

- militarism
- Allies
- Central Powers
- Archduke Franz Ferdinand
- no man's land
- trench warfare
- Lusitania
- Zimmermann no

LEARN ABOUT the international politics that led to war in Europe  
TO UNDERSTAND why the United States finally became involved in the world war.

### ONE AMERICAN'S STORY

It was about 1:00 A.M. on April 6, 1917, and the members of the U.S. House of Representatives were tired. For the past 15 hours they had been debating President Wilson's request for a declaration of war against Germany. At last the roll call began. When the clerk came to the name of Jeannette Rankin of Montana, the first woman elected to Congress, there was a breathless hush. Suddenly Representative Rankin, contrary to precedent, stood up and declared, "I want to stand by my country but I cannot vote for war. I vote no." In later years she reflected on her action.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE

I believe that the first vote I cast was the most significant vote and a most significant act on the part of women, because women are going to have to stop war. I felt at the time that the first woman [in Congress] should take the first stand, that the first time the first woman had a chance to say no to war she should say it.

JEANNETTE RANKIN, quoted in *Jeannette Rankin: First Lady in Congress*

Both the House and the Senate voted overwhelmingly in favor of U.S. entry into World War I, thus abandoning American neutrality three years after hostilities first began. And even then, there was considerable debate as to whether the United States should join the fight. Woodrow Wilson had won a second term in 1916 on the antiwar slogan "He Kept Us Out of War." What, then, made the United States change its mind in 1917?



Jeannette Rankin was the only member of the House to vote against entering both World War I and World War II.

## Long-Term Causes of World War I

The First World War began on August 4, 1914, when German troops poured into Belgium. Although many Americans wanted to stay out of the war, several factors made American neutrality difficult to maintain. As an industrial and imperial power, the United States felt many of the same pressures that had led the nations of Europe into devastating warfare. Historians generally cite four long-term causes of the First World War: nationalism, imperialism, militarism, and the formation of a system of alliances.

**NATIONALISM** Nationalism—the belief that national interests and national unity should be placed ahead of global cooperation and that a nation's foreign affairs should be guided by its own self-interest—grew in Europe throughout the 19th century. Often, it was expressed as competitiveness with, and even antagonism toward, other nations.

France and Germany jockeyed for European leadership. France still smarted over its loss of parts of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. Germany, which had been created after the Prussian victory over France, wanted to protect its newly industrializing economy by ensuring open markets in Europe and access to overseas territories.

Russia regarded itself as the protector of Europe's Slavic peoples, no matter which government they lived under. Among these were the Serbs.

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*CAUSES OF  
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*putting the  
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Serbia—located in the Balkans—was an independent nation at the time, but millions of ethnic Serbs lived under the rule of Austria-Hungary. As a result, Russia and Austria-Hungary were rivals for influence over Serbia.

In addition, various ethnic groups resented domination by others and hoped to create nations of their own. Poland, for example, had been divided among Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. Poles wanted to reunite as an independent Polish nation. The Czechs were restless under the domination of Austria-Hungary, which would not let them use their own language.

**IMPERIALISM** Nationalist competition often worsened imperial conflicts among the major powers of Europe. To some degree, industrialization and imperialism were closely linked. As Germany industrialized, it competed with France and Britain in the contest for colonies, which supplied imperial powers with raw materials such as cotton, oil, and rubber, as well as markets for manufactured goods. Colonies also added to the imperialist nations' prestige.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed several quarrels and small wars over colonies. The Russo-Japanese War was an imperial war over Korea and Manchuria. France and Britain nearly went to war over Africa.

**MILITARISM** Empires were expensive to build and to defend. The growth of nationalism and imperialism caused military budgets to rise. Because each nation wanted its armed forces to be stronger than those of any potential enemy, the imperial powers followed a policy of **militarism**—the development of armed forces and their use as a tool of diplomacy.

By 1890 the strongest nation on the European continent was Germany, which had set up an army reserve system that drafted young men, trained them, and returned them to civilian life until they were needed. At first Great Britain was not concerned about Germany's military buildup. An island nation, Great Britain had always relied on its navy for defense and protection of its shipping routes—and the British navy was the strongest in the world. However, in 1897, Wilhelm II, Germany's kaiser, or emperor, decided that his nation should also become a major sea power in order to compete more successfully against the British. Soon British and German shipyards competed to build the largest battleships and destroyers. France, Italy, Japan, and the United States quickly joined the naval arms race.

