A Socialistic State in the First World War

THE RISE AND FALL of the Nonpartisan League was a part of the agrarian discontent of all the western states, a part of colonial revolt wherever colonial status prevailed. In a similar vein, North Dakota’s response to the First World War was part of a world-wide development. The war was a turning point in the history of all nations and all peoples. Its impact upon government, taxation, agriculture, and industry was everywhere profound. The tremendous efforts, the millions of dead, the violence and destruction, the overturning of social systems, and the rise of Communism and Fascism brought a deepening disillusionment which eroded old values and ways of thinking, weakened democratic and Christian ideologies, and brought a revolution in manners and morals. The titanic struggle profoundly altered every aspect of life throughout the world.

What was North Dakota’s response to the war, and how did the war affect the state? As with its agrarian revolt, North Dakota, a land of extremes, made a strong response, stronger than that of many other places. Its response was affected by the state’s colonial status and the attitudes springing from that status. The war, in turn, reacted upon the fundamentally agricultural character of the state, bringing near disaster by inflation to the semiarid grassland. There was continuity as well as change in the war years.

The Nonpartisan League and North Dakotans generally did not want the United States to enter the First World War. They regarded President Woodrow Wilson’s rigid position on neutral rights as unjustifiable; they believed that powerful financial and industrial interests, more concerned with profits than democracy, were pushing the nation toward war. Their
hostility toward these interests, which was making them socialistic, also made them antiwar; North Dakota’s socialism and pacifism were related.

Once the United States had declared war, however, the state patriotically supported the war effort. Accepting the Nonpartisan League’s war aims, North Dakotans favored conscription of wealth, as well as of men, and a just peace without secret treaties, annexations, or indemnities. They stood for the extension of federal controls over prices and transportation to curb profiteering. Thus North Dakota’s wartime patriotism, like its prewar pacifism, had a socialistic coloring. Both attitudes were reflections of its status as a dependent and exploited colonial hinterland.

The state’s conservatives quite naturally sought to discredit both the Nonpartisan League and its socialistic program by depicting its leaders as disloyal and by excluding the League from all patriotic projects. The conservatives would use the powerful wartime emotions of patriotism to destroy socialism in North Dakota. Their efforts gave North Dakota a reputation, entirely unjustified, as a disloyal state. Moreover, North Dakota did not share the prevailing war prosperity of the nation. Although its farmers expanded their wheat acreage, crops were poor. Wartime inflation and the end of free land increased the cost of farm land and laid the foundation for the hardships of the 1920’s.

The seven years from 1915 to 1921 brought a traumatic emotional experience to North Dakotans. The rise of the Nonpartisan League generated extremely intense emotions among both its friends and its enemies, and the events of the First World War raised them to a high pitch: the opposition to America’s entry into the war, the experiences of the draft, the sacrifices of the war effort, the deaths of many young men, and the charges of disloyalty. About one-fifth of the people were of German stock; war against Germany must have aroused a conflict of loyalties in thousands.

At almost the same time, pioneering came to an end as the last free land was taken up. As the dreams of the pioneers faded, as the exciting and hopeful experiences of opening up a new country ended, thousands of settlers on the Missouri Plateau struggled with the problems of adjustment to a strange, flat, semiarid land. Many were recent immigrants with the additional problem of adjusting to a new society.

Then came the great turning point in North Dakota history: the tide of population which had flowed into the state for so long began to ebb. The process of uprooting and leaving often must have been accompanied by deep emotions of fear, frustration, and regret. All of these experiences—the Nonpartisan League struggle, the wartime sacrifice, the end of the pioneer dream, adjustment to semiaridity and a new society, and uprooting and leaving—came together, and they undoubtedly intensified one another. At the same time, the war prosperity sweeping over the nation passed North Dakota by, a keen disappointment.
OPPOSITION TO INTERVENTION

When war came to Europe in early August, 1914, North Dakotans rejected it as “needless and foolish”; they believed that trade rivalries and the alliance system had caused the war. They were skeptical of propaganda about German atrocities. “Don’t believe all the wild stories,” warned the Fargo Courier-News. The Fargo Forum felt that Germany’s offense lay in making “more rapid advance in commerce than any of her rivals.”

North Dakota newspapers presented an impartial picture of the war. They warned their readers that European dispatches were censored, and after wireless communication with Germany was established in November, 1914, they printed news stories from Berlin. At Bismarck, Der Staats-Anzeiger dealt exultingly with German victories; the Jamestown Alert and Valley City Times-Record defended Germany. The Grand Forks Herald, Germany’s severest critic in North Dakota, published articles by German officers. The Bismarck Tribune said that it was futile to justify one nation in the war against another. Many newspapers printed the German defense of the execution of Edith Cavell, an English nurse.

