

# World War One

In 1914 Europe was plunged into the First World War. The war matched the Allies, primarily consisting of Great Britain, France, and Russia, versus the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. President Wilson immediately declared that the United States would remain neutral, a stance widely supported by the American public. Wilson hoped that by remaining out of the conflict the United States could play a role as an impartial observer and help negotiate an end to the bloodshed.

Events, however, slowly began to shift the tide towards involvement. A large portion of the population, including Wilson himself, were much more sympathetic to the Allied cause. The U.S. had strong ties of language and culture to Great Britain. Britain and France were also the two largest democracies in Europe. British war propaganda made the most of this, depicting the war as a great moral struggle pitting democracy versus military dictatorship. The German invasion of neutral Belgium at the beginning of the war and their brutal behavior towards Belgian civilians lent some credence to British charges of German savagery and scorn for "civilized" behavior. Yet, the reality was a bit more subtle. Germany did have some democratic institutions, and both France and Britain were great imperial powers who often used military power to enforce their will upon their colonies. The Irish had experienced heavy-handed British rule first-hand, leading a huge number to migrate to the United States in the 19th century. These Irish-Americans were wary of British claims of moral superiority, as were many German-Americans.

The U.S. also had economic reasons to support the Allies. At first President Wilson had tried to establish the idea of absolutely neutral free trade. He argued that under traditional rules of warfare, neutral powers had this right. Under 19th century international law, belligerent powers did have the right to impose blockades upon their enemies, but to do this they had to establish a clear naval presence in the immediate vicinity of enemy ports and they could only halt the import of military supplies, not goods for civilians like food or medicine. It was a fundamental rule that war should be waged against armies, not civilian populations. Britain, however, refused to play by the old rules. Rather than blockading individual ports, they simply declared broad zones as under their control and they seized all types of cargoes. This ultimately led to considerable suffering among the German civilian population: it's estimated that approximately 400,000 German civilians died as a result of famine, caused in part by the British blockade of food supplies. Despite the clear violation of American neutral rights and the civilian suffering caused by the blockade, Wilson was reluctant to do more than issue formal protests. The value of U.S. trade with the Allies had skyrocketed, giving the American economy a much needed boost. The U.S. not only became a key source of military and non-military goods for the Allies, American banks made generous loans to ensure that the cash strapped Allies could continue to make these purchases.

What ultimately pushed the United States into direct involvement in the war was the Germany policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. The British surface fleet was superior to that of the Germans and they were able to use this to enforce their blockade. The German navy responded by attempting to cut off the supplies reaching the Allies through submarine warfare. However, while British surface vessels

could stop cargo vessels and escort them into port without harming the crews, German submarines did not have this ability. Early in the war they did attempt to surface and warn the crews to abandon ship before they sank them, but after the British began to arm their merchant vessels they generally abandoned this policy. By 1915 German submarines were attacking and sinking Allied cargo and passenger vessels, although they tried to avoid neutral shipping. American public opinion, however, was dismayed by the attacks upon civilian crews and passengers; a sentiment which flared up into outrage in May of 1915 with the sinking of the British passenger liner Lusitania. Over 1,200 passengers were killed, including 128 Americans, leading President Wilson to condemn this type of submarine warfare as an affront to humanity and international law. He demanded that the Germans immediately cease their attacks on unarmed merchant vessels. The German government replied by arguing that they were simply responding to the illegal blockade established by the British; a blockade which, they suggested, was in itself a huge violation of international law and human rights. Wilson's refusal to grant any credence to these arguments prompted his Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, to resign his office. Bryan believed that Wilson had ceased being neutral and was leading the country into war. Wishing to avoid war with the United States, the German Kaiser ordered his navy to scale back their attacks on civilian vessels.

In February of 1917, however, the German navy resumed unrestricted submarine warfare. With their resources increasingly strained, the German military believed that a quick end to the war was essential. The German navy suggested that moving decisively to choking off overseas aid to the Allies would help ensure this victory. They recognized that this might lead to an American declaration of war, but they hoped that by the time American troops began to arrive the fighting would be over. This assessment proved to be wildly over optimistic.

President Wilson went before Congress on April 2 and asked for a declaration of war. He pointed to the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare as a fundamental violation of human rights that the U.S. could not ignore. He also observed that the "Zimmerman Telegram" clearly revealed Germany's hostile intent towards the U.S. This secret diplomatic message between Germany and Mexico had been intercepted and decoded in January of 1917. In it Germany proposed that in the event of a war with the United States, Mexico would join with Germany to attack their neighbor. In exchange, Germany would help Mexico recover the territories taken from it in the Mexican-American War of 1846. Throughout his speech Wilson made it clear that the war would be a holy crusade to "Make the world safe for democracy" and that the U.S. was acting from the highest principles, seeking to defend not only its own rights but the rights of all humanity.

