

It Took a World War

By Mary Lyle, Director of Education

It had been called *The Great War* and the *War to End All Wars*, but by the time the armistice was signed on November 11 of 1918, all of the nations of the world were drawn into one of the bloodiest conflicts in the history of mankind. Over four years, men were conscripted into military service resulting in the need for women to take their place in the domestic workforce. As a result, women who worked in the factories and on the battle field as nurses, found it difficult to accept that they were not considered fully equal to men.

Just as during the Civil War, women were asked to put aside their own struggle for equal rights to support the war effort. But due to the resolve of some new leaders, whose determination was unshakable, the demand for a resolution to the question of women's suffrage would no longer be delayed or denied.

Before the outbreak of World War I, the women's suffrage movement in Great Britain had become much more militant than in America. *The Women's Social and Political Union* headed by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, adopted the slogan "Deeds, not words," indicating that they would mount an activist campaign to accomplish their goals. To this end, the protestors engaged in confrontational tactics to get attention. These included heckling speakers, throwing rocks through windows, and spitting and slapping policemen. These actions resulted in arrests and imprisonment—just what the organizers wanted. The imprisoned women staged hunger strikes, and the authorities responded by force-feeding them. The spectacle of the force-feeding of women was publicized in a very sensational way, gaining sympathy for the women's rights groups. Once Britain entered the war, however, the Pankhurst organization declared a sort of truce in support of the war effort. They believed that women had a patriotic duty to suspend their suffrage campaign while the nation was at war.



Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst



Illustration of Alice Paul being force-fed

American suffragette, Alice Paul traveled to Britain in 1905 to work alongside the Pankhursts. It was there that she met fellow American, Lucy Burns and they quickly became part of the leadership of the Pankhurst organization. They were arrested and jailed numerous times and subjected to force-feeding and other types of brutality at the hands of the British government. Upon their return to America, the two women began using what they had learned in Britain to motivate women's rights organizations into action.

Woodrow Wilson, who had run on a progressive platform in 1912, was reluctant to endorse a Constitutional Amendment for Woman's Suffrage, which Paul, Burns and their allies believed was non-negotiable. In 1913 they organized the "Woman's Suffrage Procession." Thousands of women from across the United States participated, carrying signs that read, "Mr. President how long must women wait for Liberty?"

When World War I broke out in Europe in 1914, President Wilson pledged to keep the United States out of the war. "He kept us out of the war" was a slogan used by the Wilson reelection campaign, and led to his victory over his more interventionist opponents. The German attack on the RMS Lusitania with 125 American citizens killed made it impossible for the President to ignore the threat posed to American interests by Germany. Public sentiment changed after the attack, and President Wilson was forced to ask for a declaration of war against Germany in 1917 stating, "The world must be made safe for democracy." Alice Paul and her more militant allies did not backdown asserting, "When men are denied justice, they go to war. This is our war, only we are fighting it with banners instead of guns." They kept up the pressure, sending a group of women known as "Silent Sentinels" to picket outside the White House—Alice Paul and Lucy Burns made sure that the fight for women's rights continued during the war.



Alice Paul



Lucy Burns



Woman's Protest March

There were, however, opposing voices in the women's movement. Harriot Stanton Blatch, daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton for example, supported the war effort. She wrote several pamphlets urging women to "go to work" as their patriotic duty. Her focus was to prove that women were an economic force. And because of the war, her argument was shown to be sound. In an early speech Stanton stated:

From creation's dawn, our sex has done its full share of the world's work; sometimes we have been paid for it, but oftener not. . . Unpaid work never commands respect; it is the paid worker who has brought to the public mind conviction of woman's worth. — Harriot Stanton Blatch



Harriot Stanton Blatch

Finally, in 1918 President Wilson gave his support to the Women's Suffrage Amendment saying, "I regard the extension of suffrage to women as vitally essential to the successful prosecution of the great war of humanity in which we are engaged." It took a war to bring the nation together in support of the Nineteenth Amendment.

Because of the closure of the Museum due to Coronavirus restrictions, our planned *Classic Film Series* in honor of the 100th Anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment has been cancelled. I would like to recommend two films on the subject: *Iron Jawed Angels* (2004), starring Hillary Swank and *Suffragette* (2015), starring Carey Mulligan, Meryl Streep, and Helena Bonham Carter.

Source: Zimet, Susan. *Roses and Radicals: The Epic Story of How American Women Won the Right to Vote*. Puffin Books, 2020.