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## The Empire State at War

As the nation commemorates the centennial of American participation in the First World War, historians across the country—and around the world—will revisit this oft-forgotten conflict and its significance to understanding our history today. With the global nature of the war that erupted in Europe in 1914 and into which the United States was drawn three years later, it is fair to question the significance of a museum exhibition or a book that focuses on the contributions of a single state. Given the scope of the conflict, how can a study of New York State’s role in World War I add to the abundance of scholarship already available? The following examination of the enormous contributions of the Empire State to the American war effort will once again affirm that, in so many ways, the study of New York State history is, in fact, the study of American history. The story of New Yorkers during World War I mirrors those of other Americans from 1917 to 1918. What makes New York State’s story unique, however, is the leading role that the state and its people played during this critical period—on both the battlefield and the home front. New York served as the site where critical questions were addressed pertaining to civic participation and protest; civil rights; race, ethnicity, and gender relations; and many other topics. The following chapters explore in depth how New York State answered the nation’s call to arms and how these questions were addressed.

I AM NEW YORK.

. . . Because the war was fought for  
Right, I gave unsparingly my sons and  
my resources.

And not until the last dollar of Victory is paid shall I call my  
task complete.

—From “I Am New York and This Is My Creed” by Bruce Barton, 1919<sup>1</sup>

The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 helped to propel the Empire State to its pre-eminent position. The state’s business and political leaders solidified its standing over the remainder of the 1800s. New York City was the commercial and financial capital of the nation, and many of the country’s leading manufacturers called New York State their home. During the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865, the Empire State contributed



**"New York will see it through" (1918).**

*Artist:* Unknown; *Printer:* Lutz and Scheinkman Inc. Litho., New York, New York; *Publisher:* Liberty Loan Committee, Government Loan Organization, Second Federal Reserve District; *Technique:* Lithograph; *Dimensions:* 55 x 80.5 cm.

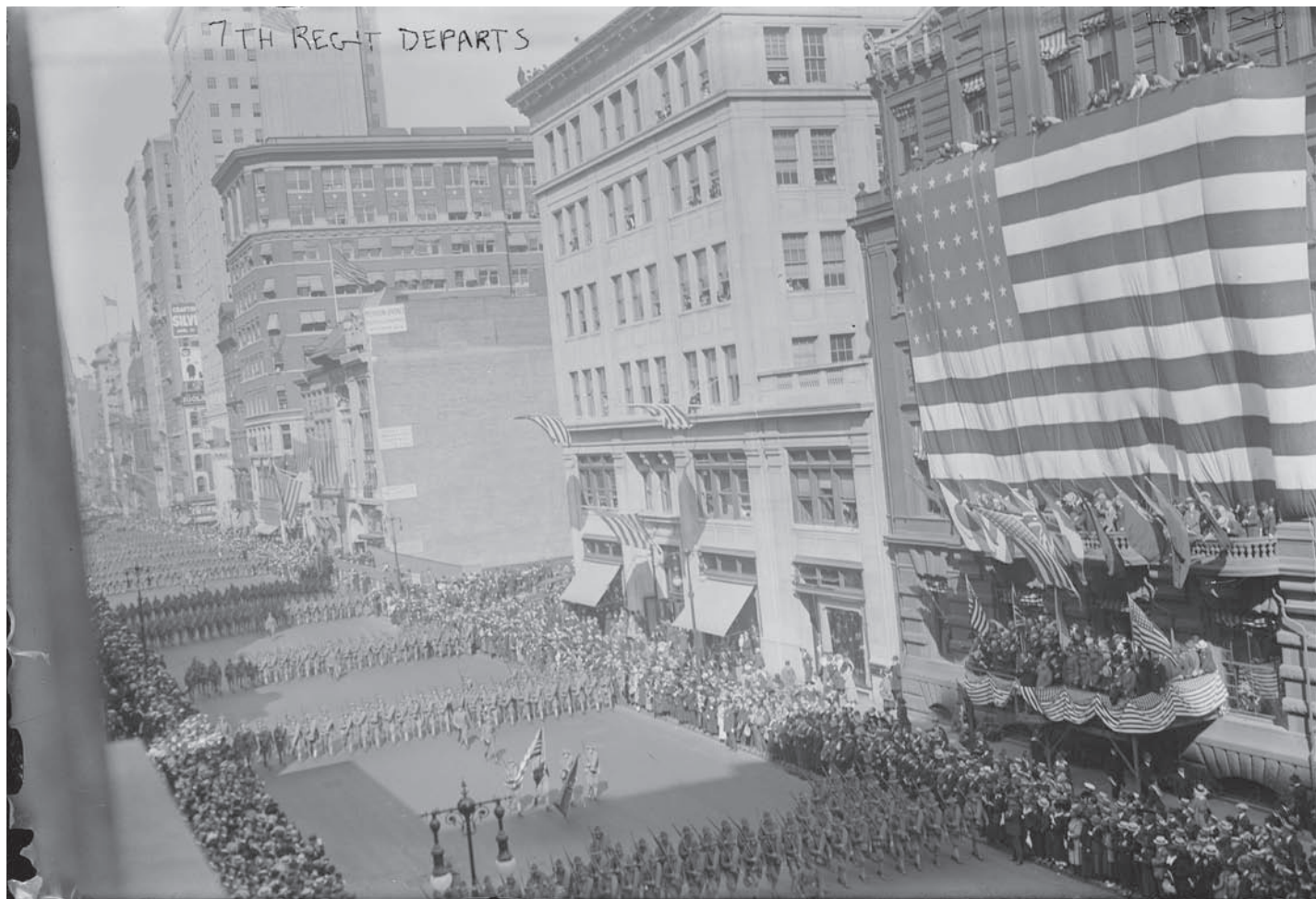
This Liberty Loan poster was one of several variations printed that could be customized for a locality—in this case, New York. New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections.

