

Section 2 — A War of Firsts for the United States



This famous World War I recruiting poster helped entice tens of thousands of young American men to register for the draft in 1917. Once they did, it took weeks of training to prepare them for combat. MPI/Getty Images

For the United States, World War I was a war of firsts. **To start, it was the first time the government had agreed to commit large numbers of American soldiers to a distant war across the sea.** In fact, when Congress first declared war, many Americans thought the nation would provide money, food, and equipment to the war effort—but not troops. Learning that military officials planned to expand the army, Virginia Senator Thomas Martin cried out in surprise, "Good Lord! You're not going to send soldiers over there, are you?" That was indeed Wilson's plan. Still, with Germany preparing for a final assault, many Americans wondered whether the United States could set up military camps, train large numbers of troops, and transport these soldiers to Europe quickly enough to make a difference.

The Nation's First Selective Service System

Prior to American entry into the war, the United States had a volunteer army of about 200,000 soldiers. These forces received low pay and lacked equipment. Few soldiers had ever seen combat. To enter the war, the military would need tens of thousands more soldiers—and quickly. In May 1917, Congress passed the **Selective Service Act [Selective Service Act: a law passed by Congress in 1917 to create a national draft]**, which created a national draft. The act required all men ages 21 to 30 to register for military service at local polling stations. **This was the first time the U.S. government had established a draft before entering a war.** To encourage Americans to comply with the draft, the government launched a major propaganda campaign. Secretary of War Newton Baker hoped tens of thousands would register on the assigned day. He urged mayors, governors, and other local leaders to make the day a "festival and [a] patriotic occasion." These efforts paid off. Nearly 10 million young men registered. Across the nation, many towns held parades and celebrations honoring their draftees.

The First Americans Reach French Soil

American troops first landed in France in June 1917. Their official name was the **American Expeditionary Force (AEF)**, but they were nicknamed "the doughboys." The AEF fought under the command of General John J. Pershing, and most were **infantry [infantry: soldiers who fight on foot]**—soldiers who fight on foot. **Although few in number, the American infantry bolstered the Allies' morale.**



World War I began on two main battlefronts. The western front stretched across Belgium and northern France. The eastern front spread across much of present-day Poland. Russia's withdrawal from the war in early 1918 closed down the eastern front.

By the time the Americans reached France, the war was going badly for the Allies. Their armies had suffered several major defeats and lost many men. Even victories were deadly. The battle at Passchendaele in November 1917 cost the Allies 300,000 soldiers. For all that bloodshed, the Allied forces had regained control of barely 5 miles of German-held territory.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 added to the Allies' woes. Until then, Russian troops had kept the Central powers busy with fighting on the eastern front. **As soon as Russia's new revolutionary leaders took control of the government, they began making plans to withdraw Russia from the war.**

To counter the increase in German troops on the western front, the Allies asked General Pershing to assign American soldiers to Allied units to replace men killed or wounded in action. With Wilson's backing, Pershing resisted this request, insisting that most of his soldiers remain in the AEF. Pershing had two main reasons for doing so. First, he disagreed with Allied military strategy. He did not think the Allies could end the stalemate by fighting a defensive war from the trenches. Instead, he advocated tactics that were more forceful and offensive. Second, both Wilson and Pershing felt that if the AEF did well as a separate army, the United States could demand a greater role in the peacemaking process after the war. Pershing got his way. By war's end, some 2 million Americans had served overseas as part of the AEF.

The First African American Officer Training Camp



During the course of the war, nearly 400,000 African Americans joined the armed forces. The military strictly segregated black and white troops in training camps and overseas. At first, it did not allow black soldiers to become officers. However, people across the country held mass meetings to push for officer training for African Americans. In 1917, the military set up a separate camp to train black soldiers as officers. Later that year, the camp graduated its first class, including 106 captains, 329 first lieutenants, and 204 second lieutenants.

Most black soldiers served under white officers in labor or supply units in France or the United States. The all-black 369th Regiment [369th Regiment: in World War I, an African American regiment of the U.S. Army] had a different experience. As an exception to Pershing's rule about American soldiers not fighting in Allied units, the 369th operated under French command. They took part in active combat, for which they earned high praise. The soldiers of the 369th fought so fiercely, Germans called them the "Hell Fighters." After the war, France awarded the 369th the country's highest military honors.