The United States Home Front During World War I
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The home front of the United States in World War I saw a systematic mobilization of the entire population and the entire economy to produce the soldiers, food supplies, munitions, and money needed to win the war.

- Although the United States entered the war in 1917, there had been very little planning, or even recognition of the problems that the British and other Allies had to solve on their home fronts.
- As a result, the level of confusion was high in the first 12 months, then efficiency took control.

Key Dates:
- 28 July 1914 World War I begins
- 7 May 1915 The Lusitania is sunk
- January 1917 The Zimmerman Telegram revealed
- February 1917 Russian Revolution begins (leaves WWI in October)
- April 1917 US enters World War I
- 11 November 1918 World War I ends

President Wilson spent 1914-1917 trying to keep America out of the war in Europe.
- He offered to be a mediator in 1916, but neither side took his requests seriously.
- Republicans, led by Theodore Roosevelt, strongly criticized Wilson’s refusal to build up the US Army in anticipation of the threat of war.
- Wilson won the support of the peace element (mostly women and churches) by arguing that an army would provoke war.

Presidential Election of 1916
- President Wilson defeated Supreme Court Justice Charles Hughes, 49.2% (277 electoral votes) to 46.1% (254 electoral votes); Hughes was endorsed by popular former president Theodore Roosevelt.
- Public sentiment in the still neutral United States leaned towards the British and French (Allied) forces, due to the harsh treatment of civilians by the German Army, which had invaded and occupied large parts of Belgium and northern France. However, despite their sympathy with the Allied forces, most American voters wanted to avoid involvement in the war, and preferred to continue a policy of neutrality. Wilson’s campaign used the popular slogan “He kept us out of war” to appeal to those voters who wanted to avoid a war in Europe or with Mexico. The Progressive Hughes also criticized Wilson for not taking the “necessary preparations” to face a conflict, which served to strengthen Wilson’s image as an anti-war candidate.
- It was a close election. 600,000 votes separated the candidates nationally; Wilson won California by less than 4,000 votes.

President Wilson wanted to assist the British, but he did not feel America was ready for war.
- Recognizing that the US was a country of immigrants in recent generations who continued to identify with their cultural heritage, he felt they might advocate for different sides in the conflict.
- His fear is that this could lead to a second Civil War within the nation, unless there was an event which unified the nation behind one side in the European conflict.

Unrestricted submarine warfare
A type of naval warfare in which submarines sink ships such as freighters and tankers without warning
- This was done out of fear that the ship would be delivering weapons or personnel to their adversaries.
- It was also done to break the blockade imposed by ones adversary.
- Over the course of the German U-boat campaign of World War I, German submarines sank almost 5,000 ships, while losing 178 boats and 5,000 sailors themselves.
- German had warning announcements placed in American newspapers in 1915, cautioning against trying to sail to Europe, sowing fear

Sinking of the Lusitania
- A ship which was torpedoed by a German submarine on 7 May 1915. The initial explosion as followed by a second, larger one, and it sank in minutes.
- Of 1,959 passengers and crew aboard, 1,195 died. Only 10 of the 139 US citizens aboard lived.
- The disaster outraged many in the US

War bonds
- Elaborate propaganda campaigns were launched to encourage Americans to buy Liberty Bonds.

Zimmerman Telegram
A 1917 diplomatic proposal from Germany encouraging Mexico to declare war on the US.
- Germany anticipated their resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare early in 1917 would bring the neutral US into the war, so the goal was to have Mexico preoccupy the US on their continent.
- Germany promised money and a military alliance with Mexico, and promised them a return of the territories of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona (which were lost from Mexico between 1836-1848).
- Germany had been attempting to get Mexico to attack the US since 1914, hoping that in doing so it would cease the Lend Lease activities.
- The proposal was intercepted and decoded by British intelligence, and the revelations of the contents outraged American public opinion and helped generate support for the US declaration of war on Germany in April 1917.
- After contemplation, Mexico rejects the proposal.

President Wilson had come to believe that the world war was a threat to all of humanity.

Temporary agencies
The government set up a multitude of temporary agencies to bring together the expertise necessary to redirect the economy into the production of munitions and food necessary for the war, as well as the production of ideas necessary to motivate the people.
- Congress authorized President Woodrow Wilson to create a bureaucracy of 500,000 to 1 million new jobs in five thousand new federal agencies. To solve the labor crisis the Employment Service of the Department of Labor attracted workers from the South and Midwest to war industries in the East.

