course, what the estimated 8 million Europeans who died in the course of the war might otherwise have contributed to politics, to medicine, or to art. What we do know is that Europe is still suffering from that huge loss of its best men and is still struggling to figure out how to even cope with their memory.

The American experience of World War I must therefore be kept in its proper perspective. Americans who do not understand what the war did to Europe will never really understand the Europe that emerged. Europe's ambivalent attitude toward the United States, its drive toward unification, and the relatively recent coming together of the French and German governments will all come into sharper focus if they are set against the backdrop of the killing of 1914-1918. Americans, a European might say over coffee in Arras, do not really understand war because it has not touched us as it has them.

For that, of course, we can all be very grateful. Although the war did not result in destruction for Americans on the European scale, it nevertheless had deep and often forgotten impacts on America. Perhaps most importantly, it led to fundamental, long-term changes in the way America (and Americans) relate to the outside world. It is hard to imagine today, but when Woodrow Wilson went to Paris for the postwar peace conference in early 1919, it marked the first time ever that a sitting American president had visited Europe. This was due to much more than the limits of transportation technology. It reflected instead an American mindset that clearly relegated European affairs to the back burner.

Woodrow Wilson forever changed that attitude, and with it he changed much more. Wilson committed America to international sponsorship of an idea of foreign policy based around the high-minded quest for democracy, capitalism, and freedom. While not all Americans have seen the problem in the way Wilson did and while even Wilson did not fully believe in all of the consequences of his own idealism, his way of viewing the world has bequeathed a legacy to every American leader since. Echoes of his belief in the use of American power to pave the way for ideals that would in turn secure the freedom and peace of peoples everywhere has influenced American foreign policy ever since. Presidents of both parties, down to the present day, have used Wilson's ideals and his language as the basis for their global involvement.

To many Europeans, these ideals have come, as Wilson hoped they would, as a breath of fresh air to a continent hopelessly mired in ancient hatreds. To others, they have come as a lofty intrusion from a society that they see as having more power than wisdom. Georges Clemenceau, France's hard-bitten premier, famously dismissed Wilson's idealistic Fourteen Points with the witty, "God Himself only gave us ten." In some versions of the anecdote, the anti-clerical Clemenceau followed that quip with "and we soon enough learned to break those." His principled distaste for Wilson's idealism notwithstanding (Clemenceau derisively called him "the professor"), Clemenceau had a deep admiration for America. As a young journalist, he had covered the end of the American Civil War, spoke English with American idioms, and had an American wife, at least until he had her deported on trumped up charges. His experiences with America are a symbolic microcosm of those of his French countrymen, and, more generally, Europeans across at least the western part of the continent.

Clemenceau and Wilson did agree on their shared dislike of communism. Although it is now hardly more than a

footnote, even in American histories of the war, the United States sent an expedition to northern Russia from 1918 to 1920 to assist the noncommunist Whites in the Russian Civil War. Although ultimately unsuccessful in stopping the spread of Bolshevism, the incident showed Wilson's faith in the ability of even small numbers of American soldiers to influence world events. It can also be seen as the first real American shot in the Cold War, and one that Josef Stalin never fully forgave or forgot.

Historians short on space and teachers short on time like to contrast the interventionist Wilson to the supposedly isolationist years that followed. But the contrast is not entirely accurate. The United States rejected the Treaty of Versailles and refused to join the League of Nations, but those events are only part of the story. The United States did participate in a number of international conferences and programs designed to reduce world tensions; in many cases the United States provided the key leadership. These conferences included the Washington Conferences on Naval Disarmament, the Kellogg-Briand Pact that aimed to eliminate war as an act of statecraft, the Dawes and Young Plans to refinance German war debt, and the promotion of international trade in the hopes that nations that trade together would not go to war against one another. American isolationism, to the extent that it even existed, is therefore best seen as a desire not to go to war; it was not a desire to bury the nation's collective heads in the sand. The distinction is critical. A rough analogy might be found today in the environmental movement, where the United States is a recognized player and sometime leader, but only on American terms, as the continued American refusal to sign the Kyoto Accords demonstrates.

The war had equally dramatic impacts on the American home front. The idea of intervening in a bloody and inconclusive European war for unclear gains generated tremendous controversy. Conservatives and many east coast elites supported American entry into the war in large part because they believed that the nation's honor had been impinged by repeated German insults such as submarine warfare and the notorious Zimmerman telegram promising Mexico parts of American territory in exchange for military intervention. Even before America entered the war, hundreds of young men from "good families" and Ivy League universities had volunteered their services for the French cause in the French Foreign Legion and an all-American fighter squadron called the Lafayette Escadrille. Among the Escadrille's most vocal supporters was the former president and Wilson nemesis Theodore Roosevelt, who praised the courage of young Americans willing to risk their lives and their American citizenship to fight for a cause that they believed to be just.

But not all Americans responded as Roosevelt did. In the Midwest and South there was widespread suspicion of entering the war and lukewarm feelings about America's potential British and French allies. Although few Americans supported the Central Powers after the callous German sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915, there was a deep chasm between anti-German sentiment and a desire to send American troops "Over There". The problems of Europe were a long way from the minds of most Americans and, censorship notwithstanding, Americans could read the newspapers and understand how murderous the battlefields of the western front were. Moreover, Americans were making money from their definition of neutrality, which permitted trade with both sides. Why put American safety and security at risk? Why kill the goose that laid the golden eggs?

