**Note: This paper was written primarily for my fellow historians of the United States. But in my talk on Oct. 31, I promise to frame it within a wider context, both internationally and temporally.- MK**

**“War Against War: Explaining The Rise, Failure, and Legacy of the American Peace Movement, 1914-1918”**

**Michael Kazin**

I am writing a book on a subject that many historians of the United States may assume they know quite enough about already. As far back as 1935, the journalist Walter Millis described, in a best-selling “revisionist” narrative, the resistance by a large number of congressmen, Senators, and the one lone congresswoman to intervening in what was then called the Great War. Beginning in the 1950s, historians of and usually on the left have written extensively about the principled opposition by the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World to a conflict “made by the classes and fought by the masses”—and chronicled the unprecedented repression they faced after the U.S. declared war in April, 1917. More recently, such scholars as Frances Early and David Patterson have examined the central role played by anti-war feminists in building an international movement, led by women, that attempted to persuade the belligerent nations to agree to a mediation process that might end the appalling bloodshed. And every biography of Woodrow Wilson and study of his presidency devotes some significant pages to his ambivalent relationship with peace activists – who met with him often from the early months of the war until just weeks before he asked Congress to send young Americans to “fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

So why did I decide to add to this tall stack of worthy volumes? One reason is that, despite the wealth of scholarship, historians outside the rather tiny sub-field of peace studies do not appreciate how many Americans opposed the war, strongly and consistently, and took part, on a variety of levels, in agitating for peace. Outside of certain academic precincts, this history is almost completely unknown, as I discover whenever friends, relatives, or undergraduates ask me to tell them about my new project. As Niall Ferguson has written, in the United States, the Great War is “the forgotten war…Considering the extent of the American contribution to the war, and its effect on American society, this is surprising.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

I would like to help dispel that ignorance – which is why I am writing an essentially narrative account which should be published near the centennial of the US declaration of war in 2017.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The significance of the movement’s failure also deserves attention. World War I is a war that no one celebrates. In Europe, many still mourn it. The Great War touched off three decades of genocide, massacres, and perpetual armed conflict between nations and within them – a period Eric Hobsbawm dubbed “The Age of Catastrophe.” So perhaps the movement which tried to stop the United States from contributing to this thirty-year debacle ought to be better understood, if not honored. If that movement had prevented the US from joining Allied forces in France, I will speculate later, it might have altered the course of the war – and thus the history of the rest of the twentieth century.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A second reason for undertaking this project is that the American peace movement, unlike its counterparts in Europe, has never really been analyzed as a totality. Existing studies focus either on congressional opposition to preparedness and the war itself, or on protests by labor and the left, or on peace networks organized by such middle-class reformers as Jane Addams, or on such individual endeavors as Henry Ford’s “peace ship” which are too easily dismissed as quixotic. To understand the most important questions about this movement -- what it achieved, why it failed, and what its legacy has been -- one needs to examine when and how these different groups and individuals worked together and how their combined, if not always coordinated, efforts influenced the course of U.S. policy and politics – before, during, and after the declaration of war in 1917.

What they built was the largest, most sophisticated, and perhaps most popular effort to stop a war to that point in U.S. history. There would not be another to rival it until the Vietnam conflict half-a-century later. Yet, unlike every other sustained example of collective action on a national scale in the 20th century, the efforts of peace advocates have never really been analyzed *as a social movement*. The Americans who fought the drift towards war at every step – from Wilson’s angry notes after the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 to his call to augment the size of the military in 1916 to his demand that US merchant ships be armed in 1917 and then his rupture of relations with the Kaiser’s government and the declaration of war – were engaged in a process like that of other modern movements whose achievements and limits historians and social scientists have extensively analyzed.

To explain the course and fate of the peace effort, one needs to weigh key factors, both internal and external to the movement itself: its demographic composition, its ideology, its resources and strategy, its own publicity apparatus as well as its sympathizers in the press, and its protean relationship with different segments of the political elite. Such concepts as “political opportunity structures” and “repertoires of contention” developed by such prominent scholars as Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly can be useful in this effort, as long as they are embedded in particular contexts, narratives, and biographies. [[5]](#footnote-5)

Towards this end, I offer some partial, tentative, admittedly somewhat schematic answers to five big, interrelated questions about the organized opposition to World War I. All are questions historians should ask about *any* social movement; answering them should help place the American resistance to the Great War within both a comparative and a longitudinal perspective. To keep this paper relatively short, I have omitted the transnational features of a movement which, by its nature, was deeply conscious of and continually involved in the difficult attempts by Europeans – belligerents and neutrals alike – to stop the conflict.

1.Who belonged to it?

2. What did they believe and how did they organize?

3. What influence did they have?

4.Why did they fail?

5.What was their legacy?

**Membership**

The movement grew steadily from the late summer of 1914 until the winter of 1916-17. Fueling its expansion was a loose alliance of three groups of political actors: first, participants in progressive reform movements, most of whom hailed from comfortable, native-born, Protestant backgrounds; second, activists from the organized left and certain unions (most of whom were immigrants or had strong ties to immigrant ethnic groups, especially Germans, Scandinavians, Jews, and Irish); third, a bloc of members of Congress from both parties, most of whom represented states or districts where the influence of Populist ideas remained strong -- in the Great Plains, the upper Midwest, and the South. This broad coalition of political insiders and insurgent outsiders spanned the nation geographically and had various means to sway public opinion and influence policy.

