

The Common Man in the Great War

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The “common” man who served in the Great War has not been studied nearly as thoroughly as the soldiers who fought in the Second World War. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate one American’s personal experiences while serving in the Great War in France. Based upon excerpts from three diaries that Corporal Charles Schaff kept, the paper will discuss the difficulties that soldiers experienced in everyday life while fighting in Europe. These memoirs reflect boredom, frustration, and anti-French sentiments felt by American soldiers, as well as a blend of admiration and resentment the French felt toward their American allies serving in France.

The Great War transformed much of the world, including America. As historian David Trask notes, it was during and after World War I that the nation encountered a set of national attitudes, reactions, and problems that would preoccupy the country for decades to come (1). Not many Americans favored U.S. intervention during the early phases of the war. The first impact of the war on the country was a recession that produced an unsettling effect on the economy. Nevertheless, due to a dislocation of international commerce and trade, perceptive American businessmen quickly benefited from the conflict. A national debate arose when it became obvious that the war was going to last an extended period of time and that it would challenge American interests. There were advocates of both “preparedness” and pacifism. Women and churches would become the first and the most vocal representatives of the antiwar faction (Trask 3-4). In 1915 the Germans sank the British ship the *RMS Lusitania*, and 128 Americans perished. Although this action caused angry protests against Germany in the United States, it did not result in a U.S. declaration of war (Gilbert 188).

In the beginning of 1917, the Germans decided to instigate unrestricted submarine assault on neutral trading across the Atlantic in order to impair America’s ability to ship goods to the Allies in Europe, since the U.S. was the most important neutral shipper (Trask 5). As Germany intensified the war at sea, the German Foreign Minister Dr. Alfred von Zimmermann, realizing that unrestricted submarine warfare could bring the U.S. into the war, devised a plan: to offer Mexico “generous financial support” and to let it “reconquer” Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona in return for its alliance with Germany. After Zimmermann’s telegraphed proposal was intercepted, deciphered in London, and sent to the U.S. government, it was published on March 1, 1917. Immediately public opinion shifted. A few weeks after the Zimmermann telegram was published, an American tanker, the *Healdton*, was sunk by a German submarine while in a specially designated Dutch “safety zone.” Twenty Americans died in the attack, leading President Wilson to call a meeting of Congress on April 2. America entered the war two days later.

Nobody could have predicted in late 1916 that the pacifist Wilson would enter the war. He had been condemning violations by the warring European states since the onset of the war. There had, however, been national interests that reinforced an antiwar approach. Wilson feared that the American melting-pot might suffer or even explode should nationalism arise as a consequence of U.S. involvement in the war. Many members of the large Irish and German populations in the U.S. despised the British, and Wilson worried that an alliance between Britain and America might damage American internal unity. The press supported the Allies from the beginning and focused more on covering German war crimes than those of the Allies. Furthermore, Americans were aware of the fact that unrestricted German submarine warfare could greatly damage trade with the Allies, a lucrative business that had quadrupled since 1914 (Ferro 113-14). When Congress voted in favor of entering the war, the country abandoned a policy of isolation that had lasted more than a century.

A month after America's declaration of war, General John J. Pershing, who had previously been the commander of the Mexican expedition, received a telegram from his father-in-law, a U.S. senator, asking whether Pershing spoke and wrote French. Before Pershing could even respond that he was nearly fluent in the language, he had been assigned to command the U.S. forces that would later be sent to France (Gilbert 319). It was obvious, however, taking into account that the American Army was so small at this time, that it would take at least one year, if not more, to train, recruit, and transport soldiers across the Atlantic and to be able to supply troops once they were situated in France (Gilbert 318).

The mobilization process in the United States was notable. President Wilson, who had been so opposed to war, used the Espionage Act of June 15, arresting more than five hundred persons, including certain pacifist leaders (Ferro 115). The "People's Council of America for Peace and Democracy" attempted to start another antiwar movement, but it was not well received by the general public and one of its leaders was lynched as a result. The dean of the University of Minnesota was quoted as saying, "War-time is no time to quibble about constitutional rights and guarantees." In addition, the Sedition Act, passed in 1916, was used to stifle dissent by allowing further arrests. Meanwhile, famous musicians and actors, such as Irving Berlin and Charlie Chaplin, were used to promote the war. The public showed its loyalty by boycotting German-American and Austrian-American businesses, and enthusiasm seemed to be spreading across the nation. These were the same citizens who had considered the European war to be old-fashioned barbarity, and now they themselves were ready to participate in just that. Americans claimed to be fighting for "justice and right" by "fulfilling their duty"; this war was to be fought for the sake of freedom and democracy (Ferro 115-16).

