



CHAPTER 5 | AMERICA MOBILIZES & RUSSIA REVOLTS

INTRODUCTION

This week we're focusing on the year 1917. Two major events occurred this year that shaped the course of world history all the way up to the present day. On the Eastern Front, the Russians suffered a revolution at home that forced them to make peace with Germany and then they dropped out of the war completely. But to balance out that misfortune for the Allies, the Germans decided to attack American ships, which caused President Wilson to declare war on Germany. Russia might be out of the war, but America was now in.

EUROPE IN 1917

Allied Fatigue

The war wasn't going well for the Allies. Most soldiers were discouraged by the constant blood and slaughter on the battlefields. Many soldiers in the French army, for example, complained that the government had no idea what trench life was really like. They wanted more food, more leave time, and an end to the seemingly senseless offensives that killed thousands of their comrades. They also knew the war was taking a toll on their home countries and were concerned about conditions there.

Some of the French soldiers began to make sounds like sheep whenever an officer was near, trying to get the point across that they felt as if they were lambs being led to the slaughter. They were on the brink of mutiny. Then, command of the French armies passed from Joffre to General Nivelle, a man who had been the hero of the defense of Verdun in 1916.

In contrast to other generals of his day, Nivelle was personally impressive: bilingual, highly articulate, and suave. He had successfully used a tactic by which he coordinated infantry and artillery closely, using first a bombardment, then a "creeping barrage," and then a massive infantry attack.

Nivelle was himself convinced, and convinced other Allied commanders, that he could break through the German lines at Aisne. He painted a picture of a series of short attacks that would boost public morale by breaking quickly through German lines and costing relatively few lives. He promised that if the attacks were not immediately successful, they could be quickly broken off.

French and British statesmen were quick to pin their hopes to Nivelle's plan in 1917 because the French needed a victory and the British would only have to play a supporting role. As planning went forward and doubts were voiced, Nivelle responded with promises that could not be kept but raised hopes high. The French troops began to anticipate a speedy end to the war.

French armies tried to follow Nivelle's plan, but they couldn't break through German lines. As a result, the French troops were so discouraged that half the forces under Nivelle's command mutinied, meaning that they refused to obey their officers' orders. They did not murder any officers or generals, but they simply refused to go up into the maw of machine-gun fire any more. Such a refusal spoke volumes: military authority has reached an all-time low when soldiers refuse to obey their officers in a time of war.

All French attacks on the Germans had to be halted and the armies reorganized before French soldiers would continue the fight. Three months later, the new commander who replaced Nivelle, a man named



Pétain, offered better living conditions better food, and more rotations away from the trenches for the men and restored some order to the military over several months.

Meanwhile, what were the English doing? Well, wespite the misgivings of the newly elected prime minister David Lloyd George, British General Sir Douglas Haig remained in command. He first led troops in support of the French with an offensive in Arras. Even though it was clear that victory could not be gained by the end of April, Haig determined to keep fighting for another costly month. Then, committed to an offensive that attempted wrest Belgium from German hands, Haig mounted a series of attacks in Flanders between June and November.

During this time, Haig organized a spectacular explosion that blew up German defenses on June 7, killing 10,000 soldiers and allowing 7,500 to be taken prisoner. However, it was the same old story: he did not have men to follow up his victory. The Germans, meanwhile, made an orderly withdrawal and set up new defensive lines.

From July 31 to November 10 of 1917, Haig tried to help the French in a culmination of his summer offensive called the Third Battle of Ypres (also called the Battle of Passchendaele after the village that was its backdrop). Described by many as the most heartbreaking conflict of the war, this battle became an illustration of death and destruction resulting from bad leadership. Muddy, bloody, and useless, the campaign lost 250,000 men and gained nothing.

