INTRODUCTION

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AMERICANS IN WORLD WAR I – WORLD WAR I IN AMERICA

Historians of the United States and World War I have noted that theirs is a “forgotten war,” with no firmly established place in American historical memory. World War I lingers in the shadows of the Civil War, World War II, and the Vietnam War, Jennifer Keene observes in a recent review essay, “because Americans never developed a unifying collective memory about its meaning or the political lessons it offered.” According to Keene, the war’s subordinate place in American historical consciousness is mirrored by the small number of “dedicated World War I historians” in the United States. But as her own essay bears out, historians have continued to produce a rich and diverse historiography. There are excellent overviews and syntheses, monographs and articles exploring U.S. diplomacy and military participation, not to mention scholarship devoted to the war’s impact on American social and cultural history. The war’s centennial, moreover, has prompted several major conferences and discussions on World War I, resulting in special issues of Diplomatic History and the Journal of American History. Although World War I continues to take a backseat in American public memory, research on this key twentieth-century period has lost no steam.

While historians have continued to investigate the many dimensions of the United States in World War I, the centennial also has highlighted a shift in emphasis. Recent work reassesses the different roles Americans assumed during the war and, by implication, the relationship between American civil society and the federal state. This special issue of The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era pays tribute to the ways in which historians today grapple with the history of the United States during World War I by providing different perspectives on some of the most salient developments in recent historical writing, from political to social to cultural history. Taken together, the essays in this issue represent the scope of historical investigation today, from refining topics with a long historiographic tradition to opening up new ones. While all of these approaches help advance our understanding of the war period, some of the essays in this issue emphasize a recent trend to inquire about the political implications of non-state action.

But let us take a step back. Americans have debated the war’s meaning for a century. Initially, the focus was very much on the role of the state. Between 1914 and 1917, Americans disagreed over President Woodrow Wilson’s pursuit of neutrality and, eventually, over their country’s entry into a war they knew entailed unprecedented carnage. As a
belligerent, the country was divided over its war aims and, after victory had been achieved, over participation in the League of Nations. In the postwar decade, many Americans came to see U.S. entry into World War I as a tragic mistake incited by a conspiracy of profiteering “merchants of death.” Not surprisingly, U.S. scholarship on World War I was long dominated by diplomatic and political historians investigating why America entered the war, why Woodrow Wilson’s grand vision of a new world order failed, and what legacies Wilsonianism left for U.S. foreign relations.5 A flurry of recent publications shows just how relevant this focus continues to be as diplomatic historians refine our understanding of these important issues.6

In this special issue, Ross A. Kennedy (Illinois State University) examines the implications of Woodrow Wilson’s view of World War I for U.S. national security by comparing how the president and his secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan, responded to the sinking of the British passenger ship Lusitania in May 1915 by a German submarine, which resulted in the deaths of some 1,200 civilians, among them 128 U.S. citizens. Although Bryan and Wilson both intended for the United States to remain neutral, to mediate a negotiated peace, and to reform international politics, Kennedy shows how their strategic assessments and calculations differed from one another. Bryan did not believe that the outcome of the war, which he considered a hopeless stalemate, would affect U.S. national security. These views led him to support policies aimed at de-escalating the Lusitania crisis. Wilson, in contrast, considered Germany a potential threat to the United States and a chief obstacle to mediation. Wilson also saw the Allies as more sympathetic to international reform than Germany. These views led him to adopt a confrontational policy toward Germany’s submarine warfare campaign. By emphasizing Wilson’s strategic motives, Kennedy expands our understanding of an important decision in American diplomatic history.

Kennedy’s essay sets the stage for an investigation of the many ways in which Americans interacted with the world. Historians have expanded the investigative horizon of civil society to focus on the manifold ways in which the United States was connected to the world, including migration, business, communication, and art. For the study of the United States in the era of World War I, this approach is of particular relevance because governmental relations were but one way in which Americans interacted with the world. The country’s many ethnic, humanitarian, and economic ties to the world extended out from American civil society. They helped shape the two and a half years of neutrality that preceded entry into the war, and they continued to be of great import after the American soldiers had returned home.7 With an eye on humanitarian work by the American Red Cross and the American Relief Administration before and after America’s military participation, Julia Irwin has proposed “a reperiodization of U.S. involvement in the war” since American “participation in the conflict entailed more than a three-year window of U.S. military intervention and postwar peace negotiations.”8 In line with a growing interest in global history, Bruno Cabanes considers the immediate postwar period a springboard for global humanitarism.9

