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Ethnic Minorities at War (USA)

By [David Laskin](#)

The First World War was a watershed experience for the ethnic minorities who had come to the United States in record numbers at the turn of the last century. Though the overwhelming majority of immigrants supported their adoptive country both on the battlefield and on the home front, the United States government cracked down on enemy aliens with some of the most harshly repressive measures in American history. The Great War significantly hastened the assimilation of foreign-born soldiers and their families, changed United States immigration law, and influenced the way immigrants and enemy aliens were treated during the Second World War.

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Introduction

In the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, the [United States](#) absorbed some 23 million immigrants, most of them from Eastern and Southern Europe.^[1] When the First World War began in the summer of 1914, the impact on America's immigrant population was immediate and complex. Since most of the recent immigrants traced their ancestry to the nations at war, there was concern that American society would fissure on ethnic fault lines. Such fears increased exponentially when the United States entered the conflict in April 1917.

Would non-citizen immigrants serve loyally in American armed forces? Could immigrant recruits serve effectively if they spoke little English and clung to the customs and traditions of their countries of origin? How should [enemy aliens](#) be dealt with at home? This article addresses these questions by exploring both the impact of the war on America's ethnic minorities and by examining how the [United States government](#) and military dealt with immigrant recruits and enemy aliens during the period of the Great War.

The article begins with the period immediately preceding the war, describing the ethnic composition of the United States and the social conditions of immigrants in 1914. Next it addresses the social unrest (and fears of social unrest) that arose during the nearly three years of American [neutrality](#). When the United States entered the war, the role of ethnic minorities entered a newly critical phase – the article will consider the immigrant experience inside the armed forces, home front pressures and [propaganda](#), and the concerted government crackdown on enemy aliens, particularly German-speaking [conscientious objectors](#).

The Ethnic Character of the United States in 1914

The United States has always been a nation of immigrants – but never more so than in the first decades of the 20th century. Immediately after the Civil War, immigrants from [Germany](#), Scandinavia, [Ireland](#) and [the Netherlands](#) began to stream in to the reunified nation; but by the turn of the century, Eastern, Central and Southern Europe had far surpassed Northern Europe as the source of new immigration. In the first decade of the new century, more than 3 million immigrants arrived in the United States from [Italy](#) and from the Pale of Settlement, the western fringe of the Russian Empire where Jews were confined. After Italians and Jews, Poles were the third largest immigrant group in this period, with approximately 750,000 ethnic Poles relocating from the Russian partition of [Poland](#) (known as Congress Poland) to the United States between 1899 and 1913.^[2]

By 1910, immigrants accounted for 15 percent of the United States population (by comparison, in

2010, the percentage of foreign-born residents stood at 12.9 percent).^[3] When Europe went to war in 1914, fully one-third of the people living in the United States were either foreign-born or had a parent born overseas.^[4]

Unlike the native old stock Americans, the majority of immigrants who passed through Ellis Island starting in 1892 were Catholic or Jewish; they were by and large poor and poorly educated, and most of them lacked strong national or political bonds to their countries of origin. Italians tended to identify not with the nation of Italy (which came into being only in 1861) but with their village or family; Jews, who had been systematically deprived of civil rights by the czars, were actively hostile to Russia's imperial government; Poles were fierce nationalists without a nation state of their own, since Poland had ceased to exist after it was divided by the Prussians, Russians and Austrians in the 18th century.

In the United States, the new immigrants gravitated to distinct sectors of America's emerging industrial economy – Italian “pick and shovel men” provided the muscle to build the urban infrastructure; Jews worked in the garment industry or as peddlers or shopkeepers; Poles were miners or steel-workers. All three groups were slow to surrender the languages, customs and traditions of their country of origin. As a 1910 report noted of Buffalo's Polish community, “They have their own churches, their own stores and business places, their own newspapers.”^[5]

All of these factors influenced the responses of America's ethnic minorities to the war in Europe.

