



## World War I, Propaganda & War Profiteering – The Untold History of the United States | Peter Kuznick

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### Know Your Stuff - World War I, Propaganda & War Profiteering

**Zain Raza (ZR):** Welcome to Know Your Stuff, a program aimed at providing historical context and educating on societal issues. My name is Zain Raza. Today we are joined by Peter Kuznick, Professor of history and a director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at the American University. He's also the author of the book called *The untold history of the United States*, which he wrote together with Hollywood film director and producer, Oliver Stone. Peter Kuznick, glad to have you on again.

**Peter Kuznick (PK):** Glad to be with you.

**ZR:** Let us begin by examining the first chapter of your book called World War I: Wilson vs Lenin. Without getting into the geopolitics, at first can you talk about the general sentiment in the United States before the US entered into World War I? And then can you also define and examine the role of the Committee on Public Information CPI – which is also known as the Creel Committee – that you argue in your book played an influential role in shaping public opinion for the government to enter into war.

**PK:** Yeah, and the two questions really go together, because the attitude in the United States was, people did not want to get involved in World War I. We saw this slaughter going on in Europe; there was nothing that was appealing. You saw trench warfare in which young men were being mowed down by machine guns as they fought over a few feet in each direction. We saw poison gas being used in large amounts and the effects on people were just horrific. So the attitude in the United States even before the war – and it wasn't just in the United

States – globally, the assumption was that civilization had advanced to the point when people would never go to war against each other.

This is the time when you have the great Second International, so you had the big European labor parties and socialist parties who were part of this, and what they said was, they're not going to go to war for their capitalist masters. If the capitalists declare war then, rather than killing workers in other countries, they're going to go on a general strike against their governments. Some leaders said that we're gonna turn this into a communist or a socialist revolution and overthrow the capitalists entirely.

We saw that with Rosa Luxemburg in Germany. We saw that with Lenin and Trotsky in Russia. So there was a sentiment that we would never go into this war. And then it was a tragedy, beginning with the SPD in Germany and then the French socialists, they all started to support both the war credits and support the war effort. The attitude in Germany was, we have to protect our country against the Russian hordes, these barbaric Russians. And so then country after country lined up for the war and they sent their boys off to slaughter each other for greed and glory and God and prophets and the motherland. It was so demoralizing on a planetary basis that people would choose to be killing other working men just like themselves in the name of nationalism, in the name of capitalism, in the name of greed.

So the United States watch this, and when the Europeans go to war in 1914 the United States stays out and the United States doesn't enter the war until April of 1917. So by that point there was a strong anti-war sentiment in the United States. Woodrow Wilson got re-elected in 1916 on the basis that he kept the United States out of the war. That was his campaign slogan, but deep down he knew that he wanted the US to get involved in the war. So when the United States declared war – I think it was on April 7th 1917 – they called for a million volunteers, they got 73,000 after six weeks. So people were not lining up, they were not ready to go and fight under those horrific conditions. Eventually they were drafted and two million Americans eventually went off to war. It was, in some ways, the worst war ever. World War II had more casualties, World War II had its own atrocities, a Holocaust, and the atomic bombs. So we can say the World War II was in some ways the most horrific war ever, but we could also say that about World War I because it demoralized civilization.

We thought we were beyond solving problems with war. But what was going on? We had the Europeans fighting over the colonies. There was a tremendous increase in colonization of the planet in the late 19th century and the early 20th century. Germany was a newcomer, and Germany's economy was developing very rapidly, and they were challenging the Brits in steel production and coal and all manufacturing. The British were not investing in new industry and technology, the Brits were off in Africa and other places, with a stagnant economy and trying to expand by colonization and exploiting and stealing the resources and labor from those countries.

One of the startling facts to me was that in 1914 only 1% of young British men were graduating high school – I looked it up – in the United States at the same time, 9% were graduating high school. Britain's economy was stagnant. British society was stagnant, rigid class barriers, not a lot of social mobility. But then you've got these new up-and-coming countries like Germany and Japan, and they wanted a piece of the action.

The world was not able to find a way to integrate them and to give them what they considered a fair cut of colonies or profits or investments and resources. So really World War I is a war to redivide colonies and redistribute the colonies and the wealth of the colonies. It's not a war for higher ideals, it's not a war for greater purposes. That's why we needed the Creel Committee – the Committee for Public Information – because we needed to sell this war to the American people. World War I is the first large-scale example of government-run propaganda and propaganda was lies. So the Creel Committee started to do this massive propaganda campaign to try to convince the American people to support the war.

