

# **The United States and World War I: Perspectives and Legacies**

39th Annual Conference of the Historians in the DGFA/GAAS

Conference Report

by

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The year 2017 marks the centennial of the United States' entry into World War I. The Great War had a profound impact on the U.S. Domestically, the period between 1914 and 1918 represented both the climax and the turning point of the Progressive reform movement. Internationally, the conflict shifted the global balance of power to set the stage for what has been called the "American century." The 39th Annual Conference of the Historians in the German Association for American Studies (DGFA/GAAS) provided an opportunity to reassess the war's significance in American history. The three-day conference (February 10-12, 2017) was hosted by MANFRED BERG (Heidelberg) and AXEL JANSEN (German Historical Institute Washington) at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies.

In their opening remarks, Berg and Jansen introduced the conference theme by drawing a parallel between World War I and current political events. Toward the beginning of the welcome speech, they addressed the elephant in the room – Donald J. Trump. Indeed, it seems only natural to keep in mind recent political developments when reflecting on the transformative years of early twentieth-century U.S. history. World War I usually is considered as the event that turned the U.S. into a world power, even if the country initially shied away from this role after the war. Warning against presentism, however, Berg and Jansen emphasized that the past should be studied on its own merits in order to make such analysis fruitful for questions of the present. The conference presentations picked up on this core idea and studied America's involvement in the "European War" from various fascinating angles, comparing developments during the period of U.S. neutrality to decisions taken when the U.S. had joined World War I.

The conference's first panel, titled "Preparing for War," focused on the American debate over proper defense measures that followed the outbreak of the European

conflict in 1914. DIRK BÖNKER (Duke University) analyzed the U.S. naval leadership's vision for American global power that was reflected in the goal to create a navy "second to none." Bönker argued that World War I actualized the Navy's already existing ambitions for global mastery and reinforced its understanding of world politics as a struggle for supremacy. Having identified commercial strife as the most pressing issue of international relations, naval elites regarded the American fleet as an instrument of economic geopolitics. Their unilateral view of the United States as an imperial power in a competitive milieu of global empires, Bönker highlighted, stood in sharp contrast to the Wilsonian language of anti-geopolitics.

MANUEL FRANZ (Heidelberg) explored the key role of civilian defense societies in the American preparedness movement. By surveying their activities, pamphlets, and lobby work, he highlighted how the groups shaped the public debate on national security and acted as principal agents of preparedness. As such, defense societies did not end their propaganda campaign once the United States entered the war or even after the Allies' victory but intensified their activities in 1917 and in 1918. Viewing the movement through the lens of its civilian branch, Franz argued against historiography's traditional periodization of the defense debate. The historiographic time frame of preparedness, he emphasized, cannot be limited chronologically to America's years of neutrality, but must include the period after 1917.

In his keynote lecture, ROSS A. KENNEDY (Illinois State University) analyzed the strategic calculations of Woodrow Wilson's neutrality policy following the sinking of the *Lusitania*. The President's harsh reaction toward Germany's submarine warfare, he argued, was highly influenced by Wilson's view of the war's impact on U.S. national security. Kennedy explained that the President's strategic calculations profoundly differed from those of his Secretary of State, who would resign over this disagreement. William Jennings Bryan's approach of impartial neutrality toward the belligerents was based on the fundamental assumption that, regardless of who won the war, America's security would be assured due to its remote geographic location and its great military potential. Wilson, on the other hand, believed that a victorious Germany would pose a vital threat to the American way of life, though he deemed a German victory to be unlikely. Wilson concluded that the best policy was to keep up good relations with the

British to ensure the Allies would agree to an American-mediated settlement once they began to prevail over the Central Powers. Wilson's strategic calculations in the submarine crisis, Kennedy outlined, led him to define American rights at stake in the most inflated way possible. The President's shift toward a more genuinely neutral position in mid-1916 came too late to avert the ultimate escalation in German-American relations in early 1917.

Opening Panel II, which centered on the topics of mobilization and propaganda, ELISABETH PILLER (Trondheim) spoke about the impact of war relief campaigns during the neutrality period. She reflected upon the question whether American relief work could be considered a factor of war culture and repudiated the leading opinion that relief work was motivated by pure humanitarianism and, thus, apolitical. By focusing on two camps of humanitarian aid providers, who supported either German or Belgian victims of war and famine, she demonstrated that their proponents held differing beliefs about the war in Europe and the belligerents. Notions about who was innocent and thus deserving of help prominently played into relief work, which was, as Piller elucidated, all but an impartial humanitarian effort. Thus, war relief campaigns directed emotional alliances and constituted an integral precursor of mobilization.