North Dakota wanted to be entirely neutral, to stay out of the war. In the congressional elections of 1914 the North Dakota Democrats used a statement by Robert M La Follette concerning President Woodrow Wilson: “He is keeping us out of war.” In 1915 and 1916 the people of the state generally opposed preparedness: their congressmen voted against Wilson’s program for a larger army and navy. Frequently opinions were expressed in anticapitalistic terms. Most North Dakotans believed that munitions makers were behind the preparedness movement. In January, 1916, the Tri-State Grain and Stock Growers Association passed a resolution favoring government manufacture of munitions and warships as a means of taking the profit out of war. On May 12 the Germans of Hebron sent a telegram to the state’s congressmen: “T. R. may roar his head off—but take a straight tip—the big bunch are behind Ford, Bryan, and Benson…. N. D. is keeping her shirt on. Play the people’s game, not Morgan’s.” Significantly, the Grand Forks Herald, the chief opponent of the Nonpartisan League, was also the chief advocate of preparedness in the state and the chief defender of American neutral rights.

Many in North Dakota, however, were ready to surrender the nation’s rights on the seas rather than run the risk of war. Representative Henry T. Helgesen though Wilson should take a strong stand against the British blockade in order to avoid any possibility of trouble with Germany. Although many editors denounced the sinking of the Lusitania, they did not want to go to war about it. The Bismarck Tribune urged the people to remember that “England offended against international law first.” Many newspapers were critical of Wilson’s stiff stand against
Germany’s unrestricted use of the submarine. The state’s delegation in Congress voted for the Gore-McLemore resolutions to give up the right of Americans to travel in war zones on the merchant ships of belligerents. Senator Porter J. McCumber believed in “being so everlastingly neutral in this war that not one of the nations engaged in the conflict can make any complaint against us.” Governor Louis R. Hanna was the only American political leader to be a member of Henry Ford’s Peace Ship party, which went to Europe on the Oscar II in a vain effort to restore peace. The press of the nation ridiculed the Peace Ship; most North Dakota newspapers had only kind words for it.

The presidential election of 1916 revealed the socialistic state’s strong desire for peace. The Democrats put a two-page anticapitalistic advertisement in the Nonpartisan Leader: “Is Wall Street and Big Biz putting up the money for the Hughes campaign because Hughes would be a good President for you?... If you want peace, elect Wilson.” Although, paradoxically, most of the counties with large German populations voted for Hughes, Wilson carried thirty counties and received 55,206 votes to 53,471 for Hughes. Editor Gerald P. Nye wrote in the Fryburg Pioneer that the clear thinking of “a sane people” gave Wilson the victory.

As the crisis deepened, however, many North Dakotans gave up hope for peace. The dailies of the larger towns supported the diplomatic break with Germany on February 3, 1917, but Representative Henry T. Helgesen and Senator Asle J. Gronna voted against the resolution to back the President. Gronna said: “Many want war, for they hold British bonds.” Helgesen and Gronna opposed giving Wilson authority to arm merchant vessels; they had many supported in the state. When German submarines sank several American merchantmen in March, the Grand Forks Herald, the Bismarck Tribune, and the Fargo Forum—all opponents of the socialistic Nonpartisan League—called for war.

But telegrams for peace poured into the offices of North Dakota congressmen. Governor Lynn J. Frazier and Arthur C. Townley telegraphed senators McCumber and Gronna that while the people of the state were “patriotic and loyal,” they were still for peace. In the debate on the war resolution, Gronna, a stolid North Dakotan with a massive walrus mustache, asked, in his unpolished and deliberate manner, why the hundreds of thousands of petitions against war were being ignored. La Follette, making the principle speech against war, began by reading a letter from Mrs. H. A. Wood of Flasher, North Dakota: “Is the sinking of a few merchant ships worth even on life?” On the roll call in the Senate, Gronna courageously cast the first of six nay votes. McCumber, however, voted for war, and in the House, Patrick D. Norton and George M, Young also did so. But Helgesen, who was to die shortly, was in a hospital and did not vote.

Why did North Dakota so staunchly oppose entry into the war? Although about one-fifth of its people were of German stock, the ethnic
factor should not be overemphasized. North Dakotans, always hostile to outside interests, believed that the war was being fomented by eastern financiers and industrialists for their own selfish advantage. They believed that the war would destroy progressive reform, that it was not really a just one for democratic ends. And finally they believed that war was not necessary to vindicate national honor. They remembered that European neutrals, such as Norway and Sweden, had lost 667 vessels through German submarines, as compared to only 19 lost by the United States. “Deeply rooted ideological distrust of the financial and industrial capitalist classes by the German and Norwegian elements of the population,” wrote Professor Robert P. Wilkins, “which was greatly intensified by the exploitation of North Dakota producers, may be said chiefly to account for the persistent opposition to policies that appeared to lead to war.”

HELPING TO WIN THE WAR: MILITARY SERVICE

After the United States entered the war, North Dakota performed its full share of patriotic service. The first men from the state to go overseas were those of the two National Guard regiments. One regiment, the First North Dakota, had served on the Mexican border. Soon after it was discharged from such service on February 14, 1917, part of the regiment was put to work guarding the bridges and yards of the Northern Pacific. In May, other companies began to drill in their armories, and the regiment was recruited up to full strength. Many of its former members were eager for service, so, late in June, Governor Frazier authorized the organization of the Second North Dakota under Colonel Frank White, Valley City banker and former governor, who had commanded the First North Dakota in the Philippine insurrection. In two weeks the new regiment had 47 officers and 1,622 men.

