

doughboys the great war and the remaking of america jennifer d keene

Doughboys, The Great War, and the Remaking of America: Jennifer D. Keene's Definitive Account

The First World War, often overshadowed by its successor, was a cataclysmic event that irrevocably reshaped the American landscape. Jennifer D. Keene's seminal work, "The Doughboys: The Great War and the Remaking of America," offers a profound and meticulously researched exploration of this transformative period. This comprehensive article delves into the multifaceted impact of American involvement in "The Great War," examining how the experiences of ordinary soldiers, known as doughboys, reverberated through society, politics, and culture. We will explore the initial motivations for America's entry, the brutal realities of trench warfare, the profound psychological and physical tolls on the soldiers, and the subsequent social and political upheavals that marked the remaking of America. Keene's nuanced analysis provides essential insights into how this global conflict served as a pivotal moment in the nation's development, influencing everything from its international standing to its domestic social fabric.

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The Great War: America's Entry and Initial Expectations

Jennifer D. Keene masterfully details the complex path that led America into the devastating conflict of World War I. Initially, the United States maintained a stance of neutrality, a policy deeply ingrained in its historical identity. However, a confluence of factors, including unrestricted submarine warfare by Germany, the Zimmermann Telegram, and a growing sense of moral obligation, gradually eroded this neutrality. President Woodrow Wilson's idealistic vision of making the world "safe for democracy" became the rallying cry, framing American intervention not as a quest for territorial gain, but as a crusade for global ideals. The initial expectations among many Americans, including the eager young men who would become the doughboys, were often romanticized. They envisioned a swift and glorious campaign, a chance to prove American prowess on the world stage. This perception, however, stood in stark contrast to the grim realities that awaited them across the Atlantic.

Life in the Trenches: The Doughboys' Experience

Keene's account vividly portrays the harrowing reality of life in the trenches for the American

doughboys. The Western Front was a landscape of unimaginable brutality, characterized by static trench warfare, machine-gun fire, artillery bombardments, and the constant threat of poison gas. The doughboys, many of whom were farmers, factory workers, and students from all walks of American life, found themselves thrust into an environment that tested their resilience to its absolute limits. They endured weeks, even months, in muddy, rat-infested trenches, facing conditions that bred disease, despair, and a profound sense of alienation. The psychological toll of witnessing constant death and destruction, coupled with the physical hardship, created a shared experience that would profoundly shape these soldiers. Keene highlights the camaraderie that emerged amidst this suffering, the bonds forged in shared adversity that became a crucial source of strength for the doughboys.

The Nature of Trench Warfare

The defining characteristic of World War I combat was trench warfare. Elaborate systems of trenches stretched for miles, creating a brutal stalemate. The doughboys learned to live and fight in these confined, subterranean spaces, a stark departure from any previous military experience. The "no man's land" between opposing trenches became a kill zone, a treacherous expanse often littered with barbed wire, unexploded ordnance, and the bodies of fallen soldiers.

Daily Life and Routine

Life in the trenches was a grim routine punctuated by moments of intense terror. Doughboys faced constant threats from shelling, sniper fire, and disease. They endured the biting cold of winter and the sweltering heat of summer, all while subsisting on meager rations. Fatigue was a constant companion, and the psychological strain of anticipating the next attack was immense. Despite these conditions, the doughboys maintained a remarkable spirit, often finding solace in humor, letters from home, and the bonds with their fellow soldiers.

The Psychological and Physical Scars of War

Jennifer D. Keene emphasizes that the Great War left indelible psychological and physical scars on the doughboys, shaping their lives long after they returned home. The constant exposure to violence, the loss of comrades, and the sheer horror of the battlefield contributed to widespread shell shock, now understood as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many soldiers struggled with nightmares, anxiety, and depression, conditions that were often poorly understood and inadequately treated by the military and society at large. Physical injuries, from dismemberment to chronic pain, were also common. The returning doughboys carried the weight of their experiences, a burden that often made reintegration into civilian life a difficult and isolating process. The war had fundamentally altered their perspectives and their understanding of the world.

Shell Shock and Mental Health

The psychological impact of the war was profound. Soldiers experienced "shell shock," a term used to describe a range of combat-related psychological distress. Symptoms included mutism, amnesia, and uncontrollable tremors. The military's understanding of mental health was nascent, and many soldiers suffering from shell shock were often misdiagnosed or stigmatized. Keene's work sheds light on the silent battles fought by many doughboys, battles that continued long after the armistice.

