

Americans Question Neutrality

In 1914, most Americans saw no reason to join a struggle 3,000 miles away. The war did not threaten American lives or property. This does not mean, however, that individual Americans were indifferent to who would win the war. Public opinion was strong—but divided.


DIVIDED LOYALTIES Socialists criticized the war as a capitalist and imperialist struggle between Germany and England to control markets and colonies in China, Africa, and the Middle East. Pacifists, such as lawyer and politician William Jennings Bryan, believed that war was evil and that the United States should set an example of peace to the world.

Many Americans simply did not want their sons to experience the horrors of warfare, as a hit song of 1915 conveyed.

“I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier,
I brought him up to be my pride and joy.
Who dares to place a musket on his shoulder,
To shoot some other mother’s darling boy?”

Millions of naturalized U.S. citizens followed the war closely because they still had ties to the nations from which they had emigrated. For example, many Americans of German descent sympathized with Germany. Americans of Irish descent remembered the centuries of British oppression in Ireland and saw the war as a chance for Ireland to gain its independence.

On the other hand, many Americans felt close to Britain because of a common ancestry and language as well as similar democratic institutions and legal systems. Germany’s aggressive sweep through Belgium increased American sympathy for the Allies. The Germans attacked civilians, destroying villages, cathedrals, libraries, and even hospitals. Some atrocity stories—spread by British propaganda—later proved to be false, but enough proved true that one American magazine referred to Germany as “the bully of Europe.”

More important, America’s economic ties with the Allies were far stronger than its ties with the Central Powers. Before the war, American trade with Britain and France was more than double its trade with Germany. During the first two years of the war, America’s transatlantic trade became even more lopsided, as the Allies flooded American manufacturers with orders for all sorts of war supplies, including dynamite, cannon powder, submarines, copper wire and tubing, and armored cars. The United States shipped millions of dollars of war supplies to the Allies, but requests kept coming. By 1915, the United States was experiencing a labor shortage. 

Vocabulary

emigrate: to leave one’s country or region to settle in another; to move

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Motives

1 Why did the United States begin to favor Britain and France?

ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

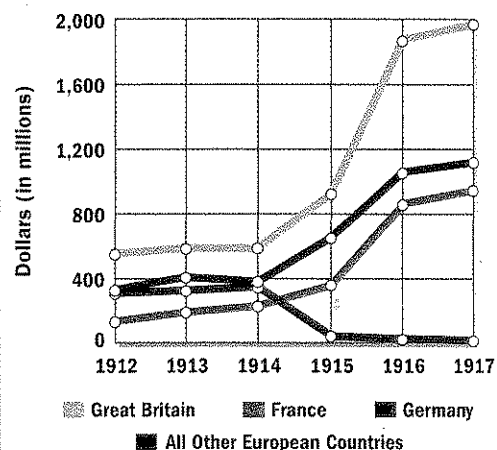
TRADE ALLIANCES

Maintaining neutrality proved difficult for American businesses. Trade with Germany became increasingly risky. Shipments were often stopped by the British blockade. In addition, President Wilson and others spoke out against German atrocities and warned of the threat that the German Empire posed to democracy.

From 1912 to 1917, U.S. trade relationships with European countries shifted dramatically. From 1914 on, trade with the Allies quadrupled, while trade with Germany fell to near zero.

Also, by 1917, American banks had loaned \$2.3 billion to the Allies, but only \$27 million to the Central Powers. Many U.S. leaders, including Treasury Secretary William McAdoo, felt that American prosperity depended upon an Allied victory. (See *trade* on page R47 in the Economics Handbook.)

U.S. Exports to Europe, 1912–1917



SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Graphs

- By how much did total U.S. exports to Europe rise or fall between 1914 and 1917?
- What trends does the graph show before the start of the war, and during the war?



▲ This image of a U-boat crew machine-gunning helpless survivors of the *Lusitania* was clearly meant as propaganda. In fact, U-boats seldom lingered after an attack.

The War Hits Home

Although the majority of Americans favored victory for the Allies rather than the Central Powers, they did not want to join the Allies' fight. By 1917, however, America had mobilized for war against the Central Powers for two reasons: to ensure Allied repayment of debts to the United States and to prevent the Germans from threatening U.S. shipping.

