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Memories from the Great War: An Analysis of Jackson Purchase Veterans' Changes in Perspective since 1914

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David Wallace

ABSTRACT

The First World War affected the lives of millions, creating collective memories of hardships, uncertainty, political tension, and animosity toward foreign enemies. In the United States, World War I was a turning point in the nation's growth and development, but on a smaller scale it was a critical historical moment in the individual lives of the veterans who served. This research project showcases the experiences of the Jackson Purchase's WWI veterans with an emphasis on their perceptions during the war, their reasons for enlisting, the countless once-in-a-lifetime experiences they had along the way, the hardships they faced, and the remarkable clarity of their memory years after the fact. Regardless of their race, religious beliefs, or hometowns, the Purchase's WWI veterans were linked through their strong sense of duty, love for their families, and attachment to their homes. The project is primarily based on the oral history collections of Murray State's Pogue Special Collections Library, notably the Jackson Purchase Oral History Project's interviews, conducted in the late 1970s and 1980s, of octogenarian WWI veterans. Their memories of the war and accounts of life in the Purchase Area in the early twentieth century are strikingly clear and well-delivered considering the interviewees' advanced age. The remarkable uniqueness of Pogue Library's WWI oral history collection served as the inspiration for this project.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: A Soldier's Story	1
Historiography	4
"Oh, It's a Lovely War!": Perspectives on the War and its Justification	8
"Over Here, Over There": Global Perspective Shifts	20
Looking Homeward: American Society from a New Vantage	31
Conclusion	43
Bibliography	46

Introduction: A Soldier's Story

On an autumn day in 1985, Clell Cecil Olds recounted how, more than 68 years prior, he had been drafted into the US Army to fight in the First World War. When he left his home in Paris, Tennessee, he left behind his family farm, a steady job in a clay pit, and Thelma Elizabeth Wright: the woman who would become his wife when he made it home safe.¹ In that moment, his life changed forever: he was going to join the Infantry. Olds did not know yet that he would cross over to fight on the front in Europe, but he did know there was a chance he would never see home again. After boot camp and training at Camp Gordon, Olds was a private first class with the 6th Infantry Headquarters Division, serving in a pioneer platoon. Because of his prior experience with explosives from his time working in clay pits, Olds was

¹ "Obituary of Clell Cecil Olds," *The Commercial Appeal*, July 25, 1992, A8.

hand-picked to use the demolitionists' tools of the trade: dynamite, Sheddite, and TNT, to aid the Allied war effort in Europe.

When it was finally time to cross over, the journey to Brest, France, from Chickamauga Park, Georgia, was a hellish 12-day slog on the freighter USS *Covington*. When he returned stateside by way of Fort Oglethorpe in February 1919, both he and the world around him had changed forever. Olds was wounded in the Argonne Forest a month before Armistice Day, and gave a grisly, spine-chilling account of seeing his brothers in arms (including a good friend of his) returning from the front after a gas attack. He said the men "were vomiting and it would be just the blackest stuff you have ever looked at in your life. They were just stumbling along, a lot of them..."² But the

² Clell Cecil Old, Interview by Peggy Pritchard, September 10, 1985, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

things he recalled with the most clarity and fondness were the mundane and easily overlooked: marching orders, place names, gorgeous mountain vistas, French villages and their inhabitants, living conditions, and food. Although his experience in Europe was abruptly interrupted by a piece of German artillery shrapnel leaving a ghastly wound across his shoulder and collarbone, Clell Cecil Olds did not describe being “shell-shocked” or traumatized at all. He especially did not address the incident to the same length or level of detail as he described life at camp or trekking around the pristine mountain lakes of France’s Vosges region. This says that the most profound moments of his wartime experience were not just the heroic sentiments behind his service or combat traumas he faced, but also the eye-opening experiences he had along the way.

This project is primarily based on the oral history collections of Murray State’s Pogue Special Collections Library, notably the Jackson Purchase Oral History Project’s interviews, conducted in the late 1970s and 1980s, of octogenarian WWI veterans like Clell Olds. Veterans’ memories of the war and accounts of life in the Purchase Area in the early twentieth century are strikingly clear and well delivered considering the interviewees’ advanced age. The remarkable uniqueness of Pogue Library’s WWI oral history collection served as the inspiration for this project. The collection is expansive and includes narratives from the entirety of the Jackson Purchase region between the Tennessee and Mississippi Rivers, from Paducah, Kentucky, to western Tennessee. The interviews were conducted in veterans’ homes so that they could be at their most comfortable, with some photographs, medals and other documents selected by the

veterans to show their interviewers parts of their pasts firsthand. Most interviewers were students and history department faculty members, as well as some consultants from the community, like Bill Peyton, who conducted interviews of many Purchase Area African Americans for the Black Oral History Program.

In a way, the war was a coming-of-age experience for both American soldiers and the United States itself. While the war was far from easy for Olds, he looked back on the experiences he had with a relative fondness that is unexpected when using the lens often applied to wartime histories since the second half of the twentieth century: that of jaded combat veterans recounting the unending horrors they have seen. Clell Olds' wartime experience changed him in far more ways than one. When he came back home, his views on the war itself and the Europeans he

encountered were different from when he had left. His first-hand experience allowed him to see new perspectives thousands of miles from home: perspectives that defined his memories of the "Great War." For Olds and many Lost Generation Jackson Purchase residents like him, World War I represented their first (and often only) experience with global cultures through life overseas. For Black veterans, interfacing with a desegregated society for the first time opened their eyes to new possibilities and paved the way for a new social movement. And for all doughboys who served on the front, life in the trenches was a sobering reminder of the dire consequences of warfare. Through seeing both the war itself and foreign languages and cultures firsthand, Jackson Purchase veterans of World War I experienced shifts in their perspectives of the rest of the world,

the war and its justification, and American society.

Historiography

This project fits into a greater context of social histories that have been undertaken on the First World War, histories that have become particularly popular since the various centenaries of WWI events marked from 2014 to 2018. While a great deal of French and German scholarship has been devoted to analyzing the social impacts of soldiers' experiences in the Great War, very little English-language historiography exists that interprets American soldiers' changes in viewpoint due to their wartime experience. This is due in part to the "forgotten" nature of the war and the relatively short period of US involvement, which was only 19 months as opposed to the four years European nations spent at war. In the years immediately following the war, military histories of the tactics and major

battles of World War I were most prevalent. Additionally, much early historical scholarship was dedicated solely to assigning blame for the war. Scholars from Entente nations: Britain, France, and the United States, largely worked to levy blame on Kaiser Wilhelm and Germany, just as the drafters of the Treaty of Versailles had done. Some German historians worked to counter these arguments, arguing that Germany was not wholly or chiefly responsible for the escalation of the war. These efforts were highly politicized in favor of or against the treaty's "war guilt clause" and the punishments the Allied Powers had imposed on Germany. Over time, more nuanced and specialized approaches to the history of World War I have evolved. For example, the Great War is now interpreted through the structuralist approach, which recognizes that a complex web of factors is responsible for the war and no one party is wholly to blame.

Attitudes on the war and how its history should be interpreted changed incredibly rapidly in the postwar years, and a complex historiography covering many schools of thought have evolved. In the second half of the twentieth century, political and military histories of the Great War fell out of favor, while social and cultural histories were brought to the fore.

Since the 1990s, eminent scholars such as Jay M. Winter have shifted historians' focus to the Great War's social and cultural impacts. Winter's 1995 work *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* marked a significant milestone in this paradigm shift, emphasizing how the war is remembered and how its fallen soldiers have been commemorated in both the immediate aftermath of the war and in recent years.³

³ Winter, Jay. *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Canto Classics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. doi:10.1017/CBO9781107589087.