Ethnic Minorities in a Neutral Nation: 1914-1917

Divided loyalties in “the one great nation of peace”

In a Declaration of Neutrality delivered to Congress shortly after the start of the First World War, American President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) warned that if the nation's ethnic minorities became active partisans of their countries of origin, the consequences would “be fatal to our peace of mind and might seriously stand in the way of the proper performance of our duty as the one great nation of peace.”^[6]

But in fact, the nation of immigrants divided along ethnic and national lines as soon as war was declared in Europe. Even as the mainstream [American press](#) branded Germans as “Huns” after the so-called Rape of Belgium in August 1914, many Americans of German origin (who numbered 8,282,618 in the 1910 census, accounting for nearly 8 percent of the United States population)^[7] were outspoken in their support of the Fatherland. Young German-American men flooded the German Embassy in Washington with requests to be shipped back “home” so they could join their co-nationals at the front. Germany provided its American ambassador with an ample propaganda budget to be used in swaying the American public toward neutrality; American reporters were bribed to portray the German cause in a more sympathetic light.^[8] The German-American press, catering

to both German immigrants and Americans of German heritage, fell into line of its own accord.

Irish-Americans, motivated by their antipathy to British rule of Ireland, tended to join German-Americans in backing the Central Powers. The “enemy-of-my-enemy” rationale also initially drove Jewish-Americans to support the Central Powers: in the minds of Jews who had emigrated from the Russian Pale, the Allied cause was fatally tainted by the inclusion of Russia, the land of the pogrom. Once Italy entered the war on the side of the Allies in the spring of 1915, Italian-Americans also had a personal stake in the conflict.

Fears of ethnic civil war

Ethnic tensions rose in the United States after a German U-boat torpedoed and sank the *Lusitania* on 7 May 1915, killing 128 Americans. German-Americans came under increasing suspicion as spies or saboteurs – and they countered by banding together with Irish-Americans to rail against the nation’s increasing moral and material support for Britain.

A month after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Irish and German protesters mounted a massive peace demonstration in New York City, and there were pro-German/pro-neutrality picnics and rallies throughout the summer in the Midwest. The streets of Chicago erupted in violent clashes between Slavs and Germans. Cincinnati Jews talked of raising a Jewish militia to join the German forces fighting the czar. “Each of the belligerent nations had children in the New World,” write historians Meirion and Susie Harries, “and every outburst of passion in Europe was echoed in America.”^[9]

Impact of the Russian Revolution

The news that the Russian people had overthrown the czar and established a provisional government in March 1917 sent shock waves through America’s already volatile ethnic and political landscape. The United States Jewish community, hopeful that revolution would transform Russia into a tolerant democracy, immediately switched its allegiance to the Allied Powers. Polish-Americans, though politically more conservative than Jews and thus more fearful of a Bolshevik take-over, believed revolution in Russia might hasten the reunification and independence of their homeland. Later that year, the Balfour Declaration (2 November 1917), signaling Britain’s support for a “national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine, reinforced the American Jewish embrace of the Allied cause.

Whatever hopes and fears revolution in Russia raised among ethnic minorities in the United States were soon overshadowed by a more significant turn of events closer to home: America’s entry into the war on the side of the Allies on 6 April 1917.

The United States at War

Ethnic minorities and the draft

Given its large immigrant population, it was clear that the United States would go to war with a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual army – but it was far less clear how this army would be raised, trained and welded into a unified fighting force. The United States decided to muster the bulk of its wartime force through conscription, and difficult questions arose over whether immigrants would, could or should serve, and how to determine their eligibility

