**How WWI Changed America**

**Podcast Series**

**Chris Cappazolla - Conscientious\_Objectors** (19m 31s)

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**3 speakers** (Speaker 1, Dr. O'Connell, Dr. Chris Cappozola)

**[0:00:11]**

**Speaker 1**: Welcome to the, How world War I Changed America Podcast Series. Sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon foundation with hosts, Dr Libby O'Connell.

**[0:00:26]**

**Dr. O'Connell**: This is Libby O'Connell. Our guest today, Dr Chris Capozzola professor from MIT.

**[0:00:32]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: Thank you for having me.

**[0:00:34]**

**Dr. O'Connell**: Today our topic is Citizenship In America. Rights And Responsibilities During World War I. Could you talk a little bit about the large religious minority groups in The United States, in 1914. I say large because there's so many different religions in United States. So many people came here for religious freedom and so many people developed new religions when they got here. So let's just focus on some of the bigger ones. What are their stances on war? What are the stances of the large religious minorities on World War I in 1914, when the war breaks out?

**[0:01:07]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: Well, the United States, as you mentioned, it's an incredibly religiously diverse place and always has been. But by the early 20th century, the immigration that had happened in the previous generations had made it even more so. So if it has a historically Protestant core with the Christian tradition, the United States has other religious groups and that groups populations were growing by the early 20th century. In some ways you see a big increase in the number of Catholics in the United States, a big increase in the number of Jews who were entering the United States. And I think it's worth noting that there are also changes within Protestant Christianity as well. Big debates going on within Protestant churches and blitz over how to read the Bible, how to worship, and the emergence of what we would now call Evangelical Christianity and Mainline Christianity. Now when the war comes in 1914, this is a world crisis. They see country's at war, they see levels of devastation. And what people who are religious do is they view this crisis through the lens of their faith. They turn to their church, they turn to their spiritual leaders for answers to what to do about the war. All of the major religious facts, support or at least have no sort of official position on the war. Right? And don't sort of speak out and call for sort of pacifism or for their members not to participate or support the war. But all of the religious organizations want and in fact do a lot of work to try to mitigate the destruction than the damage that the war is causing. And particularly for American Religious Organizations trying to raise funds and raise awareness for those suffering in Europe.

**[0:02:54]**

**Dr. O'Connell**: What about the Pacifist Religious Groups, like the Mennonites?

**[0:02:59]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: There's also other groups whose religious views are opposed to war in general and people that we would now call pacifist some more so than others. And for them the war is the confirmation of the horrors of war in general and they are calling for the United States to end war and for all of the warring powers to end war. And calling on their own members not to take part. Pacifism in the United States can be found as a strand in almost any religious tradition, but it's probably best associated with the so called Historic Peace Churches. These are ones that have peace as sort of central principles of their faith. That includes the friends or Quakers who are one of the largest and derives out of sort of the Christian traditions of Britain in the 18th century. And so most of the people who are Quakers are born in the United States, are sort of English speaking are sort of middle class or living in towns or cities. And then the other big sort of historic peace churches are the Brethren Oriented sort of Mennonite, Amish and others. And many of these are German speaking and coming from parts of... From German communities, either in Germany or actually in Central or Eastern Europe. And for these groups they have an opposition to war and to participating in it, which they feel is sinful and wrong.

**[0:04:25]**

**Dr. O'Connell**: A lot of these groups have been in America for a long time. I grew up in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which was settled by the Moravians in the 18th century. How did the Historic Peace Churches, deal with war in the past? I mean, they were here during the Civil War and also in the Indian Wars and the Spanish-American War, did they refuse to fight? Was there pushback on that at the time? How was World War I different in their response?

**[0:04:50]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: So Pacifists had opposed all of the Wars in America's past and either on principle or on the level of participation, either as an organization or as individuals. Though some Quakers, even if they supported the American revolution as an idea, we're opposed to the violence of the revolution itself. And we can see those in other past Wars. A delegation of pacifists met with president Abraham Lincoln during the civil war and he sort of said, "Well, if everyone was as good as you, we wouldn't have a civil war." Right? And so there's a respect for Pacifist views, but generally not an accommodation of the principal. What's different in the First World War is large scale conscription: the Selective Service Act of 1917. And what is different about it is that, everyman between 18 and 45 has to register. But it includes a provision that allows those with religious objections to war to make a claim on them, to be the so-called conscientious objector, which is a new term in 1917, and it's also a new legal right.

**[0:05:56]**

**Dr. O'Connell**: Well, would that claim of being a conscientious objector, fall under the First Amendment Rights? Is that a religious right that's being recognized in the Selective Service Act?

