

## WORLD WAR I AND ITS AFTERMATH, 1914–1920

*It breaks his heart that kings must murder still,  
That all his hours of travail here for men  
Seem in vain. And who will bring white peace  
That he may sleep upon his hill again?*

Vachel Lindsay, "Abraham Lincoln Walks at Midnight," 1914

The sequence of events in 1914 leading from peace in Europe to the outbreak of a general war occurred with stunning rapidity:

- **SARAJEVO, JUNE 28:** A Serbian nationalist assassinates Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand—the heir apparent to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian empire—and his wife.
- **VIENNA, JULY 23:** The Austrian government issues an ultimatum threatening war against Serbia and invades that country four days later.
- **ST. PETERSBURG, JULY 31:** Russia, as an ally of Serbia, orders its army to mobilize against Austria.
- **BERLIN, AUGUST 1:** Germany, as Austria's ally, declares war against Russia.
- **BERLIN, AUGUST 3:** Germany declares war against France, an ally of Russia, and immediately begins an invasion of neutral Belgium because it offers the fastest route to Paris.
- **LONDON, AUGUST 4:** Great Britain, as an ally of France, declares war against Germany.

The assassination of the archduke sparked the war, but the underlying causes were (1) nationalism, (2) imperialism, (3) militarism, and (4) a

combination of public and secret alliances, as explained above, which pulled all the major European powers into war before calm minds could prevent it. It was a tragedy that haunted generations of future leaders and that motivated President Woodrow Wilson to search for a lasting peace.

President Wilson's first response to the outbreak of the European war was a declaration of U.S. neutrality, in the tradition of Washington and Jefferson; and he called upon the American people to support his policy by not taking sides. However, in trying to steer a neutral course, Wilson soon found that it was difficult—if not impossible—to protect U.S. trading rights and maintain a policy that favored neither the Allied Powers (Great Britain, France, and Russia) nor the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empires of Turkey). During a relatively short period (1914–1919), the United States and its people rapidly moved through a wide range of roles: first as a contented neutral country, next as a country waging a war for peace, then as a victorious world power, and finally, as an alienated and isolationist nation.

## Neutrality

In World War I (as in the War of 1812), the trouble for the United States arose as the belligerent powers tried to stop supplies from reaching the enemy. Having the stronger navy, Great Britain was the first to declare a naval blockade against Germany by mining the North Sea and seizing ships—including U.S. ships—attempting to run the blockade. President Wilson protested British seizure of American ships as a violation of a neutral nation's right to freedom of the seas.

## Submarine Warfare

Germany's one hope for challenging British power at sea lay with a new naval weapon, the submarine. In February 1915, Germany answered the British blockade by announcing a blockade of its own and warned that ships attempting to enter the "war zone" (waters near the British Isles) risked being sunk on sight by German submarines.

**Lusitania Crisis** The first major crisis challenging U.S. neutrality occurred on May 7, 1915, when German torpedoes hit and sank a British passenger liner, the *Lusitania*. Most of the passengers drowned, including 128 Americans. In response, Wilson sent Germany a strongly worded diplomatic message warning that Germany would be held to "strict accountability" if it continued its policy of sinking unarmed ships. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan objected to this message as too warlike and resigned from the president's cabinet.

**Other Sinkings** In August 1915, two more Americans lost their lives at sea as the result of a German submarine attack on another passenger ship, the *Arabic*. This time, Wilson's note of protest prevailed upon the German

government to pledge that no unarmed passenger ships would be sunk without warning, which would allow time for passengers to get into lifeboats.

Germany kept its word until March 1916 when a German torpedo struck an unarmed merchant ship, the *Sussex*, injuring several American passengers. Wilson threatened to cut off U.S. diplomatic relations with Germany—a step preparatory to war. Once again, rather than risk U.S. entry into the war on the British side, Germany backed down. Its reply to the president, known as the *Sussex* pledge, promised not to sink merchant or passenger ships without giving due warning. For the remainder of 1916, Germany was true to its word.

