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Introduction

The United States and the Great War

In August of 1914, the most “civilized” nations on earth turned their guns on one another and marched off to war. World War I marked the key turning point of our century. The rise of the twin totalitarian systems of fascism and communism, the collapse of the European empires, World War II, and the Cold War — all were consequences of the wreckage of World War I and its flawed peace settlement. Today, in many ways, we still live in the shadow of “the Great War.”

That war came as a surprise and a shock to most Americans. President Woodrow Wilson had taken office in 1912 hoping to carry out an ambitious progressive domestic agenda. And he did succeed as a progressive reformer to a very great degree. But before taking office he had said, “It would be an irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs.” That irony of fate soon came to pass. In America, the war resulted in a government-led centralization and coordination of life such as had never been seen before. In some ways, progressive idealism was transferred to the war effort itself. As a result, hopes were raised high, only to be followed by bitter disappointment.

The twelve illustrations in this booklet focus on the several aspects of both the hopes and the disappointments that World War I brought to millions of Americans. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three of the illustrations to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

America Goes to War

The illustrations for this lesson stress the contrast between America's lack of preparation for the war (in both a military and psychological sense) and the terrible destructiveness of the warfare Americans would encounter.

An Age of Mechanized Warfare

World War I was vast in its destructiveness. In part that was because it was a modern and fully mechanized war. The illustrations here focus on certain key aspects of the technology of World War I.

The War “Over Here”

World War I was a “total war.” This concept refers to the degree to which each nation's entire industrial might had to be harnessed to the needs of war. It also refers to the way the hearts and minds of the whole population had to be enlisted in supporting the war effort.

A War to End Wars?

Woodrow Wilson's idealistic desire to make the world safe for democracy gave Americans high hopes for what victory might mean. Perhaps that's what it took to get them to accept the sacrifices they had to make. But as the three illustrations in this lesson suggest, it also set them up for great disappointment when the peace settlement turned out as flawed as it did.

Using Photos, Cartoons and Other Visuals to Teach History

Most textbooks today are full of colorful visuals. But all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. But only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, and their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

The principles that guided us in developing the lessons in this booklet are spelled out more explicitly in the MindSparks visual literacy materials, especially *The Visual Image in the Classroom: A Visual Literacy Resource Booklet* and *The Way Editorial Cartoons Work*. You may want to consider using these resources along with your other MindSparks materials.

How to Use this Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS FOR EACH ILLUSTRATION

Each sheet displays one illustration and presents questions for discussion. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small group or all-class activities.

TRANSPARENCIES FOR EACH ILLUSTRATION If you have ordered this booklet with transparencies, or if you make your own, use these to facilitate group discussion as you work with each illustration and its discussion-activity sheet.

America's World War I

**OBJECTIVES
FOR THIS LESSON:**

1. Students will understand how unprepared the U.S. was for war when World War I began.
 2. Students will better appreciate the horrors of trench warfare in World War I.
-

America Goes to War

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS:

Illustration 1

When war broke out in Europe in August of 1914, many Americans were surprised. Europeans had often fought wars on their own territory and in other lands. Yet since 1815, no major war had engulfed all of Europe. Instead, a century of vast scientific and industrial progress had left Europeans and Americans quite proud of Western civilization. Suddenly, that civilization fell into bloodshed and barbarism. In America, in 1912, Woodrow Wilson was elected to carry out a major program of progressive reforms. His focus was on domestic matters. Just before taking office he said, "It would be an irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs." But as this illustration suggests, that was exactly the irony he had to face. From 1914 on, the ghost of war haunted him more and more. In the end, it came to control his life, and the nation's, completely.

Illustration 2

At first, Wilson promised to keep America out of the war. But the nation was drawn into it anyway. In the meantime, plans were made to prepare the nation for battle. Camps were set up to train recruits. But heated debates about preparedness kept the nation from increasing its number of soldiers all that much. When America entered the war in April 1917, the army and National Guard still only had a combined strength of about 380,000. This would increase tenfold by the war's end. Yet even after entering the war, few Americans were ready for what faced them. As this photo of bayonet practice in Texas suggests, training could never prepare Americans fully for the horrors of this world war.

Illustration 3

This is also a photo of a military training exercise. But it conveys a more realistic idea of what Americans would face once they arrived at the front in World War I. The photo is of Canadian soldiers training near the front in France. It shows the trench warfare that helped to make the war so destructive, and that gave ordinary infantry soldiers such a sense of helplessness. After a few all-out initial attacks against enemy lines, both sides learned that such offensives could not achieve total victory. In the age of the machine gun, men found themselves pinned down in the trenches, locked in a bloody and hopeless stalemate.

Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustration

1. This illustration shows a famous U.S. president being haunted by a ghost. Name this president and the years when he held that office.
2. The ghost is meant to stand for a big problem that really started to worry President Wilson in August of 1914. What big problem was that? How does the way the ghost is pictured here help to show what it is supposed to stand for?
3. In the illustration, President Wilson is shown reading a stack of papers and trying to ignore the ghost of war behind him. From what you know about Wilson's presidency, what big issues or problems do you think those papers might be about?
4. What point do you think the illustration makes by showing Wilson as trying to ignore the ghost of war while he works on the papers next to him?
5. Do you think the artist believed Wilson would be able to ignore the ghost of war for much longer here? Explain your answer.

Follow-up Activities

1. Woodrow Wilson was first elected president of the United States in 1912. Just before taking office in 1913, he said, "It would be an irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs." Prepare a brief talk to give to class on these remarks of Wilson's. In your talk, answer these questions: Who were the presidential candidates of the two major political parties in the 1912 election? What other important candidates for president ran in 1912? What were the big issues in the election race that year? What did Wilson stress in his campaign? Why do you think he was elected? Finally, how does the campaign of 1912 help to make clear what Wilson meant by the remarks of his quoted above?
2. Create your own caption for this drawing. Or write a few sentences for the ghost of war to be whispering and some thoughts that Wilson might be having. As a class, discuss the different versions of the drawing you and other students have created. Which of these versions do you like the best? Why?