

# World War I

In the summer of 1914, World War I broke out in Europe between the Allies—Great Britain, France and Russia—and the Central Powers—Germany and Austria-Hungary. President Wilson issued a proclamation of neutrality. He warned the American people that they should not be thrown off balance by a war that had nothing to do with the United States.

Wilson hoped that the US would eventually be able to mediate between the European powers and restore peace. But there are problems with neutrality.

1. The US is a world power, and has made treaties with various members of the conflict.
2. The US is a merchant power. We use the Atlantic Ocean to ship products to our customers and we are then vulnerable to attack on the high seas and to loss of revenue because of the war.

Like most Americans Wilson was pro-British. There was some support for the Germans in America. Most notable among those who supported Germany was William Jennings Bryan and the Populists. They had anti-British sentiment because British capital helped to build the railroads.

Germany's invasion of Belgium changes the American view of Germans. In the early part of the conflict the Germans were viewed primarily as simply a country at war. But stories of the German invasion of Belgium, heavily propagandized by the British, led most Americans to see the Germans as savages. They were nicknamed the "Huns." Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany is called the "Beast of Berlin."

Another reason for American support of the Allies was because Britain and France were democratic (we overlook the Russians) while Germany and Austria were monarchies.

There were still problems in supporting Britain though. British naval policy angered the U.S. because:

- ★ British blockade of Germany forced the British to enter into some acts out at sea which Americans felt were in violation of international law.
- ★ The British intercepted American vessels and seized goods bound for neutral countries like Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

But the dispute between the US and Great Britain was quickly overshadowed by the aggressiveness of German submarine policy. In 1915, Germany declared that the waters surrounding Great Britain and Ireland were a war zone and German submarines would destroy any shipping in that area. The Germans advised all neutral shipping to stay out of that area so that "unfortunate mistakes" could be avoided. They also advised neutral personnel to avoid travel in ships that belonged to the Allies. The American government protested because according

to international law a war ship was supposed to search an enemy vessel before destroying it. This was called the “search and warning rule.”

### **Submarine Warfare**

In early May of 1915, the *Lusitania* left New York with almost 150 Americans on board. The ship was sunk by a German submarine. Wilson demanded that the Germans cease unrestricted submarine warfare. The German ambassador informed the State Department that liners would not be sunk by German submarines without some attempt to protect the lives of noncombatants.

Then in 1916, the French passenger vessel the *Sussex* was torpedoed in the English Channel. Several Americans were injured. Wilson protested and the Germans pledged not to sink merchant vessels without warning. This is called the *Sussex* Pledge. The Pledge was adhered to by the Germans until January 1917, when the Germans went back to unrestricted submarine warfare. All ships entering British waters were attacked regardless of neutrality.

### **Peace Without Victory**

Wilson was reelected in 1916. He spent a great deal of energy trying to end the war. He sent two peace missions to Europe with no real success. *Peace without Victory* became his slogan and his own personal ambition (“fantasy” might be a better word). Wilson hoped that he would be able to convince the warring powers to end the war without anyone actually winning—no victor, no loser—so the peace would not be dictated, but shared by all parties in the war. So long as both sides believed that they could win a decisive and glorious victory, nobody was willing to give up that victory to placate the idealistic, somewhat incomprehensible, neutral President Wilson.

### **The Zimmerman Note**

In the spring of 1917, British Intelligence intercepted a telegram from Arthur Zimmerman, the Foreign Secretary of the German Empire to the German ambassador to Mexico. The Telegram stated that if the United States appeared likely to enter the war he was to approach the Mexican government with a proposal for military alliance. He was to offer Mexico material aid in the reclamation of territory lost during the Mexican-American War (the southeastern section of the area of the Mexican Cession of 1848) and the Gadsden Purchase, specifically the American states of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. Eckardt was also instructed to urge Mexico to help broker an alliance between Germany and Japan. At first, the so-called Zimmerman Telegram was widely believed to be a forgery perpetrated by British intelligence. This belief was promoted by German and Mexican diplomats, and by some American papers, especially the Hearst newspapers. However, first on March 3, 1917 and later on March 29, 1917, Arthur Zimmermann himself admitted that the Telegram was genuine.

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On February 1, Germany had resumed "unrestricted" submarine warfare, which caused many civilian deaths, including American passengers on British ships. This caused widespread anti-German sentiment. The Telegram greatly increased this feeling. Besides the highly provocative anti-U.S. proposal to Mexico, the Telegram also mentioned "ruthless employment of our submarines."

Unrestricted submarine warfare and the Zimmerman Note pressured Wilson, into declaring war on Germany. On April 2, 1917, Wilson delivered a war message to Congress. He blamed German submarine warfare as the prime cause. On April 4<sup>th</sup>, Congress declared war on Germany. It is important to note that Wilson's idealism even came to the fore in his declaration of war. Wilson announced that the United States had no quarrel with the other Central Powers, only Germany, and so the U.S. declared war, *only on Germany!* Additionally, Wilson announced that the U.S. did was not entering the war as members of any European alliance, but alone against Germany.