The idea was that the British and the French treated their colonies nobly and were very generous to their colonies but the Austro-Hungarians were brutal to their colonies – they were bloodthirsty, and look at the terrible things they did, bayoneting babies and all kinds of horrible things.

So it was a massive propaganda effort. There were 75,000 volunteers, they were called Four Minute Men. And they would go around making speeches shopping centres on streetcars, in churches, in the schools, every place the public gathered, movie lines. And they would make speeches talking about the virtues of the Allied cause and the horrors of the enemy's cause, and they would try to basically convince the American people that this was a noble effort. The American people were not buying it and so the government took even more extreme measures that we can talk about.

**ZR:** Yes let's talk about that. Can you continue your discussion on the Creel Committee?

**PK:** Well the Creel Committee did a number of things. It was headed by George Creel who was a newspaperman from Denver, Colorado, and in addition to the Four Minute Men in their propaganda, the Creel Committee put out reports and one of the reports – the next-to-last report they issued, was about the German Bolshevik conspiracy and it re-published documents that had been long known as forgeries in Europe, but they publish them as if they were true.

And the idea was that Lenin and Trotsky were paid German agents on the German payroll and then they went back in the interests of Germany to spread this revolution and get Russia out of the war. Well Russia does leave the war after, and they signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk which was a terrible treaty for Russia (for the Soviet Union) at that point, but

Lenin and Trotsky were so desperate to get their country out of the war that they were willing to take the hit that treaty imposed on them.

The Russian people were going to war without uniforms, without boots, without rifles. But they were suffering. You know we talk about poison gas, but it was the Russians who suffered the most from the poison gas that was used. It was the Russians who suffered the most casualties, the Russians who suffered the most deaths, and they weren't in a position to protect themselves. So the Tsar had allowed this war effort to continue and then, after the Menshevik revolution, they still stayed in the war effort so the Western countries – the Allies – were very happy to have Russia there, the Russian troops as cannon fodder, the Russians holding off the Germans, at least in part of that war effort. So when Lenin and Trotsky pulled the Soviet Union – pulled Russia – out of the war the West went apoplectic, and one of the things that we will probably talk about is the Western intervention into the Soviet Union to try to stop the Russian Revolution. It was one of the turning points in history.

**ZR:** So how was the state of dissent during that time in the US particularly? Were there movements campaigns or influential figures that tried to stop the US war once US entered into it. And how did they – if at all – did the government intervene and try to clamp down on the dissent?

**PK:** There was strong dissent in the United States. In the election of 1912, the Socialist Party won numerous mayoral elections, city council elections, people were elected to Congress from the Socialist Party during this period. You know, you had the socialists, you also had the strong labor movement – the IWW (International Workers of the World) – was very powerful during this time. And they were both anti-war and were organizing across the country. There were very strong anti-war movements.

In fact in 1915, the most popular American song was the song, *I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier*, Teddy Roosevelt hated that song, he said, that song makes as much sense as a song titled, I didn't raise my girl to be a mother. Roosevelt always was waving the bloody flag and wanting to get into wars. In fact when World War I broke out Roosevelt asked Wilson for permission to raise a volunteer battalion and take them over to Russia. In fact Roosevelt had four sons, all of whom volunteered for the war effort, two of whom were wounded and gassed, and Roosevelt's youngest son, 20-year-old Quentin, was actually killed when his plane was shot down. Teddy Roosevelt never recovered from that, he died six months later. He was a broken man and he had some realization how terrible this was.

In the same sense that Rudyard Kipling – you know, the proponent of British Empire "white man's duty", white man's obligation to go in and civilize the heathens, white man's burden as he called it. He also encouraged his young son to volunteer for the war and on his son's first day in combat he was killed. Afterwards Kipling wrote his epitaph for the war and he wrote there, "*If any question why we died/Tell him because our fathers lied.*"

So there was strong anti-war sentiment and the government repressed it. It was repressed, they passed legislation: the Espionage Act of 1917, the Sedition Act of 1918, the Amended Espionage Act – which banned, basically, the anti-war protests. Anybody who spoke out against the war could be jailed. Anybody who opposed the war bonds could be jailed. anybody who spoke out against the draft could be jailed, and people were – by the hundreds, by the thousands. And in fact, not only that, but they also cracked down on freedom of speech throughout society. The campuses went silent. As Nicholas Murray Butler the president of Columbia said, well freedom of speech and academic freedom might have been a luxury we had before the war – now anybody on our campus speaks out against the war, he's going to be fired or thrown out of school. And so, very quickly, two leading Columbia faculty members James McKeen Cattell – one of the country's leading psychologists – and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana – the grandson of the poet – were both fired from the Columbia faculty – there were huge protests in opposition.