Physical Wounds and Disabilities

The physical toll of the war was immense. Doughboys suffered from horrific wounds inflicted by artillery, machine guns, and bayonets. Amputations were common, and many returned with lifelong disabilities. The advancement of medical technology, while saving lives, also meant that more soldiers survived severe injuries, leading to a generation grappling with the physical consequences of combat.

The Home Front: Mobilization and Social Change

While the doughboys fought on the front lines, the Great War instigated significant social and economic changes on the American home front. Jennifer D. Keene's analysis highlights how the war effort necessitated a massive mobilization of resources and manpower. Industries were retooled to produce munitions and supplies, leading to increased employment but also to new labor challenges. The war also provided unprecedented opportunities for women, who entered the workforce in vast numbers to fill roles previously held by men, contributing significantly to the war effort and sparking a reevaluation of women's societal roles. Furthermore, the war intensified social movements and political discourse, including the suffrage movement and calls for social reform, as the nation grappled with its evolving identity and its place in the world. The propaganda machine worked tirelessly to rally support, often demonizing the enemy and fostering a sense of national unity, but also contributing to a climate of intolerance and suspicion towards dissenters and minority groups.

Women in the Workforce

The war effort opened doors for women in ways never before imagined. With millions of men serving overseas, women stepped into factory jobs, clerical positions, and nursing roles. This participation challenged traditional gender roles and provided a powerful impetus for the women's suffrage movement, which achieved a significant victory with the passage of the 19th Amendment shortly after the war's end.

Economic Impact and Industrialization

The demand for war materials spurred significant industrial growth in the United States. Factories churned out weapons, ammunition, and supplies, leading to economic expansion. However, this rapid industrialization also created new labor disputes and highlighted the growing power of organized labor and the need for worker protections.

Propaganda and Public Opinion

The Committee on Public Information, led by George Creel, orchestrated a massive propaganda campaign to mobilize public support for the war. Posters, films, and speeches aimed to unite the nation, demonize the enemy, and encourage participation in war bonds and other patriotic efforts. This campaign, while effective in rallying support, also contributed to a climate of conformity and suspicion towards any form of dissent.

Returning Home: Readjustment and the Legacy of the Doughboys

The return of the doughboys marked a crucial period of readjustment for both the soldiers and American society. Jennifer D. Keene illustrates the complex challenges faced by these veterans as they attempted to re-enter civilian life. Many found it difficult to articulate their experiences, and society, eager to move past the war, often struggled to comprehend the profound changes the soldiers had undergone. The promised land of opportunity and gratitude did not always materialize, and many doughboys faced unemployment, underemployment, and a sense of disillusionment. However, their experiences also fostered a spirit of shared identity and a desire for collective action, leading to the formation of veterans' organizations that played a significant role in advocating for their needs and shaping public policy. The legacy of the doughboys was not merely one of suffering, but also of resilience, adaptation, and a burgeoning sense of civic engagement.

Challenges of Demobilization

Demobilizing millions of soldiers and reintegrating them into the civilian economy was a monumental task. Many faced a lack of jobs and a disconnect between their wartime skills and civilian opportunities. The transition from the structured, communal life of the military to the individualistic demands of civilian society proved challenging for many.

Social and Political Activism

The shared experiences of the war fostered a sense of solidarity among the doughboys. Many became involved in veterans' organizations, advocating for benefits, pensions, and recognition for their service. These organizations played a vital role in shaping public discourse and influencing policy in the post-war era.

The Remaking of America: Long-Term Consequences

Jennifer D. Keene's "The Doughboys: The Great War and the Remaking of America" powerfully argues that American involvement in World War I was a watershed moment, fundamentally altering the nation's trajectory. The war propelled the United States onto the global stage as a major power, shifting its focus from domestic concerns to international affairs. The economic boom generated by wartime production, coupled with the war's disruption of European economies, solidified America's position as a dominant economic force. Socially, the war accelerated existing trends, such as the Great Migration of African Americans to Northern industrial centers and the burgeoning women's rights movement. Politically, the war ushered in an era of increased federal government power and a more interventionist foreign policy. The disillusionment that followed the war, the rejection of the League of Nations, and the subsequent rise of isolationism also represented a significant, albeit temporary, shift in the nation's global outlook. The experiences of the doughboys, both on the battlefield and upon their return, contributed to a profound reevaluation of national identity, citizenship, and the very meaning of American progress.