Winter also played a critical role in shifting televised history documentaries toward this new paradigm as co-writer, co-producer, and chief historian for the award-winning 1996 documentary *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*, put on the air by the BBC and PBS. It employed a wider variety of sources than ever before to emphasize not just military and political perspectives, but social, cultural, and economic ones as well. Further, the documentary employed oral histories in an innovative manner, popularizing them with the public.⁴

The field of social history did not come into prominence until the 1960s and 1970s, at a time when even the youngest veterans of the Great War were in their late 60s and 70s. Many dedicated oral history

⁴ Ann Gray and Erin Bell, *History on Television: The Problem of Sources* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013), 30.

projects of World War I veterans took place in this period, but by this time it was often too late to conduct multiple interviews across the interviewee's lifetime. This was the case with the Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, whose youngest interviewees were octogenarians. The oldest of the interviewees was nearly 93 years old, and remembered very little of his military service. In the early days of what historian Richard H. Kohn described in 1981 as the "new" military history, which included Bottom-Up histories of soldiers' experiences, a particular emphasis was placed on World War II and the Vietnam War due to their relative recency.⁵ As such these two conflicts are viewed as more significant focal points of historical scholarship regarding American soldiers'

⁵ Richard H. Kohn. "The Social History of the American Soldier: A Review and Prospectus for Research." *The American Historical Review* 86, no. 3 (1981): 554. doi:10.2307/1860370.

wartime experiences and their impact on those soldiers' perceptions. The experiences of World War I and Korean War veterans, who fought in "forgotten wars," have gone relatively unexplored in mainstream historiography. But, the First World War includes the same topics of ethnic and racial identity, the perception of "otherness" in the enemy, whether American entry into foreign wars is justified, and the impact of media efforts or first-hand learning on these perceptions, as the two more oft-covered wars.

What seems most significant to me, in terms of telling a social history of the war, is not necessarily applying modern views on WWI to veterans' interpretations, but rather analyzing and understanding why soldiers felt the way they did about their wartime experience. Using the work of modern

historians as a guideline, I hope to allow the Purchase Area's veterans of the Great

War to express their own sentiments from their time in the service. Recent historical works like Edward A. Guttierrez's *Doughboys on the Great War: How American Soldiers Viewed Their Military Experience* have used new methodologies to get as close as possible to veterans' firstperson perspectives through the use of documentary evidence. Guttierrez's research highlighted service records and veteran surveys (administered as close to soldiers' return from Europe as possible) as a way to show how troops felt immediately after their service abroad was complete. Guttierrez raises the critical point in *Doughboys* that a story always changes with the telling, and that just as memories are flawed, they are

also subject to reinterpretation and reframing with age.⁶

The Purchase Area veterans interviewed in the 1970s and '80s had decades to forget or reshape their narratives to fit cultural norms or storytelling standards, whether intentionally or not. In several cases the interviewers gloss over very important aspects of the veterans' personal histories in favor of asking the next question, perhaps to fit the interviewee's narrative more into the historical standards of the era. In others, the interviewers have not done an appropriate amount of research ahead of time and thus are not prepared to facilitate the veterans' answers or engage in a dialogue with them. And perhaps worst of all: although many of the veterans prepared documentary evidence, commemorative

⁶ Edward A. Guttierrez, *Doughboys on the Great War: How American Soldiers Viewed Their Military Experience*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 7.

photographs, and mementos from their wartime experience to show their interviewers, these documents were not preserved alongside the interviews in Pogue Library's collections.

By bringing together a wide array of secondary sources covering topics from veterans' views on the war, to homefront perspectives on the war's justification, to the role of ethnic immigrant and African-American soldiers, to historiographic trends in analyses of the Great War, it is possible to fill in the gaps of the primary source narratives. The primary source interviews in turn provide validity to the overarching interpretations social historians have made by fitting into the greater global and national trends established in their social histories. This interpretation of Jackson Purchase WWI veterans' experiences and perspective shifts fits into the greater national and global trend

that overseas military experience, regardless of the time period, leads to shifts in veterans' perspectives on cultural and social topics.

"Oh, It's a Lovely War!": Perspectives on the War and its Justification

Critical to understanding the greater changes in perspective of Jackson Purchase veterans due to their wartime service is analyzing their views on the war outside of modern re-interpretations of their experience. Those most able to tell us about the real nature of their experience were the veterans themselves in accounts given as close as possible to their service. One thing is particularly shocking when working with veterans' first-person narratives: due to changes in historiographic interpretations and media portrayals, there are fewer actual parallels between American Great War veterans' experiences and the experiences of US veterans of the Vietnam, Persian Gulf,

and Iraq Wars than we would at first believe (at least in terms of whether veterans thought their war was worth fighting). This is for a variety of reasons. Questions of the justification of the war in which they fought are difficult to ask veterans of modern wars, with answers often being incredibly divisive and indicative of changing views on warfare, government policy, duty, and honor. This is due in large part to shifting public sentiments on war and its justification that harken back to anti-war movements that came decades after the Great War itself (and as such were partly, but not wholly, inspired by the war). For the veterans and civilians of the Vietnam era, war evolved to take on a deeper meaning, especially when combined with the turbulent nature of the civil rights movement. War fatigue and the frivolous loss of tens of thousands of Americans in a foreign war had an intense impact on the

American psyche, boosting anti-war sentiment massively.⁷

The historians and filmmakers of the late 1960s and '70s then sought retroactively to apply this theme to the American soldiers of the Great War, but this policy of "disillusionment" does not fit the mold of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) experience, which is too complex to be surmised in that way alone. While the experience was sobering for Purchase Area and national veterans alike, the American populace did not view the war as quite so protracted, purposeless, and brutal as the European/ANZAC experience was, or later American military endeavors would be.⁸ The

⁷ Howard Schuman, "Two Sources of Antiwar Sentiment in America," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 3 (1972): 519, www.jstor.org/stable/2776305.

⁸ The Australia and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) was a critical component of the British force assigned to the doomed Gallipoli campaign, an amphibious assault on the Ottoman Empire which lasted nearly 11 months from February 1915 to January 1916.

Great War sent home soldiers who had seen the brutality of a World War firsthand, and who deeply hoped there would not be another.⁹ What started as a journey of adventure and heroism did not just create the broken, disillusioned American veterans portrayed in Lost Generation literature, but also made better educated, wizened men who had seen the damage modern warfare was capable of.

The most significant contributor to Jackson Purchase soldiers' views on the war's justification was, at first, the American propaganda machine. After two and a half years of watching from across the Atlantic, it took a great deal of convincing to mobilize US forces and inspire young men to enlist. Even after the May 1915 sinking of the RMS *Lusitania*, a British ocean liner carrying

⁹ Gutierrez, 172.

American civilians and British war munitions, and the death of nearly 1,200 of its passengers and crew members, President Woodrow Wilson preserved American neutrality.¹⁰ Wilson won reelection in 1916 on the premise that he had kept the United States out of the fighting in Europe and would continue to do so. Starting in 1915, Wilson espoused a form of "America First" rhetoric whereby America would not have direct military involvement in the war in Europe.¹¹

Wilson's policies and reelection campaign were incredibly popular among the Jackson Purchase veterans, and even years after Wilson broke his promise to keep

¹⁰ Thomas A. Bailey, "The Sinking of the *Lusitania*," *The American Historical Review* 41, no. 1 (1935): 57, Accessed April 21, 2021, doi:10.2307/1839355.

¹¹ Arthur Sears Henning, "Wilson for 'America First,'" *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 12, 1915, 1.

the nation out of the war, they harbored no ill will for him. The vast majority, in fact, still supported him without question. The general sentiment among the Purchase Area veterans was that Wilson had done his best to keep the United States out of the war, and that overall he did an excellent job as president. Sam Basham, a veteran from Mayfield who trained to be a machine gunner at Camp Gordon, Georgia, described President Wilson as arrogant, but still called himself a “great admirer” of his policies.¹² Arthur James, an ambulance driver from the 68th division of Ambulance Company #8, expressed that Wilson had “done the right thing” by entering the war, and liked him a lot.¹³ Even

¹² Sam Basham, Interview by John Watson, June 7, 1983, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

¹³ Arthur James, Interview by Ted Belue, June 30, 1983, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

those interviewees who were not particularly interested in politics still agreed with Wilson’s decision years later, though it is somewhat more difficult to know exactly how they felt at the time.

