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Nexus: The Great War's Grain Crisis and the Coming of Prohibition in America

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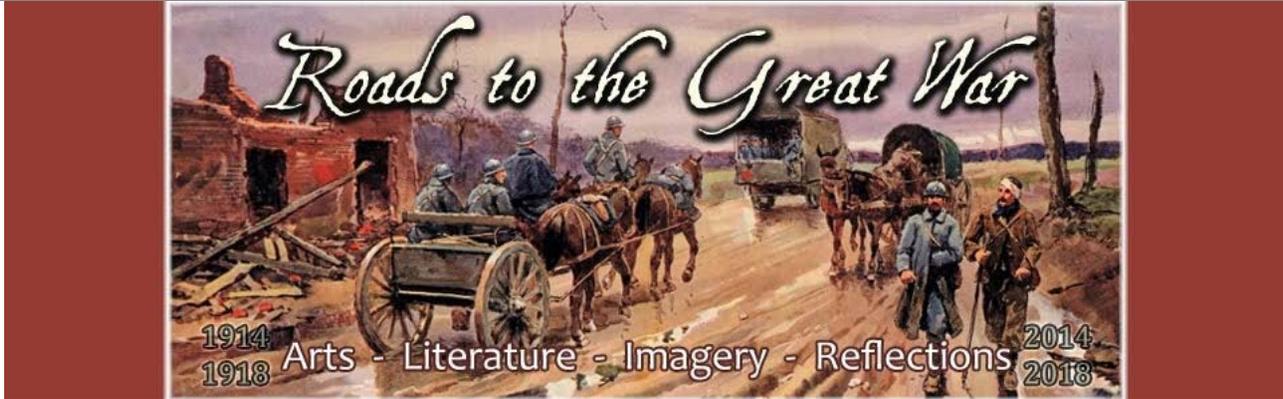
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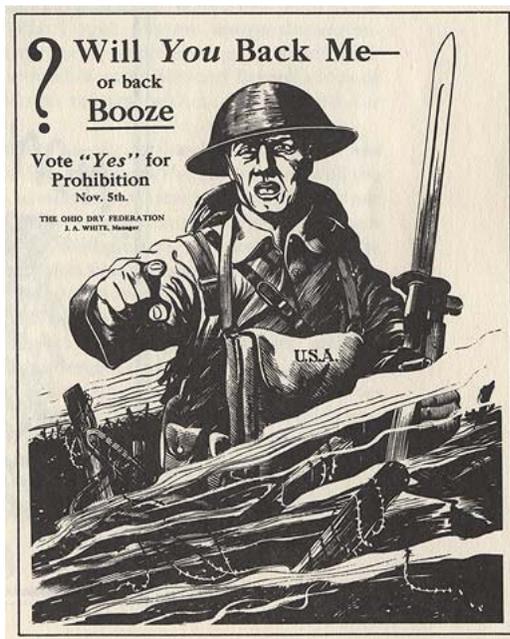


*Now all roads lead to France and heavy is the tread
Of the living; but the dead returning lightly dance.*

Edward Thomas, *Roads*

Saturday, January 2, 2016

Nexus: The Great War's Grain Crisis and the Coming of Prohibition in America



Anti-Saloon League Wartime Poster

By Keith Muchowski

Food was one of the central crises of the First World War. So many millions faced food insecurity during and after the conflict that the issue became a central preoccupation for the Wilson Administration. Drys, as those who advocated for the prohibition of alcohol were called, understood the significance of the food crisis— how could they not with the price of bread rising so quickly? — and grasped that it could be a way to advance their agenda. The Great War itself did not bring about Prohibition; the temperance movement had been making incremental progress for decades. Activists created the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874. That same decade First

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Lady Lucy Hayes became known, with either admiration or derision depending on the individual, as "Lemonade Lucy" due to her strict edict that only non-alcoholic beverages be served at White House receptions. The Anti-Saloon League came into existence in 1893. New York City Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt sparked outrage within Gotham's Irish and German communities a few years later when he began enforcing the city's strict Sunday blue laws. By the time America entered the war more than a dozen states had gone dry. The grain problem proved to be a convenient means for the dries to advance their initiative.