**[0:06:06]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: At the time, it's definitely understood as a religious accommodation, that people would trace back to the First Amendment of Protections, of Freedom of Religion. And although there are some people who object to war on secular grounds, particularly political opponents of war in general or of this war. When Americans talked about conscientious objectors in 1917, they generally only had religious objectors in mind. And here's that problem, right, is that although the right exists on paper, it's very unclear what the policy is going to look like in practice. So there's a space on your draft registration form, to mark down if you are a conscientious objector, but it doesn't guarantee that you won't be drafted. For example, the president Woodrow Wilson said, "Well, we'll have some sort of policy for these people." But he didn't really act very quickly to develop one. And in the meantime, conscientious objectors who wanted to know what was going to happen to them we're really sort of not sure.

**[0:07:09]**

**Dr. O'Connell**: How did people respond to these conscientious objectors within a community, those who were, for example, eager to join the war or knew that their sons would be going? Was there an open intolerance or something in between?

**[0:07:23]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: This was not an easy time to be a conscientious objector. Even if the right existed in the law. That there were, as you mentioned, there were Americans who were watching their sons or their brothers march off to war and we're critical of conscientious objectors. And they had some sort of grudging acknowledgement that these people had religious views, but they felt that they were getting away with something that their own children were not. So many conscientious objectors make an enormous effort to try to do some alternative service. They want to say, "Well look, we're a good American. We want to support our country, but our religious faith doesn't allow us to fight. So we'd like to do something else." So many objectors wanted to find a form of alternative service. And then eventually this leads to things like the American Friends Service Committee, which is a group of volunteers who are trying to do humanitarian pacifist, sort of non-military help in a war zone. There are some religious groups that felt that any cooperation with the war was a support for war. And for them the conscientious objection is a principle that they will not break. And so they don't want to do alternative service. And many of them end up in fact, in prison. In military prisons for refusing to follow orders, refusing to do anything at all. It's also extra hard for Mennonites and Amish who are ethnically German or speak German. And because then they're both Pacifist and German-Americans. And so they find themselves under a lot of scrutiny and sometimes even violence in their community.

**[0:09:00]**

**Dr. O'Connell**: So you've given us a great overview of how religious minorities in United States were treated during world war one, particularly those who are, what we call the Historic Peace Churches, including the Brethren and the Quakers. Are there specific examples you could give us so that we get a little cleaner or sort of closer look at what specifically might be going on?

**[0:09:21]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: Yeah, so conscientious objectors had very different experiences and that dependent in many ways on sort of what it was like at any particular military camp where they might have been drafted. And some sort of camp officers were very accommodating and would dispatch conscientious objectors to area farms, to work at the harvest [inaudible 00:09:41]. Others could be more critical and felt like it was their job actually to dissuade conscientious objectors or change their mind. And this was particularly true for those conscientious objectors, who were sort of extremists, who wanted nothing to do with the war. And you can see this in the story of Joseph and Michael's Hofer, who were Hutterites, the kind of Anabaptist much like the Amish or Mennonite. And the Hofers felt that they couldn't do anything to support the war effort. Even sort of helping people, even wearing a uniform, anything like that would have been a violation of their religious views. They were eventually court-martialed and sent to the military prison at Alcatraz in San Francisco Bay. And experienced incarceration, they experienced solitary confinement and in fact, actually two of the brothers died in jail during the war. And so I think it just shows the extremes that some conscientious objectors would go to defend their faith and also the extreme test that non objectors often subjected them to, in order to test the religious faith.

**[0:10:49]**

**Dr. O'Connell**: What about someone like Alvin York, who starts off as a Pacifist as part of his religious faith, but then eventually ends up fighting in the military? Do you know that story?

**[0:11:02]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: The story of Alvin York is probably one of the best known conscientious objectors from the first world war. Alvin York was from Eastern Tennessee. He was sort of basically a farm boy, who grew up in a pacifist church and he claims conscientious objector status just as many others did when he first registered for the draft, but nevertheless found himself drafted. And when he got to his military camp, he was questioned, was asked about his religious faith, was tested on his Bible knowledge, put under a real ringer and eventually gave up his status and joined the US army. He did eventually serve overseas in France and in fact served with remarkable distinction and was awarded the medal of honor for an attack that he led in 1918. And York, for many Americans at the time, was a symbol that, "Oh gosh, consciousness objection must have been a terrible idea, because having this policy means that we could have lost a really good soldier like Alvin York." But I think the message is different. It's that, it just shows how important it is to have policies like this in place to help people [inaudible] reconcile their religious obligations with their political obligations. Alvin York thought that through. He prayed it through. He chose to serve and he did that, but I think that his choosing to serve defends the choice of others, who felt I can't make that same choice. What's also interesting about York is that he comes back during the second world war, in 1940, when the United States was debating having a draft again on the Eve of World War II and in fact becomes a national celebrity. There's a movie made about him and he becomes a real symbol, of power someone can reconcile their religious face with their national patriotism.