Rise of the United States as a Global Power

The Great War marked a pivotal moment in America's emergence as a dominant world power. While initially hesitant to enter, its vast industrial capacity and manpower ultimately tipped the balance. The post-war period saw the U.S. playing a more assertive role in international diplomacy and economics.

Shifts in Social Structures

The war had profound social ramifications. The Great Migration saw millions of African Americans move from the rural South to urban centers for wartime jobs, transforming American demographics. The war also accelerated the push for women's suffrage and altered gender roles, laying groundwork for future social progress.

Changes in Government and Politics

The war effort led to an expansion of federal government power, with increased regulation and control over the economy and public life. This shift laid the groundwork for the more active role the government would play in subsequent decades, influencing everything from economic policy to social welfare.

Jennifer D. Keene's Contribution to Understanding the Doughboys

Jennifer D. Keene's "The Doughboys: The Great War and the Remaking of America" stands as a cornerstone in understanding this pivotal period. Her meticulous research, drawing on a wide array of primary sources including soldiers' letters, diaries, and official records, provides an unparalleled depth of insight into the doughboys' lived experiences. Keene avoids simplistic narratives, instead offering a nuanced portrayal of the soldiers as individuals shaped by circumstance, grappling with both the horrors of war and the complexities of societal change. Her work is crucial for historians seeking to grasp the human cost of conflict and its enduring impact on the American psyche. By focusing on the rank-and-file soldier, Keene offers a ground-level perspective that complements broader political and diplomatic histories, revealing how the war truly remade America from the bottom up.

Research Methodology and Sources

Keene's scholarship is characterized by its rigorous research methodology. She expertly synthesizes a vast array of primary sources, including personal accounts from soldiers, official military documents, and contemporary newspapers. This allows for a comprehensive and authentic representation of the doughboys' experiences.

Historiographical Significance

The book holds significant historiographical weight, contributing new perspectives to the study of World War I and its impact on American society. Keene's focus on the soldiers' experiences offers a vital counterpoint to traditional diplomatic and military histories, enriching our understanding of how the war fundamentally reshaped the nation.

Conclusion: The Enduring Impact of the Doughboys and The Great War

In conclusion, Jennifer D. Keene's "The Doughboys: The Great War and the Remaking of America" provides an essential, comprehensive, and deeply human account of how American involvement in World War I transformed the nation. The experiences of the doughboys, from their initial idealistic enlistment to the brutal realities of trench warfare and the challenging process of returning home, reveal a generation irrevocably altered by global conflict. The Great War was not just a military engagement; it was a catalyst for profound social, economic, and political changes that continue to resonate today. Keene's meticulous research and insightful analysis underscore the enduring legacy of the doughboys and the profound, often contradictory, ways in which this seminal conflict forged a new American identity and propelled the United States onto the world stage, forever remaking the fabric of American life.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central thesis of Jennifer D. Keene's 'The Doughboys: The Great War and the Remaking of America'?

Keene's central thesis is that the American experience in World War I, often overlooked in favor of its European impact, was a pivotal moment that fundamentally reshaped American society, politics, and its place in the world. She argues that the war acted as a catalyst for significant domestic changes and redefined America's international role.

How does Keene argue the Great War contributed to the 'remaking of America'?

Keene details how the war led to increased federal power, mobilized the economy and workforce, spurred technological advancements, and fostered a sense of national unity (though often with exclusionary undertones). It also significantly altered social dynamics, influenced women's roles, and had a profound impact on racial and ethnic relations.

What specific aspects of the American soldier's experience in WWI does Keene highlight in 'The Doughboys'?

Keene emphasizes the harsh realities of trench warfare, the psychological toll on soldiers, the adaptation of American troops to a new kind of combat, and the ways in which their experiences abroad influenced their postwar lives and perceptions of America. She also discusses the challenges faced by African American soldiers and other minority groups.

What role did propaganda and public opinion play in shaping the American involvement and perception of the Great War, according to

Keene?