Charles Beard resigned in protest, America's leading historian resigned in protest, he was supporting the war effort, but he said this kind of crackdown on freedom of speech cannot be tolerated. And others supported him and resigned in protest, so you had a period here when civil liberties were out the window, freedom of speech out the window, academic freedom out the window, and people were being thrown in jail. Among them was Eugene Debs, the leader of the Socialist Party. He went to Canton, Ohio to the prison where three socialists were in jail for speaking out against the war. He made a famous anti-war speech before a huge crowd there and then they brought charges against him. They convicted him with a 10-year sentence for his opposition to the war – speaking out against the war. And he said, let the capitalists furnish their own corpses and there will never be another war. Let them send their own sons off to fight and their fellow capitalist off to fight there will never be another war. He says instead, when they send their sons of workers off to kill the sons of other workers in other countries, and he wasn't going to remain silent in the face of that.

I wish we had that kind of protest going on now. How long has the United States been involved in the war in Afghanistan? 17-18 years already. Is there a strong protest on the campuses? I haven't seen it. My university, American University, keeps getting named by the Princeton Review, the most politically active campus in America, and what I tell my students is that the most politically active campus in 2019 is less active than the least politically active campus was in the late 1960s. I mean there's a lot of concern about environmental issues and that's great, also gender equality, racial issues, but not about war and peace issues, and that to me is appalling right now.

**ZR:** You know, I have to comment on that, that I find it appalling as well, because the military-industrial complex the budget is staggering. I think it's somewhere between 1.4–2 trillion dollars a year, and yet there's so little focus on that because if we take that money out and put it in social or climate issues, things would change so much. Getting back to World

War I, I want to take a step back and talk about the backdrop. Things that are not mentioned in historical literature, at least here in Germany about World War I, is the commercial interest as well as the interest of war profiteers and what role they play during World War I. Could you provide your assessment on this?

**PK:** I think it's useful to add some numbers. The US banks had loaned 2.5 billion dollars to the Allies and only 27 million to the Central Powers. The US was selling, by 1917, 3 billion dollars to Britain and France and selling less than a million dollars to Germany and Austria-Hungary. So it was clear that there was a financial motivation for getting involved in this war.

And Wilson saw it more as a diplomatic issue. What Wilson said to his critics was that, if the United States remains neutral we're gonna have no influence in shaping the post-war world. He says, all I'll be able to do is yell through a crack in the door but if we get involved in the war then we'll be at the table and I can shape the post-war world according to my vision. And Wilson's vision was, in some ways, a relatively noble one, had he actually lived up to any of that, but it wasn't gonna happen. When the Bolsheviks took over – one of the first things they did is, they went into the foreign ministry and exposed all the secret treaties that were already in place. The main one – the Sykes-Picot treaty – between the British, the French and the Russians, which talked about how they're going to divide up the colonies, they're going to divide up the Ottoman Empire, divide up the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the German Empire, and this was what they actually ended up doing at Versailles.

So all of Wilson's highfalutin rhetoric about making the world safe for democracy, “the war to end all wars”, “we're gonna end colonialism”. Bullshit. None of that happened. In fact, the United States actually even took over the trusteeship for Armenia. (British Prime Minister) Lloyd George and (French Premier) Clemenceau joked, we'll call Wilson the Grand Turk after the war. So the United States went along with all of that. Wilson did not fight for the 14 points – Germany surrendered based on the 14 points. Germany thought that this would be a non-punitive treaty, that there would be the things that they called for: freedom of the seas, free trade, disarmament, self-determination. Did that happen? No that didn't happen after the war and so there were a lot of ideals that were expressed but they weren't lived up to in the Treaty of Versailles.

