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Historiography 1918-Today (USA)

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This essay covers the historiography of military, political, social, and cultural aspects of U.S. involvement in World War I. As this body of literature attests, entry into the war thrust America onto the world stage and transformed its institutions and society. Following an initial flood of military works published immediately after the war, historians in the 1930s began exploring the war's political implications. World War II caused the topic to languish until the 1960s, when domestic turmoil influenced a wider reevaluation. Millennial conflicts and the war's centennial has sparked a recent flurry of scholarship on a diverse range of topics.

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Introduction

In the century since the [United States](#) entered the First World War, Americans have shown a remarkable ambivalence towards their country's participation in a conflict that continues to shape the world they inhabit. This ambivalence has had a negative impact on scholarly study of the war, illustrated by the fact that the standard works on the military and home front are now forty-nine and thirty-seven years old, respectively. Nonetheless, a vast body of literature exists that encompasses many essential aspects of the war and its influence on the last century of American history.

For those seeking a general understanding of the war's overall impact on American society, David Kennedy's *Over Here* remains the standard work. The best scholarly work on American military participation is Edward Coffman's 1968 volume *The War to End all Wars*. Anne Venzon's *The United States in the First World War*, an alphabetically arranged reference work, provides concise historical and biographical information from many leading scholars.

U.S. Military Participation

Americans Who Fought Before 1917

While much has been written about America's military participation following the U.S. declaration of war, only a small amount of work has been done on American citizens who volunteered to fight for the Allies prior to 1917. These volunteers, many of whom came from upper-crust families, were often motivated by outrage over German conduct and a strong sense of duty. Edwin Morse's *America in the War* highlights the service of these forgotten individuals. For a lively firsthand account by an American in the [British Expeditionary Force](#) (BEF), readers should consult [James Hall's \(1887-1951\) 1916 *Kitchener's Mob*](#). James Seymour edited several volumes regarding the celebrated medical personnel of the American Field Service in his *History of the American Field Service in France*. Lastly, Philip Flammer's *The Vivid Air* provides an exceptional unit history of the famed [Lafayette Escadrille](#).

Preparedness and Mobilization

In 1914, as many young Americans were volunteering to fight for foreign armies, some leaders back home saw the writing on the wall and advocated for [military preparedness](#) to get ready for the nation's inevitable involvement in the war. For an overall history, see John P. Finnegan's *Against the Specter of a Dragon*. Also, the Plattsburg Movement, a pre-war effort to offer young elites military training, is covered in *The Citizen Soldiers* by J. Garry Clifford.

Mexican Border Prelude

Historians have viewed the U.S. army's Punitive Expedition against [Pancho Villa \(1878-1923\)](#) as a dress rehearsal for participation in World War I. The leader of this expedition, [John J. Pershing \(1860-1948\)](#), chronicled his experiences in *My Life Before the World War*. Those seeking a general survey should consult Joseph Stout's *Border Conflict*. Charles Harris and Louis Sadler chronicled the National Guard's service during the Punitive Expedition with *The Great Call-Up*. Friedrich Katz surveys the Mexican point of view in his authoritative *Life and Times of Pancho Villa*.

The AEF

When America finally entered the First World War in April of 1917, the U.S. army was still quite small, despite the successes of the Preparedness Movement. The creation of the [American Expeditionary Forces](#) (AEF) saw the rapid expansion of the American army, with 2 million men eventually serving overseas. The U.S. army's account of the AEF, *United States Army in the World War, 1917-1919*, was published in 1948 and encompasses seventeen volumes rich in detail. Pershing's two-volume *My Experiences in the World War* also outlines the history of the AEF from the commander's own slanted perspective.

One of the first difficulties to descend upon the nascent AEF was the Amalgamation Controversy, when Allied leaders pressured Pershing to parcel out his units to the French and British. Pershing was forced to compromise on this matter following the crisis of the [German spring offensives](#), but his dogged determination to incorporate most of his divisions into a single American army eventually paid off. In David Trask's *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking*, the amalgamation issue is examined along with the decisiveness of American arms. Citing reliance upon [France](#) and [Britain](#) for supplies and [equipment](#), among other issues, Trask minimizes American contributions on the battlefield and concludes that the AEF played a subordinate role to their allies in winning the war.