more men, money, and materiel in defense of the Union than any other state—and had correspondingly paid the highest cost in fathers, sons, and brothers lost, as well as in taxes paid and moneys donated. By the advent of the twentieth century, New York State remained unrivaled in the nation in regard to its population, industry, finance, and transportation networks. As the United States was drawn closer to being pulled into the war raging in Europe from 1914 to 1917, it was readily apparent to New York's civic, business, and political leaders that the Empire State would again be called upon to bear a tremendous burden in the conflict to come. As Governor Charles S. Whitman declared in his annual address to the legislature in January 1917, "no less than in 1776 and 1861, the Empire State [will be called to be] the sound and trustworthy keystone in the arch of national defense."<sup>2</sup>

Between April 2, 1917, and November 11, 1918, 518,864 New Yorkers entered military service. New

Yorkers comprised more than 10 percent of the entire American Expeditionary Force (AEF). Consequently, New York State endured more casualties during the conflict, with 13,956 New Yorkers paying the ultimate sacrifice on the battlefields of France.

During World War I, New York State provided some of the most storied units, including the 165th Infantry Regiment of the 42nd "Rainbow" Division. The former 69th New York had earned fame as the "Fighting Irish" during the Civil War and retained both its Irish character and reputation in the trenches of the Western Front. The African American 369th Infantry Regiment, the "Harlem Hellfighters" (formerly the 15th Regiment of the New York National Guard), became one of the most decorated regiments of the war while fighting for the French Army; and the infamous "Lost Battalion" was part of the 77th "Liberty" Division comprised largely of draftees from New York City. New York's National Guard Division—the 27th—spearheaded the Allied breakthrough of the



**New York's 7th Regiment departs for the war.**

This September 11, 1917 photograph features the 7th Regiment, New York National Guard departing New York City for training at Spartanburg, South Carolina. Once federalized, the regiment became the 107th Infantry Regiment. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

vaunted Hindenburg Line in the fall of 1918, but at tremendous cost. The heroism of New Yorkers during the war did not go unrecognized. New Yorkers earned eighteen of the 121 Medals of Honor awarded during the war, or thirteen percent of the total number of awards.

