

# Protesting the First World War

by Colby Smart

Evocative primary source documents are especially important to our discussions of World War I. While any analysis of the war “to make the world safe for democracy” demonstrates the downward spiral into militaristic violence that ushered in a century of unparalleled destruction, most traditional discussions are devoid of anti-war voices and actions. Yet without this perspective, students leave the subject of World War I thinking that the vast majority of Americans willingly fought in the war and/or unquestioningly supported the war effort. As historians, we know that such was not the case.

In Chapter 14, students are exposed to first-hand accounts of how Americans opposed the war and the trend toward militarism. These voices not only illustrate the widespread nature of the antiwar movement, they also highlight the federal government’s calculated reaction to the movement and the way in which the war influenced art and literature among the generation who survived the war. Our students will learn of the dynamic nature that comprised the antiwar appeal to the imperialistic foundation of the war, and they will come away with an understanding of how the views of these antiwar activists were, in many cases, systematically suppressed. Finally, these documents of resistance better equip our students with the tools they will need to become, critical, responsive and thorough practitioners of historical thought.

## Document Based Questions

### HELEN KELLER

1. Explain what Keller meant when she said that “the future of America rests on the backs of 80,000,000 working men and women and their children.”
2. Cite Keller’s explanation of the motive Congress had in preparing for war.

3. Instead of preparing for war, Keller states, “the kind of preparedness the workers want is reorganization and reconstruction of their whole life, such as has never been attempted by statesmen or governments.” Explain what Keller meant.

### **JOHN REED**

1. In what ways were wealthy industrialists placing pressure on working Americans to conform and enlist?
2. “I know what war means. I have been with the armies of all the belligerents except one, and I have seen men die, and go mad, and lie in hospitals suffering hell.” Compare and contrast this quote from Reed with the dominant view of the “nobility” of war.
3. What hypocrisies does John Reed point out concerning the ways atrocities are viewed by the United States government? Give two examples.

### **“WHY THE IWW IS NOT PATRIOTIC TO THE UNITED STATES”**

1. Why is the IWW not patriotic to the United States? Do you believe this excerpt illustrates Howard Zinn’s statement that the IWW was opposed to the “class character of the war”? How and why?
2. Using details from the reading in Chapters 14, support or refute the statement of the IWW that “[t]his war is a business man’s war”?

### **EMMA GOLDMAN**

1. What point about political violence was Emma Goldman trying to make in her analogy of a physician and his medicine?
2. In what ways does Goldman believe that the violent tactics of the establishment encouraged a backlash of political violence?
3. How does Goldman present the ways in which the antiwar movement posed a threat to established government and economic interests in the world?

### **EUGENE DEBS**

1. Why did Eugene Debs admit to being a “disloyalist”? What did he mean by this admission?
2. Which segment of American society do you think would be most receptive to the ideas expressed in these two speeches? Explain.
3. In his “Statement to the Court,” Debs makes the case that Socialism must replace the existing social order of capitalism. What are the main reasons Debs outlines to make his case? In contrast, what argument could be made against Debs’ Socialist views?

### **RANDOLPH BOURNE**

1. Assess the validity of this statement: In time of war “[t]he citizen throws off his contempt and indifference to Government, identifies himself with its purposes, revives all his military memories and symbols, and the State once more walks, an august presence, through the imaginations of men.”
2. Does Randolph Bourne place blame on citizens for conforming to and accepting the state as a king or savior in times of war? Why, or why not? What evidence from the document lends support to your argument?
3. Bourne states that “agreements which are to affect the lives of whole peoples must be made between peoples and not by Governments, or at least by their representatives.” What is Bourne alluding to in this statement?

### **E. E. CUMMINGS**

1. From your perspective, is it important for societies to allow people, who disagree with war and violence, to make a conscious choice to avoid it without consequence? Why, or why not?
2. What support for becoming a conscientious objector do you find in this poem?

### **JOHN DOS PASSOS**

1. John Dos Passos continues to repeat the line, “how can I get back to my

outfit,” throughout the first part of the document. Why? Why does he stop making this statement toward the end?

2. Why is the main character named John Doe in this story?
3. What opinions does Dos Passos express about the tragedy of war? What is he trying to say at the end of the passage about the pomp and circumstance surrounding a soldier’s death?

### DALTON TRUMBO

1. Why does the main character insist on being seen by so many people? Is it to teach people about the tragedies of war, or is it to fill them with shame for letting something like this happen to a fellow human being?
2. Why, in your opinion, was this “brain” left alive? For what purposes was it taken and shown to people?
3. In *Johnny Got His Gun*, Dalton Trumbo is making a serious condemnation. Who and/or what is he condemning?

### Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 14, “Protesting the First World War”

1. After reading Chapter 14 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are five possible main points:
2. The antiwar movement was in part a manifestation of a rift that existed in American society between organized labor and industrialists.
3. The voices of protest in the antiwar movement cut across racial, ethnic, and gender boundaries.
4. World War I influenced art and literature both during the war and after the end of hostilities.
5. Official United States policy suppressed dissent during the war, suggesting that to be a patriot, one must always support the government’s policies.
6. Individual liberties are often restricted during times of war.

### Main Point in *Voices*, Chapter 14, “Protesting the First World War” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 14, “War Is the Health of the State”

7. If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapter 14 in both books.” Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.
8. World War I was in large part a war for imperialistic gain.
9. The war effort was not universally endorsed.
10. Civil liberties were limited during the war in order to suppress antiwar activism.
11. Working people of both the Allied and Central Powers bore the true cost of war with their lives.
12. At the end of the war, a generation of people ushered in new forms of art and literature that reflected the terrible toll the war placed on humanity.

### General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 14, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation and simulation tools.

1. What similarities existed in the messages about class conflict in the documents by Helen Keller, John Reed, and Eugene Debs?
2. How do the various voices in this chapter illustrate the point that fear was used to promote consensus for war? What role did fear play in attempts to build support for other twentieth-century wars? Do you think similar efforts to use fear were apparent in the effort to create support in 2003 for the invasion of Iraq? Explain.
3. How do the voices in this chapter demonstrate that young men from working-class families on both sides of the conflict actually fought the war? Do you think World War I was yet another example of “the rich man’s war and the poor man’s fight”?

4. These voices provide many examples of how the antiwar movement was suppressed. Which examples do you feel were most convincingly expressive?
5. Do you think the Espionage and Sedition Acts were unconstitutional? Explain. Was this the first time in United States history that such laws were passed? Was it the last time?
6. From your own understanding of United States history, do you think it is possible for the world to live, as Eugene Debs said, in “the harmonious cooperation of every nation with every other nation on earth”? Do you think it is more or less possible in the twenty-first century than it was in the twentieth century?
7. In what ways can a student of history better understand the nature of conflict by reading a wide variety of sources about a particular event?
8. Do you think that there is any “pomp and circumstance” that is appropriate or inappropriate when dealing with the death of a soldier? Explain.
9. Many historians agree that World War I was fought for imperialistic reasons. What documents best illustrate this point?
10. *Johnny Got His Gun* eventually became one of the banned books of the McCarthy era—and it is still banned in many school districts across the nation. Why do you think this book was, and still is in many areas, banned? Do you think it is controversial? How and why?
11. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the five themes listed in “Main Points in *Voices*”?
12. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful? How and why?

### General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 14 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

13. Randolph Bourne wrote that “war is the health of the State.” Why do you

think Howard Zinn choose this quote as the title for Chapter 14 in *A People's History*.

14. In what ways was organized labor suppressed during World War I?
15. How was class consciousness and class conflict used by antiwar advocates to illustrate the war's "true aims"?
16. What similarities do you detect between the antiwar movement during World War I and the antiwar movement prior and during the 2003 United States invasion of Iraq? Explain.
17. In what ways did the United States government sway public opinion to support the war effort? From your own perspective, was it appropriate for the government to employ such methods to build a consensus?
18. Upon passage of the Espionage and Sedition Acts, many people felt that their civil liberties were under attack as the government sought to stifle dissent. Do you think these measures were an appropriate domestic policy during a time of war? Explain.
19. What is civil disobedience? What role did it play in the antiwar movement? Do you think Emma Goldman, John Reed, and/or Eugene Debs would have supported civil disobedience? Explain.
20. How would you define our First Amendment right to freedom of speech? Do you think the Sedition Act violated that freedom? Explain. If so, how and why was it able to become law?
21. What was the Espionage Act of 1917? Do you think it was constitutional? What was the Sedition Act of 1918? Was it constitutional?
22. When Eugene Debs was in prison serving his term for violating the Espionage Act of 1917, he ran for president during the 1918 presidential election. While he was in prison, he won almost one million votes. How was that possible? What does this tell you about American society in 1918?
23. Is the right to protest protected in the United States Constitution? Explain.
24. What other voices might have been added to Chapter 14 in *Voices* that might have provided a more complete understanding of Chapter 14 in *A People's History*?