Robert Bruce's *A Fraternity of Arms* argues that American and French units *were* nearly amalgamated in instances such as the Meuse-Argonne Campaign, and that such combined operations led to mutual respect and admiration between the soldiers of the two nations. Similarly, [Mitchell Yockelson](#) looks at Americans under British command in *Borrowed Soldiers*, downplaying Anglo-American acrimony and demonstrating how two American divisions benefitted from front line service with the battle-hardened troops of the BEF. Taking a more expansive view of British and American relations, [David Woodward](#) reveals the strain placed on the high commands of both countries over amalgamation, and charts the ensuing impact, in *Trial by Friendship: Anglo-American*

Military historians' evaluation of the AEF's training and prowess on the battlefield has also been hotly debated. In his essay "American Military Effectiveness during the First World War," Timothy Nenner states that shunning the lessons learned by the Allies in favor of "open warfare" – in which marksmanship and the bayonet were favored over [air](#) and [artillery](#) support – quickly resulted in disaster. James Rainey is even harsher in "The Questionable Training of the AEF in World War I," suggesting that American tactics devolved into armed mobs hurling themselves at German [machine gun](#) positions. A trio of recent works by [Mark Grotelueschen](#) (*The AEF Way of War*), Richard Faulkner (*The School of Hard Knocks*), and [Edward Lengel](#) (*Thunder and Flames*) paint a more nuanced picture of the AEF's performance. These authors acknowledge poor training and leadership while maintaining that the American force slowly improved over time and ended the war as an effective fighting force.

No campaign illustrates this steep learning curve better than the Meuse-Argonne Offensive of late 1918. For many years, Paul Braim's *The Test of Battle* was the only detailed treatment of this decisive clash. Braim's book is still useful, especially for its survey of sources on American combat effectiveness, but has been supplanted by Edward Lengel's *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918*. Lengel explores tactical and operational considerations in detail while describing the murderous combat that eventually led to the Armistice. *To Conquer Hell* shows how doughboys learned "on the job," and how adaptation at the small unit level won the day. In 2014, Lengel edited *A Companion to the Meuse-Argonne Campaign*, which concludes with a section on the lessons and memory of the campaign. Douglas Mastriano's "Changing Views on the Meuse-Argonne Offensive" deals deftly with the [historiography](#) of the campaign and the bickering between historians over which Allied nation deserved the greater laurels for victory. Mastriano convincingly argues that the AEF was the deciding factor in ending the war in November 1918.

Soldier Studies

The common soldier of the AEF enjoyed a celebrated return to the United States following the Armistice, but soon lapsed back into obscurity. With the advent of the "new" military history that sought to understand [warfare](#) through the lens of race, class, and gender, the average Yank of 1917 has been revisited and reassessed. In 2000, Gary Mead published *The Doughboys: America and the First World War*, a competent overview of the average soldier. Relying heavily upon post-war [veteran](#) surveys, Mead's book elucidates who the common soldiers were and how the war had a lasting impact on their lives.

Two other works based on original research in veteran surveys are Mark Meigs' *Optimism at Armageddon: Voices of American Participants in the First World War* (1997) and [Edward A. Gutierrez's](#) *Doughboys on the Great War: How American Soldiers Viewed Their Military Experience* (2014). Meigs used a plethora of primary sources to try to establish an overall mindset for soldiers in the AEF, demonstrating that their perceptions often strayed from reality. With no clear understanding

of the issues that brought them to France, soldiers accepted the information provided by their superiors and were thus able to risk their lives in combat, Meigs asserts. Edward Gutierrez has also looked into previously untapped veteran surveys to challenge the prevailing historiography that doughboys were mindless automatons who were embittered and destroyed by a war they didn't understand. Drawing on over 30,000 questionnaires, Gutierrez found that many veterans were proud to have fought and viewed service overseas as their duty as men. The author surveys soldiers' ethnic and religious backgrounds as well as the communities they came from. From there, the work touches on all aspects of military training and service, much of it in the words of the men themselves.