### ***Economic Links With Britain and France***

Even though the United States was officially a neutral nation, its economy became closely tied to that of the Allied powers, Great Britain and France. In early 1914, before the war began, the United States had been in a business recession. Soon after the outbreak of war, the economy rebounded in part because of orders for war supplies from the British and the French. By 1915, U.S. businesses had never been so prosperous.

In theory, U.S. manufacturers could have shipped supplies to Germany as well, but the British blockade effectively prevented such trade. Wilson's policy did not deliberately favor the Allied powers. Nevertheless, because the president more or less tolerated the British blockade while restricting Germany's submarine blockade, U.S. economic support was going to one side (Britain and France) and not the other. Between 1914 and 1917, U.S. trade with the Allies quadrupled while its trade with Germany dwindled to the vanishing point.

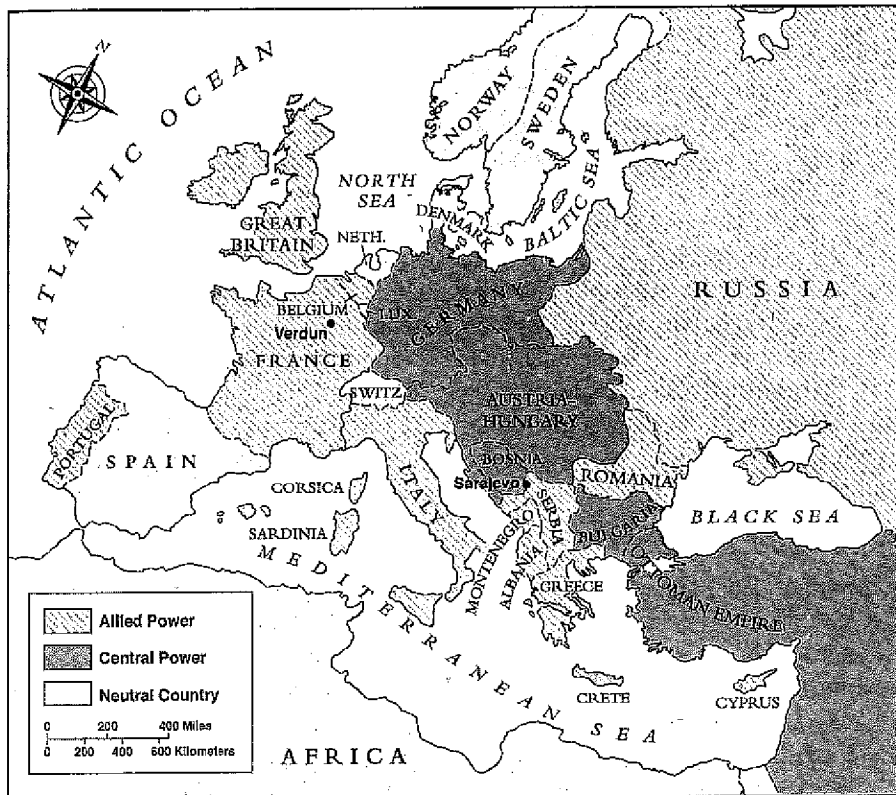
**Loans** In addition, when the Allies could not finance the purchase of everything they needed, the U.S. government permitted J. P. Morgan and other bankers to extend as much as \$3 billion in secured credit to Britain and France. These loans promoted U.S. prosperity as they sustained the Allies' war effort.

### ***Public Opinion***

If Wilson's policies favored Britain, so did the attitudes of most Americans. In August 1914, as Americans read in their newspapers about German armies marching ruthlessly through Belgium, they perceived Germany as a cruel bully whose armies were commanded by a mean-spirited autocrat, Kaiser Wilhelm. The sinking of the *Lusitania* reinforced this negative view of Germany.