### **The War**

By the summer of 1917, 600,000 U.S. troops had begun to arrive on the Western Front. The U.S. forces in the war were called the A.E.F. — the American Expeditionary Force. The A.E.F. was commanded by General John J. "Blackjack" Pershing. General Pershing insisted that American soldiers should be well-trained before going to Europe. As a result, few troops arrived before 1918. In addition, Pershing insisted, probably as a matter of political policy, that the American force would not be used merely to fill gaps in the French and British armies. He resisted European efforts to have U.S. troops deployed as individual replacements in decimated Allied units. By August, the Americans had pushed the Germans back to the "Siegfried Line" — essentially the German border. In the fall Germany's allies began to surrender. On November 11, 1918, the Germans and Allies agreed to an Armistice. and the war was essentially over. But the fight for the peace was just beginning.

### **The Peace**

In January, 1919, the Major powers (Britain, France, Italy and the U.S.) met at Versailles, the magnificent palace of Louis XIV, to prepare a peace settlement. Europe had been devastated, and the Allies wanted only one thing — REVENGE! France and Britain refused to take any responsibility for the war. Selfishness reigned supreme at Versailles. The results of the treaty played a major role in causing the next great war.

The U.S. didn't share in the general mood of their European allies. President Wilson, the U.S. representative at Versailles, opposed the greed of the Europeans. Wilson, an idealist, believed that he could prevent further European wars by imposing American values and the American view of government on the

Europeans. Wilson published a peace plan before the end of the war called the 14 Points, which he believed would end wars in Europe. The plan called for arms reductions, banned secret treaties, promoted “national determination,” and provided for an international body to settle disputes — the League of Nations. The British and French had very different ideas.

German delegates came to Paris hoping to take part in peace negotiations. They were confined to their hotel which was surrounded by guards and barbed wire. When the treaty was finished by the Allies, the German diplomats were simply told to sign it, or face an allied invasion of Germany. The treaty blamed Germany completely for the war and made her financially obligated to foot the entire cost of it. Most of her colonies were taken over by France or Britain. Germany lost the Alsace-Lorraine to France. The German army was reduced to a maximum of 100,000 men, no armor, no artillery; her navy was cut back to 6 ships, and even her fishing fleet was reduced by 25%. The Allies would occupy the Rhineland for 15 years, and after that the Germans would be forbidden from placing any troops there.

### **The Fourteen Points**

In an address to Congress on January 8, 1918, Wilson presented as the “only possible program” for maintaining peace following the war a set of fourteen proposals, which was ultimately dubbed the Fourteen Points. The first five points, covering a broad range of relations that nations have with one another, were in essence as follows.

- ★ Abolition of secret diplomacy
- ★ Freedom of the seas in peace and in war
- ★ Removal of international economic barriers and establishment of equality of trade
- ★ Reduction of armaments
- ★ Impartial adjustments of colonial claims

The next eight points pertained to specific cases of political or territorial readjustments concerning Russia, Belgium, Alsace-Lorraine, Italy, Austria-Hungary, the Balkan states, the Turkish Empire, and Poland. The fourteenth point was the crowning proposal: “a general association of nations” must be formed to afford “mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.” Allied leaders exploited the Fourteen Points as propaganda, they did nothing to implement them. They were too busy grabbing everything they could from Germany.

Humiliated abroad by the Allies rapacity, Wilson was also humiliated at home, when the American people elected Republican majorities in both the Senate and House of Representatives in 1918, just a couple of months before Wilson started out to attend the Paris Conference. Wilson chose no high ranking Republicans to

join his delegation, which angered Republicans in Congress. An academic by temperament, Wilson wasn't inclined to be much of a team player. He did nothing to try to insure support from the new Congress, which became increasingly hostile to Wilson's increasingly somewhat irrational peace goals and expectations for Paris. Similarly, Wilson alienated the American press by his lack of cooperation. Wilson's relations with the press led to a spate of negative news coverage just at a point when Wilson desperately needed good press and positive public opinion.

### **The League of Nations**

It was anticipated that in the matter of future peace the framework of the newly created association of nations would compensate for the deficiencies of the Treaty of Versailles. All countries except the Central Powers and Communist-controlled Russia were asked to affiliate with the world organization.

*Drafting the Covenant* — Wilson achieved his supreme goal of having the Covenant of the League of Nations written into the Treaty of Versailles. Sadly, in order to achieve this objective, he had to compromise with the British, French, Italian, and Japanese delegates.

