America in World War I: Crash Course US History #30

Crash Course: U.S. History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=y59wErqg4Xg
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/y59wErqg4Xg

(Intro)

=====Wilson and U.S. Reluctance to Enter the War=====

Americans were only involved in The Great War for 19 months and compared with the other belligerents we didn't do much fighting. Still, the war had profound effects on America at home, on its place in the world, and it also resulted in an amazing number of war memorials right here in Indianapolis. So The Great War, which lasted from 1914 until 1918 and featured a lot of men with hats and rifles, cost the lives of an estimated ten million soldiers. Also the whole thing was kind of horrible and pointless - unless you love art and literature about how horrible and pointless World War I was, in which case it was a real bonanza.

So when the war broke out, America remained neutral, because we were a little bit isolationist, owing to the fact that we were led, of course, by President Wilson. But many Americans sided with the British, because by 1914 we'd pretty much forgotten about all the bad parts of British rule, like all that tea and monarchy. Plus they're so easy to talk to with their English. But there were a significant number of progressives who worried that involvement in the war would get in the way of social reforms at home. In fact, Wilson courted these groups in the 1916 presidential campaign, running on the slogan "He kept us out of war." and will continue to keep us out of war until we re-elect him and then he gets us into war. But for that slogan to make sense there had to have been some way in which war was avoided. Which brings me to one of the classic errors made by American history students.

What? I haven't even said anything yet.

=====The Lusitania=====

But you were about to, me from the past. Because if I had asked you "What event led the U.S. to enter World War I?" you would have surely told me that it was the sinking of the cruise ship Lusitania by German submarines. 124 American passengers died when the ship, which had been carrying arms, and also guns, was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland. Even though Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan warned Americans not to travel on British, French, or German ships, Wilson refused to ban such travel, because, you know, freedom. Bryan promptly resigned. So how do I know it wasn't the immediate cause of our involvement in the war? Because the United States declared war on Germany and the Central Powers on April 2nd 1917, almost two years after the sinking of the Lusitania.

=====U.S. Decision to Enter the War=====

So why did the United States declare war for only the fourth time in its history? Was it the German's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare in early 1917? Was it the interception and publication of the Zimmerman telegram, in which the German Foreign Secretary promised to help Mexico get back California if they joined Germany in a war against the U.S.? Or was it the fall of the Tsarist regime in Russia, which made Wilson's claims that he wanted to fight to make the world safe for democracy a bit more plausible?

Yes, yes, and yes. Also there was our inclination to help Britain, to whom we had loaned two billion dollars. That's the thing about wars; they never start for easy, simple reasons like Lusitania sinkings. Stupid truth, always resisting simplicity.

=====The Mystery Document and Wilson's Fourteen Points=====

Oh, it's time for the Mystery Document? The rules here are simple. I guess the author of The Mystery Document; I'm either right or I get shocked.

> I (or possibly 1) Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.
>
> II (I'm starting to think these are Roman numerals) Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action for the enforcement of international covenants.
>
> Three. The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for it's maintenance.
>
> And fourteen, (I'm going to guess we skipped some), a general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity of great and small states alike.

Stan, thank you for throwing me a soft ball; that's my favorite kind of ball, other than you, Wilson. With its mention of self-determination, freedom of the seas, open diplomacy, and liberal use of Roman numerals, I know it is Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, our second consecutive Woodrow Wilson week and my second consecutive non-shock.

Given all of his quasi-imperialism, there's something a little bit ideologically inconsistent about Wilson but his Fourteen Points are pretty admirable as a statement of purpose. Most of them deal specifically with colonial possessions and were pretty much ignored. But I suppose if we've learned anything it's that in American history, it's the thought that counts.

(Libertage)

=====America's Contribution to Entente Victory=====
America's primary contribution to the Entente powers winning the war was economic, as we sent all sorts of arms and money over there. Troops didn't arrive until the spring of 1918 and eventually over 1 million American doughboys served under General John J. Pershing. Not all of these people saw combat - they were much more likely to die of flu than bullet wounds. But their sheer numbers were enough to force the defeat of the exhausted Germans.

=====Ernest Hemingway=====

And now, as promised, I will mention Ernest Hemingway. He served as an ambulance driver, which gave him a close-up view of death and misery and led to his membership in the so-called "Lost Generation" of writers who lived in Paris in the 1920s and tried to make sense of everything. Turns out it's pretty hard to make sense of and you're just gonna end up with a lot of six-toed cats and then, eventually, suicide.

=====Thought Bubble: Government Regulation and

Propaganda=====

Okay so I said earlier that a lot of American progressives were anti-war but certainly not all of them. Like, according to Randolph Bourne, "War is the health of the state" and for progressives like him, the war offered the possibility of reforming American society along scientific lines, instilling a sense of national unity and self-sacrifice and expanding social justice. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

World War I made the national government much more powerful than it had ever been. Like, in May of 1917, Congress passed the Selective Service Act, which required 24 million men to register for the draft and eventually increased the size of the army from 120 000 to 5 million. The government also commandeered control of much of the economy to get the country ready to fight, creating new agencies to regulate industry, transportation, labor relations and agriculture. The War Industries Board took charge of all elements of wartime production, setting quotas and prices and establishing standardized specification for almost everything, even down to the color of shoes. The Railroad Administration administered transportation and the Fuel Agency rationed coal and oil. This regulation sometimes brought about some of the progressives' goals. Like, the War Labor Board, for instance, pushed for a minimum wage, 8 hour work days and the rights of workers to form unions. Wages rose substantially in the era, working conditions improved and union membership skyrocketed. But then, so did taxes and the wealthiest Americans ended up on the hook for 60% of their income.