Urban white feminists were the first to mobilize. Their initial action took place in Manhattan on a cloudy afternoon at the end of August, 1914. About 1500 women strode down Fifth Avenue in a silent protest against the growing war in Europe. The local and national press predictably played up the participation of famous individuals – such as the novelist Gertrude Atherton and Fanny Garrison Villard, the sixty-nine-year old daughter of the great abolitionist and widow of a wealthy railroad financier.

Many marchers were dressed either in black or white, to symbolize mourning. Ten times as many New Yorkers massed along both sides of the famous boulevard, their silence reflecting the solemn tone of the occasion. “I was more than surprised at the reverential attitude of the spectators,” remarked Villard, lead organizer of the Women’s Peace Parade. “It was only a feeble effort really, we have simply cast a pebble into the water. I hope there may be many ever widening circles that perhaps will make men realize what a crime it is to send thousands of husbands and fathers and sons to a useless slaughter.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

The circles did widen, and rather quickly. That fall, two charismatic European feminists from belligerent nations -- Rosika Schwimmer from Hungary and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence from Great Britain – lectured in several American cities, inspiring local women to establish “peace committees” in their wake. In January, a conference of 3000 met in Washington, DC to found the Woman’s Peace Party (WPP). The 77 separate delegations included nearly every prominent female reformer in the country – from suffrage leaders like Anna Howard Shaw and Carrie Chapman Catt to settlement workers like Jane Addams (who was elected president of the Party) to reforming academics and journalists who wrote for such periodicals as The Survey, The New Republic, and La Follette’s Weekly. [[7]](#footnote-7)

At the same time, a group of progressives and radicals began meeting regularly in New York City to find ways to publicize the evils of war and put pressure on President Wilson and Congress to remain strictly neutral. The initial convenors were Paul Kellogg, editor of The Survey and Lillian Wald, head of the Henry Street Settlement. By the fall of 1915, the group, now named the American Union Against Militarism (AUAM), included such well-known figures as Amos Pinchot, Oswald Villard (Fanny’s son and the editor of the New York Evening Post), and Rabbi Stephen Wise. David Starr Jordan, longtime president of Stanford University and a renowned biologist, took part in its meetings on his frequent trips to the East. Led by its secretary Crystal Eastman – an experienced labor lawyer, suffragist, and socialist – the AUAM became the main coordinator of anti-war activities in cities throughout the East and Midwest.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Opponents of the war were also vocal and active in large corners of working-class America. Until 1917, every prominent Socialist campaigned against preparedness and urged strict neutrality. So did the leaders of such major unionsas the Mine Workers, the Clothing Workers, the Textile Workers, the Ladies Garment Workers, the Butchers, and central labor councils in the West and Midwestern states. In nearly all the Preparedness Day parades held in the spring and summer of 1916, labor was conspicuously absent.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Hostilities rooted in European conflicts drove members of several sizeable ethnic groups into peace activism. Anti-war feeling was particular strong among Finns, Swedes, Jews from the Czarist Empire, Irish Catholics, and, of course, German-Americans. The national loyalties of Germans put them consistently on the defensive, even before the US declared war on their erstwhile Fatherland. But when prominent figures from the other ethnic clusters spoke out, they had to be taken seriously by both pro-war and oppositional forces.

Irish peace activists had an outsized significance. They belonged to the group that was the mainstay of the Democratic Party everywhere outside the South and whose sons dominated the leadership of the country’s largest Christian denomination. At the beginning of the war, Irish-Americans governed Newark, Boston, New Haven, Albany, and New York City and were a major presence in the politics of Chicago, Kansas City, St Louis, and San Francisco. Most of these cities, not coincidentally, were also hotbeds of Irish republican sentiment and organizing. Irish-American politicians and leading hierarchs of the Church tended to avoid overt criticism of President Wilson. But neither did they openly denounce the efforts of strong Hibernian nationalists who founded such organizations as the American Truth Society and the Irish Race Convention, which blamed Great Britain and its allies for blockading German ports and secretly coordinated some of their activities with the Kaiser’s emissaries in Washington.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Under the influence of the Social Gospel, a good many Protestant ministers also aggressively tried to arrest the drift toward war. In early 1916, the Federal Council of Churches, which represented most of the largest denominations in the land, gave wide circulation to a proposal that condemned “the policy of armed peace” and urged “men everywhere…to follow a better way.’ At the same time, some 1100 ministers and a small number of rabbis – most of whom came from Northeastern and Midwestern states -- signed a more pointed petition which denounced “the organized and determined efforts to stampede the nation..into increased and extravagant expenditures for ships and guns…” Once the U.S. joined the war on what was Good Friday in 1917, nearly all these clergymen fell into line. But they continued to evince their reluctance by preaching what one historian calls “traditional Christian imperatives such as loving one’s enemies,…sustaining social and economic justice, and maintaining an international outlook.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Before the declaration of war, the peace movement was an almost exclusively white affair. This was not the result of a clash of views. African-Americans rarely endorsed the belligerent views of Theodore Roosevelt or either endorsed and took part in preparedness campaigns. In fact, black journalists, quite aware of what King Leopold and his minions had wrought in the Congo, rejected the dominant view among white Americans that the German invasion and “rape” of Belgium had been acts of unparalleled bestiality. “The Belgians are reaping what they sowed,” concluded one black editor early in 1917.[[12]](#footnote-12)

