

HOW WWI CHANGED AMERICA:

Immigrants and World War I

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT:

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

At the time of World War I, we are at the peak of immigration. More people came into this country in 1907 than any other time in our history.

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

America is a nation of immigrants in 1914 when Europe goes to war, and Woodrow Wilson recognizes this. In fact, in his address for neutrality, Wilson urges Americans to avoid violently taking sides, afraid that the different ethnicities might line up against each other.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

He realizes that creating national unity, what he calls 100% Americanism, is going to be a key factor in winning the war.

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

100% Americanism was the notion that immigrants had to renounce any sort of ties to their homelands; political ties, cultural ties, economic ties to be considered 100% loyal. It was this notion that the hyphen, Irish-American, French-American, that the hyphen represented divided loyalties that weakened your commitment to the United States. In reality, it's a little more complicated.

Many German immigrants and German-Americans supported Germany. There were some, however, who did not. There could be the complication of Russian-Jews, who had fled Russia because of persecution. They were actually not sympathetic to Russia's cause in the first World War. But on the other hand, you had a lot of immigrants like, Italians, for example, French, British who were very supportive of the Allied side. And so, immigrant communities were diverse in their reaction to the war, just like Americans at large.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

Once the United States enters the war, suspicions of immigrants turn into outright fear.

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

The immigrant group that suffered the most were German immigrants. They were considered enemy aliens. They had to go down to the police station, be fingerprinted, photographed, and had to carry around an identification card. They were put under surveillance by the government, and also by their communities.

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

You're no longer allowed to teach German in schools, any expression of German culture is repressed, and German newspapers, of which there were many, were forced to cancel.

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

We had some silly things like, people changing the name of hamburgers to liberty sandwiches and some not silly things where vigilante groups would attack German immigrants. There were examples of people being tarred and feathered, being forced to kiss American flags, their houses being painted yellow, and even some lynchings.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

This is one the most heartbreaking chapters of American history, in which one of the most vibrant ethnic cultures in the United States, that of German-Americans, is systematically dismantled in the space of about two years.

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT: IMMIGRANTS AND WORLD WAR I

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

But on the other hand, we also saw this sort of valorization of immigrant cultures in a way that we had not seen before in the United States. A lot championing of Italian immigrants' patriotism, Russian-Jew's patriotism, Polish patriotism, and the ways that these groups were contributing.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

One out of every five soldiers in the US Armed Forces is an immigrant. And they are serving in every branch.

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

Some immigrant groups thought, "This is a path to citizenship for me." They were drafted, they went, and they learned what it meant to be an American in many ways. They would be in the training camps for Thanksgiving, and they would see a turkey, and sweet potatoes, and cranberry sauce, and all these things that make up an American Thanksgiving. They would never have encountered that before.

There were ideas that bringing them together like the famous Rainbow Division of what they called, "Hyphenated Americans" bring them all together, and they will lose the hyphen, and they will just become Americans.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

Immigrants, many of whom had been living in sort of their own ethnic enclaves, are then all of a sudden thrown into the US Army, and they're all speaking English. It's a chance for immigrants to meet more Americans, and it's a chance for more Americans to meet the recent immigrants. This is sometimes a learning experience that creates more national unity, but for those Americans who wanted to reduce, or close off immigration, it in fact, confirmed in some ways their worst fears and stereotypes about the Americans who'd just been coming to the United States.

Jennifer D. Keene, Ph.D.:

So there was kind of a mixed bag for immigrants. On the one hand, we had repression of the German-American community, very repressive, very anti-immigrant, but then on the other hand, we had this valorization of other immigrant groups. A way that they were invited in to participate in mainstream American society in a brand new way.

Christopher Capozzola, Ph.D.:

I think for most immigrants, they experienced the war as this intrusion of Uncle Sam, that sort of finger pointing at them, telling them what to do. They also know that it's changing them, and that it's changing their cultures and their communities. It's only a generation or two later that most immigrant groups realized how much the war had been a turning point in making them permanent parts of this new American landscape.

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Music

"ZERO GRAVITY"

WRITTEN BY M. PERKINS & D. PACE

COURTESY OF EXTREME MUSIC

"FEEL THE SAME"

WRITTEN BY C. SHAKER & A. K. AL-HILALI

COURTESY OF EXTREME MUSIC