

THE UNITED STATES AND WORLD WAR I, 1914-1918

“One historian has said that the First World War lies like a giant scar dividing our world from that which existed before 1914. The war ushered in dramatic social changes and transformed the political landscape of Europe and the Middle East. It threw into question the elevated role of rationality in human affairs that was championed by great European thinkers of the previous century, not least Clausewitz. It destroyed longstanding regimes of traditional European Great Powers. It helped to breed Fascism in Italy and Germany, it made possible the triumph of Communism in Russia, and it led to the establishment of unstable new states in Europe and the Middle East. Many have seen a chain of cause-and-effect linking the First World War, the Second World War, and the Cold War. Stretching historical perspective even further, we can see now that most of the major military interventions by the United States since the Cold War have arisen from the long-term consequences of the changes created by the First World War in the Balkans and in the Middle East.”—from the U.S. Naval War College website, <http://www.nwc.navy.mil>

World War I: Industrialized Total War

- This is the first general European war since the time of Napoleon
it results from a complex mixture of imperial competition for resources, European arms races, and intricate, fragile mutual defense treaties
 - Allied Powers: England, France, Russia, others
 - Central Powers: Germany, Austria, others
 - Tiger (Germany) vs. Shark with Tiger Allies (England with France and Russia)
- Trench warfare and the huge role of technology in shaping the war
 - Modern railroad networks enable fast mobilization and equipping of massive armies
 - Modern destructive weaponry (machine gun and high-powered artillery) makes it impossible for these armies to survive on the surface of the ground, so they dig elaborate trenches for protection
 - The most highly developed trench lines were on the Western Front in France, which Germany invaded in 1914
 - The entrenched positions, defended by machine guns and barbed wire, are almost impossible to breach; weapons and tactics give the defense rather than the offense the overwhelming advantage
 - Casualty rates are horrendous
 - Example: 1915, France loses 1 1/2 million men while advancing only 3 miles (*cf.* 1 million combined Union/Confederate losses during the whole U.S. Civil War, which itself dwarfed all previous U.S. wars combined)
 - Example: 1916, the Battle of Verdun, lasting 10 months, cost the Germans alone 350,000 casualties

- Example: 1916, during the Battle of the Somme, the British lost 60,000 men in a single day
- The warring states mobilize population, economy, and industry to fight this new type of war, which makes unprecedented demands on national warmaking ability
 - the warring states turn to large-scale drafts to produce ever more massive armies and thus absorb the unprecedented casualty rates (*cf.* the French *Levée en Masse* of 1793)
 - Industries and economies of the warring states devote themselves completely to war production (*cf.* the French *Levée en Masse* of 1793)
 - The warring states devise new, unconventional, indiscriminate, and highly controversial weapons (some of which tend to violate international law and principles of *jus in bello*) spawned by the Industrial Revolution to break the stalemate. These include
 - Airplane and dirigible (relatively minor importance)
 - Flame thrower (relatively minor importance)
 - Poison gas (considerable importance)
 - Submarine (extreme importance, especially from U.S. perspective)
 - *Cf.* the modern weapons of mass destruction (WMD) debate.

1914: U.S. is neutral but not impartial

This begins as a European/imperial war in which the U.S. has no immediate stake

- Since settlement of *Alabama* claims in 1870s, U.S. and Great Britain have been on good terms
- Despite large German elements in U.S. population, U.S. economic, political, legal, cultural, and (to a declining extent) racial heritage is predominately English
 - President Woodrow Wilson is a constitutional scholar who is very committed to the Anglo-American concept of the rule of law, and thus tends to be partial to England and the Allied cause
- The importance of Trade
 - As in the Napoleonic Wars, U.S. merchants sell supplies to the European combatants, but now, unlike before, the U.S. is an industrial and agricultural powerhouse, thus making it more important than ever before as a source of supply
 - As in the Napoleonic wars, Britain and France (but on the same side this time) purchase vast amounts of food and supplies from American merchants, without which their war effort would falter
 - Germany also purchases war materiel from the U.S., but far less than the Allies do because of the British blockade