THE BRITISH BLOCKADE As fighting on land continued, Britain began to make more use of its naval strength. It blockaded the German coast to prevent weapons and other military supplies from getting through. However, the British expanded the definition of contraband to include food. They also extended the blockade to neutral ports and mined the entire North Sea.

The results were two fold. First, American ships carrying goods for Germany refused to challenge the blockade and seldom reached their destination. Second, Germany found it increasingly difficult to import foodstuffs and fertilizers for crops. By 1917, famine stalked the country. An estimated 750,000 Germans starved to death as a result of the British blockade.

Americans had been angry at Britain's blockade, which threatened freedom of the seas and prevented American goods from reaching German ports. However, Germany's response to the blockade soon outraged American public opinion.

GERMAN U-BOAT RESPONSE Germany responded to the British blockade with a counterblockade by U-boats (from *Unterseeboot*, the German word for a submarine). Any British or Allied ship found in the waters around Britain would be sunk—and it would not always be possible to warn crews and passengers of an attack.

One of the worst disasters occurred on May 7, 1915, when a U-boat sank the British liner *Lusitania* (lōō'sī-tā'nē-ə) off the southern coast of Ireland. Of the 1,198 persons lost, 128 were Americans. The Germans defended their action on the grounds that the liner carried ammunition. Despite Germany's explanation, Americans became outraged with Germany because of the loss of life. American public opinion turned against Germany and the Central Powers.

OCEAN STEAMSHIP

CUNARD

EUROPE VIA LIVERPOOL
LUSITANIA

Fastest and Largest Ship
now in Atlantic Service
SATURDAY, MAY 1, 1915
Transylvania, Fri., May 7
Orduna, -- Tues. May 11
Tuscania, -- Fri., May 15
LUSITANIA, Sat., May 22
Transylvania, Fri., June 5

Gibraltar—Genoa—Naples—
S.S. Carpathia, Thurs., May 28

ROUND THE WORLD
Through London to all ports
of the World
Company's Office, 21-22 Ave. C.

NOTICE!

TRAVELLERS intending to embark on the Atlantic Ocean are reminded that a state of war exists between Great Britain and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles in accordance with the notice given by the Imperial Government vessel the flag of Great Britain; that any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters; that travellers sailing in war-zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.

IMPERIAL GERMAN EMBASSY
WASHINGTON, D. C., APRIL 1915

▲ A newspaper advertisement for the *Lusitania* included a warning from the German Embassy.

MAIN IDEA

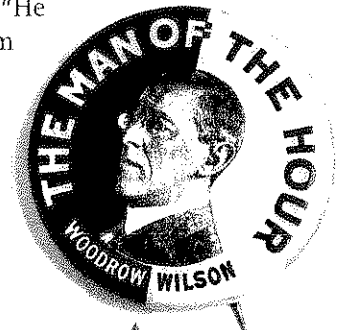
Analyzing Effects

How did the German U-boat campaign affect U.S. public opinion?

Despite this provocation, President Wilson ruled out a military response in favor of a sharp protest to Germany. Three months later, in August 1915, a U-boat sank another British liner, the *Arabic*, drowning two Americans. Again the United States protested, and this time Germany agreed not to sink any more passenger ships. But in March 1916 Germany broke its promise and torpedoed an unarmed French passenger steamer, the *Sussex*. The *Sussex* sank, and about 80 passengers, including Americans, were killed or injured. Once again the United States warned that it would break off diplomatic relations unless Germany changed its tactics. Again Germany agreed, but there was a condition: if the United States could not persuade Britain to lift its blockade against food and fertilizers, Germany would consider renewing unrestricted submarine warfare.

THE 1916 ELECTION In November 1916 came the U.S. presidential election. The Democrats renominated Wilson, and the Republicans nominated Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes. Wilson campaigned on the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War." Hughes pledged to uphold America's right to freedom of the seas but also promised not to be too severe on Germany.

The election returns shifted from hour to hour. In fact, Hughes went to bed believing he had been elected. When a reporter tried to reach him with the news of Wilson's victory, an aide said, "The president can't be disturbed." "Well," replied the reporter, "when he wakes up, tell him he's no longer president."