Congress decreed that on 5 June 1917, all men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one had to register for the draft regardless of citizenship status or country of origin. But not all the men who registered were ultimately eligible for the draft. By the terms of the [Selective Service Act](#) of 1917, immigrants who had not yet declared their intention of becoming United States citizens were exempt, as were all non-citizens born in the nations the United States was at war with – i.e., enemy aliens. Determining exactly who qualified as an enemy alien was no simple matter, especially after the United States declared war on the ethnically diverse [Austro-Hungarian Empire](#) in December 1917. Was a Pole born in the Austro-Hungarian division of Poland an enemy alien even though his ethnic loyalties lay with the Allies? Treaties governing the draft eligibility of immigrants born in neutral and Allied nations presented additional problems. The wrinkles multiplied when semi-autonomous armies of Czech and Polish immigrants were formed. Still more problems arose from language difficulties. Non-declarant aliens were required to appeal their conscription and prove they were ineligible – but many lacked the proficiency in English to understand the law or explain their status.

Local draft boards did the best they could, though inevitably there were errors. But when an army of sufficient manpower to fight a modern industrial war was finally raised, it included some half a million immigrants – fully 18 percent of the total – from forty-six different countries.^[10]

Ethnic minorities in the training camps and on the home front

A story, probably apocryphal, made the rounds in 1917 that when a staff sergeant called the roll on day one at Maryland's Camp Meade, not a single man recognized his own name – but when the officer sneezed ten recruits stepped forward.^[11] Whether true or not, the anecdote reflects the shock Americans felt at the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the armed forces that were rapidly mustered from the autumn of 1917 to the spring of 1918. “I’m in a barracks with 270 [recruits],” one drafted newspaper reporter wrote in his diary on his first day at Camp Upton on Long Island, New York, “and so far I’ve found a half dozen men who could speak English without an accent. Is it possible to make soldiers of these fellows?”^[12]

Their officers were wondering the same thing. Overwhelmingly native-born, the officer corps brought the typical prejudices and ethnic stereotypes of the period into the army with them. In *The Passing of the Great Race*, an influential bestseller of 1916, New York lawyer [Madison Grant \(1865-1937\)](#) argued that a “dark Mediterranean subspecies” was undermining the “splendid fighting and moral qualities” of the Angle-Saxon and Nordic “races” that had settled America. Grant warned that “the wretched, submerged populations of the Polish Ghettos” could never become effective soldiers^[13] –

and many newly created officers shared these views.

The first months of training camp did little to dispel their prejudices. Officers reported their foreign-born recruits were in bad physical shape from poor nutrition and years of punishing labor; their command of English was so poor that many failed to respond to orders. Catholic immigrant recruits complained that they could not confess their sins since no chaplains spoke their language; Jews refused to eat non-kosher food. Ethnic slurs and insults heightened tensions, and scuffles, in some cases serious, broke out between immigrants and native-born soldiers and between members of historically hostile ethnic groups.

To its credit, the army addressed these problems quickly and creatively. At Camp Gordon in Georgia, a program was initiated to accommodate the needs of foreign-born recruits. Multi-lingual officers were assigned to the camp; “development battalions” were formed in which immigrants deemed fit for combat got a crash course in English (along with United States history and civics); and ethnically appropriate food was served.

Foreign-born recruits were not assimilated overnight, and the army never did stamp out pejorative ethnic nicknames and stereotypes. Nonetheless, when large numbers of soldiers began shipping out to France in the spring of 1918, ethnic tensions had eased considerably. No matter what their ancestry or citizenship status, men in the same unit were beginning to think of themselves as comrades.

The war was also a strongly Americanizing force for the families of foreign-born recruits. Having a boy in uniform obviously gave immigrant families an emotional stake in the outcome of major battles. Immigrants joined their native-born neighbors in festooning their windows with service star flags (one blue star was sewn on the flag for every son in uniform). Immigrant organizations, for example the formerly pacifist United Hebrew Trades, participated enthusiastically in the Liberty Loan (war bonds) campaigns.^[14] Though many immigrants had come to the United States expressly to keep their young men out of required military service in their nation of origin, once their sons were drafted to serve in the army of their adopted country, they by and large backed the war effort enthusiastically. In the end, the war opened a portal into the American mainstream both for immigrants in uniform and for their families back home.

