

THE FIRST WORLD WAR 1914-1919

A century of relative peace in the Western world ended in 1914 with the outbreak of World War I. America had been involved in the previous general wars of Europe and again found it impossible to remain neutral.

EUROPEAN BACKGROUND

Ever since the defeat of Napoleon, Great Britain had dominated the world without serious challenge. The unification of Germany under Prince Bismarck of Prussia's guidance created a new imperial power strong enough to challenge Britain's position in international politics and commerce. Soon after 1900 most European nations, and a few others, began to polarize, according to the interpretation of their particular national interests, around these two powers. Leading the Central Powers in the Triple Alliance were Germany and Austria-Hungary; the Triple Entente included Britain, France and Russia. Each camp engaged in an armaments race; incident after incident threatened to throw off a spark that would ignite the war.

Ultimately the match that lit the powder barrel came with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary by Serbian nationalists in June 1914. The numerous alliances caused most of Europe to side with either Serbia or Austria-Hungary when A-H threatened to attack Serbia. As in the War of 1812 (the Napoleonic Wars) the direct ostensible cause of American entry in the war arose from efforts to uphold its rights at sea as a neutral nation.

AMERICA BEFORE ENTRY IN WORLD WAR I

With the outbreak of war in Europe Wilson proclaimed American neutrality and soon afterwards asked the nation to be neutral "in fact as well as in name." The government soon became involved in efforts to uphold American rights at sea against the two powers, Britain and Germany, each of whom was seeking to destroy the other's foreign trade.

RELATIONS WITH GREAT BRITAIN

Britain immediately sought to enforce a blockade against Germany according to her own interpretation of international law. Wilson asked all nations to respect the rules drawn up in the Declaration of London (1909), which Britain and Germany had refused to sign. Britain instead enlarged the rights of a warring country in certain practices offensive to the United States. 1) Britain enlarged the list of contraband to include foodstuffs and other goods not previously accepted as contraband. 2) Britain invoked the doctrine of continuous voyage to stop American goods being shipped to neutral countries bordering Germany. 3) Britain enforced her blockade against neutral shipping to Germany, not along the German coastline, but by inspecting ships throughout the world. 4) Britain limited American commerce with Germany's neutral neighbors to what had existed before the war broke out – to prevent goods from then being shipped to Germany over land. 5) Britain set up a blacklist of American firms that traded with Germany.

Wilson sent notes of protest to the British for these violations of the Declaration of London but did nothing to apply sanctions. Americans soon learned to live with the British regulations and government officials privately agreed that a British victory was in America's interest. Besides, American firms enjoyed a profitable market with the Allies for all it could produce.

BACKGROUND CAUSES OF AMERICAN ENTRY

Many reasons exist for American support of Britain and the Allied Powers. 1) The English background of the influential majority of the American people caused them to identify themselves with the British cause. This background included language, literature, law and other aspects of a common culture. 2) American credits with Britain from the sale of munitions and other supplies were stressed at one time as a cause of pro-British sentiment (many businesses sold to Britain on credit prior to the war and continued

after the war started. Most of these businesses sold to other countries on a cash up-front basis.) 3) The flood of sensational propaganda made a great psychological impact as contrasted with the German's logical and legalistic presentation of their case. Furthermore, the British controlled the cables and other communications by which war news reached America; news had to be favorably slanted before it was transmitted to America. 4) Germany's manifest militarism was viewed as a threat to American interests in her empire. If Germany conquered Europe, it would then proceed to take America also.

GERMAN WAR OPERATIONS AND AMERICA

Germany, lacking equality of surface naval craft with Britain, employed a new weapon, the submarine; it did so to enforce strangulation of the British Isles and to break the British blockade. In February 1915, Germany declared that all enemy ships in the waters around the British Isles would be sunk on sight and warned neutral vessels to avoid these waters. Germany, upset with America bowing to the British, warned America to not attempt to travel on Allied ships or attempt to trade with Britain. The United States asserted that Germany must observe the rule of visit-and-search and allow for citizens to escape before sinking vessels. Germany believed this would make their submarines vulnerable to armed merchant ships and refused to follow the America stipulations. However, Germany would be willing to stop the submarine warfare if the United States would get Britain to abide by the Rules of London.