On July 3, President Wilson called the National Guard into federal service. On August 16, Field Hospital No. 1 of North Dakota (six officers and seventy men) entrained at Lisbon for Camp Cody, Deming, New Mexico; there it became Field Hospital No. 136 of the Thirty-fourth Division. On September 29 the First North Dakota, 51 officers and 2,057 men under Colonel John H. Fraine of Grafton, entrained for Camp Greene, North Carolina. Fraine, an English immigrant and attorney, had been a member of the regiment since 1885. On October 1 the Second North Dakota also left for Camp Greene.

Both regiments, except for the field-hospital company at Camp Cody, became part of the Forty-first, or Sunset, Division, which was composed of Guard units from several western states. It was a replacement division; its men became widely scattered, serving with many Regular Army

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units. On December 15 the Forty-first Division, after a few weeks’ training interrupted by epidemics, sailed for Liverpool on the Leviathan, the reconverted German ship Vaterland. These men fought at Cantigny and Soissons, held the defensive Toul sector, helped to stop the German offensive at Château-Thierry, and then took part at Saint-Mihiel and in the Argonne Forest in the Allied offensives which ended the war.

One of them was Wesley R. Johnson, a tall, 126-pound university student who had enlisted in the Guard at seventeen. That was in August, 1917. By March 2, 1918, young Johnson was in the front lines. For much of the next nine months he marched through rain and mud, stumbled about in dark woods, dug trenches, stretched barbed wire, listened to deafening artillery fire, slept in barns, went over the top, and saw his comrades die.

National Guardsmen like Johnson numbered 4,195 officers and men; a few of these were in the state quartermaster detachment and the rest went overseas. In all, 31,269 officers and men from North Dakota served in the various branches of the armed forces during the First World War. Of this total, 19,772 volunteered, 11,481 entered through the Selective Service System, and 16 were civilians attached to the armed forces. The first draft call, 1,582 men, came on September 5, 1917; the peak of the draft was in May, June, and July of 1918. Of those called, 78 percent were physically fit, compared to 70 percent in the nation.

In all, 160,292 men from 18 to 45 years of age registered for the draft in North Dakota. The county draft boards placed 44,134 men in Class I as liable to military service; 24,382 of these were in the 21-30 age group and none were over 36. Most draftees filed claims for exemption or deferment. In 1918 the state draft board considered 35,815 claims. No able-bodied Sioux from Standing Rock sought exemption; all were eager to do their part in preserving civilization.²

Before the draft was under way, many eager patriots rushed into war service. College students and alumni flocked to officers’ training camps and earned commissions. Early in April, 1917, Dr. Eric P. Quain, Swedish-born surgeon and founder of a clinic in Bismarck, organized a Red Cross hospital unit with doctors and nurses from Bismarck. It became a base hospital at Bazeilles-sur-Meuse, and Quain himself served as chief of surgical services and director of operating teams in military hospitals in France. At the Armistice, 148 North Dakota nurses

and about 200 physicians were serving with the United States Army Medical Corps.\(^3\) Eight men (including former Governor Louis B. Hanna) and seven women went overseas with the Red Cross; others worked in army libraries. More than 100 men entered the war work of the Young Men’s Christian Association.

Some North Dakota women used their talents to entertain the troops. Young Ethel Halcrow (later to be Mrs. John B. Cooley and long the national Republican committeewoman for North Dakota) was a dramatic entertainer in army hospitals and camps. After the Armistice, Helen J. Sullivan, a member of the university faculty, managed the Étoile Service Club in Paris. Hazel B. Nielson, a young high school teacher in Fargo, and Delia Linwell, talented in dramatics, worked in army recreation centers in southern France. They and several hundred other American girls—all tremendously proud to be doing their bit—talked, walked, picnicked, sang, and danced with battle-weary veterans; they put on vaudeville acts, drove mobile canteens, and served chocolate and doughnuts. Everywhere she went, Hazel Nielson heard nothing but praise for North Dakota soldiers. A little later, while “fighting the battle of Paris,” she met a number of them and had gay, exciting reunions with the girls from the University of North Dakota.

Many North Dakota women went to Washington to take government jobs. The state’s institutions of higher education were, of course, affected by the war. In March, 1917, students at the university began to drill under volunteer faculty instructors. Some soon enlisted; many others went to work on farms, but in the fall the enrollment was down only 11 percent. The university and the Agricultural College gave courses in radio, telephony, auto mechanics, blacksmithing, carpentry, and other practical subjects to prepare men for the armed services. In the fall of 1918 the federal government established units of the Student Army Training Corps at some five hundred colleges and universities throughout the nation to combine military training and college courses and to train officers and technical experts. In North Dakota, S.A.T.C. units were placed at the university, the Agricultural College, Fargo College, and Jamestown College. An influenza epidemic stopped the program when it had been under way a week. At the university the epidemic forced the suspension of classes and a quarantine of the campus. A week later, most of the students were ill. Dormitories became hospitals, and the well fled to their homes; the physicians and women of Grand Forks helped nurses and an army doctor care for the stricken. At the Agricultural College, 12 of the 735 students enrolled there died; 29 of the university’s 473 students died in three weeks. It had been a tragic experience.

