

POST WWI AMERICA: A SOCIETY IN TURMOIL

Main Idea	Notes
Post War Recession	Economic Problems:
Labor Unrest	Boston:
Post War America and African Americans	Great Migration:
Racial Violence	Chicago: NAACP: Marcus Garvey/Black Nationalism
Rise of Radicalism	Red Scare:
End of Progressivism	

Open Response:

-Directions: *answer the following question in a 1-2 paragraph response.*

- Identify in your own words the reasons why the United States struggled in the post WWI period (1918-1920). Provide specific evidence in your analysis to back up your reasoning.

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Even during the Paris Peace Conference, many Americans were concerned less about international matters than about turbulent events at home. Some of this unease was a legacy of the almost hysterical social atmosphere of the war years; some of it was a response to issues that surfaced after the armistice.

Post-War Recession

The war ended sooner than almost anyone had anticipated. Without warning, without planning, the nation lurched into the difficult task of economic reconversion. At first, the boom continued, but accompanied by raging inflation. Through most of 1919 and 1920, prices rose at an average of more than 15 percent a year. Finally, late in 1920, the economic bubble burst as inflation began killing the market for consumer goods. Between 1920 and 1921, the gross national product declined nearly 10 percent; 100,000 businesses went bankrupt; and nearly 5 million Americans lost their jobs.

Labor Unrest

Well before this severe recession began, labor unrest increased dramatically. The raging inflation of 1919 wiped out the modest wage gains workers had achieved during the war; many laborers were worried about job security as veterans returned to the workforce; arduous working conditions continued to be a source of discontent. Employers aggravated the resentment by using the end of the war to rescind benefits they had been forced to concede to workers in 1917 and 1918—most notably, recognition of unions. The year 1919, therefore, saw an unprecedented strike wave. In January, a walkout by shipyard workers in Seattle, Washington, evolved into a general strike that brought the entire city to a virtual standstill. In September, the Boston police force struck to demand recognition of its union. With its police off the job, Boston erupted in violence and looting. Governor Calvin Coolidge called in the National Guard to restore order and attracted national acclaim by declaring, *"There is no right to strike ... against the public safety."*

Coolidge's statement tapped into a broad middle-class hostility to unions and strikes, a hostility that played a part in defeating the greatest strike of 1919: a steel strike that began in September, when 350,000 steelworkers in several mid-western cities demanded an eight-hour day and union recognition. The long and bitter steel strike climaxed in a riot in Gary, Indiana, in which eighteen strikers were killed. Steel executives managed to keep most plants running with nonunion labor, and public opinion was so hostile to the strikers that the American Federation of Labor timidly repudiated the strike. By January, the strike—like most of the others in 1919—had collapsed.

Post-War America and African Americans

Black World War I veterans (367,000 of them) came home in 1919 and marched down the main streets of cities with other returning troops. And then (in New York and elsewhere) they marched again through the streets of black neighborhoods such as Harlem, led by jazz bands and cheered by thousands of African Americans, who believed that the glory of black heroism in the war would make it impossible for white society ever again to treat African Americans as less than equal citizens.

As it turned out, the fact that black soldiers had fought in the war had almost no impact at all on white attitudes. But it profoundly affected black attitudes, accentuated African American bitterness, and increased blacks' determination to fight for their rights. During the war, nearly half a million blacks had migrated from the rural South to industrial cities (often enticed by northern "labor agents," who offered free transportation) in search of the factory jobs the war was rapidly generating. This was the beginning of what became known as the "Great Migration." Within a few years, the nation's racial demographics were transformed; suddenly, large black communities arose in northern cities, in some of which very few African Americans had lived in the past.

By 1919, the racial climate had become savage and murderous. In the South, lynchings suddenly increased; more than seventy blacks, some of them war veterans, died at the hands of white mobs in 1919 alone. In the North, black factory workers faced widespread layoffs as returning white veterans displaced them from their jobs. And as whites became convinced that black workers with lower wage demands were hurting them economically, animosity grew rapidly.

Racial Violence

Wartime riots in East St. Louis and Tulsa (at right) elsewhere were a prelude to a summer of much worse racial violence in 1919. In Chicago, a black teenager swimming in Lake Michigan on a hot July day happened to drift toward a white beach. Whites onshore allegedly stoned him unconscious; he sank and drowned. Angry blacks gathered in crowds and marched into white neighborhoods to retaliate; whites formed even larger crowds and roamed into African American

neighborhoods. For more than a week, Chicago was virtually at war. In the end, 38 people died— 15 whites and 23 blacks—and 537 were injured; over 1,000 people were left homeless. The Chicago riot was the worst but not the only racial violence during the so-called red summer of 1919; in all, 120 people died in such racial outbreaks in the space of little more than three months. Racially motivated urban riots were not new. But the 1919 riots were different in one respect: they did not just involve white people attacking blacks, but also blacks fighting back. The NAACP signaled this change by urging blacks not just to demand government protection but also to defend themselves. The poet Claude McKay, one of the major figures of what would shortly be known as the Harlem Renaissance, wrote a poem after the Chicago riot called "If We Must Die": *Like men we 'll face the murderous cowardly pack. Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.*

Marcus Garvey and the UNIA At the same time, a black Jamaican, Marcus Garvey, began to attract a wide following in the United States with his ideology of Black Nationalism. Garvey encouraged African Americans to reject assimilation into white society and to develop pride in their own race and culture. His Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) launched a chain of black-owned grocery stores and pressed for the creation of other black businesses. Eventually, Garvey began urging his supporters to leave America and return to Africa, where they could create a new society of their own. In the early 1920s, the Garvey movement experienced explosive growth for a time, but it began to decline after Garvey was indicted in 1923 on charges of business fraud. He was deported to Jamaica two years later. But the allure of Black Nationalism survived in black culture long after Garvey was gone.