In Missouri the idea of a war against Germany was more problematic because of the important German presence in the state, both culturally and numerically. In 1901 there were nearly 400,000 persons of Germanic birth or descent residing in Missouri. A substantial part of the German population kept up their social and cultural ties with their homeland. Many German Missourians came from the intellectual class, and German was by far the most popular modern language offered in high schools (Crighton 13-14). When World War I broke out, great concern arose in Missouri, especially in cities with large populations of first-generation immigrants. In fact, many went back to Germany during the first week of the war to serve their mother country (Crighton 27). The socialist and German newspapers in the state had initially been largely opposed to U.S. intervention in the war (Crighton 165). However, after the Zimmermann plot was disclosed, most opposition in the Midwest disappeared. By the time the U.S. was involved, Missourians were just as willing to define the interests and rights of the United States and its allies as were other Americans (Crighton 179-87).

The first 243 Americans sent overseas landed in Britain on May 18, 1917. This group of soldiers was part of a medical staff for one of the base hospitals. Nine days later the first American combat troops reached the shores of France. In less than a week there were more than a thousand serving there. The first U.S. troops arrived in the nick of time. By late May the frequent French desertions on the Western Front turned into actual mutiny (Gilbert 333). In early June, under the Selective Draft Act, registration for military service began in the United States for men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty (Gilbert 336).

Charles Schaff was born on April 19, 1892, in St. Joseph, Missouri. He was the oldest of ten children born to first-generation immigrants from western Germany. The family spoke German in the home, and the children learned to read and write it as well. Taken out of school after fifth grade to work in support of the family, he went back to school at age seventeen to study at a business college night school. Seven years later, determined to practice law, he enrolled in the St. Joseph Law School and later earned his law degree and passed the Missouri bar exam. Upon joining the Army in 1917, Schaff volunteered to serve in Motor Truck Company #6, Missouri Supply Train. His company was sent to train at Camp Clark, Nevada, in mid-August.

The conditions at the camp were harsher than he expected. In his first diary entry as a soldier, he wrote, "Mental and physical, internal and external disturbances, made us dejected, down-

hearted, listless and miserable in mind and body.” He described the days at camp as being the longest days of his life, with endless drills and vaccinations and countless medical examinations. During their pastime, the companies would often play baseball against each other. Ten days after arriving at Camp Clark, Schaff’s company was transferred to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for further training; they would remain there until their departure overseas. On New Year’s Eve in 1917, five months before being sent to France, Schaff recorded the following in his diary:

In this year I have plunged from the heights of satisfaction to the rocks of disgust and indifference in life. The country has been plunged from a peaceloving nation, into a mighty war camp. Mars rules supreme. The war eagle has driven the peace dove from its perch. It is my earnest prayer that the year 1918 will see this terrible tragedy brought to a close. What does the year 1918 presage, for us? For me? Wonder if I shall be here to record the closing of 1918?

Between 1917 and 1918 a large army was created from what had been only a small professionalized force. For many young men, the war represented an opportunity for an adventure with the ultimate goal of going “over there.” Many left for Europe with inadequate training. The idea of preserving democracy was emphasized in the military training camps, but the immediate purpose, of course, was war. Approximately two million Americans were sent to France, and many of these would eventually find themselves fighting in the trenches (Coffman 84).

For the soldiers, being sent overseas presented a busy time of preparation for the long journey. They had to pack necessary equipment, welcome their replacements who would take their spots in the training camps, and clean the barracks and tent areas they had used while preparing for war. There were a few who were not enthusiastic about going to Europe, but the vast majority were ready to join the fighting across the Atlantic. Of the more than 1,600,000 men who were called to serve abroad, only approximately 5,000 deserted. Very few committed suicide or injured themselves to avoid being sent to war. The Navy protected most of the ships carrying U.S. troops across the ocean. The quality of the voyage itself depended on the type of ship, the weather, and the soldier’s rank. The trip usually took twelve days. Activities on board consisted of military drills, cleaning the quarters, reading, playing cards, and various other ways of keeping busy. Seasickness often made some unable to eat for days at a time. The living quarters were very tight, and soldiers often referred to themselves as “sardines in dungeons” (Coffman 228-31). Charles Schaff described his journey overseas:

May 27, 1918

Left the dock this morning early. Don’t think I will be overenthusiastic about ocean travel under these conditions. Jammed to death in a regular dungeon. Some of the boys have long faces.