To assure Americans of the necessity of joining the war after years of official neutrality, Wilson created the Committee on Public Information (CPI) and appointed journalist George Creel as its civilian chairman. The CPI became the first large-scale propaganda arm of the US government, and served both to diffuse propaganda in support of the war effort, and censor both anti-war and anti-Wilson publications.¹⁴ Wilson justified this

¹⁴ Caryn E. Neumann, “Committee on Public Information,” Committee on Public Information (The First Amendment Encyclopedia), accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.mtsu.edu/firstamendment/article/1179/committee-on-public-information>.

censorship on the basis that in wartime “it is legitimate to regard things which would in ordinary circumstances be innocent as very dangerous to the public welfare.”¹⁵ Creel encouraged newspapers and other media outlets to self-censor, but the CPI also had the power to edit newspaper copy, print its own advertisements and public notices, and limit the diffusion of information across cable and radio. Bolstering morale on the homefront and on the front lines was incredibly important to American success in the war, so the CPI created a wide range of propaganda posters to demonize the Central Powers and embolden American troops and workers to continue the fight against them.

¹⁵ Nick Fischer, "The Committee on Public Information and the Birth of US State Propaganda," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 1 (2016): 57, Accessed March 29, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44779771>.

Although President Wilson waited until nearly two years after its sinking to declare war on the Central Powers, the *Lusitania* featured heavily in anti-German propaganda efforts in the lead-up to US entry into the war. For most Americans, the sinking of the *Lusitania* became a treacherous act of unrestricted warfare which had to be avenged. No justification from the German Empire could make up for the lost lives of over a hundred American civilians.¹⁶ A significant number of Jackson Purchase veterans interviewed mentioned the *Lusitania* as a large part of their inspiration for enlisting. Of those who did not, many mentioned the propaganda effort and the idea that the German military had to be stopped because it was the right thing to do. As such, it is apparent that the

¹⁶ Frank Trommler, "The Lusitania Effect: America's Mobilization against Germany in World War I," *German Studies Review* 32, no. 2 (2009): 241-2, Accessed March 30, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40574799>.

propaganda machine had a significant impact on encouraging Jackson Purchase veterans to enlist, and justifying the war effort. Jackson Purchase residents also supported the war effort by purchasing Liberty Bonds, growing backyard Freedom Gardens, conserving materials wherever possible, and in the case of farmers and grocers, producing an excess of food to feed Americans at home and overseas.¹⁷

The American propaganda machine changed Americans' sentiments on the war's justification rapidly. It required a great deal of work on the CPI's part to sell the idea of joining a foreign war to the American people. This was supplemented by Wilson's international political aspirations, which shaped the scale and

scope of the war in its final year and a half. Before US entry in April 1917, the war aims of the Great War were based on the nationalist and imperialist ambitions of the European nations involved. When the United States entered the war, however, the Allies' war aims were modified to fit Wilson's progressive ideals of world democracy, free trade, and self-determination. For Wilson, this was an important step to mobilize the American populace into crossing over to fight in Europe. "Making the world safe for democracy" is a lofty ideal that Americans were more likely to fight for than the nationalist European goals of returning the strategically important region of Alsace-Lorraine to France or preserving Serbian independence from Austria-Hungary. The message of fighting for democracy became especially potent with the March 1917 deposition of the

¹⁷ Sam Basham, Interview by John Watson, June 7, 1983, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

Czar and Russia's subsequent exit from the war. American political cartoons were quick to emphasize that the war was a struggle between democracy and autocracy. This would have been far hazier if the Russian Empire was still fighting on the side of the Allies.¹⁸

In January 1918, Wilson furthered his international policy aims through his Fourteen Points address to Congress, in which he set a series of guidelines for a "just and secure peace."¹⁹ The Fourteen Points, the basis for "Wilsonian idealism," represent the political and economic goals which American veterans of the Great War fought for and served a propaganda purpose as well. The Points inspired

¹⁸ Roy Douglas, *The Great War, 1914-1918: the Cartoonists' Vision* (London: Routledge, 2006), 91.

¹⁹ "President Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points (1918)," Our Documents - President Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points (1918) (Our Documents), accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flashed=false&doc=62>.

American soldiers on the front to fight for American ideals and were dropped behind enemy lines to discourage and demoralize German troops. In the years to follow, Wilson's policies of encouraging self-determination, internationalization, and the spread of democratic values created what some historians call a "Wilsonian moment," which set expectations that the end of the Great War would be a watershed for change in the United States and internationally.²⁰ In the immediate period from the Fourteen Points address to the end of the war, it seemed to many that Wilson would lead the world into a new era of international cooperation. Much of the colonial world hoped that Wilson's policies would uproot the influence of European imperialism in favor

²⁰ Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6-8.

of national self-determination to immediate effect, but this was not the case. And although it was likely not the president's intention, Wilsonian idealism inspired a generation of African-American activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois and William Monroe Trotter, who went on to campaign for civil rights and effect change across the country.²¹

Kentucky had quite a few dissenters to the national consensus that the war with the Central Powers was just and worthy of American involvement. For many Jackson Purchase residents, the war was a foreign conflict that did not matter nearly as much as the local economy. When President Wilson announced American entry to the Great War, it was third-page news in *The Murray Ledger* behind articles on the tobacco

market.²² In fact, the early stages of the draft were poised to disrupt farm life in the Purchase so heavily that exemptions were offered to tobacco farm workers until the harvest was done.²³ Kentucky legislators' initial arguments against President Wilson's establishment of the Selective Service hedged heavily on the fact that the draft was bound to affect lower-class workers and farmers disproportionately, thus harming the state economy.²⁴ Eventually, though, the much-needed farm workers crossed over as well.

²² The Murray Ledger, "The Murray Ledger, April 12, 1917" (1917). The Murray Ledger. 483.

<https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/tml/483>

²³ The Murray Ledger, "The Murray Ledger, April 25, 1918" (1918). The Murray Ledger. 536.

<https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/tml/536>

²⁴ David J. Bettez, *Kentucky and the Great War: World War I on the Home Front*, Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2016. 86.

www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1f5g5vw.

²¹Ibid, 8.

Even Purchase Area farm boys with established careers, such as people well into their 30s like South Fulton's Carl Milam, were drafted and sent to Europe. Milam's objections to crossing over, like those of many Purchase residents, were not on moral or political grounds like Kentuckians of Irish and German descent. Rather, his concerns were far more practical: he did not want to leave his widowed father to take care of the farm on his own. Even Milam, who had every right to object to being drafted into driving trucks for the war effort in Europe, still felt the war was worth fighting inasmuch as it was like being a "good neighbor" to America's allies.²⁵

For the veterans of the AEF, especially those from the Purchase region, wartime experience only solidified soldiers' sense of honor and duty to their cause. It even deepened their sense of adventure, but

by the war's end even the archetypical American soldier knew his adventure was coming to a close. American forces spent only one year on the frontlines, with an average of 327 Americans dying per day. The French, over four years of fighting, lost 897 men every day along the way.²⁶ Thus, AEF soldiers did not have the same chance to develop a sense of disillusionment as their European counterparts. When they first enlisted to fight or answered the draft, those Jackson Purchase veterans who did not already have an anti-war or anti-draft disposition, cited their national pride and sense of duty and honor as their reason for signing up. Of the Purchase Area veterans interviewed, the majority either enlisted or tried to enlist before being drafted, and of those who were drafted most said they were glad to have done their duty. This sense of obligation and honor was so strong that it

²⁵ Carl Milam, 19.

