

## WORLD WAR I

THE NATIONS OF EUROPE WENT TO WAR IN the late summer of 1914. The conflict that we now call World War I would drag on for four years. Ten million people would die on its battlefields.

Twenty million more would die of hunger and disease related to the war. And no one has ever been able to show that the war brought any gain for humanity that would be worth a single life.

At the time, socialists called it an "imperialist war"—a war fought in the service of empire building, by nations that wanted to increase their power by controlling territory or resources. The advanced capitalist nations of Europe fought over boundaries, such as the region of Alsace-Lorraine, claimed by both France and Germany. They fought over colonies in Africa. And they fought over

*(left, detail)*  
Eugene V. Debs  
at a Labor Convention,  
1910s.

"spheres of influence," areas in Eastern Europe and the Middle East that were not claimed openly as colonies but still came under the "protection" and control of some European nation.

### Blood and Money

MANY NATIONS JOINED THE WAR ON ONE SIDE or the other, but the main enemies were Germany on one side and the Allies, France and Great Britain, on the other. The killing started very fast, and on a very large scale. In one early battle in France, each side had half a million casualties. Almost the entire British army from before the war was wiped out in the first three months of fighting.

The battle lines were drawn across France. For three years they barely moved. Men spent months in filthy, disease-ridden trenches. Each side would push forward, then be pushed back, then push forward again for a few yards or a few miles, while the corpses piled up. In 1916 the Germans tried to break through the lines at a place called Verdun.

The British and French counterattacked and lost six hundred thousand men.

The people of France and Britain were not told the full numbers of dead and wounded. When a German attack on the Somme River caused three hundred thousand British casualties in the last year of the war, London newspapers told readers, "Be cheerful. . . . Write encouragingly to friends at the front."

The same thing was true in Germany—the true horror of the war was kept from the people. On days when men were being blown apart in the thousands by machine guns and artillery shells, the official war reports said, "All Quiet on the Western Front." German writer Erich Maria Remarque later used that phrase as the title of his great novel about the war.

Into this pit of death and deception came the United States in 1917.

Earlier, President Woodrow Wilson had promised that the United States would keep out of the war. But the question of shipping in the North Atlantic Ocean drew the United States into the fight.

In 1915 a German submarine had torpedoed and sunk a British liner, the *Lusitania*, on its way from North America to Britain. Nearly 1,200 people,

including 124 Americans, died. The United States claimed that the *Lusitania* was carrying civilian passengers and innocent cargo, and that the German attack was a monstrous atrocity. In truth, the *Lusitania* was heavily armed. She carried thousands of cases of ammunition for the British. False cargo records hid this fact, and the British and American governments lied about the cargo.

Then, in April 1917, the Germans warned that their submarines would sink any ships that were carrying supplies to their enemies. This included the United States, which had been shipping huge amounts of war materials to Germany's enemies.

The war in Europe had been good for American business. A serious economic decline had hit the country in 1914, but things turned around when Americans began manufacturing war materials to sell to the Allies—mainly to Britain. By the time the Germans issued their warning about shipping, the United States had sold 2 billion dollars' worth of goods to the Allies. American prosperity was now tied to England's war. President Wilson said that he must stand by the right of Americans to travel on merchant ships in the war zone, and Congress declared war on Germany.

(left)  
Eugene V. Debs  
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Wilson called it a war "to end all wars" and "to make the world safe for democracy." These rousing words did not inspire Americans to enlist in the armed forces. A million men were needed, but in the first six weeks, only 73,000 volunteered. Congress authorized a draft to compel men into service. It also set up a Committee on Public Information. That committee's job was to convince Americans that the war was right.

### The Radical Response

THE GOVERNMENT WANTED TO DISCOURAGE dissent and criticism of the war. It passed a law called the Espionage Act. The title makes it seem like a law against spying. But one part of the law called for up to twenty years in prison for anyone who refused to serve in the armed forces or even tried to convince others not to enlist. The act was used to imprison Americans who spoke or wrote against the war.

About nine hundred people went to prison under the Espionage Act. One of them was a Philadelphia

socialist named Charles Schenck. Two months after the act became law, Schenck was sentenced to jail for printing and distributing fifteen thousand leaflets against the draft and the war. He appealed the verdict, claiming that the act violated his First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The case went to the Supreme Court.

All nine justices agreed. The Court decided against Schenck. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said that even the strict protection of free speech "would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing panic." This was a clever comparison. Few people would think that someone should be allowed to get away with shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theater and causing a dangerous panic. But did that example fit criticism of the war?