But, unsurprisingly, black activists were too absorbed with the ongoing fight against Jim Crow to devote time or political capital to the cause of peace. For their part, none of the anti-war organizations, all of which operated in a segregated environment, made much an effort to include black participants – although the latter’s hostility to Woodrow Wilson was certainly greater than theirs. Only after April, 1917 did African-Americans divide into pro- and anti-war factions, while the federal government employed its new powers to spy on and, when possible, suppress the protests of such figures as William Monroe Trotter, Hubert Harrison, and A. Phillip Randolph.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In Congress, stalwart opposition to war and preparedness came mainly from office-holders in both parties whom one historian calls “the peace progressives,” although “peace populists” would be a more apt description.[[14]](#footnote-14) All suspected that large Eastern corporations and investors were pushing the nation toward war to serve their own financial interests; all garnered praise from constituents -- native-born small farmers and wage-earners as well as recent immigrants – who bridled at taking part in what they condemned as a “rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.”

One extremely rich and famous man agreed with that charge, at least until the US broke off relations with Germany early in 1917. And Henry Ford was willing to back up his convictions with a sizeable fraction of his swelling fortune. The voyage of the Oscar II, the large steamer Ford chartered at the end of 1915 to take peace campaigners to Europe to urge mediation on the belligerent powers, was plagued by his grandiose promise to “get the boys out of the trenches by Christmas” and by the chaotic rush to organize the enterprise and convince well-known peace activists to take part. In the end, few of the latter sailed along with Ford and 77 other “delegates” – and a larger number of reporters and college students.

But the voyage of the “peace ship” was not quite the folly cynical journalists made of it. Jane Addams would have sailed with Ford, if she had not taken ill, and William Jennings Bryan saw the party off from the dock in Hoboken. A cross-section of anti-war figures – excluding only elected officials – warmly endorsed the expedition, including Oswald Villard and Clark Kellogg. With the death toll continuing to mount and Woodrow Wilson refusing to propose a mediation plan of his own, many Americans thought Ford’s plan at least demonstrated that the peace movement was willing to act in imaginative ways. As Edgar Guest, whose sentimental poems were syndicated in hundreds of newspapers, put it:

It may be folly, it may be wrong, as all the critics say,

And to end the strife and slaughter grim this may not be the way..

But just the same when your ship sets out, I’ll cheer for your splendid pluck

And wave my hand in a fond farewell and wish you the best of luck.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The demographic diversity of the anti-war camp was both a strength and a weakness. While it enabled the opposition to reach a variety of constituencies in their own fashions, it also made coordination difficult and, at times, not even desired. Groups had their own priorities and their own timetables, and they related to both the president and to Congress in different ways. As I will discuss later, this fragmentation helped Woodrow Wilson set the terms of engagement with the peace movement – an advantage he skillfully exploited.

**Ideology**

Among the movement’s more prominent activists were men and women who had fundamental disagreements about many domestic issues – from a progressive income tax to corporate regulation to the rights of unions to woman suffrage and prohibition. But they agreed that the US should stay out of the war that was destroying Europe and should avoid building up its defenses to prepare for entering that war – or any war.

Henry Ford could make common cause with female progressives like Villard and Addams because they were all committed “pacifists.” The term, widely used at the time to describe opponents of the Great War on both sides of the Atlantic, did not have the same meaning it does today when it connotes principled resistance to all uses of violence. Coined, in French, in 1901 at the Tenth Universal Peace Congress – one of several well-meaning but largely ineffective societies of talkative reformers launched at the time -- a “pacifist” meant one who advocated mediation, arbitration, and moral suasion – usually in combination -- to avoid future wars or to stop one that had already started. Few “pacifists” opposed all uses of violence by the state or, for that matter, by individuals or social movements. They were, however, convinced that wars were grossly inefficient and fundamentally immoral ways to settle disputes between nations. Before he sailed for Europe, Ford declared, with characteristic bluntness, ‘To my mind, the word ‘”murderer” should be embroidered in red letters across the breast of every soldier.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

But Ford, Addams, and Villard found allies among the more radical activists in the labor movement, including such leaders of the Socialist Party as Morris Hillquit and Eugene Debs and nearly every member of the Industrial Workers of the World. None of these militants were pacifists by either the older definition or the one we use today; they opposed only wars for imperial conquest and looked forward to winning the class war to come. They were determined to avoid what they viewed as the “betrayal” of their labor and socialist counterparts on the other side of the Atlantic.

What’s more, it is impossible to understand the fortunes of this large and sophisticated movement within the parameters of our current definitions of left and right. While stalwart progressives like Senator Robert LaFollette and Jane Addams grabbed many of the headlines and leftists like Crystal Eastman and Hillquit did the lion’s share of organizing protest groups, it would be a mistake to say that opposition to the war was a cause of “the left” and support for it the province of the “right.”

Was Theodore Roosevelt, creator of the New Nationalism — a key forerunner of the New Deal – a “conservative” because he denounced Woodrow Wilson for “being too proud to fight”? Was Wilson a “progressive” when he asked Americans to be “neutral in word and deed” before he reversed himself and became a disciple of preparedness?