*Aims* — Member nations of the League agreed upon the following aims:

- ★ To respect and preserve the political independence and territorial integrity of one another
- ★ To employ military and economic sanctions against nations resorting to aggression
- ★ To present to the League for inquiry all controversies which threatened war
- ★ To reduce armaments
- ★ To establish a Permanent Court of International Justice (soon known as the World Court), which would arbitrate disputes submitted to it by contending nations

*Structure* — The final form of the Covenant provided for the following structure:

- ★ An assembly composed of delegates from all of the member nations, each of which had one vote
- ★ A council composed of representatives from the five leading powers—the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan—and representatives from four other nations elected periodically by the Assembly
- ★ A Secretary-General to manage the routine affairs of the League.
- ★ The League headquarters were at Geneva, Switzerland.

### **Senate Rejection of the Treaty**

After winning his fight at the peace conference in Paris to have the Covenant of the League of Nations incorporated into the Treaty of Versailles, Wilson was unable to get the Senate to ratify the treaty. Americans were tired of Wilson's experiment in American involvement in European affairs. Americans were shocked and insulted by the greed of the Allied Powers. The Senate was willing

to support ratification with some restrictions to the original treaty, but the president refused to accept the treaty with any changes at all. Hence, the Senate refused to ratify.

Wilson, in one last spasm of idealism, decided that the Senate was defying his wishes and the wishes of the American people, or perhaps he believed that Americans would agree with him if only he explained his position better. Whatever the case, Wilson decided to carry his case in person to the American people. In September 1919, he began a speaking tour of the Midwest and West. But his trip was cut short when his health broke and he was compelled to return to Washington, there suffering a stroke that paralyzed the left side of his face and body. Although Wilson had gained larger and more enthusiastic audiences as the tour proceeded, there was no indication that his appeal had aroused the public to demand ratification.

### **The Lodge Reservations**

There was criticism of many sections of the treaty, such as those that dismembered the Austro-Hungarian Empire, allotted most of the German colonies under the mandate system to Great Britain and to its dominions, and granted Japan rights to the Shantung province of China. But the hostility to the document was primarily toward the Covenant of the League of Nations. In September, 1919, a few days after Wilson had begun his speaking tour, the treaty was reported out of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations with more than forty amendments and five reservations to the League Covenant. After weeks of debate the treaty came to the actual voting stage, with fourteen reservations (called the Lodge Reservations after the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations) having already been passed and added to it. The Lodge Reservations included, among other things, the following:

- ★ The United States reserved the right of withdrawal at any time from the League of Nations
- ★ American military forces could not be used to carry out Article X of the Covenant of the League (in which member nations pledged to defend the political independence and territorial integrity of one another against aggression) except by an act of Congress
- ★ Purely domestic questions were to be excluded from consideration by the Assembly and the Council of the League
- ★ A mandate could be accepted by the United States only by congressional consent
- ★ The Monroe Doctrine was wholly outside the jurisdiction of the League.

President Wilson asserted that the Lodge Reservations had the effect of nullifying the treaty and urged his supporters in the Senate to vote against the treaty if it were coupled with the reservations.

## **Senate Divisions**

Members of the Senate divided on the League issue into four groups:

- ★ The Democratic supporters of Wilson, who favored ratification of the treaty without changes, led by Senate Minority Leader Gilbert M. Hitchcock of Nebraska
- ★ The mild reservationists, who were willing to accept the treaty with minor changes
- ★ The strong reservationists, who favored the ratification of the treaty with the Lodge Reservations to insure the protection of American interests, led by Henry Cabot Lodge
- ★ The “irreconcilables,” a faction of fifteen ultra isolationists who advocated full rejection of the treaty, led by Republicans William Borah of Idaho, Hiram Johnson of California, and Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin.

## **The Final Vote**

On November 19, 1919, the Senate voted on the Treaty of Versailles, rejecting ratifications either with or without the Lodge Reservations. A combination of Wilson supporters and irreconcilables had defeated the treaty with reservations. In the spring of 1920 the Senate returned to a consideration of the treaty and the Lodge Reservations. (At this time a fifteenth reservation was adopted, expressing sympathy for self-government in Ireland.) The final test came on March 19. Some Democrats disregarded Wilson’s instructions to vote against the treaty with the Lodge Reservations. Even so, the treaty with reservations received fifty-seven ayes and thirty-nine nays, less than the two-thirds vote necessary under the Constitution for ratification.

## **Aftermath**

In May 1920, Congress passed a joint resolution declaring the war with Germany at an end, but Wilson vetoed it. On July 2, 1921, Wilson’s successor, Warren G. Harding, signed a similar resolution. Subsequently, treaties that did not provide for a League were negotiated with Germany, Austria, and Hungary (the latter two nations had been newly created from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire) and were promptly ratified by the Senate. After his inauguration, Harding had said bluntly; “The Administration which came into power in March, 1921, definitely and decisively put aside all thoughts of entering the League of Nations. It doesn’t propose to enter now, by the side door, back door, or cellar door.”