**Ethnic Influences** In 1914, first- and second-generation immigrants made up over 30 percent of the U.S. population. They were glad to be out of the fighting and strongly supported neutrality. Even so, their sympathies reflected their ancestries. For example, German Americans strongly identified with the struggles of their "homeland." And many Irish Americans, who hated Britain because of its oppressive rule of Ireland, openly backed the Central Powers. On the other hand, when Italy joined the Allies in 1915, Italian Americans began cheering on the Allies in their desperate struggle to fend off German assaults on the Western Front (entrenched positions in France).

## OPPOSING SIDES IN WORLD WAR I



Overall, though, the majority of native-born Americans wanted the Allies to win. Positive U.S. relations with France since the Revolutionary War bolstered public support for the French. Americans also tended to sympathize with Britain and France because of their democratic governments. President Wilson himself, as a person of Scotch-English descent, had long admired the British political system.

**British War Propaganda** Not only did Britain command the seas but it also commanded the war news that was cabled daily to U.S. newspapers and magazines. Fully recognizing the importance of influencing U.S. public opinion, the British government made sure the American press was well supplied with stories of German soldiers committing atrocities in Belgium and the German-occupied part of eastern France.

### The War Debate

After the *Lusitania* crisis, a small but vocal minority of influential Republicans from the East—including Theodore Roosevelt—argued for U.S. entry into the war against Germany. Foreign policy realists believed that a German victory

would change the balance of power and United States needed a strong British navy to protect the status-quo. However, the majority of Americans remained thankful for a booming economy and peace.

### ***Preparedness***

Eastern Republicans such as Roosevelt were the first to recognize that the U.S. military was hopelessly unprepared for a major war. They clamored for “preparedness” (greater defense expenditures) soon after the European war broke out.

At first, President Wilson opposed the call for preparedness, but in late 1915, he changed his policy. Wilson urged Congress to approve an ambitious expansion of the armed forces. The president’s proposal provoked a storm of controversy, especially among Democrats, who until then were largely opposed to military increases. After a nationwide speaking tour on behalf of preparedness, Wilson finally convinced Congress to pass the National Defense Act in June 1916, which increased the regular army to a force of nearly 175,000. A month later, Congress approved the construction of more than 50 warships (battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and submarines) in just one year.

### ***Opposition to War***

Many Americans, especially in the Midwest and West, were adamantly opposed to preparedness, fearing that it would soon lead to U.S. involvement in the war. The antiwar activists included Populists, Progressives, and Socialists. Leaders among the peace-minded Progressives were William Jennings Bryan, Jane Addams, and Jeannette Rankin—the latter the first woman to be elected to Congress. Woman suffragists actively campaigned against any military buildup (although after the U.S. declaration of war in 1917, they supported the war effort).

### ***The Election of 1916***

President Wilson was well aware that, as a Democrat, he had won election to the presidency in 1912 only because of the split in Republican ranks between Taft conservatives and Roosevelt Progressives. Despite his own Progressive record, Wilson’s chances for reelection did not seem strong after Theodore Roosevelt declined the Progressive party’s nomination for president in 1916 and rejoined the Republicans. (Roosevelt’s decision virtually destroyed any chance of the Progressive party surviving.) Charles Evans Hughes, a Supreme Court justice and former governor of New York, became the presidential candidate of a reunited Republican party.

**“He Kept Us Out of War”** The Democrats adopted as their campaign slogan: “He kept us out of war.” The peace sentiment in the country, Wilson’s record of Progressive leadership, and Hughes’ weakness as a candidate combined to give the president the victory in an extremely close election. Democratic strength in the South and West overcame Republican power in the East.

### **Peace Efforts**

Wilson made repeated efforts to fulfill his party's campaign promise to keep out of the war. Before the election, in 1915, he had sent his chief foreign policy adviser, Colonel Edward House of Texas, to London, Paris, and Berlin to negotiate a peace settlement. This mission, however, had been unsuccessful. Other efforts at mediation also were turned aside by both the Allies and the Central Powers. Finally, in January 1917, Wilson made a speech to the Senate declaring U.S. commitment to his idealistic hope for "peace without victory."

