

New York Public Library exhibition on US entry into World War I

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While this summer marked the 100th anniversary of the eruption of the First World War, the entry of the United States into the imperialist conflict did not take place until almost three years later, in April 1917.

Perhaps in anticipation of the 2017 date, a small but historically interesting exhibition is on view at the main branch of the New York Public Library in Manhattan.

The title of the show explains its focus: “Over Here: WWI and the Fight for the American Mind.” The emphasis is on the efforts carried out between August 1914 and April 1917 to win political support for United States entry on the side of the Allied forces against Germany, and also the official efforts, once war had been declared, to mobilize public opinion and suppress anti-war opposition.

Using the voluminous collections of the New York Public Library, among the most extensive in the world, the exhibition “explores the manner in which public relations, propaganda and mass media in its many forms were used to shape and control public opinion about the war,” as the show’s brochure explains.

Various publications, books and pamphlets of the period are displayed, along with photos, propaganda posters, short films, lithographs and even recorded songs, to show some of the opposing points of view on the war during the 1914-1918 period and the techniques used, especially by the government, to mold public opinion. As with other commemorative articles and new histories of WWI that have been published, it is clear that these topics are all too appropriate a century later, amidst the threat of global war between nuclear powers and the increasing attempts by Western imperialism to whip up chauvinism and support for war preparations.

While President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed a policy of neutrality in the global slaughter that began in the summer of 1914, sections of the ruling class almost immediately began beating the drums for war. Among the loudest voices for “preparedness” was none other than ex-President Theodore Roosevelt.

This most jingoistic American chief executive had attracted national and international attention with his exploits during the Spanish-American War of 1898. This did not prevent his selection as the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906, in which capacity he was a forerunner to Barack Obama a little more than a century later.

Roosevelt had been elected vice-president in 1900 and less than

a year after that became president upon the assassination of William McKinley. The exhibit shows a copy of TR’s 1916 book, “Fear God and Take Your Own Part,” which played a significant role in the buildup of war fever.

There are other, even more inflammatory examples of pro-war propaganda displayed, such as a book of “alternate history” that imagined the invasion of the United States and its defeat at the hands of Germany. Another book contained the image of the 47-story Singer Building, the best-known skyscraper of the day, being toppled by enemy attack.

New media, like motion pictures and recordings, were also utilized. The exhibit provides examples, such as a recording of Irving Berlin’s “What Kind of an American Are You?,” a provocative question aimed at millions of immigrants, especially from southern and eastern Europe, who were told they had a special obligation to display their patriotism, much as Muslims are today. This was only one of many such popular songs, by Berlin, George M. Cohan and others.

A short film cartoon deals with the sinking of the British liner *Lusitania* in 1915, which was used to whip up anti-German sentiment. Another short film, entitled “Colored Man is No Slacker,” was used to build support for war aims among the African-American population denied the most basic rights at home. Another example is “Hate the Hun,” a film by the young director Raoul Walsh. Walsh (*High Sierra*, *They Drive By Night*), who lived another six decades and became an important figure in the history of American film, later called this early movie “the rottenest picture ever.”

Propaganda posters were also widely employed. According to the exhibit, there were more than 20 million copies of about 2,500 different poster designs used by the time the war ended in November 1918. A few of the best-known posters are displayed in the show.

Amid this detailed memorabilia, one thing becomes clear almost from the beginning of the exhibition. In its focus on “the fight for the American mind,” it leaves out two crucial issues: first, the causes of the war and of the drive for US entry into the conflict; and second, the nature of mass opposition to the war that found expression in this country both before and after the US joined the fighting in 1917.

There is some mention of anti-war opinion, but it is brief and vague. “As anti-German sentiment within the United States grew,” the exhibit explains, “... hawkish, often nationalistic voices were, in

turn, answered by those belonging to a diverse group of individuals, among them pacifists, suffragists, socialists, anarchists, religious figures, and German sympathizers, who believed that it was in America's best interest to stay out of the war."

The example chosen to illustrate the supposed anti-war coalition is a book by Jane Addams, the famed social worker, sociologist and pacifist. Addams's *Patriotism and Pacifism During War Time* is displayed alongside the abovementioned clarion call to war by Roosevelt.