Germany's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare in April 1917 may have convinced Wilson and his advisers of the need for war, but millions of Americans remained unconvinced. The administration was worried about active opposition to the war from radical labor groups like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), anti-British Irish-Americans, and ethnic Germans living in the Midwest and in most major cities. Aware of the need to build consensus and ensure support for the war, the government engaged in a massive public relations and propaganda campaign, the like of which the country had never seen. Newspapers and books combined with new media like movies to saturate the American people with images and ideas to promote the war. As with all propaganda, it is hard to know exactly how average Americans responded to these images. But Americans did rally around the flag and even opponents of the war generally gave the government its support once the country was officially at war.

The American experience of war may have been brief, but its impacts on the home front were dramatic. Among the groups most deeply affected were African-Americans, thousands of whom moved north to take jobs in the now booming northern factories. This "great migration" was a transformative event in African-American history as individuals and entire families left the sharecropping south and came north. While the jobs paid well and offered an escape from the Jim Crow racism of the south, problems and violence emerged when white workers came back and demanded their jobs. Many also demanded that African-Americans return to the South as well. Nineteen-nineteen was a year of terrible racial violence characterized by widespread lynching. African-American deaths due to racial violence in

the turbulent period 1917-1923 appear to have at least equaled, and may have exceeded, the number of African-American battle deaths. This figure is a function both of the general exclusion of African-Americans from the battlefield and the intensity of racial tension in the immediate postwar years.

The extent to which the war made the United States a “nation” remains a point of considerable debate among scholars. Some argue that the mass movement of people across the nation, the shared military service of Americans (in segregated units) raised across the nation, and increased government standardization of the economy all point to the emergence of a national mindset. World War I was the first large-scale crisis that required a shared response from Northerners and Southerners, Easterners and Westerners, city dwellers and farmers, men and women. The country had national heroes like John Pershing (born in Missouri), Alvin York (born in Tennessee), and Eddie Rickenbacker (born in Ohio). Having worked together to meet a common challenge, America, these scholars argue, was ready to face the 1920s era of mass media as people who identified themselves as Americans first and foremost.

This narrative is compelling, but it is not the full story. America remained deeply divided along numerous fault lines, especially that of race; the United States Army raised two African-American divisions for military service, but it treated one so brutally that it performed badly in combat and it gladly dispatched the other to the French Army, under whose guidance it won numerous citations. Most of the divisions in the United States Army, moreover, were National Guard units connected to a state. Many of the largest and most important monuments to the Americans on the Western Front are dedicated not to the United States Army, but to state units like the 28th Division from Pennsylvania, memorialized at Varennes in one of France’s largest World War I monuments.

Perhaps what makes this complex war ultimately so difficult to teach is the absence of an easy and straightforward narrative. Although we recognize the limits of grand narrative, there is a simplicity in teaching the Civil War as the end of slavery and World War II as the destruction of Nazism and Japanese totalitarianism. World War I’s narrative is much more complex and ultimately less satisfying to most students. Nevertheless, it is a critical part of American history and deserves a greater place in the curriculum than the parenthesis to which it all too often gets relegated.

Resources

Books

Hew Strachan’s *First World War* and my own *Fighting the Great War* are accessible to high school and college students; my *World War I Reader* contains excerpts from primary and secondary sources. For the American home front, David Kennedy’s *Over Here* remains a classic. Joe William Trotter’s *The Great Migration*, Ronald Schaffer, *America in the Great War*, and Jennifer Keene’s *The United States and the First World War* are also well worth recommending to students. Keene’s is designed for classroom use and is written by one of the finest scholars in the field. Erez Manela’s *The Wilsonian Moment* nicely dissects and analyzes the meaning of the Americans to the rest of world at the end of World War I.

Web sites

- <http://www.abmc.gov> (the site of the American Battle Monuments Commission, which oversees American cemeteries overseas)
- www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar (the Canadian War Museum’s new trench warfare exhibit)
- <http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/>
- <http://members.aol.com/TeacherNet/WWI.html>
- <http://www.worldwar1.com>
- <http://www.history.sfasu.edu/BaylorExhibit.html>
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwone/index.shtml>
- http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/games/western_front/index.shtml
- <http://www.1914-1918.net/>
- <http://www.gwpda.org>
- <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/rotogravures/rototime1.html>
- <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ahec/index.htm> (the official site of the U. S. Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle, Pa.)

Maps:

- <http://www.dean.usma.edu/history/web03/atlas/atlas%20home.htm>
- <http://www.westernfront.co.uk/thegreatwar/maproom.php>

You may forward this email as you like provided that you send it in its entirety, attribute it to the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and include our web address (www.fpri.org). If you post it on a mailing list, please contact FPRI with the name, location, purpose, and number of recipients of the mailing list.

If you receive this as a forward and would like to be placed directly on our mailing lists, send email to FPRI@fpri.org. Include your name, address, and affiliation. For further information, contact Alan Luxenberg at (215) 732-3774 x105.

- [Become an FPRI member](#)

Copyright © 2001–2009 Foreign Policy Research Institute, All Rights Reserved.

Site developed by [Argo Potomac](#)