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One Hundred Years Ago, in the Spring of 1917: Why Did America Go to War in 1917?

Excerpt from Jacques R. Pauwels, 'The Great Class War 1914-1918,' James Lorimer, Toronto, 2016

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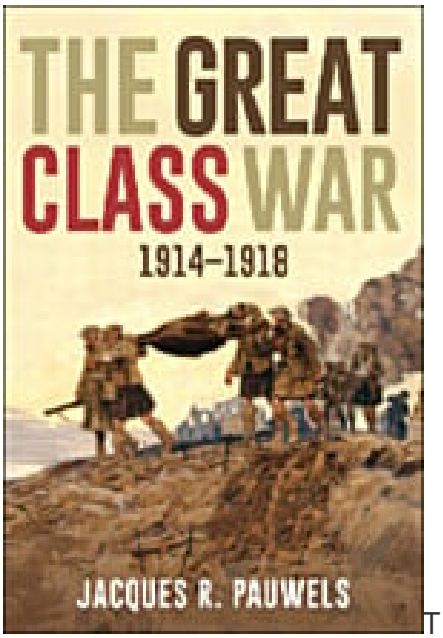
Global Research, May 27, 2017

Region: Europe, Russia and FSU, USA
Theme: History

1917 was not a good year for any of the belligerent countries, but for the members of the Entente – France, Britain, and Russia – it was nothing less than catastrophic. The main reasons for that were the mutinies in the French army, which made the situation on the western front extremely precarious, as well as the revolution in Russia, which raised the spectre of Russia exiting the war, leaving Britain and France bereft of the ally that forced Germany to fight on two fronts. Add to this the fact that civilians as well as soldiers in France and Britain were desperate for peace, and one understands why the political and military authorities in London and Paris had plenty of reasons to be concerned.

They had wanted this war and wanted desperately to win it, and to achieve this they needed the support of the population and of all their allies. But in 1917, victory was nowhere in sight, and had never seemed so far away. And what would happen if the war was not won? The answer was provided by the events in Russia, and it was a grim warning: revolution!



The only ray of hope in 1917, from the viewpoint of the Entente, was that in April of that year the United States declared war on Germany, something Paris and London had fervently been hoping for. It would obviously still take some time before American troops would disembark in Europe to help turn the tide in favour of the Entente, but hope for a final victory was thus revived.

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For the overwhelming majority of the people of the United States, however, the entry of their country into the war was hardly a wonderful thing. They realized that the war raging in Europe had been a disaster, and that in all belligerent countries civilians as well as soldiers longed for a return to peace. The Europeans wanted to exit this war as soon as possible; why would Americans want to enter it? And why would they have to fight on the side of the British and the French against the Germans? Why not on the side of the Germans against the countries of the Entente? Let us examine the factors that caused many Americans to ask such questions.

For a long time already, the United States had enjoyed good relations with Germany. It was not Germany but Britain that was the traditional enemy and great rival of Uncle Sam. The British were former colonial masters against whom the country's war of independence had been fought during the 1770s, and against whom another armed conflict took place between 1812 and 1815, the so-called War of 1812; and throughout the 19th century relations with Britain had remained tense on account of issues such as the border of the US with British North America (to become the Dominion of Canada in 1867), influence and commerce in the Pacific, South America, and the Caribbean, and British sympathy for the South during the American Civil War. (Until the 1930s, in fact, Washington would have plans ready for a possible war against Britain.)

Marquis de Lafayette (Source: history.com)

The Americans did not regard the British as beloved "Anglo-Saxon" twins. Clearly, many Americans were of English origin and supported Albion and its allies. But the majority of Americans – unlike the elite of the country's northeast, consisting to a large extent of WASPs – were not "Anglo-Saxons" at all but came from all over Europe, including many from Ireland and Germany. In 1914, when the war broke out in Europe, Americans of Irish or German origin had good reasons to hope for a German victory and a defeat of Britain. As for France, the Americans who disembarked there in 1917 held banners proclaiming "Lafayette, here we are!," an allusion to the aid the Americans had received from France during their war of independence against Britain, aid that was personified by the Marquis de Lafayette. The slogan suggested that the Americans were now paying back a debt of gratitude to the French, but why had they not rushed to support their old Gallic friend in 1914? In reality, hypothetical gratitude towards the French had nothing to do with the US entry into the war, the more so since many Americans were very religious and had little or no sympathy for a republic that was anticlerical if not atheistic. The Protestant Americans sympathised with Germany, ruled by the Lutheran Hohenzollerns, and Catholic Americans had a soft spot for Austria-Hungary, whose rulers, the Habsburgs, had been the great white knights of Catholicism ever since the time of the Reformation. And Russia? That empire was viewed by

