

Work or Fight! Race, Gender, and the Draft in World War One

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Author:

Gerald Shenk

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Reviewer:

Kristofer Allerfeldt

I think I would like Gerald Shenk but I am not certain that I agree with him. I like the fact that he does not make any secret of where his allegiances lie. He tells readers he was educated in a Mennonite college and opposed Vietnam, and introduces this book on draft dodgers through recollections of his grandparents struggle to maintain their religious belief in pacifism in the face of communal opposition. Also, he is not blind to the experience of others. He has some sympathy for what he eloquently calls Woodrow Wilson's struggle to steer a Progressive course between 'vigilance and vigilantism' as he led the nation into the European conflict he had so successfully avoided. He also makes the point that pacifism is a minority view, and that mobilising a nation for war will of itself create casualties, albeit moral rather than physical. He is also able to draw conclusions which relate to wider issues than the struggle between the draft and objections to it – namely, what this conflict tells us about attitudes to citizenship, representation and race. So far, so good. It is when he gets tangled in sexuality and gender that I begin to worry.

His is a view that has some pedigree and currency. War and/as masculinity is a popular topic. It was handled very successfully, for example, in Kirsten Hogan's *Fighting for American Manhood* (Yale, 1998) which blends Darwinian concepts and a gendered interpretation to explain why America went to war with Spain in 1898. Joanna Bourke's *Dismembering the Male* (London, 1996) uses the shared horrors of men's military experience in the Great War to explain a new masculinity which broke down class barriers among men and contributed to further conflict. Masculinity played a part, no doubt, in the draft for America's Expeditionary Force in 1917–19. The strenuous trials of strength and daring which Theodore Roosevelt constantly expounded must have rung in the ears of American men as they contemplated joining up. The manly, but chivalrous, defending of Belgian women from the ravages of the Hun was certainly one of the rallying calls.

But does it play as big a part as Professor Shenk makes out? Did 'whiteness' really equate to masculinity, because in this racially and gendered society that was where the power and influence lay? Even if it does, why do we need such an equation? Isn't it enough that we apply the term 'racism' to a society which would probably not have understood our notions of such a crime, without compounding that error by adding another which would have been far less intelligible – 'sexism'? Surely the value of any study of the past is in attempting to understand it in the terms which would have motivated those living through it. To apply our own values seems, at best, indulgent, and, at worst, it can do little but muddy our understanding. Besides, if, as Shenk argues, the war served to protect the racial gradations of society, it also hastened women's empowerment immeasurably, converting Woodrow Wilson and a majority of Congress to the cause of female suffrage.

Having said that, this is a scholarly book and there is a great deal of valuable, productive and insightful research which needs to see the light of day. Shenk tells us that in declaring war on Germany, President Woodrow Wilson 'publicly legitimised a kind of national social othering that was [already] familiar to middle-class white[s]' throughout America. What he then goes on to show is that this 'othering' was diverse. In each of the four regions he examines – Coweta County, Georgia; Paterson, New Jersey; Adams County, Illinois and San Diego, California – this government sanctioned alienation was aimed at different groups which drew on different histories. What unites them is their rejection of the Selective Service Act – the draft. In essence, response to the draft showed opposition to or support for the war. In Shenk's evaluation it also showed a lot more. He draws on sources which demonstrate the use of masculinity as the benchmark for patriotism. Those who responded to the call were 'manly' men. Those who opposed the Act or attempted to evade conscription were 'slackers', a term which he sees as 'gendered' – and somehow the more insulting because it was reserved for men alone.

These terms were not considered strong enough to overcome the reluctance to the war felt by many. In Coweta County, Georgia, the initial draft of August 1917 called 506, white, men. It hoped to enlist 253. More than 10 per cent ignored the draft and failed to register. Of those who responded, over 150 failed the medical. As if that was not bad enough, two-thirds of the remaining men, who passed the medical, sought exemption. This was not purely motivated by ambivalence to American entry into the war, or – in spite of the arguments raised by draft officials – cowardice. In rural areas of sharecropping and subsistence farming, the loss of labour could mean hardship, if not starvation, for those left behind. There was also the ever-present fear that the racial imbalance that the exodus of young whites would leave behind could encourage the natural sexually predatory nature of the local negroes. At the start of September, only 12 men shipped out to Camp Newman for training. It would have been interesting to have known how this compared with the average take up across the nation, and why Shenk chose to study the regions he picked.

Some saw the answer to the latent dilemma of patriotism versus rural depopulation lying in the conscription of blacks, but this brought with it a dangerous set of problems. To a large proportion of whites in segregated Georgia, black 'boys' were inherently inferior: they were lazy, unreliable and frivolous. They were also difficult to draft since they were often illiterate and itinerant. Perhaps most importantly, they were also vital to the cotton harvest, as Shenk tells us the primary concern for the Georgia Council of Defense was 'preserving a stable, obedient, and dependable labor force in cotton cultivation'. Initially attempts were made to overcome the increasing labour vacuum through a system of farm furloughs. Under these African American draftees were sent by camp commandants to work on farms. Sometimes they were sent as individuals to their home region, sometimes for large farms in groups, reminiscent of the system of contract convict labour. This created further friction, being resented by poor white conscripts as preferential treatment, and they claimed that black soldiers on furlough took liberties, seeing their uniforms as granting them immunity from prosecution. The result was seething resentment which often erupted into violence, most importantly in Houston, Texas, where 17 whites were killed, 13 black conscripts executed and 41 others given life sentences.