What happens in the Treaty of Versailles? The place was overrun by Morgan's agents. It was Morgan and the Morgan banking interests who were the ones who were calling the shots before the war. They were the official British banking agents - all of that vast amount of purchase the British were making was going through the Morgan banks. This was all money in Morgan's coffers. There was something obscene about this. Some people were making billions of dollars of profits, or at least millions of dollars of profits, many millions of dollars of profits, off the blood that was being shed throughout the war. And that's the ugliness of war. That there are people now, every time the United States sets off another drone in

Afghanistan, or in Syria, or in any place where we're doing this – in northern Africa -- people are making profits off that.

So clearly the United States, if it was gonna get involved, was going to get involved on the side of the Allies where our financial interests were, and more of our countrymen came from those areas, but there was a propaganda campaign that was going on. It was so anti-German, this propaganda effort: the German language was removed from the high school college curricula, German music was removed from the repertoires that were being played by American orchestras, sauerkraut was renamed "liberty cabbage", German measles now became "liberty measles", hamburgers were now "liberty sandwiches", German shepherds were now renamed "police dogs".

We saw some of that happening after Germany and France refused to support the United States in the invasion of Iraq – in the cafeteria in the Senate, french fries were renamed "freedom fries". The same kind of thing is happening in 2003 that happened in 1917 and 1918. This kind of blind patriotic nonsense that takes over during war. So when people are being lynched – what we had was mobs breaking into the Socialist Party headquarters, the IWW headquarters around the country. People like Frank Little (IWW Executive Board Member) were being lynched. The Washington Post as well. But we were really excited to see this patriotism in the American heartland and they wrote, if a few lynchings are the price we have to pay so be it, we're willing to accept that price.

It was a very ugly period in the United States, and the period afterwards with the Palmer Raids, and the jailing, throwing the Russian/foreign radicals out of the country and start shutting down the labor movement, the left-wing movements. We went through a period between 1920 and 1933 or so, in which the left was largely wiped out in the United States because of this kind of repression

**ZR:** For our young viewers, there was a first time use of chemical weapons and increased use of aerial warfare in World War I. Can you provide a detailed account of this, and also talk about what ramifications it had on the battlefield? And also on international diplomacy?

**PK:** The first real use for chemical weapons was in Bolimow in Russia and it was done by Germany, but it was not terribly successful. The first successful use – and usually when people talk about the start of chemical warfare they point to Ypres, Belgium, the second battle of Ypres – Germany did use chlorine gas very effectively against the French troops. The headlines in the United States were that the French soldiers were dying in anguish, they were turning blue and green and yellow and suffocating, and going insane from the horrors of the poison gas that was being used. The British tried to get revenge against Germany in the Battle of Loos but the wind shifted, and it blew back on the British troops. So there was a lot of use of poison gas.

When the United States gets in the war in 1917, we set up the chemical warfare service and my university – American University – became the staging ground for all of this. The chemists flooded into American University, they constructed and took over 60 buildings and they began to do the chemical warfare research. It was then weaponized at the Edgewood Arsenal in Maryland and the American chemical warfare. By 1918 the US was producing 3 times as much as Britain, France and Germany combined, and they had increasingly deadly kinds of mustard gas and other gases that were being produced.

The person who headed the program at the Edgewood Arsenal was a Colonel George Walker who had been a Professor of Chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and he said that, by the end of the war we had produced these one-ton mustard gas canisters, that if we dropped them through airplanes over a German city, the entire city would be wiped out. There would be nothing left alive, not even a rat. He said when the war ended, before they could be used, he said we felt as if “we had been cheated of our prey”. They wanted to use it. In fact there were enormous amounts of chemical weapons on the docks ready to be shipped for use against Germany in the war, but the war ended too soon and they regretted it. After the war there was a great effort nationally to ban the use of poison gas and chemical warfare again, but the American chemists and American chemical industry was opposed to it, they opposed the Geneva protocols to ban chemical warfare. Even though the rest of the world adopted it, the United States never signed on and I don't think Japan ever did either.

So there was at least a coming to an awareness. It's so different, the chemists led the fight against the Geneva protocols. After World War II, the nuclear physicists were leading the fight for abolishing and banning nuclear weapons. The opposite after World War I: the chemists felt that they were the soldiers of democracy they were finally being appreciated and there were editorials in the New York Times and others who did applaud them and thank them for their great sacrifice for the war effort.