many Americans as a bastion of autocratic, old-fashioned monarchism, as the antithesis of the democratic republic the United States was (at least in theory).

Numerous Americans such as Jews and Ukrainians were refugees from the Czarist empire who had about the same feelings for Russia as the Irish had for Britain. In the United States, Germany was not the object of such rivalry, dislike, or outright hostility. Moreover, many Americans, for example Theodore Roosevelt, considered themselves to belong to the superior "Nordic race" and therefore to be close relatives of the "Aryan" Germans, presumably an equally superior breed. The fact that Germany was hardly a democracy did not constitute a problem for elitist types such as Roosevelt, who looked down on the popular "masses." As for the Americans who did not belong to the elite and did in fact favour democracy, even they had little or nothing against Germany. Indeed, with its social legislation and universal suffrage, the Reich loomed in some ways as more democratic than Britain, for example, and the United States itself. American democracy was indeed a kind of "*Herrenvolk* democracy," that is, a democracy for an ethnic elite, namely the "white man," a system from which Indians and blacks, a large part of the population, were ruthlessly excluded – *de facto* and/or *de jure*. This "democracy for the few," as the political scientist and historian Michael Parenti has called it, featured a kind of apartheid *avant la lettre*, in which blacks were the victims of segregation and lynchings and Indians were cast aside in wretched reservations. In comparison to that, the Reich of William II was an egalitarian paradise. President Woodrow Wilson's claim that the US went to war for the sake of democracy, a claim that even today many consider to be sincere, was not only totally false, but even ludicrous. If Wilson had really wanted to do something to promote the cause of democracy, he should have started in his own country, where there was still an awful lot of work to be done.

Lynching in Nebraska, 1919 (Source: williambowles.info)

One can say that in early 1917 the American population was divided with respect to the war. Some Americans – and above all the WASPs and other citizens of English origin – rooted for the Entente, while others sympathized with the Central Powers; and countless Americans probably had no particular opinion about what was going on in distant Europe. But sympathy is one thing, and fighting is something else. Most of the citizens tended to be pacifist or "isolationist," wanted nothing to do with the war raging in Europe, and were against their country becoming involved in it. It is in this context that the song *I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier,* which originated in 1915 and had already enjoyed a lot of success in Britain, become the musical icon of pacifism in the United States (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQwEqhtGcW0). The song was deeply offensive to those Americans who did favour intervention in the war, the bellicose type of Americans whose figurehead was "Teddy" Roosevelt. The presidential elections of 1916 were won by Wilson, the incumbent. He was perceived as the peace candidate, opposed to America's entry into the war. As happens more often in the case of US presidents, he was to do exactly the opposite of what was expected of him: on April 2, 1917 he persuaded Congress to declare war on Germany, and this decision became official on April 6. Wilson claimed that Western civilization might collapse and mankind perhaps even become extinct if the United States did not intervene in the conflict; with the US involved, he suggested, the war would become a "war for democracy," a "war to end all wars."