And what should one make of the stiff opposition to Wilson’s policies by many of his fellow Democrats in Congress? These Democrats sometimes echoed the blasts against intervention articulated by progressive Republicans like La Follette. But, at other times, they put forth arguments from which most cosmopolitan Midwestern and Northeastern opponents of .war recoiled.

For example, nearly every anti-war politician denounced militarism for strengthening the power of big corporations who produced munitions or loaned money to foreign governments to buy them. As Republican Senator George Norris of Nebraska memorably charged in his April, 1917 speech opposing Wilson’s call for intervention, “We are going into war upon the command of gold. We are going to run the risk of sacrificing millions of our countrymen's lives in order that other countrymen may coin their lifeblood into money.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

But many Democrats, especially those from the South, raised other kinds of protests that to us today sound more like those a Tea Party organizer might make than ones a New Deal liberal would endorse. Correspondents to Southerners like Rep. Claude Kitchin of North Carolina complained that the US could not afford to expand the size of the military as the President desired – and that to do so would mean raising taxes on rich and working-class Americans alike. For many white Southerners, mistrust of federal power trumped support for Wilson, a president born in the South who shared their opinions about white supremacy. Sen. James Vardaman of Mississippi was not alone in voicing the fear that going to war would stir up agitation for racial equality among black people all over the nation. Vardaman, one of the more notorious racists in Congress, was also one of the six senators who voted against declaring war.

In fact, nearly every opponent of the war made a powerful argument that was conservative in the literal sense: they questioned the value, morally as well as economically, of the rapid, centralizing changes that Wilson and less ambivalent pro-war figures such as Theodore Roosevelt and Leonard Wood were advocating for the nation. Opponents of belligerence recoiled at first the drift and then the march toward the establishment of a national security state, paid for by a higher and broader income tax. This was, they charged, a state which demanded compulsory obligations from its citizens – some of which were legal, like conscription, some of which were based on a combination of state and popular pressure, such as buying war bonds and saying nothing that could be interpreted as criticism of the war effort. War was, indeed, in Randolph Bourne’s deathless phrase, “the health of the state” – but it was an emerging state of a kind no peace activist favored. As Senator William Stone, who resigned his chairmanship of the Foreign Relations Committee in order to speak his conscience, put it, “I won’t vote for this war because if we go into it, we will never again have this same old Republic.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Was he wrong about that?

**Actions**

Any large, potent, and durable movement has to enable people to participate in different ways and for different, if not antagonistic, reasons. Some central direction and leadership are essential, but tactical commands tend to be as ineffective in protest campaigns as they are essential in military ones. This was certainly true a century ago.

The broad repertoire of tactics employed by the anti-war movement reflected the anger and creativity of Americans who sincerely believed the fate of the world was in their hands. They spoke and circulated petitions and pamphlets all over the nation, packed urban arenas for protest rallies, campaigned for peace candidates for state and federal office, and founded such new organizations as the Women’s Peace Party and the American Union Against Militarism which coordinated some of this mushrooming activity. In New York City, peace advocates attracted crowds of up to ten thousand people per day with an exhibit, “War Against War,” that featured savagely witty cartoons, captivating speakers, and a huge metallic dragon representing the bellicose denizens of Wall Street who “are at all times willing to give their country’s service the last full measure of conversation.” With funds from the Carnegie Endowment, the Women’s Peace Party staged a professional production of Euripides’ The Trojan Women in cities throughout the country.

A spirit of muckraking modernism suffused the publications of the WPP and the AUAM. Movement journalists like Crystal Eastman and Mary White Ovington proved as adept at exposing the financial interests funding the Navy League as they did at writing in the voice of an Irish washerwoman whose son had just been dispatched to war: “I’ll go back to my tubs,” sighed “Mrs. O’Toole.” “The boys is making the world bloody and the women must be around to make it clean.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

In the last weeks before April, 1917, the opponents of war came together to mount what was probably their most daring, if desperate, challenge to the emerging elite consensus that the United States had to join the Allies. Every major peace advocate, in and out of political office, demanded that a national referendum be held before Congress could fulfill its constitutional obligation to declare war. In so doing, they took the progressive zeal for direct democracy a giant step beyond its previous applications to local and state affairs. Robert LaFollette had planted the germ of the idea, a year earlier, in a Senate resolution which acknowledged that such a referendum could only serve an advisory function.

But after the US broke relations with Germany, the idea generated a flurry of mass rallies, editorials, and supportive congressional speeches and bills. In Chicago, local peace groups even managed to get the slogan, “Let the People Decide,” run across movie screens in five local theaters. In the House, several anti-war representatives held or endorsed referendums in their own districts, which, unsurprisingly, produced lopsided majorities endorsing their stand. They and their fellow peace activists were confident that “the people” would recoil from fighting and paying the bills in order to help one group of European powers defeat and conquer another. [[20]](#footnote-20)

From the beginning of the war in Europe until the U.S. became a combatant, a shifting coalition of peace-minded lawmakers had aggressively combatted each step toward the abandonment of neutrality. They opposed expanding the army and navy and introduced their own bills to bar Americans from traveling on the ships of belligerent nations and to nationalize the production of war materiel. In early March 1917, on the eve of war, a small group of senators, led by LaFollette, filibustered the administration’s request to arm merchant ships against potential assaults by German U-boats. In the aftermath, a majority in the upper house broke with Senate tradition by enacting a provision to cut off debate, the cloture rule, to insure that such defiance by a tiny minority would never succeed again.

