

Post-war Societies (USA)

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World War I transformed the United States in so many important ways that it is certainly one of the key causal components in the development of the modern nation. Emerging in no small part from the war itself were: the anti-left and immigrant repression of the Red Scare, the racist violence of the Red Summer, an anti-statist politics and increase in business prestige, the rise of mass consumer culture, and the creation of the largest cohort of veterans by far since the Civil War.

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the war, the [United States](#) appeared almost unscathed compared to its European allies and their empires. The [Russian Empire](#) had nearly 2,000,000 combatants killed, the French nearly 1,500,000, and the British nearly 1,000,000.^[1] Russia was mired in [civil war](#) and its people faced starvation, [France](#) faced an enormous burden of debt, and revolt was shaking the foundations of the [British Empire](#) from [Ireland](#) to [Egypt](#).^[2] The United States, in contrast, had participated in military operations on the [Western Front](#) on a mass scale in only the final months of the war and had fewer than 100,000 combatants killed.^[3] The home front was isolated from the horrors of the fighting at a far remove and the calamitous impact of the war on the wealth of European powers had left the United States as the world's greatest industrial and financial nation.^[4]

It would be easy to assume that there was not a *post-war society* in the United States, one that had been profoundly changed having gone through the war, but rather one simply unleashed into an economic and cultural golden age, a *roaring 1920s*, instead. Americans themselves seemed to be making such a case. Despite having just fought their first large overseas war and won, the people spurned global leadership and historian [John Milton Cooper, Jr.](#) has written that "World War I for a while came to be repudiated even more thoroughly than Vietnam or Iraq" and "the decade of the 1920s featured mostly a benign amnesia toward the conflict".^[5] However, it is now clear to scholars that the war experience did transform the nation in so many important

ways that it is certainly one of the key causal components in the development of the modern United States. Emerging in no small part from the war itself were: the anti-left and immigrant repression of the [Red Scare](#), the racist violence of the Red Summer, an anti-statist politics and increase in business prestige, the rise of mass consumer culture, and, of course, the creation of the largest cohort of veterans by far since the Civil War.

Repression and Violence

The Red Scare

The Red Scare of 1919-1920 in the United States escalated after a rare urban general strike of [labor](#) unions in Seattle, Washington in early 1919 that newspapers nationwide sold to a nervous public as the harbinger of a Soviet-style revolt.^[6] It resulted in widespread [government](#), business, and vigilante suppression of not just leftist revolutionary groups, but also of mainstream organized labor and had a chilling effect on liberal activism and speech broadly. It was in many ways, however, a continuation of a wartime campaign creating an indelible connection between a supposedly un-American revolutionary politics and the ethnic groups that had arrived in large numbers during a recent wave of immigration from eastern, central, and southern Europe. This phenomenon could be traced back to the beginning of the republic, of course, with fears of foreign agents importing the radicalism of the French Revolution and later immigrant anarchism during the Gilded Age.^[7] However, World War I built a new federal capacity to investigate and repress this perceived threat, in conjunction with local police and vigilante forces. The Department of Justice and its [Bureau of Investigation](#), armed with the Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 and 1918 and the Immigration Act of 1918, now had both the laws and the means to raid, prosecute, and even deport immigrants with leftist politics.^[8] German immigrants had to register as *enemy aliens* during the war, formally establishing that the nation had internal enemies in need of policing. Historian [Christopher Capozzola](#) has argued that “the assumption widely held in the United States that Germany had deliberately fomented the Bolshevik Revolution” aided a “shift from ‘pro-German’ to ‘Bolshevik’ in the immediate aftermath of the war.”^[9]

