

## History 118 US Since 1877 Discussion Transcript for February 25, 2021

### **Main Reading: Yawp, chapter 21 + Forte site on WWI**

*This Yawp chapter covered US entry into WWI and the Progressive (capital P) effect the war had on American society. In other words, war mobilization empowered the already existing Progressive movement in profound ways. The aftermath of the war, especially US senate rejection of the Treaty of Versailles, however, left a bitter legacy. Here are selections from student comments:*

#### **WWI AND SPANISH FLU**

STUDENT COMMENT: This week's reading of YAWP Ch. 21 covers the rise, climax, and fall of World War I. It goes into great detail of the prelude to the war, how the war began to spread through Europe, how and when America entered the war, and the aftermath, both in the U.S. and other places like the Middle East, for example. The Forte Site also supplements this reading by going into a lot of detail of the 79th division in France, the battles in September, 1918, and how America had to find new ways to fight in WWI. This YAWP chapter also has additional sections explaining things such as the League of Nations and how the Influenza Pandemic affected the war. It was shocking to read just how much the Influenza epidemic affected the war. I had heard about it before, but when I read numbers that "half a million suffered from influenza" while "227,000 soldiers were hospitalized from wounds received in battle," that really put the gravity of Influenza in perspective. (YAWP, 21) The first strain of Influenza appeared in Spring, 1918 in Kansas and spread quickly to army training camps, which consequently made the deadly virus spread like wildfire around the nation, and then the world. (YAWP, 21) Then, it mutated into a more deadly strain, and at its worst, during "the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in the fall of 1918" more soldiers died from the flu than in combat. (YAWP, 21). A primary source that ties in directly with this topic of the Influenza Pandemic during WWI, is the letter by Lutiant Van Wert, a Native American, who wrote in 1918 to a friend, while she was working in Washington, DC as a volunteer nurse (YAWP, 21, XI). In the letter she describes her time as a volunteer, and what work she had to do there, and the details of her letter are quite revealing. For example, she says that "as many as 90 people die every day here with the "Flu,"" and that "repeated calls come from the Red Cross" looking for people to volunteer.(YAWP, 21) Moreover, this letter really brings to light the tragedy of this pandemic and how it affected not only soldiers abroad, but people in the U.S. as well. It also ties in perfectly to the rest of this chapter, because Wert was writing to her friend at the Haskell Institute in Kansas, which is where the disease first started, on a small farm.

#### **US ENTRY INTO WWI**

STUDENT COMMENT: World War one was unlike anything that the American military had ever faced. The advancing technologies of military weapons, specifically German submarine attacks, required the United States to work towards strengthening their military power. The American YAWP chapter quotes George Washington advising future American powers to avoid foreign

alliances, and this was alongside the idea that the American values were powerful enough to protect us on their own. This was reflected when President Woodrow Wilson initially remained neutral in this war from 1914 to 1917. However, this may have been because he felt we were unprepared and needed time to improve our military strength. The war started when Austria declared war on Serbia, Russia defended Serbia and Germany defended Austria. What made it a "World War" was that many alliances and agreements required countries to involve themselves in the war to support their own beliefs and the beliefs of their allies.

STUDENT COMMENT: Under Wilhelm II Germany grew in power prior to World War I. Germany allied with Italy and Austria-Hungary, and in response to this allegiance the triple Entente was formed, an alliance between Great Britain, France, and Russia. In 1914 a Serbian man, Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand who was the heir to the Austrian Hungarian throne. With Serbia under the control of Russia this conflict slated the war to break out between both alliances. Germans tried to bring Mexico into the war by promising to back Mexico in its acquisition of Texas. These correspondents were known as the Zimmerman telegrams, and they were intercepted by America which raised the already high tensions between the United States and Mexico. This was one influence in the United States joining the war, another was the sinking of the RMS Lusitania in May 1915 by German submarines killing hundreds of Americans. With fears of the German Victory Congress declared war on Germany on April 4, 1917 under the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. America began drafting men ages 21-30 under the Selective Service Act of 1917. White and black men were drafted but the black men were in separate all black units. The Black units were laborer and did not go into battle. Women began filling rolls previously held by men to make up for the men being drafted into the war. They also were admitted into armed forces as nurses. Millions of women also volunteered in civilian groups, like the red cross and the YMCA, to help in war efforts. Black women did not have the same opportunities of service as white women they could not serve as enlisted medical personnel.

### **WWI AND BLACK AMERICANS**

STUDENT COMMENT: The Great War offered Black Americans initially the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment and value to the US alongside white soldiers; however, according to American Yawp editor Paula Fortier, segregation persisted in combat as only white soldiers could fight while the almost 200 thousand Black soldiers and sailors were designated as "general laborers"(section 4). As US forces fought alongside their French and British allies partly to help free the German people of authoritarian rule, it demonstrated its hypocrisy once more. Meanwhile domestically, the same was taking place in the context of the war as millions of Black women were forced into "auxiliary units" if they wanted to support the cause. Given that the US government very likely did not want to divide Americans in the time of war, progressive policies in such a time would have been a hurdle in this regard; and African American men aged 21-30 were also forcefully drafted upon passing the required tests. As W.E.B DuBois implored returning Black Americans to continue fighting for their rights domestically in "Returning Soldiers," writing, "Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why," conditions and

divisions became bleaker. The six months of the “Red Summer” of 1919 witnessed violence stemming from racial tensions, bringing waves of significant rioting violence. Although African Americans acted with violence only to guard their families, outside whites saw this as an attempt of anarchy (section 9). Violence continued in this fashion after Wilson’s final term, as the Tulsa Race Massacre brought about the worst case of racial violence in American history. Even as President Wilson and the United States Government claimed to help declare peace and stability worldwide in World War 1 and its consequences, little was done secure the safety and freedoms of Black Americans at home.

### **GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

STUDENT COMMENT: Once Willhelm took the throne for Germany in 1888, he immediately established their stance of wanting Germany to become a global power. His “maneuvers and Germany’s rise spawned a new system of alliances as rival nations warily watched Germany’s expansion.” (Yawp Ch. 21) And after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and Grand Duchess Sophie, Austria declared war on Serbia, and as Russia was allied with Serbia, they began to mobilize its armed forces. Soon after, Germany declared war on Russia, as they were allies with Austria. Next to join the war was Great Britain after Germany failed to respect Belgium as a neutral nation....The first empire to go down was Russia in 1917. After this, Germany shifted their efforts West to France. Germany plotted five key battles to try and break the western front, but none of them succeeded. As if there weren't enough deaths already, the influenza disease started rapidly spreading across forts and army camps. Both sides knew they couldn't humanly survive much longer with these new conditions, and they decided to sign the Treaty of Versailles. This included Wilson's 14 points, which included the creation of the League of Nations that would help make our world safer for democracy.