During the war, there were 1,305 deaths among the men from North Dakota: 514 were killed in action; 149 died from wounds; and 642 died

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from disease. North Dakotans won 133 decorations: 2 Medals of Honor, 26 Distinguished Service Crosses, 4 Distinguished Service Medals, 4 Navy Crosses, and 97 decorations by Allied governments.4

North Dakota appreciated the service rendered by its fighting men. The legislature declared a moratorium on their debts, and when the war was over, it gave them a bonus of $25 a month for each month of service. North Dakota was the first state to give veterans a substantial bonus; in May, 1921, Senator Edwin F. Ladd boasted that no other state had equaled it. By the end of 1928 the state had paid out $8,800,000 to 26,475 veterans.

HELPING TO WIN THE WAR: CIVILIAN EFFORTS

Besides supplying men, North Dakota mobilized its material and emotional resources. On May 28, 1917, Governor Frazier appointed a state council of defense; each county set up a subsidiary committee. In July, John P. Hardy of Fargo began to organize a corps of “Four-Minute Men” to give patriotic speeches. Soon the 130 towns with motion-picture theaters had their Four-Minute Men; eventually, 588 speakers enrolled. Each week some of them gave patriotic talks in movie houses, schools, churches, and poolrooms. They talked to threshing crews and at lodge meetings and auction sales, asking for binoculars for the navy, preaching conservation, whipping up support for the war, and aiding bond sales.

There were five bond drives, Liberty Loans, to raise money for the war. Federal Reserve officials assigned each state and each county a quota. North Dakota’s quota was $1,500,000 in the first loan, $6,000,000 in the second, $6,500,000 in the third, $19,000,000 in the fourth, and $18,500,000 in the fifth, which came after the war was over. A system of state, county, and local committees organized the drives, put on nightly appeals at movies, and personally called on every prospective subscriber. Louis B. Hanna was state chairman for the first two loans.

The response was tremendous. North Dakota oversubscribed every loan, the third by 87 percent, and bought $65,500,000 worth of bonds. This was 24 percent more than its quota; the nation oversubscribed by only 16 percent. On one occasion a threshing hand subscribed for $5,000 worth of bonds, pulling out his bankbook to prove he had the money. The poverty-stricken Sioux of Standing Rock, throwing prudence to the winds, bought some $100,000 worth of bonds. Bond buying seemed to stimulate other saving. Although the war years, except for 1915, produced poor crops, per capita bank deposits rose from $35 in 1914 to $132 in 1918.5

In addition to buying bonds, North Dakotans gave generously to the

5Samuel Torgerson, “North Dakota’s Contribution Thru the Liberty Loan,” Quarterly Journal of the University of North Dakota, X (October 1919), 17-22.
Red Cross, the Young Men’s Christian Association, and other agencies working for the troops. The Sioux alone gave more than two thousand dollars to the Red Cross. “The Red Cross,” wrote Aaron McGaffey Beede, an Episcopal missionary at Standing Rock, “is the center of Indian eager emotion and firm resolve in all war work... because of the association of the Red Cross with the Sundance, or at least with the basic Sundance ideas.” The Sioux associated both the Red Cross and the Sun Dance with the recovery of sick or wounded persons, with a cross symbol, and with the color red. During the war, Sun Dance vows were sometimes paid by giving horses to the Red Cross, and a red cross would be worn as a substitute for the old-time cutting of the breast.

Many white women joined the Red Cross (the state was near the top in membership) and spent long hours making surgical dressings, socks, and sweaters. In the Junior Red Cross, school children also turned out large quantities of such items. There were many other ways to help the war effort. In every village and town, vacant lots became war gardens; housewives canned vegetables as never before and cheerfully accepted restrictions on the consumption of meat, sugar, and wheat flour. It became fashionable to be frugal. Dean E. J. Babcock of the university’s School of Mines, in charge of fuel conservation for the state council of defense, preached the gospel of lignite to cut down the consumption of eastern coal. As state fuel administrator, Captain I. P. Baker, an old-time steamboat captain, continued Babcock’s work, publishing pamphlets on the uses and advantages of lignite. The use of lignite increased, the state had ample fuel, and the lignite industry was permanently benefited.

