**How WWI Changed America**

**Podcast Series**

**Chris Cappazolla\_-\_Immigrants and Immigration in WWI** (22m 27s)

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**3 speakers** (Announcer, Libby O'Connell, Chris Capazzola)

**[0:00:11]**

**Announcer**: Welcome to the How WWI Changed America podcast series, sponsored by the Andrew W Mellon foundation with host Dr. Libby O'Connell.

**[0:00:26]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Hello and welcome to this morning's podcast from the WWI Centennial Commission. I'm Libby O'Connell. I am delighted to welcome Prof. Chris Capozzola from MIT. This morning we're going to be talking about immigrants and immigration in WWI. So welcome Chris. Thanks for joining us today.

**[0:00:48]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Thank you for having me with you.

**[0:00:50]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So Chris America has always been a nation of immigrants. What makes the early part of the 20th century unusual?

**[0:00:56]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Well, you're right, the United States has always been a country of immigrants, but never more so than at the turn of the 20th century. This is a time when the United States is undergoing rapid industrialization and agricultural transformation. And so it's drawing people to the United States as workers and new settlers from all over the world. They're also drawing immigrants to the United States from parts of the world that hadn't really sent immigrants before. So the number of immigrants was higher and where they're coming from is different. This is going to pose challenges for Americans sense of themselves as a nation. And when the war comes, it makes them stop and think and look around a little bit and figure out who are we and what is the nation that we're fighting for.

**[0:01:43]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So when war breaks out in Europe in 1914 does that affect the flow of immigration to the United States?

**[0:01:51]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Yes, absolutely. And I think it affects immigration in really three ways. So first of all, there are military call ups and a lot of the war in European powers. So a lot of the people who might have otherwise immigrated to the United States are suddenly finding themselves in uniform. Second, all of the European economies and in fact the whole world is suddenly on an economic war footing. So there are jobs to be had anywhere. So a lot of people who might've left their countries to come to work in a factory in the United States suddenly are working in their home countries. Now those are both things that are going to reduce immigration. But the one thing that really does it, and the final nail in the coffin is by 1915 there's submarine warfare all through the Atlantic. So even people who might've wanted to get on a boat, were very reluctant to do so after that point. So the rates of migration into the United States just plummet within about a year of the beginning of the war.

**[0:02:52]**

**Libby O'Connell**: But you do have a lot of the recent immigrants in the United States and many of them are coming from countries that are participating in WWI. How does that affect the immigrant communities in America?

**[0:03:05]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Well, exactly. This is not to say that there aren't tons of immigrants in the United States were watching their own European homelands as they are going to war with each other, or even if their home countries are neutral, are being affected by them. So some of the largest immigrant groups in the country at the time are part of the war that recent immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe like Italy or Russia are involved in the war. Irish Americans are keeping an eye on what's happening and also how it affects Ireland at home and of course German Americans are sort of very conscious of the fact that their Homeland in Germany is at war with the rest of Europe.

**[0:03:44]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Yeah, a lot of those immigrant groups, particularly the Irish and the Germans had been the United States for decades. Some of them are newer arrivals, but they have still maintained their sense of heritage and cultural ties to their old countries and that must have influenced them a little bit in terms of how they felt about the players in the great war.

**[0:04:04]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Yes, well absolutely and I think that in particular for different ethnic groups in the United States. I think that German and Irish Americans face challenges and some similar, some different, but in both cases what their sort of doing with this fact that the news coverage, the press coverage is generally supportive of Britain and France and their allies and that the central powers, Germany and others are getting much more negative press, much more criticism. Although the United States is officially neutral. There's definitely a lot of talk about the war, a lot of discussion and many people, particularly German Americans, feel that their Homeland is part of the story is not being told. So they are advocating not necessarily that the United States should get into the war and fight on Germany's behalf. What they're advocating is saying, well, if this country is neutral, let's really be neutral and let's really stay out of this war and not say we're neutral, but lean towards Britain and France.

**[0:05:07]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So in a way the various immigrant communities strengthened or tried to strengthen America's commitment to stay neutral. How do you think that was met with the sort of more gung ho groups like the Plattsburgh preparers?

