

Review

The War at Home: Minnesota During the Great War, 1914–1920

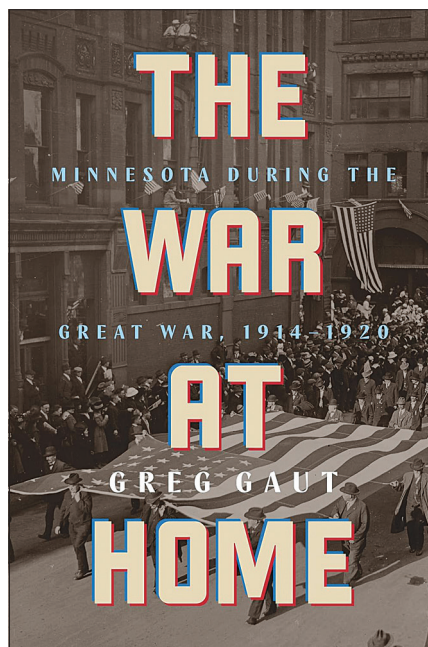
By Greg Gaut, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2025

REVIEWED BY FREDERICK L. JOHNSON

US Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis wrote that during World War I, Minnesota experienced more “interference with civil liberty than any other state.” Historian Greg Gaut explains how the state earned this dubious honor with his compelling new book *The War at Home: Minnesota During the Great War, 1914–1920*. States Gaut, “. . . relatively peaceful and well-mannered Minnesota was an explosive hot spot in this war at home.”

On April 6, 1917, the United States entered World War I. Just ten days later the Minnesota legislature adjourned into war-time obscurity—lawmakers yielded control of the state government to a seven-man Minnesota Commission for Public Safety. Before hurrying out of St. Paul, legislators passed the Minnesota Sedition Act that placed limits on freedom of speech. A military guard would soon patrol the capitol building, while vigilant secret agents of the American Protective League monitored the populace, and self-described 100 percent Americans suspiciously eyed German-Americans, the state’s largest ethnic group. A deep polarization of Minnesotans was underway.

The Minnesota Commission for Public Safety (MCPS), with Governor Joseph A.A. Burnquist at its head, established MCPS branches in every Minnesota county. With the state National Guard heading for combat overseas, commissioners created the Minnesota Home Guard, an armed force under their control. St. Paulite Burnquist and MCPS would intervene after Twin City



streetcar workers unionized in fall 1917 and called a strike. The commission ordered Home Guard companies onto St. Paul streets to put down the following unrest during this major moment of Minnesota organized labor history.

Political intrigue assumed a critical role in the Minnesota war at home. The 1918 Republican Party primary race for governor matched MCPS chair Burnquist with Charles Lindbergh, Sr. and the Nonpartisan League (NPL), a left-leaning farmers’ association. MCPS and its backers were relentless in their attacks on NPLers, painting them all as dangerous subversives. Gaut pays close attention to the statewide aspects of this ugly, sometimes dangerous campaign.

To John McGee, the most controversial MCPS member, the NPL and its leaders ranked with the pro-Germans as serious threats. Testifying at a US Senate committee meeting in Washington, D.C., McGee proclaimed, “A Non-Partisan League lecturer is a traitor every time . . . no matter what he says or does. Where we made a

mistake is not establishing a firing squad in the first days of the war.” McGee also pointed out, “The disloyal element in Minnesota is largely among the Swedish-German people.” Minnesota Swedes—their homeland had been neutral since the Napoleonic Wars—took offense; Germans winced at yet another slander.

Working with an arsenal of primary-sourced research and injecting careful analysis, Gaut examines Minnesota’s war at home with a steady hand. Considering that the subject matter was highly controversial in its day, passions and prejudices were on public display. The author ably uses a three-section organization—The War Across the Ocean, The War at Home, and The War About the War. And an on-going timeline found on each right-hand page is a valuable tool for readers. So, too, was the use of two Minnesota County maps showing boundaries and county seats. It is a handy guide for his wide-ranging study. A perceptive introduction takes readers back to 1917 as America teeters toward war. His concluding “Observations After a Century” points to four “particularly instructive” insights and thoughtful lessons of history.

The 400-page account is a readable and relevant narrative directed at a broad audience while providing rich background detail for scholars to ponder. The photographs and images selected for use are excellent. Not to be missed is the epilogue, “Lives After Wartime,” where the author tells “the rest of the story” about a number of interesting individuals featured along the way. Among them are Clarence “Cap” Wigginton, the St. Paul city architect who led the African American 16th Battalion of the Home Guard, and John McGee, the powerful but flawed MCPS point man.

Minnesota historian Frederick L. Johnson is the author of Patriots Hearts: World War I Passion and Prejudice in a Minnesota County.