Richard Faulkner's *Pershing's Crusaders: The American Soldier in World War I* (2017) offers detailed minutiae on how doughboys were equipped, what they ate, how they lived in the field, and what soldiering entailed. The author follows the average soldier from basic training until final discharge, leaving readers with a vivid sense of what it was like to serve during the Great War.

After the war, U.S. veterans were not content to passively trust the [government's](#) promises to care for them. [Jennifer Keene's](#) *Doughboys, the Great War and the Remaking of America* examines the important post-war development of military veterans advocating for the benefits they were owed by the federal government. Keene focuses on the resultant Bonus Bill of 1924 and the GI Bill. Similarly, *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill: How Veteran Politics Shaped the New Deal Era* by Stephen R. Ortiz shows how important First World War veterans were as political actors during the interwar period.

Beth Linker's *War's Waste: Rehabilitation in World War I America* discusses the medical treatment that wounded soldiers received after the war and analyzes the varied outcomes of the federal government's expansive efforts not only to heal physical wounds, but to provide vocational training and expanded access to education to ensure the soldier's peaceful transition back into American society.

Political Aspects

Wilson and Wilsonianism

The Progressive Era saw massive reform movements sweep through the United States. Government institutions expanded rapidly with the onset of the war, and the individual responsible for much of this growth and transformation was President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#), whose legacy remains hotly contested among historians. [Arthur Link \(1920-1998\)](#) devoted his entire career to writing about nearly every facet of Wilson's life and thought, and his writings are essential. Link edited over sixty volumes of Wilson's papers, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, published between 1966 and 1994. Two recent biographies of by John Thompson and [John M. Cooper](#) (both titled *Woodrow Wilson*) offer excellent and fair-minded overviews of Wilson's life.

Wilson's approach to diplomacy and statecraft has been the subject of much controversy as well.

Historians writing in the 1940s and 50s, such as [Walter Lippmann \(1889-1974\)](#) and [George Kennan \(1904-2005\)](#), were highly critical of the president's idealism, which, in their view, did not match well with the ugly realities of war. A collection of essays by Lloyd Ambrosius entitled *Wilsonianism* contains a more recent appraisal of the consequences of what Link referred to as Wilson's "higher realism." Other helpful volumes include Robert Ferrell's *Woodrow Wilson and World War I*, David Esposito's *The Legacy of Woodrow Wilson*, and [Ross Kennedy's](#) *The Will to Believe*.

U.S. Entry into the War

The reasons for U.S. involvement in World War I and the fervor of the average American citizen for the war is a topic no less controversial than Wilson's policy and principles. Two of the major milestones on the path to war were the sinking of the passenger liner [Lusitania](#) in May of 1915 and the [German government's](#) bizarre attempt to influence Mexico to invade the American southwest, detailed in the infamous [Zimmermann Telegram](#). Both incidents enflamed American anger and perpetuated the notion of Germans as monsters who would stop at nothing to win their bid for conquest.

A worthy overview of the sinking of the *Lusitania* can be found in Thomas Bailey and Paul Ryan's *The Lusitania Disaster*. Willi Jasper's more recent *Lusitania: The Cultural History of a Catastrophe* should also be consulted. The Zimmermann Telegram is the subject of Barbara Tuchman's short book of the same name. Frederick Katz's *The Secret War in Mexico* concurs with Tuchman's assessment that the telegram was part of a well-planned scheme to incite hostilities with Mexico and keep America distracted from the European war. Thomas Boghart offers a revisionist take in his 2012 monograph, which sees the telegram as more of a spur of the moment decision than an insidious plot by the Germans.

