

World War I

(1.)



By 1917, the war in Europe was not going well for anyone. On the Western Front in France and Belgium, British and French soldiers faced their German enemy in a **stalemate** along trench lines that ran from the Swiss border all the way to the English Channel. In the east, the Germans and Austrians had won several important battles against the Russians, but could not advance much further into Russia.

(2.)



Casualties were enormous. In the summer of 1917, the British launched an offensive in Belgium which captured only six square miles of territory but cost 448,614 men killed, wounded, and missing in action – more than 25,000 lives for every square mile taken.



British troops in gas masks prepare to attack

(3.)



French casualties were just as appalling, if not worse, and their army's **morale** was very low. In 1917 fifty-four French divisions – more than 750,000 men – mutinied. They refused to carry out their officers' orders and many commanders were shot by their men. Over 20,000 soldiers deserted outright and simply left the battlefield.

(4.)



The situation in Russia was shaky as well. Their war dead numbered 1.3 million, and the long-suffering Russian people were finally losing their patience. The Russian leader, Tsar Nicholas II, ruled a country that was already unstable and **plagued** by revolutionary movements. In February of 1917, the 300-year rule of the Romanov family in Russia came to an end. The Tsar stepped down

and was replaced by a **provisional** government that was eventually overthrown in November by Bolsheviks (Communists) under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin.

(5.)



Woodrow Wilson and the U.S. Congress wanted to steer clear of this turmoil, but as the war in the North Atlantic progressed this became increasingly unlikely. Naval operations in World War I were as unconditional as the fight on land. The British were blockading German ports with the aim of starving the entire population into **submission**. The Germans were sending their submarines (U-boats) around the world sinking every British ship they could find, civilian and military.

(6.)



This was known as unrestricted submarine warfare. On January 31, 1917, the German Ambassador to the United States informed President Wilson that Germany would extend this unrestricted warfare to American vessels. German U-boats would sink any ship going to England, regardless of type or nationality. Wilson’s response was to break off diplomatic relations with Germany. All German diplomats were ordered to leave the United States and did so on February 14.

(7.)



At this point, the president and his cabinet wanted additional funding to arm American merchant ships, so Congress authorized \$100 million for this purpose. There was still strong opposition within Congress to entering the European war. The German announcement that they would begin unrestricted submarine warfare angered many Americans, but Wilson didn’t think it was enough to push the country to war.

(8.)



They had been on the verge of it before. On May 7, 1915 a German U-boat off the coast of Ireland sank the British luxury ship *Lusitania*. The ship was British but carried 188 Americans, 114 of whom drowned. What made the attack even more sinister was the fact that when the *Lusitania*’s departure was advertised in New York City papers the week before, the German Embassy in Washington warned its passengers that they sailed at their own risk.



German coin depicting a grinning skeleton standing over the sinking Lusitania.

(9.)



This threat didn’t attract much attention until after the ship was sunk. It then appeared as if the Germans had deliberately targeted the ship. The *Des Moines Register and Leader* editorial said simply: “The sinking of the *Lusitania* was deliberate murder.”

(10.)



All eyes were now on President Wilson for his reaction. To those who wanted war with Germany, it was a disappointment. Speaking before an audience in Philadelphia on May 10, he said, “The example of America must be the example not merely of peace because it will not fight, but of peace because peace is the healing and elevating influence of the world and strife is not. There is such a thing as a nation being so right that it does not need to convince others by force that it is right... There is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight.”

(11.)



If any statement could show the difference between the foreign policy of Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt, this was it. Beside himself with rage, the

former President said acidly, “Wilson and [Secretary of State] Bryan are cordially supported by all the hyphenated Americans, by the solid flubdub and **pacifist** vote. Every soft creature, every coward and weakling, every man who can’t look six inches ahead, every man whose god is money, or pleasure, or ease, and every man who has not got in him both the sterner virtues and the power of seeking after an ideal, is enthusiastically in favor of Wilson.”

(12.)



These “hyphenated Americans” were the recently naturalized citizens who were Woodrow Wilson’s audience for his “too proud to fight” speech. World War I split many Americans along ethnic lines. Pro-German **sentiment** among German-Americans was fairly strong in the years before the United States entered the war. Among Irish-Americans, the sentiment was not so much pro-German as anti-British. English colonization of Ireland had produced deep resentment among Irish immigrants.

