

The great war narrative essay



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The above statement made by Kennedy can be proven to be full of truth. Even though World War 1 was before Kennedy's time as president, he always had a major interest in affairs abroad; sometimes even more so than America itself. This is evident even in his inaugural address, on the 20th of January 1961, where he references more about foreign policy than that of topical American issues such as civil rights. World War I had a massive impact on America as a whole; more than some realise.

The Great War, as it is also known as, 'changed not only those who participated in it directly, but also the home front and the nation's government and economy.' As Kennedy says, it certainly exacerbated or heightened the conflicts regarding ethnicity, race, and class in America. This essay will attempt to outline these three conflicts and how the war was a factor in igniting them further.

To look these topics and to fully understand WWI's involvement in them, we must first examine America's attitude towards the war prior to and entering it. America's involvement in the war came very late, on the 6th of April 1917. They had tried their best to stay out of it, declaring themselves a neutral country soon after it had begun in July 1914.

The President at the time, Woodrow Wilson, believed it was best for America to stay out of the war and urged Americans to feel the same. 'Most Americans saw staying out of the conflict as the chief goal.' Songs were even written, expressing their view to stay neutral. One such song is "I didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier" composed by Al Piantadosi. However, three key factors drove America to get involved in the war. The first was its

economic and cultural ties to Britain and France; through providing them with provisions, as well as to other allied powers during the course of the war.

The second was the infamous Zimmermann Telegram, a telegram secretly issued to Mexico. It promised an alliance with Germany to help them regain lost territories from Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico', as long as Mexico declared war on America. The third and most likely the deciding factor of America's entry into the war, was ' German violations of Wilson's definition of neutral rights'.

This sinking of The Luisitania, where the lives of many American civilians (128) were lost was the most prominent. ' American ships have sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us deeply to learn of'. President Wilson, asked Congress to declare war on Germany: ' I advise that the Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the government and people of the United States,.... but also to exert all its power and employ all its resources to bring the Government of the German Empire to terms and end the war'.

The first conflict we will look at is the ethnic conflict. This relates to the attitude of Americans towards Germans. To drum up support for America's involvement in the war, it was deemed necessary to instil an anti-German mind-set amongst Americans. It was particularly aimed at men who were suitable to volunteer to expand the army, under The Selective Service Act of May 1917.

This act required all men between the ages of ‘twenty-one and thirty (later expanded to eighteen and forty-five) to register with local draft boards.’ This kind of persuasion was considered necessary to give them motivation to fight in a war that up until now, they thought of as a European war: ‘For the European powers, this was a global war, but for the United States, the focus was on Europe’.

The notion of anti-German ideas was portrayed through many different forms of media including movies, advertising, posters etc. The most effective of these mediums perhaps, were the posters. They were strategically put together and mostly combined ‘wartime promotional text, an image, and a small sponsorship notice. This type of persuasion worked, because by the time the war had ended, and the Armistice was signed on November 11th 1918, there were approximately 1, 908, 000 American troops overseas.

However, this was not the only effect anti-German propaganda had on America. It is apparent that it had an influence on the general American public. People were in agreement with the propaganda and deeming it necessary to go to war, to defeat the Germans overseas. But what about the Germans closer to home? They are German as well, so should we hate them too? The CPI (the Committee on Public Information) and its Bureau of Cartoons had a massive part to play in advertising and public relations throughout the 20th Century.

Lead by George Creel, it ‘publicized the government’s version of events and discredited all who questioned that version’; while claiming to be just reporting the facts. They were responsible for the war’s representation to the

American people. They controlled multiple outlets of media, which ‘beckoned so compellingly in the streets.’ This became a huge problem for German-Americans or hyphenated Americans. A once prosperous and popular minority in America; were suddenly being completely isolated and hated on.

German books were banished, towns with German names changed them, speaking the German language was forbidden and so on. Being German or speaking the German language became "dirty". Anyone associated with Germans was deemed suspicious by Americans and questioned their loyalty to America.

President Wilson said ‘Any man who carries a hyphen about with him, carries a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this Republic when he gets ready’. This quote really emphasises how marginalised the Germans were in America during and after their entry to the war. In other words, it made America ‘less culturally German’.

As well as ethnic conflict, racial conflict also emerged in light of WW1. Anti-black sentiment was already increasing before the war, but the amount of hate being spread about the Germans led to other groups being targeted also. The question became who was truly American? And many minorities became under scrutiny as a result.

The Ku Klux Klan is a perfect example of this conflict, especially in terms of race. There was a re-emergence of the KKK from 1915 to the early 1920's, the years following the World War. It came back stronger and had much more of an impact than its first outbreak in the 1860s. It was considerably

more successful than that of the first Klan as it flourished not just in southern states, but it brought many parts of America ' under its paralyzing grip of racism and bloodshed.

It sought to maintain a white, Protestant supremacy ideology across America; practically everything else that did not fit into that mould was in opposition. ' Catholics; bootleggers and other prohibition law violators; unfaithful husbands; sexually adventurous women; indiscreet, successful, or assertive blacks, Jews, or immigrants; even corrupt or unresponsive public officials- all found themselves targeted by organized, often extralegal, Klan activism. If the anti-German sentiment had not been started to aid the war effort, all the other racial and ethnic conflicts could have been prevented.

It is now apparent, that America's involvement in World War I heightened the conflicts of ethnicity, race, and class. This essay has tackled these three conflicts, with evidence supporting them. There are many other points to be made with regards to the conflicts that were amplified by their involvement in the war; several essays could be written in doing so. That said, this essay is sufficient in giving a clear picture for each as to how the war affected these conflicts.