**ZR:** Following World War I there was a congressional proposal in 1934 to investigate individuals as well as corporations for profiting from war. Could you talk about this investigation, provide us some context, its findings, and where it eventually led to?

**PK:** Senator Gerald Nye, a senator from Nebraska led a bipartisan effort at the time, beginning in 1934 extending through 1936. They actually had hearings and the debate was, if war broke out again – because war had become very unpopular. After World War I, the sentiment throughout the United States was that we had been bamboozled, we had been tricked, dragged into this horrible war. And it wasn't a war for greater ideals or for democracy, it was a blood war. People can make their blood profits. In fact the manufacturers, munitions makers were called "merchants of death" widely throughout society. That's what they are, that's what they should be called now, "merchants of death". They should be on trial in the Hague, they shouldn't be allowed to profit off this but that's what these people do.



There was an awareness – look at the movies, movies like *The Big Parade* (great movie from I think 1926). A lot of terrific movies were coming out during this period and they were anti-war. There were anti-war songs and anti war books and plays and poems – ee cummings and others. So by 1934, the sentiment was strongly opposed to profiting off war so Gerald Nye held these hearings and they called in the DuPont's. The DuPont's profits according to one New York Times headline was "DuPont profits up 800% because of the war manufacturing". These people were considered what they were, scum of the earth, slime, vermin and subhuman. And so that was the widespread attitude in the United States during this period. And so the proposals were, either for if war broke out, the first day of war to nationalize the entire arms industry so they couldn't profit off it. Or else they wanted to have a 98% tax on all incomes overnight over 10,000 dollars in the event war broke out again. so people couldn't profit off this.

There was a survey done of the American people, I think it was in 1936 – because the hearings went on. 82% wanted to abolish all profits from war and wanted to nationalize the industry in the event that war broke out: 82%, 18% were opposed. So this was the overwhelming sentiment, the attitude was that World War I was a horrible war. That's part of why the Americans were so slow to get involved in World War II, which in my opinion was a necessary war – what Germany was doing and what Japan was doing. In the US we call it a good war. I don't think there is ever any such thing as a good war but if there is any a war that's justifiable this was the one war that was. But there was a strong anti-war sentiment, the Americans did not want to get dragged it to another nonsensical wasteful war in Europe and so they were slow to wake up to what was actually happening there.

We could have stopped it earlier. Had we gotten involved on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, we could have defeated the Germans and the Italians there. Unfortunately the only country that came to the Spanish Republic's aid was the Soviet Union, and there are a lot of issues around that as well. When Italy began its efforts in Libya, there were a lot of places where we could have intervened to stop this, but instead we stuck to our dumb neutrality, and Roosevelt later recognized what a mistake that was.

So the hearings go on for a couple years. Finally they turn against the Nye Committee efforts because they start to blame Wilson for lying the United States into the war. Wilson did lie the United States into the war but the Democrats said this was too much, we can't tolerate that.

Then you've got 76 or 78 year-old Carter Glass – senator from Virginia – going before the Senate and starting pounding his desk saying, how dare you defame our great leader Woodrow Wilson. He's pounding the desk so hard, the blood is spurting out of his hand, all over, as he's pounding the desk, and this is what's gonna turn the debate against the proposals for abolishing profits for war. Nationalizing industry.

It's crazy there are certain industries, certain issues, that people should not be able to profit off. One is sickness, second is war and militarism. I mean there are others also, but this is a basic decency kind of question and these people still advertise, they lobby in order to get the United States and other countries involved in wars, and the United States has an enormous defense budget. Of course we should be cutting that in half at least (for starters), but Trump's budget is a record-breaking budget.

So instead of doing what needs to be done... What we need in the United States is a Green New Deal and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Bernie Sanders and others have been advocating. And how are we gonna finance that? By raising taxes on the wealthy, instead of Trump giving a two trillion dollar tax cut to the wealthiest Americans, we'd have to be raising taxes. We need a wealth tax, we need to be cutting the military budget, using that for something productive.

**ZR:** Battling wartime profits, something very unthinkable today. But what an interesting discussion we hope to continue it with you in the future. Thank you so much for joining us today.

**PK:** My pleasure. Good to see you again

**ZR:** And thank you guys for joining us today don't forget to subscribe to our YouTube channel and to donate so we can continue to produce independent and nonprofit news and analysis. My name is Zain Raza, see you guys next time!

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