May 28, 1918

The sea is smooth so far. Some of the boys are getting seasick. The whole ship seems permeated with the scent of Hindoo culinary art. The smell is enough for me.

May 30, 1918

Today is memorial day and what a fine way to spend it for me sick as the proverbial dog. Can’t be made comfortable in my hammock. Feel miserable.

Schaff’s division reached the shores of France after eleven days of ocean travel:

June 7, 1918

At last we sighted land this A.M. The land is _____ the scene of many turbulent times, present and past. Arrived in the dock tonight and we were surely a tickled bunch. The crew was glad to see us leave. “A bloody bunch.”

Approximately one year before Schaff arrived in France, the first large group of U.S. troops had been sent to France. These 14,000 men disembarked at St. Nazaire and awaited the next

large shipment of troops, which would arrive three months later. These first troops were inadequately prepared in many ways. Some artillerymen arrived without guns and furthermore had no idea how to operate them once they were provided. General Pershing was said to be “shocked by the poor quality of his men.” Luckily, Pershing was an outstanding organizer, and he quickly established training schools for his men to make them ready to serve on the front within a year. To the utter frustration of the French, the Americans had arrived but were not participating right away. “Where are the Americans?” was frequently asked as the French found themselves desperate for allied assistance (Gilbert 341-42). By the beginning of July 1918, more than a million American troops and military personnel had been sent to France and 20,000 tons of supplies were arriving in France daily (Gilbert 437).

Schaff’s diary suggests the routine of his first month in France:

June 23, 1918

We roused out of pleasant dreams at 3:30 A.M., ate mess and were off on our first assignment. We now live on our truck and never leave it. Allright in fine weather, but in Winter? Didn’t get back until 11 P.M. Hauled troops.

July 1, 1918

Hauled rock all day. Had lots of fun trying to converse with some girls washing in the creek. All had their “submarine” chasers on. We entertained the natives with baseball, boxing, singing and English to their delight.

While in training, American soldiers had to adjust to various French customs and conditions. “Sunny France” was not so sunny after all; almost constant rain or dampness turned the term into a joke and made supply roads slick and hard to navigate (Coffman 132). Schaff described the feeling in mid-October 1918: “*Sunny France* is surely a misnomer. My feet have been soaking wet for a week.” Another problem worth noting was the constant battle to avoid being infected by lice: “Killed some cooties with a bath and some gasoline.” Living quarters were also more primitive than most Americans might have been accustomed to. Their billets usually consisted of old stables or barns. Most commonly, the soldiers ate out of their mess-kits on the streets and would entertain themselves in their leisure time by visiting other billets, reading out-of-date newspapers, and playing cards or ball. Baseball was the most common pastime for those interested in sports (Coffman 132). Playing ball in times of war sometimes proved a bit more dangerous than one might expect:

October 20, 1918

Mac and I were playing catch in the pasture when I heard Big Bertha “go off.” I said to Mac “here comes one of ‘em” and whiz-z-boom she lit in the field about 150 yards from us. Mac says “here’s the ball, I’m goin’.”

Prohibition was the rule for men in service in the United States; however, relaxation of the regulation for men serving in France led to occasional drunkenness. After the first payday in the 26th Infantry, the regiment commander allowed for celebration among his men by suspending training for two days to allow for drinking and sobering up (Coffman 132). Schaff made this brief entry about a holiday binge:

December 26, 1918

Al, Deacon, Orie and George celebrated a belated X-mas with 3 qts. of rum. It was wild crowd to ride with.

Not surprisingly, Americans and Frenchmen did not always get along entirely. Most of the soldiers had provincial backgrounds, as did the French citizens they came in contact with.

Needless to say, both sides had never been exposed to such a different culture. The Americans were welcomed as reinforcements, but for the vast majority of villages, they seemed to be just another occupying power. American standards for sanitation collided with French customs and traditions. The French found the Americans disrespectful in their attitudes toward private property. They also envied the abundance of American possessions that were not available in occupied France. The French found Americans to be thrifty, and Americans in return felt as if they were constantly being overcharged by the French (Coffman 134). For example, in his diary Schaff complains, "Bought a Harper's for 3,50 today. U.S. price 35 cents. I asked them whether they could 'compre' [sic] robbery. They said, No!"

The language barrier was another difficulty soldiers had to learn to overcome. It was especially difficult to find an interpreter one could trust to translate the entire message without leaving out parts of it. This is where children came in handy. It is believed that many of them were intrigued by soldiers in uniform and that they were the primary teachers of French to American soldiers (Coffman 134). Schaff, however, managed quite well in communicating, as his diary notes:

October 30, 1918

Done local work today. Hauled clothes, yes we have plenty of warm clothes. Had a great time with my French pals today, calling into play English, French, German, at one time even Latin, sometimes successively, sometimes simultaneously though successfully.