When the Armistice of November 11, 1918, ended the fighting, North Dakota rejoiced with the rest of the nation. The Sioux at Standing Rock held victory dances, the first since the Little Big Horn. At Cannonball they counted coups (touching with war club or lance in imitation of an ancient battle custom) on an effigy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. At Fort Yates, however, missionary Beede heard some old Indians decide that the most appropriate punishment for Kaiser Wilhelm, the object of intense hatred throughout America as the instigator of the war, would be to give him an allotment of land like an Indian’s, some trees for a log cabin, a team of horses, harness, a wagon, a few cattle, and some agricultural implements such as were given to the Indians. Then the Indian agent should say to the Kaiser:

Now you lazy bad man, you farm and make your living by farming, rain or no rain; and if you do not make your own living, don’t come to the Agency whining when you have no food in your stomach and no money, but stay here on your farm and grow fat till you starve.6

6Aaron McGaffey Beede, “The Dakota Indian Victory-Dance,” North Dakota Historical Quarterly, IX (April 1942), 173-174; United States Bureau of
The number of Indian farms in North Dakota declined from 721 in 1910 to 517 in 1920.

**WAR AIMS IN NORTH DAKOTA**

The cost of the war, the terrible sacrifices demanded of the participants, made the goals for which the nations were fighting a matter of great importance. Early in the war some socialist groups in Europe began to talk of a peace based on no annexations and no indemnities. Before the United States entered the war, President Wilson spoke of the need for a peace without victory: a peace dictated by the victors would only plant the seeds for future wars. As a radical organization, the Nonpartisan League naturally sympathized with such views and opposed war profits. Its conservative opponents sought to identify such a stand with disloyalty and thereby destroy the League and its socialist schemes by turning the powerful emotions of patriotism against it.

The League wanted to pay for the war with taxes on war profits and the conscription of wealth-methods which would promote the socialist goal of equality. In 1917, before the declaration of war, the League-controlled lower house of the legislature passed a resolution calling on Congress, in the event of war, to make the first levy upon the “swollen fortunes” created by war profits. When Congress began to finance the war by means of bond sales instead of drastic taxation, Arthur C. Townley spoke throughout the state in favor of the conscription of wealth as a war policy. He favored conscription of men but also demanded that the government take the profits of the “rotten rich” to pay for the war. “Is this treason?” he would ask. “It is right!” the farmers would shout.

Late in the spring of 1917 the League drew up a statement of war aims. These resolutions pledged League members to defend the nation. They opposed the annexation of territory or the exaction of indemnities because these would deepen hatreds and cause future wars. They asked that the United States and its allies immediately make a common public declaration of peace terms “without annexations of territory, indemnities, contributions, or interference with the right of any nation to live and manage its own internal affairs.” The resolutions called for the conscription of wealth: “Patriotism demands service from all according to their capacity. To conscript men and exempt the blood-stained wealth coined from the sufferings of humanity is repugnant to the spirit of America and contrary to the ideals of democracy.” The League leaders denounced the evils of secret diplomacy; they feared that secret treaties instead of generous principles of humanity and democracy would govern the making of the peace.

The Nonpartisan League also favored federal control of the economy during the war. It urged food and price controls and the taking over of
the railroads, the communications system, the major utilities, and resources of coal and oil. Such controls, it believed, would protect the well-being of all citizens. Leaguers liked President Wilson’s strictures on profiteering; they loved Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Carl Vrooman, who spoke in Fargo, praising the patriotism of the farmers and blasting the “food pirates”: “We have the best blood of the nation; we must draft also the wealth of the nation.” They cheered when Herbert Hoover told a congressional committee that the people were being robbed of fifty million dollars a month by profiteering on flour alone.

There were obviously many similarities between the policies advocated by the League and those of the Wilson Administration. Wilson’s Fourteen Points, announced in January, 1918, contained many of the League war resolutions drawn up in the spring of 1917: a just peace, no indemnities, no annexations, and an end to secret diplomacy.

Although he was not a member of the Nonpartisan League, Senator Porter J. McCumber supported Wilson’s war aims, especially the proposal for a League of Nations. As early as January 13, 1916, he introduced a resolution in the Senate asking that the United States take the lead in forming such an organization. In 1919 he fought hard for the acceptance of the League Covenant, which Wilson had framed in Paris, and sharply criticized the isolationists and the selfish partisan opposition of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and most of the Republican senators. McCumber was the only Republican senator to vote for joining the League of Nations both with and without reservations. Senator Asle J. Gronna, however, joined its most extreme opponents: “I for one will die before I will vote for the League of Nations in its present form.” There was considerable support for Wilson’s plan in North Dakota. One newspaper wrote that the League of Nations was a “scheme to boost and not to knock.” Twice in 1919 (in March and again at a special session in December) the state legislature passed resolutions favoring participation by the United States.

Woodrow Wilson’s liberal philosophy had long appealed to the Nonpartisan League. Before America’s entry into the First World War, the Nonpartisan Leader had often printed paragraphs from Wilson’s published speeches, The New Freedom, and League speakers constantly quoted the book. The League was soon selling it at a special price to members, commending it as a “textbook of League principles.” Late in 1917, George Creel, head of the federal war propaganda agency, arranged an interview between Townley and Wilson. Creel himself wrote: “North Dakota… has as fine a record of war support as any other commonwealth in the Union.”