1915-1916: U.S. gradually changes positions

- The German U-boat campaign: an inherent violation of international law

- May, 1915: A German U-boat sinks the British passenger liner *Lusitania* and kills 1500 civilians, claiming (correctly) that the ship is also carrying munitions
 - This violates international law, being war against civilians, including American (neutral) passengers
 - Similarity to Sherman's March? Differences?
 - It turns Wilson against the peace movement in his administration, although he decides not to push for war against Germany
 - nevertheless, the U.S. military begins to draw up plans for possible future war
- 1916: A German U-boat sinks the French steamer *Sussex*, injuring several Americans
 - Bowing to American pressure, Germans take the *Sussex* pledge, promising to "visit and search" unarmed ships before sinking pursuant to international law
- By 1916, the Allies are borrowing heavily from American creditors, giving U.S. an economic stake in the Allied victory (if the Allies lose, U.S. creditors probably won't get their money back); by the end of the year the figure approaches two billion dollars (equivalent to 33 billion dollars in the year 2000, adjusting for inflation)

1917: The tide in the U.S. turns in favor of American involvement

- February: U.S. learns of Zimmermann Telegram, a secret proposal from Germany for an alliance with Mexico
 - In this telegram, the Germans call upon Mexico to make war against the U.S. and take back the southwest U.S. as compensation
 - This makes Germany seem to be a blatant aggressor hostile to the U.S. and it angers Americans
- March: Russian Revolution removes autocratic Russian regime and makes joining Allies more palatable to the U.S.
- Early 1917: Germany resumes unrestricted submarine warfare, hoping to starve England to death before U.S. can intervene
- March 18: Germany sinks three U.S. merchant ships
- April: Wilson asks Congress to declare war; Congress does so on April 6
 - Wilson sides with Allies largely on principle, to restore the rule of law in international relations: "The world must be made safe for Democracy"

The U.S. at War

- The U.S.: Not an Allied Power, but an Associated Power (associated with the Allies), thus trying to rise above the issues the other combatants are fighting over
- 1917: The navy
 - The U.S. devotes the navy to anti-submarine warfare, including escorting of merchant convoys
- 1918: The army

- Fall, 1917: The Bolshevik revolution takes Russia completely out of the war, thus increasing German pressure on the Western Front
 - The U.S. must now intervene on the ground
- Summer 1918: The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) of a million soldiers arrives in France
- Fall 1918: The AEF is sufficient to tip the balance against Germany, which seeks and gets an armistice on November 11, 1918

The War at Home, 1917-1918

- 1917, the U.S. resorts to a major draft for the first time in its history (with a few narrow exceptions)
- Anti-German sentiment results in violence against some German-Americans (*cf.* some distrust of American Muslims today, which tends to be far less than anti-German-American sentiments of 1917-19) and anyone suspected of being opposed to U.S. involvement in the war or the U.S. war effort
- U.S. passes Espionage and Sedition Acts, barring citizens speaking or acting in ways that interfere with the draft or military operations; (*cf.* Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798; USA Patriot Act of 2002); the Supreme Court upholds the acts

Winning the War; Losing the Peace, 1918-1919

- Wilson travels to Versailles, France for the peace negotiations (the first time a sitting U.S. president has ever left the country) and proposes a peace based on the Fourteen Points, including
 - Self-determination of peoples (anti imperialism/colonialism)
 - No secret treaties
 - A League of Nations, a standing international organization designed to mediate international disputes (*cf.* the U.N.)
- The Allies disagree
 - Allies want revenge on Germany for prosecuting the war
 - They impose astronomical reparations payments on Germany
 - They reject most of the Fourteen Points
 - But they do agree to the League of Nations in the Treaty of Versailles, which ends the war
- The U.S. response
 - Americans don't want an open-ended commitment to involvement in European and world politics, which the Treaty of Versailles and League of Nations would mean
 - 1919: The Senate refuses to ratify the treaty
 - Fall 1919, Wilson suffers stroke during massive campaign to appeal directly to the American people for ratification
 - The U.S. never ratifies the treaty
 - Nevertheless, the U.S. is now for the first time a Great Power, having become rich from the war while suffering little; *cf.* the European Great Powers, which collectively took millions of casualties, suffered social upheaval and financial collapse, and underwent political revolution

- The League of Nations never becomes a major force, and as Europe destabilizes in the 1920s and 1930s because of economic chaos and resentment in Germany over the harsh terms imposed at Versailles, a new world war—or perhaps simply a continuation of the old one—begins brewing . . .