Despite the tensions, there was mutual admiration, and the French did express their gratitude for American assistance, as the diaries record: "Talked to six Poilus, who said we were scrappers, and that the big show would be over now if we hadn't intervened." On October 12, 1918, Schaff wrote again, "Looks like another big move for the 35th. Frenchmen say 'La guerre finir toute suite.' 'Americaine bons soldat [sic].'" Even with the chaos and fear produced by the war, soldiers still managed to take their minds off the battlefields occasionally: "Took another run today. Had a chat with a 'peach' who told me 'It's fine here now but wait until winter and it's thirty below zero.' She made me shiver when she said it."

Another problem faced in Europe during the war was an influenza epidemic that would claim more American lives than warfare itself. It started in India and England and quickly spread to the Front as well (Gilbert 437). More than one-fourth of the American army caught the "Spanish Flu" during the war (Coffman 81). The disease hit especially hard in Germany, where the city of Berlin recorded a death toll of 1,700 people on a single day in October 1918. This worldwide calamity claimed in India alone more than six million people (Stokesbury 278). Schaff recorded on November 6, 1918: "Have been a trifle 'under the weather' the last few days. The Spanish Flu is trying to get me I suspect." Luckily for Schaff, he managed to fully recover from the illness and continue serving in the Army.

Starting June 1918, Americans began to make small military advances, which instantaneously created a boost to French morale in both the military and the civilian sectors (Gilbert 429). No Man's Land varied between fifty and five hundred yards between the American and German lines on the Front. At night both sides patrolled their area to detect any possible enemy activity and protect their space (Coffman 146). The fighting on the Western Front would continue to the very end of the war, interspersed with rare unofficial cease-fires decided by the soldiers in the trenches. By the end of the war, both the Allies and the Central Powers in the trenches found themselves exhausted and ready to end the conflict and return home. It would, however, take a while before their leaders would finally reach a peace agreement.

The fiercest fighting Schaff described in his diaries occurred in mid and late September of 1918. That was also the time of the successful St. Mihiel Offensive led by General Pershing, which surprised the Germans on September 12 and left many of them ready to surrender (Coffman 278-79). Schaff wrote:

September 13, 1918

It seems to rain incessantly here. Hear that our 1st Army advanced 8 K and captured 8000 Germans in its first attempt as an individual unit.

September 14, 1918

In at midnight, went to bed and was immediately awakened by bursting bombs nearby, and anti aircraft fire overhead.

September 25, 1918

Heard a terrific barrage this morning early, wonder if the big push has begun in which "Pershing's Pets" will play a stellar role. We are ready for the acid test, can we do it? Time will tell.

September 26, 1918

Last night at 12 o'clock the big bombardment began and the sky was lighted by flashes and the earth shook under the heavy concussions of the grand array of cannon of all calibre. Went to near Augeville where six inch shells were tearing up the earth. At noon today large numbers of prisoners were brought in.

September 27, 1918

The bombardment continues with unabated fury today. Went to Aubreville, a mere heap of ruins. Our doughboys are still gaining according to the reports. But have no definite information as yet.

September 28, 1918

V__es__ a town taken in the drive. Almost impassible road—blown up by mines. Indescribable scenes. Seen evidence of furious fighting. Dead Germans and Americans along the road. Brought a load of wounded back to Field Hospital.

September 29, 1918

Got stuck in the mud by the Hospital and stayed there all night. Didn't sleep a wink. Finally pulled out at noon, starved and sleepy. Our bunch on the truck got four German helmets. Also seen Gen. Pershing at V____s. The 35th are fighting fools. Hear wonderful stories of bravery and nerve.

The Germans lost more than 17,000 men in the St. Mihiel Offensive alone. This significantly boosted American morale and intensified the fighting spirit of the soldiers although it was by no means the biggest battle seen on the Front (Coffman 280-83).

During most of October, peace rumors circulated among the soldiers, but many found themselves distrustful, including Schaff: "Lots of peace stories in the air. I think they are all fabrications tho." On October 1, 1918, Schaff heard for the first time that Americans were being relieved from the trenches. Two days later he learned that the Bulgarians had capitulated. The Turks gave up about a month later, followed by the abdication of the German Kaiser on November 10, 1918. The Central Powers realized they had no option but to surrender only nineteen months after the United States had intervened in the Great War. before U.S. involvement, Europeans had fought for thirty-one months. Since the European powers were completely exhausted from fighting and the U.S. was still capable of military dominance, President Wilson found himself in a good position to shape the peace treaty that would follow in Versailles the next year (Trask 11-12).