²⁶ Gutierrez, 173.

still permeated their narratives 70 years after their original tours of duty. As the war wore on this sense of duty was not worn down among American doughboys, but rather reflected soldiers' changes in viewpoint on whether the conflict was ever an "adventure" at all. The immense gravity of warfare has a profound impact on soldiers, and most of all on those who have seen combat. The war was quite easy to justify for those political pundits, journalists, and government officials who had not fought Austrians and Germans themselves or seen their friends killed in brutal trench fighting, but the archetypical doughboy lost his taste for warfare after seeing combat firsthand. The Great War proved to a generation of veterans that war, no matter how just, should always be a last resort.²⁷

One of the most important things Jackson Purchase veterans learned over the course of their military experience was the true value of human life. The humanity of the average soldier was central to their military experience. Going to war was seen as a miserable and horrific job that just had to be done; as such the vast majority of soldiers did not relish killing their enemy. There is a reason those who fought on the front lines came back with a much less jingoistic worldview than those who did not: combat was an utterly atrocious experience wherein death could come at any moment. Soldiers' accounts of their wartime experience feature far more tales of enemies and allies dying than they do of the soldiers and their allies killing people. Depending on a soldier's personal views and morals, killing was rationalized in a variety of ways. But only very rarely, and under dire circumstances, was it done without any

²⁷ Gutierrez, 148.

feelings of guilt.²⁸ In this way, even in the darkest moments of a soldier's experience, their empathy still shines through. Every soldier on the front was a human being with a home, friends, and a family. The vast majority of those present realized that; if not immediately after killing or wounding their fellow man, then perhaps weeks, months, or years after the fact when looking retrospectively. It weighed heavily on their hearts and minds, having a significant impact on the way Great War veterans viewed their wartime experiences. For many Jackson Purchase veterans who served on the front or met German people, the "dreaded Hun" was not the demon he was made out to be in Allied propaganda. They,

like the average veteran of World War I, saw the humanity in the enemy they faced.

Amidst the backdrop of brutal trench warfare, ruthless propaganda, and sensationalist jingoist media urging them to crush their enemies and save democracy, Jackson Purchase veterans described their first encounters with their German enemies in an empathetic and compassionate way. This reflects a greater complexity to the average Purchase Area veteran's view on the war, as real human encounters with their enemy humanized the people they were supposed to detest. When Harry Hammond saw German Prisoners of War (POW) unloading bombs and ammunition from ships that would later be used to kill their countrymen he did not think of the justness or glory of the war, he thought of the cruel irony of forcing a human being to be an accomplice in the murder of their fellow

²⁸ David Taylor, *Memory, Narrative and the Great War: Rifleman Patrick MacGill and the Construction of Wartime Experience*, 39, Liverpool University Press, 2013.

countrymen.²⁹ When Clell Olds watched his fellow soldiers loot a recently-captured German prisoner of everything but his clothes, he felt sorry for him.³⁰ These men did not consider their enemy lesser or deserving of these punishments. They looked on them as honorable soldiers just like themselves, who were really no different from them. As they recalled it, the Jackson Purchase veteran's wartime experience was not a radicalizing one, but rather served to highlight the rare shreds of humanity they saw along the way, moments of intense empathy and compassion that changed their outlook on the war.

Although the aforementioned encounters were with German POWs carrying out forced labor, there were several other instances wherein Jackson Purchase

veterans came to live and work alongside Germans as part of the AEF's occupation of the Rhineland. This, too, brought former enemies into close cooperation with one another. Jackson Purchase veterans did not harbor grudges against these Germans or express any wild, hateful, murderous sentiments; the war did not turn them into monsters. For the most part they liked the German people they encountered, and deeply appreciated their hospitality.³¹ The general sentiment at that time, at least among the average German soldier who had served on the front, was that it was good for the war to have finally ended. American troops, though not as fatigued as their European fellows, felt much the same way. As previously mentioned, they had had their fill of war and adventure.

²⁹ Harry Hammond, Interview by John Watson, June 21, 1983, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

³⁰ Clell Cecil Old, 16.

³¹ Fritz Metzger, Interview by Mark Fuller, December 3, 1982, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

In this way both sides' soldiers shared a common goal: returning home to their families. Leslie White, of Paducah, Kentucky, described the elation shared between American soldiers and the German prisoners they guarded when the news broke that the Armistice had been signed: they shook hands with one another, paraded in the street and drank whiskey in celebration.³² At that moment, years of brutal wartime experience had come to an end and everyone in that courtyard, German or American, knew that nothing mattered more than making it back home; no ideology, cause, or alliance was quite so important as the soldiers' homecomings would be. The fighting was done, and their lives forever changed, but they had gained no great love for war.

³² Leslie White, Interview by Bill Peyton, September 27, 1979, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

“Over Here, Over There”: Global
Perspective Shifts

When American troops crossed the Atlantic starting in 1917, they experienced a variety of new languages, culture groups, ethnicities, and nationalities that they had not encountered before. Jackson Purchase veterans in particular had not experienced foreign cultures or life abroad, as the majority were the sons of farmers or other working-class men (or worked these kinds of jobs themselves). These men had likely not spent much time outside of their own counties, let alone across the Atlantic Ocean from their homeland. Thus, the experience of crossing over was a jarring one that would change Jackson Purchase doughboys' views on their allies and enemies, people of other ethnicities, the European nations that hosted them, and their own country by comparison.

A significant portion of these shifting perspectives falls into the category of confronting “otherness.” Doughboys experienced “others” when they learned to communicate with French citizens, coordinated with their British and other European allies, and worked to thwart German efforts on the front (or encountered German POWs). These encounters served not only, as one would at first believe, to fill the gaps between Americans and Europeans, or citizens and soldiers, but also to establish a sense of common belonging. President Wilson and General John Pershing, commander of American forces in Europe, held firmly that AEF troops should be kept in separate divisions from their French and British allies, as they would respond best to the American command structure (and taking orders from fellow Americans).³³ But

³³ Michael S. Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War: A Global History*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 325.

in spite of this initial desire of AEF commanders to preserve the independent “identity” of American soldiers through cultural segregation, troops on both sides were brought together by the common experience of fighting a dreadful war. Soldiers and civilians mingled on either side of the front through troops marching through populated areas, camping in the countryside, and occupying enemy territory. Occupied areas, the shared territories of coalition forces like training, rest, and POW camps, townships in the French countryside and bustling cities and ports like Paris, Brest, and Marseille, served as a common ground upon which citizens and soldiers of all nationalities intermingled.³⁴

This mingling led to a cultural and social exchange, which tied the allies closer

³⁴ Emmanuelle Cronier and Victor Demiaux. 2018. “Encountering the Other in Wartime: The Great War as an Intercultural Moment?” *First World War Studies* 9 (2): 141–50. ³⁵ Gutierrez, 137.

together and opened soldiers' eyes to both the similarities and differences between not just their allying nations, but their German and Austro-Hungarian enemies as well. A complex relationship evolved between all of these groups, at both a national and individual level, as they were brought together under strenuous circumstances and bonded by either shared sacrifice or, after the Armistice was signed, a desire to rebuild, go back home, and move forward. Soldiers generally felt a strong cultural kinship to their allies, and in some ways an even stronger relationship emerged between AEF forces and Rhinelander Germans after the war ended, with the American zone of occupation being considered the most effective and compassionate of the four (the others being the Belgian, British, and French zones). Aid programs carried out by occupying American forces and US-based charities showed stark contrasts with the

more resentful French zone occupiers, and American troops reportedly showed more respect and courtesy for local villagers' privacy and individual rights than the German Army itself had done.³⁵

There was one significant hurdle for Jackson Purchase doughboys to overcome before truly understanding the German people: the American propaganda effort headed up by the CPI. Throughout the war, the CPI worked to demonize Germany and the German people as militaristic, brutish, and inhuman. George Creel rejected the idea that the CPI was a propaganda unit in the same capacity as German propaganda efforts were, instead claiming that the CPI had never preached a message of hate or appealed to people's emotions. He suggested that it only sought to drive home that the war was a "fundamental necessity."³⁵ However,

³⁵ George Creel, "Public Opinion in War Time," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 78

upon examining the CPI propaganda of the era, it becomes much more apparent that Creel's committee instilled an intense amount of anti-German sentiment in the American people.

The anti-German propaganda effort bred resentment for Germans and contributed to a hostile environment against Americans of German descent in the United States. After a November 16, 1917 proclamation by President Wilson, all German citizens over the age of 14 living in the United States were required to register as "enemy aliens" with their local governments. "Enemy aliens" were not allowed the privileges of citizenship and were subject to intense scrutiny and surveillance by government officials. In numerous cases across the country, natural-born American women were stripped

(1918): 185-6, Accessed March 30, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1014269>.

of their citizenship because they were married to "enemy aliens" who were born in Germany.³⁶ Anti-German sentiments did not stop with political efforts: in perhaps the first use of food as a tool for American war propaganda, across the US, German foodstuffs were renamed to more "American" alternatives. Sauerkraut became "liberty cabbage," hamburgers became "liberty steaks," and in some cases German foods were removed from cafeteria lunch counters entirely.³⁷ Anti-German sentiments led to the elimination of

³⁶ Kimberly Jensen, "From Citizens to Enemy Aliens: Oregon Women, Marriage, and the Surveillance State during the First World War," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 114, no. 4 (2013): 453-4, Accessed March 30, 2021, doi:10.5403/oregonhistq.114.4.0453.