Keene illustrates how government propaganda played a crucial role in mobilizing public support for the war effort, demonizing the enemy, and creating a sense of patriotic duty. The Committee on Public Information, for instance, significantly shaped public discourse and perceptions.

How did the Great War impact the American economy and its industrial development, as explored by Keene?

Keene explains how the war effort dramatically stimulated American industry, leading to increased production, the growth of new sectors, and the consolidation of corporate power. The demand for war materials propelled the US economy and solidified its position as a major industrial power.

In what ways did the war contribute to social and cultural shifts in the United States, as presented in 'The Doughboys'?

Keene examines how the war accelerated social changes, including increased opportunities for women in the workforce, the Great Migration of African Americans to urban centers, and a rise in nativism and intolerance. The war also left a lasting impact on American culture, influencing literature, art, and national identity.

What is the significance of the title 'The Doughboys' in the context of Keene's book?

The title 'The Doughboys' refers to the common nickname for American infantry soldiers during World War I. By centering the narrative on these soldiers, Keene underscores the human element of the war and how their collective experiences, both abroad and upon their return, were instrumental in the subsequent remaking of America.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Jennifer D. Keene's work on the Doughboys and the remaking of America during World War I, with short descriptions:

1. The Price of Victory: The United States and the Great War

This book delves into the American experience of World War I, examining the motivations for entry, the mobilization of resources, and the impact of the conflict on domestic society. It explores how the war altered America's role on the global stage and set the stage for future international engagement. The narrative highlights the sacrifices made and the profound societal shifts that occurred in response to the war.

2. Over There: The American Expeditionary Forces in France

Focusing specifically on the Doughboys' journey and actions in Europe, this title provides a detailed account of the American Expeditionary Forces' combat experiences. It covers everything from troop deployment and training to key battles and the challenges faced by American soldiers. The book offers insight into the military strategies employed and the realities of trench warfare for the American doughboys.

3. The Home Front: America During World War I

This work shifts the focus to the domestic impact of the Great War, exploring how the conflict reshaped American life. It examines the economic changes, the role of women and minorities, the rise of propaganda, and the suppression of dissent. The book illustrates how the war effort permeated every aspect of American society, creating lasting transformations.

4. American Dreams, Global Realities: The United States in the Interwar Years

Tracing the consequences of World War I, this title analyzes how the war's aftermath influenced American foreign policy and domestic identity in the period between the two world wars. It discusses the disillusionment with internationalism, the economic boom and bust cycles, and the cultural shifts that defined the era. The book connects the experiences of the war directly to the subsequent trajectory of the nation.

5. When America Went to War: The Mobilization of the Nation

This book offers a comprehensive look at the massive undertaking of mobilizing the United States for World War I. It details the creation of the draft, the organization of industries, the financing of the war, and the public's response to the call to arms. The narrative emphasizes the scale of the national effort and the challenges of transitioning from peace to wartime production and manpower.

6. The Lost Generation: American Writers and the Great War

This title explores the profound impact of World War I on American literature and culture, focusing on the experiences and artistic output of writers who served or were deeply affected by the conflict. It examines themes of disillusionment, trauma, and the search for meaning in the wake of unprecedented destruction. The book highlights how these writers captured and shaped the nation's understanding of the war.

7. A Soldier's War: Personal Narratives of the Great War

Drawing from letters, diaries, and memoirs, this collection presents the unfiltered experiences of individual Doughboys. It offers a deeply personal perspective on the realities of combat, the psychological toll of war, and the camaraderie among soldiers. The book provides intimate glimpses into the lives of those who fought on the front lines, humanizing the grand historical events.

8. Wilson's War: Woodrow Wilson and the American Experience in World War I

This book centers on the leadership of President Woodrow Wilson during World War I and its impact on the nation. It analyzes his decision-making process, his vision for a new world order, and the domestic challenges he faced in prosecuting the war. The title assesses Wilson's role in shaping America's involvement and its post-war aspirations.

9. The Great War and the Shaping of Modern America

This broader study examines how World War I fundamentally altered the course of American history, impacting its political, social, economic, and cultural landscapes. It explores the long-term consequences of the war, including its influence on civil liberties, the rise of federal power, and the nation's evolving global responsibilities. The book positions the Great War as a pivotal turning point in the making of modern America.

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