Americanization of a nation
The outbreak of war in 1914 increased concern about the millions of foreign born in the United States.
- The short-term concern was their loyalty to their native countries
- The long-term concern was their assimilation into American society.
- Numerous agencies became active in promoting “Americanization” so that the ethnics would be psychologically and politically loyal to the US.
- The states set up programs through their Councils of National Defense; numerous federal agencies were involved, including the Bureau of Education, the United States Department of the Interior and the Food Administration.
- Francis Kellogg, speaking for the NAC in 1916, proposed to combine efficiency and patriotism in her Americanization programs. It would be more efficient, she argued, once the factory workers could all understand English and therefore better understand orders and avoid accidents. Once Americanized, they would grasp American industrial ideals and be open to American influences and not subject only to strike agitators or foreign propagandists. The result, she argued would transform indifferent and ignorant residents into understanding voters, to make their homes into American homes, and to establish American standards of living throughout the ethnic communities. Ultimately, she argued it would “unite foreign-born and native alike in enthusiastic loyalty to our national ideals of liberty and justice.”

The war prevented millions of recently arrived immigrants from returning to Europe as they originally intended.
- The great majority decided to stay in America.
- Foreign language use declined dramatically.
- They welcomed Americanization, often signing up for English classes and using their savings to buy homes and bring over other family members.

Even though war was not being fought on US soil, children’s lives were greatly affected as all of these changes were made to their daily lives as a result of the conflict. World War I affected children in the United States through several social and economic changes in the school curriculum and through shifts in parental relationships.

Vigilantism
The private American Protective League, working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was one of many private patriotic associations that sprang up to support the war and at the same time identify slackers, spies, draft dodgers and anti-war organizations.

America
Alien internments
German citizens were required to register with the federal government and carry their registration cards at all times.
- Some 2,048 German citizens were imprisoned beginning in 1917, and all were released by spring 1920.
- Allegations against them included spying for Germany or endorsing the German war effort.
- They ranged from immigrants suspected of sympathy for their native land, civilian German sailors on merchant ships in US ports when war was declared, and Germans who worked part of the year in the United States, including 29 players from the Boston Symphony Orchestra and other prominent musicians
- Sometimes, ethnic groups were pitted against each other, so that the Polish-American population in Chicago was urged to out purchase bonds compared to the German American population

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Women
World War I saw many women taking traditionally men’s jobs for the first time in American history.
- Many worked on the assembly lines of factories, producing tanks, trucks and munitions.
- For the first time, department stores employed African American women as elevator operators and cafeteria waitresses.
- The Food Administration helped housewives prepare more nutritious meals with less waste and with optimum use of the foods available.
- Most important, the morale of the women remained high, as millions joined the Red Cross as volunteers to help soldiers and their families, and with rare exceptions, the women did not protest the draft

Children
As a number of fathers and brothers entered the war, and many were subsequently maimed in action or killed, many children to be brought up by single mothers.
- Additionally, as the male workforce left for battle, mothers and sisters began working in factories to take their positions, and the family dynamic began to change; this affected children as they had less time to spend with family members and were expected to grow up faster and help with the war effort.
- Similarly, Woodrow Wilson called on children involved in youth organizations to help collect money for war bonds and stamps in order to raise money for the war effort.
- This was significant because the children were having a direct effect on the financial state of the US government.
- As children were collecting large amounts of money outside of school, within the classroom, curriculum also began to change as a result of the war.
- Woodrow Wilson again became involved with these children as he implemented government pamphlets and programs to encourage war support through things like mandatory patriotism and nationalism classes multiple times a week.

Civil liberties
The Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 attempted to punish enemy activity and extend to the punishment expressions of doubt about America’s role in the war.
- The Sedition Act criminalized any expression of opinion that used “disloyal, profane, scurrilous or abusive language” about the US government, flag or armed forces. Government police action, private vigilante groups and public war hysteria compromised the civil liberties of many Americans who disagreed with Wilson’s policies.
- In a July 1917 speech, Max Eastman complained that the government’s aggressive prosecutions of dissent meant that “You can’t even collect your thoughts without getting arrested for unlawful assemblage

Food and Fuel Control Act
The US Food Administration under Herbert Hoover launched a massive campaign to teach Americans to economize on their food budgets and grow victory gardens in their backyards.
- It managed the nation’s food distribution and prices.
- Gross farm income increased more than 230% from 1914 to 1919.
- Apart from ‘wheat-less Wednesdays’ and ‘meat-less Tuesdays’ due to poor harvests in 1916 and 1917, there were ‘fuel-less Mondays’ and ‘gasless Sundays’ to preserve coal and gasoline

