

# THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN AMNESIA

## STUDYING PENNSYLVANIA'S GREAT WAR, PART 1

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**ABSTRACT:** This article is an introduction to this journal's special two-part edition on Pennsylvania in World War I. At the centennial of the Great War in Pennsylvania it is uncertain how much residents of the Keystone State remember about World War I. World War II, fought by the greatest generation, overshadowed their fathers' war. In order to remind Pennsylvanians about this critical period in the state's history, this edition, Part 1 of a two-part series, highlights important historical issues, including religious history, military history, and the history of criminology. The goal of these editions is to commemorate the service, suffering, and sacrifices of Pennsylvanians—men and women, black and white, at home and overseas—at the centennial of the war that was supposed to end all wars.

**KEYWORDS:** World War I, Pennsylvania, memory

At the end of the World War I segment in my military history course, I discuss the Meuse-Argonne, the greatest, most decisive American battle that no one in the class knows about. My lecture ends with a picture of the American Battle Monuments Commission cemetery, which honors the American dead and missing from that final battle of the war that did not end wars. In one class, a student raised his hand after looking at the almost endless rows of crosses and asked, "Are they *all* Americans?" It is not surprising that someone who came of age in the twenty-first century, when the number of war dead does not exceed eight thousand in two separate wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, would find the more than fourteen thousand men and women memorialized in this single cemetery shocking. Among the dead and missing commemorated in this landscape, seventeen hundred Pennsylvanians—an Abbot, Adzentoivitch, Alfonso, and even a Trump—are together for all eternity.

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Among these brothers and sisters is Alfred L. Johnson, an African American Pennsylvanian in the all-black Ninety-Second Division; there are no color lines in this cemetery.<sup>1</sup>

The title of this introductory article is both an homage to a wonderful book, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, and a statement on the nature of American war memory at the centennial. While Fussell chronicled how World War I profoundly changed the very nature of how Europeans remember, one may wonder if Americans at the centennial remember World War I at all. In honor of all the men and women who died in this war, the next two editions of *Pennsylvania History* hope to present a partial remedy for this forgetting. Because of the status of the Great War in American memory, Linda Ries, our editor, and I were concerned about finding enough articles for one edition, let alone two. However, we have been enormously gratified by the fine articles in this edition and those we have planned for the next. In both volumes, scholars examine a number of fascinating aspects of the Great War and Pennsylvania. Topics include everything from the sacred—religion and war in Pennsylvania—to the almost sacrilegious—crime and punishment. Redemption may be found in strange places; some of those who sinned against society became soldiers overseas and their story will be chronicled in the next edition. When the war ends, death comes home; the flu ravages Pennsylvania. Women also serve and suffer in war and peace; Pennsylvanians nursed soldiers and civilians. When the war ended, monuments were built and museums saved artifacts, but as the decades passed, the war faded into memory and then often forgotten.

Despite this amnesia, Pennsylvania's Great War was more than about a single battle; instead, from the shipyards of Philadelphia to the steel mills of Pittsburgh, the state mobilized for total war. Its National Guard Division, the Twenty-Eighth Infantry Division, became one of the hardest-fighting units of the war. The American Expeditionary Force commander, John Pershing, nicknamed this unit the "Iron Division." Even beyond the state's National Guard, hundreds of thousands of Pennsylvanians—black and white, men and women—served in a variety of functions in the army, navy, and marine corps. Overall, about ten thousand Pennsylvanians were killed in action; among these were African Americans who served in support units, though some like Alfred L. Johnson served in combat units. As many as two thousand women performed clerical functions for the navy and marine corps in Philadelphia; they were among the first women who ever enlisted in these services as "yeomen (F)." Others served overseas; women served as nurses

and doctors in combat hospitals staffed by Pennsylvania's civilian hospitals. Some of these women died at home, a victim of the influenza epidemic; in our second edition, we will have a remarkable article on this catastrophe.<sup>2</sup>