Having emerged out of popular nativist sentiment and justified by the determination of the state and industry to brook no interference with war mobilization, the campaign evolved to continue after the conflict, although without a new federal peacetime sedition law.^[10] Not just the [Russian Revolution](#), which inspired radicals worldwide, but the dramatic growth of American Federation of Labor unions, their partnership with war production agencies during the war, and the record strike year of 1919, pushed the urgency of a campaign that brought about the dramatic diminishment of working-class organizing during the 1920s.^[11] The Red Scare faded as a central newspaper and public political focus over the course of 1920, and failed to take hold as a major issue in the fall presidential campaign.^[12] However, its impact was long lasting; working-class and progressive politics were pushed to the margins of national life until the Great Depression of the 1930s.^[13] The Red Scare was also instrumental, along with a revived post-war Ku Klux Klan with a large national membership, in bringing about the National Origins Act of 1924, which ended the mass emigration of Catholic and Jewish Europeans to the United States and made the exclusion of Asian immigration more comprehensive.^[14] Congress funded a new U.S. Border Patrol that same year.^[15]

The Red Summer

One of the most transformative outcomes of World War I was the beginning in earnest of the Great Migration of Blacks out of the Southeast. Between 1900 and 1970, about 6,000,000 Black Americans left the region and the proportion living there declined from 93 to 53 percent. The economic opportunities of war mobilization were the key catalyst for this journey away from the Jim Crow system of racial apartheid and toward hopes of greater safety, prosperity, and dignity.^[16] Tragically, the successful community building efforts of Black migrants were met with strenuous local resistance. Tensions erupted into an unprecedented wave of [race rioting](#) that stretched from 1917 to at least 1921 and set the stage for a long-term future of urban segregation and further violence.

The rioting would peak in the post-war summer of 1919 (hence the long-used term *Red Summer* refers to the bloodiness of the season, and not to the simultaneously simmering conflict over revolution), but it broke open spectacularly during the first wartime summer of 1917 in the small, but rapidly growing midwestern industrial community of East St. Louis, Illinois.^[17] “When the terror ended,” historian Charles L. Lumpkins wrote, “white attackers had destroyed property worth three million dollars, razed several

black neighborhoods, injured hundreds, and forced at least seven thousand black townspeople to seek refuge.”^[18] The official death toll, in the dozens, may well be a dramatic undercounting. According to historian Malcolm McLaughlin, “Many deaths, it was said, were not recorded officially and some bodies had been thrown into the Mississippi River and been swept away, south.”^[19]

There was more to come. Historian David F. Krugler found that “between late 1918 and late 1919, the United States recorded ten major race riots, dozens of minor, racially charged clashes, and almost 100 lynchings.” Krugler’s work asserts the importance of active Black resistance to this onslaught in the forms of armed self-defense, reporting the truth in the Black press, and pursuing justice through the courts.^[20] The era reached a bloody climax four years after the violence in East St. Louis, in the Great Plains city of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Historian Scott Ellsworth found that, in the aftermath, “while most rioters returned to their homes, most of Tulsa’s black citizenry was imprisoned; over six thousand blacks were reported as being interned” and “over one thousand homes and businesses – much of black Tulsa – lay in ruin.” As in East St. Louis, death estimates ranged from dozens to over several hundred, with many more injured.^[21]

A Modern Society

The Anti-statist Turn

A celebration of private enterprise permeated the politics of the 1920s and historian Lynn Dumenil has emphasized “strong hostility to government, especially federal, power” during the era, as opposed to the several-decade drive (often referred to as the *Progressive Era*) to apply ameliorative reform to a rapidly growing and modernizing society with statist solutions preceding World War I. Dumenil has positioned World War I as a turning point here, after which both political parties would rail against “federal expansion” and assert “states’ rights”. The war effort had relied upon and encouraged voluntarism as much as possible, but the federal government still had to expand its prerogatives, capacity, and national reach enormously. It often used coercive power that was highly visible through an unprecedented regulation of industries and firms, restrictions to consumption and civil liberties, enactment of mass conscription and training, and the incessant production of propaganda.^[22]