**[0:05:22]**

**Chris Capazzola**: It's interesting because in many ways there aren't big communities of British Americans or French Americans, certainly not recent migrants who feel toward Britain and France the way that German Americans for example feel for Germany. In some ways that group is represented by people who find themselves as American. Some of them even tracing their heritage back to the Mayflower or Jamestown, Virginia. And for them the term they use is 100% American and they certainly want to be at 100% American. They want the United States to be more involved in the war, particularly in supporting Britain and France. And when they hear sort of criticisms from recent immigrant groups, it makes them actually sort of critical of immigration as a whole and wonder if these people are American enough. Well they see themselves as mainstream American society, but at least they considered themselves that quote, native born Americans, even though some other people may have been in the United States as long.

**[0:06:29]**

**Libby O'Connell**: What about the response of some religious and ethnic minorities during the period of neutrality from 1914 to 1917? Did they feel compelled to send assistance overseas? I know there was a big effort, the committee for the relief of Belgium run by Herbert Hoover sending tons of food and supplies to neutral Belgium in response to them being overrun by the Germans. How do Jewish communities respond?

**[0:06:58]**

**Chris Capazzola**: They're very involved both in terms of humanitarian efforts and then also in sort of political advocacy. And we can see this in a couple of directions. So the war is a real challenge for recent Jewish immigrants, especially those who are coming from the lands of the Russian empire, which of course was a country that had fled often because of its antisemitic policies and particularly because of its military draft and so they're not necessarily excited about getting on board with the war effort that supports the Russian empire and they sort of wants to kind of draw attention to the experiences of Jewish soldiers and Jewish people in Russia itself. At the same time, the first world war is a world war. It's affecting populations everywhere, including in the Middle East and the Ottoman Lands where there are some Jewish settlers and Palestine at the territory of Palestine and then also sort of an emerging Zionist movement that wants to identify a Homeland for the Jewish people and many Jewish Americans are actually watching that, advocating for it, and particularly after 1917 when Britain makes a public statement in support of that, there are really intense debates within the Jewish American community about whether the war abroad has a longterm effect for them. I would have a second story too, which is one of the biggest humanitarian organizations that's active during and after the war is the American committee for Near East Relief and this begins in response to the violence that Armenian communities are experiencing under the Ottoman Empire and the refugee flows, starvation and the deaths that followed from that. And then after the war the former Ottoman Lands are really destroyed and there's famine that affects all the different groups in the area and the committee for Near East Relief raises more money than almost any other organization except for Red Cross during the war. And it really, among other things, it draws American's attention to the plight of Armenian as an ethnic and religious minority. And it also all that humanitarian aid bought an enormous amount of Goodwill and good feeling for Americans in the middle East in the early 20th century.

**[0:09:11]**

**Libby O'Connell**: That's very interesting. I had no idea that the American committee for Near East Relief was that big.

**[0:09:16]**

**Chris Capazzola**: It was and it sort of appealed to, among other reasons, because Armenians are generally Christians that it drew on American Christian religious traditions and institutions and a lot of religious groups in the U S were raising money for Armenian relief.

**[0:09:32]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So along with the A being sent by Americans to the middle east I know there was some A being sent by Irish Americans. Chris could you tell us a little bit about that?

**[0:09:42]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Yeah, so at this time, Ireland is part of the British empire, right? And when Britain enters the war, so does Ireland. But at the same time, there is an ongoing movement in Ireland for either more autonomy or full independence from the United Kingdom. And that political controversy is one that affects Irish people all over the world. Irish people had migrated all different parts of the world in that early 20th century, or 19th century. And in the United States there were people who actively supported Irish independence. Some of them are providing sort of moral support, publicity, advocating for this. Some of them are using the war to critique Britain and saying, well, if this is a war for democracy, shouldn't there be some democracy for the Irish in Ireland? And some actually really do support active arms movement for Irish independence, so-called Easter rebellion and Irish revolution of 1916 the number who actually go to Ireland to fight or to go with weapons. It's pretty small, but there's certainly a lot of political and monetary support for the movement.

