

## Introduction

The basic issue of this study, as it should be for all historical research and analysis, is how do we confront the past? And since war especially invites the construction of a mythic past, the writing of history becomes an attempt to correct our collective memory. In the case of the Great War of 1914–1918, remembrance has often taken the form of heritage and celebration rather than more profound learning and understanding. But we do not want to rehash the platitudes of “conventional wisdom.” Among the many aspects of a conflict that engulfed much of the world, for the United States, it involved coming to terms with the great diversity within the population as its military forces went off to fight on foreign battlefields. It sent men into combat against the military forces of the lands their families had only recently left but that had become enemy nations. It asked other men to become allies of friendlier states from which they had departed, sometimes with uncertain plans about whether they ever intended to return. How this affected the mobilization of troops for the combat that lay ahead remains to be fully told. But it left a legacy that persisted in national policy and popular culture, even after the war had ended.

In the years after the Great War, performers on the theatrical stages of America would celebrate the victory of the United States and the Allies over the Central Powers. Drawing on a vast repertoire of musical selections that reflected various aspects of the ended but still intrusive war, audiences could hear a catchy song called “When Tony Goes over the Top,” whose words intoned:

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*Hey! You know Tony the Barber*  
*Who shaves and cuts-a the hair*  
*He said skabooch, to his Mariooch*  
*He's gonna fight "Over There"*  
*Hey! You know how Tony could shave you*  
*He'd cut you from ear to ear . . .*  
*When Tony goes over the top*  
*He no think of the barber shop,*  
*He grab-a-da gun and chase-a da hun*  
*And make 'em all run like a son-of-a-gun*  
*You can bet your life he'll never stop*  
*When Tony goes over the top*  
*Keep your eyes on that fighting wop*  
*With a rope of spagett*  
*And-a big-a-stilette*  
*He'll make-a the Germans sweat*  
*When Tony goes over the top.<sup>1</sup>*

Recorded in separate versions in the autumn of 1918, by Billy Murray, a son of Irish immigrants, and Gus Van and Joe Schenck, performers of racial and ethnic dialect songs, the lyrics celebrated the exploits of Tony, an intrepid Italian immigrant soldier in the U.S. Army on the Western Front.

On the surface, such entertainment offered a modicum of accurate information. Tony, the Italian, and many other foreign-born men did go over the top as American soldiers. Beneath that basic fact, however, the message held more complicated nuances. Two years before the United States entered the war, other “Tonys” had answered the call by the Italian government to return to Italy as reservists to serve in the war against Austro-Hungarian forces on another front. But an even greater number of them would cast their lot with whatever the future held in America. Many Italians who had defied the order, as well as the American-born sons of immigrants, would eventually find themselves called to military duty after Congress, having declared war, enacted the Selective Service Act in the spring of 1917. And thus Tony, in various representations during the Great War, could be found clad in the gray-green uniform of the army of King Victor Emmanuel III; or as a *renitente*, using his ambiguous suspension between two countries to avoid military service; or as a khaki-clad “Sammy,” serving with General John J. Pershing’s American Expeditionary Force on the Western Front. But Tony, consciously or unconsciously, was also seeking and sorting out his identity as an Italian and

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an American. While the journey toward becoming an American remains an unresolved issue in the study of assimilation, it also reflects an aspect of war in modern times that has yet to be fully explored. World War I was a war in which the immigrant presence became an important issue, played a vital role, and underwent a great transformation by an accelerated assimilation process.

In *The Age of Empire*, Eric Hobsbawm raises the often ignored question of the public reaction to modern warfare: “What would the attitude of these masses be when called to the colors, and what would the impact of war be on civilians especially if, as some military men shrewdly suspected—though taking little account of it in their planning—the war would not be over quickly?” Except for events that transformed Russia during the war, Hobsbawm would give little further attention to the question. Similarly, American historian, David M. Kennedy, while exploring the “home front,” noted that American society had no longer remained homogeneous, with its cities’ “polyglot cauldrons roiling with astonishing various ethnic ingredients” as industrialization “opened the ugly fissures of class.” Addressing what Hobsbawm had found to be so important, Kennedy, despite his emphatic recognition of diversity, depicted an American society all but totally devoid of ethnic groups within its population. Although recognizing military service as the instrument to “yank the hyphen” out of Italian American, Polish American, and other immigrant recruits, Kennedy omitted any further consideration of its impact on identities and communities. While diversity as a dimension of modern war needs to be more fully explored, it remains especially germane as an aspect of America’s participation in the Great War.<sup>2</sup>

