

Background: Historical Context on World War I

Critical Terms

Alliance: A relationship between nations built to support common interests.

Anarchy: The belief that society is better off without government and/or established rules or laws.

Belligerent Nations: Nations that are actively engaged in war.

Colonization: To settle in another country and establish political control over it.

Empire: A group of countries under a supreme ruling authority.

Nationalism: The belief that national interest and unity should be placed above global cooperation and foreign affairs should be guided by self-interest.

Neutral (Neutrality): refusing to participate in war; a state of being unsupportive of both sides.

Socialism: The belief that industry should be owned by the whole community.

Events Leading to U.S. Involvement in World War I

After the fall of Napoleon's Grand Empire in 1815, European nations worked to restore their boundaries and governments. **Nationalism** led to many conflicts. In 1870, Prussia, with support from Germany, went to war with France. France's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War required they give up territory to Germany and left France eager for revenge.

Prior to 1914, European governments fought for power and wealth through imperialism, the act of acquiring land and natural resources through **colonization**. Disputes over boundaries and ownership encouraged European nations to develop **alliances**. Argument turned into open hostilities when Austria's Archduke, Franz Ferdinand, and his wife were assassinated while traveling in Serbia. Alliances quickly tangled the European nations and their colonies into war. Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire formed the "Central Powers" while Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and Japan formed the "Allied Powers." On August 4, 1914, German troops entered Belgium, ignoring the country's **neutrality**, to launch its offensive against France. "The Great War," later called "World War I" (WWI), had begun.

Utilizing the Schlieffen Plan, Germany successfully invaded Belgium and Northern France but met more resistance than expected. Allied forces stopped the German advance just 20 miles outside of Paris. Both sides dug a network of deep trenches guarded with new inventions such as barbed wire and machine guns. Fighting tactics did not match this new defense strategy and deadly battles, such as the Battle of the Somme (July 1 to November 18, 1916), which claimed 1,265,000 casualties but only advanced the Allied line five miles, interrupted long stalemates.

When Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, Russia mobilized its troops to aid the small nation. Russia's involvement forced Germany to fight a war on two fronts. The fighting on the eastern front did not degrade into trench warfare, but the death toll, as in the west, was staggering.

The United States became an **empire** in 1899 when it took control of the Philippines after victory in the Spanish-American War. With goals of expanding its power, President Theodore Roosevelt pushed for

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the construction of a canal through Panama, beginning in 1904, and used the opportunity to assert "police power" over Latin America. After his election in 1913, President Woodrow Wilson applied American morality to this control and refused to recognize non-democratic governments. Wilson sent troops into Mexico in 1914 to overthrow revolutionary leaders. U.S. troops remained until 1917. Mexico's outrage and anti-American feelings created hostility and fear along America's southern border.

As a nation isolated from Europe, the United States remained neutral at the onset WWI. President Wilson played a balancing act of maintaining neutrality while participating in a trade-based economy with **belligerent** nations. In 1915, Germany set a submarine blockade around Great Britain and considered any ship a fair target. Prior to war, America conducted more trade with Great Britain and France than Germany. Americans also viewed Germany as the "bully of Europe" after their invasion of Belgium. As a result, the U.S. continued its trade with the Allied nations, including an increase of munitions, a decision seen by many as a violation of strict neutrality. On May 7, 1915, German submarines sank the Lusitania, a British ocean liner traveling from New York to Liverpool, England, killing 128 American citizens. American outrage forced Germany to end the blockade, but with the potential to starve Great Britain into defeat, Germany renewed unrestricted use of submarines in 1917. German submarines, called U-boats, sank thousands of passenger and merchant ships during WWI.

Prior to war, European nations and the U.S. underwent social unrest over rights and fair treatment. **Anarchy** and **socialism** gained interest and strength. Women fought for suffrage, the right to vote, with more aggressive tactics. Labor unions went on strike for better wages and safer working conditions with more successful outcomes. Liberal groups fighting for justice and equality across gender and class feared war would distract from these more important social aims. Some even claimed that the rich advocated for war as a means to end these societal movements.

In November 1916, Woodrow Wilson was re-elected under the campaign slogan: "He kept us out of the war," but debate over American involvement in WWI continued. On March 1, 1917, the U.S. learned about a German plot to recruit Mexican support by offering Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona in the final peace agreements. This Zimmermann Telegram, named after its sender, German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann, stunned Americans who felt safe in physical isolation.

Activity:

Review the articles related to the Great War.

Do they support sending American troops to war, are they opposed to participation, or do they present a different issue entirely? What support is given to their position? Who wrote the article or what group's viewpoint is captured there? Is their opinion important? Why or why not?

Historical Context on World War I: America Declares War

But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. — President Woodrow Wilson, Declaration of War Message to Congress

On April 2, 1917, in his address to Congress, President Woodrow Wilson blamed U-boat attacks on all ships regardless of flag or cargo and its impact on American lives as the primary cause for war with

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Germany. He also cited anger over the Zimmermann Telegram and repeated offenses to America's status as a neutral nation. The U.S. declared war on Germany with a cry for freedom for the oppressed and an end to war.

With America's declaration of war, Germany knew they did not have much time to act before fresh reinforcements arrived. Russia's soldiers had long been struggling to continue their campaign against the Central Powers on the eastern front, but the battles had not yet ended. As a means to free up troops for fighting on the western front, Germany provided transportation for a revolutionary leader, Vladimir Lenin, out of exile and into Russian territory, where he could further his aims to overthrow the government. The Russian Revolution resulted in armistice, or an end to war, on the eastern front in December 1917.

With additional troops moving from the eastern front to the west, Germany launched a final offensive to overthrow the Allied Powers in March of 1918 before large numbers of American troops reinforced war-weary soldiers. Their initial attack pushed the Allied line back, but ultimately failed. By the end of April, German advances stopped and in May enough American troops arrived in Europe to make decisive victories. With a rise of revolutionary ideals and the threat of a complete governmental collapse at home, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated his throne to a new German republic, which signed an end to war on November 11, 1918. The Allied Powers met to negotiate peace agreements, which resulted in the Treaty of Versailles, signed on June 28, 1919.

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