³⁷ Tanfer Emin Tunc, "Less Sugar, More Warships: Food as American Propaganda in the First World War," *War in History* 19, no. 2 (2012): 195, Accessed March 30, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26098429>.

German as a foreign language in many states' school curricula, the burning of pro-German books, the banning of German classical music and operas, and in the most dire cases, the lynching of left-wing German political organizers.³⁸ The ever-popular *Saturday Evening Post* even called German-Americans "the scum of the melting pot."³⁹ Although they had very little interaction with Germans or Americans of German descent in their rural hometowns, Jackson Purchase veterans' views of German people were colored by the national consensus that Germans were brutish, evil, and not to be trusted.

In perhaps the most famous example of anti-German propaganda from the Great War, an ape dressed in German military attire with a mustache reminiscent of Kaiser Wilhelm has arrived on America's shores

with a bloody club. Europe lies in ruins behind him, evocative of what the future would hold if America did not contribute to the Allied war effort. The poster is labeled "Destroy this Mad Brute- Enlist."⁴⁰ This and other anti-German propaganda posters of the era inspired a great many Jackson Purchase veterans to enlist and fight the Germans in France. Once they arrived in France and met the enemy firsthand, however, the majority of Jackson Purchase veterans realized that the propaganda which had inspired them to enlist was entirely incorrect. This experience is summarized best by Hughie Butler from Water Valley, Kentucky, who served as a surgical nurse in the Navy. Butler enlisted because he thought the Germans were "the meanest people in the world" due to the propaganda effort. He wanted to stop the atrocities which were said to have taken

³⁸ Ibid, 205

³⁹ Tunc, 205-6.

⁴⁰ Harry R. Hopps, Artist, *Destroy this mad brute Enlist - U.S. Army.*, 1918, Photograph, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2010652057/>.

place across the war zone. Upon later contemplation, and after meeting many German POWs, one of which was fluent in English after living much of his life in the US, his outlook changed significantly. On the German soldiers he met, he reflected: “I’ll tell you what, I don’t think they’re a bit worse, or meaner, than any American sailor or soldier.”⁴¹

Another veteran, Jesse Flowers from Paducah, did a remarkable act of kindness for a German POW; Flowers ran into a teenage soldier, likely around 14 or 15 years old, who had been captured by the French army. At the time, the boy had escaped a French prison camp and was hiding out in a building close to the AEF base. Because it seemed to Flowers that the boy had been mistreated by the French, he, at risk of

⁴¹ Hughie Butler, Interview by Mark Fuller, October 28, 1982, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

court-martial to himself, told the boy: “I’m going this way, and you go that way, and I don’t want to see you again.”⁴² This merciful act shows that although Jackson Purchase veterans’ initial perspectives on their foe was shaped by American propaganda, they never fully de-humanized them. And in many cases, they grew to appreciate the German people and culture more because of their experience.

Veterans from the Jackson Purchase were no exception in terms of growing accustomed to international experiences and cultures. Though each individual differed in terms of his personal views and prejudices, each showed a remarkable degree of empathy and gained a much greater cultural understanding over the course of his wartime experience. What the region’s soldiers first saw when they arrived in Europe was a

⁴² Jesse Flowers, Interviewer Unknown, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

grateful French civilian population that had been committed to a total war for years.⁴³ The general consensus was that the French were incredibly willing to work alongside the American troops, and that the AEF's arrival was a welcome sight for the war-weary French people. For some, the best impressions the French people made were through their food culture. The French economy (as with the rest of the world involved in the Great War) was in a tumultuous state throughout the war years. Clell Olds recounted his experiences of eating eggs from French farmsteads and buying champagne from vendors for \$2 a bottle. At the time of his interview, he speculated the same brand would have cost more than \$20 at the liquor store in Paris, Tennessee.⁴⁴

Another veteran, Harry Hammond, was greatly impressed with French workers' and soldiers' strong affinity for coffee, recounting bonding with them while sharing the drink. Due to coffee's relative scarcity in France at the time, he remembered the French reputation for flocking to coffee wherever it could be found aboard American ships, and that where the French were concerned, he liked them a lot. He expressed a great deal of contempt for the British, however.⁴⁵ Most importantly though, these experiences always contributed to a deeper understanding than surface-level interactions normally would have. For Olds, his wartime experience also meant learning the French language and reading American newspapers in French, or having his friend Private White read them to him. Soldiers' lifelines to news from back home, especially

⁴³ Clell Cecil Old, 11.

⁴⁴ Clell Cecil Old, 31.

⁴⁵ Harry Hammond, Interview by John Watson, June 21, 1983, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

on the supply-starved front lines, often ended up being French language sources.

African-American soldiers like Andrew Carmon, of Mayfield, Kentucky, and Reverend William Davis, of Paducah, Kentucky, even enlisted with French divisions so that they would be allowed to fight on the front and prove themselves.⁴⁶ This was the most direct form of cultural exchange between different nations' soldiers possible, as these troops interacted with Frenchmen constantly. Cultural and social exchanges took place in an osmotic fashion, whereby military experience immersed Jackson Purchase veterans in foreign cultures and allowed them to have experiences that were extraordinary. These experiences made the world seem smaller than it had been before. A mutual cultural

⁴⁶ Andrew Carmon, Interview by Bill Peyton, October 18, 1979, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

understanding was reached between allies that allowed both to benefit from the other's presence. These experiences defied the standard of cultural segregation set by coalition leaders. The barriers of "otherness" came to be broken down as Jackson Purchase veterans discovered that in spite of their different nationalities, at a base level everyone was the same. Carl Milam, a South Fulton resident, said it best: "We were there to help them and they would help us. That's right. Otherwise, the nicer you are, they'll soon learn... The nicer you are, the nicer they'll be to you."⁴⁷

As for the French viewpoint of American soldiers, a lack of French-language sources in translation means that raw data and top-down histories are what is most plentiful, as well as

⁴⁷ Carl Milam, Interview by Ted Belue, October 2, 1982, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

American viewpoints on French perspectives. What can be said for certain is that the arrival of the AEF had a significant impact on the French national morale. This took time, however, as the first waves of American soldiers who crossed the Atlantic arrived slowly and sporadically. General Pershing refused to create mixed American-British and American-French divisions in the early stages of the US mobilization which slowed American deployment even further, much to the chagrin of his allies.⁴⁸ After much arguing between Pershing and Field Marshal Haig, commander of the British Expeditionary Force, mixed divisions were permitted and American soldiers were shipped more rapidly to the front.

Throughout much of 1917, French protests and calls for an end to the war grew

⁴⁸ Brock Millman, *Pessimism and British War Policy: 1916-1918* (London: Routledge, 2014), 243.

rapidly. Though defeatist viewpoints were wholeheartedly rejected, the prospects of a white peace, or a French victory with a treaty that was more favorable to the German people than the Treaty of Versailles, were on the rise. Of French letters sent through Bordeaux postal inspection in September 1917, a lesser number than in previous months advocated peace through total victory, while letters advocating peace through compromise saw a 7 percent increase.⁴⁹ This shows a degree of war weariness in the populace. The outlook of French military leaders was somewhat more positive. Marshal Phillippe Pétain, by then known as “the Lion of Verdun,” had greater hopes for cooperation from American commanders than British ones.⁵⁰ Tensions

⁴⁹ Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People*, trans. Arnold Pomerans, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 225.

