

"Identify the reasons why the US, trying to remain neutral at the outset of WW I, ultimately became involved in the 'war to end all wars' in 1917."

War in Europe (1914-1918): The US Pursues a Policy of Neutrality

- The stunning rapidity with which **war** erupted in **Europe in 1914** shocked the US.
- Though involved in world affairs since 1895, the **US** still held strongly to the **tradition** begun by **Washington and Jefferson** of **not** becoming **involved in a war** "on the other side of the pond."
- Wilson's first predictable response was a declaration of neutrality in the war that pitted the **Allied Powers** (Britain, France, and Russia) against the **Central Powers** (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey).
- **Wilson** soon found it was **impossible to protect US trading rights and maintain a policy of neutrality**.
- For almost **three years the US avoided involvement in World War I**. Many **progressive** leaders believed **promoting peace and democracy** would serve as an example for the warring nations. Additionally, people were divided over whose side to join given that the vast number of **"hyphenated-Americans"** in the US.

Causes of US Involvement in World War I

⇒ Submarine Warfare

- Britain was the first to declare a naval blockade against Germany by mining the North Sea and seizing ships—including US ships—attempting to run the blockade. Britain, cognizant of **US strong belief in freedom of the seas**, paid for the confiscated items seized from US ships.
- Germany responded by deploying submarines to blockade war material to the Allied Powers.
- The first major crisis **challenging US neutrality** was torpedoing and sinking of a British passenger liner, the **Lusitania**, in May 1915. Over 1,000 were killed including 128 Americans. Wilson responded with a tersely written diplomatic message warning that Germany would be held to "strict accountability" if it continued to sink unarmed ships.
- In August, 1915, two more Americans lost their lives when a German submarine attacked the passenger ship, the **Arabic**.
- No further attacks ensued until March, 1916 when a German torpedo struck an unarmed French merchant ship, the **Sussex**, injuring several Americans. Wilson threatened to cut off diplomatic relations with Germany—a step preparatory to war. In what became known as the **Sussex pledge**, Germany promised not to sink merchant or passenger ships without warning.
- The **Sussex pledge** had several impacts on the US; it led to **increased military preparedness by the US** (which violated the US tradition of no standing army) and virtually **guaranteed US involvement in war if Germany resumed its attacks** on unarmed merchant ships.

⇒ Economic Ties

- Within one year of the outset of war, the US economy rebounded from recession in large part because of orders for war supplies from the British and French.
- In theory, US manufacturers could have shipped supplies to Germany as well, but the British blockade prevented such trade.
- As a result, **US economic support was going to the Allies and not the Central Powers**.
- In addition, when the allies fell short of funds, **US businesses secured large loans to Allied countries**. These loans, in excess of \$ 3 billion, maintained US prosperity and sustained the Allies' war effort.

⇒ **Cultural Ties and Popular Sentiment**

- In 1914, first- and second-generation immigrants made up over 30 % of the US population. As a result, "**hyphenated-Americans**" developed both **pro-ally and pro-German sympathies** (including Irish –Americans with anti-British sentiments).
- Overall, the great majority of native-born Americans wanted Britain and France to win the war (many recent Italian immigrants supported the allies after Italy joined the Allied Powers.)
- Overall, **Americans tended to sympathize with the Allied Powers because of their democratic governments.**

Allied Propaganda

- Not only did Britain command the seas but it also commanded the war news cabled daily to US newspapers. The British government supplied the willing American press with stories of German atrocities (especially in neutral Belgium.)
- Britain censored US newsmen in Europe to guarantee a pro-British news slant and quietly recruited preachers, politicians and intellectuals in the US to promote the Allies' cause.

Immediate Causes of US Involvement in World War I

- In April 1917, after winning re-election on a campaign slogan, "**He kept us out of war**", **Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany** because "***The world must be made safe for democracy***".
- Two German actions led to Wilson's decision. In **February, 1917**, Germany sent a diplomatic note (intercepted by Britain) to a German diplomat in Mexico. Known as the **Zimmerman Telegram**, it implied that should Mexico declare war against the US, Germany would help them regain territories lost during the Mexican-American War.
- In the **first weeks of March, 1917**, **German submarines sank five unarmed US merchant ships**. Although they knew this would cause the US to enter the war on the Allied side, Germany was confident it could end the war before US troops could be mobilized.