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In spite of that record, loyalty became an issue in North Dakota. Wartime patriotism, the presence of many recent immigrants, and the struggle against the Nonpartisan League raised the issue. The last-named cause was especially important. Conservatives, seeking to destroy the League, seem to have entered into a conspiracy to picture North Dakota as a disloyal state. To attack the patriotism of League officeholders was, in reality, to attack the patriotism of the overwhelming majority who had elected them and who still supported them. Yet for most of the war, Jerry Bacon filled the *Grand Forks Herald* with statements questioning the loyalty of Lynn J. Frazier, Arthur C. Townley, and other League leaders. It frequently attacked Senators La Follette and Gronna for their alleged pro-German feelings and represented the election of League-backed John M. Baer to Congress in 1917 as a defeat for Americanism. Other conservative newspapers and speakers at patriotic meetings repeated the same themes. The opposition press freely misquoted Townley’s speeches—in order to give them a pro-German cast—until he began to have a stenographic transcription made for his own protection.

Opponents of the League—community leaders: bankers, lawyers, and members of commercial clubs—took the lead in all patriotic activities, such as Liberty Loan, Red Cross, and war-charity drives, and excluded the League. When collections for the Red Cross were taken up at League meetings, Red Cross officials refused to accept the money. The state Red Cross chairman’s secretary sent out a letter on official stationery: “Here in North Dakota we consider the League thoroughly disloyal.” Statements like this were falsehoods. There was never a federal indictment for sedition or discouraging enlistment returned against a League official or against a League-elected state officeholder. Under such men, North Dakota compiled an outstanding record in patriotic service. After a year and a half of vilification, North Dakotans re-elected Governor Frazier by a large majority.

There were, however, some trials involving League speakers, although they did not prove disloyalty. In December, 1917, Kate Richards O’Hare was sentenced at Bismarck to five years in a federal penitentiary after a trial before Judge Martin J. Wade of Iowa. She was a well-known Socialist and an earnest pacifist. While a guest of prominent Leaguers Mr. and Mrs. George A. Totten of Bowman, she made an antiwar speech, not sponsored by the League, and was charged with sedition. Many believed that she was convicted on false testimony.

The most important case involving the Nonpartisan League was that of Walter Thomas Mills. A veteran Socialist and agitator from California and nearly eighty, Mills made a fiery speech in Fargo before the June,
Who are the men who are fighting for us in France? They are not the sons of members of chambers of commerce; they are not the sons of commercial travelers; they are not bankers’ or merchants’ sons; but they are your boys. For every thousand soldiers killed in France there is one additional millionaire in America.

Boiling with anger, a group of Fargo businessmen demanded that Mills be indicted. At the conclusion of his trial, Judge Charles F. Amidon seeing that aroused emotions made a fair judgment unlikely, directed the jury to return a verdict of not guilty. He said that although the sons of the rich were serving in France, “unfair speech does not constitute a violation of the espionage act.”

The Fargo business community turned on Amidon, one of the leading men of the city for over a third of a century. For days he was scarcely spoken to; businessmen crossed the street to avoid meeting him; at church, people moved out of the pew in which he sat. Amidon, a courageous judge, was sympathetic with the Nonpartisan League; for a time, his daughter worked for it.

There were, of course, espionage and sedition trials which did not involve the League. In the 1880’s, John H. Wishek had promoted the settlement of McIntosh County, winning the affectionate title “Father Wishek,” and had become wealthy. Although born in Pennsylvania, he was proud of his German ancestry, and gave away five or six copies of a booklet entitled *German Achievements in America*. Enemies, jealous of his business success, secured his indictment under the Espionage Act and gathered at Bismarck to gloat over his downfall.

The trial dragged on for three weeks. Wishek’s attorneys showed that he had bought more Liberty bonds than all of his business rivals combined. At the end, Judge Amidon pointed out that the prosecution witnesses bore a “private grudge” against Wishek. He told the jury that three things were forbidden by the Espionage Act: false reports to interfere with the success of the armed forces, incitement to mutiny, and obstruction of recruiting. The jury must decide whether Wishek’s act would naturally tend to accomplish any of these things and whether he gave away the booklets with that “deliberate purpose” in view. The jury, standing nine to three for acquittal, disagreed. The charges were dropped, but the incident darkened Wishek’s later years.

As the trial revealed, Judge Amidon tended to interpret the Espionage Act in a manner that would make it less effective as a tool for suppressing dissent.

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Act narrowly. He excluded as valid evidence acts and speech which showed that a defendant lacked patriotism, if these things did not interfere with the success of the armed forces or obstruct recruiting. Amidon’s fair handling or such cases won him the praise of Zechariah J. Chafee, Jr., a Harvard law professor, his book *Freedom of Speech* (1920). The two became friends. Amidon gave North Dakota a good record on civil liberties during the First World War, probably the period of their greatest restriction. Edwin F. Ladd, making his first speech in the United States Senate in 1921, boasted that during the war the state had been “an oasis of sanity in a desert of hysteria.”

There were, however, some convictions in North Dakota under the Espionage and Sedition acts. Farmer Henry von Bank, a naturalized citizen from Luxembourg, was president of a strict school board in Cass County. When the board was criticized for refusing to buy a flag, he visited the school. Miffed by the fuss, he told the teacher (the originator or the criticism) that he would just as soon see a pair of old trousers flying over the schoolhouse as the flag of the United States. Von Bank was convicted, but the circuit court ordered a new trial because Judge Amidon had not directed a verdict of not guilty.