By the end of the war, there were more than 38,000 New York companies employing more than one million workers in wartime industry. Companies such as Remington Arms (Ilion), Eastman Kodak (Rochester), General Electric (Schenectady), and Alcoa (Massena), to name but a few, all contributed immensely to the production of weapons and equipment for the American and Allied war efforts. New York Harbor was central to America's role in France. Of the 2.1 million men in Europe during World War I, 1.65 million sailed from New York as did the bulk of the materiel needed to equip the AEF

New Yorkers played an equally important role on the home front. As the wealthiest state in the nation, New York contributed more in taxes to the war effort than any other state. New York City's banks supplied more than \$2.5 billion in loans to cash-strapped Allied governments during the war—enabling the city to surpass London as the world's credit capital. New Yorkers purchased approximately one-third of the Liberty Bonds sold during the war, and the state's citizens proved immensely generous in their charitable giving between 1914 and 1918.

While New York's contributions surpassed those of all other states, its citizens were hardly united in their opinions about the conflict. These disagreements raised doubts about the nation's ability to fight this war, and called into question the loyalty of many of its citizens. These divisions needed to be overcome if the nation hoped to unite its citizens behind the war

effort. To achieve this goal, New York's Progressive leaders—Theodore Roosevelt, Charles Whitman, John Purroy Mitchel, and others—sought to mobilize millions of people of disparate backgrounds, social classes, races, and of both genders, and unify them in pursuit of a common goal. Using every means and media at their disposal—posters, film, newspapers, theater, and more—these political leaders attempted to mold public opinion in favor of the war.

Much of the language used to sway American opinion was based in the republican tradition of duty and obligation. According to historian Christopher Capozzola, Americans in 1917 associated these concepts with their relationship to the government. These “obligations were not just rhetorical flourishes,” but rather were the customs and practices that enabled the nation's leaders to impel the nation to war.<sup>3</sup>

The central role occupied by New York State in terms of its industry, agriculture, and infrastructure,

as well as New York Harbor's position as the nation's most critical port, and New York City's position as the financial capital of the nation, made the Empire State a target for enemy activities. German agents and sympathizers planned and attempted numerous plots aimed to slow the supply of materiel to the Allied Armies in Europe. New York City remained a hotbed of German espionage efforts from 1914 until 1917.

In many cases, New York State became the laboratory where the nation's leaders sought to answer some of the most troubling questions arising out of the war: How could a diverse population of native-born whites, immigrants, African Americans, and men and women from dramatically different backgrounds and political leanings unify to fight a war an ocean away? How could this need for order, uniformity, and unity—which often required a suppression of dissent—be reconciled with the nation's democratic traditions and fundamental freedoms of speech and the press?<sup>4</sup> In



**Anti-war rally in Union Square.**

Prominent New York Socialist Party leader Cornelius Lehane speaks during an anti-war demonstration at Union Square in New York City on August 8, 1914. Socialists like Lehane argued that the “Capitalist War” in Europe pitted members of the working class—or proletariat—against one another. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

New York, nearly 40 percent of the population was foreign-born. Many had arrived from motherlands now engaged in the European War—on both sides. Many initially favored their nation of birth. Other groups opposed American involvement based on conditions in their homelands. Many Irish Americans, for instance, were against American support of the Allies as a result of the continued British occupation of Ireland. Many Eastern European Jews had fled to New York City as a result of anti-Semitism in Russia. They refused to side with Czar Nicholas II and the Russian government as a result of its anti-Jewish pogroms and other policies.<sup>5</sup> It was concern over this diversity that Woodrow Wilson cited in support of American neutrality in 1914, when he stated that the United States must remain neutral in the European war, else “our mixed population would wage war on each other.”<sup>6</sup> As overall American popular opinion began to shift against the Central Powers, the loyalty of immigrants from Germany and Austria-Hungary came under suspicion.<sup>7</sup> Former President Theodore Roosevelt famously declared that “there is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism.” Roosevelt and others feared that competing loyalties among immigrants would lead the nation to ruin.<sup>8</sup> Such fears lay at the foundation of the 100% American Movement, which had a significant following in New York during and after the war. In this vein, New York served as a proving ground in defining the relationship of these diverse immigrant communities with the government, with native-born New Yorkers, and their support (or perceived lack thereof) for the war effort.