⁵⁰ Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 392.

between the Allies rose when Field Marshal Haig described French soldiers as coddled, lacking in discipline, and refusing to fight. In a June 1917 telegram, Pershing relayed back to Washington that “the attitude of the Supreme War Council... is one of depression.”⁵¹ For many troops on the ground, opinions on the American military and its doughboys were incredibly pessimistic. The early successes of the Nivelle Offensive, an April 1917 assault on the Aisne River front through which the Allies hoped to break the German lines in 48 hours and end the war, led to a significant spike in Allied morale.⁵² This did not last for long, however. Within days it was clear that the offensive would fail, and troop morale plummeted once more.⁵⁴ On May 1, French

postal authorities reported that some French soldiers had a negative outlook on American entry into the war. They felt that while it would aid the war effort significantly, American workers would soon replace French ones in cities and ports, leading thousands more Frenchmen to be sent to the front lines and killed. Exhausted French soldiers blamed their commanders’ incompetence for the Nivelle Offensive’s failure, which some troops described as a “butchery” and a “fiasco.”⁵³

In the summer following the offensive, French soldiers conducted a mutiny consisting not of militant revolts against their commanders, but of “military strikes” whereby they refused to leave the trenches until policies changed and morale was uplifted again. The mutineers would stand their ground and defend, but refused to be thrown “over the top” like the

⁵¹ Doughty, 454.

⁵² Hew Strachan, "John Buchan and the First World War: Fact into Fiction," *War in History* 16, no. 3 (2009): 298. Accessed April 9, 2021.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26070692>.⁵⁴ Doughty, 363.

⁵³ Ibid.

almost-200,000 Frenchmen who had died in the offensive.⁵⁴ Tired British soldiers told their American counterparts that the war was already lost, and that even their best efforts could only prolong the brutal fighting.

Confidence in the entire allied high command had been eroded and would need to be revived quickly.⁵⁵ This set the tone for the AEF's arrival on the front in October 1917. An immediate contrast was set as soon as American troops arrived on the front in greater numbers: they were numerous, healthy, well-fed, and had a strong morale that had not yet been dulled by years of trench fighting.

They arrived not a moment too late, as American forces were central to stopping General Ludendorff's Spring

⁵⁴ Bentley B. Gilbert, and Paul P. Bernard. "The French Army Mutinies of 1917," *The Historian* 22, no. 1 (1959): 30. Accessed April 10, 2021.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24436670>.

⁵⁵ Millman, 253.

Offensive of 1918. American divisions halted the German advance in the Belleau Wood, just 35 miles from Paris, and on the Marne River, for which one US regiment received the powerful nickname "The Rock of the Marne."⁵⁶ The impact this newfound fame had on the morale of allied citizens and soldiers, especially the French, was tremendous. As such, while AEF soldiers held the French in high regard, the feeling was mutual. Thus, it becomes easier to understand the warm welcome Jackson Purchase veterans received in France. This is also due to the strong relationship between battlefield performance and feelings of xenophobia. Soldiers and citizens alike become more likely to accept and learn about foreign cultures not just through proximity and shared battlefield trauma, but also through feelings of gratitude or indebtedness to foreign

⁵⁶ Neiberg, 328-9.

soldiers. The inverse became true of Russians in 1918, when anti-Russian xenophobia reached a peak. It was said in Paris that the Russians, who had dragged France into the war to begin with, would never be forgiven for their cowardice after making peace with the Central Powers to focus on the Russian Revolution.⁵⁷ They had left the French high and dry, whereas the AEF had come to save the nation.

The feelings of unity and brotherhood inspired by the AEF's combat performance, through which relatively undrilled and undertrained American troops had held off against Germany's last-ditch attempts to seize Paris and win the war, created a strong sense of supranational pride. Whether allied soldiers on the western front in 1918 were African, American, Asian, European, or French, they were united by their common alliance and struggle against

the Central Powers. Though many of their forces were culturally and nationally segregated, the war gave all soldiers, Jackson Purchase residents included, the opportunity to live, fight, and die alongside people of dozens of different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures. Thus, their eyes were opened to myriad lifestyles, experiences, and cultures they previously may have written off as "foreign" and never seen or explored.

Looking Homeward: American Society
from a New Vantage

Their time in Europe and participation in the war effort provided Jackson Purchase doughboys with a new perspective from which to view their own society back home. On a national scale, the Great War served as a moment for every stratum of American society to play their part: from women working to maintain the homefront to African-Americans and ethnic

⁵⁷ Becker, 307.

minorities striving to prove their American-ness on the frontlines. Thus, the niche each group filled and the lofty heights to which they rose to accomplish the tasks set for them defined the new place in American society they found after the war. While ethnic immigrants and African-Americans sought to fight for their civil rights and citizenship out of a sense of national pride or desire to showcase their capabilities, the average white Protestant American soldier who fought had some trouble returning to his former place in society as well. In spite of this, those who served expressed a remarkable patriotism, one that was molded, even amplified, by their wartime service. Those who had risked life and limb for their country above all looked back to their home country as the best in the world: otherwise they likely would not have served. Expressed above all was the idea that the lessons taught by

World War I were lessons that they would never forget.⁵⁸

For many World War I veterans, the right to citizenship and acceptance in the United States was not one granted by birth. Close to 20 percent of the AEF were foreign-born nationals, and thousands of second-generation immigrants fought alongside naturalized American citizens; Though it is uncertain to what degree, they fought alongside the men of the Jackson Purchase as well.⁵⁹ For these immigrants, making a home in America was a lofty goal to aspire toward, one that could be more easily earned through military service and bloodshed, if need be. As is true of all ethnic minority immigrants, non-native doughboys could not just assimilate to American society. What is most indicative of the social

⁵⁸ Gutierrez, 153-4.

⁵⁹ Nancy Gentile Ford, *Americans All!: Foreign-Born Soldiers in World War I*, (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2011), 1.

and cultural change of the time is the ways in which the Armed Forces handled the intake and accommodation of immigrant soldiers who could not speak English or had little knowledge of American society and culture. Many of these soldiers were drafted and had no other choice but to join the service. Their experiences, however, show a sensitive and empathetic arm of the military that fought to ensure none of its members were left behind socially.

In making the best possible effort to help these people, especially in a time period characterized by ethnocentric nativist sentiments, the military stood in stark contrast with other groups across the nation. Through the Camp Gordon Plan, English language and literacy courses were included in the training immigrant soldiers received before being sent to Europe. Special considerations were made for Catholic and Orthodox Christian immigrant soldiers so

that their religious needs could be met, and high command reorganized whole divisions with ethnic immigrant populations' abilities to inter-communicate taken into consideration. It was known that putting immigrant soldiers alone in divisions alongside native-born troops might lead to nativist persecution, so companies of immigrants of the same ethnicity comprised a larger support network for non-native soldiers.⁶⁰ These companies, like the most decorated regiments of the Second World War, had something to prove. They sought not just to repay a debt of gratitude to the military programs that helped them become better citizens, but also to prove themselves worthy of being called "Americans."⁶¹ These sentiments eventually paid off for them, while American society as a whole also benefited from the military's sensitive and compassionate policies. Throughout their

⁶⁰ Ford, 70-71.

⁶¹ Ford, 86.

wartime service, native-born soldiers were instructed not to call immigrant soldiers degrading names or bully them; and most importantly, because native-born soldiers saw the high morale, patriotism, and willingness to fight of their immigrant counterparts, they gained a greater understanding of what it meant to be an American.⁶²

The other group with the most on the line was African-American soldiers: the 370,000 Black soldiers who served comprised 18.5 percent of AEF troops, and yet the vast majority were not allowed to fight. Of the hundreds of thousands of Black soldiers in Europe, only around 30,000 fought in the two US “colored divisions.”⁶³ By contrast, 160,000 Black men were drafted and put into manual labor

battalions or made stevedores; one-third of all labor troops in the military service were Black, and racist policies meant that Black draftees could not get the same deferments for flat-footedness or other ailments as white draftees could.⁶⁶ Thus, in stark contrast to the white doughboy’s experience, and even the ethnic minority immigrant’s experience, African-American soldiers in the Great War faced intense persecution and carried out harsh manual labor. Many Black Americans signed on to fight for their country and prove that they were just as capable in battle as their white counterparts, but had little to no practical way to prove this due to oppressive military policy. This is an experience that the African-American veterans of the Jackson Purchase knew incredibly well. All of the Purchase Area’s AfricanAmerican veterans experienced persecution over the course of their military service, and at least two of the interviewees

⁶² Ford, 113.

