

How They All Became Americans

-A Book Review of David Laskin's:

*The Long Way Home-An American Journey from Ellis Island to the Great War*

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Early 20<sup>th</sup> century America experienced immigration on a massive scale. Perhaps more significantly, the United States would come to be called home by massive waves of immigrants from what contemporary observers would sometimes call *savage lands*. This derogatory remark was meant to note the fact that late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrants did not come from the English speaking world (with the exception of the Irish) and that these immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe as well as China and Southeast Asia were somehow inferior. Rampant civil war and social disorganization, a lack of opportunity, and religious freedom propelled these people to America's shores. Their different customs, languages, and other ways of life would play a significant role in how they would come to be *Americanized* as these customs literally reshaped American life and added to the polyglot of customs that would become early 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture.

Facing significant discrimination and marginalization in America, many immigrants turned to service in the armed forces during World War I in order to become full citizens. Other immigrants served simply because they were told to do so and they felt it was their duty. As Laskin suggests, "some fought not for an idea, but because the sergeant told them to fight, because their buddy was fighting, because they were part of a platoon. But in the end, they also fought because they were Americans."<sup>1</sup> Detailing and interpreting the journey from immigrant-status to full-American citizenship for twelve immigrants (and countless other individuals mentioned throughout the book) is David Laskin's undertaking in his book: *The Long Way Home*. In the novel, Laskin does far more than tell the stories of twelve men who come to the United States from places such as: the Jewish settlement in the Russian Pale, Finland, Germany, Southern Italy (Calabria), and Ireland as well as many other lands characterized at that time as

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<sup>1</sup> David Laskin, *The Long Way Home-An American Journey from Ellis Island to the Great War* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 2010), xix.

chaotic and lacking opportunity. Instead of simply retelling glorious stories of modern Americans' relatives, Laskin sets out to describe the process by which these immigrants assimilated into mainstream American society. Laskin is never shy of pointing out the humiliating conditions in which many immigrants got their start in America, nor does he omit how they were often discriminated against even after they had enlisted to fight for America. However, his constant thesis is to prove that through this War, these disparate groups of immigrants came to identify themselves as Americans and by finally (and fatally in some cases) shedding their blood for their homeland, they not only became true Americans, they also earned the respect and admiration of those that had once denounced and discriminated against them. In this way, Laskin brings together two very important concepts for any student of United States' history: immigration and War. He melds the concepts together and shows how Americans both at home and abroad in battle learned to give up what Charles Minder, a soldier and native of New York City, called the *suffering of race prejudice*.<sup>2</sup> Laskin's work, at its core, is a narrative of how immigrants and native-born Americans learned to build a community amid the backdrop of the devastation of World War One. Certainly, that is significant for modern America as the nation struggles with increasing immigration and with a War on two fronts.

Laskin divides his book into sections which provide the reader with easy comprehension of the process by which immigrants came to America (i.e. the decision to leave one's homeland, the voyage to America, and life in America as well as life in battle). This organization and Laskin's overall writing style provide the reader with a real guttural sense of the sights, sounds, and smells encountered by immigrants as they traveled to and fought for America. However, Laskin's work can also be overwhelming as the cast of characters is quite large and the number

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<sup>2</sup> IBID, 245.

of simultaneously examined stories can lead to some confusion. While Laskin should be applauded for his scholarship and attention to detail (his notes section is meticulously documented), the way in which he weaves and sometime re-weaves stories together through subsequent chapters can leave the reader somewhat befuddled. However, Laskin is also careful to reiterate his thesis throughout the book and while this may sometimes feel repetitive, it does help to re-establish the author's purpose in his writing and to refocus attention on how immigrants transcended their foreign status in order to truly be considered American.

Laskin's introductory chapters help to situate the reader in the tumultuous world of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Laskin is careful to note government records, census data, economic data (mostly census-based), and family records and lore as a way of explaining why these twelve men decided to immigrate to America. Laskin paints a grim picture of the *old world* suggesting in the words of a Norwegian immigrant that "the strongest argument for coming to America was the poverty among the common people where we lived and also the hopelessness of ever amounting to anything."<sup>3</sup> Laskin further suggests that many of these new immigrants while not being refugees from War, were refugees all the same because they ran from a future and a country that they believed could no longer support them and in the case of many immigrants (e.g. Jews in the Russian Pale) countries that expressed outright hatred towards them. Laskin correctly demonstrates that immigrants came to America by the hundreds of thousands in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for a number of reasons, all of which might be summed up in one word: hope.

