

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Department of Homeland Security World War I Centennial poster series, volume 1, 2017

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) traces its origins to the Bureau of Immigration and the Bureau of Naturalization, two federal agencies that played significant roles in the U.S. effort during World War I (WWI). Immigrants themselves also greatly contributed to the war effort, especially through military service. In honor of the WWI Centennial, USCIS is proud to commemorate the contributions of our legacy agencies, their employees, and the thousands of immigrants and new citizens who served.

THE FIRST ACT OF WAR



Headline from The Tacoma Times, April 6, 1917.

The Bureau of Immigration played a key role in the U.S.'s first act of war. Minutes after the U.S. declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, immigration officers stationed at U.S. ports received pre-arranged telegrams ordering them to "proceed immediately."

In response, immigration officers boarded docked German merchant ships and took the German officers and crewmembers into custody as U.S. Customs collectors seized the ships. These removals occurred simultaneously at over a dozen ports, all without violence or major incident.

The Bureau temporarily detained these crews at several immigration stations, including Ellis Island and Angel Island. Eventually, the Bureau transferred them to an internment center in Hot Springs, North Carolina, where the Bureau oversaw more than 2,000 German internees.

AN IMMIGRANT ARMY

The U.S. entered WWI amidst a peak period of immigration. During the war, immigrants joined the military as volunteers and through conscription. Almost one in five draftees, and more than 18 percent of the total U.S. Army, was foreign-born.

To help "Americanize" the men, the War Department instituted English language classes for immigrants in wartime training camps; these often included lessons on civics and citizenship. Some units from regions with strong ethnic enclaves even became known for their immigrant members, such as the 77th Infantry Division, drawn mostly from New York City and nicknamed the "Melting Pot Division."

Whether overseas or stateside, immigrants served honorably in WWI, often before they earned their American citizenship. Many immigrants proudly viewed their WWI service as a transformational event in their lives and a key part of their identities as new Americans.



This 1919 Victory Liberty Loan poster by Howard Chandler Christy highlighted the diversity of the American armed forces. Library of Congress.

CITIZEN SOLDIERS

Foreign-born members of the armed forces in WWI did not gain citizenship through military service alone. However, to encourage immigrant enlistments and to naturalize servicemen before they shipped out, Congress passed laws to expedite military naturalizations.

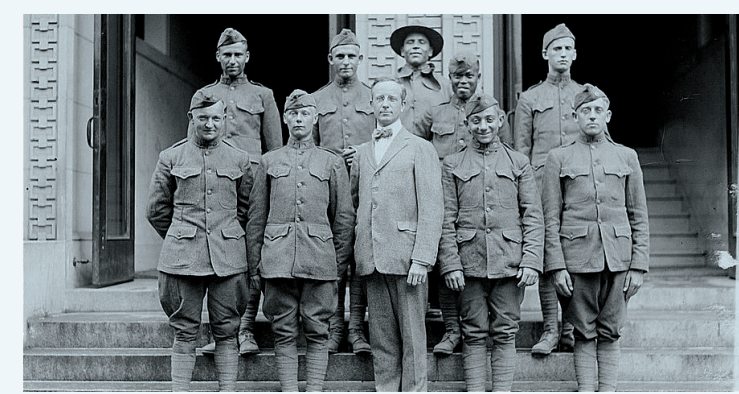
Under the Act of May 9, 1918, service members only needed proof of enlistment and testimony from two witnesses to naturalize. The law exempted them from



Soldiers at Camp Upton, New York, swear the Oath of Renunciation and Allegiance to become U.S. citizens, circa 1918-1919. USCIS History Office and Library.

having five years of U.S. residency, filing a declaration (or "first papers"), speaking English, and taking history and civics exams. Since soldiers were often stationed far from home, they could become citizens in any naturalization court.

To speed up soldier naturalizations, the Bureau of Naturalization dispatched examiners to military



Commissioner of Naturalization Raymond F. Christ (center) with newly naturalized soldiers, Washington, D.C., 1918. National Archives.



Foreign-born soldiers filling out naturalization applications in Washington, D.C., 1918. National Archives.

bases and enlisted volunteer attorneys and hastily-trained servicemen as temporary examiners. Often, judges traveled to bases to hold large, open-air naturalization ceremonies. Under this system a foreign-born soldier could become a citizen in just one day.

After the war, Congress passed a series of laws extending most of the benefits of military naturalization to veterans.

Eventually, more than 300,000 soldiers and veterans of WWI became U.S. citizens under these laws.



U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

Naturalization of foreign-born soldiers of the 310th Calvary at Fort Ethan Allen, Vermont, on June 25, 1918. Library of Congress.