### **Decision for War**

In April 1917, only one month after being sworn into office a second time, President Wilson went before Congress to ask for a declaration of war against Germany. What had happened to change his policy from neutrality to war?

### **Unrestricted Submarine Warfare**

Most important in the U.S. decision for war was a sudden change in German military strategy. The German high command had decided in early January 1917 to resume unrestricted submarine warfare. Germany recognized the risk of the United States entering the war but believed that, by cutting off supplies to the Allies, they could win the war before Americans could react. Germany communicated its decision to the U.S. government on January 31. A few days later, Wilson broke off U.S. diplomatic relations with Germany.

### **Immediate Causes**

Wilson still hesitated, but a series of events in March 1917 as well as the president's hopes for arranging a permanent peace in Europe convinced him that U.S. participation in the war was now unavoidable.

**Zimmermann Telegram** On March 1, U.S. newspapers carried the shocking news of a secret offer made by Germany to Mexico. Intercepted by British intelligence, a telegram to Mexico from the German foreign minister, Arthur Zimmermann, proposed that Mexico ally itself with Germany in return for Germany's pledge to help Mexico recover lost territories: Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. The Zimmermann Telegram aroused the nationalist anger of the American people and convinced Wilson that Germany fully expected a war with the United States.

**Russian Revolution** Applying the principle of moral diplomacy, Wilson wanted the war to be fought for a worthy purpose: the triumph of democracy. It bothered him that one of the Allies was Russia, a nation governed by an autocratic czar. This barrier to U.S. participation was suddenly removed on March 15, when Russian revolutionaries overthrew the czar's government and proclaimed a republic. (Only later in November would the revolutionary government be taken over by Communists.)

**Renewed Submarine Attacks** In the first weeks of March, German submarines sank five unarmed U.S. merchant ships. Wilson was ready for war.

### ***Declaration of War***

On April 2, 1917, President Wilson stood before a special session of senators and representatives and solemnly asked Congress to recognize that a state of war existed between Germany and the United States. His speech condemned Germany's submarine policy as "warfare against mankind" and declared: "The world must be made safe for democracy." On April 6, an overwhelming majority in Congress voted for a declaration of war, although a few pacifists, including Robert La Follette and Jeanette Rankin, defiantly voted no.

### ***Mobilization***

U.S. mobilization for war in 1917 was a race against time. Germany was preparing to deliver a knockout blow to end the war on German terms. Could the United States mobilize its vast economic resources fast enough to make a difference? That was the question Wilson and his advisers confronted in the critical early months of U.S. involvement in war.

### ***Industry and Labor***

The Wilson administration, with Progressive efficiency, created hundreds of temporary wartime agencies and commissions staffed by experts from business and government. The legacy of this mobilization of the domestic economy under governmental leadership proved significant in the Great Depression New Deal programs. For example:

- Bernard Baruch, a Wall Street broker, volunteered to use his extensive contacts in industry to help win the war. Under his direction, the War Industries Board set production priorities and established centralized control over raw materials and prices.
- Herbert Hoover, a distinguished engineer, took charge of the Food Administration, which encouraged American households to eat less meat and bread so that more food could be shipped abroad for the French and British troops. The conservation drive paid off; in two years, U.S. overseas shipment of food tripled.
- Harry Garfield volunteered to head the Fuel Administration, which directed efforts to save coal. Nonessential factories were closed, and daylight saving time went into effect for the first time.
- Treasury Secretary William McAdoo, headed the Railroad Administration which took public control of the railroads to coordinate traffic and promoted standardized railroad equipment.

