

Neutral America

On May 7, 1915, a German U-boat torpedoed the British passenger liner *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland. It sank in 15 minutes. More than 1,000 passengers, including 128 United States citizens, died in the attack. The Germans claimed the ship was carrying war materials. The American and British governments, angry, condemned the attack. It was learned later that the ship was in fact carrying war materials. Several months later, a German U-boat torpedoed the unarmed French passenger ship *Sussex*, injuring several Americans. The Americans said the attacks were a violation of international law, and President Wilson threatened to end diplomatic relations with Germany. Fearing the Americans might enter the war; Germany offered to pay Americans injured on the *Sussex* and promised to warn neutral ships and passenger vessels before attacking. For awhile, the Sussex Pledge, as it was called, seemed to resolve the issue.

Why were the Germans sinking American ships?

As a neutral nation at the start of World War I, America sought to trade with both sides, but Britain's blockade of Germany made this difficult. The British navy stopped and searched American ships heading for German ports, often seizing the ships' goods. The United States protested. The British responded with the defense that they were fighting for their survival. The United States government could do nothing about the blockade, so they stopped trading with Germany and continued trading with Britain. American business was doing quite well because of the European conflict. In addition Britain and France borrowed millions from American banks to help pay for their war efforts. All this business caused an economic boom in the United States. It also upset the Germans, who watched the United States-supposedly a neutral nation- become the arsenal of the Allies. To stop American economic assistance to Britain, Germany announced in February 1915 that it would use its U-boats to sink any vessels that entered or left British ports.

The End of Neutrality

The crisis over submarine warfare encouraged the United States to strengthen its military forces. In the summer of 1916, Congress passed legislation that doubled the size of the army and provided funds to build new warships. President Wilson still hoped to stay out of the war. By January of 1917, Germany reversed its policy on submarine warfare. It announced it would sink all merchant ships that were headed for Allied ports. The Germans believed they could defeat the Allies before the Americans were able to enter the war. An angry President Wilson broke off diplomatic relations with Germany. A few weeks later, a secret telegram-intercepted by the British government- pushed Americans closer to the idea of war with Germany. In late February the German foreign minister, Arthur Zimmerman, sent a telegram to Mexico with an offer to the Mexican government:

“MAKE WAR, TOGETHER, MAKE PEACE TOGETHER, GENEROUS FINANCIAL SUPPORT, AND AN UNDERSTANDING ON OUR PART THAT MEXICO IS TO RECONQUER THE LOST TERRITORY IN TEXAS, NEW MEXICO, AND ARIZONA.”

Newspapers published the Zimmerman telegram on March 1, and the Americans reacted angrily to the German action.

The Americans Enter World War I

In the weeks following publication of the Zimmerman telegram, dramatic events pushed the United States to the edge of war:

- First, a revolution took place in Russia. Following a period of rioting and strikes, the Russian people overthrew the monarchy. In its place they set up a temporary democratic government.
- With Russia's change to a democratic form of government, President Wilson could claim the Allies were fighting a war for democracy against autocracy-the rule by one person with unlimited power.
- On March 18, 1917, German U-boats sank three American merchant ships without warning and with heavy loss of life.

President Wilson concluded that the United States could no longer remain neutral. Congress passed a declaration of war on April 6, 1917.

Americans Join the Allies

In 1917 the Allies desperately needed the help of American soldiers:

- Years of trench warfare had exhausted the Allies armies
- Some French troops refused to continue fighting after a failed offensive in 1917
- The British had started to run out of war supplies and food; their people were starving
- German submarines were sinking one out of every four ships that left British ports

Supplying the Allies

The American entry into the war made an immediate difference. To ensure that needed supplies made it to Britain, The United States Navy took two steps:

- It helped the British to find and destroy German submarines.
- Convoys-teams-of navy destroyers escorted groups of merchant ships across the Atlantic.

The convoy system worked well. In one year it reduced Allied shipping losses from 900,000 to 300,000 tons a month. With the convoy system, not one American soldier bound for Europe was lost due to submarine attack.

Russia Is Out of the War

The Allies needed more troops because of a second revolution in Russia. In November 1917, the Bolsheviks, a group of communists, overthrew the democratic government set up in March 1917. Led by Vladimir Lenin, the Bolsheviks wanted to end Russia's involvement in the war so they could focus on the problems they had at home. With food shortages and riots, the Russians did not have the energy or the resources to continue fighting the Germans. With the Russians out of the war, the Germans could now move their troops from the Eastern Front to the Western Front in France. The Germans launched a powerful offensive between March and June 1918 pushing the Allies back to within 50 miles of Paris. After years of stalemate along the Western Front—the area along the French-German border—it suddenly looked as if Germany might win the war.

The End of the Great War

The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) saw its first serious fighting in early June 1918. It helped to turn back a German offensive on the Marne River east of Paris. By the middle of July 1918, the Allies, according to General Pershing (leader of the AEF), had “turned the tide of war”. From September to November the Battle of the Argonne Forest raged. By the end of the 7 week battle the Germans were retreating and they were now faced with an invasion of their own country. With their troops in retreat, the German military leaders realized they had little chance of winning the war. On October 4, 1918, suffering from shortages of food and other needed supplies, the German government asked President Wilson for an armistice. While waiting for Wilson's reply, German Kaiser Wilhelm II was forced to give up his throne on November 9. The new leaders quickly accepted Wilson's terms for peace.

The armistice began on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, November 11, 1918.

Germany agreed to:

- withdraw all land forces west of the Rhine River
- withdraw its fleet to the Baltic Sea
- surrender huge amounts of equipment

With the signing of the armistice, the Great War ended. President Wilson announced:

“Everything for which America fought has been accomplished. It will now be our duty to assist by example, by sober, friendly counsel, and by material aid in the establishment of just democracy throughout the world.”

What the world did not know at the time was the choices made in the coming months would affect the way the rest of the 20th Century's history would unfold.