After war was declared, the movement which had tried to prevent it obviously had to change what it said and how it behaved. Congress, whose members knew large numbers of Americans still opposed the decision they had made, enacted the Espionage and Sedition Acts, which essentially made most criticism of the war or the government a criminal offense. The new laws helped legitimize vigilante attacks on peace advocates and German-Americans more generally as well as the postwar Red Scare.

With their periodicals routinely banned from the mails and their speakers hounded by federal agents, most anti-war groups remained in business by telling their truths but telling them slant. They backed candidates who called for a speedy and just peace – such as Morris Hillquit who won almost a quarter of the popular vote in the race for mayor of New York in 1917. They advocated for the rights of conscientious objectors and established the National Civil Liberties Bureau -- later renamed the ACLU-- to defend men and women accused of disobeying the new, draconian statutes.

Meanwhile, a leaderless opposition to the draft was causing problems for the wartime state. As many as three million men never bothered to register; about 350,000 registrants either did not report as required or deserted from training camps. Black Americans who suffered under Jim Crow laws and customs were particularly loath to risk their lives in a “war for democracy” proclaimed by a president who defended segregation. Taken together, a higher percentage of American men resisted conscription during World War I than during the Vietnam War half a century later. An unknown number of the resisters in 1917 and 1918 were certainly motivated more by a desire to avoid disrupting their lives than by a moral objection to “Mr. Wilson’s war.” Still, the strong persistence of peace sentiment and activity helps explain why the federal government felt the need to create a large, pervasive apparatus of propaganda, surveillance, and repression.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**Political Influence**

The anti-war movement could always count on support from some national office-holders, but its most dependable allies represented a distinct minority in each major party. In the GOP, the peace faction came largely from states and districts in the Midwest and Far West inhabited by large numbers of German and Scandinavian immigrants and their children. Wisconsin, North Dakota, Iowa, and Oregon headed the list. LaFollette was the unofficial leader of this group – a status based on his well-cultivated national prominence as well as his zeal for challenging Woodrow Wilson and pro-British Republican leaders alike.

The Democrats included a more sizeable group of anti-war politicians. Most followed the lead of William Jennings Bryan – after he resigned from the cabinet in June, 1915 during the Lusitania crisis -- rather than that of their own president and party leader. Their most prominent figure was Claude Kitchin, who served both as Majority Leader and as chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. In those posts, Kitchen could potentially block administration policies he disliked. Yet, he also had to avoid jeopardizing – or appearing to threaten – the Democrats’ fragile majority, their first in two decades. So Kitchin’s relationship with the White House was, by turns, adversarial, tense, and cooperative – sometimes all in the same week. The leading peace organizations – the AUAM and the WPP -- communicated frequently with both the LaFollette Republicans and the Bryan-Kitchin Democrats and routinely publicized their speeches and writings for the cause.

A handful of well-known individuals in the anti-war movement also kept up a dialogue with Woodrow Wilson. Doing so, ironically, may have hindered their influence. Due both to his moral convictions and his political needs, Wilson straddled the line between sincere neutrality and forthright support for the Allied powers during most of the period when the U.S. remained at peace. His critics liked to joke that, “Anyone who followed Wilson down a political path was almost certain to meet him coming in the opposite direction.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

On some occasions, the president sounded like a pacifist. In December, 1914, he told the New York Times that a deadlock would be the best outcome of the war because it would show the belligerent nations “the futility of employing force in the attempt to resolve their differences.” Then, during the winter of 1916, Wilson suggested the war was unjust because it was fundamentally undemocratic: “This war was brought on by rulers, not by the people; and I thank God that there is no man in America who has the authority to bring war on without the consent of the people.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Yet Wilson was always equally troubled about “the danger of an unjust peace, one that will be sure to invite future calamities.” That concern eventually persuaded him that the U.S. had to intervene with arms if it hoped to secure a just peace and a just and durable world order.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Wilson often displayed both his ambivalence and his rhetorical dexterity when he spoke with activists from the peace movement, something he did almost every month during his first term. On May 8, 1916, for example, the president had a lengthy discussion in the White House about preparedness with several leaders of the AUAM. His guests included the celebrated reformer Lillian Wald and Max Eastman, the celebrated Greenwich Village radical and brother of Crystal Eastman.

