

# America and the Great War

*Winter Term 2002*

A Message from Your Instructor, Michael Toth

This first session of the mentor section provides a good opportunity to do several things that will be relevant to the class on America and the Great War—the war that we know more familiarly as the First World War, WWI, or the war of 1914-1918.

Stuck between the Civil War and the Second World War, it has been America's most forgotten war—yet it was a war that profoundly influenced the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and America's place in it. In fact, the noted historian Page Smith titled the seventh of his ten-volume history of the United States, most of which concerns World War I, America Enters the World.

Yet we Americans are very ahistorical; we tend to be a very here and now people. But the history of the past is also the history of the present. So one of our goals in the course will be to recall this war by understanding the war itself—why it occurred, how it was fought, how the U.S. got involved, how it changed our society—and how it then shaped the rest of the century.

But first I would like for us to start with our own immediate history. Like you—and American society as a whole—the events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath have changed my thinking. One immediate change is that I approach this class differently, because I now see some curious parallels between Europe in 1914 and America in 2001. As a sociologist one key aspect of the “sociological imagination” (as you will shortly read) is the ability to comprehend one's own individual life in relation to the larger and complicating dynamics of the society one lives in. So I would like you to take the opportunity of this first mentor session to explore your own responses to several questions about your thinking and then share them with your classmates. This will put some of the issues we will be concerned with on the table and also enable you to get to know one another. This may also be helpful later when you will be working together on some of the aspects of the course.

The questions have to do with the events of 9/11 and their aftermath—in your life, in the United States, and the larger world of international affairs. How were you affected by these events? How has your thinking changed? What do you think is now different about your life, the U.S., the world? What was your opinion of President Bush prior to 9/11? What is your opinion now? What were your ideas about war and peace then? What are your thoughts and concerns now?