**ALLIANCE SYSTEM** All these mutual hostilities, jealousies, fears, and desires led the nations of Europe to sign treaties of assistance that committed them to support one another if they faced attack. By 1914 there were two major

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7 mutual-defense alliances. The Triple Entente, later known as the **Allies**, consisted of France, Great Britain, and Russia. (Russia also had a separate treaty with Serbia.) The Triple Alliance consisted of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. (In 1915, Italy would join the Allies in return for promised territorial gains.) Germany and Austria-Hungary, together with the Ottoman Empire—an empire of mostly Middle Eastern lands controlled by the Turks—were later known as the **Central Powers**. The alliances provided a measure of international security because nations were reluctant to disturb the balance of power. As it turned out, though, a spark set off a major conflict.

## n Assassination Leads to War

That spark flared in the Balkan Peninsula. The peninsula—bounded by the Black Sea, the Adriatic Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Aegean Sea—was known as “the powder keg of Europe.” Most of the continent’s leading powers had interests there. Russia wanted to gain an outlet to the Mediterranean Sea. Germany wanted to extend the railroad between itself and the Ottoman Empire. Austria-Hungary—which had annexed Bosnia in 1908—objected to Serbia’s role in encouraging Bosnians to reject the rule of Austria-Hungary. The “powder keg” was ready to explode.

On June 28, 1914, the streets of Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, were jammed with people who had gathered to see **Archduke Franz Ferdinand**. A nephew of Emperor Franz Joseph, the archduke was heir to the Austrian throne. He and his wife, Sophie, waved gaily to the crowd as their automobile moved along. Suddenly a young man leaped toward them from the curb. Before the guards could react, he fired a series of shots, killing the archduke and his wife.

The teenage assassin, Gavrilo Princip, turned out to be a member of a secret society called the Black Hand. The society’s aim was to unite all Serbs, including those living in Bosnia, under one government. The assassination immediately touched off a diplomatic crisis. Austria-Hungary hoped to make an example of Serbia once and for all and to squelch the possibility of nationalist uprisings within Austria-Hungary. On July 28, Austria-Hungary declared what it expected to be a “bright, brisk little war” against Serbia.

The alliance system pulled one nation after another into the conflict. To help its ally Serbia, Russia ordered full mobilization of its armies on July 29. On August 1, Germany, obligated by treaty to support Austria-Hungary, declared war on Russia. On August 3, Germany declared war on Russia’s ally France. Great Britain, linked by treaty to France, declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Great War had begun.

snow-ball effect!

## The Fighting Starts

Germany began its war offensive by invading Belgium on August 4, 1914. The Germans followed a strategy that Count Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the German General Staff, had planned in 1905. The Schlieffen Plan called for a holding action against Russia, combined with a quick drive through the Belgian lowlands to Paris. Then, after France had fallen, the two German armies would join to defeat the Russian czar. As German troops swept across Belgium, thousands of refugees fled in terror. The American war correspondent Richard Harding Davis described the Belgians’ reaction as the troops entered the capital, Brussels.

## A PERSONAL VOICE

[We] found the side streets blocked with their carts. Into these they had thrown mattresses, or bundles of grain, and heaped upon them were families of three generations. Old men in blue smocks, white-haired and bent, old women in caps, the daughters dressed in their one best frock and hat, and clasping in their hands all that was left to them, all that they could stuff into a pillow-case or flour-sack. . . . Heart-broken, weary, hungry, they passed in an unending caravan.

**RICHARD HARDING DAVIS**, quoted in *Hooray for Peace, Hurrah for War*

Unable to save Belgium, the British and French retreated to the Marne River in France, where they managed to stop the German advance in September 1914. By the spring of 1915, two lines of deep, rat-infested trenches zigzagged across northern and eastern France. German soldiers occupied one line, Allied soldiers the other line. Between them lay “**no man’s land**”—a barren expanse of mud pockmarked with shell craters and filled with barbed wire entanglements. Every once in a while, the soldiers would climb out of their trenches and try to overrun enemy lines, while machine guns blazed and poison gas filled the air.