Lastly, two recent works on American entry into the war are required reading: Justus Doenecke's 2011 study *Nothing Less Than War* and [Michael Neiberg's](#) *The Path to War*. Doenecke emphasizes the role that [propaganda](#) played in influencing Americans to favor war with [Germany](#). Neiberg offers a fascinating reassessment that concludes that the American populous was by and large ahead of President Wilson in favoring U.S. entry into the conflict.

Economic Implications

The United States was the only Allied power to emerge from World War I with a more thriving economy than when it entered – a fact that has caused many to suspect that the main motivation for American entry into the war was financial gain. This interpretation was popularized by a 1934 work by Helmut Engelbrecht and Frank Hanighen called *Merchants of Death*. The "merchants" referred to were a combination of financiers and arms manufacturers who had [profited](#) so much from the fighting in Europe that they plotted behind the scenes to influence President Wilson to enter the war. Congressional investigations ensued after *Merchants* was published, prompting a renewed commitment to American [neutrality](#) as another world war loomed.

A rosier picture of how America prospered from the war was Bernard Baruch's *American Industry in the War*, published in 1941. This official history detailed the important work of the War Industries Board, while neglecting any unseemly issues that arose from war profiteering. Ellis Hawley's *The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order* surveyed the relationship between the federal government and big business, concluding that the two would be joined at the hip for the remainder of the 20th century because of World War I. The war economy's impact on [labor](#) is examined broadly in Joseph McCartin's *Labor's Great War*.

Social and Cultural Considerations

Minorities in Wartime

Beginning in the 1960s, when the U.S. was embroiled in the unpopular conflict in Vietnam, historians turned their gaze to the impact of the First World War on American society. The civil rights movement also influenced a new wave of scholarship on the African-American experience. Some works to derive from this transformation include Nancy Weiss' excellent study of the Wilson administration's draconian policies, "The Negro and the New Freedom: Fighting Wilsonian Segregation," (1969) and Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri's groundbreaking 1974 study of African-American fighting men, *The Unknown Soldiers*.

Elliott Rudwick's 1981 book *W. E. B. DuBois* discusses the war's role in radicalizing the burgeoning civil rights movement, and Adrienne Lentz-Smith's more recent *Freedom Struggle* (2009) also charts the rise of black activism. Chad Williams' masterly study *Torchbearers of Democracy* supplants *The Unknown Soldiers* as the standard overview of African American military involvement, and also shows how black veterans joined in the civil rights movement.

President Wilson's fear that returning [African American soldiers](#) would spread communism within their communities and the ensuing "Red Scare" of 1919 are the subject of two important studies – Theodore Kornweibel's *Investigate Everything* and Ann Hagedorn's *Savage Peace* – both of which show just how widespread the issue of racism was following the war. The [racial violence](#) that began in 1914 would lead to the "Great Migration," when blacks left the South for the Midwestern and Northern states in search for civil and economic opportunities. Carole Marks' 1989 classic *Farewell – We're Good and Gone* covers this demographic shift in admirable detail. For details on the war's impact on Native Americans, see Thomas Britten's *American Indians in World War I* and Susan Krouse's *North American Indians in the Great War*.

Women's History

The [contributions of American women](#) during the First World War and the subsequent passage of the 19th Amendment have been the subject of excellent scholarship. Lettie Gavin's *American Women in World War I* offers an overall survey, while Susan Zeiger looks at the women who served the AEF in her book *In Uncle Sam's Service*. These works show that women were exposed to many of the

same dangers and hardships as men, but once the armistice was signed, the government and military expected them to return to their pre-war roles. Those women who opposed the war and advocated pacifism are chronicled in Francis Early's *A World Without War*.

In her 2008 book *Mobilizing Minerva: American Women in the First World War*, [Kimberly Jensen](#) shows how female participation in the First World War was intended to transform the military as an institution and the United States as a whole. Jensen proposes that many American women participated in the war effort to display their worthiness for full [citizenship](#) in the post-war nation.