Within a vast repertoire of studies begun even before the war had ended, research that focused on immigrants in training and combat as well as their communities at home has uncovered promising initiatives, without exhausting the subject. Whether from voluntary enlistment or conscription, organizing the new National Army was made more difficult by recruitment from a far more diverse population than ever before in American history. Exploring this problem, Nancy Gentile Ford argues in *Americans All!* that the methods of scientific management and beliefs of the Progressivist movement guided military efforts in promoting Americanism while allowing immigrants to retain cultural traditions during their indoctrination into military life. Relying largely on official reports focused on stateside experience rather than combat overseas, her study abruptly concludes that the integration of immigrant recruits and native-born Americans was successfully achieved. But Gentile Ford isolates the challenge that the nation faced in transforming ethnic diversity into unified military preparedness.<sup>3</sup>

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Official policy, however, did not reveal much of the intensely personal experiences that ensued on the battlefield or in the postwar reception of returning soldiers. David Laskin, in *The Long Way Home*, describing the poignant encounters of 12 immigrants who served as doughboys in France, vividly depicts the “reality of the soldier’s life in war.” In contrast to a more saccharine view of a nation grateful to its foreign-born soldiers, he also recognizes that with restrictive immigration legislation after the war, “the parades had barely ended when the doors began slamming shut.” Throughout his narrative, Laskin shows that the ordeal of warfare was widely shared by a sometimes united and at other times divided population.<sup>4</sup>

Applying a more sociological perspective, Christopher M. Sterba, in *Good Americans*, compares the experiences of the Italian colony of New Haven, Connecticut, with the enclaves of Eastern European Jews of New York City. He seeks to answer three main questions: How did the war affect their communities? How did their communities respond to the war? and What was the long-term significance of the war for the “new immigration” to America? While focusing on the indoctrination to military life of Italians and Jews as individuals but also examining the adjustments forced upon their communities at home, Sterba’s approach expands the context for understanding the war. Whether concerned with soldiers or civilians, he shows that “foreignness” continued to resonate in the resolution. By his critical debunking of more “heroic” interpretations, Sterba provides a useful perspective on immigrant soldiers and their communities during the war.<sup>5</sup>

In considering the American role in the Great War, Jennifer D. Keene’s analysis of issues that challenged military and political leaders exposes major matters of military operation. After decades of disparaging any role for citizen soldiers in modern warfare, regular army officers, suddenly needing to do exactly what they long resisted, had to mobilize and train wholly inexperienced recruits into a force capable of defeating a formidable enemy. Army officials had to establish an institutional setting that weaned civilians from private life and infuse a shared sense of purpose that could support military interests after the war. Repeatedly returning to the theme of how citizen soldiers, many of them reluctant to be in the army at all, forced military authorities to dilute unquestioning obedience by granting concessions to their demands, Keene reveals the reciprocity of power within the ranks. But while recognizing the tragic plight of black soldiers, the large population of immigrants whose presence within the National Army also threatened the goal of integration receives little attention.<sup>6</sup>

This brief review is not meant to serve as a critical appraisal as much as to discern a context for the present work. While some scholars find favorable

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consequences in the experience of immigrant groups during the war, particularly in regard to assimilation—reflecting what might be called a “unity narrative”—they have left space, although sometimes partly addressed by them, for a more skeptical conclusion. Without being exhaustive, these works provide valuable vectors that allow for the introduction of further research. In the present case, another study, based on the history of Philadelphia’s Italians as an immigrant population, is introduced.

While challenging all who were touched by it, the war forced Italian immigrants to confront some difficult choices. Within that community, intellectuals found the need to transcend their usual reflections on personal identity. With the exigencies of political allegiance encouraging more profound considerations than peace had required, they explored the meaning and relevance of Americanization. In December 1915, journalist Agostino De Biasi, an editor of *L’Opinione*, an Italian newspaper in Philadelphia, before becoming an important voice of Fascism, identified the relationship between their country of origin and country of relocation as the key question facing Italians. But, for other Americans, the war brought a reciprocal question in the problem posed by the presence of foreigners who threatened to disrupt the political and cultural unity of America. Unlike intellectuals such as De Biasi, who proposed a pluralistic, simultaneously dual allegiance, advocates of Americanization expected a more acquiescent response from the foreign born. And while the nation would eagerly embrace them as industrial laborers, military recruits, and even citizens, especially if they were willing to adopt “American” ways of thinking and acting, it would remain hesitant if they retained “foreign” identities, languages, and behaviors. In short, native-born Americans believed that newcomers had to be more unequivocally assimilated as Americans if the war was to be won.<sup>7</sup>

Within this framework, the present study seeks to examine the impact of the war on men who served in the ranks of the military and civilians who defended the nation in industrial and civic roles on the home front. In particular, it asks how an immigrant population reacted to the war, especially as foreigners on a path to becoming Americans. The case of Philadelphia’s Italians presents a large population of foreign origin still uncertain about its own intentions toward life both in America and in a city that was ambivalent about them. The war forced Italians along with other Philadelphians to seek answers to these questions. Hopefully, the present study provides a better understanding of the relationship of war to such matters as diversity and assimilation, along with a greater appreciation of a previously missing dimension of the history of the Great War and Philadelphia as an American city.