Military draft
In 1917 the administration decided to rely primarily on conscription, rather than voluntary enlistment, to raise military manpower for World War I.
- The Selective Service Act of 1917 was carefully drawn to remedy the defects in the Civil War system and - by allowing exemptions for dependency, essential occupations, and religious scruples - to place each man in his proper niche in a national war effort. The act established . . .
- a “liability for military service of all male citizens”
- authorized a selective draft of all those between twenty-one and thirty-one years of age (later from eighteen to forty-five)
- prohibited all forms of bounties, substitutions, or purchase of exemptions.
- Administration was entrusted to local boards composed of leading civilians in each community.
- These boards issued draft calls in order of numbers drawn in a national lottery and determined exemptions.
- In 1917 and 1918 some 24 million men were registered and nearly 3 million inducted into the military services, with little of the resistance that characterized the Civil War

Government propaganda
In April 1917, the Wilson Administration created the Committee on Public Information (CPI), known as the Creel Committee, to control war information and provide pro-war propaganda.
- Employing talented writers and scholars, it issued anti-German pamphlets and films.
- It organized thousands of “Four-Minute Men” to deliver brief speeches at movie theaters, schools and churches to promote patriotism and participation in the war effort.
- In Hollywood, the young film industry produced a wide variety of propaganda films.

Labor
Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labor, and nearly all labor unions were strong supporters of the war effort.
- They minimized strikes as wages soared and full employment was reached.
- The AFL unions strongly encouraged their young men to enlist in the military, and fiercely opposed efforts to reduce recruiting and slow war production by the anti-war IWW and left-wing Socialists.
- President Wilson appointed Gompers to the powerful Council of National Defense, where he set up the War Committee on Labor.
- The AFL membership soared to 2.4 million in 1917.
- In 1919, a year after World War I concluded, the AFL tried to make their gains permanent and called a series of major strikes in meat, steel and other industries. The strikes ultimately failed, forcing unions back to positions similar to those around 1910. Anti-war socialists controlled the IWW, which fought against the war effort and was in turn shut down by legal action by the federal government.
To keep factories running smoothly, Wilson established the National War Labor Board in 1918, which forced management to negotiate with existing unions.

Economic confusion in 1917
In terms of munitions production, the first 15 months involved an amazing parade of mistakes, misguided enthusiasm, and confusion.
- Americans were willing enough, but they did not know their proper role.
- Washington was unable to figure out what to do when, or even to decide who was in charge.
- Typical of the confusion was the coal shortage that hit in December 1917.
- Because coal was by far the major source of energy and heat and a grave crisis ensued.
- There was in fact plenty of coal being mined, but 44,000 loaded freight and coal cars were tied up in horrendous traffic jams in the rail yards of the East Coast. Two hundred ships were waiting in New York harbor for cargo that was delayed by the mess.
- The solution included nationalizing the coal mines and the railroads for the duration, shutting down factories one day a week to save fuel, and enforcing a strict system of priorities.
- Only in March, 1918, did Washington finally take control of the crisis chicken and collar greens

American attitudes towards Germany focused on the U-boats (submarines) which sank the Lusitania in 1915 and other passenger ships without warnimg. That appeared to Americans as an unacceptable challenge to America’s rights as a neutral country, and as an unforgivable affront to humanity.
The Home Front During World War I

1. What evidence suggests Wilson strove to keep the United States out of the first world war?

2. What criticism did former-President Roosevelt have about current-President Wilson?

3. Who did Wilson defeat in the presidential election of 1916, and by what percentage?

4. Wilson has a fear were the United States to join the war before the population was sufficiently unified. What was it?

5. What was unrestricted submarine warfare?

6. Why were the Germans using the strategy of unrestricted submarine warfare?

7. What happened to the Lusitania? (please offer statistics in your answer)

8. What was the Zimmerman Telegram?

9. What did Germany promise Mexico in the Zimmerman Telegram?

10. How did the president view the war?

11. What was the short-term concern regarding the Americanization of ethnics?

12. What was the long-term concern regarding the Americanization or ethnics?

13. The war prevented millions of recently arrived immigrants from returning to Europe. What happened to them?

14. How were those of German ethnicity viewed?

15. What was the role of women during the war?

16. In what ways were children viewed as being part of the war effort?

17. What did the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 do?

18. What did the Food and Fuel Control Act do?

19. What did the Selective Service Act of 1917 do?

20. How did the labor movement view the war effort?