

World War I in Washington

By David Wilma, Posted 8/20/2004

http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=5732

The U.S. entry into World War I, at the time called the World War or the Great War, proved a boon economically to Washington, but cost the state in lives and in the loss of civil liberties. The Great War in Europe began in August 1914, with Germany, Austro-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire (Central Powers) lined up against Great Britain and its empire, France, Russia, Italy, and other countries (Allies). Most of the conflict raged in France and in Western Russia, with other campaigns in the Middle East, and in the Austrian and Italian Alps. The United States entered the war in April 1917. The war ended on November 11, 1918, when Germany surrendered.

When the war began in Europe in 1914, the United States quickly became an important source for war materiel for the Allies. U.S. ships carried arms, munitions, raw material, and foodstuffs to France and Great Britain. Germany, cut off by the British Royal Navy from its customary overseas sources of supply, fought back by attacking shipping with surface raiders and submarines. The German government suspended its attacks on all shipping in the war zone around Britain and Ireland after the torpedoing of the civilian liner *Lusitania* in May 1915. The Germans resumed submarine warfare resumed in 1917 and President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war. The U.S. officially entered the war on April 6, 1917 against Germany. Congress declared war against Austria-Hungary the following December.

The Washington National Guard had just returned home from guarding the Mexican border when in March 1917, Washington Governor Ernest Lister (1870-1919) ordered units mobilized. The 2nd Washington Infantry Regiment was drafted into federal service on August 5, 1917, and folded into the 41st Division along with National Guard units from Montana, Idaho, and Oregon. The Washington Field Artillery became part of the 146th Field Artillery Regiment. Both units were shipped to France late in 1917. The 41st Division served as a replacement, training, and depot unit. The 146th Field Artillery saw combat duty.

Neutrality

Despite the neutral position of the U.S., American industry actively supplied belligerents, particularly the Allies. German agents sabotaged munitions shipments, one in Elliott Bay in 1915 and one on Black Tom Island in New Jersey in 1916. The warring governments launched propaganda campaigns for the sympathies of the American people.

In the general election of 1916, the war in Europe was a hot issue. Washington voters and others in Western states went for incumbent President Woodrow Wilson who campaigned on his efforts to keep the nation out of the war. His position was supported by socialists, pacifists, organized labor, and many immigrant groups who did not want to join in the carnage between corrupt monarchies. More conservative elements of society, such as businessmen, advocated preparedness. At a Preparedness Day Parade in San Francisco in July 1916, a bomb killed 10 people. Radicals were wrongfully blamed for the act. In February 1917, before Wilson was inaugurated, Germany announced the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare.

Economic Boom

Washington farmers, loggers, and food packers benefited from the war from the outset. Lumber and wheat prices climbed to record levels and the demand for flour and processed salmon kept new mills and canneries humming. Wood and steel shipbuilding grew from a minor industry to second only to lumber in the Northwest economy. Seattle, Tacoma, and Vancouver built new shipyards, first for European customers, then for the U.S. government. Skinner & Eddy, Ames, and J. F. Duthie in Seattle, Todd in Tacoma, and Columbia Shipbuilding in Vancouver all built modern shipyards. Fifty thousand men took jobs in the new sector, which spun off thousands of other jobs.

Washington forests supplied wood for ships, Army posts, and airplanes (the Sitka spruce was uniquely suited for wing spars), but the woods had been a battleground between organized labor and the owners. In the summer of 1917, 40,000 to 50,000 loggers and mill workers struck for an eight-hour day and it took the intervention of Governor Ernest Lister and Secretary of War Newton Baker to get owners to grant concessions and get the men back to work.

But the owners were not up to wartime demands for quantity and quality. Only 10 percent of the mill runs met military specifications. So the War Department sent 5,000 soldiers into the woods as the Spruce Production Division under Lieutenant Colonel Brice P. Disque. The civilian arm was the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen (4 Ls), which by the end of the war had signed up 100,000 men who pledged not to strike. After the war, the 4 Ls became a company union and stymied organizing efforts by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Colonel Disque got the industry on track and the Spruce Division built camps, and railroads and accessed remote stands of spruce for the war effort.