Herbert Hoover

The food crisis began when the war did in summer 1914. Mining engineer Herbert Hoover proved invaluable throughout the Great War and his first, most immediate task was getting Americans stuck in Europe safely back to the United States. He did this so efficiently—helping nearly 200,000 stranded Yanks find passage home that summer—that he booked his own ticket to come home in late September. The severity and ensuing privations brought on by the German invasion of Belgium soon ended those plans. Belgium was a nation of nearly ten million urban dwellers who soon found themselves running low on foodstuffs of all varieties. Hoover soon found himself in a new, albeit unpaid, position—chief of the Commission for Relief in Belgium. The CRB, a private, non-governmental organization, held its meeting on 22 October 1914, when the war's first winter was soon to get under way. The commission's mission was no easy one; it had to feed the millions of Belgians stuck between the German war machine

and the British naval blockade. Hoover and his colleagues performed their work with ruthless efficiency, eventually distributing five million tons of flour, sugar, cereals, meat, grains, milk, and other provisions worth over 20 billion in 2015 dollars to Belgians trapped at home and in neighboring France over the next five years. The task was complicated by the Germans' intermittent use of submarine warfare, which sent several thousand tons of additional supplies to the ocean floor.

The plight of the starving Belgians was tragic and yet the food crisis was just beginning. The American declaration of war on 6 April 1917 naturally marked a new phase in the conflict. The war had been good to many Americans until spring 1917, with farmers and Wall Streeters prospering as food went to Europe and the credit to pay for it came to America. Historian David M. Kennedy notes in his seminal book *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* that wheat selling for less than a dollar a bushel prior to the war was going for \$1.25 in 1915, two dollars in 1916, and capped at \$2.20 by the Wilson Administration for 1917. Americans would now have to bear the burden at the dinner table. Not only that, they would have to provision their own American Expeditionary Force and the armies of their new allies as well. That burden became more acute when Russia signed a separate peace with Germany and subsequently descended into civil strife and mass starvation. No Russia in the war meant no grain from the east.

No one grasped the need for urgency better than Woodrow Wilson. He requested that Hoover return to the United States and take a U.S. government position. Hoover arrived in the United States in May 1917 and got to work before he officially had a job. That post came three months later after the passage of the Lever Act, sometimes called the Food and Fuel Control Act, on 10 August 1917. Four days later President Wilson created the Food Administration Grain Corporation, part of the wider United States Food Administration, to add teeth to the new law. He put Herbert Hoover in charge with the official title of United States Food Administrator. Others understood the problem as well. In May, as Hoover was returning to America, Progressive reformer and Yale economist Irving Fisher created a Committee of Sixty, who campaigned against using America's grain supply in the distillation of alcoholic beverages for the duration of the war. The committee's motto was "Save 11,000,000 loaves of bread a day."

Congress got into the act in June when the Senate Agricultural Committee debated whether to ban beer, wine, and spirits. The Anti-Saloon was one of the provision's strongest supporters. The bill was defeated at this time, but brewers were required to lower the alcohol content and also to use 30 percent less grain in their products. That December former president Theodore Roosevelt publicly declared his support for prohibition not just in the army but for civilians working in such war-related tasks as shipping, mining, munitions manufacturing, and military transport.

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Editors & Contributors

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U.S. Food Administration Poster, 1918

The task was urgent and the problems real. Grain prices were quickly set at \$2.26 for the next two crop years. The Grain Corporation's distribution of food stuffs is staggering to imagine, with the organization selling nearly 30 billion 2015 dollars worth of wheat, grains, cereals, and other perishables over the 33 months course of its existence. America's principal allies—Belgium, France, Great Britain, and Italy—were the chief beneficiaries. After the Armistice, however, the Food Administration and its successors fed friends and enemies as disparate as Finland, Estonia, Germany, Turkey, Hungary, Austria, and Denmark, to name only a few. The initiative had taken its toll, with Americans forced to observe Wheatless Mondays and Wednesdays among other deprivations. Bakers and consumers alike also chafed that bread prices were increasing while the loaf itself was shrinking. *Scientific American* published what it thought to be a helpful article in its 23 November 1918 edition on the wonders of "substitute bread," a concoction using alternative ingredients.