Wald urged the president to realize that “a big army or a big navy program would simply neutralize or annul the moral power which our nation ought, through you, to exercise when the day of peace negotiations has come.” Wilson responded, “we should work this thing out wisely” and “carefully discriminate between reasonable preparation and militarism…if you say we shall not have any war, you have got to have the force to make that ‘shall’ bite.” But, he added, there is no need to have “an almost limitless armament..because you have a moral force that takes its place.” Wald and her compatriots nodded in agreement. After all, a “moral force” was precisely what they imagined themselves to represent.[[25]](#footnote-25)

But in believing they could eventually win Wilson over to their views on the war, these elite advocates diluted the strength of their independent voice and assumed, naively, that regular dialogue could change the stance on this vital question of a stubborn man who took counsel only from his wife and a tiny group of close friends. Their relationship with the president also made it difficult to forge a sturdy alliance with most Socialists, Irish-American nationalists, and those labor unionists whose slim trust in Wilson’s diplomatic intentions had diminished entirely by the spring of 1916 – when the president condemned “hyphenated Americans,” endorsed a large increase in the size of the military, and then marched in a preparedness parade in Washington, waving a tiny American flag.[[26]](#footnote-26)

However, the ideological diversity of the anti-war coalition did help it gain influence in a variety of institutions, both inside and outside the federal government. And, until two months before Wilson asked for a declaration of war, the peace coalition may have had a majority of the nation on its side. Without public opinion polls, we will never be able to gauge the size or breadth of that opposition with any precision. But the previous fall, both Wilson and Charles Evans Hughes, the Republican nominee, had run for president on platforms which promised to continue what the Democrats called “the peaceful pursuit of the legitimate objects of our National life” and the Republicans termed the maintenance of “a strict and honest neutrality.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Unlike its earlier and later counterparts, this movement came close to achieving its aim - to prevent the U.S. military from fighting in a conflict which peace activists regarded as a moral and material disaster. Whatever their influence, the Northern Whigs and abolitionists who railed against the Mexican War, the anti-imperialists who opposed the re-colonization of the Philippines after 1898, and the peace activists who argued against Lyndon Johnson’s escalation of the Vietnam War in 1965 all emerged only after the killing they abhorred had begun.

Even after the Germans resumed unrestricted submarine attacks in early February 1917, peace activists were still eager to hold a national referendum they hoped would force Wilson and Congress to “keep us out of war” at least a few months longer. Arthur Link’s conclusion about the popularity of the movement seems indisputable. “We can be confident,” he wrote near the end of his epic five-volume biography of Wilson, “in making only one very crude generalization – that articulate Americans were profoundly divided up to the very end of American neutrality, and that organized peace activity and visible signs of peace sentiment were nearly as strong…as organized war activity and signs of war sentiment.”[[28]](#footnote-28) But, of course, the president won the day.

**Defeat and Two Reasonable Counter-Factuals**

The defeat of the anti-war movement, like most turning points in history, had multiple explanations. The German military, betting that the U.S. would soon be its enemy, resolved to try to win the war on the Western front before a significant number of Americans could join the fight. That decision, coming just weeks after Wilson made a belated attempt at mediation and then gave a utopian address calling for “peace without victory,” seemed to prove to many Americans that the “Huns” had always been bent on conquest. The pro-war lobby -- led by figures like Roosevelt and Lodge, mobilized by such well-financed organizations as the Navy League and National Security League, and enjoying the editorial support of the bulk of big-city newspapers -- made a forceful case that most members of Congress could not or would not resist. Finally, few of the Democrats and progressive Republicans who had contended with Wilson’s policy in the past were willing to stand against him once he made up his mind to take the nation into the malestrom in Europe. They had always preferred his frustrated ambivalence to the militant convictions of TR and his ilk.

But just a few months before Wilson delivered his war message, it was not at all certain the decision would be his to make. The 1916 presidential election was one of the closest in U.S. history. If the Hughes had received just 3774 more votes in California, he would have won a majority in the electoral college – although he still would have lost the popular tally by over 500,000.

A Hughes victory would have set up an intriguing and, I think, quite reasonable counter-factual narrative: a more divided nation and a much closer vote on declaring war. During the campaign, the Republican nominee had clumsily tried to avoid antagonizing either pro-intervention or anti-war voters. But most of the latter ended up voting for Wilson, including hundreds of thousands who had voted Socialist in 1912. Quietly, the German ambassador himself let it be known that his government preferred sticking with the incumbent as well.

So if Hughes, having won a little over 46% of the popular vote, had tried to take the nation into war, he may well have faced a large and implacable opposition in Congress. LaFollette and Kitchin would not have been lonely, marginal figures but confident leaders of that opposition, one swelled by Democrats free from the obligation to support a president of their own party and by progressive Republicans who had long clashed with Taft, Lodge, Elihu Root and other conservative, pro-war chieftains of the GOP. The peace movement would have mobilized its followers to come to Washington in huge numbers to influence the vote. Even if Congress did, narrowly, approve a declaration of war, President Hughes would have struggled to govern a bitterly partisan nation – one in which resistance to conscription and to higher taxes might have overwhelmed him.

And if, by some combination of contingencies, the U.S. had not entered the war at all, we can imagine one of two, admittedly less coherent, counter-factual narratives. Either the Germans would have won the war in 1917 or early 1918 -- or it would have lasted a year or two longer, until all sides-- weakened by popular resentment, hunger, and civil war – staggered into a negotiated peace.