The conviction of the Reverend John Fontana was also revered. A German Evangelical pastor at New Salem, he had become a naturalized citizen in 1898. Fontana blamed President Wilson for the declaration of war. Moreover, he refused to buy Liberty bonds, to put up a flag in his church, or to give to the Red Cross. Judge Amidon told the jury that these deeds were not crimes, but when Fontana was found guilty, Amidon sentenced him to three years in the penitentiary. After his conviction, Fontana’s congregation refused to dismiss him, and his synod chose him as chief speaker at the dedication of the new church in Hebron.

**THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE WAR**

The war, of course, influenced North Dakota agriculture, always subject to outside forces. The war’s inflationary impact was intensified by the almost simultaneous end of free land. The war did not make the state prosperous, as it did the nation; rather, the wartime inflation of land values wrought permanent injury to the North Dakota economy.

North Dakota’s role was to supply wheat for the United States and the Allies. The war increased the price of wheat, but the state did not benefit very much because in half of the six years from 1914 through 1919 it had poor crops. The wheat crop was poor (50,000,000 to 60,000,000 bushels) in 1916, 1917, and 1919; it was average (about 100,000,000 bushels) in 1914 and 1918; only in 1915 was it large—a record-breaking 159,000,000 bushels. That year, however, the price fell off sharply (about twenty-five cents a bushel) when the farmers sold the crop.

When the United States entered the war, farmers were urged to increase their production of food. The day after the declaration of war, Governor Lynn J. Frazier urged farmers to plant every available acre to
meet the need. In 1918, Frazier, Edwin F. Ladd, then president of the
Agricultural College and state food administrator, and Thomas Cooper,
director of the North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station, asked
North Dakota farmers to grow more wheat and rye. They increased their
plantings and in 1918 harvested about half a million more acre of wheat
than they had the year before.

The federal government, however, moved against the wheat farmer. In
August, 1917, a commission appointed by Food Administrator Herbert
Hoover set the price of No. 1 Northern at $2.20 at Chicago. The cash
price at that time was $3.06. In 1918 the government raised the price to
$2.26. It did not, however, regulate the price of flour. It hardly seemed
fair that the farmer should be singled out for control while others were
allowed to make all they could from the war boom. The Nonpartisan
Leader called it virtually “commandeering the crop.”

Drought also hurt farm income. The western two-thirds of the state had
less than normal precipitation for four straight years, from 1917 through
1920. The year 1917 was the driest since statehood, with only 10.75
inches; only 1934 and 1936 have been drier. By the fall of 1918, hay was
fifteen dollars a ton and scarce. Stockmen were culling their herds and
selling the cattle they could not feed. After three dry years, cattle went
in to the winter of 1919-1920 in poor condition; many starved. Ranchers,
operating on borrowed capital, had to sell their herds in a declining
market, and some of the older men never recovered from their losses.
The price of good beef steers fell 48 percent from the fall of 1920 to the
fall of 1921.10

Earlier the war had created a shortage of farm labor. Thousands of men
entered the armed services; many others left the state for jobs in war
industries. In the summer of 1917 a committee of the Nonpartisan
League worked out an agreement with representatives of the Agricultural
Workers’ Union (affiliated with the radical Industrial Workers of the
World), but Arthur C. Townley thought the four-dollar minimum daily
wage was too high and refused to accept it. Governor Frazier then issued
an order for strict protection of employers and crops against worker
violence but forbidding police action against workers seeking higher
wages. By 1918 farm hands were getting an average wage of seventy
dollars a month. School terms were shifted, allowing high school boys
to work in the fields. In most towns, groups of businessmen helped to
bring in the crops. Six-foot-four John Moses, then a lawyer at Hazen and
later to be governor of the state, organized such a harvest brigade and
excelled the others as a bundle pitcher. Labor shortages and high farm
wages were a part of the national inflationary trend.

The decade from 1910 to 1920 saw some expansion in agriculture. The
number of cattle on farms more than doubled, but farms were still not

10M. B. Johnson, Range Cattle Production in Western North Dakota, North
Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 347 (Fargo, 1947) pp. 13-16.
well stocked in 1920 and wheat still dominated the economy. There was a small increase in the number of farms, from 74,000 to 78,000, but there were large increases in the amount on land in farms (from 28,000,000 acres to 36,000,000) and in their average size (from 382 acres to 466). The really big increase, however, came in the value of all farm property—from $975,000,000 to $1,760,000,000, a peak which would not be reached again until the inflationary spiral of the 1950’s.

Land was, of course, the basic wealth of North Dakota. Its value had been rising since the beginning of settlement, and the end of free land, followed shortly by wartime inflation, drove land values even higher. Farm land averaged $11 an acre in 1900, $26 in 1910, and $35 in 1920. As the value of the land went up, so did the number of mortgaged farms, the mortgage debt, and tenancy. Half of the farms operated by their owners were mortgaged in 1910, 71 percent in 1920. The mortgage debt increased from $48,000,000 to $108,000,000. The percentage of farms operated by tenants increased from 14 percent to 26 percent.