- Former president William Howard Taft helped arbitrate disputes between workers and employers as head of the National War Labor Board. Labor won concessions during the war that had earlier been denied. Wages rose, the eight-hour day became more common, and union membership increased

### **Finance**

Paying for the costly war presented a huge challenge. Wilson's war government managed to raise \$33 billion in two years by a combination of loans and taxes. It conducted four massive drives to convince Americans to put their savings into federal government Liberty Bonds. Congress also increased both personal income and corporate taxes and placed an excise tax on luxury goods.

### **Public Opinion and Civil Liberties**

The U.S. government used techniques of both patriotic persuasion and legal intimidation to ensure public support for the war effort. Journalist George Creel took charge of a propaganda agency called the Committee on Public Information, which enlisted the voluntary services of artists, writers, vaudeville performers, and movie stars to depict the heroism of the "boys" (U.S. soldiers) and the villainy of the kaiser. They created films, posters, pamphlets, and volunteer speakers—all urging Americans to watch out for German spies and to "do your bit" for the war.

War hysteria and patriotic enthusiasm provided an excuse for nativist groups to take out their prejudices by charging minorities with disloyalty. One such group, the American Protective League, mounted "Hate the Hun" campaigns and used vigilante actions to attack all things German—from the performing of Beethoven's music to the cooking of sauerkraut. Under the order of the U.S. Secretary of Labor, manufacturers of war materials could refuse to hire and could fire American citizens of German extraction.

**Espionage and Sedition Acts** A number of socialists and pacifists bravely risked criticizing the government's war policy. The Espionage Act (1917) provided for imprisonment of up to 20 years for persons who either tried to incite rebellion in the armed forces or obstruct the operation of the draft. The Sedition Act (1918) went much further by prohibiting anyone from making "disloyal" or "abusive" remarks about the U.S. government. About 2,000 people were prosecuted under these laws, half of whom were convicted and jailed. Among them was the Socialist leader Eugene Debs, who was sentenced to ten years in federal prison for speaking against the war.

**Case of *Schenck v. United States*** The Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Espionage Act in a case involving a man who had been imprisoned for distributing pamphlets against the draft. In 1919, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes concluded that the right to free speech could be limited when it represented a "clear and present danger" to the public safety.



## Armed Forces

As soon as war was declared, thousands of young men voluntarily enlisted for military service. Still, the military felt it needed more soldiers and sailors.

**Selective Service Act (1917)** To meet this need, Secretary of War Newton D. Baker devised a “selective service” system to conscript (draft) men into the military. He wanted a democratic method run by local boards for ensuring that all groups in the population would be called into service. The government required all men between 21 and 30 (and later between 18 and 45) to register for possible induction into the military. Under the Selective Service Act, about 2.8 million men were eventually called by lottery, in addition to the almost 2 million who volunteered to serve. About half of all those in uniform made it to the Western Front.

**African Americans** Racial segregation applied to the army as it did to civilian life. Almost 400,000 African Americans served in World War I in segregated units. Only a few were permitted to be officers, and all were barred from the Marine Corps. Nevertheless, W. E. B. Du Bois believed that the record of service by African Americans, fighting to “make the world safe for democracy,” would earn them equal rights at home when the war ended. However, he would be bitterly disappointed.

## Effects on American Society

All groups in American society—business and labor, women and men, immigrants and native-born—had to adjust to the realities of a wartime economy.

**More Jobs for Women** As men were drafted into the military, the jobs they vacated were often taken by women, thousands of whom entered the workforce for the first time. Women’s contributions to the war effort, both as volunteers and wage earners, finally convinced Wilson and Congress to support the 19th Amendment.

**Migration of Mexicans and African Americans** Job opportunities in wartime America, together with the upheavals of the revolution in Mexico, caused thousands of Mexicans to cross the border to work in agriculture and mining. Most were employed in the Southwest, but a significant number also traveled to the Midwest for factory jobs. African Americans also took advantage of job opportunities opened up by the war and migrated north.