Rise of Radicalism

Much of the public regarded the industrial warfare and racial violence of 1919 as frightening omens of instability and radicalism. This attitude resulted in part from other evidence that suggested the existence of a radical menace. After the Russian Revolution of November 1917, communism was no longer simply a theory but the basis of an important regime. Concerns about the communist threat grew in 1919 when the Soviet government announced the formation of the Communist International (or Comintern), whose purpose was to export revolution around the world.

In America, meanwhile, there was, in addition to the great number of imagined radicals, a modest number of real ones. These small groups of radicals were presumably responsible for a series of bombings in the spring of 1919. In April, the post office intercepted several dozen parcels addressed to leading businessmen and politicians that were triggered to explode when opened. Two months later, eight bombs exploded in eight cities within minutes of one another, suggesting a nationwide conspiracy.

In response to these and other provocations, what became known as the Red Scare began. Nearly thirty states enacted new peacetime sedition laws imposing harsh penalties on promoters of revolution. Spontaneous acts of violence against supposed radicals occurred in some communities, and universities and other institutions tried to expel radicals from their midst. But the greatest contribution to the Red Scare came from the federal government. On New Year's Day, 1920, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and his ambitious young assistant, J. Edgar Hoover, orchestrated a series of raids on alleged radical centers throughout the country and arrested more than 6,000 people. Most of those arrested were ultimately released, but about 500 who were not American citizens were summarily deported. Later in 1920, a bomb exploded on Wall Street, killing thirty-eight people. No one was ever convicted of this bombing.

The ferocity of the Red Scare gradually abated, but its effects lingered well into the 1920s. In May 1920, two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were charged with the murder of a paymaster in South Braintree, Massachusetts. The case against them was weak and suffused with nativist prejudices and fears; but because both men were confessed anarchists, they faced a widespread public presumption of guilt. They were convicted and eventually sentenced to death. Over the next several years, public support for Sacco and Vanzetti grew to formidable proportions. But on August 23, 1927, amid widespread protests in the United States and around the world, Sacco and Vanzetti, still proclaiming their innocence, died in the electric chair.

On August 26, 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment, guaranteeing women the right to vote, became part of the Constitution. To the suffrage movement, this was the culmination of nearly a century of struggle. To many progressives, it seemed to promise new support for reform. Yet the Nineteenth Amendment marked not the beginning of a new era of progressive reform but the end of an earlier one.

The End of Progressivism?

Economic problems, labor unrest, racial tensions, and the intensity of the antiradicalism they helped create—all combined in the years immediately following the war to produce a general sense of disillusionment. That became particularly apparent in the election of 1920. Woodrow Wilson wanted the campaign to be a referendum on the League of Nations, and the Democratic candidates, Governor James M. Cox of Ohio and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt, dutifully tried to keep Wilson's ideals alive. The Republican presidential nominee, Warren G. Harding, an obscure Ohio senator, offered a different vision. He embraced no soaring ideals, only a vague promise of a return, as he later phrased it, to "normalcy." He won in a landslide, with 61 percent of the popular vote and victory in every state outside the South. The party made major gains in Congress as well. To many Americans it seemed that, for better or worse, a new age had begun.

CONCLUSION

Presidents Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson contributed to a continuation, and indeed an expansion, of America's active role in international affairs, in part as an effort to abet the growth of American capitalism and in part as an attempt to impose American ideas of morality and democracy on other parts of the world. Similar mixtures of ideals and self-interest soon guided the United States into a great world war. For a time after the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, most Americans—President Wilson among them—wanted nothing so much as to stay out of the conflict. But as the war dragged on and the tactics of Britain and Germany began to impinge on American trade and access to the seas, the United States found itself drawn into the conflict. In April 1917, Congress agreed to the president's request that the United States enter the war as an ally of Britain.

Within a few months of the arrival of American troops in Europe, Germany agreed to an armistice and the war shuddered to a close. American casualties, although not inconsiderable, were negligible compared to the millions suffered by the European combatants. Wilson's bold and idealistic dream of a peace based on international cooperation suffered a painful death. The Treaty of Versailles, which he helped draft, contained a provision for a League of Nations, which Wilson believed could transform the international order. But the League quickly became controversial in the United States; and despite strenuous efforts by the president—efforts that hastened his own physical collapse—the treaty was defeated in the Senate. In the aftermath of that traumatic battle, the American people turned away from Wilson and his ideals and prepared for a very different era.

The social experience of the war in the United States was, on the whole, dismaying to reformers. Although the war enhanced some reform efforts—most notably prohibition and woman suffrage—it also introduced an atmosphere of intolerance and repression into American life. The aftermath of the war was even more disheartening to progressives, because of both a brief but highly destabilizing recession and a wave of repression directed against labor, radicals, African Americans, and immigrants.