The slaughter was unbelievable. For example, during the First Battle of the Somme—which began on July 1, 1916, and lasted until mid-November—the British lost 60,000 men the first day alone. Final casualties totaled about 1.2 million—650,000 Germans, 420,000 British, and nearly 200,000 French. Yet only seven miles of ground changed hands. This bloody **trench warfare**, in

which armies fought and died for mere yards, continued for more than three years. Elsewhere, the fighting was equally devastating and equally inconclusive. On the Eastern Front, Russian and German armies advanced and retreated in turn. The Italian Front, between Austria-Hungary and Italy, was likewise deadlocked. The Allied assault on the Dardanelles, part of the waterway between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, ended after almost a year of trench warfare. In Africa, German and British troops were stalemated after two years of battle. It seemed as if neither side would be able to gain a decisive victory.

## American Neutrality

In 1914, most Americans saw no reason to join a struggle 3,000 miles away. The war did not threaten American lives or property. Whether or not the Allies beat the Central Powers did not seem a matter of national concern. This does not mean, however, that individual Americans were indifferent to who would win the war. Public opinion was strong—but divided.

**OPPOSITION TO THE WAR** Millions of naturalized U.S. citizens followed the war closely because they still had ties to the nations from which they had emigrated. For example, many Americans of German descent sympathized with Germany. Americans of Irish descent remembered the centuries of British oppression in Ireland and saw the war as a chance for Ireland to gain its independence.

Socialists criticized the war as an imperialist struggle between German and English businessmen to control raw materials and markets in China, Africa, and the Middle East. Pacifists, such as William Jennings Bryan, believed that war was evil, and that the United States should set an example of peace to the world. Bryan asserted, "If civilization is to advance, the day must come when a nation will feel no more obligated to accept a challenge to war than an American citizen now feels obligated to accept a challenge to fight a duel."

Many Americans simply did not want their sons to experience the horrors of warfare, as a hit song of 1915 conveyed.

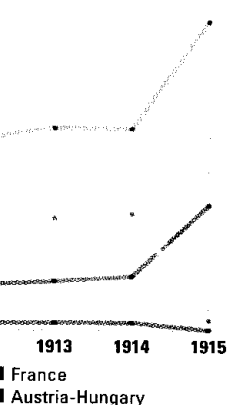
I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier,  
I brought him up to be my pride and joy.  
Who dares to place a musket on his shoulder,  
To shoot some other mother's darling boy?

**SYMPATHY FOR THE ALLIES** Despite the widespread opposition to the war, a general feeling of sympathy for Great Britain and France emerged. Many Americans felt close to England because of a common ancestry, language, and literature, as well as similar democratic institutions and legal systems.

Germany's aggressive sweep through Belgium also increased American sympathy for the Allies. On one occasion, for example, the Germans leveled the town of Louvain because a Belgian sniper had killed a German soldier. They charged hundreds of civilians, including women and children, with armed resistance and shot them without trial. They destroyed cathedrals, libraries, and even hospitals. Some atrocity stories—distributed in British propaganda—later proved to be false, but enough proved true that within a month after the war broke out, one magazine referred to Germany as "the bully of Europe."

More important, America's economic ties with the Allies were far stronger than its ties with the Central Powers. Before the war began, America had traded with Great Britain and France more than twice as much as with Germany. During the first two years of the war, America's

## Europe, 1910–1915



transatlantic trade became even more lopsided, as the Allies flooded American manufacturers with orders for all sorts of war supplies, including TNT, cannon powder, submarines, copper wire and tubing, and armored cars. The United States shipped millions of dollars of war supplies to the Allies, but requests kept coming. By 1915, the nation was experiencing a labor shortage.

## United States Enters the War

Although the majority of Americans favored victory for the Allies rather than the Central Powers, they did not want to join the Allies' fight. By 1917, however, Americans had mobilized for war against the Central Powers for two reasons: to ensure Allied repayment of debts to the United States and to prevent the Germans from threatening U.S. shipping.

**THE BRITISH BLOCKADE** As fighting on land continued without any resolution, Great Britain began to make more use of its naval strength. It set up a blockade along the German coast to prevent contraband—or weapons and other military goods—from getting through. However, the British expanded the definition of contraband to include food. They also extended the blockade to neutral ports and mined the entire North Sea.

