

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gerald E. Shenk. *"Work or Fight!" Race, Gender, and the Draft in World War One*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. x + 194 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-6175-4; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4039-6177-8.

Reviewed by Richard Fogarty (Department of History, University at Albany)

Published on H-Minerva (October, 2007)

## Drafting Conformity

With the passage of the Selective Service Act in 1917, the United States adopted a new system of conscription to meet the challenges of full participation in Europe's Great War. While the U.S. military actually needed less than 10 percent of eligible men to serve in uniform, officials believed that the exigencies of modern total war required the utilization of all of the nation's productive capacities, both military and economic. The resulting policies, vividly distilled in the slogan "Work or Fight," sought to ensure that every available, healthy American male contributed to the war effort through uniformed service or labor deemed necessary to the prosecution of the war. However, Gerald Shenk's study of the draft during the First World War shows that the officials who administered the system, and the people who supported it in unofficial capacities, sought not only to mobilize the nation for war, but also to ensure "that millions of other men and women work to sustain the existing social order" (p. 2). In short, "the fundamental goals of draft officials at the local, state, and national levels were to protect privileges associated with property, patriarchy, and white supremacy, while providing men to fight the war" (p. 153).

Shenk's work is not a general history of the origins and operation of conscription during the war,[1] but an attempt to write "a multilayered portrayal and analysis of what the draft meant to Americans of all kinds where they lived their daily lives in their homes and communities" (p. 4). In particular, he investigates how the workings of the Selective Service System revealed the roles race, gender, and class played in American life in the early twentieth century, and how local attitudes about these issues affected the administration of conscription policies. To that end, Shenk has taken a case study approach, focusing on the implementation of policies at local and statewide levels in Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, and California. The author employs this methodology presumably because it provides broad national coverage—

of the Northeast, the South, the Midwest, and the West—though he does not spend much space justifying this approach or explain fully why he chose these states, what makes them representative or good choices for closer examination. Still, the strength of the approach is to set these state and local stories against the broad background of the national war effort, and the wide-ranging regional coverage allows the author to draw conclusions at both the macro and micro levels.

In his examination of Georgia, and in particular of Coweta County, Shenk demonstrates the ways in which local draft board members worked in accordance with white planters' interests, especially by releasing black sharecroppers to the army only when it was economically convenient, and by ensuring that black soldiers would return to farms on furloughs that once again served local white elites' interests. In this context, "work or fight" policies became a labor draft. Likewise in Illinois, both across the state and in Adams County, local officials administered national military and labor policies in ways that best served the parochial interests of white, propertied men. These officials, aided by freelance vigilante groups like the American Protective League, worked diligently to ensure that women, conscientious objectors (from sects like the pacifist Church of the Brethren), German Americans, and Industrial Workers of the World labor activists all played their prescribed roles, though Shenk finds evidence that members of these groups sometimes found ways to manipulate the system, even if only slightly, for their own benefit. State officials in New Jersey, and municipal authorities in Paterson, manipulated the work or fight imperatives in order to consolidate the position of middle-class white men and manufacturers interested in controlling the labor and behavior of women, immigrants, and perceived "slackers" (a rubric that covered a broad range of noncompliance). California as a whole, and San Diego County, presented probably the most complicated racial environment—an

environment to which federal understandings of race as black and white were ill suited—as prominent white business and political leaders acted to preserve their economic interests, avoid induction into the army for themselves and their friends, and control the movement and labor of a complex mix of residents of European, Native American, Mexican, Japanese, and Chinese descent.