With U.S. forces now involved, the war turned decisively against the Central Powers. By November of 1918, Germany and her partners were forced to sue for peace. Earlier in that year President Wilson had articulated became known as his "Fourteen Points": his vision of what the post-war world should look like, his plan for a lasting world peace. He called for free trade to facilitate the flow of commerce between the nations, dramatic reductions in armaments, a new international organization to help settle international disputes without resorting to war, and the principle that all nations and nationalities, whether large or small, should have equal rights in international affairs. In the peace talks which followed the war, Wilson failed to achieve all that he desired, but he did win on the proposal to create a

new international body to keep the peace: what became known as the League of Nations. Returning home from Europe, however, Wilson confronted an angry Senate controlled by the opposing Republican party. They were upset because of the high-handed way in which Wilson had refused to consult with them or accept any compromises on his proposals. They were alarmed by the proposal to join the League of Nations, arguing that this would lead to a decline in American sovereignty. Ultimately, they rejected the peace treaty that Wilson had worked so hard to secure. The U.S. would later sign a separate treaty with Germany and decline membership in the League, signaling a partial return to the old American policy of isolationism. Having stepped hesitantly onto the international stage as a major player in WWI, the U.S. would draw back from this role in the coming decade.

The First World War was significant for the United States not only in terms of foreign policy, but also with respect to its domestic impact upon the nation. The war required Americans to make sacrifices. About 5 million men entered the military, most through being drafted. Over 100,000 of these men died during the war. The government also sharply raised taxes to pay for mobilization, although much of the money for the war effort came from the sale of bonds. The federal government also considerably expanded its regulatory control over the economy to ensure the swift and efficient production of necessary war material. In 1917 Wilson created the War Industries Board which oversaw the allocation of raw materials, set prices, and controlled the output of particular goods. To help run this board he recruited 100 nationally prominent businessmen. Wilson also instituted a National War Labor Board to regulate labor relations and ensure there would be no labor disputes disrupting production. The most comprehensive government intervention occurred in the transportation sector. The railroads proved unable to efficiently manage the greatly increased demands being made upon them, so the government created the U.S. Railroad Administration which took over direct operation of railroads during the war.

Despite this high level of government regulation, corporations did extremely well during the war. To ensure the highest level of production the government gave out generous "cost plus" contracts which paid manufactures the cost of producing goods and a guaranteed profit. In addition, anti-trust prosecutions were suspended during the war. Government actions actually encouraged corporate consolidation since most contracts were given to big companies rather than small producers, simply because it was logistically easier to handle a few large contracts than hundreds or thousands of small ones. Even with higher corporate taxes, their profits soared and it's estimated that the war made some 42,000 Americans millionaires.

Other groups also did well as a result of the wartime economic mobilization. Even prior to American involvement in the war the agricultural sector had been doing well because of the huge demand from the Allied powers. With the U.S. in the war the government established prices for agricultural goods that ensured healthy profits for farmers. Many farmers took these profits and invest heavily in additional machinery and land so they could meet the demands of this expanded market. Industrial workers also made gains. With some 5 million able bodied men entering the military there were chronic labor shortages. This was exacerbated by the interruption of immigration from Europe which dried up this source of labor. Corporations were desperate to maintain high levels of productions, so they willingly made concessions to labor, such as higher wages. The War Labor Board also strove to prevent labor conflicts by supporting worker demands for an 8-hour day and decent working conditions. The

government also tolerated union organizing in exchange for promises that the unions would refrain from engaging in strike activity. Union membership in the U.S. soared from about 2.7 million in 1916 to over 4 million by 1919.

Some groups that historically had limited access to well-paid industrial jobs also benefited from the wartime mobilization. Women were already involved in some aspects of industrial production, but the war created opportunities for them to move into the types of work previously exclusively reserved to men. African-Americans had been largely excluded from industrial work prior to the war, but labor shortages in northern industries opened up new possibilities. More and more African-Americans moved out of the rural south into the industrial cities of the north, beginning a massive migration that would continue through World War Two.

With seemingly everyone benefiting from the wartime mobilization, many progressive reformers saw this as the ultimate fulfillment of their desires for a more harmonious and efficient economic order. For decades they had been striving to use the government to free American society from the social and economic turmoil that had accompanied industrialization, and in this wartime crisis which impelled much heavier government supervision of the economy, it seemed their dream had finally been realized.

Yet, there was a dark lining to this silver cloud. In order to effectively mobilize the American public to support the war, Wilson had made it into a great moral crusade. It was the “War to End All Wars” and “A War to Make the World Safe for Democracy.” To ensure Americans got this message he created the Committee on Public Information headed by journalist George Creel. Under Creel’s direction the CPI began a vigorous propaganda campaign in support of the war. They emphasized the idea of the war as a fundamental struggle for freedom and democracy and characterized the enemy as barbarous “Huns”. Fueled by these messages, many Americans came to believe that anyone who opposed the war, for whatever reason, was a dangerous traitor. One of the reasons Wilson had long hesitated to enter the war was precisely because he recognized the danger of this mentality:

Once lead this people into war and they’ll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance. To fight you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fibre of our national life, infecting Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat, the man on the street.