(13.)



On the other side were Americans whose heritage came from countries at war with Germany. Those of Italian, Russian, Polish, British and French origin held strong anti-German sentiments. Wilson recognized these differences among the American people and pledged to keep the country out of war. He ran this as a plank in his reelection platform of 1916 and won by a narrow margin.

(14.)

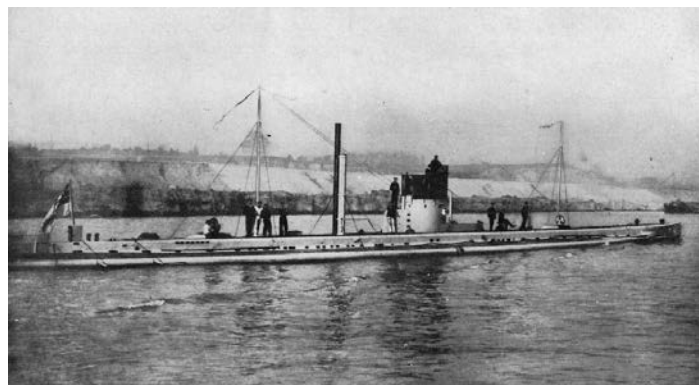


The German announcement that their unrestricted submarine warfare would be extended to vessels of all nations took place a month before the inauguration of Wilson’s second term. After breaking off diplomatic relations with Germany, Wilson still held out hope that the United States might not be drawn into the conflict. He thought peace negotiations between the European powers were possible in 1917 due to the stalemate on the Western Front and the revolution in Russia. In spite of Germany’s policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, Wilson wasn’t sure he had enough votes in Congress to approve a declaration of war, even if he asked for one.

(15.)



All that changed with the Zimmermann Telegram. On February 24, 1917, the U.S. Ambassador in London, Walter Page, sent an urgent message to the State Department. It was a coded telegram which the British Secret Service had intercepted between the German Foreign Ministry in Berlin and the German Embassy in Mexico City.



A German submarine gets underway

(16.)



By the standards of the day, by the standards of any day, it was a shocking document. The German Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Arthur Zimmermann, instructed the German Ambassador in Mexico to make “a proposal of alliance on the following basis: 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.”



President Woodrow Wilson

(17.)



In other words, if Mexico entered the war on Germany’s side against the United States, the Germans would assist Mexico in taking over three American states.

(18.)



So fantastic was this proposal that the State Department spent several days verifying its authenticity, worried that it might be a hoax. The British sent them the original intercept and the German text. It was all true. The country was stunned by the prospect of a behind-the-back deal between Germans and Mexicans for a piece of **sovereign** American territory.

(19.)



As a direct result of the Zimmermann Telegram, President Wilson **convened** a joint session of Congress on April 16, 1917, where he asked for and received a declaration of war against Germany.

(20.)



The tired armies of the British and French were reinforced with American soldiers in the summer of 1917, but they were slow in coming. When Lenin’s Bolsheviks took control of Russia in November 1917, they sent word to the Germans that they wanted to make peace. By March of 1918 more than two million Russian soldiers had died in the war and the country didn’t have much to show for it. Russia was on the verge of civil war and the Bolsheviks knew they could only fight one enemy at a time.

(21.)



So in March 1918 Russia and Germany signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. It was a very one-sided agreement; the Germans charged a very high price for peace. In exchange for an end to hostilities, the Russians agreed to give them control of one of their richest provinces, the Ukraine. It was a sign of just how desperate Lenin was, but he had more important fish to fry, because as soon as the treaty was signed, Russia **descended** into civil war.

(22.)



The British and the French were Russia's allies. Their agreement had been that none of them would make a separate peace with the Germans and so leave the others to fight alone. That agreement had been made when the Tsar was in power. Now Russia was in the hands of different men. All bets were off, and as far as the Russians were concerned, France and England were on their own.

(23.)



As soon as Germany made peace with Russia, the German General Staff began to transfer its army from the Eastern Front. Three thousand guns and one million men were shifted to France in spring of 1918. The German commander on the Western Front, Erich Ludendorff, now had the assault forces he needed to break through the British and French lines and capture Paris.