Even a global flu pandemic, which peaked in late 1918 and killed an estimated 675,000 Americans, a shocking proportion of them in the prime of life, failed to create public demand for experts and reformers to provide protection through the state.^[23] Great Britain established a ministry of health, but the U.S. did not found a new agency of equivalent importance until 1953. Historian Sandra Opdycke has argued that “most physicians dealt with their defeat by obliterating all reference to it and going on with their careers.” Opdycke has concluded that the key outcome of the pandemic in the U.S. was silence, despite “orphaned children, bereaved husbands and wives, broken homes, financial hardships, and lingering physical and mental disabilities.”^[24]

The drive to prohibit alcohol was a critical factor in the development of the anti-statist turn.^[25] Early in the war effort, all potential foodstuffs were banned from the distillation of alcohol, and military training camps, even their surrounding areas, were declared dry. The Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution passed through Congress in December 1917 and spent 1918 going through the ratification process at the state level.^[26] Prohibition ultimately proved a disaster for federal prestige in the post-war era and became the first amendment to the Constitution ever to be repealed in 1933.^[27] It was an engine for corruption and violence, with anemic enforcement and little popular support in the growing cities that were shaping the nation’s future.^[28]

With the federal government appearing inept and outmatched by its own laws, business leaders had an opening that they used well. Often cast as villains in the Progressive Era, the war effort had been an opportunity to refocus their image on patriotism, cooperation, and victory.^[29] With a new post-war understanding of public relations, corporations drove out the unions that had gained so much momentum during mobilization and offered instead the “American Plan”, which included stock ownership, profit sharing, pensions, and insurance. The plan was heavily promoted as workplace liberty and opportunity, while unions were painted as restrictive, counterproductive, and suppressive of individual opportunity.^[30] The Russian Revolution during the war and the attendant domestic anti-radical campaign, as well as United States military intervention in the civil war in Russia, set capitalism on the side of liberty and set socialism, even reform, as un-American for the post-war period. The use of propaganda to push Liberty Bond drives during the war introduced many Americans to investing for the first time and equated it with patriotism.^[31] The massive propaganda campaigns of the mobilization effort dramatically expanded and modernized the

advertising industry and positioned it to become central to the American economy and a new mass culture in the 1920s as a dizzying array of new products and technologies competed for rising urban incomes.^[32]

Consumer Culture

The mobilization effort had played an outsized role in the further development of technologies, and their mass production, that would shape the modernization of American society. Mass ownership of automobiles revolutionized the economy, and American life broadly, in the post-war period.^[33] Even more than an ascendant film industry that had projected its patriotism, radio played an extraordinary role in connecting Americans and shaping a national culture during the 1920s. German destruction of Allied transatlantic cables during the war made this emerging technology a strategic priority and the government claimed radio patents until the conflict ended. Afterward, the military pushed General Electric to create the Radio Corporation of America to produce their equipment. Historian Phillip G. Payne has asserted that “as the centerpiece company making the hot new technology, [RCA] became the glamour stock of the decade.”^[34] However, even as mass ownership of radios and other burgeoning consumer technologies skyrocketed during the decade, it is important to remember that despite low unemployment and rising wages, the post-war nation was characterized by a vast wealth disparity. Historian Roland Marchand has found that for the advertising industry in this period “the term ‘mass audience’ ... referred primarily to those Americans with higher-than-average incomes” and could exclude 30 to 65 percent of the population.^[35]

The emergent mass consumer culture held particularly uneven results for **women**. The war had a substantive impact on the rise of the ready-to-wear fashion industry, which was, of course, part of a longer process of emancipation from the suffocating strictures of Victorian dress that were increasingly incompatible with women’s participation in the leisure and work opportunities of the modern city.^[36] The work and volunteer needs of the mobilization effort required more practical clothing, and both official and popular imagery of women wearing it and performing these new roles was approving, despite the potentially jarring shift in **gender** norms. But the transformative power of the war had its cultural limits; the iconic imagery of the tough woman war worker and the sexualized post-war flapper can mask the persistence of ongoing barriers to women’s equality and autonomy, even just as they had won the franchise in the war era after decades of organized struggle.^[37] The widespread equation of women’s liberation with the politics of revolution, and the declining place for progressive reform movements in national politics, should serve as a caution against overestimating the staying power of wartime shifts and underestimating the cultural conservatism of the 1920s.^[38]