Woodrow Wilson (Source: The Common Constitutionalist)

It is understandable that many historians have failed to take these Wilsonian declarations seriously and have sought elsewhere for the real reasons that caused America to join the war against the will of the overwhelming majority of its people. Germany is usually blamed for this, namely because in 1917 the Reich responded to the British blockade – and the fiasco of the Battle of Jutland in the previous year – with an escalation of submarine warfare. By means of this strategy, Berlin hoped to be able to force the British to capitulate within six months. From January to April 1917, an enormous tonnage of ships was sent to the bottom of the sea, but from May on, when the British introduced the convoy system, their losses declined drastically. Submarine warfare also antagonized neutral powers, including the United States, and spoiled relations between Washington and Berlin, eventually leading to war. It is in these terms that numerous historians try to explain America's entry into the conflict. In this context the name *Lusitania* is inevitably mentioned. This great British ocean liner left New York for Liverpool but was sunk by a German *U-Boot*, and American citizens were among the victims. Stateside, this fanned the flames of anti-German sentiments. The attack proved to be grist for the mill of the "interventionists," the partisans of entry into the war, and this allegedly led to an American declaration of war on Germany.

The problem with this explanation is that the *Lusitania* had already been sunk on May 7, 1915, that is, no less than two years before Washington went to war. Also, the 1,198 victims included only 128 Americans, the others being British and Canadian. Moreover, the *Lusitania* transported munitions and war materiel, something that, according to prevailing norms of international law, made the ship "fair game" for the Germans to target. (The German consulate in New York had in fact warned potential passengers via newspaper advertisements that this might happen). Finally, it is likely that the British authorities, including Churchill, had intentionally arranged for the ship to take on ammunition in the hope that it would be attacked by the Germans, thus triggering an American entry into the war. It is understandable that under such questionable circumstances, the US government failed to take the bait. In early 1917, on account of the intensification of submarine warfare, relations between the United States and Germany were admittedly deteriorating. Even so, it was not for this reason that Wilson declared war in April.

THE DAILY MISSOURIAN

NINTH YEAR — COLUMBIA, MISSOURI, FRIDAY EVENING, APRIL 6, 1917. — NUMBER 184

U.S. OFFICIALLY AT WAR

WILSON TELLS PLANS FOR RAISING ARMIES

Approves of Conscription of 500,000 Men in Addition to Regulars.

AGE LIMIT 18 TO 25

Drafting to Be Practiced in National Guard if Volunteering Fails.

THE WEATHER

GUARDS TO MOBILIZE AT NEVADA IN WEEK

Inspector of Company F Says Fourth Missouri Infantry Will Be Called.

75 RECRUITS NEEDED

Local Unit Will Probably Take Members From Other Cities.

DRAFTING OF ARMY TO AFFECT STUDENTS

Large Per Cent Come With in Age Limits—Many Have Had Experience.

MUST BE EXAMINED

Recruits Will Be Given Rigid Test and Army Standards Maintained.

WILSON SIGNS RESOLUTION AT 1:13 O'CLOCK TODAY

Four Missouri Representatives Vote "No" When House Passes Act 373 to 50—First War Measures Total $164,000,000—Conscription Plans Call for 2,000,000 Men.

BULLETIN

WASHINGTON, April 6.—The general defensive bill calling for $100,000,000 for national defense purposes and $64,000,000 for war expenses was the first war measure to pass Congress today.

WASHINGTON, April 6.—War was declared at 1:13 this afternoon. At exactly that time President Wilson sign-

Newspaper headline from Columbia, Missouri on April, 6, 1917 (Source: Pinterest)

It was not the American people but the American elite – of which Wilson, a former president of Princeton University, was a typical representative – that wanted war; and the war that was wanted was a war against Germany. The reason for this is that in 1917 the US elite, like its European counterpart in 1914, expected war to bring considerable advantages, and also help to dodge a major threat. The US was a great imperialist power, different from Britain, France, Russia and Germany in one small but important aspect: the US had developed a new imperialist strategy, later to be known as neo-colonialism. This involved acquiring raw materials, markets, sources of cheap labour, and investment opportunities not via direct colonial control of a country, but via an indirect, mostly economic penetration, combined with the establishment, usually with the collaboration of local elites, of preponderant political influence. The US thus no longer used colonies and protectorates to achieve imperialist aims, as the European powers continued to do.

The Great War was a conflict between great imperialist powers. It was clear that the powers that would emerge triumphant from this war would also be the great winners with respect to imperialist interests. And it was equally clear that, as in a lottery, those who did not play could not win. It is highly probable that at the time of its declaration of war on Germany, the US government was aware of a statement made shortly before, on January 12, 1917, by the French Prime Minister, Aristide Briand, had thought about it, and had drawn conclusions from it. Clearly alluding to the United States, Briand had let it be known that

> "it would be desirable, at the peace conference, to exclude the powers that had not been involved in the war."