(24.)



It was the last card the Germans had up their sleeve. They had already lost three million men in the war, and on March 21, 1918, they began their final offensive. They got within 40 miles of Paris when they were met by two divisions of the United States Marine Corps at Belleau Wood. The Americans stopped the German assault and threw it back. By June, the Allies were advancing steadily across France. Ludendorff's gamble had failed.

(25.)



The Germans soon asked for surrender terms, and on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, Germany signed an armistice with the Allies. World War I was over, but the implications of this unsettled peace would cast a long shadow. The seeds of the Second World War would be planted in the closing days of the first.

Learning Objectives and Discussion Topics:

- Know the history of relationships among different political powers and the development of international relations

Describe the situation in Europe before America entered the war. What was happening on the Western Front? What was happening on the Eastern Front?

By 1917 the war in Europe had ground to a stalemate. On the Western Front the French and British faced the Germans across hundreds of miles of trenches. The casualties were enormous. A British offensive in the summer of 1917 captured just six square miles of territory at a cost of 448,614 killed, wounded, and missing soldiers. French casualties were even more appalling. They caused 750,000 men to mutiny and shoot their officers or refuse their orders.

The situation on the Eastern Front was even worse. Russia's war dead numbered 1.3 million, and it was also locked in a stalemate with Germany. The regime of Tsar Nicholas II was threatened by these losses. His people were growing tired of the war, making an already unstable political situation worse. In February of 1917 he was forced to step down. He was replaced by a provisional government, which was eventually overthrown by Vladimir Lenin's Bolsheviks. Lenin surrendered to the Germans the following year, allowing the Germans to transfer all their troops from the Eastern to the Western Front.

- Understand how the United States government develops foreign policy

Give three reasons why the United States entered World War I:

The goal of Germany's policy of unrestricted submarine warfare was to sink all ships sailing to England regardless of their flag. Its purpose was to starve England into submission, since the British were blockading German ports for the same reason.

This policy backfired in 1915 when the Germans sank the passenger ship *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland, drowning 114 Americans. What made the attack especially sinister was the warning the German Embassy issued to passengers of the ship before it left New York. It made it seem as if the Germans had deliberately targeted the *Lusitania* even though it knew it was not a warship.

In February 1917 the British Secret Service intercepted a message from the Foreign Ministry in Berlin to the German Embassy in Mexico. It was called the *Zimmermann Telegram*, and it was an offer of support from the German government if Mexico waged war on the United States. The Germans suggested the Mexicans invade Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. This behind-the-back deal to conquer a piece of sovereign U.S. territory outraged Americans. The *Zimmermann Telegram* led directly to President Wilson's request for a declaration of war against Germany.

- Know how to interpret and evaluate primary and secondary sources of historical information

- Know the history of relationships among different political powers and the development of international relations

Read the primary source, the Zimmermann Telegram, and answer the following questions:

Does the German proposal in the Zimmermann Telegram strike you as outrageous? Is it worth going to war over?

It is outrageous, especially because Germany really had nothing to gain by making such a bold offer to Mexico. Since the Mexican Army could not have reclaimed U.S. territory on its own, such an operation would have required a German expeditionary force in Mexico, a logistical and military impossibility. If an enemy thinks he can violate sovereign American territory so easily, a show of force is probably necessary to protect U.S. interests.

Refer to the timeline to answer the following questions:

Aug. 1914 May 1915 Jan. 1917 Feb. 1917 Apr. 1917 Nov. 1917 Nov. 1918
[_____] [_____] [_____] [_____] [_____] [_____] [_____]

August 1914: World War I begins

May 1915: *Lusitania* sunk

January 1917: Germany begins unrestricted submarine warfare

February 1917: Zimmermann Telegram discovered

April 1917: America enters the war

November 1917: Russian Revolution

November 1918: World War I ends with Treaty of Versailles

1. How many months did the First World War last before America entered it? **32**
2. How long did it take the U.S. to enter the war after the Zimmermann Telegram was discovered? **Two months**
3. How many months passed between the Russian Revolution and the end of World War I? **Twelve**