The results were twofold. First, American ships carrying goods for Germany refused to challenge the blockade and seldom reached their destination. Second, Germany found it increasingly difficult to import foodstuffs and chemical fertilizers. Since it had to use its available nitrates to produce munitions, it could not produce fertilizers of its own. Without fertilizers, German farmers could not grow enough food. By 1917, famine stalked the country. An estimated 750,000 Germans starved to death as a result of the British blockade.

**GERMAN U-BOAT RESPONSE** Germany responded to the British blockade with a counterblockade by U-boats (from Unterseeboot, the German word for a submarine). The kaiser announced that all cargoes headed for Great Britain would be considered contraband. Any ship found in the waters around Britain would be sunk—and it would not always be possible to warn crews and passengers in advance of an attack.

The German blockade turned out to be far less destructive than the British blockade. All told, about 75,000 people lost their lives from German submarine warfare, about one-tenth of the number of Germans who died of starvation. However, the effects of the British blockade were only visible inside Germany. U-boat attacks, on the other hand, were spectacular events, easily exploited in the propaganda reaching the United States from Britain, which had cut the transatlantic cable between Germany and the United States. News of the European front that flashed around the world from London carried accounts of sinking ships and drowning victims. *covered more*

As a result, Americans who had been angry at Great Britain's blockade, which threatened freedom of the seas and prevented American goods from reaching German ports, became outraged with Germany because of the loss of life. American public opinion toward Germany and the Central Powers rapidly became negative.

One of the worst disasters occurred on May 7, 1915, when a U-boat sank the British liner **Lusitania** off the southern coast of Ireland. Of the 1,198 persons killed, 128 were Americans. The Germans defended their action on the grounds that the liner carried ammunition and explosives. But most Americans agreed with the New York minister who thundered from his pulpit, "This sinking . . . is

*Lusitania is sunk*

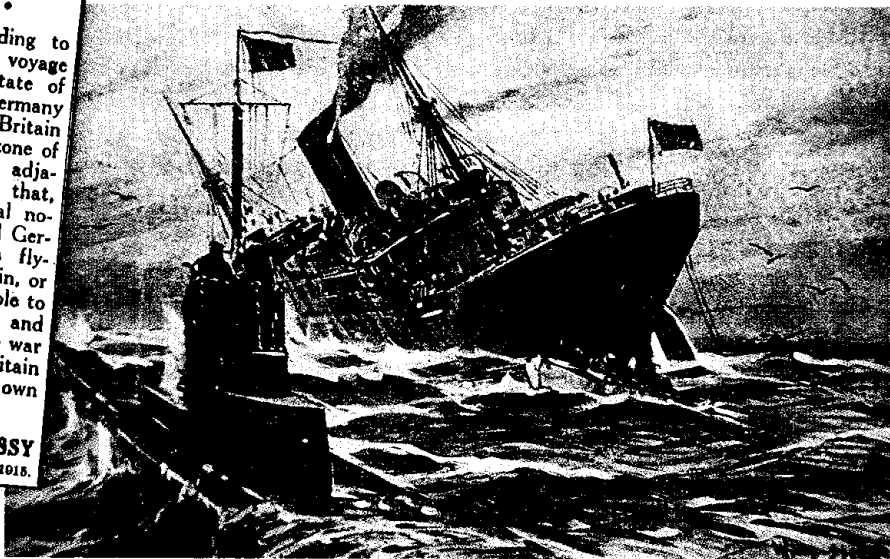
### THE COST

Although World War I was necessary to keep America from becoming a First World War, it was difficult for the United States to deal of money. Some war-torn nations to cut food and war. United States slow down the industries. So William McA maintain Am United States. By 1917 A loaned \$2.3 billion only \$27 million. Powers. Further with the Allies trade with the drastically be A major reason backed the A an Allied victory repayment of (See *trade on Economics H*

## NOTICE!

TRAVELLERS intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or of any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.

IMPERIAL GERMAN EMBASSY  
WASHINGTON, D. C., APRIL 22, 1915.



Notices like the one above were printed in American newspapers, warning passengers not to travel by sea. The 1915 painting of an American transport sunk by a German U-boat (right) shows how serious that warning was.

not war; it is . . . organized murder and no language is too strong for it. . . . It is getting to be too much to ask America to keep out when Americans are drowned as part of a European war.”