Shenk's overall finding—that privileged white men manipulated the draft for their own benefit and in their social, political, and economic best interests—is not surprising. After all, “rich man's war, poor man's fight” is an old story.[2] The author's observation that “there was little distinction between public, or state, authority in Progressive Era Georgia” (p. 46) rings true for many other eras and places. What is truly interesting about this study is that it documents the precise ways this process worked at local and state levels in response to directives and imperatives from the highest levels of society and government in America. The system was not monolithic, and could be used by the powerful and the not-so-powerful alike in different ways. Shenk shows with considerable skill and attention to nuance the ways in which all participants in the system used and manipulated it, or attempted to do so, often in ways that contradicted the larger aims of the state. Thus, the Selective Service System became a “field of engagement” where power and behavior were “negotiated,” rather than dictated from above (p. 159). In this view, economic and political elites, planters, factory owners, and even vigilantes sought, and often achieved, coercive power over others. But even these groups did not always serve the larger interests of the state, as evidenced by the federal investigator who “bemoaned ‘the darkness in Georgia,’ where few of the wartime programs seemed to be functioning as intended by Washington officials” (p. 29). And conscientious objectors, members of pacifist sects, Japanese Americans, women, and others also found ways to work the system to their advantage, or to mitigate some of its disadvantages. Women, in particular, often used the requirements of “work or fight” to force recalcitrant husbands to support their families. As Shenk notes, this meant that some individuals who were not men exercised, ironically, the kind of agency here that was supposed to be the exclusive preserve of propertied white men (p. 81). But Shenk shows how powerful these mechanisms of social control really were by observing that even those who found ways to manipulate the system did so on terms set by powerful white men—they rarely questioned the fundamental basis of white patriarchy, or the fundamental ideology that underpinned it (pp. 7, 160). The Illinois woman who complained that, “A man is no man that is not willing to

fight for his own country,” shared, or was at least willing to recognize and use strategically, the ideals of manhood established by white males in her patriarchal society (p. 49).

What, exactly were these ideals? Whiteness and manhood were not inherent attributes, but culturally constructed identities that men had to earn through appropriate “performance” of mastery over oneself, nature, economic production, and other people. Even some white men could fail to perform these roles—if they were poor and lacked the resources to assume these forms of control, or if they lacked the civic consciousness to do their duty as prescribed by political and social elites—and thus place themselves outside full membership in their national and local communities. And this went beyond the fulfillment of one's military obligations, since of course not all men would need to serve. “Manhood could not be dependent on military service if only some men were selected. There had to be room in the concept of manhood for those who performed their duties on other ways. Yet this left enough room to shame men who worked ineffectively or did nothing to assist in the war effort by calling their manhood into question. In this view, a citizen was a particular kind of man. He was one who had self-discipline, was well-trained and thus effective, and who retained agency in the affairs of his own life” (p. 85). Blacks and women could of course not satisfy these requirements, though white men expected them to do their part. Middle-class women could not be men, but they could participate in the war effort as “extensions of manhood” (p. 17), supporting the war through their cooperation.

Shenk's claims about race and gender sometimes sound underwhelming, such as his frequent assertions that women could not be men because they were not, well, male, and blacks could not be white because they were, well, black. But behind such seemingly obvious statements lie shifting identities and multiple meanings of race and gender that could be very complex indeed. Some women could behave in ways that were a bit male, and blacks who exercised agency upset assumptions about American manhood and citizenship. A good example of this kind of complexity comes in the final chapter, on California. In that complex racial environment, Japanese Americans did not fit into the federal government's black and white racial paradigm, and so California officials were compelled to classify them (along with Chinese Americans and Native Americans) as “white” for the purposes of the Selective Service System. This troubled many Anglo Californians, not only because these men were of Asian descent, but because many Japanese Amer-

icans had themselves claimed “white” identity. These assertions, and the ambition, industriousness, and prosperity that underpinned them, threatened notions of white supremacy, and thus the very social fabric. In another indication of just how complicated the racial landscape in California appeared, so-called Mission Indians were considered white if their father had been white, reversing historical understanding of transmission of racial identity in America as proceeding through the mother. This stemmed primarily from political imperatives: the then-current policy was to transform Native Americans into acquisitive white men, respectable and stable members of the community. Shenk is skilled at guiding the reader through this maze of conflicting, contradictory, and contested identities, showing the complex ways understandings of race can operate in different social and historical contexts. As a touchstone for making sense of this complicated reality, Shenk employs W. E. B. Du Bois’s understanding of whiteness as an issue of control—of resources and of other people. This broad concept allows us to see that when white men acted, they acted in racialized and gendered terms, even when issues of race and gender were not immediately apparent. White men understood their actions this way, and their identities (pp. 130-131).