For many immigrants that hope was dashed soon after their arrival in America as they quickly learned that they would have to take the most menial jobs and live in the most hostile

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<sup>3</sup> IBIB, 21.

and filthy environments should they ever truly wish to achieve the American Dream. According to Laskin, their introduction to America, through the gates of Ellis Island, would be an experiment in the “reduction of their humanity to a number, a code, a sum of money, and a stamp of approval.”<sup>4</sup> However, once inside the United States, immigrants settled in communities representative of their home cultures. Italians mixed with other Italians, Slovaks with other Slovaks and so forth, creating miniature versions of their homelands. Interestingly enough and problematic for the future functioning of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF-the name given to the American army in World War I), many immigrants and even some native-born Americans who were raised in these communities only began to learn English when they entered the army. Laskin further suggests that a lack of a common language along with immigrants often, but not always self-imposed segregation from mainstream America made them a target for discrimination. Furthermore, only their courage and their willingness to shed their blood in the War would remove this target.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, understanding this unique connection between immigration and War (and the corollary forces of segregation and discrimination) is important for any modern student of history .

Laskin continues his work here by carefully illustrating the challenges that these immigrants face. Indeed, his book is more of a case study in twelve immigrant experiences that one may use to generalize to the larger population. Although generalizations in history can often be misleading, Laskin is careful to note that each man’s experience with discrimination was different and at the same time, all of them regardless of whether they were German, Jewish, or Italian were met with some hostility once they entered the army and in the very first days of

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<sup>4</sup> IBID, 23.

<sup>5</sup> IBID, 68.

basic training. These experiences are carefully set against the backdrop of American social culture and popular (as well as fictitious) scientific fads such as eugenics. As each of these immigrants signed up for the AEF, there were constant worries and discussions carried out in the public media that America would not stand a chance if they did not somehow transform these “aliens” into a solid American fighting force.<sup>6</sup> For no other group was the more true than for German-Americans. Their country of origin had been vilified by the popular press, who often referred to the Germans as “Huns”. German-Americans fought against rampant discrimination at home as Americans sought to obliterate the cultural mark they had made on America by outlawing the teaching of German in public schools and universities, burning books by German authors, and re-naming cities and towns that had German names. Laskin notes that this discrimination and rage was even protected by state and local governments who did nothing to protect citizens and even codified discrimination in the law by passing the Espionage Act in 1917.<sup>7</sup> One of the book's greatest strengths is the deep and complete history that the author presents. This nuanced writing continues into Laskin's retelling of the immigrant experience in World War I.

Half of Laskin's work (chapters 7-14) is dedicated to a careful analysis and discussion of the immigrant experience in World War I. Laskin documents the story of these men as they traveled from basic training to Europe and carefully notes their heroic deeds amid a larger discussion of military history, foreign policy discussions, and debates about how the War served to *Americanize* immigrant troops. Indeed, the process by which the War Americanized the

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<sup>6</sup> PBS. "The Great War." - <http://www.pbs.org/greatWar/chapters/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> David Laskin, *The Long Way Home-An American Journey from Ellis Island to the Great War* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 2010), 176.

immigrant troops, some 280,000 who served in the AEF, is at the core of Laskin's argument throughout the book and features as his thesis in these chapters. Laskin describes the AEF as an "army of 43 languages" where troops of vastly different cultures had to learn to fight together and rely upon one another for survival.<sup>8</sup> That the AEF did become a cohesive fighting force is in owing to the army's adoption (although this does not happen until later in 1918) of a more diverse and inclusive educational program for all soldiers and because the experiences of battle taught these soldiers to see each other as human beings and not as a mixture of the stereotypes common to their individual ethnicity. Laskin devotes much of his book to this discussion and by reiterating this point continuously, he teaches the reader a lesson about how a bloody War that has been eclipsed by the horrors of World War II did much to unify America.

Throughout his discussion of the War, Laskin is also careful to note the variety of experiences among the immigrant soldiers. He notes that a number of battles (e.g. Argonne Forest, Belleau Wood, 2<sup>nd</sup> battle of the Marne, Mont Blanc, and breaking the Hindenburg Line) proved that Americans could work together with both the French and British as allies even though in the beginning all nations were suspicious of one another.<sup>9</sup> Laskin suggests that even though American entry into the War was delayed for far longer than either the British or the French expected, by eventually working as a cohesive unit, the Allied Powers were able to overcome (at least in part) not only the Central Powers, but also their long-held suspicions of one

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<sup>8</sup> IBID, 143. See Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion of how immigrant and American-born soldiers overcame their prejudices against one another.