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**Dr. O'Connell**: What about people who are opposed to the war, but didn't claim that opposition as a religious right, but rather just a Freedom of Speech First Amendment Right? How were they treated?

**[0:13:05]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: Well at this time, the sense of the First Amendment that Americans had was not as robust as it is in the 21st century. That, although there was a sense that there were rights to publish or to petition for the regressive grievances, there were also concerns that most Americans had, that those rights could be taken too far. And so very soon after the US enters the war, they adopt the Espionage Act and then expand it with the Sedition Act in 1918, that imposed restrictions on what you could say against the war, what you could do against it and what you could publish about it. These provisions are pretty strict and include possible jail time and enormous fines. And so organizations that opposed the war for political reasons had even fewer options than the conscientious objectors to state their claims.

**[0:13:57]**

**Dr. O'Connell**: You see it dampening of First Amendment Rights in wartime generally, I think in the United States, right? I mean, Lincoln certainly supported the First Amendment in many ways, but during the civil war, people were jailed for their opposition. Does this make president Wilson just one more president following that tradition or was his administration unusual in their response to the suppression of First Amendment Rights?

**[0:14:23]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: Yeah, there's an old Latin term, right? "Inter arma enim silent lēgēs." Right? In times of war, the law is silent. And from as early as the founding of the Republic, at times of war, Civil Liberties have been restricted. And what's ironic is that Woodrow Wilson knew that Abraham Lincoln had restricted Civil Liberties. He had been critical of Lincoln's policies and written about them when he was a younger man before he became president. But then Wilson oversaw restrictions of Civil Liberties that were quite substantial and they were in different areas that had more to do with speech and some of the large scale efforts, that were undertaken during the civil war. But we certainly can't say that Wilson was good on Civil Liberties or the First Amendment, even by the standards of the day. And he was criticized groundly both by opponents of the war, but even by members of his own Congress for the positions that were taken

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**Dr. O'Connell**: Looking forward from World War I, how did that experience impact religious minorities and people who were speaking out against World War II or Korea or Vietnam? Was there more acceptance among Mainstream-America as the 20th century progresses or do you see it as a changing scenario that was less predictable?

**[0:15:48]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: I mean there's always tensions between Liberty and security in wartime, but that's that. I think that there's a big difference between the First World War and the Second World War, particularly around the accommodation of religious opposition to the war. And that there are conscientious objectors in the Second World War. They again have a legal right but they are able to claim it and they're able to undertake alternative service to sort of do something for their country, even if they feel they can't do something for the war effort without violating their conscience. And I think also the Second World War, because it's a war against a Pacifist power, so it forces Americans to be more explicit about the rights and freedoms that they're defending and Religious Liberty is one of those. And I think in many ways we have religious minorities to thank for those protections. Both Amish and Mennonite groups, Quaker groups and here I would also add Jehovah's Witness Groups, who file lawsuits and bring cases, that force the Supreme Court to recognize these rights.

**[0:16:54]**

**Dr. O'Connell**: I have a question for you about what citizenship meant during this time and what were the rights and responsibilities during World War I? I think that understanding is different from what we see as the rights of responsibility of citizens today. How did World War I, shape that understanding of citizenship? I know that's a complicated question, but just thought I'd love to hear what you have to say on that.

**[0:17:20]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: So when we talk about citizenship, we're really talking about two things, right? First there's the formal category. Are you a citizen of the United States or of some other country? And of course the war makes that boundary visible, because of the war, because of the draft, because of all kinds of other policies. But citizenship is also something a little bit more general or a morphous. A sense of do you feel like you belong? That you are a full citizen or an equal citizen? And part of that is being a member of America and feeling like an American and part of it is also having the rights and responsibilities of an American citizen. And those rights we know of pretty well. We talk about those all the time. Freedom of Speech of The Press and the General Sense of Liberty, which includes just being able to be an American and have your individual freedom. But we tend to talk less about the responsibilities but we all have them. We pay taxes. We might be called for jury service. We might be called for military service if there were a draft. And those responsibilities are also more visible during war time and because the government needs you to do things. So the First World War generates a long conversation in the United States about; who is a citizen, what their rights are, and also what their responsibilities are.

**[0:18:38]**

**Dr. O'Connell**: Chris, it's been great to have you here again. Thanks so much for bringing all your knowledge to an audience that I'm hoping includes not just teachers and students but the general public as well. So today we were talking about Citizenship, Rights and Responsibilities. With our guest today, Dr Chris Capozzola, professor at MIT. Chris, thank you so much for joining us.

**[0:19:00]**

**Dr. Cappozola**: Thank you.

**[0:19:04]**

**Speaker 1**: Thank you for listening to this episode of; How World War I Changed America. The podcast series is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon foundation and the collaboration of the US World War I Centennial commission, the Doughboy foundation, the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas city, National History day, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History.

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