The solution to these problems came when Washington authorised 'Work or Fight' legislation in 1918. Under this amendment, local draft boards could order draft age men to serve in specific jobs or face

immediate induction into the army. In Georgia this was enthusiastically adopted and expanded as an adjunct to the existing vagrancy laws, enabling the arrest, fining or imprisonment of those – even women – deemed to be slackers. These extra-legal coercive powers ensured that although nearly 50,000 rural Georgians served in the US Army, there was actually a labour surplus which outlived the war and fed an increase in white sharecropping and peonage over the next decade. This excessive use of the draft also ‘reinforced the dependent position of African American men ... confirmed the exclusion of women from the realm of the state and preserved some white men’s sense of manhood, and it got the cotton picked’.

In his analysis of Georgia, Shenk describes the manipulation of the draft process by a white, male, elite who sought to retain their position over a black majority. This balance was maintained, he contends, because of the constant feminising of the black since the days of slavery – and feminising signals impotence, for the feminised are property. But this was not always the case. He gives details of a letter from a white mother in Illinois seeking to have her son sent to the trenches in France in order that she might receive a proportion of his pay. She was successful. He describes another woman with similar aims in Paterson, who also eventually won her case. Here Shenk’s masculinity thesis is plausible and valuable. He uses these incidents to show that women gained power over men who relinquished their manly status by cowardice, namely by trying to avoid the draft.

It was not always the actions of individuals that led to pressure to respond to the call. Sometimes those who were deemed ‘undesirable’ in their local communities were sent to join up. Once more, to illustrate this, Shenk chooses a sexualised theme. He tells the story of the hermaphrodite farm boy conscript who baffled medical inspectors in Illinois and uses this, rather obscure, story to show yet again the importance of conformist masculinity in US wartime society.

But as may be imagined, many sought to avoid rather than seek military service. Aside from failing the medical – which accounted for over 60 per cent of those registered being exempted from service – working in agriculture was the most likely reason to avoid conscription. In Adams County, Illinois, one out of every two and a half appeals to the draft board made by farmers or agricultural workers was successful. This compares with one out of every 100 for industrial workers. Some farmers met with less success. The farmers of the Adams County Brethren had three reasons to wish not to be drafted: they had their farms to run; they were pacifists by religion; and most came from German backgrounds. Shenk gives the example of Lucas Ackers, a man from just the type of ‘peace church’ whose members the government deemed legitimate ‘conscientious objectors’. Although Ackers’s exemption plea was dismissed, he was sent to work on farms throughout the Mid-West. He was fortunate. He could have been assigned to ambulance or other non-combatant work, sent to the front classified as ‘insincere’ or even imprisoned in Fort Leavenworth.

If objectors sought to escape the draft they might find themselves subject to the attentions of the American Protective League (APL), a government-sanctioned vigilante group whose ‘slacker’ raids ‘controlled’ hyphenated Americans. They might find that their harvest was sabotaged or boycotted, or their house had a yellow stripe painted on it. The war on the home-front, as always allowed old scores to be settled. In industrial Paterson, New Jersey, where over 60 per cent of the population was first or second generation immigrant, anti-Semitism, anti-radicalism and nativism combined to drive the ever-enthusiastic APL operatives. On 2 September 1918, an estimated 25,000 APL agents swooped on saloons, pool halls and other ‘slacker’ haunts in New Jersey and New York City. Tens of thousands of draft-dodgers were arrested. When friends, family and neighbours produced draft cards, most were released. Only a couple of hundred were sent to Fort Dix, but these netted the APLers a tidy \$50 per deserter.

Nor was such action limited to New Jersey. Across the nation, One-Hundred Percent Americanism, as this super-patriotism was known, meant that aliens or suspected pro-Germans were made to fly the US flag, kiss it or even wear it. Rumours of less than patriotic behaviour could result in being beaten or arrested, or, as in the case of the German-born, Illinois socialist, Robert Prager, lynched. However, although Shenk devotes considerable space to this vigilante behaviour, he does not give details of the other side of this phenomenon – the so-called parade ground naturalisation by which aliens gained citizenship via voluntary military service. He does give instances of two men who voluntarily joined up, but not for citizenship, rather to

receive medical attention for oddly incurable, but predictably emasculating, conditions – one was for syphilis, another for incontinence.

Waterworks also played a central role in the history of the draft in San Diego which was even more anomalous than the other three regions described in Shenk's book. When a local businessman was made San Diego's Selective Service Board representative, he used his office to gain an exemption for the son of the local newspaper baron. Having done this service, he demanded the support of the papers for his proposed dam which would supply water to the growing population of the region. His dam would flood the San Diego Indian reserve at El Capitan Grande, nevertheless the Mission Indians there were not consulted.

Shenk uses this incident to conflate 'whiteness ... [with] private ownership of land or other resources' in Progressive California. He shows that while the Dawes Act and Alien Land Laws explicitly barred non-whites – Native Americans and Asians rather than 'coloreds' (African Americans) – from the ownership of land, the San Diego draft still included 'American Indians, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans and Mexican Americans', all called as part of the "white" quota'. Perhaps unsurprisingly none of these groups ever saw combat, but at least for the Native Americans it contributed to their gaining of citizenship, en masse, in 1924. Asian Americans would need to wait for the wake of another war, but these are subjects beyond the remit of this book. Perhaps they could form the basis for another study on the long-term effect of the racial impact of the Selective Service's decisions, and few would argue that, with his unparalleled knowledge of the draft and its enforcement, Shenk should not be the person to write it.

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