<sup>9</sup> This finding is corroborated by David Kennedy in his book: *Over Here-the First World War and American Society*. London: Oxford University Press, 2004. Kennedy's book features numerous and useful discussions for students of American history who want to know the domestic effect of World War I. It is a useful source to inform students of what they experience in a modern American society which is also at War.

another.<sup>10</sup> Aside from the knowledge that the War caused severe psychological trauma to many soldiers (i.e. shell-shock), Laskin suggests further in a direct quote from Rabbi Levinger who administered to soldiers on the front line that “these world-shaking events have become a part of their very being...the War gave the world a new angle of vision on life and death, on good and bad.”<sup>11</sup> This type of discussion is a significant part of Laskin’s work in chapters 9, 14, and 15. Aside from the narrative descriptions of individual immigrant’s experiences with the War, Laskin takes on a much larger discussion of the physical, psychological, economic, and political toll wrought by World War I and in doing so helps to inform the reader by providing a solid historical background through which to view the individual experiences of both immigrant and native-born American soldiers.

The conclusion to Laskin’s work brings the reader full-circle to the end of the War, its greater meaning at that time and in historical memory, and the author describes what happens to these twelve immigrants at the conclusion of the War. Laskin’s analysis of the impact World War I had on America is very well researched and carefully articulated. He suggests strongly that any attempt to make sense of the War, which produced no long lasting treaties, destroyed millions of lives and half a continent, would “prove futile—and if anything, the war and its aftermath consumed and destroyed the very idea of meaning in art, in politics, in civil life and rhetoric.”<sup>12</sup> These are very strong words, but perhaps they are not overly dramatic for those individuals who witnessed and actively participated in the carnage of the War. The human toll of the war composes a large part of the discussion in Laskin’s final chapter. The foreign-born

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<sup>10</sup> David Laskin, *The Long Way Home-An American Journey from Ellis Island to the Great War* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 2010), 242.

<sup>11</sup> IBID, 197.

<sup>12</sup> IBID, 314.



American soldiers who witnessed the war went on to have families, some lived past 100 years old, yet others died in the war and in so doing provided their families with much needed financial security (a security they would greatly rely upon in the coming Great Depression) through the army's life insurance program. Still others suffered needlessly from the psychological trauma wrought by the War and in an age that did not well understand how to treat shell shock. Their variety of experiences after the war is in keeping with their individual personalities and inclinations. In carefully documenting these experiences, Laskin reminds the reader that it is difficult and sometimes dangerously inaccurate to generalize about Americans' experiences during World War I. This is a good reminder for history teachers who often use generalizations in order to help a student understand a historical topic. Teachers must be careful because in using any generalization, they are running the risk of causing more misunderstanding than true comprehension.

As any American must realize, we are truly a nation of immigrants. As such, Laskin's book has much to offer us in the way of personal-narrative history and helps to paint a much more detailed picture of those that dedicated to the cause of patriotism and justice. Although, as Laskin instructs, we cannot make sweeping generalizations about the immigrant experience in the war, one can say with certainty that all of these soldiers did become Americans. These soldiers were given American citizenship, indeed it what they had fought for, all became officially and ideologically a part of their adopted country. As Laskin details this process for individual immigrants in his last chapter, he instructs the reader about what it truly means to be an American. While Laskin is not overly preachy and this book certainly does not exert overly patriotic enthusiasm because it is also necessarily critical of the United States at this time, his work is also a reminder about the sacrifices many Americans and adopted-Americans have made

for their country and for the cause of liberty and freedom. To students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this is a sound reminder of the sacrifices our soldiers and immigrant soldiers make today. Today, there are thousands of men and women who serve in the United States' military as soldiers for the promise of becoming an American citizen. This book can help today's American history students by reminding them that while America's armed forces have also practiced discrimination, America also has proud tradition of integrating people through military service. Certainly, these ideas and Laskin's book are worth teaching in a modern era where discrimination and war still affect us.

### **Bibliography**

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“David Laskin’s *The Long Way Home* is a brilliant blending of social analysis and personal narrative, which recovers the experience of a “lost generation” the immigrant “greenhorns” who became Americans through service on the battlefields of World War I. (Richard Slotkin, author of *Gunfighter Nation*). Moving, revealing, and lovingly researched, this book is a must read, and a great read, for any of us whose forebears came from overseas—meaning just about all of us. David Laskin, by homing in on the lives of a dozen immigrants to Ellis Island, is able to tell a grand American saga about the true cost of democracy. All around a deeply compelling narrative. The result is a marvelous evocation of what it means to become an American and the many paths to that end.”