Following Piller's talk, KATJA WÜSTENBECKER (Jena/Hamburg) commented on the Committee for Public Information's strategy to brace the American public for war. Discussing George Creel's roots in progressive journalism, Wüstenbecker portrayed the CPI as an example of how government can make use of the media to influence public opinion. By demonstrating that the majority of Americans received material by the CPI, and that this same material fueled stereotypes about citizens of the Central Powers, Wüstenbecker made a strong case for the CPI's crucial role in American propaganda.

Focusing on the urban context of a Northern and Southern metropolis, the third panel dealt with the perspective of German-Americans during World War I. JÖRG NAGLER (Jena) reassessed their experience in New York City during the neutrality period. He outlined how the perception of German-Americans transformed, in less than three years, from a role model immigrant group into the enemy within – a process Nagler called "metamorphosis." As the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 and the Black Tom

Explosion in July 1916 fueled the anti-hyphenated fever, German-Americans had to react to the challenge of dual loyalties. The war, Nagler argued, became an agent of change that forced immigrants to constantly negotiate their identities – often with ambiguous results.

ANDREAS HÜBNER (Kassel) explored the German-American community of New Orleans during the neutrality period. He illustrated how the war mobilized the immigrant community and created new networks of patronage. Often supported by state and city officials, German-Americans engaged in war relief activities and waged a campaign to reintroduce German language classes into the city's high schools. Spearheaded by the German Society of New Orleans, they vigorously challenged pro-Allied propaganda to support the fatherland. Their cultural and intellectual responses to the "European War," Hübner concluded, revitalized the immigrant community and made New Orleans a stronghold of German-American filiopietists.

In the second keynote lecture of the conference, JENNIFER KEENE (Chapman University) explored the impact of World War I on social justice movements, focusing on civil liberties, female suffrage, and African-American civil rights. While acknowledging that actors for social change faced oppression in the war period, Keene argued that the situation also created moments of innovation and the impetus for many activists to reconsider organizational structure and strategies. The Civil Liberties Union, she pointed out, was born out of the movement against conscription. Keene directed her focus toward the question of how social movements prospered in the war. She illustrated that patriotic endeavors helped legitimate activists' positions. Members of the National Union of American Women, for instance, succeeded in making the women's vote appear respectable by getting involved in home front activities and thus improving their public image. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had experienced a growth in members before the war. While African-Americans continued to face extreme violence and oppression during and after the war, civil rights activists gained valuable experience in local organizing and developed strategies to fight against lynching on a judicial level. The NAACP further profited from a rise in publicity that would, in the long run, contribute to its success as the chief organization in the fight for African-American civil rights. Keene concluded by

reinforcing her thesis that the war created opportunities for social movements. A new sense of citizenship that grew out of the war marked a turning point in their history and a basis for successes later in the century.

The fourth panel explored new perspectives on the social impact of the war. MISCHA HONECK (German Historical Institute Washington) discussed the demographic and symbolic capital that societies assign to children in wartime. While acknowledging the interdependence of class, race, gender, and regions, Honeck focused on the category of age in his analysis. He explored ideas about childhood in contemporary representations of children and adolescents and shed light upon their wartime experiences. These included a range of patriotic leisure activities, as well as opportunities, particularly for young people of color, to participate in protests for a safe America. Finally, Honeck made the case for viewing children as historical actors and for using childhood as an analytical framework.

MATTHIAS VOIGT (Frankfurt) presented a paper on Native American soldiers fighting in World War I. Analyzing their enlistment motives, wartime experiences, and veteran activities, he illustrated how their participation in the conflict made the men reinvent their masculine subjectivities. The Great War, Voigt argued, transplanted existing notions of tribal warriorhood into U.S. military service, thus syncretizing both Native and Western martial traditions. Subsequently, the conflict not only brought a cultural revitalization of Native Americans' martial heritage, but set a precedent of American Indian service in a white man's army.