Within the boundaries of the Empire State, advocates for the Preparedness Movement and others calling for American entry into the European War between 1914 and 1917 gave rise to the first citizens’ military training camp at Plattsburgh. Additional camps would quickly follow across the country. At the same time, many of the leaders of the antiwar movement resided in New York City. The socialist and anarchist movements had found their most significant U.S. foothold in New York and many of the leading leftist intellectuals called Manhattan home. These groups argued that the war was caused by capitalist greed at the expense of the slaughter of the working classes in the trenches of Europe.<sup>9</sup>

New York was also the center of the burgeoning “New Negro” movement, particularly in Harlem.

Leaders in the African American community, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, resided in the city. Influential black newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Age* and *The Crisis*, were published in New York, giving voice to the growing civil rights movement and the emerging Harlem Renaissance to follow in the 1920s. The state’s African American population was needed for the war effort, but New York’s leaders had to reconcile the need for black patriotism with the social and economic injustices experienced by the African American community.<sup>10</sup>

As the chapters will show, New Yorkers did rally to support the war effort by sending their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers to war. Thousands of women joined the effort as nurses and stenographers, but also as truck drivers and factory workers and volunteers for countless charitable organizations. New Yorkers struggled to answer many of the troubling questions raised by American entry into World War I. The results of these answers were decidedly mixed. New Yorkers demonstrated tremendous patriotism and unity, but often at the expense of freedom of speech and those who dissented. Immigrants and minorities fell under intense and largely unjust scrutiny and suspicion. The legacy of these results affected New York State and the nation far beyond the Armistice in November 1918.

### The Power of Propaganda

During World War I, governments systematically employed visual propaganda on an unprecedented scale to mobilize millions of citizens for the war effort, to sway popular opinion about the conflict, and to unify support for the war. In New York and elsewhere, Progressive leaders demonstrated a willingness to use the press, public relations, and commercial art for wartime government purposes. Posters were an incredibly powerful weapon during World War I. Their visually stunning illustrations immediately conveyed important messages to passersby. A message that would normally be conveyed in a few paragraphs of text could be made immediately understandable through the use of the proper illustration.



**"Enlist" (ca. 1916).**

**Artist:** Fred Spear; **Printer:** Sacketts and Wilhelms Corporation, New York; **Publisher:** Boston Public Safety Committee; **Technique:** Photochemical print: Rotogravure, color; **Dimensions:** 82 x 58 cm.

Few posters more readily illustrate the power that posters of the era played in shaping the American people's outlook on World War I. Allied and pro-Allied propaganda in the United States targeted American popular opinion following the sinking of the British passenger liner *Lusitania* by German U-boats. This poster, alluding to the civilian casualties aboard the *Lusitania*, depicts a woman cradling an infant as both sink beneath the ocean's surface. Such graphic depictions were intended to inspire hatred towards the atrocities committed by Germany. New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections.



**“The Hun—his Mark” (1917).**

*Artist:* James Allen St. John; *Printer:* Brett Lithograph Company, New York; *Publisher:* Treasury Department; *Technique:* Lithograph; *Dimensions:* 76 x 51 cm.

This poster was produced during the Second Liberty Loan drive from October 1 to 28, 1917. The bloody handprint is a clear and menacing allusion to the reported atrocities committed by the German Army and the danger a German victory would mean to the United States. Across the country, the war was now portrayed as a struggle between the democracies of the world and the “monster of autocracy.” German victory, it was argued, would result in “the strangling of individual liberty” and that the “age-long struggle of the submerged masses of the world toward light and liberty is not only to be checked but rendered fruitless . . . that there shall be no right but the right of selfishness and the power to enforce it.”<sup>1</sup> New York State Museum Collection, H-1976.53.4.

