

doughboys the great war and the remaking of america

jennifer d keene

Doughboys: The Great War and the Remaking of America by Jennifer D. Keene is a comprehensive exploration of the profound impact that World War I had on American society, culture, and identity. The term "doughboys" refers to the American soldiers who fought in the war, and Keene's work delves into their experiences and the subsequent transformation of the United States in the post-war era. Through a detailed examination of numerous aspects of this historical period, Keene provides a nuanced understanding of how the war reshaped America, influencing everything from politics to social norms, and the legacy that persists today.

Introduction to the Doughboys

The term "doughboy" is often used to describe American soldiers from World War I, though its origin remains somewhat unclear. The nickname is thought to have derived from the flour dust that would cover the uniforms of soldiers who prepared dough for food. However, the significance of the term extends far beyond its etymology. Keene begins her study by emphasizing the importance of understanding the doughboys not just as soldiers, but as symbols of a larger societal transformation.

The Mobilization of American Forces

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, it marked a significant shift in American military strategy and identity. The mobilization of forces involved several key components:

1. **Drafting and Recruitment:** The Selective Service Act of 1917 mandated that men aged 21 to 30 enlist or be drafted into military service. This was a significant departure from previous voluntary enlistment practices.
2. **Training and Preparation:** Once drafted, soldiers underwent training at various camps, where they were prepared for the realities of modern warfare. The training not only focused on physical conditioning but also on instilling a sense of camaraderie and national pride.
3. **Diversity in the Ranks:** The ranks of the doughboys included a diverse array of individuals, representing various ethnicities and backgrounds. This diversity played a crucial role in shaping the doughboys' experiences and interactions during the war.

The Experience of Combat

Keene meticulously details the experiences of doughboys in combat, illustrating the harsh realities of trench warfare and the psychological toll it took on soldiers. The experiences can be categorized into several key themes:

The Reality of Trench Warfare

Doughboys faced the brutal conditions of trench warfare, which included:

- **Living Conditions:** Soldiers lived in muddy, unsanitary trenches that were often infested with rats and disease. The lack of proper sanitation and the constant threat of enemy fire made life in the trenches incredibly difficult.
- **Psychological Impact:** The constant bombardment and the sight of death and destruction led to psychological issues, including what was then known as "shell shock," now recognized as PTSD. Keene emphasizes that many soldiers returned home forever changed by their experiences.

Brotherhood and Comradeship

Despite the challenges, the war fostered a strong sense of brotherhood among the doughboys. This sense of camaraderie was built through:

- **Shared Experiences:** The horrors of war created bonds between soldiers, as they relied on one another for support and survival.
- **Cultural Exchange:** Doughboys often interacted with soldiers from other countries, which facilitated cultural exchanges that impacted their perspectives on the world.

The Home Front and Societal Changes

As doughboys fought overseas, life continued on the home front. Keene explores how the war catalyzed significant societal changes in America:

The Role of Women

The war opened new opportunities for women, as many men were away fighting. Key changes included:

- **Increased Workforce Participation:** Women took on roles traditionally held by men, working in factories, offices, and other sectors critical to the war effort.
- **Suffrage Movement:** The contributions of women during the war bolstered the suffrage movement, leading to the eventual passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, which granted women the right to vote.

Racial Tensions and Opportunities

The war also had a significant impact on racial dynamics in America:

- **Great Migration:** Many African Americans moved from the rural South to the urban North in search of job opportunities in factories, leading to demographic shifts and increased racial tensions.
- **Civil Rights Movements:** The contributions of black soldiers in the war helped to galvanize the civil rights movement, as returning soldiers sought to claim their rights and challenge the status quo.

The Return Home and Reintegration

After the war ended in 1918, the reintegration of doughboys into American society presented both challenges and opportunities:

Post-War Challenges

Doughboys faced numerous challenges upon their return:

- **Economic Hardships:** Many soldiers struggled to find jobs in a rapidly changing economy. The transition from military to civilian life was not always smooth, and many veterans faced unemployment or underemployment.
- **Mental Health Issues:** The psychological toll of war continued to haunt many veterans, leading to a crisis in mental health support.

The Formation of Veterans' Organizations

In response to their experiences, many doughboys became active in veterans' organizations, such as:

- The American Legion: Founded in 1919, this organization advocated for veterans' rights, including healthcare and financial support.
- Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW): Established to support veterans who had served in foreign wars, the VFW worked to address the needs of returning soldiers.

The Legacy of the Doughboys

Keene concludes her analysis by reflecting on the enduring legacy of the doughboys and World War I in shaping American identity. Several key aspects of this legacy include:

- Cultural Representations: The doughboys became symbols of American bravery and sacrifice, influencing literature, film, and popular culture.
- Military Policy Changes: The experiences of the doughboys led to significant changes in U.S. military policy and strategy, including a reevaluation of how the country prepared for future conflicts.
- National Memory: The memory of World War I and its soldiers continues to be honored through monuments, memorials, and commemorative events, ensuring that the sacrifices of the doughboys are not forgotten.

Conclusion

In *Doughboys: The Great War and the Remaking of America*, Jennifer D. Keene provides a compelling examination of the profound impact of World War I on American society. Through her exploration of the experiences of doughboys, the changes on the home front, and the legacy of the war, Keene sheds light on a pivotal moment in American history that reshaped the nation in significant ways. The book serves as a reminder of the sacrifices made by those who served and the ongoing effects of their experiences on American culture and identity. As we reflect on the past, it is crucial to acknowledge the lessons learned and the ways in which they continue to resonate in contemporary society.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes explored in 'Doughboys: The Great War and the Remaking of America' by Jennifer D. Keene?

The book explores themes of identity, transformation, and the impact of World War I on American society, focusing on how the war reshaped notions of masculinity, citizenship, and national identity.

How does Jennifer D. Keene address the experiences of American soldiers in World War I?

Keene provides a detailed account of the experiences of American soldiers, known as 'doughboys,' highlighting their training, combat experiences, and the psychological effects of war, as well as their return to civilian life.

In what ways does 'Doughboys' connect the Great War to contemporary American society?

The book draws parallels between the societal changes initiated by World War I and contemporary issues such as patriotism, military service, and the role of veterans in shaping national memory and identity.

What sources does Keene utilize to support her arguments in 'Doughboys'?

Keene utilizes a variety of primary sources, including letters, diaries, military records, and contemporary newspaper articles, alongside secondary sources to provide a comprehensive analysis of the war's impact on American society.

What is the significance of the term 'doughboy' in the context of Keene's work?

The term 'doughboy' not only refers to American soldiers during World War I but also symbolizes the broader societal changes and the complex legacy of the war, making it a central focus in understanding the remaking of America during that era.

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