There is not a single mention of Eugene Debs, either in this section or elsewhere in the exhibition. Debs was the Socialist Party (SP) candidate for US President in both 1912 and 1920, and in the latter instance, Debs ran while in federal prison for opposing the war. Each time he won close to 1 million votes, which represented 6 percent of the total in 1912.

Of course, Debs did not begin from the standpoint of "America's best interest," but rather from the interests of the working class all over the world. He made this eloquently clear in his trial on sedition charges in 1918, as we shall see.

But the library exhibition does not refer to the working class or the class struggle. The omission includes the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the revolutionary syndicalist organization founded in 1905 that played such an important role in labor battles in the decade leading up the war, especially in the West, but also in such struggles as the Lawrence textile strike of 1912.

Exhibition curator Michael Inman and his team may well have thought their focus on war propaganda would suffice to indicate a critical attitude. They refer, for example, to xenophobia. There is a brief mention of Emma Goldman, and a section of the exhibit discusses the attack on *The Masses*, the socialist monthly led by Max Eastman and John Reed. The magazine ceased publication in November 1917, several months after the US postmaster general, using the allegation that the publication was obstructing the draft, rescinded its mailing privileges.

The general impression from all of this, however, is that opposition to the war was confined to the fringes of society, and perhaps to sections of the intelligentsia. The important issues of civil liberties are mentioned, but the class issues underlying the repression of 1917-1918 are ignored.

In the 1914-1917 period, as throughout the past century, the drive toward militarism and war was bound up with both the global interests of American capitalism and the class struggle at home. A discussion of US entry onto the world stage as an imperialist power that does not discuss the class struggle, and specifically the role of the IWW and the SP, is deeply flawed, to put it mildly.

In fact, the war remained unpopular among broad layers of the population, and not just those with pro-German sympathies. The lack of enthusiasm was demonstrated in the total of only 73,000 volunteers in the first six weeks after the declaration of war in April 1917, leading to the imposition of conscription. Both the IWW and the Socialist Party opposed the war, with the SP in emergency convention calling it "a crime against the people of the United States."

The IWW, despite its own limitations and its numerous reverses

in the period after the Lawrence strike of 1912, saw a significant revival in 1917, in the months before and after the US declaration of war. It participated actively in the struggle of the Arizona copper miners earlier in the year and led the lumber workers' strike in the Pacific Northwest.

These struggles were viciously attacked, with the federal army used as strikebreakers against the lumber workers. This was followed, in September of that year, by simultaneous raids on IWW offices. Some 165 IWW leaders were arrested, 101 eventually facing trial and conviction for violating the just-enacted Espionage Act (the same legislation under which Bradley Manning was convicted and under which Edward Snowden has been charged), with its prohibitions against "disloyalty" and "insubordination." IWW leader Big Bill Haywood was sentenced to a 20-year jail term, later jumping bail and seeking refuge in the Soviet Union.

Many of the Socialist Party leaders, along with figures like Jack London and Clarence Darrow, supported the war, but thousands of SP members, including large numbers of immigrant workers, remained opposed. Support for SP candidates grew rapidly in the period between 1915 and 1917, with Morris Hillquit winning 22 percent of the vote for mayor of New York, the socialist vote increasing from 3.6 to 34.7 percent in Chicago, and 10 socialist candidates elected to the New York State legislature.

After the Russian Revolution in November 1917, ruling class fears increased further. The Espionage Act was used to arrest and convict hundreds of opponents of the war, most famously Debs himself.

The Socialist leader was arrested in June 1918 after he visited three Socialists in prison for opposing the draft and addressed a crowd outside. "Wars throughout history have been waged for conquest and plunder.... And that is war in a nutshell," he told the crowd. "The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles."

Addressing the court after being found guilty, Debs famously declared, "Your honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

Debs was sentenced to a 10-year term and served about 32 months before being released by President Warren Harding in 1921.

To sum up, "Over Here," despite containing much useful and interesting material, leaves the visitor with the false impression that the drive toward war is virtually unstoppable. Official propaganda and official repression is depicted, while the scale of popular opposition is minimized and the voices of those who opposed the war on the basis of socialist internationalism are virtually ignored. This is a serious weakness indeed.



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