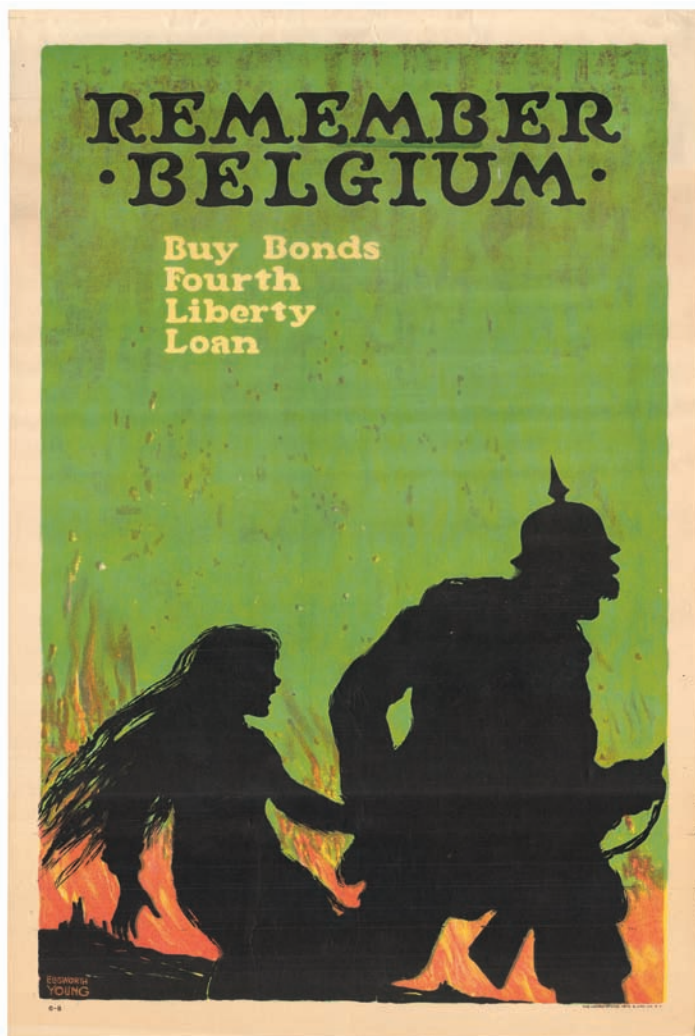
1. The Oneida County Home Defense Committee, “A Message on the War,” June 1917, James Sullivan, Working Files for a Publication on New York in World War I, 1917–1925, New York State Archives Series A3166.

**J. Allen St. John (1872–1957).**

James Allen St. John was born in Chicago and studied at the Chicago Art Institute and the American Academy of Art.<sup>1</sup> St. John moved to New York City to continue his studies at the Art Students League of New York in 1898. He was employed by the *New York Herald* until 1906, when he traveled to Paris to study at the Académie Julian. In 1912, St. John returned to Chicago, where he continued his artistic career. During the war, the forty-seven-year-old St. John was too old to serve in the Army. He was subsequently recruited to design propaganda posters for the Division of Pictorial Publicity (DPP).<sup>2</sup>

1. Darracott, Joseph, ed., *The First World War in Posters* (New York: Dover Publications, 1974), page XX.

2. “J. Allen St. John” Biography, Pulpartists.com (<http://www.pulpartists.com/StJohn.html>).



**"Remember Belgium" (1918).**

*Artist:* Ellsworth Young; *Printer:* United States Prtg. and Lith. Co.; *Publisher:* Fourth Liberty Loan; *Technique:* Lithograph; *Dimensions:* 51 x 76 cm.

The German violation of Belgian neutrality in 1914 and reports of atrocities committed against Belgian civilians sparked widespread condemnation in the United States. Belgium had been "ravaged as no country . . . since Attila's day. To Germany treaties were naught. International law, humanity and morality were naught."<sup>1</sup> With American entry into the war in 1917, "Remember Belgium" became a rallying cry for the American war effort. New York State Museum Collection, H-1972.7.2.

1. The Oneida County Home Defense Committee, "A Message on the War," June 1917, James Sullivan, Working Files for a Publication on New York in World War I, 1917–1925, New York State Archives Series A3166.



**"Must Children Die and Mothers Plead in Vain?"**

*Artist:* Walter H. Everett; *Printer:* Sackett and Wilhelms Corporation, New York, New York; *Publisher:* Treasury Department; *Technique:* Lithograph; *Dimensions:* 102 x 75 cm.

The illustration for this poster features a mother clutching her child and reaching out for aid. The struggle of civilians in Europe was a popular theme in many of the propaganda posters of the era. New York State Museum Collection, H-1973.94.1 CC.