Nearly every historian of World War I agrees that the American Expeditionary Force played a highly significant and, perhaps, decisive role in compelling the Germans to sue for peace in the fall of 1918 and accept what became a humiliating Armistice, in which the Kaiser abdicated and fled into exile. What turned the tide was not the actual fighting done by US troops, nearly all of which occurred in the final six months of the conflict. German generals recognized they had no ability to counter the two million or more doughboys set to arrive in the summer of 1918. So, that spring, they threw all their remaining forces into a final offensive in northern France. We must strike, General Erich Lundendorff told his fellow commanders, “before America can throw strong forces into the scale.” That strike failed and, with it, any real hope for some semblance of that “peace without victory” in which Woodrow Wilson devoutly believed.[[29]](#footnote-29)

**Legacy**

In the end, the rise and defeat of the U.S. anti-war movement helped bring about several developments of great consequence:

-Woodrow Wilson’s messianic vision of America’s role in the world, which, ironically, was indebted to the writings of peace activists who strenuously opposed his decision to use armed force to realize it. Although the identity of the nation’s enemies has changed often since then, the larger ends of its policies have remained much the same: to deploy the military, equipped with the state-of-the-art weaponry, to make the world “safe for democracy,” as U.S. leaders define it.

-The beginning of a permanent military-industrial establishment in the United States. Although the four- million strong AEF quickly demobilized after Germany’s defeat, the armed services retained far more troops, ships, and airplanes than before 1917, and such corporations as DuPont and Boeing prospered by supplying their needs—and would continue to do so into the 21st century. During the war, Congress also replaced the old tariff system with a huge increase in the income tax, a fiscal revolution that now goes unquestioned. Although Congress disbanded the draft, the Selective Service System, in 1920, it was revived two decades later and was vital to filling the manpower needs of the military during World War II and through much of the Cold War.

-The creation of a modern surveillance state. The Bureau of Investigation (later renamed the FBI) took charge of enforcing the Espionage and Sedition Acts, and Military Intelligence sent undercover agents to report on the “subversive’ activities of black, immigrant, and radical organizations. At the same time, federal authorities urged immigrants from Europe to become citizens and drew a firm line between the rights of citizens and those of non-citizens. The apparatus to enforce such policies grew in size, power, and legitimacy during the rest of the 20th century.

Finally, the legacy of this peace activism, as in the period of its heyday, also bridged divides between right and left – and continues to do almost a century later. In Congress, after the Armistice, the most dedicated backer of amnesty for Eugene Debs and other jailed critics of the war was Tom Watson, the former Populist who had become a virulent hater of Jews and Catholics. The so-called “revisionist” argument that economic interests had, in fact, propelled the U.S. into war found favor across the political spectrum in the 1920s and 1930s – and helped generate support for the America First Committee from leftists such as Norman Thomas and from anti-New Deal capitalists like Robert Wood, the chairman of Sears Roebuck.

What’s more, contemporary historians on both left and right continue to express their retrospective distaste for the war. Compare these two quotes from books published in 2012 by authors with quite dissimilar political views:

1.“…the isolationists’ charge that bankers were drawing the United States into war was not entirely wrong…To a large degree, Wilson actively forced Germany into a box from which there was no good strategy for escape….[and then was guilty] of “egregious violations of civil rights.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

2. “Economic interests clearly placed the United States in the Allied camp…Congress passed among the most repressive legislation in the country’s history…The agents hired to enforce this crackdown on dissent were part of a burgeoning federal bureaucracy.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

The first quote comes from A Patriot’s History of the Modern World, whose authors, Larry Schweikart and David Dougherty, are proud conservatives; the second is from The Untold History of the United States by Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick – who are equally proud of their leftist convictions.[[32]](#footnote-32)

There’s a certain irony in this convergence of views: World War I, the event which initiated seven decades of brutal, sometimes genocidal conflict – international, regional, and civil -- between armed representatives of the left and right generated something quite different in the United States: a loose alliance between people of contrasting ideologies during the war and then ambiguous and entangled loyalties in its aftermath. Perhaps, American exceptionalism endures after all.

In the end, I hope my book plays a modest part in rescuing the anti-warriors of a century ago from the enormous disregard of posterity. They refused to believe in the ideological grandiosity of either their president or his more aggressively militarist critics and, later, allies. They would, I think, have agreed with Timothy Snyder, who writes, at the end of his magnificent, gruesome history of the killing fields of Eastern Europe in the 1930s and 40s, “Ideology, when stripped by time or partisanship of its political and economic connections, becomes a moralizing form of explanation for mass killing, one that comfortably separates the people who explain from the people who kill.[[33]](#footnote-33) Now, perhaps, those Americans who refused to accept moral talk in the service of a higher, deadly immorality can finally receive their due.

