



# AMERICA & WWI

## ISOLATION & WAR IN EUROPE

Isolation was a long-held American tradition. Since the days of George Washington, Americans attempted to remain secluded, protected by the mighty oceans on either side. When European conflicts erupted, as they frequently did, many in the United States claimed exceptionalism: America was different. Why get involved in Europe's self-destruction? When the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary was killed in cold blood and his empire declared war on Serbia, alliances forced most European countries to pick a side, igniting the most destructive war in human history until that point. But the initial reaction in the United States was the expectation to remain neutral. As a nation of immigrants, the United States would have difficulty picking a side. Despite the obvious ties to Britain based on history and language, there were many United States citizens who claimed Germany and Austria-Hungary as their motherlands. Support of either the Allies or the Central Powers might prove too divisive.

In the early days of the war, as Britain and France struggled against Germany, American leaders decided it was in the national interest to continue trade with all sides as before. A neutral nation cannot impose an embargo on one side, continue trade with the other, and still retain its neutral status. In addition, American merchants and manufacturers feared that a boycott would cripple the economy. Great Britain, with its powerful navy, had different ideas. A major part of the British strategy was to impose a blockade on Germany. American trade with the Central Powers simply could not be permitted. The results of the blockade were astonishing. Trade with England and France more than tripled between 1914 and 1916, while trade with Germany was cut by over ninety percent.

With American trade becoming more and more lopsided toward the Allied cause, many feared that it was only a matter of time before the United States would be at war. The issue that propelled most American fence-sitters to side with the British was Germany's submarine warfare against Americans at sea.

The British, with the world's largest navy, had effectively shut down German maritime trade. Because there was no hope of ever having more ships than the British, the Germans felt that the submarine was their only key to survival. One German "unterseeboot" (undersea boat), or "U-boat," could secretly sink many battleships, only to slip away unseen. This practice would stop only if the British would lift their blockade.

## SINKING THE LUSITANIA & THE SIMMERMAN TELEGRAM

The isolationist American public had little concern if the British and Germans tangled on the high seas. The incident that changed everything was the sinking of the British ship Lusitania.

The Germans felt they had done their part to warn Americans about the danger of overseas travel. The German government purchased advertisement space in American newspapers warning that Americans who traveled on ships carrying war contraband risked submarine attack. When the Lusitania departed New York, the Germans believed the massive passenger ship was loaded with munitions in its cargo hold. On May 7, 1915, a German U-boat torpedoed the ship without warning, sending 1,198 passengers, including 128 Americans, to an icy grave. The Lusitania, as it turned out, was indeed carrying over 4 million rounds of ammunition.

President Wilson was enraged. Wilson's Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, recommended a ban on American travel on any ships of nations at war. Wilson preferred a tougher line against the German Kaiser. He demanded an immediate end to submarine warfare, prompting Bryan to resign in protest. The Germans began a 2-year practice of pledging to cease submarine attacks, reneging on that pledge, and issuing it again under U.S. protest.

Wilson had other reasons besides the Lusitania for leaning toward the Allied side. He greatly admired the British government, and democracy in any form was preferable to German authoritarianism. The historical ties with Britain seemed to draw the United States closer to the Allies.

Many Americans also felt a debt to France for their help in the American Revolution. Several hundred volunteers, appropriately named the Lafayette Escadrilles after the French general who served in the American Revolutionary War, volunteered to fight with the French in 1916. In November of that year, Wilson campaigned for re-election with a peace platform. "He kept us out of war," read his campaign signs, and Americans narrowly returned him to the White House. But peace was not to be.

In February 1917, citing the unbalanced U.S. trade with the Allies, Germany announced a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. All vessels spotted in the war zone would be sunk immediately and without warning. Wilson responded by severing diplomatic relations with the German government.

Later that month, British intelligence intercepted the notorious Zimmermann Telegram. The German foreign minister Arthur Zimmermann sent a message proposing an alliance with Mexico in the event that the United States should enter the war. Zimmermann promised Mexico a return of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona — territories it had lost to the U.S. in 1848.

Relations between the U.S. and Mexico were already strained. Despite the recent souring between Mexico and its northern neighbor, the Mexican government declined the German offer. In a calculated move, Wilson released the captured telegram to the American press.

## WAR DECLARED ON GERMANY

A tempest of outrage followed. More and more Americans began to label Germany as the true villain in the war. When German submarines sank several American commercial ships in March, Wilson had an even stronger hand to play. On April 2, 1917, he addressed the Congress, citing a long list of grievances against Germany. Four days later, by a wide margin in each house, Congress declared war on Germany, and the U.S. was plunged into, what was at the time, the bloodiest battle in history.

After two and a half years of isolationism, America entered the Great War. Unfortunately, the United States was developing a nasty pattern of entering major conflicts woefully unprepared.

When Congress declared war in April, the army had enough bullets for only two days of fighting. The army was small in numbers at only 200,000 soldiers. Two-fifths of these men were members of the National Guard, which had only recently been federalized. The type of warfare currently plaguing Europe was unlike any the world had ever seen.

The Western front, which ran through Belgium and France, had been in a virtual stalemate since the early years of the war. A system of trenches had been dug by each side. Machine-gun nests, barbed wire, and mines blocked the opposing side from capturing the enemy trench. Artillery shells, mortars, flamethrowers, and poison gas were employed to no avail.

