

World War I Impact on America

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR U.S. ENTRY into World War I was strong, even though about 10 million Americans came from enemy countries Austria-Hungary and Germany. In part, U.S. support grew from the efforts of the Committee on Public Information, created in 1917 to enjoin entertainers to build patriotism. Led by journalist George Creel, movie stars Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, and Douglas Fairbanks worked with the committee to sell Liberty Bonds; and George M. Cohan, John Philip Sousa, and Irving Berlin wrote patriotic songs, including “Over There” and “The Caisson Song.” Excessive patriotism manifested itself in anti-German sentiment, seen in the renaming of German items popular in the United States, banning of German language and music in

some public places, and boycotting German-American and Austrian-American businesses. Pacifists and other protesters were persecuted as traitors, whether Oklahoma farmers demonstrating against conscription (made law in 1917) or unionists like Eugene Debs opposing war as a grab for capitalist domination. After World War I ended, however, U.S. attitudes changed. The ravage of the European continent and massive loss of lives left some Americans, particularly veterans and intellectuals, disaffected. Famously, writers and artists took self-imposed exile from their country and become known as the “lost generation.” In general, Americans drew inward and became suspicious, as evidenced in movements such as a strengthened Ku Klux Klan and the “red scare.”

World War I Food Consumption

Although World War I resulted in a 25 percent increase in overall domestic food production, the American public was being persuaded to eat less. To amass food to send to war-ravaged Europe, the U.S. Food Administration (under the direction of Herbert Hoover) asked Americans to decrease consumption of butter, sugar, and meats. It also encouraged them to sign pledges to systematically abstain from certain staples throughout the week, as indicated here:

- Wheatless Monday
- Meatless Tuesday
- Wheatless Wednesday
- Porkless Thursday
- Porkless Saturday

Anti-German Euphemisms

During World War I, Americans revised their language to delete references to Germany, even from items of German origin, as noted here:

- dachshund—liberty hound
- German measles—liberty measles
- German shepherd—Alsatian
- hamburger—liberty sandwich
- sauerkraut—liberty cabbage

Anti-World War I Sentiment

As 4 million men in the armed forces trained, in President Wilson’s words, to “fight . . . for democracy,” small but active bands of demonstrators protested U.S. involvement in World War I. Until the passage of the Sedition Act of May 16, 1918, which placed public antiwar demonstrations under government overview, demonstrators were often countered by citizen groups, one called the Vigilante League. In addition, the press denounced the demonstrators: The New York Times called the International Workers of the World “German agents.” Among the antiwar protesters:

- The International Workers of the World (IWW) and anarchist Emma Goldman opposed the war as a capitalist conspiracy.
- The IWW and reformer Jane Addams opposed the war on pacifist grounds.
- The Oklahoma farmers’ movement demonstrated against conscription.
- Twelve percent of Americans who were drafted (338,000) evaded service before or during basic training; nearly 65,000 registered as conscientious objectors.
- The Green Corn Rebellion opposed the war and proposed the overthrow of the government.

The Red Scare

Anxious about the effects of European radicalism and the communist movement that brought revolution in Russia, the U.S. government tried to quash internal radicalism by demanding loyalty oaths and deporting aliens. One of the government’s most substantial actions was what would become known as the Palmer Raids. Conducted under Justice Department auspices and named for Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, these actions took place during 1919 and 1920, with the following results:

November 1919 Two hundred fifty members of the Union of Russian Workers are arrested, 39 of whom are named candidates for deportation.

December 1919 The U.S. returns 249 aliens to the Soviet Union, including anarchist Emma Goldman.

January 1920 Federal agents arrest 6,000 suspected communists nationwide, 600 of whom are required to leave; many of those arrested are unconnected to radical causes.

May 1920 The red scare ebbs when Palmer asserts that revolutionaries are planning violent protests on May 1, but none occur. Nonetheless, the Justice Department continues some forms of antiradical activities until 1924.



Liberty Bonds poster, 1918.

The Disillusioned Soldier

In his short story “Soldier’s Home,” Ernest Hemingway captures in the character Harold Krebs the disenchantment of a naive young man sent to fight in World War I who returns “much too late” to adjust to life in Oklahoma:

“He did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again. He wanted to live along without consequences.”