Despite Irwin’s suggestion that we broaden the historical framework, some historians who focus on non-state actors continue to operate within the 1914–1917–1918 structure. Some works emphasize the role of American expatriate civilians, diplomats, journalists, artists, relief workers, physicians, nurses, and volunteers in foreign armies, both before 1914 and after 1918. Chris Dubbs, for example, has assessed the role of journalists in
the war period, and Kenneth D. Rose has traced the different groups of Americans in the war zone during the neutrality period. For both authors, American entry into the war remains a relevant juncture. George Nash’s work on the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) established some time ago the international dimensions of the organization’s global fundraising network. During the neutrality period, the CRB negotiated with belligerent governments to provide support for Belgian civilians. In 1917, the American Red Cross became a symbol of the war effort, bolstered by an unprecedented influx of support from the American public in national donation campaigns. Scholars such as Alan Price have pointed to the transformation of relief work when the ARC began to take control of hundreds of private relief organizations in Europe in 1917. By contrast, Julia Irwin highlights the concept of “voluntarism” for both the period of neutrality and for the period of belligerency when the U.S. government endorsed privately funded relief work. She emphasizes that after 1917, “voluntary organizations remained at the heart of the American military relief enterprise.” A comparison of semi-governmental to non-governmental private efforts has allowed Irwin and others to broaden the range of relevant American actors and to emphasize continuities rather than ruptures such as entry into the war in 1917 or the armistice in 1918. Herbert Hoover’s postwar American Relief Administration (ARA) offers Irwin a case in point. The organization initially was funded by Congress to provide aid to Europe after 1919. When American government support dried up, Hoover turned to private support.

In this special issue, Elisabeth Piller, Axel Jansen, and Helke Rausch in their respective essays suggest that relief work carried out by non-state actors must be analyzed in its specific political context. Elisabeth Piller (Trondheim University) reassesses American relief work between 1914 and 1917. Tracing the “humanitarian narratives” employed in the relief campaigns for the Central Powers, the Allies, and in Belgium, she argues that humanitarian involvement not only expressed ethnic, cultural, and political affinities but shaped American attitudes toward the different belligerents. Humanitarian pursuits were never impartial but drew Americans to different sides of the war. Piller maintains that relief work should be understood as a force of “cultural mobilization” because it helped forge discrete moral and emotional alliances across the Atlantic from 1914 to 1917. Further expanding this line of investigation, Axel Jansen (German Historical Institute Washington DC) then looks at the pre-1917 role of American volunteers in Europe and their evolving public role in the United States. He argues that even avid supporters of the Allies rarely called for U.S. intervention because this would have turned their fight into a national cause and public duty, thereby reducing the perceived value of their personal decision to go to war. When the United States entered the war in 1917, some volunteers remained to support their flag, whereas others abandoned a war they no longer considered relevant. Jansen concludes that these responses were part of a significant shift in expectations concerning the nature of American citizenship. Next, Helke Rausch (University of Freiburg) focuses on a particular group of public elite actors during the neutrality period: philanthropists in the fledgling Rockefeller Foundation. The foundation’s officers, Rausch demonstrates, disregarded American neutrality and from the outbreak of the war in 1914 pleaded for entering into direct commitments in the European war zone. With the entry of the United States into war in early April 1917, Rockefeller officials and collaborators then became “combat” philanthropists, assisting the U.S. military by providing moral education and running campaigns to
bolster the American alliance with France. Rausch concludes that World War I served as the Rockefeller Foundation’s period of incubation, transforming it into a hallmark of the American twentieth century. Taken together, the contributions by Piller, Jansen, and Rausch suggest that while some types of American engagement in the war indeed spanned the 1917-divide, American entry into the war reframed (and transformed) its rationale and meaning. While their work helps expand the agenda of historical investigation, therefore, it also insists on the relevance of political decisions. They remind us that non-state activities have political significance.

