

# World War I and Its Impact

**World War I** In 1914, World War I broke out in Europe. President Wilson planned to keep the United States out of the war. However, as the war continued, the United States moved closer to the Allied side. In 1917, Germany's use of submarines caused the United States to declare war on Germany.

Americans quickly prepared for war. American factories and farms increased production in order to supply more goods. By the spring of 1918, American troops were ready to take part in the fighting. American soldiers played an important part in defeating the German army.

**War Breaks Out in Europe.** There were many causes for World War I. Beginning in the late 1800's, relations among the major countries of Europe became more and more strained. Each of these countries wanted to be stronger than its neighbors. These countries also competed for colonies in order to have markets, raw materials, and glory. Fearing one another's growing power, several major European countries prepared men and machines for war.

This competition led to a system of alliances. Countries that formed alliances made certain agreements. In some alliances, if one member became involved in a war, the other members would have to go to its aid. By 1914 there were two major alliances in Europe. Great Britain, France, and Russia formed one group. Germany and Austria-Hungary belonged to another. Other agreements linked the smaller countries of Europe to these larger groups. Therefore, a war between two countries might involve many countries of Europe.

The incident that brought Europe to war happened on June 28, 1914. A young Serbian student killed the archduke and archduchess of Austria-Hungary. The killer was caught and brought to trial. However, the leaders of Austria-Hungary were not satisfied. They blamed Serbia for the murders. Therefore, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. Germany honored its promise to Austria-Hungary and entered the war. Russia then came to the defense of Serbia. Within days, most European countries were at war. The countries that backed Germany and Austria-Hungary came to be known as the Central Powers. The other side, known as the Allied powers or Allies, was led by Great Britain, France, and Russia.

Germany had planned for an easy victory. This was because Germany planned to use its strong army to

defeat France. To do this, the Germans marched through Belgium and into France in August 1914. They were not stopped until they reached the Marne River. There, the fighting on the western front became a *stalemate* - a standstill. For three years, soldiers fought from 2 facing lines of trenches. Millions of men were killed or wounded in battles that gained only a few feet of land. For example, in 1916, a battle was fought on a 20-mile [32-kilometer] front near Verdun, France. Nearly 1 million men were killed in the fighting. In 10 months the front line had moved less than 4 miles [6.4 kilometers].

*Think about it: What incident in 1914 led to World War I?*

**American Neutrality.** When war broke out, President Wilson announced that our country would be neutral. This meant that the United States would try not to favor the Allies or the Central Powers. This also meant that the United States would trade with countries on both sides.

Most Americans agreed with the President's decision. However, it was hard for Americans not to favor one of the sides in the war. Many Americans had come from Europe. Many more had family members or friends living in Europe. Overall, however, the United States had more ties with the Allies than with the Central Powers. For example, our ideas about government were similar to those in Britain and in France. The United States had also done more trading with the Allies than with the Central Powers.

As the war continued, American ties with the Allies became stronger, while our ties with the Central Powers became weaker. In part, this was because the Allies used the powerful British navy to blockade the Central Powers. With this blockade, the Allied leaders planned to stop the Central Powers from receiving any goods that could help them in the war. British ships would not allow many American ships to deliver goods to the Central Powers. Although this violated America's rights as a neutral country, President Wilson did not take any steps to end the British action. Therefore, American trade with the Central Powers was cut back. At the same time, the Allies were buying more goods from the United States. Americans were also making large loans to the Allies. In this way, business ties between the United States and the Allies grew stronger.

The Central Powers wanted to end the British blockade. They also wanted to stop the flow of goods to the Allies. The sea power of the Central Powers

was based on a new weapon—the submarine. In 1915, Germany declared all the waters around Great Britain to be a war zone. It was announced that German submarines would sink any Allied ships in the zone. Germany warned neutral ships to stay out of these waters. Germany also warned that Americans would be in danger if they traveled on Allied ships.

President Wilson did not like Germany's plan. He knew that it put American lives in danger. The President also believed that Americans had the right to travel on Allied ships without fearing a submarine attack. Because of this, he said that Germany would be held responsible for any loss of American lives.

On May 7, 1915, there were 128 Americans among the 1,198 people killed when a German submarine sank the *Lusitania*. The *Lusitania* was a British passenger ship. It also carried explosives. However, the Allies denied that there were war materials on board. Americans were shocked that Germany would sink a passenger ship.

President Wilson was angered by this act. However, he still hoped to avoid war. He called for an end to submarine warfare. In reply, Germany agreed to limit its use of submarines.