United States naturalization law 1917-1918: facts, myths, and amendments

When the United States War Department began raising a large army in the summer of 1917, it was commonly – and wrongly – believed that military service meant automatic United States citizenship. Immigrants enlisted under this misapprehension, especially Poles, who signed on in greater numbers than any other group. By some counts, some 40 percent of the first 100,000 men to volunteer for service were Polish, even though Poles account for only 4 percent of the United States population.^[15]

A year into the United States involvement in the war, however, the myth about naturalization of alien soldiers became reality. On 9 May 1918, in recognition of the large number of non-citizens on active duty, Congress amended the nation's naturalization laws to allow alien soldiers to fast-track the citizenship process. The amendment specified that foreign-born soldiers serving in the army or navy "in the present war" could apply for citizenship "without making the preliminary declaration of intention and without proof of the five years' residence within the United States." Ultimately, more than 123,000 immigrant soldiers were naturalized as a result of their military service in the First World War.^[16]

The 1918 amendment set a precedent for subsequent wars. Similar legislation expedited the naturalization process for aliens on active military duty during the Second World War and the Korean War.^[17] On 3 July 2002, President George W. Bush granted the right of immediate naturalization to all foreign-born soldiers serving honorably at any time on or after 11 September 2001 – and this provision remains in effect today.

Enemy Aliens in Wartime

Suspicion of German-Americans had been widespread in the run-up to America's entry into the war, but once the United States became an active combatant, suspicion calcified into outright repression. During the year and a half of United States involvement in the conflict, Congress seriously curtailed the civil rights of enemy aliens. Intense social pressure heightened anti-German sentiment and fostered a climate of hostility bordering on persecution.

Legal measures, social surveillance, and vigilantism

In response to the perceived threat of subversive enemy alien activity on the home front, the Wilson administration pushed through the Espionage Act in June 1917, criminalizing the spread of information that might hamper the American war effort. The act essentially made it legal to spy on aliens, suppress publications deemed objectionable by the government, and silence political opposition. The Sedition Act of May 1918 further restricted civil liberties: it was now criminal to use "any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" in speaking out against the United States government, flag or military. The two acts unleashed a nationwide campaign of surveillance, propaganda and social ostracism directed against not only enemy aliens but socialists, pacifists, labor leaders and others deemed insufficiently loyal.

The most intense repression was focused on German-Americans. Some of it was trivial, like renaming "sauerkraut" as liberty cabbage; some of it was absurd, like banning German music and removing German books from libraries; but some of it was pernicious and violent. Americans were encouraged to spy on their German neighbors and join "Loyalty Leagues" that policed ethnic neighborhoods for nationalistic purity. It became dangerous, and in some jurisdictions illegal, to speak German in public. Germans who failed to buy liberty bonds had their houses daubed with

yellow paint. In the heavily German city of St. Louis, a German-born immigrant was lynched by a mob in April 1918.

The crackdown on German-speaking conscientious objectors

The German-Americans who suffered most during the war were the Hutterites and Mennonites of the upper Midwest. Tradition-bound and insular, these groups had immigrated to the United States in the last decades of the 19th century in search of religious freedom, particularly the freedom from military service, which was a central tenet of their faith. They tended to band together in tight isolated communities – collectivist colonies in the case of the Hutterites – and they maintained the culture, customs and German language of their ancestors. By contrast, many German families from earlier waves of immigration had become integrated into the American mainstream, while retaining vestiges of their German heritage. As a result, in 1917 a considerable part of the German-American community was indistinguishable from the white population at large. When the United States entered the war, the War Department had no clear, consistent policy toward conscientious objectors (COs). Individual cases were left to the discretion of training camp commanders – and the pressure on COs to renounce their faith and fall in with basic training often bordered on, or crossed the line to, torture. One particularly flagrant case involved four young German-speaking conscripts from the Rockport Hutterite Colony near Parkston, South Dakota. Court-martialed after they reported for duty but refused to obey orders at Camp Lewis in Washington State, the four were sentenced to twenty years of hard labor. They were imprisoned first in solitary confinement at Alcatraz and later at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas. After months of torture and mistreatment, two of the men – brothers named Joseph Hofer (1894-1918) and Michael Hofer (1893-1918) – fell ill and died. When Joseph Hofer's wife came to claim her husband's body, she discovered that he had been dressed in the military uniform he refused to wear while alive. The brothers' graves in South Dakota are marked with the word "martyr."