The second part of this issue then focuses on another important dimension of American civil society during wartime, the fate of civil liberties in the United States after the country had gone to war in 1917. The essays in this section investigate the impact of World War I on the federal state as well as on civil society and civil liberties. The impact of wartime mobilization on the expansion of the federal government continues to be an important topic discussed among historians. During the nineteenth century, the federal state had remained “hidden in plain sight” as the government preferred to work through intermediaries rather than in its own name. Although supposedly based on old principles, the military draft and large-scale economic regulation began to move the federal government into the lives of ordinary Americans, prompting some historians to see World War I as the beginning of a profound political transformation. In his contribution to this special issue, Manuel Franz (Heidelberg University) presents an important hinge in that development, the public campaign for American military “preparedness.” Franz charts the history of two major defense societies active between 1914 and 1920, namely the National Security League and the American Defense Society. He argues that civilian organizations were not merely appendices to a campaign run by military professionals and politicians to bolster government support for an ambitious military but that these organizations were key advocates of preparedness in their own right. Franz emphasizes that the preparedness campaign, much like other types of civil engagement in the war context, carried over from the neutrality period into the war and even the postwar periods.

While the preparedness campaign sought to ready the United States for war, many Americans remained ambivalent about the expansion of the federal government’s role in wartime. Progressive reformers were among the most vocal critics of preparedness but when the United States entered the war, some of them abandoned their earlier scruples. Philosopher John Dewey, one of the Progressive movement’s intellectual guides, came to welcome opportunities to upgrade the role and relevance of the federal state. Dewey’s support of the war in 1918 prompted his former student Randolph Bourne to comment bitterly that war “is the health of the State,” a critical assessment that has carried over into scholarship. Historian Robert Wiebe, arguably the most influential critic of progressivism as an elitist project of technocrats, once argued that “the mobilization of 1917 and 1918 illuminated the degree to which an emerging bureaucratic system had actually ordered American society.”

Such ambivalent relationships did not escape contemporaries, among them President Woodrow Wilson, who in 1917 had to make up his mind about leading the country into a European war for the first time in its history. In a March 1917 conversation with journalist Frank Cobb, editor of the New York World, Wilson confided that he was hesitating. Even though the sinking of American merchant ships by German submarines appeared to leave
him no choice, the president was concerned that the war would trigger illiberalism and intolerance at home. “A spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fibre of our national life. … Conformity would be the only virtue … the Constitution would not survive it; … free speech and the right of assembly would go.”19 Ironically, the Wilson administration itself became a driving force of war hysteria when it launched an unprecedented propaganda campaign under the auspices of the newly established Committee on Public Information.20 The conformity Wilson dreaded was enforced by both government agencies and the self-mobilization of patriotic Americans in a process Christopher Capozzola has aptly termed “coercive voluntarism.”21

Two essays in this special issue serve as illustrative examples of recent work on the political context for social history. Mischa Honeck (Humboldt University Berlin) probes children’s responses to the war, which he considers far more complex than suggested by the customary association of childhood with victimhood. Children did not remain passive bystanders; they absorbed the politics that led to war, exploited the sometimes-jarring freedoms offered in wartime, and made the experience of war their own. Honeck examines both the demographic and symbolic capital that modern societies attach to children in war. He suggests that fusing the histories of war and childhood can help us appreciate the multiple and diverse roles played by society’s youngest members in wartime. And he argues that this history raises our awareness of how children functioned as “innocent weapons,” enabling actors of various persuasions to impose moral clarity on a messy reality.22

Charlotte Lerg (Ludwig Maximilian University Munich) charts the consequences of wartime super-patriotism for American universities. Taking a broad historical perspective, she establishes World War I as a defining moment for the concept of academic freedom in America. In her view, this period had a more profound impact on shaping and codifying academic freedom than both the McCarthy era and the Cold War. Like other authors in this special issue, Lerg crosses the 1917-divide by tracing ideas of academic freedom from the prewar period into the neutrality phase after 1914. This allows her to explain the impact of the war on the concept of academic freedom after 1917. Two competing interpretations of this idea evolved at that time, one favoring individual liberties, the other prioritizing institutional integrity. Lerg thus identifies an essential tension that has affected American academia ever since.