1. Millis, Road to War ; St. Louis Manifesto of the Socialist Party, 1917, quoted in Socialism in America: A Documentary History, ed. Albert Fried (Garden City, NY, 1970), 521; Nick Salvatore, Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist (Urbana, 1982); Frances H. Early, A World Without War: How U.S. Feminists and Pacifists Resisted World War I (Syracuse, 1997); David S.Patterson, The Search for Negotiated Peace:Women’s Activism and Citizen Diplomacy in World War I (New York, 2008). Also see the pioneering work by C. Roland Marchand, The American Peace Movement and Social Reform, 1898-1918 (Princeton, 1972) and Justus D. Doenecke’s recent narrative, Nothing Less Than War: A New History of America’s Entry into World War I (Lexington, Ky, 2011). Wilson quote from his Joint Address to Congress, April 2, 1917. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Niall Ferguson, The Pity of War (NY, 1999), xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In the narrative, I plan to focus on the views, activities, and personalities of four Americans who were among the most articulate and influential voices opposing Wilson’s policies. Each also represented a distinct constituency in the broader movement: cosmopolitan radical feminists (Crystal Eastman), immigrant workers and Socialists (Morris Hillquit), Midwestern Republican progressives (Sen. Robert LaFollette), and populist Southern Democrats (Rep. Claude Kitchin). Eastman and Hillquit both had close relationships with anti-war activists in Europe. I will place this quartet in motion throughout the four years of the war, explaining how they cooperated and when they were at odds. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eric Hobsbawm, The Age of Extremes, 1914-1991 (New York, 1994), 21-224. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A good, transnational synthesis of social movement theories is Sidney Tarrow’s Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics, 2nd edition (Cambridge, UK, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Villard quoted in “Women March in a Silent Protest Against Warfare,” NY World, 8/30/1914, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On the WPP, see the still useful study, Marie Louise Degen, The History of the Woman’s Peace Party (Baltimore, 1939) and Barbara Jean Steinson, “Female Activism in World War I: The American Women’s Peace, Suffrage, Preparedness, and Relief Movements, 1914-1919” (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1977), 8-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Blanche Wiesen Cook, “Woodrow Wilson and the Antimilitarists, 1914-1917,” PhD Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Simeon Larson, Labor and Foreign Policy: Gompers, the AFL, and the First World War, 1914-1918 (Cranbury, NJ, 1975), 61-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Joseph Edward Cuddy, “Irish-America and National Isolationism, 1914-1920 (NY: Arno, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John F. Piper, Jr. The American Churches in World War I (Athens, Ohio, 1985), 12. For the two statements, see Report of the Commission on Peace and Arbitration – Federal Council of Churches, The Church and International Relations, Vol. 3 (New York, 1917), 43-44. The stronger petition was sent on a return post-card to about ten thousand clergy, at least 1199 of whom returned it with their signatures. I computed the regional breakdown from lists included in the Claude Kitchin Papers, Rolls 8 and 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Calvin Chase in The Washington Bee. Quote in William G. Jordan, Black Newspapers and America’s War for Democracy, 1914-1920 (Chapel Hill, 2001), 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Mark Ellis, Race, War, and Surveillance: African Americans and the United States Government during World War I (Bloomington, IN, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Robert David Johnson, The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations (Cambridge, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Quoted in Barbara S. Kraft, The Peace Ship: Henry Ford’s Pacifist Adventure in the First World War (NY, 1978), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ford quoted in Barbara S. Kraft, The Peace Ship: Henry Ford’s Pacifist Adventure in the First World War (NY: Macmillan, 1978**),**  50. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Norris, CR, 4/4/17. Page # tk. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. From Stone’s brief speech in opposition to the declaration of war on April 5, 1917. Get CR reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Mary White Ovington, “Mrs. O’Toole at the Wash-tub,” Four Lights (published by the Women’s Peace Party of New York), Aug. 25, 1917, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. In LaFollette’s original bill, introduced in late April, 1916, a referendum would be held before the US could break diplomatic relations with any country and would be explicitly advisory in nature. On this tactic, see Ernest C. Bolt, Jr., Ballots before Bullets: The War Referendum Approach to Peace in America, 1914-1941 (Charlottesville, 1977), 1-87. The Chicago anecdote appears on p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Studies of resistance to the draft during World War I are rare. But see John Whiteclay Chambers II, To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America (New York, 1987), 205-237 and Jeanette Keith, Rich Man’s War, Poor Man’s Fight: Race, Class, and Power in the Rural South During the First World War (Chapel Hill, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Thomas Fleming, The Illusion of Victory: America in World War I (NY, 2003), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Wilson quoted in Thomas J. Knock, To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order (New York, 1992), 34-5 and Bolt, Ballots before Bullets, 24-5. In a larger sense, Wilson was a man of profoundly contradictory impulses and stances — a conservative who became a progressive in time to run for governor of New Jersey; a great admirer of Gladstonian liberalism who oversaw the greatest expansion of state power and taxation, to that point, in US history; a Democrat who thought the people could not be trusted to know the reasoning behind his most important decisions. The most consistent element in his thinking was probably his Presbyterian moralism which led him to struggle to understand what just governance would require and yet to shun compromise and self-correction once he had made up his mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Knock, Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Quotes taken from transcript of meeting, Arthur Link et al., The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 36 (Princeton, tk). 634-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. At the same time, peace activists like Wald did, it seems, lead Wilson to embrace and promote the concept of a new world order, which would abandon imperialism, militarism, and balance-of-power politics. For a vigorous, if overstated, version of this argument, see Knock, To End All Wars. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Quotes from “Democratic Party Platform of 1916” and “Republican Party Platform of 1916” at [www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Arthur S. Link, Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1916-1917 (Princeton, 1965), 419. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Quoted in John Keegan, The First World War (NY, 2012), p tk. Also see Christopher Clark, Kaiser Wilhelm II: A Life in Power (London, 2000), 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Larry Schweikart and David Dougherty, A Patriot’s History of the Modern World: From America’s Exceptional Ascent to the Atomic Bomb, 1898-1945 (NYC: Sentinel, 2012), 114, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Oliver Stone and Peter Kuznick, The Untold History of the United States (NY: Gallery, 2012), 5, 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Also see the entertaining assault on Wilson and his policies by Thomas Fleming, The Illusion of Victory: America in World War I (New York, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands, loc 7333-4 in Kindle edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)