## Evaluation Tools

### SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. Learn more about the historical uses and abuses of legislation related to free speech during times of war. Be sure to focus on historical examples of curbing civil liberties, beginning with the passage of the first Sedition Act in the 1790s and ending with the passage of the 2001 PATRIOT Act.
2. Conduct biographical research on one of the people whom you met in this/these chapter(s). Be sure to read more primary documents to support your research—especially speeches, letters, articles, and so forth. What was their background? What led them to join the antiwar movement? What arguments and actions they use to support their cause? What were the consequences of their actions? Do you find their antiwar arguments convincing? How and why?
3. Watch the movie *Johnny Got His Gun*. What do you think Trumbo wanted his audience to learn from the movie? What did you take from the movie? Do you think it is still controversial in the twenty-first century? How and why? Learn more about Dalton Trumbo and what led him to become one of the so-called Hollywood Ten.
4. In January 2003, officials at the University of California at Berkeley refused to allow a fund-raising appeal for the Emma Goldman Papers, which are housed on its campus. The appeal contained a quote from Goldman about the suppression of free speech and her opposition to war. The university deemed the topics too political as the United States prepared for a possible military action against Iraq. Find out more about this controversy. Do you think the university officials acted appropriately? Why, or why not? How was the problem resolved? Can you think of any other incidents since the military invasion of Iraq in which similar free-speech issues have arisen? Explain.
5. More than two thousand people were prosecuted under both the Espionage Act and the Seditions Act, and thousands of others were intimidated into



silence. Learn as much as possible about both acts. Was there congressional and/or public opposition to the legislation? How and why was the federal government able to pass such legislation?

6. The Selective Service Act of 1917 allowed the United States government to raise an army after entering into World War I. Unlike previous draft laws, the new act placed conscientious objectors (COs) under military authority *before* they obtained religious exemptions, thus making them subject to military justice. Who were COs? What was their historical role in exemption from military service? How were they treated during World War I?
7. In 1919, the Supreme Court heard the case of *Schenck v. U.S.* in which the defendant challenged the constitutionality of the Espionage Act. Learn more about the case and the Supreme Court's decision. How has this case continued to influence the question of free speech during times of war?
8. In 1919, the Supreme Court heard the case of *Abrams v. U.S.* in which the constitutionality of the Sedition Act was challenged. Learn more about the case and the Supreme Court's decision. How has this case continued to influence the question of free speech during times of war?
9. Read W. E. B. Du Bois's article, "The African Roots of War," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in May 1915. What were his primary points? Do you agree with his beliefs about capitalism, democracy, imperialism, international rivalry? Explain. What do you think Du Bois might have added to the article if he had attempted to rewrite it in 1920?
10. Learn more about the American Protective League. What were its primary purposes and accomplishments? How was it supported by the federal government? What impact did it have on the public?

## SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Using copies of the Bill of Rights, the Sedition and Espionage Acts, and the speeches by Eugene Debs, discuss in an essay whether you believe that Debs' opposition to the war justified his arrest and imprisonment.
2. Was the antiwar movement during World War I effective in its opposition to United States policy? What were its strongest and most credible arguments? Which were the least credible? Explain with citations from *Voices*.

3. What overall themes were present in the antiwar movement that parallel themes from earlier periods in United States history?
4. The measures which the United States government employed to build consensus among the public for the war were extensive and in many cases intrusive. From your understanding of the time, how important do you think it was for the United States to use these measures?
5. Define patriotism. In your view, were Helen Keller and John Reed more or less patriotic than United States soldiers who fought in the military during the war? Explain.
6. What voices of resistance in Chapter 14 in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling?
7. Imagine you are a worker in a West Virginia coal mine in 1918. You have just been drafted. Eugene Debs has just given a speech near your hometown. Is it your patriotic duty to go and fight? Why, or why not?
8. Howard Zinn writes that in the pre-World War I years, "there was worry about the health of the state" (*People's History*, p. 359). What were the worries? What do you think the federal government had to worry about? Did any of these worries lead us into war? How did they influence the course and outcomes of the war?

### **SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES**

1. Hold a town-hall meeting in the classroom in which students become characters in the documents. Invite school faculty, students, and parents to this meeting to question the characters about their antiwar positions.
2. Have students work in small groups to create Venn diagrams that compare and contrast themes of the World War I antiwar movement and the antiwar protests sparked by the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003.
3. Write a letter to Eugene Debs in prison. In this letter you should outline your opinions on his antiwar stance. In addition, be sure to discuss your thoughts on the Espionage and Sedition Acts.
4. Create a movie poster for *Johnny Got His Gun*. Posters should not have any

text with the exception of the title. Students should focus on the power of imagery and the techniques propagandists use to get a particular message across to a wide audience.