Inflation nearly ruined the state. Many farmers, dazzled by high prices for farm produce, borrowed money from banks and bought land for more than it was worth. When the bubble burst, land values and produce prices began a disastrous decline. In the deflation, North Dakota suffered severely. Many farmers lost their land in the 1920’s; many banks failed; tenancy increased rapidly. The optimistic time of rapid settlement was over, and the state now entered a period of relative stagnation.

The turning point had actually come about 1915. For the first time in North Dakota’s history the population began to grow at a rate less than that of natural increase. The rate of natural increase (the excess of births over deaths) was about 15 percent per decade. The population of the area which became North Dakota in 1889 had risen 1,435 percent from 1870 to 1880 and 417 percent from 1880 to 1890. The state’s population had grown 67 percent from 1890 to 1900, and 81 percent from 1900 to 1910. From 1910 to 1920, its population increased by only 12 percent.

North Dakotans were moving from the countryside to the towns and cities. From 1910 to 1920 the population of urban places (over 2,500) grew 39 percent; the population of the smaller towns and villages rose 29 percent; the population of the countryside increased by only 4 percent. Ten counties actually declined in population.

According to the federal census, North Dakota had a population of 577,000 in 1910 and 647,000 in 1920, an increase of 70,000 persons during the decade. This number was some 22,000 less than the rate of natural increase. A state census in 1915 put the population at 637,000. Thus almost all of the growth had come in the first half of the decade. Then, large numbers of people began to leave the state, more than matching the number still coming in. This is shown by the increase in the number of persons born in North Dakota but living in other states; in 1910 the number was 48,000; in 1920 it was 101,000. People had been leaving North Dakota since the beginning of settlement, but now, for the
History of North Dakota

first time, more were leaving than were coming in.

It was a turning point in the state’s history. Up to 1915 the major problems had been connected with the taking up of the land, the creation of farms and towns and railroads and the whole mechanism of a civilized society—the mighty influx of people and capital from the outside. Now, in 1915, the free lands were gone; the new frontiers of opportunity were the cities. After 1915 the most serious problems (although, of course, they had appeared before) were to be connected with adjustments to the semiarid nature of the country, to North Dakota’s status as a dependent hinterland producing wheat and cattle for outside markets and lacking opportunities for all of its people. That North Dakota’s greatest export was people was to become almost a folk saying in the state. Could the state diversify its economy or must it remain fundamentally a spring-wheat country? After the First World War, North Dakota began its long struggle to answer that question.
Dakota Landscape near Mouse River, engraving from railroad exploration and survey report, published 1860.

Mandan Indian women, c. 1860.
Buffalo graze in western North Dakota.
A Socialistic State in the First World War

Frontier Scout, North Dakota’s first newspaper, issue of July 14, 1864.
Bonanza farm scenes, 1878.
Theodore Roosevelt in Medora, early 1880s.

Theodore Roosevelt’s log cabin on Chimney Butte Ranch, Badlands, c. 1904.
Marquis de Morés, 1886.

Mandan Indians attend state fair at Mandan.
Red River carts in North Dakota.

Steamboat on the Missouri River at Fort Yates.
Sitting Bull, c.1880s.
Dakota rescue party, roped together, searches for missing children. Engraving from “Scenes and Incidents of the Recent Terrible Blizzard in Dakota,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, January 28, 1888.

Editorial cartoon depicting Dakota Territory applying for statehood, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, March 3, 1888.
Alexander McKenzie, 1890s.

After the blizzard, Main Street, Milton, c.1893.
John McKay threshing outfit, Milton, c. 1900.

Joseph and Annie Burkholder family, Towner County, 1901.
Hickson, around 1910.

Bishop Shanley with Indians at Fort Totten, 1909.
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William Langer.

John Burke, c. 1908.
Nonpartisan League editorial cartoon, 1916.

Crowd waiting to see World War I soldiers leave for the draft, Bismarck, c. 1917-18.
Salvation Army booth, Fargo, c. 1917.

Red River Valley Fairgrounds, Fargo, July 1918. Fargo North High School currently occupies the site.
Governor Lynn G. Frazier signs women's suffrage bills, 1917.

Old North Dakota capitol, Southwest view, c. 1910.
New state capitol, completed in 1934.

Minneapolis-Moline Power Implement Co. building, 1930s.
Building North Dakota Mill and Elevator, Grand Forks, 1922.

Home life, 1944.
Snow removal in rural North Dakota.
Lawrence Welk, 1940s.
A Socialistic State in the First World War

Garrison Dam Construction near Riverdale, 1950s.

Garrison Dam Spillway, 1950s.
North Dakota politicians, from left to right, front: Gerald P. Nye, Fred G. Aandahl; back: Otto Krueger, Usher L. Burdick, William Langer, Milton R. Young.
A Socialistic State in the First World War
Interstate 94 in western North Dakota.