Temperance advocates inserted themselves into this breach with growing boldness. In February 1918 President Wilson received a petition signed by six million women calling for a ban on beer. The measure had serious backing. This support included the usual advocates, such as Anna A. Gordon, President of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union, but also the leaders of such groups as the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Federation of Women's Clubs, the Y.W.C.A., the National Federation of College Women, and many others. The petition's chief signator was Frances Cleveland Preston, the widow of President Grover Cleveland. Hoover and Wilson were against the measure but eventually ceded to the inevitable. Hoover's Food Administration, with President Wilson's reluctant imprimatur, mandated in late summer 1918 that American breweries stop manufacturing beer and malt liquors by 1 December of that year. The brewers in a sense were an easy target. German- and Irish-Americans were among the largest producers and consumers of beer and malted beverages in the United States. These hyphenated Americans were suspect in the eyes of some, as many Irish were anti-British and many German-Americans suspected of greater loyalty to Kaiser Wilhelm than Uncle Sam.



Frances Cleveland Preston

historians, enthusiasts, and collectors to contribute to *Roads*.



An Anti-Saloon League Cartoon Explicitly Linking the Enemy with the Liquor Industry

The grain crisis and the temperance movement came together during the First World War in ways that were mutually reinforcing. Grains are of course a key ingredient in many alcoholic beverages and their shortage during the war, combined with the need to feed Europe's starving millions, made it increasingly palatable to restrict and even abolish their use in the making of alcoholic beverages. The push for an amendment banning all alcoholic beverages continued even while the war was going on. Congress passed the Eighteenth Amendment on 18 December 1917 and sent it to the 48 states for ratification. Many felt it would never obtain the three-quarter majority required for passage, yet it only took 13 months for it to become reality. Nebraska became the thirty-sixth and deciding state when it ratified the measure on 16 January 1919. President Wilson was in Europe attending the Peace Conference. Twelve months later Prohibition was the law of the land.

Our contributor, Keith Muchowski, previously contributed an article on musical genius and Harlem Hellfighter officer James Reese Europe ([view](#)). Visit Keith's Blog, *The Strawfoot*, for more interesting insights on the history of the First World War.

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10 comments:



Marc Sheinberg January 2, 2016 at 10:43 AM

Excellent article, but didn't Russia's export of grains cease when the Ottoman Empire entered the war in October of 1914?

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[Replies](#)



Unknown January 3, 2016 at 7:10 AM

Yes, it did.

[Reply](#)



bill o'neill January 2, 2016 at 12:01 PM

Interesting article. I also thought Russia ended the export of wheat in 1914. The primary reason that Germany and Austria-Hungary blocked land exports and Russia's merchant fleet and navy unable to open the Baltic Sea.

[Reply](#)

Diane R January 2, 2016 at 12:15 PM

An excellent article, raising many fascinating issues and food for thought. Prohibition activism enabled women to become politically active and involved, out of the kitchen and into the streets. Linking the prohibition cause to support for WW1 troops "Will you back me or booze?" is brilliant marketing. The movement fostered culture wars (not that they used that term) because alcohol use was commonly accepted by Germans, Irish, Italians and other Catholic/immigrant groups (my Lithuanian ancestors, for instance). And despite the privations of the war in Europe, alcohol was never banned in Belgium, the UK, France, or Germany (based on info I could find online). Many WTCU folk supported women's suffrage, perhaps with the thought that female voters would help pass prohibition laws. I was surprised to learn that WCTU is still a living organization, campaigning these days against alcohol, drugs, abortion and gay marriage (thanks Wikipedia)

Reply

Replies



David Thompson January 2, 2016 at 10:00 PM

The women and men that were part of the Anti-Saloon League (ASL) and Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) were smart politicians and used the anti-German feelings in the country in WW I to campaign against brewery companies, whose owners were of German ancestry (Adolfus Busch of Busch Brewery Company in St. Louis, MO & Gustave Pabst of Pabst Brewing Company in Milwaukee, WI) who used grain to brew beer. With this German connection to the brewery business, they helped turn the public against them and their business during WW I.