Was it not obvious that there would be much to gain for those who would in fact be present at this conference? The vast possessions of the losers would be divided: "German" real estate in Africa, the oil-rich regions of the Ottoman Empire, and influence in China were all at stake. (The imperialists had been ogling this gigantic but weak country, determined to be present when more concessions could be carved out of its territory, when rights to exploit its mineral wealth or construct railways there would come up for grabs, and when the green

light would be given for other ways to penetrate it economically.) In this respect, Japan had already shown its hand by pocketing the German concession in China. A relatively small country inhabited by members of a presumably inferior race, Japan nonetheless revealed itself as an aggressive and pesky rival of the United States in the Far East. Thanks to their "splendid little war" against Spain, the Americans had been able to establish a foothold in this part of the world in the form of tutelage over the Philippines, a Spanish colony they had "liberated." If the United States stayed out of the war, it would not be present when the Chinese prizes were distributed among the victors, and there loomed a very real danger that Japan might end up monopolizing China economically, so that American businessmen would not find the "open door" there that they were longing for. In any event, stateside it was feared that not only Japan, but also Britain and France – all of them rivals in the "rat race" of imperialism – would take advantage of victory in the war to keep the US out of China and elsewhere. Even a Wikipedia contributor acknowledges this on the topic "American entry into World War I":

> [I]f the Allies had won without [American] help, there was a danger they would carve up the world without regard to American commercial interests.They were already planning to use government subsidies, tariff walls, and controlled markets to counter the competition posed by American businessmen.

With his declaration of war on Germany in April 1917, Wilson neatly eliminated this danger. Much later, in the 1930s, an inquiry by the Nye Committee of the American Congress was to come to the conclusion that the country's entry into the war had been motivated by the wish to be present when, after the war, the moment came "to redivide the spoils of empire."

The US went to war in order to achieve imperialist objectives: more specifically, to be able to share in the rich booty that awaited the victors of the slugfest among imperialists that the Great War happened to be. Remaining neutral would not only have meant not profiting from victory but, conversely, running the risk of becoming the object of the imperialist appetite of the victors. In the case of the US, that risk was admittedly virtually non-existent, but for small neutral countries it was very real. On March 9, 1916, Portugal thus entered the war on the side of the Entente to prevent its colonial possessions from being redistributed by the victorious powers. Lisbon was particularly worried about the intentions of the British, who did in fact entertain such thoughts and were therefore allegedly keen to keep Portugal out of the conflict. Its participation in the war, opposed by the great majority of the population, would cost Portugal 8,000 dead, 13,000 wounded, and 12,000 men taken prisoner, and brought the country zero benefits. Other countries were also forced to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of neutrality. Like the US, the Netherlands could hope that abandoning neutrality might bring advantages. On the other hand, like Portugal, its government feared that maintaining neutrality would be risky. By rallying to the side of Germany, the Netherlands could perhaps acquire Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, and this possibility was in fact conjured up by Berlin through its ambivalent "Flemish policy" (*Flamenpolitik*) in occupied Belgium. Conversely, remaining neutral meant that after the war the victors might force the Netherlands to cough up some of its colonies or even part of its own territory. During the war and during the Paris Peace Conference, some Belgian politicians actually pursued such a goal – vainly, as it turned out – hoping to annex some Dutch territories.

There was a second reason why war was wanted by the US elite, which consisted almost exclusively of the big industrialists and bankers of the northeast of the country. In the years

before 1914, the United States had been hit by a major economic recession. But the war that broke out in Europe generated orders for all sorts of materiel, and on account of this increase in demand, production and profits also increased. Between 1914 and 1917, the nation's industrial production grew by at least 32 percent, the gross national product by about 20 percent, and American exports to the belligerent countries rose spectacularly. Agricultural products were also exported, naturally, but it was primarily the big industrialists – the capitalists, to use that terminology – who made fortunes thanks to the war that, to their great advantage and joy, seemed destined to go on indefinitely. It was hardly a source of concern that in that war an average of 6,000 men died daily and that countless others were mutilated. What mattered were the profits, and those were fabulous. As illustration, one can cite the profits made by a number of big American corporations thanks to the Great War:

Corporation:	*Profits, in millions of dollars:*	
	Before the war:	*At the end of the war:*
DuPont	6	58
Bethlehem Steel	6	49
US Steel	105	240
Anaconda	10	34
International Nickel	4	73

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Most of the business generated by the war was done with the countries of the Entente. Between 1914 and 1916, US exports to Britain and France increased dramatically, from approximately 800 million dollars to 3 billion. Conversely, because of the British blockade, it became virtually impossible to supply the Central Powers; the volume of American exports to Germany and Austria-Hungary shrunk during the war to an insignificant 1 to 2 million dollars. But what counted was that the war revealed itself to be good for business, and in the end it mattered little if the customer was an old friend or an old enemy, a democratic or autocratic country, an "Anglo-Saxon" relative or not.

Still, not all was well. Business was done above all with the British and, to a lesser extent, with the French, and the lion's share of these purchases was based on credits and loans extended to these countries by American banks. In 1917, the US banks had already made a total of 2.3 billion dollars available in this manner. The loans to France alone rose spectacularly during the war, namely from 50 million francs in 1914 to 1.9 billion in 1915, 1.6 in 1916, 7.5 in 1917, 5.3 in 1918, and 9.2 in 1919. Crucial in this context was the role of J. P. Morgan & Co, the bank that was also known as the "House of Morgan." With offices in London and Paris, this Wall Street institution was in an ideal position to finance the transatlantic business, and already in 1915 Morgan was designated as the sole agent for stateside purchases made on behalf of Britain of ammunition, foodstuffs, etc. (The British also made purchases in the US on behalf of their French and Russian allies.) Thus there emerged in the US a kind of "circle of friends" of Morgan, consisting of firms such as DuPont and Remington, which obtained the contracts and were thus able to make fortunes. Morgan pocketed a two-percent commission on this business, which in 1917 alone amounted to a total value of 20 billion dollars. The US thus replaced Britain as the world's financial superpower, New York's Wall Street took over from London's City as financial capital of the world, and the dollar replaced the British pound as the leading currency.

As far as Wall Street was concerned, the war in Europe was a kind of goose that laid golden eggs, and the longer it lasted, the better – as long as the Entente ended up being victorious.

In other words,

> "economic interests placed the United States clearly in the camp of the Allies."

The financial collaboration with Britain possibly amounted to a *de facto* violation of American legislation with respect to neutrality, as some US politicians argued at the time and the aforementioned Nye Committee of Congress would acknowledge in the 1930s. In any event, it is understandable that Germany saw things that way and demonstrated a growing hostility to the United States. Morgan could not have cared less, but in 1916 Wall Street began to worry about the fact that the British debt was becoming extravagant. And in early 1917 the situation became truly worrisome when the revolution in Russia conjured up the spectre of a Russian exit from the war, likely to be followed by a German victory. In this case, Britain might not be able to pay off its debt, which would mean a financial catastrophe for Morgan. It became all too obvious that only an American entry into the war on the side of the British could forestall such a scenario. In March 1917, the US ambassador in London warned Wilson that "the imminent crisis" constituted a grave menace for Morgan and that

> "a declaration of war on Germany was probably the only way to maintain an excellent commercial situation and to prevent a panic."

Naturally, Morgan and the bank's influential circle of friends likewise started to lobby in favour of entry into the war. A few weeks later, in early April 1917, the United States did declare war on the Reich, and so Wall Street had achieved its goal. "Money talks," says an American proverb; in 1917, money talked and President Wilson listened.

Wilson's radical critics were convinced, writes Adam Hochschild, that

> "the real reason the U.S. was fighting for an Allied victory was to ensure that massive American war loans to Britain and France would be paid back."