The conference's final panel dealt with the legacy of World War I. CHARLOTTE LERG (Münster) reassessed the war's impact on interpretations of academic freedom. Focusing on collective actors such as the Association of American University Professors (AAUP), Lerg argued that, although German influence was undeniable and *Lehr-* and *Lernfreiheit* had long been admired concepts, the war provided both a challenge and an opportunity to define a new social purpose, as well as inciting unity, for American academia. While academics felt responsible for keeping the nonpartisan nature of academic freedom alive, pressure on American universities to take a stand for their country increased during the war. Two distinct versions of academic freedom emerged

that served as the basis for legal and public arguments, institutionalized academic freedom, emphasized the autonomy of the individual scholar, and, therefore, shaped American academia for decades to come.

In the conference's final presentation, HELKE RAUSCH (Freiburg) explored how World War I influenced the establishment of American philanthropy. Centering on the Rockefeller Foundation, Rausch identified philanthropic efforts during wartime, including funding for health campaigns and war relief, as hitherto unknown opportunities for science-led interventions abroad. She demonstrated that philanthropists challenged the idea of neutrality even before the beginning of hostilities and continued to strive for mobilization once the United States had entered the war. Furthermore, Rausch revealed that the experience philanthropists had gained under the particular conditions of war inspired their endeavors in the 1920s and onwards, thus building a foundation for global American philanthropy in the twentieth century.

Over the course of the conference, it became clear that World War I furthered a socializing process by mobilizing various segments of society: women and men, children and adults, native, hyphenated, and mainstream Americans, soldiers and civilians, nationalists and global philanthropists, and even academics. Thus, the war functioned as a catalyst for social change that shaped U.S. society for decades to come.

## **Conference Overview**

### *Welcome and Introduction*

Manfred Berg (Heidelberg University), Axel Jansen (German Historical Institute Washington)

### *Panel 1: Preparing for War*

Chair: Axel Jansen (German Historical Institute Washington)

Dirk Bönker (Duke University): A World Power Second to None? The U.S. Navy, Geopolitics, and the Challenge of World War I

Manuel Franz (Heidelberg University): Defense Societies in the Campaign for American Preparedness, 1914-1920

*Keynote Lecture*

Chair: Manfred Berg (Heidelberg University)

Ross A. Kennedy (Illinois State University): Strategic Calculations in Woodrow Wilson's Neutrality Policy, 1914-1917

*Panel 2: Mobilization and Propaganda*

Chair: Mischa Honeck (German Historical Institute Washington)

Elisabeth Piller (Trondheim University): American War Relief, Cultural Mobilization and the Myth of Impartial Humanitarianism, 1914-1917

Katja Wüstenbecker (University of Jena/University of Hamburg): How to Mobilize an Unwilling Country for War: The Committee on Public Information

*Keynote Lecture*

Chair: Axel Jansen (German Historical Institute Washington)

Jennifer Keene (Chapman University): Deeds Not Words: American Social Justice Movements and World War I

*Panel 3: The German American Experience*

Chair: Simon Wendt (University of Frankfurt/M.)

Jörg Nagler (University of Jena): The Conflict of Divided Loyalties and Negotiated Identities: German Americans during the Neutrality Period in New York City

Andreas Hübner (University of Kassel): "We are here as Pro-Americans, as Pro-Louisianians, as Pro-Orleanians": Reassessing the German American Community of New Orleans during World War I

*Panel 4: New Perspectives on the Social Impact of the War*

Chair: Wilfried Mausbach (Heidelberg University)

Mischa Honeck (German Historical Institute Washington): Playing on Uncle Sam's Team: American Childhoods During World War I

Matthias Voigt (University of Frankfurt/M.): Native American Doughboys in the Great War

*Panel 5: Legacies*

Chair: Anja Schüler (Heidelberg University)

Charlotte Lerg (University of Münster): World War I and the Birth of Academic Freedom in America

Helke Rausch (University of Freiburg): The Birth of U.S. Philanthropy from the Spirit of War: Rockefeller Philanthropists in World War I

*Young Scholars Forum*

Chairs: Philipp Gassert (University of Mannheim), Michael Hochgeschwender (University of Munich), Britta Waldschmidt-Nelson (University of Augsburg)

Participants: Vivian Seidel (University of Mannheim), Lara Track (Heidelberg University), Sarah Epping (Free University of Berlin), Evelyn Huber (University of Mannheim), Alexander Schwanebeck (University of Cologne), Helen Gibson (Free University of Berlin), Daniel Hanglberger (University of Frankfurt/M.), Clara-Sophie Höhn (University of Augsburg)