Some of the first victims of this wartime hyper-patriotism were German-Americans. There were numerous instances of them being harassed, beaten, and forced to kiss the flag. Several states passed laws banning the teaching of the German language in public schools. The wartime repression soon spread to other groups. The native-born Protestant majority in the United States had long been uneasy about the huge influx of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. One solution during the Progressive era was the Americanization movement which sought to ensure that these immigrants adopted both the English language and American values. During the war, however, there was increasing intolerance to “hyphenated Americans” (groups that continued to assert some affinity to their old homeland and its culture). Americanization efforts became more coercive and the movement to halt or limit immigration gained strength. Another group that came under attack were political radicals. The

Socialist Party had opposed America's entry into the war, arguing that it was "a rich man's war and a poor man's fight."

Ongoing criticisms of the war coming from groups like the Socialists, German-Americans, and Irish-Americans prompted the government to pass laws banning dissent. In 1917 Congress passed the Espionage Act which made it illegal to make "false statements" designed to impede the draft or promote military insubordination. It also banned from the mails any material considered "treasonous", a provision which was used to ban almost all Socialist or German language publications during the war. The following year it amended the Espionage act with what became known as the Sedition Act. This law made it illegal to use "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive" language against the government, the Constitution, the flag, or the military. During the war over 1,000 people were convicted and sentenced to terms from 10 to 20 years in prison under the provisions of these acts. The most high profile case involved Eugene Debs, a prominent labor leader and former presidential candidate of the Socialist Party. Debs was sentenced to 10 years in prison for encouraging resistance to the draft. The laws were often interpreted very broadly. A film producer, for instance, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for creating a film about the American Revolution which had the British committing atrocities. The prosecution successfully argued that this was unacceptable, since the British were now U.S. allies.

The end of the war also brought considerable turmoil to the country. After a period of prosperity, the economy suddenly collapsed into a serious recession with unemployment reaching 12%. This was fueled by the abrupt manner in which the federal government simply abandoned wartime economic controls, the sudden drying up of military orders, and the return to the workforce of millions of former soldiers. Workers were also incensed by what they saw as the uneven benefits the war had bestowed. While corporations had made money hand over fist, increases in wages had been more than offset by spiraling wartime inflation in living costs. The natural consequence of these conditions was a tremendous wave of strikes across the country involving more than four million workers. Although almost entirely inspired by a desire for higher wages and shorter hours, some viewed this activity as a prelude to a social revolution – an idea encouraged by business leaders who wanted the strikes quickly crushed. This alarmed was spurred as well by the successful Communist revolution in Russia during this same era and the wave of revolutionary activity in post-war Europe. It was also plausible because the country was still in the grip of the anti-immigrant and anti-radical mood of the war.

The government quickly sided with the employers in these struggles. In the steel industry, for instance, workers had long suffered from low wages and a 12-hour workday. The steel strike of 1919 represented an effort to win an 8-hour day and decent wages, but it was broadly portrayed in the newspapers as the beginning of a radical revolution. Employers placed ads urging workers to "Stand by America, Show up the Red Agitator." In the end police and troops were used to forcibly break the strike. Similar events occurred elsewhere in the country.

Fears of radicalism were fueled as well by the Attorney General, A. Mitchell Palmer. He declared that "the blaze of revolution was eating its way into the homes of the American workmen, its sharp tongues of revolutionary heat licking the altars of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, burning foundations of society." After a series of anarchist

bombings which targeted Wall Street and government officials, including Palmer himself, he stepped up attacks upon organizations he considered radical. The “Palmer Raids” began in November 1919, spearheaded by a special anti-radical division of the Justice Department headed by a young J. Edgar Hoover. They raided homes, meeting halls, and the headquarters of suspected organizations. Thousands of people were arrested, some without any type of warrant, and some 600 immigrants were deported. Some of the people swept up in these raids were indeed violent revolutionaries, but a larger number were simply victims of public fear and Palmers’ ambitions to ride this sentiment into the Presidency. By the end of 1920 the great Red Scare had largely petered out, but the fears stirred by the war and the post-war crisis continued to color the mood of the country for the rest of the decade.

Other groups also saw the advances they had made during the war rolled back. Labor unions, which had swelled their membership during the war, were shattered by the failed strikes of 1919 and they remained weak throughout the 1920s. Women who had taken on new economic roles during the war were forced out. As one woman observed, “During the war they called us heroines, but they throw us on the scrapheap now.” African-Americans suffered even more. In many ways the war had offered them hope for a new birth of freedom and opportunity. Many were able to move north into better paying industrial jobs. Others served in the military, although typically in segregated units. They had believed that this great crusade which Wilson had promised would make the world safe for democracy would apply to them as well – that the U.S. itself would become a fairer and more democratic society. They too were disappointed.

As African-Americans moved into northern cities they were greeted with growing hostility from the resident white populations. This reached a peak in the summer of 1919 as the war ended. The country witnessed the worst race riots in its history with some 25 cities throughout the country witnessing horrific violence, mostly directed towards African-Americans. In Chicago it raged for 13 days, leaving 40 African-Americans dead. With the war over many were also forced out of the good industrial jobs they had come north to enjoy.

Wilson had promised that the Great War would be the “War that would make the world safe for democracy” – that it would lead to a new birth of freedom and economic liberty everywhere – but it hadn’t. The world remained torn by conflicts and the aftermath of the conflict was something less than a triumph for democracy in America.