

HOW WWI CHANGED AMERICA:

World War I: Coming Home

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT:

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

Throughout history when soldiers go off to war they think, "Let's go boys, we're gonna be heroes!" And in fact, for the World War I soldiers, it turned out to be a harrowing experience with catastrophic violence.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

In the fall of 1918, the war ends faster than anyone really expected. The United States was prepared for a long and difficult war but the German army really collapses very quickly and the warring powers agree to set an armistice, an end to fighting, on November 11th, 1918.

Even though soldiers had not been gone from the United States for a very long time, they returned to a country that has changed.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

The transition from war to peace is always difficult. World War I, the soldiers come home, there's maybe a parade on their arrival but it's nothing like what sent them off. They come home and they're looking for work and it's not just sitting there waiting for them.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

There had been a big economic boom but now that economic boom is over and there aren't really plans for how to reintegrate returning soldiers into the workforce.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

They see their former jobs have been taken by others and there is some unemployment. To many it seemed like reason enough to resent those who had stayed home, made millions in war contracting. That makes them angry. They feel forgotten and they can't describe their experiences cause what they've seen is so horrible.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

Soldiers returned from World War I with both physical and mental injuries. This was a war of artillery. Shells and bombs that could do terrible damage to the physical bodies of soldiers. Many came home without arms or legs. The war also exposed many soldiers to chemical weapons that injured their nervous systems and their lungs. There were also psychological wounds. Being in battle, being surrounded by artillery shells for days, weeks at a time could have enormous impact on them.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

Shell shock, today we would call it post-traumatic stress disorder. It is manifested by what they call the thousand-yard stare. It's the soldiers staring out into the distance, oblivious, really, to what else is going on. Originally, it could have been seen as a sign of weakness. "What's wrong with him? He has no wounds." But the wounds were the deepest where they'll never be seen and that's in your brain and in your heart.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

The government and medical officials were not prepared for the scale of injury and there wasn't the support system that we have today to support those with physical and mental injuries from war. And there isn't a GI Bill that there would be after World War II. There was some job training and there was a promise that someday they would be paid a bonus but in the meantime, soldiers are very much on their own in terms of reintegrating into everyday life in the economy.

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Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

They're changed individuals and it gives rise to a whole different attitude of almost, of cynicism that will feed into things like the Roaring Twenties. People are going to live for today because who knows what's gonna happen tomorrow. You start seeing it in poetry, in our literature. You see a bleakness that you did not see prior to the war.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

I think the generation of Americans who lived through the First World War are in many ways forgotten to the extent that the United States is the power in the world that it is today. In many ways that's the creation of the generation who lived through the First World War.

Libby H. O'Connell, Ph.D.:

They are the forgotten participants in a transformative event that turned the 20th century into the American century. It changed our arts. It changed our social structure. It initiated changes in civil rights and the role of women. This was enormous change.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

You know we often hear about World War I being described at the time as the war to end all wars. Now I think we respond almost cynically to that idea but I think one of the things that we could do most to honor those who fought and died in World War I is to do what we can to make that dream come true. What are we doing to minimize war and conflict, to bring about peace? I think that's something that we owe the people of that generation.

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Music

"FAR AWAY"
WRITTEN BY C. SHAKER, V. HARRISON, & O. PRICE
COURTESY OF EXTREME MUSIC

"IT'S TOO LATE"
WRITTEN BY J. P. GARBER
COURTESY OF EXTREME MUSIC