The ASL and WCTU also aligned themselves with Methodist and Baptist clergy and their congregations across the country, which provided political ground troops in their battle against alcohol. One of their most famous speakers against alcohol was former Philadelphia Phillie's baseball player turned fundamentalist Baptist minister, the popular evangelist Rev. Billy Sunday, who was said to have preached to more than 100 million people on the evils of alcohol. He is quoted on p.97 of Daniel Okrent's book, "Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition" that "liquor was God's worst enemy and hell's best friend." Speaking of the alcohol trade, Rev. Sunday said at a rally at the University of Michigan: "I'll fight them until hell freezes over; then I'll buy a pair of skates and fight them on the ice."

The ACLU and ASL were great at building alliances and coalitions for a political fight against alcohol, not only among religious teetotalers, but with The Progressive Party, Southern Democrats, western populists, the women's suffrage movement and the Industrial Workers of the World. They together became a formidable force to push for the adoption of the 18th Amendment.

Reply



David Thompson January 2, 2016 at 2:21 PM

This is a great article that buttressed Daniel Okrent's excellent book, "Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition."

In the grain producing Mid-west, not only did the grain crisis and temperance movement come together during WW I in ways that were mutually reinforcing, but the temperance movement leveraged itself into the fray of the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety that ran a rein of terror in MN to identify disloyal citizens and root out "slackers" and "drunks" and immigrants suspected of being "enemies within" sabotaging war efforts. They used these crises over "grain" and "loyalty" to further their prohibition agenda during WW I.

It became a perfect storm on the home-front with the WCTU/Anti-Saloon league engaged both in the grain crisis and working with the MN Commission on Public Safety in rooting out public "enemies within" who were drunkards and slackers who were characterized as not being loyal Americans supporting the war effort.

Dr. Annette Atkins made a presentation in January 2014 at the Minnesota Historical Society and broadcast on MPR in March 13, 2014 on the Minnesota Commission on Public Safety and the role the prohibition forces had in "rooting out enemies within" who drank alcohol and were not productive workers in the wheat fields and in the iron ore mines of Northern Minnesota that helped produce steel for the war effort (listen to the MPR program: http://www.mprnews.org/story/2014/03/13/mpr_news_presents).

The above MPR presentation is both humorous and at the same time chilling, as efforts were made to truncate many civil liberties in the state.

One of the leading voices in the prohibition movement was Andrew Volstad from Yellow Medicine County, MN, a U.S Representative to Congress from MN and Chairman of the House Judiciary

Committee. He pushed through the 18th Amendment in Congress and it was passed into law. The law became known as "The Volstead Act" ushering in prohibition to America.

[Reply](#)

Anonymous January 2, 2016 at 2:37 PM

Marc and Bill, thanks for the comments. I could have spoken more clearly in the passage about Russian grain. What I meant, but did not articulate clearly enough, was that losing Russia as an ally ended any possibility of grain coming from that country, at least in the short term. Russia's exit from the war raised the stakes and the responsibility for Hoover and the Food Administration, coming as it did at the precise moment when the United States was mobilizing and preparing to become fully engaged in the fighting. America's material support for Europe continued after Versailles. The U.S. eventually added Russia to the list of countries receiving food stuffs as part of the initiative, Russia having fallen into full-blown Civil War by the early 1920s. I was trying to keep the focus on Prohibition and domestic issues here in the U.S. Your points are valid and I should have been clearer.

Best,
Keith Muchowski

[Reply](#)



Bryan Alexander January 2, 2016 at 5:10 PM

Excellent article, Keith. Very informative. Sheds light on the Progressive Era and on Hoover's reputation.

I second David Thompson's recommendation of _Last Call_, which is a delight.

[Reply](#)



Unknown January 3, 2016 at 7:16 AM

What it does not explain is that there were more than a few substitutes for wheat that were not only known at the time but were offered as exemptions, but the prohibitionists wouldn't allow them. Their agenda had nothing to do with "saving" anything but their interests. Like any other petulant child, they would have their way.

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David John Hastie February 1, 2016 at 4:36 AM

It is also interesting that it all came to passing after the Great War was over. Also there was mass smuggling of alcohol into the US from all our neighbors and Europe, which never stopped production. I guess the momentum just carried it thru... and opened a very sad era of greatly increased crime and corruption in America after the war. And even FDR drank... So we live with the echos of this today in criminal enterprises and corruption.

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