In 1916, Wilson ran for reelection. In the campaign, the President's backers boasted of Wilson's record of neutrality. They used the slogan "He kept us out of war." The Republican candidate was Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes. President Wilson won in a close election. He received 9,127,695 popular votes, while candidate Hughes received 8,533,507 votes.

*Think about it: How did Great Britain violate America's rights as a neutral country?*

**The United States Enters the War.** Even before the 1916 election, President Wilson thought that the country might be drawn into the war. Because of this, he asked Congress to improve our army and navy. The President wanted the country to be prepared to fight if necessary.

In January 1917, Germany announced that its submarines would once again attack all ships in the waters around Great Britain. This would put American lives in danger.

In late February, the United States learned about a message sent from a German leader, Arthur Zimmermann, to Mexico. The message asked Mexico to go to war against the United States. Germany also noted that Mexico might be able to get back the lands that had become Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico.

President Carranza of Mexico refused Germany's offer. The Zimmermann note caused more Americans to want to go to war against Germany. This feeling grew in March 1917 when several American trading ships were sunk by German submarines. Therefore, on April 2, 1917, President Wilson asked Congress to declare war. Congress agreed, and on April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany.

*Think about it: What important announcement did Germany make in January of 1917?*

**The Country at War.** The United States was immediately able to aid the Allies in several ways. The American navy was used to protect Allied ships from German submarines. Our government helped the Allies with loans. The United States also brought its industrial strength to the Allied side. Factories and farms increased production. The federal government set up the War Industries Board to direct factories in making war goods. The Food Administration was given the power to set food prices and to limit the amount of food sold at home. As a result, our government was able to ship millions of tons of food to the Allies.

To raise an army, Congress passed the Selective Service Act in May 1917. This law gave the federal government the power to draft men into the army. These men had to be trained and outfitted. Because of this, large numbers of American soldiers did not reach France until 1918. By the end of the war, in November 1918, 4 million American men had served in the armed forces. About one-half had been sent overseas.

The war caused a shortage of workers in the United States. Because of this, more women entered the industrial work force. Many black Americans from the South moved to northern cities because of more job openings. Many Mexicans migrated to the United States to take jobs.

The government raised money for the war through taxes and by borrowing from the people. The government borrowed money by selling Liberty bonds. Millions of Americans bought bonds to help the war effort.

To make sure that all Americans backed the war effort, the Committee on Public Information was set up. This group printed millions of booklets to explain why the United States was fighting the war. Congress also passed laws that outlawed disagreement with the war. Under these laws, some people who were against the draft or against the war were put in jail.

Some Americans turned their dislike for the German government into a distrust of German Americans. Anti-German feelings took many forms. Some schools stopped teaching the German language. Libraries took books by German authors off their shelves. And some people would not use German-sounding words. For example, sauerkraut became known as liberty cabbage.

*Think about it: How did the United States raise money for the war?*

**American Troops at War.** Germany knew that it would take a long time before American soldiers could be sent to France. The German army believed it could defeat the Allies before American soldiers reached the front. Because of this, Germany planned a series of attacks beginning in March 1918.

In part, this plan was possible because Russia had left the war. A revolution forced the Russian czar-emperor to give up his power in early 1917. Later that year, the *Bolsheviks* - the Communists - took over the Russian government. The Communist government concluded a peace treaty with Germany in March 1918. With peace on the eastern front, Germany was then able to move more soldiers west to France. By this time, the Allied forces were badly weakened after three years of trench warfare.

However, by early 1918, the United States was prepared to send soldiers overseas. About 85,000 American soldiers arrived in France in March 1918. In April, 120,000 more troops were sent. Thereafter, an average of 200,000 American soldiers arrived in France each month for the next 6 months.

American soldiers poured toward the front to help stop the German attack. In May 1918, American and Allied forces won an important battle at Chateau-Thierry. This victory ended the German advance.

With the help of American troops, the Allies were able to launch a counterattack against the German army in July 1918. American soldiers attacked the German line at Saint-Mihiel, France. Germany had held this town since 1914. The Americans, however, forced the Germans to retreat. Less than two weeks later, Americans were involved in more fighting. This battle, at Meuse-Argonne, lasted more than six weeks. There were heavy losses on both sides. In the end, the Germans were defeated.

By October 1918, the German army had been beaten by the Allies. The German government asked for an *armistice* - an end to the fighting - in November. On November 11, 1918, the fighting stopped after an armistice was signed .

*Think about it: Why was Germany able to transfer troops to the western front in 1917?*

**The Impact of World War I** After World War I, the Allies wrote the peace terms. The treaty included President Wilson's plans for a league of nations. However, many Americans did not like many parts of the treaty. Because of this, the United States Senate rejected the treaty. Therefore, the United States never joined the League of Nations.