THE SINKING OF THE *LUSITANIA*

The British ship *Lusitania* was sunk by torpedo near Ireland in February 1915, with the loss of over 100 American lives. Wilson sent successive notes to Germany to persuade her to abandon unrestricted submarine warfare. After the sinking of still another British ship, the *Arabic*, in August 1915, Wilson protested more strongly and Germany agreed to abandon sinking unless provisions were made to protect the lives of noncombatants if German ships were not endangered by doing so. Wilson announced that he would Germany "strictly accountable" for the loss of any American life.

THE SUSSEX PLEDGE

When the French ship *Sussex* was sunk in March 1916, with the loss of two American lives, Wilson sent an ultimatum to Germany demanding safety for the lives of passengers. Realizing the Americans were being provoked into war and Germany wanting to secure Paris and Moscow before dealing with America, Germany made the Sussex Pledge not sinking merchant ships without saving lives of those aboard.

PUBLIC REACTION TO THE WAR

Public opinion was divided in sympathy for the warring nations. Since there was no likelihood of American restraining the British, German Americans hoped for neutrality and peace. Antimilitarists and peace societies organized to oppose American involvement.

Other organizations and individuals, like Theodore Roosevelt and General Leonard Wood, campaigned for military preparedness. Wilson after a time abandoned his opposition to strong preparedness and in 1916 asked Congress to pass several defense measures.

DEFENSE LEGISLATION (1916)

Congress now 1) passed the National Defense Act to increase the size of the army and bring the state militia under the federal government. 2) In August Congress appropriated money for the construction of battleships and other naval fighting vessels. 3) In September the United States Shipping Boards was created and received money to buy and build merchant vessels to be operated under its own management. 4) A Council of National Defense was created by Wilson to make plans to mobilize the material resources of the nation in case of war.

In 1916 Wilson sent Colonel House to Europe as his personal agent to propose terms for peace. None of the major countries showed any willingness to negotiate a peace.

THE ELECTION OF 1916

The possibility of America's entry in the war in Europe made this the leading issue in the election. The Democrats renominated Wilson and endorsed his domestic reform legislation. The Democrats slogan "He kept us out of war" gave an implied promise that neutrality would be maintained.

The Republicans nominated Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes and the Progressives nominated Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt refused the nomination and asked the Progressives to rejoin the Republican Party, but they supported the more progressive Wilson. Hughes refused to speak on the war issues because the Republicans were split on the war.

Wilson won by a narrow margin in both the popular vote and electoral college. The outcome hinged on the vote in California which, to everyone's surprise swung over to Wilson the day after the election. The reason for the support of Wilson was because of Progressive Party leader Hiram Johnson. Johnson announced his support for Wilson because of a campaign slight he received from Hughes.

IMMEDIATE CAUSES OF AMERICAN ENTRY IN THE WAR

Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare was the most important immediate cause and, superficially, was the main cause of American entry in the war. In January 1917, Germany announced resumption of a sink-on-sight submarine campaign against all ships around the British Isles. Wilson immediately broke diplomatic relations with Germany upon this abandonment of the Sussex Pledge. Wilson ordered the arming of merchant vessels to defend against the submarines.

The Zimmerman Note, intercepted by the British and released by the State Department on March 1, influenced public opinion against Germany. This message from Germany to Mexico promised Mexico the return of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona if Mexico would enter the war against the United States and invite Japan to do the same.

The Russian Revolution, which resulted in the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy in March 1917, made it easier for the United States to join the Allies in the name of democracy. It was expected the Russians, now involved in their own civil war, would seek peace with Germany. When this happened, Germany would be able to fully attack the French front of the war.

After eight American ships had been sunk by the Germans, Wilson, on April 2, called a special session of Congress and asked for a declaration of war against Germany. The war resolution passed unanimously in the Senate and only two members voted against the resolution in the House on April 6.

THE UNITED STATES IN WORLD WAR I

Soon after declaring war the United States government learned of the desperate situation of the Allies. In August 1917, the communists under Lenin seized control of the Russian government to end the civil war in Russia. In September, the Germans and Russians signed a peace treaty and Russia was out of the war. This gave Germany the opportunity to mobilize their entire war effort on France and Britain. This made the involvement of the United States more important. Also, speed was a necessity.