“*Work or Fight*” is a well-researched study, making particularly thorough use of primary sources such as draft board records, local newspapers, and official government documents. The work’s theoretical apparatus is, however, fairly thin. Shenk is clearly conversant with the broad contours of scholarly work on whiteness and race in American history, but he misses an opportunity to engage with some of the broader themes with which his work intersects. His work clearly belongs in a conversation about power relations and the state via Michel Foucault’s notion of bio-power. In his *Final Report* on the wartime operations of the Selective Service System, Provost Marshal General Enoch Crowder asserted that, “Never in the history of this or any other nation had a more valuable and comprehensive accumulation of data been assembled upon the physical, economic, industrial, and racial condition of a people” (quoted, p. 157). Moreover, Crowder lamented that the end of the war brought to an abrupt halt this system of classification, as he was looking forward to more “very interesting results” (p. 156). This kind of rhetoric, and Shenk’s observation that this report betrayed characteristic “categorical and scientific ways of ordering the world” (p. 153), cries out for the kind of analysis that Foucault and others have performed on the modern state and its assertion of power over individual bodies through ever-increasing amounts of knowledge and ever more sophisticated techniques of social

control. Likewise, the book contains few references to theoretical works on gender studies that should underpin this kind of analysis. The notes contain a few nods to Edward Said’s work on colonialism, and to works in the field of subaltern studies, but Shenk’s analysis could have been enriched by a more explicit engagement with this kind of work.

More irritatingly, a number of factual errors mar what is in other ways a fine study. “Hundreds of Americans” (p. 16) did not die when a German U-Boat sank the *Lusitania*, but 128. American soldiers of the First World War did not “try to prove their manhood in Germany” (p. 25), as the fighting on the Western Front occurred in France and Belgium. The American Expeditionary Force did not place “all African American combat troops in one division, the 92nd,” and brigade them with the French army (p. 41). African Americans served in both the 92nd and the 93rd Divisions, and regiments of the 93rd were released to fight under French command, while the 92nd fought as a unit under American orders. Finally, “representatives of Germany and the United States” did not sign “the Armistice that ended World War I” (p. 155). French and overall Allied Commander Marshal Ferdinand Foch, along with Britain’s First Sea Lord, Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss, signed the Armistice with German officials. There were no American signatories. These errors are silly and unnecessary, and while they do not undermine the arguments Shenk makes about American society and culture as revealed in World War One-era conscription, they point to an ignorance of, or unconcern with, the larger historical context, the huge global conflict that provoked the draft in the U.S. in the first place.

These quibbles aside, “*Work or Fight*” is a fine piece of historical research on an important topic. Readers wishing to understand the impact of the Selective Service System on American society during the First World War will have to engage with Shenk’s analysis, and students of race, gender, and class in early twentieth-century America will profit from a close reading of his material.

#### Notes

[1]. The definitive account is John Whiteclay Chambers’s *To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America* (New York: The Free Press, 1987).

[2]. Jeanette Keith’s study on a similar topic takes this phrase for its title: *Rich Man’s War, Poor Man’s Fight: Race, Class, and Power in the Rural South during the First World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Keith’s and Shenk’s books are complementary and produce some of the same findings, though Keith’s focus ranges beyond the draft and highlights resistance to the war to an even greater degree.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:  
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Richard Fogarty. Review of Shenk, Gerald E., *"Work or Fight!" Race, Gender, and the Draft in World War One*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13715>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net and MINERVA: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact [MinervaCen@aol.com](mailto:MinervaCen@aol.com) or the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).