**[0:10:54]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So what about A from the pro German Americans, do you see organizations that are effective they're sending food over? I know there was some British blockade, I don't know how they were able to get supplies to Germany.

**[0:11:06]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Yes, actually helping Germany was more complicated because of the British blockade made it almost impossible for goods or for individuals to sort of get across the front lines to Germany. And so for example, small numbers of immigrant groups do you actually return to their homelands to join the armies of the warring powers? The largest number, probably going back to Italy, not of course counting Canadians who are in the U S but almost no one could make it back to Germany and nor could they really send a lot of food or anything like that. But they could raise money and many German Americans donated their money to the German Red Cross rather than the American Red Cross because it wasn't necessarily because they wanted one side to win or not. But also because they were thinking of their own families back in Germany who were facing food shortages and all the rest and sort of wanted to make sure that the money they were giving was getting as close to home as they could. After the war begins in 1917 though you can't give money to the German Red Cross anymore.

**[0:12:11]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So in 1917 April America declares war and soon after that the selective service act is passed. How does military service affect immigrant cultures?

**[0:12:24]**

**Chris Capazzola**: In some ways, the selective service act is a key turning point in sort of making the vast migrations of the previous 20 years visible to everyone else in America. Right? So the selective service act, which was adopted in May 1917 and the first registrations happen in June of 1917 the registration is applied to every male in the United States between 18 and 45 so even if immigrants weren't citizens of the United States, they still had to register for the draft and this basically makes every sort of young man in America sort of show up and register creates an enormous amount of visibility. And in fact, even data about the immigrant population that wasn't really known before. Now, immigrants who were not citizens didn't have to serve. But of course they could. And if they did, they would generally be naturalized as us citizens pretty quickly. And so this is also a chance for many who were planning to settle and become US citizens to do so in an accelerated manner.

**[0:13:28]**

**Libby O'Connell**: One of the phrases I've heard about the numbers that the great variety of immigrant groups in the American military service was the idea of yanking the hyphen, making everyone American. Can you tell us what yank the hyphen refers to?

**[0:13:42]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Yeah. So the hyphen is basically something that really all of us, unless you're a native American, has in our sense of our, in that we are sort of from somewhere else. I'm Irish American, Italian American, etc. And that hyphen that connects our ancestral homelands to our American identity is stronger or weaker for different people depending on how long their families have been in the US that connects them to their home countries. And in that case, at the early 20th century, there were many native born Americans supporting Americanization supporting more sort of cultural uniformity. We felt that the hyphen was a problem that the connections people had to their home countries were separating them from the United States in terms of language, culture, religion and so forth. And the idea of yank as in like the Yankees, right? So the yank the hyphen is that the army would actually sort of pull that hyphen out, native hyphenated Americans into American. And that was the theory as any army will tell you that they're more interested in winning a war than in conducting social experiments and so they understood that military service would transform in the quick groups, but they also had a job to do and they didn't hesitate to fines noncommissioned officers and so forth to command soldiers in the languages. They could actually understand the hyphen gets yanked in some ways more by the day to day experience of soldiers all getting thrown together and it does by any official policy from the top down.

**[0:15:17]**

**Libby O'Connell**: I think that's a really good point. I think that the army has played a big role in acculturating different immigrant groups through service without intent, but it just happens. They celebrate Thanksgiving. They are all mixed together and find points of commonality so that while outsiders may be looking to the military to yank the hyphen, in fact, the military didn't care that much. They wanted to get their job done as you said, but it seems like they do effectively help Americanized that that is actually a valid concept. They are soldiers by having that shared experience in the military.

**[0:15:56]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Right

**[0:15:57]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So what happens when the war ends? These different groups come home. How does the experience of the war impact the ethnic and religious groups support for there? Maybe in some cases they're cousins, but they're old country overseas in future conflicts, like in world war II, do you still see this kind of loyalty to the old country among different groups?