Conclusion

In hindsight, the official United States crackdown on German-Americans and enemy aliens in general was not only brutal but unnecessary. By and large, America's ethnic minorities, no matter what their country or culture of origin, were loyal, even exemplary. Though a German espionage ring pulled off a spectacular bombing of a munitions dump on Black Tom Island in New York harbor on 30 July 1916, no concerted sabotage campaign was ever launched by enemy aliens on the home front. Conscientious objectors like Joseph and Michael Hofer were not agitators bent on subverting military discipline but citizens exercising their basic civil rights.

Even more striking was the example set by foreign-born soldiers who fought in the [trenches of France and Belgium](#). Despite the fact that elements in the German-American community had voiced support for Germany before the United States entered the war, the overwhelming majority of American soldiers of German ancestry did not shy away from fighting against their "cousins" from

the Fatherland – much to the surprise of officers in the German army. Concerns that immigrant recruits would be weak, cowardly, backward, lazy, untrustworthy, disloyal – or at the very least unable to understand and follow orders – were unfounded. Immigrant soldiers fought as bravely as their native-born comrades – and complained as loudly about the lousy food and miserable conditions of trench warfare. Italian-born Michael Valente (1895-1976), who received the Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest military award for valor, spoke for many immigrants when he expressed pride in bringing “honor to the entire mass of Italians who emigrated here, of which I am a humble part.”^[18]

The word “pride” cropped up frequently when immigrant soldiers spoke or wrote of their experiences in uniform: pride in serving their adoptive country, pride in acquitting themselves bravely in battle, pride in honoring the traditions and beliefs of their old country while doing their duty for the new. Each soldier was unique, but on balance, the pride of ethnic minorities boosted their status in their own eyes and in the eyes of the adoptive country.

In bringing together men of markedly different backgrounds, the war proved to be an efficient agent of assimilation. Immigrant recruits became American by fighting for America. And their native-born fellow recruits came to accept immigrant comrades much more readily on the battlefields of Europe than they would have done at home. As Charles F. Minder (1895-?), a New York City recruit of German heritage, wrote to his mother from France: “We have about every nationality you can think of in my company. ...The last six months of my life in the army, living and suffering with these fellows, has done more for me to get rid of race-prejudice than anything else could have done.”^[19]

The experiences of ethnic minorities in the Great War carried forward into the future. Though the 1920s saw a resurgence of xenophobia and the imposition of tight immigration quotas, existing immigrant groups did not surrender the gains they had made. Immigrants and their descendants took a more active role in public life after the war. In many foreign-born families, the tradition of military service that began in the First World War continued in the wars that followed. First and second-generation immigrants played prominent roles in administering the New Deal. And, partly as a result of brutal treatment of Hutterites, Mennonites and other COs in the First World War, more just provisions for COs were adopted in the Second World War.

There is no question that the huge cohort of immigrants who passed through Ellis Island would eventually have joined the American mainstream, just like previous and subsequent generations of immigrants. But the First World War was a catalyst in smoothing and hastening a process that has often been fitful and fraught. It would be simplistic to assert that service in the war “made” the immigrant soldiers and their families Americans. But for many, it was a milestone that, a century later, is still recognized, honored, and celebrated.

David Laskin, Independent Scholar

Notes

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