African American Population, 1900 to 1960			
Region	1900	1930	1960
Northeast	385,000	1,147,000	3,028,000
Midwest	496,000	1,262,000	3,446,000
South	7,923,000	9,362,000	11,312,000
West	30,000	120,000	1,086,000

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*. All numbers in the above table are rounded.

## Fighting the War

By the time the first U.S. troops were shipped overseas in late 1917, millions of European soldiers on both sides had already died in trench warfare made more murderous in the industrial age by heavy artillery, machine guns, poison gas, tanks, and airplanes. A second revolution in Russia by Bolsheviks (or Communists) took that nation out of the war. With no Eastern Front to divide its forces, Germany concentrated on one all-out push to break through Allied lines in France.

## Naval Operations

Germany's policy of unrestricted submarine warfare was having its intended effect. Merchant ships bound for Britain were being sunk at a staggering rate: 900,000 tons of shipping was lost in just one month (April 1917). U.S. response to this Allied emergency was to undertake a record-setting program of ship construction. The U.S. Navy also implemented a convoy system of armed escorts for groups of merchant ships. By the end of 1917, the system was working well enough to ensure that Britain and France would not be starved into submission.

## American Expeditionary Force

Unable to imagine the grim realities of trench warfare, U.S. troops were eager for action. The idealism of both the troops and the public is reflected in the popular song of George M. Cohan that many were singing:

Over there, over there,  
Send the word, send the word over there  
That the Yanks are coming,  
The Yanks are coming,  
The drums rum-tumming ev'ry where—

The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) was commanded by General John J. Pershing. The first U.S. troops to see action were used to plug weaknesses in the French and British lines, but by the summer of 1918, as American forces arrived by the hundreds of thousands, the AEF assumed independent responsibility for one segment of the Western Front.

**Last German Offensive** Enough U.S. troops were in place in spring 1918 to hold the line against the last ferocious assault by German forces. At Château-Thierry on the Marne River, Americans stopped the German advance (June 1918) and struck back with a successful counterattack at Belleau Wood.

**Drive to Victory** In August, September, and October, an Allied offensive along the Meuse River and through the Argonne Forest (the Meuse-Argonne offensive) succeeded in driving an exhausted German army backward toward the German border. U.S. troops participated in this drive at St. Mihiel—the southern sector of the Allied line. On November 11, 1918, the Germans signed an armistice in which they agreed to surrender their arms, give up much of their navy, and evacuate occupied territory.

**U.S. Casualties** After only a few months of fighting, U.S. combat deaths totaled nearly 49,000. Many more thousands died of disease, including a flu epidemic in the training camps, bringing total U.S. fatalities in World War I to 112,432.

## **Making the Peace**

During the war, Woodrow Wilson never lost sight of his ambition to shape the peace settlement when the war ended. In January 1917 he had said that the United States would insist on “peace without victory.” A year later he presented to Congress a detailed list of war aims, known as the Fourteen Points, designed to address the causes of World War I and prevent another world war.

### ***The Fourteen Points***

Several of the president’s Fourteen Points related to specific territorial questions: for example, Germany had to return the regions of Alsace and Lorraine to France, and to evacuate Belgium in the west and Romania and Serbia in the east. Of greater significance were the following broad principles for securing the peace:

- Recognition of freedom of the seas
- An end to the practice of making secret treaties
- Reduction of national armaments
- An “impartial adjustment of all colonial claims”
- Self-determination for the various nationalities
- Removal of trade barriers
- “A general association of nations . . . for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike”

The last point was the one that Wilson valued the most. The international peace association that he envisioned would soon be named the League of Nations.

### ***The Treaty of Versailles***

The peace conference following the armistice took place in the Palace of Versailles outside Paris, beginning in January 1919. Every nation that had fought on the Allied side in the war was represented. No U.S. president had ever traveled abroad to attend a diplomatic conference, but President Wilson decided that his personal participation at Versailles was vital to defending his Fourteen Points. Republicans criticized him for being accompanied to Paris by several Democrats, but only one Republican, whose advice was never sought.