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The Conflicting Conflict: Memorialization and Memory of the Great War

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Abstract

July 1st through 3rd, 2013 marked the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. There were an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 visitors to the national park, including as many as 10,000 reenactors. The Civil War sesquicentennial was commemorated from the very beginning, and ended with a reenactment in Appomattox that saw over 6,000 people visit to re-live the end of the American Civil War. On April 9th, bells across the nation, including at Gettysburg College, tolled for 4 minutes to honor the four years the war raged on. Plans were started for the anniversary almost a decade in advance and millions of Americans in commemorating of the war that cost 600,000 Americans their lives. A collective narrative of the war began forming before the surrender was even signed, and while each side had a different memory directly after Appomattox, the settled upon collective narrative still exists today.

Keywords

Commemoration, Danielle Jones, Memory, World War I

Disciplines

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Comments

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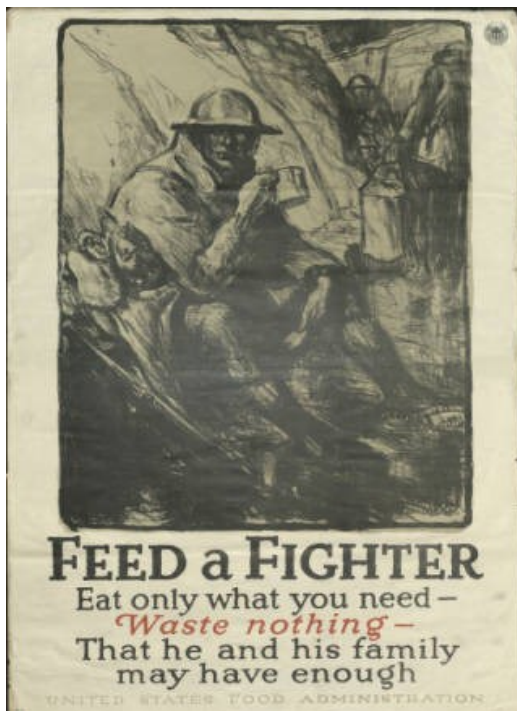
THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

The Conflicting Conflict: Memorialization and Memory of the Great War

By [Danielle Jones '18](#)

July 1st through 3rd, 2013 marked the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. There were an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 visitors to the national park, including as many as 10,000 reenactors. The Civil War sesquicentennial was commemorated from the very beginning, and ended with a reenactment in Appomattox that saw over 6,000 people visit to re-live the end of the American Civil War. On April 9th, bells across the nation, including at Gettysburg College, tolled for 4 minutes to honor the four years the war raged on. Plans were started for the anniversary almost a decade in advance and millions of Americans in commemorating of the war that cost 600,000 Americans their lives. A collective narrative of the war began forming before the surrender was even signed, and while each side had a different memory directly after Appomattox, the settled upon collective narrative still exists today.



While the Great War had a massive impact on the American home front, the war itself has largely faded from public memory. Image courtesy of [Gettysburg College Special Collections](#).

As I write this, I think of a different time, a different war, and a different April. On April 6th, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany, joining France, Great Britain, and Russia to fight in the World War I. The United States' entry into the war was controversial; President Woodrow Wilson had asked Congress for a declaration of war on April 2nd, and after four days of debate the Senate passed the declaration 82-6 and the House of Representative passed it 373-50. During the war, 116,516 American Servicemen lost their lives to battle deaths and disease. The Great War, as it came to be known, had a significant impact on the United States domestically and internationally. Entrance to war marked a significant change in America's traditionally isolationist policy. The end of the war brought an economic boom to the States and a role in international politics it had not seen before. A spot at the table at Versailles, the League of Nations, and an increasingly globalized economy illustrated that the United States was not just a nation across the Atlantic anymore. It had begun establishing itself as a world power whose presence continues to define international politics today.

In my research of World War I memorialization, I've noticed a disappointing trend. World War I has practically disappeared from American memory. Washington, D.C. is home to the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial, the National World War II Memorial, the American Revolution Statuary, the Civil War Monuments, and the Spanish-American War Memorial. The World War II Memorial opened 61 years after the end of the war. The Vietnam Memorial was established a mere seven years after the end of the war. The Korean War Memorial opened exactly 42 years after the Armistice was signed. The closest thing World War I gets is the District of Columbia War Memorial. The National Park Service and the District of Columbia argued over who would take care of the monument to D.C. soldiers who fought in World War I and it sat in disrepair until 2009. This memorial represents only those from D.C. who served; there is no monument in Washington D.C. to those who died in World War I because Congress has been fighting over legislation for decades. Let that sink in. One hundred years after World War I, the U.S. capital does not have a national memorial.

From the outset, commemoration of World War I was difficult for the American people. How can one mourn a lost loved one when the battlefield they died on was on a completely different continent? Soldiers buried in at the Somme were too far for families to mourn in person, and while the U.S. embarked on its first ever campaign to return the bodies of fallen soldiers, many remain buried in France. Moreover, the meaning of the war as enumerated by President Wilson was a meaning that the American people rejected. Having just gone through a bloody war, many Americans wanted to have their loved ones return and go back to their isolationist lives. According to historian Michael Neiberg, for every-day Americans the war was fought to "remove the German threat to their homeland . . . and when the Germans laid down their arms on November 11, 1918, most Americans thought the job was done." Wilson, on the other hand, wanted to keep the United States involved in international politics and to secure a place at the table with European powers. U.S. politicians and citizens rejected this involvement and refused to sign on to the League of Nations, thereby rejecting the Wilsonian interpretation of the meaning of the war. In statues and memorials, we recognize the Doughboys – the people who fought the war, not the war itself.

I'm currently taking a class on the Great War here at Gettysburg, and we were asked by our professor one day why we thought the United States went to war in 2017. The usual answers were thrown out—the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the Zimmerman telegrams, fears of German aggression. He then asked us what the war's purpose was. There was much more hesitation to answer and after a long pause, timid answers were given along the lines of defeating the Germans, avenging Belgium, and helping our allies. Almost one hundred years later, and despite seemingly endless amounts of research, it's still not clear to many Americans what the meaning of the Great War is. Perhaps it is just another case of historical amnesia; if the war was about stopping German aggression, then World War II showed us that we failed and thus any traditional meaning that could have been agreed upon was destroyed. Perhaps it is the result of an education system that spends two or three days on the "-isms" of the First World War and weeks on the Second World War. Perhaps it is the fact that (for America) the war was brief and far away, or perhaps it is that the disillusioned authors of the '20s and '30s changed the minds of all Americans about the war. To me, the answer is all of the above.

But World War I still happened. People still sacrificed their lives on battlefields with names not recognized by their families back home. The international political balance still changed, and the U.S. still became involved, albeit briefly, in securing peace in the early 20th century. To not remember World War I is to forget the sacrifice of an entire nation. We as historians cannot forget a war that changed the world; we as Americans cannot let the memory of the Great War fall to the wayside. As the 100th anniversary approaches, let's take some time and read about the Great War, whether it be how it changed our communities or our nation. Learn a new fact about the war, remind your friends and family about the centennial, and don't forget that the war that changed the world.

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