MOBILIZATION FOR WAR

The Allies had several needs that needed attention. 1) The greatest and most pressing need was manpower for the military services. While the navy was strong, the army had been neglected since the beginning of the country, May 1917; Congress passed the Selective Service Act those required men between the ages of 18-26 to register for military service. The total armed forces of the United States, including draftees and volunteers, reached about 4,000,000. Half of these were shipped overseas and about a third saw active service there. 2) The War Industries Board, headed by Bernard Baruch, was created to control of the manufacture of war material. 3) The War Shipping Board was created to build the bridge of ships needed to transport men and supplies and replace losses from submarine sinkings. 4) A Railroad Administration assumed government control of the railroads after they proved incapable of avoiding confusion in moving vast shipments of goods needed. 5) A Fuel Administration exerted efforts to conserve coal and increase their production. Daylight savings time was introduced to conserve electricity used in factories. 6) A Food Administration was created and placed under Herbert Hoover. Wheat and meat were

conserved for shipment overseas, and farmers were paid higher prices to encourage production, which rose by a fourth.

CONTROL OF PUBLIC OPINION

The administration showed much interest in winning public support for the war effort and suppressing dissension. Congress established immediately the Committee on Public Information under an able journalist, George Creel. This agency printed books, wrote editorials, made motion pictures, published a daily *Official Bulletin*, and spread striking posters. The war was “sold” as a holy crusade; it was a “war to end war” and “a war to make the world safe for democracy.”

Most Americans were loyal, but some dissenters regarded it as a “capitalistic” war. The tone of wartime propaganda aroused a hysteria against all things German; Wilson accepted this unnecessary persecution as a matter of course. Congress passed the Espionage Act (1917) and the Sedition Act (1918), which made it illegal to obstruct the government in its conducting of the war.

FINANCING THE WAR

One of the most important contributions to victory was made in the form of loans and supplies to the Allies. 1) More money was raised by bond sales than by taxes. Liberty and Victory bonds were sold in high-pressure campaigns; many poor were compelled to borrow money at prevailing high interest rates to buy bonds to prove their loyalty. 2) Increasing rates in the individual and corporation income levies raised tax money. A corporation excess profits tax was passed. Excise taxes were increased. The cost of the war amounted to about \$35 billion; almost \$10 billion went to the Allies as loans.

THE NAVY IN THE WAR

The navy under Admiral William Sims went to war first; for a time it was thought naval service would be the United States’ main contribution to the Allies, until the pressing need for men was revealed after war had been declared. The American navy performed four main services by 1) fighting submarines, 2) convoying troop ships, 3) laying a barrage of mines across the North Sea to bottle up German submarines, and 4) enforcing the blockade against Germany. The navy lost no ships in action; two were lost after the war was over in sweeping up the mine barrage in the North Sea.

THE ARMY IN THE WAR

General John J. Pershing, of Pancho Villa fame, was placed at the head of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) sent to France. It was seven months after the declaration of war before the army saw action in battle. Germany had hoped to win the war before the American “doughboys” could go into action.

In May 1918, with the Americans being forced to fight within British and French troop divisions, the Germans approached within 40 miles of Paris. At Pershing’s determined insistence the American army assumed responsibility for the defense of a definite sector of the battlefield. At the Battle of Chateau-Thierry the Americans stopped the advance of the Germans. The Second Battle of the Marne saw the Americans break through the German line and begin the German retreat. The Battles of St.-Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne involved over 1,000,000 American troops in continuing the German retreat.

THE WILSON PEACE OFFENSIVE

In January 1918, Wilson announced his Fourteen Points to Congress as a basis for just peace in Europe. The first provisions called for 1) the abolition of secret diplomacy, 2) freedom of the seas for all, 3) freedom of trade among all nations, 4) armament reduction, 5) the disposal of colonies of the defeated powers in the interest of the colonials, and 6) the League of Nations. Other provisions related the national aspirations of particular nations and boundary adjustments.

The Germans were showered with printed circulars announcing the Fourteen Points as a basis for peace. The terms seemed reasonable, especially since the German people were being told they were easily winning the war. Counting on the support of the people of Germany, liberal leaders forced German Kaiser

Wilhelm II to flee to Holland. The new leaders were forced into surrender to the Allies however because of the advancing armies toward Germany. On November 11, 1918, before the Allied forces had made it into German territory, an armistice was signed ending the war.

