

## Georgia's Entry Into World War I

By MILTON L. READY\*

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Part of the state's unconcerned air may be explained by its predominantly rural atmosphere in 1914. Georgia still had one foot in the horse and buggy age, and was overwhelmingly isolationist in international affairs. Although National Guardsmen from Georgia had been alerted for possible service in the Veracruz incident, likely intervention in Mexico did not lessen Georgians' disassociation from European affairs. The Athens *Banner-Herald* declared that "The Mexican problem is nearer home and consequently affects us more directly than any European nation could just now," while the Columbus *Ledger* was absorbed with reports of Texas National Guard officers selling arms and munitions to bandits in northern Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

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Other Georgians also agreed with Smith. The Athens *Banner-Herald*, spokesman for northeastern businessmen, lamented that Wilson's inconsistent policies toward England had upset Georgia's business world. "Stocks have shown a tendency to tumble. Cotton went down two dollars a bale . . . wheat will soon go to more than two dollars a bushel. . . . The man who sells cotton will pay for the war."<sup>11</sup> As the war progressed, cotton dropped from fifteen to six cents a pound, and Georgians constantly petitioned Congress to take action against Great Britain's continental cotton embargo.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to Congressmen led by Hoke Smith, cotton merchants from Savannah, and businessmen from the larger cities and towns, at least one other influential group challenged the President's course of action. Led by the waspish Tom Watson, the powerful Farmer's Union found much to criticize in Wilson's policies.

It was axiomatic in Watson's thinking that Woodrow Wilson could do no right. Deeply imbedded in the old agitator's hydrophobic mind was the bitter distaste he conceived for the Virginian when he read his five-volume history of the United States some dozen years before.<sup>13</sup> That work "*showed the Tory* all the way through," Watson believed, as well as exalting New England to the neglect of the South.<sup>14</sup> Such offenses Watson deemed intolerable.

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The entrancement of the Frank case gave Georgians little time to think of the sinking of the *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915. The Athens *Banner-Herald* duly reported that the "Crew and Passengers of the Ill-Fated *Lusitania*" were "Not All Accounted For," and the next day buried the story on page six.<sup>18</sup> The Savannah *Press* expressed regret at the sinking, but quickly cautioned against rushing "to conclusions regarding the torpedoing. . . ." <sup>19</sup> In effect, the *Lusitania* incident was not, in the judgment of a majority of Georgia newspapers, a cause for war. "It would be especially disastrous to the South should war come. This part of the nation has suffered already in an immeasurable degree."<sup>20</sup> But the incident was nevertheless regarded as an affront to the national honor, and Georgians did not want their patriotism questioned. Georgia was not to be accused of "being backward when the honor of the nation is assailed. Her record in the Spanish-American War attests the readiness with which her people will fight when they are called upon to defend the flag."<sup>21</sup>

The lynching of Leo Frank on August 16, 1915, marked the turning point in Georgia's sentiment toward intervention in World War I. Georgia stood indicted throughout the nation because of the Frank hanging. Boston merchants suggested a boycott upon all Georgia products, and the "barbarous deed" was freely compared to atrocities in "bleeding Belgium."<sup>22</sup> While Georgians could no more comprehend such an attitude than Germans could understand Allied talk of the "Hun," they nevertheless reacted to national censure. Although a few Georgians expressed indignation and withdrawal in the face of the condemnation, most felt shame and desired reconciliation with the Union. Thus, in an effort to rid themselves of recently embarrassing associations with Tom Watson and his anti-Wilson

tion in 1917, the *Banner-Herald* stated emphatically that the "Negroes of the South, Loyal to America," would not respond to the "Efforts of Germans to Incite Them."<sup>28</sup>

Despite protestations of loyalty and the obvious enthusiasm which greeted the war declaration, Georgians did not immediately flock to the colors, nor were they in unison as to how to enter the war. Newspapers proclaimed that "Food Will Win the War," and there was widespread belief in the state that American troops would not be used at all. The balance of power would be tipped by economic aid to the Allied powers and by undermining German morale. Casual references were made to the brevity of the War of 1898, and a minority groundswell wanted the nation to "make its own war with Germany, for the protection of its own commerce, thereby avoiding alliances with European nations and thus adhering to the country-old policy laid down by Washington."<sup>29</sup>

Such attitudes and propositions were natural reactions to the confusion of war, however, and were soon replaced by general agreement that "The time has come to join forces with the great democracies of the world to put down and crush the last great military autocracy in Europe."<sup>30</sup> Military camps were set up at Camp Gordon in Augusta and Fort MacPherson in Atlanta. In towns all over the state, Uncle Sam pointed a finger at Georgians on street corners saying "I Want You!" Some 80,000 Georgians responded to the call, and the city of Atlanta, in one of its more emotional moments, turned out in force to send Georgia's Eighty-Second Division off to France.<sup>31</sup>

1,589 Georgians were killed in "the Great War." Only one woman, Camille Louis O'Brien, a Red Cross nurse from Atlanta, died in service, and then from spinal-meningitis at Blois, France, on April 28, 1919. In accord with the nation, Georgia passed "work or fight" laws and suffered her anti-war sentiment in the form of Tom Watson's continuing tirades against conscription and the encouragement of resistance to enlistment of troops for foreign service. Watson not only continued his attack upon the war administration and impugned the holiness of America's cause,

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