Also, in World War I, as never before, the government used its power to shape public opinion. In 1917, the Wilson administration created the Committee on Public Information, which only sounds like it's from an Orwell novel. Headed by George Creel, the CPI's team created a wave of propaganda to get Americans to support the war, printing pamphlets, making posters and advertising in swanky motion pictures. The best-known strategies were the speeches of 75 000 "Four Minute Men", who in that amount of time, delivered messages of support for the war in theaters, schools and other public venues. The key concepts in the CPI propaganda effort were democracy and freedom. Creel believed that the war would accelerate movement towards solving the "age old problems of poverty, inequality, oppression and unhappiness," because, obviously, war is the most effective anti-depressant. Thanks Thought Bubble.

=====Suppression of Civil Liberties=====

So the aforementioned Randolph Bourne might have had good things to say about war but he was also correct when he suggested that the war would encourage and empower the "least democratic forces in American life". World War I may have been a war to make the world safe for democracy but according to one historian, the war inaugurated the most intense repression of civil liberties the nation has ever known. War suppressing civil liberties, eh? I'm glad those days have passed. Speaking of the repression of civil liberties, the NSA is about start watching this video because I'm about to use the word espionage.

The Espionage Act of 1917 prohibited spying, interfering with the draft and "false statements that might impede military success". Even more troubling was the Sedition Act, passed in 1918, which criminalized statements that were intended to cast contempt, scorn or disrepute on our form of government, or that advocated interference with the war effort. So basically these laws made it a crime to criticize either the war or the government. In fact, Eugene Debs, the socialist who ran for President in 1912, was one of those convicted for giving an anti-war speech. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison and he served 3 of them, but he ran for president from prison and got 900 000 votes! Fortunately, thanks to "checks and balances", you can turn to the courts. Unfortunately, they weren't very helpful. Like in Schenck v. U.S. the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of a guy named Schenck for encouraging people to avoid the draft and ruled that the government can punish critical speech when it presents a clear and present danger to the state and its citizens. This was when Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes introduced the famous exception to free speech, that it is not okay to "shout fire in a crowded theater." Nor, apparently, is it okay to shout "We shouldn't be in this war, I don't think. Just my opinion." But some went even further. The 250 000-strong American Protective League helped the Justice Department identify radicals by harassing people in what were called "slacker raids". Good thing those stopped before you got to high school, right, me-from-the-past? Slacker. In Bisbee, Arizona, vigilantes went so far to put striking copper miners in box cars, shipped them out to the middle of the desert and left them there.

=====Effect of War on Immigrants and American Patriotism=====

The war also raised the question of what it meant to be a real American. Like public schools Americanized immigrants and sought to "implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conceptions of righteousness, law and order, and popular government." Many cities sponsored Americanization pageants, especially around the 4th July, which the CPI in 1918 re-christened "Loyalty Day". Hamburgers, a German word, became "liberty sandwiches". World War I certainly didn't create anti-immigrant feeling in the United States but it was used to justify it. Like IQ tests introduced to screen army applicants were soon used to argue that certain immigrant groups were inferior to white Protestants and could never be fully assimilated into the United States. Now of course those tests were tremendously biased, but no matter.

But to return to the questions of dissent and free speech, the suppression continued after the war with the 1919 Palmer raids, for instance, named after Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and headed up by a young J. Edgar Hoover. To be fair, someone did try to blow up Palmer so there was some dissent related to the suppression of dissent. Also, more than 4 million workers engaged in strikes in the United States in 1919 but that didn't legally justify the arrest of more than 5000 suspected radicals and labor organizers. Most of them were arrested without warrants and held without charge, sometimes for months. Now it's difficult to imagine that all of this would have happened without the heightened sense of patriotism that always accompanies war.

=====Effects of War on Women and African-Americans=====
However, there were a handful of good things to come out of the Great War and not just the stylings of Irving Berlin. Like students are often taught that the war led directly to the passage of the 19th Amendment, although a number of states had actually granted the franchise to women before the war. In Montana, for instance, women didn't just vote, they held office. Congresswoman Jeanette Rankin voted against the declaration of war in 1917 and was the only member of the house to vote against the declaration of war against Japan in 1941.

New opportunities in wartime industry also provided incentives for African-Americans to move north, thus beginning the so-called "Great Migration" and the growth of black populations in northern cities like Chicago and New York. The biggest gain was in Detroit where between 1910 and 1920, the black population rose from 5741 to 40 838, a 611% increase!

=====Outcome of Wilson's Fourteen Points and Conclusion=====
So it's true that World War I provided some new opportunities for African Americans and women but if World War I was supposed to be an opportunity for America to impose its progressive ideas on the rest of the world, it failed. The Versailles Peace Conference where Wilson tried to implement his Fourteen Points raised hope for a new diplomatic order but the results of the treaty made the Fourteen Points look hypocritical. I mean especially when Britain and France took control of Germany's former colonies and carved up the Arabian provinces of the Ottoman Empire into new spheres of influence. Wilson's dream of a League of Nations was realized but the U.S. never joined it, largely because Congress was nervous about giving up its sovereign power to declare war. And disappointment over the outcome of World War I led the U.S. to, for the most part, retreat into isolationism until World War II. And therein lies the ultimate failure of World War I - it's not called "The World War", it's called World War I because then we had to go and have a freaking other one! We'll talk about that in a few weeks but next week we get to talk about suffrage! Yes! We finally did something right! I'll see you then.

=====Credits=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Meredith Danko, the associate producer is Danica Johnson, the show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer, Rosianna Rojas and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Café. Every week there's a new caption for the Libertage. If you'd like to suggest one you can do so in comments where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching Crash Course and, as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome. Stan, can you do some movie magic to get me out of here? Perfect.

(Laughter)