Veterans and Democracy

At the end of the war, 20 percent of American men aged eighteen to forty-five were in the military. Demobilization was chaotic, with no real national plan to suddenly reintegrate about 4,000,000 military personnel back into civilian society and an economy thrust into recession. Migration to war production centers and high wages due to labor scarcity had dramatically raised the cost of living as increased labor strength and militancy combined with deferred wartime grievances and the dismantling of federal arbitration to turn 1919 into a record strike year. Political and economic elites feared that the combat-hardened men of the Meuse-Argonne offensive would turn toward unions, or even to revolution. Black veterans saw their hopes frustrated as their service was rewarded not with more equal citizenship and opportunity, but with a wave of violence against their communities.^[39] Officers were organizing the patriotic American Legion as an anticipatory countermeasure to unrest even while the troops were still in France. The organization collaborated in suppressing radicalism and in race rioting in the immediate aftermath of the war, but could ultimately be characterized in the longer term as more of an effective lobbying group for veterans’ benefits.^[40] Historian **Jennifer Keene** has argued that “veteran vigilantism ultimately proved the exception rather than the rule.”^[41]

It was an unexpected outcome that veteran politics focused on, according to Keene, “a major legislative campaign from 1920-4 demanding that the government redistribute the profits of war from the captains of industry to the working-class men who had served in uniform.” Just as working-class organizing and progressive reform movements seemed to be in retreat, veterans emerged as just such a force. The veterans, through the American Legion, won bonds from the government in 1924 with a promise to pay them as a bonus in 1945.^[42]

Befitting the anti-statist turn of the era, corruption revelations in 1923 thrust the Veterans’ Bureau, created in 1921 to assist the

disabled, into scandal. The director, Colonel [Charles R. Forbes \(1878-1952\)](#), a decorated veteran, resigned amidst accusations that massive embezzlement and fraud had enriched him and his friends while the agency did little for the veterans it supposedly served. He was investigated by the U.S. Senate, convicted in federal court in 1924, and served a prison sentence.^[43]

In the summer of 1932, the year preceding the New Deal and perhaps the most desperate of the Great Depression, tens of thousands of veterans marched to Washington, D.C. in a racially-integrated movement that camped together in the city in hopes that Congress would hear their plea to pay the bonus early. Instead, they faced police and troops, had their encampment burned, and were pushed out of the capital of the nation they had fought for. Despite this violent defeat, the veterans responded peacefully and kept lobbying, finally achieving early payment of the bonus in 1936 and having enhanced the culture and practice of democracy in the United States.^[44]

Conclusion

For the United States, World War I was much more than a coda to the Progressive Era and an overreach of the statist reform ideal at home and abroad that paved the way for the private-sector led *roaring 1920s*. It spurred the end of mass immigration from Europe and the beginning of both the Great Migration of Blacks out of the South and an enduring and defining conflict with Russian Communism. It cemented the future of the nation as a Fordist society of mass production for mass consumption through a new mass culture. Americans turned against World War I in the post-war era, skeptical that it really had been about democracy, but they watched veterans use the tools of democracy to organize for justice and help usher in a New Deal in the era that followed the post-war period.

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Notes

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10. ↑ Murray, Red Scare 1964, pp. 244-246.
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14. ↑ Ibid., pp. 265-266; Dumenil, Lynn: The Modern Temper. American Culture and Society in the 1920s, New York 1995, p. 207.
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17. ↑ James Weldon Johnson, who became the first Black leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People during the Red Scare, may have coined the term *Red Summer* in the early 1930s. It appears in his book *Black Manhattan*, New York 1930, p. 246 and again in the autobiography *Along This Way*, New York 1933, p. 341.
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25. ↑ Dumenil, *Modern Temper* 1995, pp. 29-31.
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27. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-101.
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40. ↑ Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You* 2008, pp. 211-212.
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