And by this decision, adds Niall Ferguson, Wilson saved not only Britain and the Entente in general, he also "bailed out" the House of Morgan. The nasty reality of German submarine warfare was invoked to camouflage this indecent truth. Henceforth, Morgan was to make even more money via the sale of war bonds, euphemistically referred to as "Liberty bonds," whose aggregate value would rise to 21 billion dollars by June 1919, when the Versailles Treaty officially put an end to the war.

In contrast to the country's industrial and financial elite, the American people never displayed the slightest enthusiasm for the war. American blacks, in particular,

> "hesitated to give their support to a project they considered hypocritical."

One of them, a resident of the New York district of Harlem, declared that the Germans had never done anything wrong to him, and if they had done so, he forgave them. Alluding to Wilson's slogan to the effect that America went to war for the sake of democracy, some Afro-American leaders asked him publicly "to start by introducing democracy into America itself." Precious few volunteers signed up to go serve as cannon fodder on the other side of

the Atlantic. The authorities were hoping for one million volunteers, but only 73,000 men responded to the call. Already on May 18, a law was therefore passed, the Selective Service (or Selective Draft) Act, which introduced a selective system of compulsory military service, the “draft”, making it possible to recruit the required number of soldiers. But the draft faced much opposition, and more than 330,000 men were classified as draft evaders.

Black Americans served in the First World War (Source: Pinterest)

It is not surprising that members of the upper classes as well as skilled workers, whose presence in the factories was indispensable, remained mostly exempt from the draft. It was primarily the poor who were targeted because they were considered redundant. As in the case of the armies of the other belligerent countries, ordinary American soldiers came overwhelmingly from the lower classes of the population; they were mostly blacks, recently arrived immigrants, illiterates, and other people with little or no education. Afro-Americans were called up in large numbers, but they were mostly drafted into separate work battalions so that white soldiers would not have to consider them as their equals. In their segregated units the blacks received clothing, food, and accommodation of inferior quality. Of the total of 370,000 Afro-Americans who served in the army, 200,000 went to Europe, but only 40,000 of them received weapons and were permitted to join one of the two black combat divisions. Thus was scraped together an army that presumably went to war to fight for democracy.

That America was going on a crusade for the benefit of democracy and/or to end all wars is what Wilson wanted the American people and the rest of the world to believe. In order to achieve this aim, an enormous propaganda machine was set up, which would make use of press articles, speakers, Hollywood productions, etc. to convey the Wilsonian message to American households. The headquarters of this machine was the euphemistically named Committee on Public Information (CPI, headed by the presumably “progressive” journalist George Creel). The objective was to make Americans accept and even applaud a war they did not want and from which they would not derive any benefits, but for which they would pay a high price with their blood, their sweat, and their money, in other words, to “fabricate the public’s approval or at least agreement.” A collaborator of Creel, the journalist Walter Lippmann, called this the “manufacture of consent” – a term that would later be echoed by Noam Chomsky. What needed to be manufactured from scratch, so to speak, was an anti-

German sentiment in the American population. It was done by following the example set by the British, that is, by atrocity mongering, especially by a shameless exaggeration of the atrocities committed by the Germans in 1914 in Belgium.

Creel and his team did an excellent job and the country soon witnessed the blossoming of a veritable anti-German hysteria. Sauerkraut, which was a popular dish in the US at the time, was rebaptised "freedom cabbage,"and the disease known as German measles became "liberty measles." Hollywood was persuaded to crank out a collection of propaganda films, for example a blockbuster with the unsubtle title *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin.* (Later, other enemies of the US, such as Saddam Hussein and Colonel Kaddafi, would be demonised in the same fashion.) More serious was the fact that Americans of German origin were obliged to wear a distinctive yellow sign and often had their property confiscated, a fate that would later befall the Jews in Nazi Germany. The churches also made propaganda for the war. The Protestant Churches, in particular, claimed that the conflict was a "crusade" against imperial Germany. The Catholic Church revealed itself to be slightly less enthusiastic, because the Vatican discreetly sympathised with the Central Powers, especially with the Empire of the Habsburgs, and it did not want to offend the numerous Catholic Americans of Irish and German origin, who supported the Berlin-Vienna axis.