A total of 130,000 Americans died in the war as compared to 950,000 French and 630,000 British. Also, well over half of the Americans died from an influenza epidemic in 1918, which took many civilian and military lives.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF MAKING PEACE

Resentment against the losses and sacrifices of the war in both America and Europe made it difficult for President Wilson to realize the just and idealistic peace he desired.

WILSON'S FRUSTRATIONS IN PEACEMAKING

By electing Republican majorities in both houses of Congress, the American people repudiated the Wilson administration in the congressional elections of 1918, even before the war was over. This was the first repudiation of a wartime administration in American history. The people were tired of the government controls over every day life of Americans. It was progressivism at its extreme, and the people voted it to end. In spite of this defeat at the polls, Wilson presumed to speak for the nation by going to the Peace Conference – at Versailles, France, in January 1919 – without taking with him effective Republican advisors in close touch with their party, nor did he take with him any members of the Senate.

Wilson's promises in the Fourteen Points had been made in opposition to secret treaties committed to a division of the spoils of war among the Allies. Wilson hoped to overcome these commitments at the negotiations.

The British and French had chosen leaders pledged to vengeance upon the Germans who were held responsible for having caused the war. The Allies expected to dictate unusually harsh terms against the defeated powers.

The strengthening of communism in Russia and the threat of its spread throughout the Europe forced Wilson to accept compromises to restore peace and political stability as soon as possible.

THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

The Peace Conference was dominated by the Big Four: Wilson, David Lloyd George of England, Georges Clemenceau of France, and Vittorio Orlando of Italy. Wilson hoped to modify the harsh terms demanded by the Allies and secure acceptance of the Fourteen Points. Facing these very able diplomats, Wilson was outmaneuvered and forced to compromise many of the points he had hoped to write into the peace treaty.

The terms of the Treaty of Versailles 1) stripped Germany of all her colonies, and 2) forced Germany to surrender Alsace-Lorraine and other border areas to Poland, Belgium and Denmark. 3) Germany was forced to accept the war-guilt clause. The clause required Germany to make full reparations for the cost and damage of the war. 4) Germany was to be completely disarmed and the Allies were committed to work toward disarmament themselves. 5) Finally, Wilson induced the Allies to accept the League of Nations. The League, Wilson thought, would peacefully settle friction resulting from injustices in the treaty.

THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

The terms of the Covenant provided for: 1) a Council of nine, made up of five leading powers (the United States, France, Britain, Italy and Japan) and four delegates from all member nations elected by the Assembly. 2) An Assembly made up of delegates from all member nations; 3) a permanent Secretariat at Geneva to handle the routine business of the League.

The purposes of the League were: 1) to respect and preserve the territory and independence of its members; 2) to consider disputes likely to lead to war; 3) to apply military and economic sanctions against nations guilty of aggression; 4) to plan armament reduction; and 5) to establish a Permanent Court of International Justice.

AMERICAN OPPOSITION TO THE TREATY

Members of the Republican majority in the Senate were determined to defeat the treaty. Their leader, Henry Cabot Lodge, intensely disliked Wilson personally; other members of the Senate objected to Wilson's failure to consult that body in drafting the terms of the treaty; some opposed the concessions made to the selfishness of the Allies (read: America did not get enough); and many opposed membership in the League of Nations. American minorities of various national origins opposed the treatment accorded to their fatherlands. Many Americans suffered disillusionment from the initial idealism of the war and now felt that the United States ought to withdraw from the futile attempt to remake Europe. Others objected that the country would become involved in another European war.

When the treaty was debated in the Senate it was changes and amended so much that it looked little like the treaty that Wilson had brought home from Europe. However, the most important change in the treaty was the lack of American inclusion into the League of Nations. Because this was Wilson's most important victory at the Peace Conference, and something he wanted very badly, Wilson refused to support the new Senate version of the treaty. Wilson, having nowhere else to turn, followed an old Theodore Roosevelt strategy of turning to the American people for support. In his campaign for the treaty, Wilson suffered a stroke that left him incapacitated for the rest of his term.

The Senate eventually defeated the treaty and made peace with Germany by a joint resolution in 1921. After the final bill for the cost of the war was issued, the United States forgave the debt owed by Germany to the United States. In addition, the United States began to loan monies to Germany to help repay the debt owed to other nations.