Sedition

In 1917, Governor Lister called the legislature into special session and, among other actions, it passed an anti-syndicalism law to supplement similar federal laws. The IWW had been particularly vocal in its opposition to the European war, and the new legislation made organizers and members subject to arrest for disloyal talk and seditious actions. Lister, however, ended up vetoing the anti-syndicalism measure, stating in part:

"Many persons who are strongly opposed to the I.W.W. teachings feel that the effect of such legislation on our statute books would be to place in jeopardy the liberty of many citizens regarding whose loyalty to their government and to law and order there can be no doubt" (Governor Cut Off Appropriation for Bureau").

Two years later, the State Legislature passed the measure again, and Lister vetoed it once more. This time, his veto was overridden and the anti-syndicalism statute became law.

Preparedness groups such as Seattle's Minute Men were folded into the American Protective League, an all-volunteer force of businessmen and anti-labor agents who assisted federal officers with surveillance and in raids. Federal agents did not have cars, so the APL volunteers did the driving. Police rounded up people based on the thinnest allegations of disloyal utterances and were booked into jails for federal authorities. The overflow from the Seattle jail went to Everett. The number of loyalty-related charges in the federal judicial district of Washington were as follows:

- Passport application violations -- 1,114
- Enemy aliens -- 399
- Loyalty reports to the government -- 707
- Disloyal citizens -- 677
- Liberty Bond and Red Cross slackers -- 1,198

- IWW agents -- 1,198
- Pro-German radicals -- 990
- Alleged spies or German agents -- 449

The special prosecutor sent from Washington, D.C., found that many cases lacked probable cause for indictment and the prisoners were released after months in custody. The prosecutor had to ask the Minute Men to stop deluging his office with allegations. Anti-war activist Louise Oliveriau (1884-1963) was convicted of sedition in Seattle for mailing circulars that encouraged young men to avoid military service. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in October 1917 pulled Russia out of the war and made pro-war and business people fear that a similar uprising was imminent in the U.S. When the Russian steamer *Shilka* arrived in Elliott Bay in December 1917, headlines proclaimed that she carried arms and explosives for an insurrection by the IWW or to serve as a commerce raider. When the crew and sympathizers demonstrated on the pier, *The Seattle Times* called them "the worst kind of Bolsheviks and anarchists" (Berner, 249). The cargo turned out to be licorice root. But the hunt for seditious elements continued beyond the end of the war.

The Flu Pandemic

The last year of the war was marked by a pandemic (world wide epidemic) of Spanish influenza. The widespread movement of populations along with bad living conditions allowed the contagion to spread quickly. Seattle was infected by a trainload of Navy recruits. Hundreds of thousands died around the world and as many as 1,600 died in Seattle. Health authorities closed schools and theaters and banned public gatherings, even funerals. The disease disappeared in 1919, almost as quickly as it appeared, and it has not reoccurred since.

Germany signed an armistice in November 1918 and the guns of the western front fell silent. In all, as estimated by the United States War Department, some 8 million people were killed during the war (5 million on the side of the Allies and about 3 million on the side of the Central Powers.) Another 21 million were wounded (12 million Allies, 8 million on the side of the Central Powers)(*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

A total of 60,617 Washington men enlisted in the Army, Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard and 1,642 lost their lives, killed in action, died of wounds, died of accidents, and died of disease -- approximately as many as died of influenza in Seattle. Many of the dead were eventually repatriated and buried near their homes.

University of Washington graduate Deming "Dick" Bronson (1894-1957) received the Medal of Honor for gallantry in action. Bronson was a U.S. Army First Lieutenant in September 1918, when, over a period of two days and with severe wounds, he led several successful assaults on German positions. He was awarded his honor in 1929.

Washington's sacrifices in the Great War are remembered today with numerous monuments, including major memorials on the State Capital campus in Olympia and on Des Moines Memorial Way in King County. Centralia also erected a monument to four World War I veterans who were killed while attempting to destroy the town's IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) offices on the first Armistice Day, November 11, 1919. It is now overlooked by a mural honoring Wesley Everest, a Wobbly, who was also a veteran, lynched in the riot's aftermath.

Sources:

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Note: This essay was corrected on January 17, 2013, and the source list was updated on April 5, 2017.