**THE UNITED STATES REMAINS NEUTRAL** Despite this provocation, Wilson ruled out a military response. However, he protested sharply to Germany. Two months later, in July 1915, a U-boat sank another British liner, the *Arabic*, drowning two Americans. Again the United States protested, and this time Germany agreed not to sink any more liners. But in March 1916 Germany broke its promise and torpedoed an unarmed French passenger steamer, the *Sussex*. The *Sussex* did not sink, but about 80 passengers, including Americans, were killed or injured. Once again the United States warned that it would break off diplomatic relations unless Germany changed its tactics. Again Germany agreed, but there was a string attached: if the United States could not persuade Britain to lift its blockade against food and fertilizers, Germany said, it would consider renewing unrestricted submarine warfare.

**THE 1916 ELECTION** In November 1916 came the U.S. presidential election. The Democrats renominated Wilson, and the Republicans nominated Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes. Wilson campaigned on the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War.” Hughes pledged to uphold America’s right to freedom of the seas but also promised not to be too severe on Germany.

The election returns shifted from hour to hour. In fact, Hughes went to bed believing he had been elected. When a reporter tried to reach him with the news of Wilson’s victory, an aide said, “The President can’t be disturbed.” “Well,” replied the reporter, “when he wakes up, tell him he’s no longer President.”

**NEUTRALITY COLLAPSES** Following the election, Wilson tried to end the war by calling upon both sides to state the terms on which they would be willing to stop fighting. The attempt failed. In a speech before the Senate on January 22, 1917, the president called for “a peace without victory . . . a peace among equals” in which neither side would impose harsh terms on the other. Instead, all nations would join in a “league for peace” that would work to extend democracy, maintain freedom of the seas, and reduce armaments.

Nine days later the Germans responded. Germany’s leaders felt they had a good chance to knock out Great Britain by resuming unrestricted

## Difficult Decisions IN HISTORY

### SHOULD THE UNITED STATES ENTER THE WAR?

Though President Wilson urged Americans to be “neutral in fact as well as in name,” many wanted to join the war on the Allied side. Secretary of State Robert Lansing, for example, undercut Wilson’s peace initiatives with Britain and France, hoping Germany would resume unrestricted U-boat attacks and thus pull America into the war.

As a pacifist, Jane Addams worked hard to keep the United States out of the war altogether, and she endured criticism for her efforts. Senator George Norris argued against the war resolution in Congress, charging that millions would suffer and die “all because we want to preserve the commercial right of American citizens to deliver munitions of war to belligerent nations.”

1. In your opinion, which side had the stronger argument—those who backed the Allies or those who favored staying out of the war?
2. In your opinion, should the United States have entered the war?

submarine warfare. On January 31 the kaiser announced that U-boats would sink all ships in British waters—hostile or neutral—on sight. Wilson was stunned. The German decision meant the United States would have to go to war. However, the president held back, saying that he would wait for “actual overt acts” before breaking diplomatic relations.

The overt acts came. First was the **Zimmermann note**, a telegram sent by the German foreign minister to the German ambassador in Mexico and intercepted by British agents. The telegram suggested an alliance between Mexico and Germany and promised that if war with the United States broke out, Germany would support Mexico in recovering “the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.” Next came the sinking of four unarmed American merchant ships, with a loss of 36 lives. Moreover, in March the Russians overthrew their repressive czarist regime and replaced it with a representative government. Now supporters of entry into the war could claim that the war against the Central Powers was a war of democracies against brutal monarchies.

A light drizzle fell on Washington on April 2, 1917, as senators, representatives, ambassadors, members of the Supreme Court, and other guests crowded into the Capitol building to hear President Wilson deliver his war resolution.

### A PERSONAL VOICE

Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people cannot be. The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind. . . . We are glad . . . to fight . . . for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples . . . for the rights of nations great and small and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life. . . . The world must be made safe for democracy. . . . We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities. . . . It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war. . . . But the right is more precious than peace.

**WOODROW WILSON**, quoted in *American Voices*

The Senate passed the resolution on April 4, and the House of Representatives did so on April 6. With the illusion of neutrality finally shattered, U.S. troops would follow the stream of American money and munitions that had been heading to the Allies throughout the war. But Wilson’s desire to make the world “safe for democracy” wasn’t just political rhetoric. Indeed, Wilson and many Americans truly believed that the United States must join the war to pave the way for a future order of peace and freedom. A resolved but anxious nation held its breath as the United States prepared for war.