⁶³ Arthur E. Barbeau, Florette Henri, and Bernard C. Nalty, *The Unknown Soldiers: AfricanAmerican Troops in World War I*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 70. ⁶⁶ Ibid, 89.

expressed disgust at being kept from fighting for the AEF. This experience, which diverged from that of the average American doughboy, is best told by Reverend William Davis, of Paducah:

The United States didn't want [black soldiers] to fight, they wanted us to be stevedores. The French, I want to make this clear. I hope I can because we were treated wrongly. The French Army, the French commanders, and the French parliament, their self, said, 'They come over here to fight, and they're going to fight.' They didn't let us be stevedores. They signed us with the French Army. I had all French equipment. I had a French map. I didn't have a

United States Map. I had a French rifle. All my equipment was French. We had to stay over there until we returned back to the United States before we can come back here. That is true, and I want everybody to know that because of that little misery that they done to us.⁶⁴

Davis was poorly trained, alienated from his fellow Americans, and had to stay in France longer than white troops, all because he was Black. Davis also experienced a race riot at Camp Merritt, New Jersey on August 19, 1918. On that day, an altercation between a Black soldier and a white sergeant led to a brawl at the

⁶⁴ William G. Davis, Interview by Bill Peyton, September 25, 1979, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

heart of the camp. Over 2,000 people were present, and the military police were called in to prevent the riot from escalating further. Over the course of the riot, two Black soldiers were killed by indiscriminate fire from a National Guardsman, and eight other troops were injured.⁶⁵ As one of the major departure locations for soldiers from across the country on their way to Europe, Camp Merritt was host to multiple prominent incidents of racial discrimination. Although African-Americans were allowed to serve as officers, they could only command other Black soldiers. Throughout the war, many white troops belittled Black officers and refused to recognize their authority. In one case, white soldiers from Mississippi saluted a group of Black officers from Camp

⁶⁵ “Soldiers Shot in Race Riot at Camp; Negro Troopers and Infantry on Police Duty Fight at Merritt,” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, August 19, 1918), <https://www.nytimes.com/1918/08/19/archives/soldiers-shot-in-race-riot-at-camp-negro-troopers-and-infantry-on.html>.

Zachary Taylor but added “Damn you!” under their breath afterward.⁶⁶

Davis’ life and the lives of other African-Americans were viewed as more expendable than white doughboys’. This is reflected in the words and deeds of white troops, officers, and commanders. Frank Caldwell, the son of Black sharecroppers and a member of the 801st Pioneer Infantry Regiment, recounted numerous negative interactions with white military police (MPs) both stateside and in France. In one case, a military policeman beat and abused a young French girl for selling oranges too close to the AEF camp. Caldwell could do nothing to stop him, but said this bred a great deal of

⁶⁶ Jennifer Keene, “A Comparative Study of White and Black American Soldiers during the First World War,” *Annales De Démographie Historique*, no. 103 (OAD), <https://www.cairn.info/revue-Annales-de-demographie-historique-2002-1-page71.htm?contenu=article>.

resentment for the officer.⁶⁷ Incidents of violence by AEF military police did not stop there, and Black doughboys faced the ire of spiteful white MPs disproportionately. Caldwell said white MPs beat and killed so many Black troops that Black MPs had to be assigned in their place to prevent further bloodshed.⁶⁸ Black veteran and Paducahan William Pryor lambasted the racial hypocrisy inherent to the AEF, recalling an ideological battle of wits between General John Pershing and French General Ferdinand Foch. Foch, whose nation had an extensive corps of Black troops from across its African colonial possessions, said of Black soldiers, “are they not men?” By attacking Pershing’s policy of granting black troops less furlough than whites, Foch forced Pershing’s hand and made him change the way his operation

was run.⁶⁹ This stuck in Pryor’s mind as though Foch was standing up for him personally. It was these experiences, not those of combat on the front, that shaped the narratives of the Jackson Purchase’s African-American veterans. While some were treated quite well, others were treated exceedingly poorly. This discrimination had a long-lasting effect: as with World War II, when Black soldiers saw a society wherein the Jim Crow laws and segregation were not the norm, it gave them hope for the future. When they were received amicably by the French people and Armed Forces, it opened their eyes to a society that, while still racist, was considerably less openly oppressive and discriminatory to people of color than their own. Frank Caldwell recalled several significant differences between the conduct of Frenchmen and the white American

⁶⁷ Frank Caldwell, Interview by Bill Peyton, September 21, 1979, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY, 17.

⁶⁸ Frank Caldwell, 19.

⁶⁹ William Pryor, Interview by Bill Peyton, September 27, 1979, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

soldiers who served alongside him. A French civilian, after accidentally bumping into him in the street, begged his pardon and was very respectful. He contrasted this with a story of a white soldier who bumped into a Black American man and immediately drew his pistol on him.⁷⁰ Caldwell also explained how freeing it was to eat at desegregated restaurants in Brest, France, but that it was a regular occurrence for white doughboys, upon realizing the bar or restaurant they were in had Black Americans present, to say “we better get out of here, there’s too much chocolate in here.”⁷¹ Exposure to societies that were not segregated along racial lines laid much of the groundwork for the “New Negro” movement, which would be popularized in the Harlem Renaissance of the late 1910s and 1920s. Central to the New Negro movement was the practice of actively rejecting Jim Crow practices and

refusing to submit to them quietly. Black troops’ service in the Great War led more and more African-American activists stateside to fight for equal rights at home. By the war’s end, Black soldiers had fought in France to “make the world a safe place for Democracy,” and now were primed to return stateside and fight for a fair democracy at home.⁷²

The situation in France contrasted significantly with happenings on the homefront throughout the war and in its immediate aftermath. Home, by comparison, with its lynchings, voter suppression, segregation, and intense racist vitriol, seemed much less inviting. Frank Caldwell echoed this sentiment, saying “the American

⁷⁰ Frank Caldwell, 20.

⁷¹ Ibid, 20.

⁷² Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012), 136.

people were the biggest enemies we had.”⁷³

When he returned from France, Caldwell was surprised that he did not receive a warm welcome. Immediately upon his arrival in Paducah, he was told by a white woman to take off his uniform. Given that a Black man had been lynched there several years before, he said nothing back to her out of fear of reprisal.⁷⁴ Black soldiers who returned home to the South were in at least 10 cases lynched, sometimes still in their uniforms. Black veterans were more likely to stand up for themselves than they had been before the war, which led to confrontations and race riots in several cases.⁷⁵ The summer of 1919, immediately after Great War veterans returned from France, has come to be known as the “Red Summer” for its intense violence against African-Americans. Veterans of World War I were on both sides of the race

⁷³ Frank Caldwell, 18.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 22.

⁷⁵ Barbeau, 177-8.

riots which took place across 22 American cities and towns that summer.⁷⁶ Many white soldiers and sailors fought to maintain white supremacy, while Black veterans took up the cause to “fight for democracy at home.”

A series of factors contributed to this massive resurgence in racial violence. The New Negro movement, which gained considerable traction after the war, encouraged Black veterans to fight back against racial oppression. Racial tensions had been largely suppressed for the sake of sustaining the war effort, but they did not disappear. Riding a wave of white supremacist sentiment and national popularity generated by D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, the Ku Klux Klan was revived in 1915.⁷⁷ The Great Migration,

⁷⁶ Stanley B. Norvell, and William M. Tuttle, Jr. "Views of a Negro During "The Red Summer" of 1919," *The Journal of Negro History* 51, no. 3 (1966): 209.

⁷⁷ Rory McVeigh, and Kevin Estep, "The Ku Klux Klan in American History," In *The Politics of Losing: Trump, the Klan, and the*

through which over 500,000 African-Americans fled segregation, racial violence, and Jim Crow laws in the South for the cities of the North brought white northerners into contact with African-Americans on a larger scale than ever before. Northern whites blamed Black migrants for lost job opportunities, security concerns, and high housing costs. In the months before the Red Summer, the homes of Black families in Chicago's majority-white neighborhoods were bombed in an effort to drive them into the Black ghettos.⁷⁸ After the Armistice was signed and American doughboys returned home, belligerent white soldiers and sailors ignited the heightened racial tensions into the worst wave of anti-Black collective violence since Reconstruction.