Socialist Eugene Debs was also involved in a case before the Supreme Court. After visiting three socialists who were in prison for opposing the draft, he made a fiery antiwar speech in the street:

They tell us that we live in a great free republic; that our institutions are democratic; that we are a free and self-governing people. That is too much, even for a joke. . . . Wars throughout history have been waged for conquest and

plunder. . . . And that is war in a nutshell. The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles. . . .

Debs was arrested for violating the Espionage Act. At his trial he declared, "I have been accused of obstructing the war. I admit it. Gentlemen, I abhor war." The judge, in turn, spoke harshly about "those who would strike the sword from the hand of his nation while she is engaged in defending herself against a foreign and brutal power." He sentenced Debs to ten years in prison. (Several years later, after the war was over, President Warren Harding released Debs from prison.)

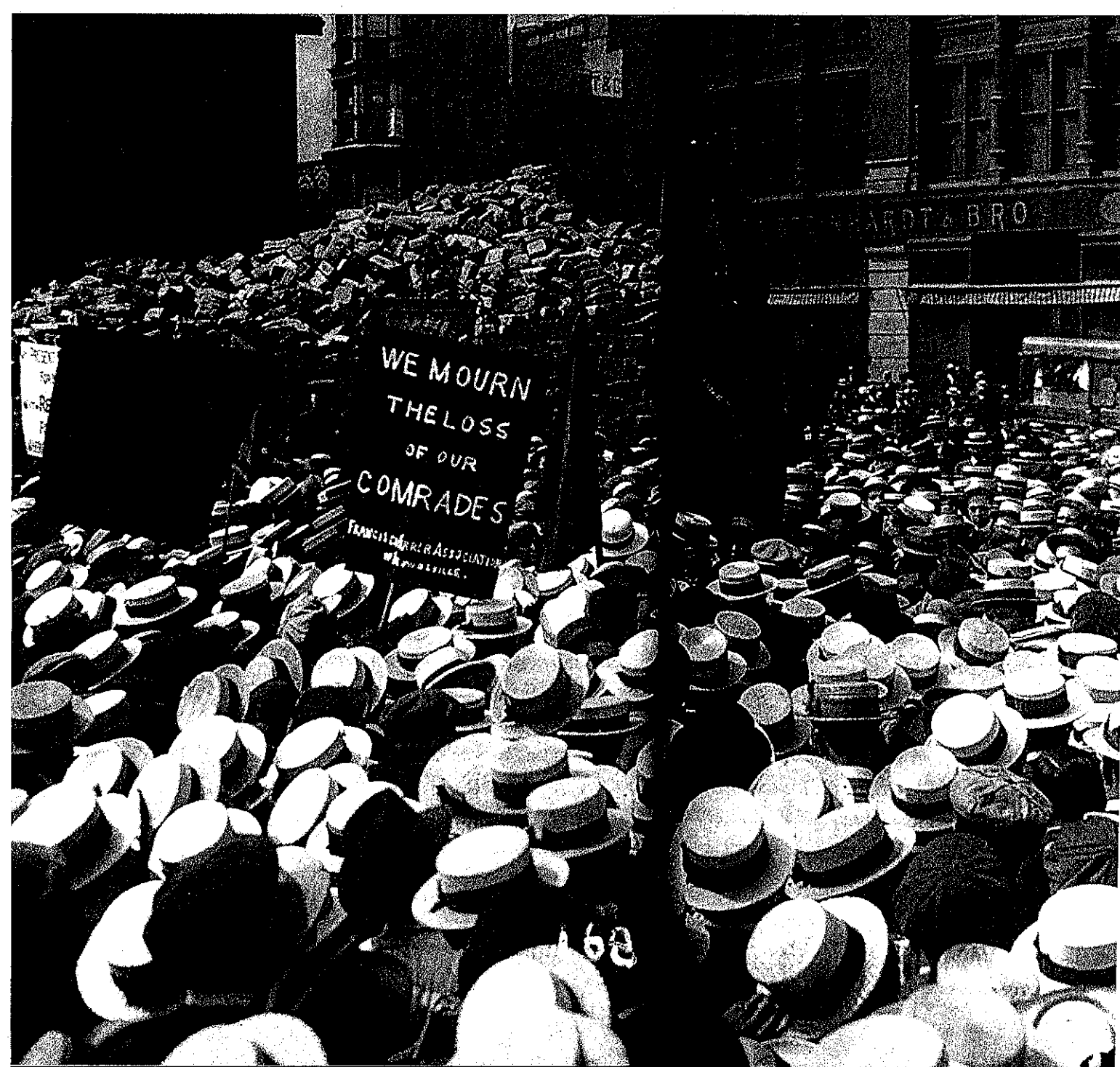
The press worked with the government to create an atmosphere of fear for anyone who dared to criticize the war. One publication asked its readers to turn in any published material they saw that seemed seditious, or disloyal, to the country. Men joined the American Vigilante Patrol to "put an end to seditious street oratory"—basically, to prevent antiwar speechmaking. The U.S. Post Office took away the mailing privileges of newspapers and magazines that published antiwar articles. The Committee on Public Information tried to turn people into spies and informers against each

other. It urged citizens to "report the man who spreads pessimistic stories. Report him to the Department of Justice."