The defensive technology was simply better than the offensive technology. Even if an enemy trench was captured, the enemy would simply retreat into another one dug fifty yards behind. Each side would repeatedly send their soldiers "over the top" of the trenches into the no man's land of almost certain death with very little territorial gain. Now young American men were sent to these killing fields.

## FEELING THE WAR AT HOME

The first problem with entering the war was raising the necessary number of troops. Recruitment was of course the preferred method, but the needed numbers could not be reached with only volunteers. Conscription was unavoidable, and Congress passed the Selective Service Act in May 1917 to enforce a draft.

All males between the ages of 21 and 30 were required to register for military service. The last time a draft had been used resulted in great rioting because wealthy people could purchase exemptions. This time, the draft was conducted by random lottery.

By the end of the war, over four and a half million American men and 11,000 American women served in the armed forces. 400,000 African Americans were called to active duty. In all, two million Americans fought in the French trenches.

The First World War had an enormous impact on US politics, culture, and society. Advocates of female suffrage successfully linked the patriotic efforts of women in the war with voting rights. This strategy was highly effective, and in 1920, the US Congress ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, which guaranteed women the right to vote.

Others were not so lucky. Hyper-vigilance on the home front led to spontaneous outbreaks of violence against groups whose loyalty to the United States was considered suspect. German-Americans, labor activists, suffragists, immigrants, African Americans, and socialists were subjected to threats, harassment, imprisonment, and physical violence.

At the same time, civil liberties were sharply curtailed. The Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 criminalized the expression of antiwar sentiment and criticism of the US government and armed forces. Voluntary associations were created to identify dissidents, and many of these worked together with the Federal Bureau of Investigation to patrol the home front and punish perceived "enemies."<sup>66</sup>

## WAR OVERSEAS

The first military measures adopted by the United States were on the seas. Joint Anglo-American operations were highly successful at stopping the dreaded submarine. Following the thinking that there is greater strength in numbers, the U.S. and Britain developed an elaborate convoy system to protect vulnerable ships. In addition, mines were placed in many areas formerly dominated by German U-boats. The campaign<sup>26</sup> was so effective that not a single American soldier was lost on the high seas in transit to the Western front.

The American Expeditionary Force began arriving in France in June 1917, but the original numbers were quite small. Time was necessary to inflate the ranks of the United States Army and to provide at least a basic training program.

When the Bolsheviks took over Russia in 1917 in a domestic revolution, Germany signed a peace treaty with the new government. The Germans could now afford to transfer many of their soldiers fighting in the East to the deadlocked Western front. The seemingly infinite supply of fresh American soldiers countered this potential advantage and was demoralizing to the Germans. Were it not for the fresh supply of incoming American troops, the war might have followed a very different path. The addition of the United States to the Allied effort was as elevating to the Allied morale as it was devastating to the German will.

## COUNTING THE CASUALTIES

The new soldiers began arriving in great numbers in early 1918. The "doughboys," as they were labeled by the French, were green<sup>30</sup> indeed. Many fell prey to the trappings of Paris nightlife while awaiting transfer to the front. African-American soldiers noted that their treatment by the French soldiers was better than their treatment by their white counterparts in the American army. Although the German army dropped tempting leaflets on the African-American troops promising a less-racist society if the Germans won, none took the offer seriously.

By the spring of 1918, the doughboys were seeing fast and furious action. A German offensive came within fifty miles of Paris, and American soldiers played a critical role in turning the tide at Chateau Thierry and Belleau Wood. In September 1918, efforts were concentrated on dislodging German troops from the Meuse River. Finding success, the Allies chased the Germans into the trench-laden Argonne Forest, where America suffered heavy casualties.

But the will and resources of the German resistance were shattered. The army retreated, and on November 11, 1918, the German government agreed to an armistice. The war was over. Over 14 million soldiers and civilians perished in the so-called Great War, including 112,000 Americans. Countless more were wounded.

Contributions to the war effort were not confined to the battlefield. The entire American economy was mobilized to win the war. From planting extra vegetables to keeping the furnace turned off, American civilians provided extra food and fuel to the war effort. The United States government engaged in a massive propaganda campaign to raise troops and money. Any opposition against this effort was stifled, prompting many to question whether American civil liberties were in jeopardy. In the end, the war was won, but peace was lost. The Treaty of Versailles, presented by President Wilson, was eventually rejected by the Senate from U.S. ratification, which prevented the U.S. from joining the League of Nations, unlike the countries that did ratify the treaty. Without the support of the United States, the League of Nations was unable to soften some of the more damaging effects of the treaty, such as worldwide economic crises between 1929 and 1933. The bitterness that swept Europe and America would prevent the securing of a just peace, imperiling the next generation as well. Two dangerous decades of political isolationism followed, only to end in an ever more cataclysmic war.

## QUESTIONS TO ANSWER FROM THE READING

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1. How did the sinking of the Lusitania and the Zimmerman Telegram affect the United States participation in WWI?
2. What was the effect of the war on US culture and society?
3. Were the domestic effects of the war more positive or negative overall?
4. In your own words briefly give a broad overview of the United States' changing foreign relations policies and values before and throughout the course of World War I. In other words explain how it went from neutrality and isolationism to intervention.