**[0:16:21]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Yes and no. I think something very important happens in the meantime, which is then when the war is over. Certainly ethnic leaders in the United States kind of spokespeople for any particular group, Greek Americans or Mexican Americans, Asian Americans are very conscious that they can be proud of the military service of the ethnic Folgers, but until you see lots of displays of that, lots of saying, well look what we've done for America, which they use to challenge particular forms of discrimination and whether formal or informal, but so in that sense, this melting pot experience of the army does actually sort of have political opportunities for immigrants and their families after the war. But there's also a negative side to it as well. That the war, like I said, makes Americans realize just how many immigrants had come in the previous 20 years. It revealed various things that for the most part they might not have had literacy rates as high, but they might not have been as healthy, as tall, even as other native born Americans. And so at a time when the eugenics movement is strong, when there's fears of integration and how it fighters. In some ways the war also contributes to the immigration restriction movements of the 1920s

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**Libby O'Connell**: you mentioned eugenics. Could you just expand on that concept so that we are all on the same page?

**[0:17:48]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Yeah, so one of the, I think, most important books that came out of the first world war is one that no one leaves and it's a great big 800 page book called The Defects Found in Drafted Men and it was published by the army and it was a list of all the different sort of health and public health issues that men who had been drafted during WWI faced now in the early 20th century, biologists, doctors and others imagined that individual health issues could be understood through the lens of a person's race or ethnicity. And they had a name for this science, they called it Eugenic and they believe that this could be supported positively by encouraging sort of healthy people to have more children. Then there was also a form of negative Eugenics trying to sort of limit the population of populations that were deemed not good for America or unhealthy

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**Libby O'Connell**: What we associate with Hitler's agenda?

**[0:18:48]**

**Chris Capazzola**: Exactly. As I said, this size is completely undermined by what happens to it during the years of Nazi Germany and in fact most scientists will tell you it doesn't even really science, but at the time these ideas were circulating broadly in the United States and elsewhere and when that data about American immigrants as soldiers meets up with ideas about race and science generates evidence that a lot of people used to say, well, you know, maybe we have too many immigrants in the United States. Well, maybe [inaudible] from the wrong places. And there were already concerns about jobs and the economy. There were concerns about the cultural difference, but that's exacerbated in the years after the war. For me, an important negative legacy of the first world war is the immigration act of 1924 which is a complicated law, but it has the general effect of making it very hard for immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who might have been disproportionately Catholic or Jewish from entering the United States. And this law affects almost 40 years of American immigration history and it has a huge impact on our culture over the 20th century.

**[0:19:59]**

**Libby O'Connell**: I think that law also established the U S border patrol, is that right?

**[0:20:05]**

**Chris Capazzola**: It did. And in fact, this is an institution that is in the news today very much and I think most Americans don't really know where it came from. And during the first world war, there are concerns about infiltration by spies, by saboteurs, and this leads to sort of more attention being paid to border crossings, whether people are good. Then of course during the war and right after the United States adopts prohibition, first of the law, and then as a constitutional amendment banning alcohol, both its distribution and its sale. So that means even more attention to what's going across the border either in the US or Canada. In 1924 the US establishes a formal agency, the U S border. Initially ts job is actually to keep an eye out for alcohol, but it's also very quickly comes to regulate the migration of people as well.

**[0:20:56]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Chris, thank you so much for your help on helping us understand that pretty complicated issues of immigrants and immigration. There's a lot more to read about this. Was there anything that you would recommend our listeners to read or how to learn more about it?

**[0:21:11]**

**Chris Capazzola**: I think in a lot of ways, one of the best places to start with this is actually a book that's almost 50 years old now, or maybe even more a book by John Higham called Strangers in the Land, which is the history of immigration at this time period, but in particular high end book tells us a lot about how it is that fears of one ethnic group during the war really get concentrated, particularly for German Americans, but then also how before and after the war. There are broader concerns about immigration that leads to new policy.

**[0:21:44]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Well, great. That's really helpful. Thank you so much for joining us today for the podcast, immigrants and immigration, and thanks again to Chris Cappazolla from MIT. He's a good friend of our outreach and education efforts.

**[0:22:01]**

**Announcer**: Thank you for listening to this episode of how world war one changed America. The podcast series is made possible by a grant from the Andrew w Mellon foundation and the collaboration of the U S world war one Centennial commission, the Doughboy foundation, the national world war one museum and Memorial in Kansas city national history day, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American history.

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