There was yet another reason why the American elite longed for war in 1917. Like the European elites in 1914, the US elite in 1917 was convinced that a war would consolidate its power and prestige, halt and possibly even roll back the trend towards democracy, and finally, liquidate the danger of revolutionary change. Indeed, during the years preceding 1914 the nation's elite had been traumatised by grave social tensions, numerous strikes, and the apparently irresistible rise of the Socialist Party and of the militant trade union IWW. This agitation culminated in April 1914 in the so-called "Ludlow Massacre." A camp of strikers in one of the coal mines of the Rockefellers in Ludlow, Colorado was attacked by troops and more than twenty persons were killed, including wives and children of the strikers. The entire country was up in arms, and in Denver an army unit even refused to intervene against the strikers.

Fortunately, the public's attention would soon be diverted by the fact that President Wilson suddenly found it necessary – on a ludicrous pretext – to shell the Mexican seaport of Vera Cruz and to wage a mini-war against this neighbouring country, where a revolution happened to be taking place. The American historian Howard Zinn feels that this was not a coincidence. He suggests that "patriotic fervor and the military spirit [served to] cover up class struggle," that "guns [were supposed to] divert attention" and that focus on "an external enemy" might "create some national consensus" at home; he concludes that the aggression against Mexico was "an instinctual response of the system for its own survival, to create a unity of fighting purpose among a people torn by internal conflict." The war against Mexico may also be considered to be a class struggle. It was in fact a conflict between two "classes" of countries. It was a conflict that reflected the oppression and exploitation of a poor and powerless country by a powerful and rich country.

Wilson's declaration of war on Germany may similarly be viewed as a stratagem to preserve social peace at home by means of war abroad. Wilson certainly did not opt for war solely for this reason, but he eagerly took advantage of the opportunity offered by the war to repress all forms of radicalism in word and deed – to the advantage of the nation's elite. Wilson, a "democrat" only in the sense that he belonged to the Democratic Party, accomplished this objective in a most undemocratic fashion, namely by awarding himself all sorts of exceptional powers that enabled him to "legally" violate the democratic rights of Americans,

and to do so with impunity.

May 1917 witnessed the promulgation of the draconian Espionage Act, a law that officially purported to combat German espionage, and in 1918 Congress would provide the president with even greater special powers by means of the Sedition Act.These laws would remain on the statutes until the summer of 1921, that is, until the United States signed a peace treaty with Germany. Some historians have described these laws as "the country's most repressive legislation" and as "quasi-totalitarian measures." The government was henceforth free to censor, close down periodicals, and arrest and incarcerate people *ad libitum*, on the pretext that the country was at war against a particularly vicious enemy who disposed of all sorts of spies and agents within the US. Those who opposed the war were deemed to oppose America, in other words, to be "un-American"; pacifism and its twin, socialism, were viewed as enemies of "Americanism."

These laws obviously aimed to scare the American people, to motivate them in favour of the war, and to repress doubts about the righteousness of the war, anti-war protests, and obstruction of the draft. Under this legislation, it became a criminal offence to speak in "disloyal" or other negative or condescending terms of the nation's government, flag, or army. It was now risky not to agree with the policies of the Wilson administration. Voicing a moderate criticism of his war, even in the privacy of one's home, might lead to imprisonment. (The Espionage Actwas to be amended repeatedly after the war, but it was never totally abolished; whistleblower Chelsea – born Bradley – Manning was indicted on the basis of military codes that are themselves based at least in part on this law.)

During the First World War, more than 2,500 Americans were persecuted on the basis of these draconian laws, and about one hundred were convicted and condemned to sentences of 10 to 20 years in prison. This is not a large number in comparison to the country's total population, but it is important to consider that the fear of persecution caused Americans to stop thinking and expressing critical thoughts and to adopt instead an unthinking conformism – and this in a country where rugged individualism had always been glorified. Countless journalists thus abandoned their earlier "muckraking" practices in favour of auto-censorship and a bland but safe regurgitation of government announcements. Too many of America's citizens, previously known to be critically inclined, adopted the habit of swallowing with hook, line and sinker whatever their leaders told them and of unthinkingly following whatever orders arrived from above.