After the Armistice on November 11, 1918, American soldiers had to begin considering the demobilization process of 4,800,000 soldiers, sailors, and Marines. They also had to terminate various business contracts and get rid of surplus camps, bases, and war matériel. This effort would last longer than America's actual participation in the war itself. The last American troops did not leave Germany until 1923. It was also a difficult task to keep up the morale of soldiers unable to return home immediately. Pershing tried to ease Americans' impatience by instituting sports contests and educational opportunities for the soldiers. One and a half million took this opportunity and some even enrolled at British and French universities while eagerly awaiting

their return home (Coffman 357-59). Schaff would also have to wait until the spring of 1919 before being sent back to the United States. In the meantime, he went on excursions with fellow soldiers from his truck company, visiting and examining remnants of the trenches and French cities:

October 25, 1918

Went to a suburb of Verdun tonight where we laid ourselves to sleep amid the capers of the god Mars. The town was drenched with gas and high explosive shells all day but we were not disturbed.

October 28, 1918

Went to V_____ itself, a characteristic example of the wrath of the war god. Apparently, of what was once a happy city, is now a demolished mass of habitations, a conglomerate heap of masonry, forsaken and deserted, except for the horizon blue, is all that remain.

November 13, 1918

Did local hauling today. Visited the German trenches and read a lot of German magazines etc. Some of their dugouts are ingeniously built, for comfort and durability and low visibility. Found an edition of the 'München Illustrierte Zeitung' containing a relief map of the Argonne sector.

November 14, 1918

The demolition, desolation and tyranny of war is very strongly in evidence. See many refugees returning to their homes apparently glad, but—think of the demolished homes that greet them.

December 6, 1918

Are we going home?

January 31, 1919

I want'a go home!

Schaff decided to take advantage of Pershing's program by applying to a university in England. His application was subject to the discretion of the Division Headquarters, which for unknown reasons never delivered his application. April 7, 1919, was his last day as a chauffeur in the American Army. The remaining days of his stay in France were characterized by great frustration:

April 10, 1919

Nearly froze to death last night with three blankets on a sack of cork shavings. These S.O.S. yokels can surely put on the red tape. If you step off the sidewalk, spit in the latrine, fail to salute, fail to put up a shelterhalf between bunkies and sleep head to fit with them, if you "crab" about the grub, if you slap another with your mess-kit or if you throw down a cigarette butt, you get delayed in sailing home from a month to six months. Evidently a last fling at us to show us fellows that the tyrant still has us under his thumb.

During the late spring and early summer of 1919, more than 300,000 Americans sailed home each month (Coffman 359). Corporal Charles Schaff was among them. His division was sent home on April 16 from the port city St. Nazaire. After another miserable voyage, the ship reached the shores of North America on April 27:

April 27, 1919

As the mainland came into view the air echoed with "hurrahs" and shouts. Today 11 months ago we left N.Y. for "over there." Indescribable sensation, finely dressed women, fruit stands, ice cream parlor and more luxurious cars than we've seen in all of France. Bought 25 cents worth of ice cream, the best stuff I've ever tasted in all my life!

April 28, 1919

But it all seems peculiar, something unreal, like a dream.

Finally, after being gone for nearly one full year, Charles Schaff returned to St. Joseph, Missouri, where his arrival was eagerly anticipated by near and dear ones and where he would begin to rebuild his future.

Although America was actively involved in the Great War for a relatively short time, the country was successful in mobilizing itself and making a difference in the outcome of the war. It is believed that without U.S. intervention, the Allies could not have won the war on their own. One can merely speculate on that in retrospect. Millions of Americans, including Charles Schaff, fought in the war with the idea that this was the war that would put an end to all wars. They fought for noble reasons, acting as the protectors of democracy and peace. It is not hard to see that World War I veterans and survivors would become disillusioned after seeing the consequences of the Treaty of Versailles. Subsequent events made many of them question whether their service had been worth it. Charles Schaff would lead a long life, dying in 1983 at the age of 90. Like many war veterans, he never particularly enjoyed discussing the war; this leaves one with questions about whether he experienced things that he never wrote about in his diaries. The diaries do, however, describe the general feelings of American soldiers while serving in France and accurately reflect the events that took place in the war, enabling the reader to sense what it was like for the young men fighting in a war that would shape the rest of the 20th century.

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