Pennsylvanians at home supported the war effort in factories and shipyards. Steel produced in Pittsburgh made artillery shells, naval guns, armor plating, and a host of other war materials. Philadelphians built merchant ships; the unrestricted submarine warfare that prompted American involvement targeted these types of vessels and required the navy to build more ships to fight U-boats. As part of this effort, Philadelphians built the largest shipyard in the world, stretching over two-and-a-half miles. Despite these accomplishments, not everyone supported the war effort, such as the pacifist Quakers and Mennonites. Guy Aiken's short article on the American Friends Service Committee chronicles their wartime humanitarian efforts overseas and the price they paid at home for their pacifism. In addition, other Pennsylvanians, including socialists, believed that the working class of the belligerents should refuse to fight one another. The government's efforts to suppress dissenters is another important chapter in the state's history.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, the people who questioned the war won the battle for memory. As the years passed, particularly in the 1930s, Americans questioned the value of their participation in the "European" war. Americans came to believe that their involvement had been due to profit-seeking arms dealers, "Merchants of Death," who manipulated Americans into joining the Allied powers. These views strengthened when the war that ended all wars did not; instead, a Second Great War devastated Europe twenty years after the first ended. Eventually, the memory of the second war replaced the first, the greatest generation of World War II sacrifices remembered, their fathers' World War I military service mostly forgotten.<sup>4</sup>

Not all religious-minded Pennsylvanians objected to the war; however, some of these men and women were singled out because of their religion. Karen Guenther offers a remarkable micro-study of how German churches at home fared as Pennsylvanians fought German armies overseas. Pennsylvanians likely have forgotten how many of their fellow citizens spoke German regularly until World War I, even those who had been in the United States for some time. At that time, anti-German sentiment prompted the language to be outlawed in churches, schools, and was suppressed elsewhere. While many readers may be aware of German churches in Pennsylvania, they may not be as aware of the Philadelphia-based organizations that began a religious movement that continues to shape the United States one hundred years

later. Richard Kent Evans identifies the rise of Christian fundamentalism in America as partly rooted in Pennsylvanians who came to believe that the Great War really was the war to end all wars because it signaled the End Times and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Ironically, a horrific war made End-Timers happy. These men and women were likely the only people in the Allied nations disappointed when the war ended. When peace came, the institutions these individuals created evolved and articulated a type of Christian fundamentalism that had profound implications for twentieth-century American society.

Religious history exists on one end of the spectrum, perhaps criminal history on the other. Bobby Wintermute does a rare service; in this edition, he documents notions of criminality and deviance in Pennsylvania by examining a memorial wall in the historic Eastern Pennsylvania Penitentiary. In the next edition, he will document these men's wartime activities. Journals usually do not have cliff-hangers, but in this instance you will have to wait and see how these men, deemed as morally wanting, found redemption in military service.

Not surprisingly, we also cover military history, looking at two aspects of material culture. Tim Ziaukas describes the impressive monument for the first American killed overseas. Unlike many mass-produced World War I memorials, it was specifically designed for its location in Lawrenceville, now a suburb of Pittsburgh. A World War I artifact of a different sort—a French-designed American tank—may be found in the Pennsylvania Military Museum in Boalsburg. Karen Tidwell and Mike Siggins explain that Americans came late to the war when warfare on the Western Front had stalemated in the trenches. Desperate to break the impasse, the Allies developed the first primitive armored forces. Americans joined the war and used French-designed, American-built tanks. Both vignettes, which document the war's material legacies, represent a tangible link to Pennsylvanians' World War I experience.

As we stand here at the centennial of World War I, those connections seem few and far between. Like Hervey Allen, a Pennsylvanian and famous novelist who wrote one of the outstanding memoirs of the war, we know that “there is no plot, no climax, no happy ending” to either this war or these editions. Despite this cynicism, which seems endemic to World War I studies, it is our hope that these editions may, in some small way, connect the generation of 2017 with that of 1917.<sup>5</sup>

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NOTES

1. American Battlefield Monuments Commission, Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, <https://www.abmc.gov/cemeteries-memorials/europe/meuse-argonne-american-cemetery#.WLMtLvIogw8>. For Pennsylvanians interred in the cemetery: <https://www.abmc.gov/database-search>, search Pennsylvania, Meuse-Argonne Cemetery. The title of this article is based on the classic study of WWI memory: Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).
2. William A. Pencak, Christian B. Keller, and Barbara A. Gannon, *Pennsylvania: A Military History* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2016), 212–21; “Pennsylvania in the First World War,” The United States World War One Commission, <http://www.worldwar1centennial.org/index.php/pennsylvania-ww1-centennial-home.html>.
3. Pencak, Keller, and Gannon, *Pennsylvania: A Military History*, 212–21.
4. *Ibid.*, 225.
5. Hervey Allen, *Toward the Flame: A Memoir of World War I* (1926; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), xix.