The repressive legislation was used selectively, first and foremost against radicals and dissidents of the lower classes, America's own "*classes dangereuses*," in particular Afro-Americans and Jews. But the radicals and dissidents *par excellence* were the American socialists, then still numerous and militant, who pursued more or less revolutionary democratic reforms and who were opposed to the war. Like their reformist comrades in Europe, some US socialists revealed themselves to be partisans of the war, but the majority of America's socialists were convinced pacifists, and for this they would pay a heavy price. Their figurehead, Eugene Debs, openly spoke out against the war and encouraged the rank-and-file to follow his example. In June 1918, he would be thrown into prison on the basis of the Espionage Act, and the same fate befell hundreds of other socialists who were found guilty of treason, incitement to rebellion, espionage, use of violence, etc.

American Federation of Labor (AFL) (Source: Wikipedia)

The big trade unions, for example the American Federation of Labor (AFL), were traditionally allies of Wilson's Democratic Party, and Wilson defended their interests, at least to a certain point, in exchange for their support. Not surprisingly, in 1917 they supported his entry into the war, just as the European unions had supported their governments when they went to war in 1914. The famous union leader Samuel Gompers turned out to be a particularly useful ally to Wilson, and he collaborated closely with Creel and his Commission of Public Information. One trade union failed to warm up to Wilson and his war, however, namely the radical and even revolutionary IWW. Its leader, "Big Bill" Haywood, would be thrown in jail, just like Debs, for having dared to criticize the war. The IWW had been a thorn in the side of the US establishment for a long time, so the latter took advantage of the war to destroy that nest of revolutionaries via physical attacks on its headquarters, confiscation of documents, arbitrary arrest of many of its leaders and their conviction of the basis of fabricated evidence, etc.

In the US, as in Europe, socialism, or at least its radical, non-reformist version, was allied with pacifism. Most socialists were pacifists and a considerable percentage of the pacifists were socialists. But not all pacifists were socialists; there were also countless bourgeois pacifists with political convictions that may be described as progressive or, as they also say in the US, "liberal." Among these bourgeois pacifists were courageous people who openly expressed their opposition to Wilson's war, and in many cases they paid dearly for this, for example by losing their job or even their seat in the legislative assembly of a state. Paul Jones, an Episcopalian bishop from Utah, was divested of his high ecclesiastical function because he spoke out against the war. And in the universities, which revealed themselves to be "homes of intolerance," the highly touted academic freedom was *de facto* suppressed for the duration of the war, and pacifist professors were systematically removed from their chairs.

The US is supposed to be the land of free enterprise, which means that the state believes, at least in theory, in the benefits of the traditional liberal *laissez-faire* approach and therefore intervenes as little as possible in economic and social life, allowing the private sector to "do its thing." In the context of America's entry into the war, this implied that the repression of pacifists, socialists, union leaders, etc. was at least "privatised," that is, turned over to individuals and groups favouring the war, and in general these were people who happened to be simultaneously anti-democratic, anti-socialist, anti-Semitic, and "anti-Hamitic" (i.e. hostile to blacks) and presented themselves as champions of "Americanism." Prominent

among these groups were the American Patriotic League, the Patriotic Order of Sons of America, and the Knights of Liberty, a branch of the Ku Klux Klan. The methods used by these “vigilantes” included denunciations, beatings, tarring and feathering, painting houses of pacifists yellow, and lynchings. In particular, these vigilantes targeted Wobblies, members of the IWW; one of its leaders, Frank Little, was lynched in Montana in August 1917.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean too, a kind of twin war broke out in 1917, consisting of a “vertical” war in which the US as a country confronted another country, Germany, but also a “horizontal” war in which two classes of American society – the elite and the rest of the population – clashed with each other. In the latter conflict, the elite, directed by Wilson, immediately went on the offensive, namely via repressive laws as well as “vigilantism,” and thus it pushed back the plebeian forces much as the Germans had pushed back the French and the British in 1914. But, as in 1914, that early success did not bring the conflict to an end, and we will later see how it developed during the rest of the war. As for the “vertical” war against Germany, the US elite appeared to be in less of a hurry: it would take quite some time, namely until early 1918, before American troops showed up in significant numbers on the western front and started to make their presence felt.

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