Immigrants

The timing of America's first large-scale overseas deployment found many recently immigrated Americans swept up in the events taking place in countries they had recently fled. Fully 20 percent of American forces raised during the conflict were foreign-born. Their experiences are chronicled in [Nancy Ford's](#) *Americans All!* and Christopher Sterba's *Good Americans*. That a large amount of these immigrants were of German ancestry proved problematic, a topic detailed in Frederick Luebke's 1974 study *Bonds of Loyalty*.

Selective Service and Domestic Dissent

To reach the desired manpower goals for the American Expeditionary Forces, the Wilson administration was forced to revive a relic of the American Civil War: conscription, or, as the government called it, "[selective service](#)." The best overall studies of the World War I draft are John Chambers' *To Raise an Army* and Christopher Capozzola's *Uncle Sam Wants You*. Two regional studies concerning the impact of the draft on local communities are Gerald Shenk's "*Work or Fight!*" and Jeannette Keith's *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight*. The Wilson administration's brutal crackdown on those who voiced opposition to the war is covered in Harry Scheiber's *The Wilson Administration and Civil Liberties*. Other general studies of note are William Preston's *Aliens and Dissenters* and Paul Murphy's *World War I and the Origin of Civil Liberties in the United States*.

The Influenza Pandemic

The [Influenza Pandemic](#) of 1918 killed as many as 650,000 Americans and dropped the average American life expectancy by twelve years. For detailed data on the flu's impact, see Alfred Crosby's *Epidemic and Peace, 1918*. For the influenza's effect on America, see [Carol Byerly's](#) *Fever of War* and Nancy Bristow's *American Pandemic*.

Impact on the Arts

America's popular understanding of the First World War is based largely upon the "Lost Generation," a group of American authors and poets who came of age during World War I and whose post-war [writings](#) cast the war in a pessimistic light. Stanley Cooperman's *World War I and the American*

Novel provides a sympathetic overview of the Lost Generation, while Keith Gandall's 2008 work *The Gun and the Pen* argues that much of their angst stemmed more from a sense of missing out on winning fame and glory. James Morris' *The Ambulance Drivers* surveys [Jon Dos Passos \(1896-1970\)](#) through the lens of his turbulent friendship with [Ernest Hemingway \(1899-1961\)](#). [Steven Trout's](#) *Memorial Fictions* analyzes [Willa Cather's \(1873-1947\)](#) First World War writings, which cast the war in a more positive light than Lost Generation writers' do.

For an overview of how World War I affected American [art](#), see David Lubin's *Grand Illusions*. Two worthwhile works on soldier art are Alfred Cornebise's *Art from the Trenches* and Peter Krass' *Portrait of War*. Jennifer Wingate's 2013 *Sculpting Doughboys* focuses on [commemoration](#) by looking at the innumerable soldier memorials erected throughout America after the war.

Commemoration and Memorialization

In 1938, the American Battle Monuments Commission published *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe*, with the assumption that Americans would flock overseas to visit the hallowed grounds where doughboys fought and died. The Second World War broke out just one year later, and this valuable guide was soon forgotten. Lisa Budreau's *Bodies of War* tells the forgotten tale of one group of Americans who did flock to Europe – the “Gold Star Mothers” whose sons had died during the conflict. For an interesting overview of some of the famous spots on American soil that have a First World War association, see Kurt Piehler's *Remembering War the American Way*.

Beginning in the Vietnam era, historians began to study the ways in which societies remembered their collective past. In 1975, American historian and World War II veteran [Paul Fussell \(1924-2012\)](#) published a groundbreaking book titled *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Channeling many Lost Generation convictions, Fussell painted a distorted picture of the war. Fairer-minded studies include two definitive works on the topic: a collection of essays edited by Mark Snell entitled *Unknown Soldiers* and Steven Trout's *On the Battlefield of Memory*.

Conclusion

As this brief overview has shown, the First World War was a defining moment in American history, and scholarship is slowly catching up to this reality. Nonetheless, World War I remains a “forgotten war” in the collective American consciousness. While it is doubtful that the war will ever compete with the American Civil War or World War II in terms of popularity, the abovementioned works provide the seedbed for continued inquiry into the impact of the war upon American institutions and society.

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