The Department of Justice sponsored the American Protective League in six hundred towns. Its members were bankers and leading businessmen. The League seized other people's mail, broke into their homes and offices, and claimed to find 3 million cases of "disloyalty." In 1918 the attorney general of the United States declared, "It is safe to say that never in its history has this country been so thoroughly policed."

Why these huge efforts? Because Americans were refusing to fight in the war. Senator Thomas Hardwick of Georgia described "general and widespread opposition on the part of many thousands . . . to the enactment of the draft law." Before the war was over, more than a third of a million men were classified as draft evaders—people who refused to be drafted, or used trickery or self-mutilation to avoid the draft.

The Socialist Party had been against entering the war from the start. The day after Congress declared war, the Socialists held an emergency meeting and called the declaration "a crime



Elizabeth Gurley Flynn  
addressing crowd, 1914.

against the people of the United States." Some well-known Socialists, including writers Upton Sinclair and Jack London, supported the war after the United States entered it. Most Socialists, though, continued to oppose the war. Some paid a heavy price for expressing their opinions.

In Oklahoma, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) planned a march on Washington for people from across the country who objected to the draft. Before the march, union members were arrested. Four hundred and fifty people accused of rebellion were put in the state penitentiary. Across the country in Boston, eight thousand Socialists and unionists at an antiwar march were attacked by soldiers and sailors, acting on their officers' orders.

Just before the United States declared war, the IWW newspaper had said, "Capitalists of America, we will fight against you, not for you!" Now the war gave the government its chance to destroy the radical union. In September 1917, Department of Justice agents raided forty-eight IWW meeting halls across the country, seizing letters and literature.

The following April, 101 leaders of the union

went on trial for opposing the draft and encouraging soldiers to desert. One of them told the court:

You ask me why the IWW is not patriotic to the United States. If you were a bum without a blanket; if you had left your wife and kids when you went west for a job, and had never located them since; if your job had never kept you long enough in a place to qualify you to vote; if every person who represented law and order and the nation beat you up . . . how in hell do you expect a man to be patriotic?

This war is a business man's war. . . .

All of the IWW prisoners were found guilty. Bill Haywood and other key leaders were sentenced to twenty years in prison; the rest received shorter sentences. Haywood fled to Russia, where a socialist revolution was taking place. The IWW in the United States was shattered.

### After the Fighting

THE WAR ENDED IN NOVEMBER 1918. Fifty thousand American soldiers had died. But when the war was over, the Establishment—the

political and capitalist elites that ran the nation—still feared socialism. The conflict between Democrats and Republicans was less important than the threat of radical change.

The government had a new tool to fight that threat. Near the end of the war, Congress had passed a law that let the government deport any alien who opposed organized government or who approved of the destruction of property. (An alien was an immigrant who was not a U.S. citizen. Deporting meant removing from the country.) In 1919 and 1920 the government rounded up more than four thousand aliens, including anarchist Emma Goldman. Eventually, they were deported to their birth countries.

An anarchist named Andrea Salsedo was held for two months in FBI offices in New York City. He wasn't allowed to contact family, friends, or lawyers. Then his crushed body was found on the pavement. The FBI said he had committed suicide by jumping from a window.

Two Boston anarchists, friends of Salsedo, learned of his death and began carrying guns. They were arrested and charged with a holdup and murder that had happened two weeks earlier. Their

names were Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

Sacco and Vanzetti were found guilty. They spent seven years in jail while their cases were appealed to higher courts. All over the world, people became involved in the case. Many believed that Sacco and Vanzetti had been found guilty just because they were anarchists and foreigners—the trial record and other circumstances make it look as though this was true. In August 1927 the two men were executed.

The Establishment had tried to silence the voices of dissent. Reforms had been made. War had been used to promote patriotism and crush criticism. The courts and jails had made it clear that certain ideas, certain kinds of resistance, were not permitted. But still, even from the prison cells, the message was going out: in the United States, a society that was supposed to be without classes, the class war was going on.