Wilson campaign button

The United States Declares War

After the election, Wilson tried to mediate between the warring alliances. The attempt failed. In a speech before the Senate in January 1917, the president called for "a peace without victory. . . a peace between equals," in which neither side would impose harsh terms on the other. Wilson hoped that all nations would join in a "league for peace" that would work to extend democracy, maintain freedom of the seas, and reduce armaments.

GERMAN PROVOCATION The Germans ignored Wilson's calls for peace. Germany's leaders hoped to defeat Britain by resuming unrestricted submarine warfare. On January 31 the kaiser announced that U-boats would sink all ships in British waters—hostile or neutral—on sight. Wilson was stunned. The German decision meant that the United States would have to go to war. However, the president held back, saying that he would wait for "actual overt acts" before declaring war.

The overt acts came. First was the **Zimmermann note**, a telegram from the German foreign minister to the German ambassador in Mexico that was intercepted by British agents. The telegram proposed an alliance between Mexico and Germany and promised that if war with the United States broke out, Germany would support Mexico in recovering "lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona." Next came the sinking of four unarmed American merchant ships, with a loss of 36 lives.

Finally, events in Russia removed the last significant obstacle to direct U.S. involvement in the war. In March, the oppressive Russian monarchy was

Alliances During WWI

| Allies | | Central Powers |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Australia | India | Austria-Hungary |
| Belgium | Italy | Bulgaria |
| British Colonies | Japan | Germany |
| Canada & Newfoundland | Montenegro | Ottoman Empire |
| France | New Zealand | |
| French North Africa & French Colonies | Portugal | |
| Great Britain | Romania | |
| Greece | Russia | |
| | Serbia | |
| | South Africa | |
| | United States | |

Although not all of the countries listed above sent troops into the war, they all joined the war on the Allied side at various times.

MAIN IDEA

Making Inferences

Why did the Zimmermann note alarm the U.S. government?

WORLD STAGE

REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA

At first, the Russians surprised the Germans by mobilizing rapidly. Russian troops advanced quickly into German territory but were turned back at the Battle of Tannenberg in August 1914.

Throughout 1915, the Russians endured defeats and continued to retreat. By the end of 1915 they had suffered about 2.5 million casualties. The war also caused massive bread shortages in Russia.

Revolutionaries ousted the czar in March 1917 and established a provisional government. In November, the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin and Trotsky, overthrew the provisional government. They set up a Communist state and sought peace with the Central Powers.

replaced with a representative government. Now supporters of American entry into the war could claim that this was a war of democracies against brutal monarchies.

AMERICA ACTS A light drizzle fell on Washington on April 2, 1917, as senators, representatives, ambassadors, members of the Supreme Court, and other guests crowded into the Capitol building to hear President Wilson deliver his war resolution.

A PERSONAL VOICE WOODROW WILSON

“Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people cannot be. The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind. . . . We are glad . . . to fight . . . for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples. . . . The world must be made safe for democracy. . . . We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities. . . . It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war. . . . But the right is more precious than peace.”

—quoted in *American Voices*

Congress passed the resolution a few days later. With the hope of neutrality finally shattered, U.S. troops would follow the stream of American money and munitions that had been heading to the Allies throughout the war. But

Wilson’s plea to make the world “safe for democracy” wasn’t just political posturing. Indeed, Wilson and many Americans truly believed that the United States had to join the war to pave the way for a future order of peace and freedom. A resolved but anxious nation held its breath as the United States prepared for war.



ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- nationalism
- militarism
- Allies

- Central Powers
- Archduke Franz Ferdinand

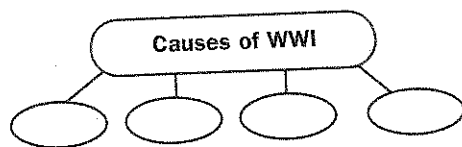
- no man’s land
- trench warfare

- Lusitania
- Zimmermann note

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

In a chart like the one shown, list the causes for the outbreak of World War I.



Which was the most significant cause? Explain your answer.

CRITICAL THINKING

3. SYNTHESIZING

Describe some ways in which World War I threatened the lives of civilians on both sides of the Atlantic.

4. SUMMARIZING

Why were America’s ties with the Allies stronger than its ties with the Central Powers?

5. ANALYZING ISSUES

Why do you think German escalated its U-boat attack in 1917? **Think About:**

- Germany’s military blockade
- the effects of the British blockade
- Germany’s reason for submarine warfare