While coercion from above and below dramatically narrowed the range of legitimate dissent, participation in the World War offered political opportunities for excluded groups to claim full citizenship rights based on the principle that those who loyally serve their country must be treated as equal citizens.23 German Americans and African Americans, pacifists and conscientious objectors, Socialists and Anarchists became targets of both government surveillance and vigilantes.24 Moral reformers seized wartime anxieties to ban prostitution and alcohol.25 But as Christopher Sterba has demonstrated for Jewish and Italian Americans, the war “offered opportunities for participating in American public life that did not exist prior to 1917.”26 Katja Wüstenbecker has spelled out the many different ways in which German Americans responded to the war.27

Most historians agree that the woman suffrage movement, through a dual strategy of loyalty and protest, successfully exploited the war to win presidential support for the Nineteenth Amendment, which granted women the right to vote. Wilson, after all, had declared the war a struggle to make the world safe for democracy. As Capozzola
emphasizes, however, the expansions and redefinitions of U.S. citizenship in the era of World War I remained ambivalent because they mirrored a militarization of society and “were not always victories for equality.” In the case of African Americans, it is doubtful if there were any victories at all, given the extent of racist violence and vicious discrimination during and after World War I. Scholars have produced impressive studies on the military service and experiences of black U.S. soldiers and on the ways the war spurred African American protest and militancy. But neither black patriotism nor black protest yielded any direct benefits in the struggle against segregation and racism. Other racialized minorities suffered as well. Mexican Americans also sought to leverage military service in wartime to claim rights as U.S. citizens. Like women’s suffrage, the granting of U.S. citizenship to Native Americans in the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 followed wartime mobilization and campaigns by indigenous soldiers and veterans. Despite such legal developments, however, Mexican American communities in the Southwest continued to be coerced and victimized. The groundswell of repression and mob violence is a major reason why many historians continue to take a skeptical view of American participation in World War I.

In her essay in this special issue, Jennifer Keene (Chapman University) revisits these issues by focusing on political opportunities perceived and pursued by women activists and by African Americans, whose participatory rights were severely restricted but who also hoped to make use of political opportunities opened up by the war. She contests the traditional view that American social justice movements were the war’s biggest losers. Conceding that civil rights and individual liberties came under pressure after 1917, she focuses on African American civil rights protests, the women’s suffrage movement, and the defense of conscientious objectors by the nascent American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to demonstrate that wartime hostility did not destroy these movements. Activists responded to a hostile environment by experimenting with new techniques to advance their causes. World War I provided a laboratory for movement-building, a process that included recruiting members, refining claims, developing media strategies, negotiating with the government, and participating in nonviolent demonstrations. Wartime experimentation, in other words, provided the civil rights and civil liberties movements with crucial ideas for their postwar efforts.

Contributions to the historiography of the United States in the age of World War I have not been confined to American scholars. For obvious reasons, German historians have also shown considerable interest in the topic, including in standard works on diplomatic history and studies on the war’s repercussions in U.S. society. Moreover, there is a long tradition of German and American historians collaborating on topics related to World War I. In line with this practice, historians in the German Association of American Studies decided to hold their 39th annual meeting in 2017 on “The United States and World War I: Perspectives and Legacies.” The conference was held at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies and brought together German and American scholars whose work encompasses a broad range of topics and approaches. This special issue of The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era evolved from this conference. It includes a selection of eight essays that reassess the many ways in which Americans interacted with the world in the era of World War I and how that war impacted the United States. While most essays focus on the years of American neutrality, all contributions raise questions about continuities and legacies that carried on from before 1914 and
after 1919. Taken together, these articles help refine an evolving historiography. They broaden the investigative agenda by including a wide range of national and international actors and by transcending the brief period of U.S. belligerency in a war with enduring consequences for both American and world history.

NOTES

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5Keene, “Remembering the ‘Forgotten War,’” 447–54; For a recent defense of American opposition to entering the war, see Michael Kazin, War against War: The American Fight for Peace, 1914–1918 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017)


27Katja Wüstenbecker, Deutsch-Amerikaner im Ersten Weltkrieg: US-Politik und Nationale Identitäten im Mittleren Westen (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2007). Also see Jörg Nagler, Nationale Minoritäten im Krieg:


30Benjamin Heber Johnson, Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); José de la Luz Sáenz, Emilio Zamora, and Ben Maya, The World War I Diary of José de La Luz Sáenz (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014); José A. Ramírez, To the Line of Fire! Mexican Texans and World War I (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2009).