As Americans returned to peacetime, they found that the war had brought about many changes in the United States. Many Americans faced hard times in the years after the war. In some cases, postwar problems caused fear and distrust between different groups of Americans.

**The Cost of the War.** World War I caused great losses to each country that took part in the fighting. In Europe, large areas of land and much property had been destroyed. More important, however, was the loss of human life. In all, more than 10 million soldiers were killed in World War I. Another 20 million soldiers were wounded. In addition, about 10 million civilians died because of the war. These deaths were caused by fighting or from famine or disease.

After the fighting ended in November 1918, many people were wondering what had caused the war. Many people also wanted to know how future wars could be prevented. President Woodrow Wilson of the United States offered a plan for world peace .

*Think about it: About how many soldiers and civilians died as a result of World War I?*

**President Wilson's Peace Plans.** President Wilson explained his ideas for world peace in January 1918. The President said that when the war was over, the countries of the world should work together to build a lasting peace. The President's guidelines for peace became known as the *Fourteen Points*

The Fourteen Points were designed to improve relations among countries. For example, one point stated that all countries should have freedom of the seas. Other points called for the end to secret treaties and a limit on the size of armies and navies. The President believed that these plans would remove some of the causes of war. In the final point, President Wilson called for an organization of the world's countries to prevent future wars. He believed that this would make it easier for countries to settle their differences and to avoid wars. This organization was later known as the League of Nations.

President Wilson believed that when the peace terms were written at the end of the war, they should be based on his Fourteen Points. He said that the peace treaty must be fair to all nations, including the defeated ones. Many German people had heard of President

**Wilson's Plans for Peace.** They expected these ideas to be the basis of the peace settlement. However, the leaders of France, Great Britain, and Italy did not fully agree with President Wilson's ideas. This was because they held different ideas on how war could be prevented. Disagreements among the countries surfaced when these leaders met to work out the peace terms.

*Think about it: What was the purpose of President Wilson's Fourteen Points?*

**The Treaty of Versailles.** Representatives from the Allied countries met in Versailles, France, in the spring of 1919. They came together to write a peace treaty. President Wilson led the American delegation to the talks. Prime Minister David Lloyd George headed the British group. Premier Georges Clemenceau led the French representatives, and Premier Vittorio Orlando led the Italian delegation. Italy had joined the Allies in 1915.

When the talks began, it soon became clear that the European leaders did not agree with President Wilson's plans. They wanted a peace treaty that would benefit their own country and also one that would punish Germany for starting the war. Their goal was to draw up a treaty that would weaken Germany. They believed that this was the way to ensure future peace.

Foremost in President Wilson's mind was the creation of the League of Nations. To gain support for this goal, Wilson was forced to compromise on other points. As a result, a rather harsh treaty was drawn up. Germany was blamed for the war and was required to pay for damages caused by the war. Also, the treaty changed European boundaries and formed some new nations. Through these changes, Germany lost some valuable land and part of its population.

President Wilson thought that the harsh terms of the treaty could cause future problems. However, he believed that these matters could be worked out through the League of Nations.

Every country that signed the treaty agreed to become a member of the League of Nations. But according to our Constitution the Senate must *ratify* - vote to accept - all treaties. Therefore, when the President returned from France in June 1919, he took

the treaty to the Senate for its approval.

*Think about it: What were the goals of the European leaders who met to write the treaty after World War I?*

**The United States Rejects the Treaty.** Many Americans did not like the Treaty of Versailles. Some people did not like the harsh terms that the treaty forced on Germany. However, most of those who disliked the treaty did so because they were opposed to the plan for the League of Nations. Some of these people thought that the league would involve the United States in future European wars. Others said that if the United States joined the league, our country would no longer be free to make its own decisions in foreign affairs. A number of United States senators shared these beliefs.

One group of senators refused to approve the treaty unless changes were made in the plans for the League of Nations. This group was led by Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts. Senator Lodge said that without these changes, the league might pull the United States into a new war.

President Wilson refused to accept any changes in the treaty. He believed that if the people knew more about the league, they would urge their senators to approve the treaty. Therefore, in September 1919, President Wilson began a speaking tour that would take him across the United States. His goal was to go directly to the people to gain public support for the treaty and for the League of Nations. But within a short time, his busy schedule put a strain on his health. In late September, President Wilson became so ill that he was forced to end the tour.

Discussion over the treaty continued in the United States Senate. The Senate voted twice on the treaty. Neither time did the treaty receive enough votes for approval. As a result, the United States did not join the League of Nations. In part, this was because many Americans wanted to turn their attention away from the problems of other countries .

*Think about it: For what reason did Senator Henry Cabot Lodge object to the League of Nations?*