Mainstreaming of Resentment, 28. New York; Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2019.

⁷⁸ Norvell and Tuttle, 210.

In cities such as Charleston, Washington, D.C., New York City, and Chicago, white soldiers initiated acts of violence that erupted into race riots with thousands of people on both sides. Racial tensions were at an all-time high in the lead-up to the Washington, D.C. race riot of July 21. In early July, the Metropolitan Police started a massive manhunt for a serial rapist, who victims said was a young Black man. Hundreds of white volunteers and at least 100 police officers from the capital and its surrounding county joined the manhunt, by which no less than 136 Black men were detained without warrants. The sexual assaults continued nevertheless; on Friday, July 18, it was purported that Elsie Stephnick, the wife of Navy contractor John Stephnick, was assaulted by two Black men.

⁷⁹ Charles Ralls, a resident of Bloodfield, a

⁷⁹ David F. Krugler, "A Mob in Uniform: Soldiers and Civilians in Washington's Red Summer,

majority-Black neighborhood in Southwest Washington, had been questioned by the police in relation to the incident. As soon as word got out that Ralls had been interviewed, Stephnick mobilized hundreds of white sailors, soldiers, and marines into a mob with the aim of “cleaning up” Bloodfield and catching Ralls.⁸⁰ The men marched, pipes, clubs, pistols, and sticks at the ready, toward Bloodfield and beat any Black passers-by they encountered along the way. The violence continued over the rest of the weekend, as white soldiers and sailors ripped black passengers from streetcars and automobiles before beating them viciously in the street.⁸¹ Policemen did little to help Black Washingtonians, and in at least one case arrested a group of Black men en masse

1919," *Washington History* 21 (2009): 56, Accessed April 8, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25704908>.

⁸⁰ Krugler, *A Mob in Uniform*, 56-7.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 59.

before brutalizing them in custody.⁸²

Knowing they would receive no help from the Metropolitan Police or federal riot troops, Black veterans and civilians took up arms to protect themselves. Black men gathered in their Washington neighborhoods by the thousands armed with knives, pistols, clubs, and other weapons to defend themselves from the white mobs. They set up barricades around Howard University and the LeDroit Park neighborhood, while many former veterans posted up on rooftops with rifles at the ready.⁸³ This was incredibly alarming to white authorities, who worked to disarm Black men as quickly as possible. Federal agents from the Bureau of Investigations (BI) and Military Intelligence Division (MID) suspected that

⁸² David F. Krugler, "1919: Defending Black Lives." *Washington History* 32, no. 1/2 (2020): 29,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26947511>.

⁸³ Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2012), 103.

African-Americans were fomenting a Communist revolution through the New Negro movement.⁸⁴ This was not the case, but demonstrates that the movement was largely misunderstood by federal authorities. An MID report suggested that African-Americans veterans were stockpiling weapons which they had illegally smuggled back home from France. A thorough military investigation found that this was incorrect, and in fact most firearms employed in that year's riots were purchased legally for self-defense.⁸⁵ In an attempt to impede Black gun ownership, officials forbade gun shops in Washington and throughout the country from selling firearms to Black customers. There was a significant uptick in gun sales throughout the Red Summer, however: to whites.⁸⁶ The riots

⁸⁴ David F. Krugler, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence: How African Americans Fought Back* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 200.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 203.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 206.

continued until July 22. At least seven people were killed, more than a dozen were wounded, and at least a hundred people were injured.⁸⁷ Throughout the rest of the summer, hundreds more Black people were killed in race riots, and dozens were lynched by white mobs.⁸⁸ The Red Summer of 1919 and the many incidents of racist violence in the years to follow were part of a larger effort to uphold white supremacy across the country, but also a watershed for change. The new tactics of resisting white supremacy founded in the New Negro movement and African-American veterans' eye-opening experiences in France brought some of the

⁸⁷ Krugler, "A Mob in Uniform," 49.

⁸⁸ The bloodiest event of the year was the Elaine massacre in Phillips County, Arkansas. It is now believed that over three days, white mobs scoured the county and killed between 100 and 237 African-Americans. An elaborate cover-up then took place, whereby the state government claimed the county's Black population had been plotting an insurrection in the same vein as the Washington and Chicago riots.

first stirrings of change in the American racial climate. For Black veterans of the Great War, the fight for democratic ideals in Europe fundamentally changed their perspectives on democracy and citizenship in the United States. In France, they were awoken to the possibility of a society unfettered by Jim Crow and segregation. When Black troops returned home many, including Frank Caldwell, realized that the greatest enemy they had to overcome was not German soldiers, but American white supremacists. In the decades after the war, the perspective shifts brought on by experiences with race at home and abroad (in both World Wars) birthed the civil rights movement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, World War I was a transformative experience for everyone involved. Jackson Purchase veterans, like all

doughboys who served, were in many ways different people than they had been before they crossed over. Depending on the things they saw, soldiers from the Jackson Purchase Area (JPA) looked at issues of race, society, politics, war, and nationality in new ways because of their international wartime experiences. For JPA veterans like Harry Hammond and Clell Olds, this meant rationalizing the experience of fighting on the front and reconciling the inner humanity they saw in their German enemies with their sense of civic duty to face them on the battlefield. For doughboys like Hughie Butler and Carl Milam, this meant overcoming the vicious American propaganda which told them Germans were barbaric and untrustworthy, so that they might gain an appreciation not just for their French and British allies, but for their German enemies as well. For Black troops from the Purchase Area like Reverend

William Davis and Frank Caldwell, this meant understanding the role of race in society on a global scale, facing systemic racism, discrimination, and prejudice from white American troops, and witnessing a desegregated alternative to the American society to which they returned after the war's end.

These men fit into a greater national trend of American soldiers who experienced previously foreign ideals and concepts through overseas service and returned stateside to tell the tale. JPA veterans' lives, especially those of draftees, were completely uprooted and shifted into an entirely new environment wherein they were given the unique opportunity to absorb elements of the unknown. AEF soldiers, Jackson Purchase residents included, effectively formed enclaves of American ideals and cultures everywhere they went. Through the mingling over time of American, British,

Belgian, French, and German people (as well as Americans of various ethnicities and backgrounds) throughout the AEF's years of combat and occupation, these cultural enclaves absorbed new experiences and formed new perspectives. In the case of US veterans of color, this mingling was even more striking. For many Black American soldiers, serving in combat roles meant direct interaction with the French language, French or Francophone African people, and French culture, on a daily basis. Jackson Purchase veterans' views of their allies, hosts, and enemies were all remarkably positive. The absolute hatred of German foes encouraged by propaganda was seldom expressed. In fact, it was markedly absent from soldiers' accounts, and instead a great deal of compassion and empathy for their fellow man was put on display.

Upon their return stateside, veterans had new stories to tell about their overseas

experiences: some good, some bad, but all incredibly interesting and important to both local and national histories. The veterans' accounts themselves, even when given more than 60 years after the war had ended, were clear, concise, and vividly told. Stories like those showcased in this project offer an important look into veterans' experiences as they remember them, and are deeply important to the field of memory studies. These memories can engender a strong sense of connection between communities and their histories, so long as they do not go untold. Veterans' families, as well, can benefit a great deal from coming to understand their ancestors' role in local, national, and global histories. Resources like Pogue Library's oral history collection can play a critical role in not just telling histories like that of the Jackson Purchase's veterans of the Great War, but also in reconnecting that history to its community. The First

World War is of particular import in this field due to its generally "forgotten" nature as one of America's least addressed wars. If veterans' stories, and by extension the stories of the war itself, go untold, an entire thread of American history will be lost to time. Though they have since passed on, the veterans interviewed in the Jackson Purchase Oral History Project live on through the oral histories they have given. Their recorded memories preserve them, though in a limited capacity, as narrators of the Great War for future generations to study and appreciate.

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