It happened this way. Haig wanted to open a way for his cavalry troops to occupy the U-boat ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge. Although Prime Minister Lloyd George did not share Haig's enthusiasm for the plan, George did not oppose him. The ridge that Haig hoped to take was well defended by bomb-proof machine guns, artillery posts, and fresh troops waiting miles behind the line. As Haig's men marched through the marsh that surrounded the high ground, it started to rain. Although Haig had been warned by meteorologists that this was to be expected, he kept pushing forward.

It rained harder than it had in thirty years that summer. Thousands of men—up to one quarter of Haig's forces, some estimate—fell into flooded shell craters or deep mud and drowned. In addition to the terrible weather, the British army was unable to break through the enemy line, yet Haig still did not stop the fighting, much to the dismay of his men and even his closest supporters.

Although Haig briefly triumphed when Canadian soldiers captured the village of Passchendaele, many thousands had died following his orders, and the Germans recaptured this ground within a few months. Haig truly poured out British blood like water in the mud pits of Passchendaele, and for nothing. Commenting on the British soldiers, one commander said that they fought like lions. Another famously responded, "True, but they are lions led by donkeys."¹

The only glimmer of limited victory in the whole awful mess was the success of the new Allied tanks. Although many failed because they broke down often, the Germans couldn't stop the tanks when they did work. The success of tanks was encouraging, but any enthusiasm felt about them had to be limited by the realities of supply and demand. There were only a few tanks ready for battle.

1. Paul Dowswell, Ruth Brockelhurst, and Henry Brook, *The World Wars* (London: Usborne Publishing, 2007), p. 97.



© 2024 Lampstand Press. Not for resale.



Fortunately for British morale, there was one other bright spot that occurred a little over a month after Passchendaele. British General Allenby worked with T.E. Lawrence (an intelligence officer who was able to make an alliance with rebel Turks) and others to capture Jerusalem shortly before Christmas of 1917. Allenby officially entered the city on December 11 after the British defeated the Turks and became the first Christians to control it in 400 years. (The Ottoman Turks had held it since 1516, shortly after the last Crusades.)

German Desperation

Things were no better for the Germans on the other side of the trenches, but the soldiers remained grimly determined. The top German generals—Hindenburg and Ludendorff—examined the Western Front in the fall of 1916 *from a strategic perspective and determined to fall back and refortify in better positions*. They shortened the front by miles, strengthened the line, and gained better positions on the terrain, moving German troops back to more defensible spots. The new defensive lines of barbed wire were between 2,500 to 4,000 yards deep! These changes were generally effective, and the Germans stopped all Allied assaults in 1917.

On the home front, however, there wasn't much help to be given to the German citizens. The common people were starving and lacked many basic necessities because anything useful typically went to the soldiers first. Furthermore, they were nearly exhausted from fighting a war on two fronts. The German leaders knew that to win—or at least not lose—they needed to take some big risks. As a result, they launched two long shots in 1917.

RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

The Germans' first long shot paid off beyond their wildest dreams. They gave money to the Communist revolutionary, Vladimir Lenin. As you may recalled from Chapter 4, Lenin was a Marxist intellectual who wanted to overthrow the Tsar's government, which (from the German perspective) would take Russia neatly out of the war and remove one of the two fronts on which Germany had to fight.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks

As a young man, Vladimir Lenin studied deeply the radical political philosophy of Karl Marx. Marx taught that socialism would inevitably triumph in advanced industrial countries. Lenin believed in Marx's analysis of history and was fiercely committed to world revolution as outlined by Marxism. Russia was not at all an advanced industrial country such as Marx described as being ripe for revolution, but Lenin didn't want to wait for it to reach that point.

Unlike Marx, he was convinced that Russia could have a proletariat revolution. He also added to Marxist theory the belief that workers needed full-time revolutionary leaders in order to revolt successfully. Lenin wanted to bring the socialist revolution sooner through a small group of trained and dedicated revolutionary leaders.



No other political actors in this drama of the Russian Revolution were willing to collaborate with the enemy—Germany—in order to gain personal power within Russia. Lenin was transported via a special train from Switzerland to Russia through Germany for the expressed purpose of disrupting and ending the Russian war effort. After he was in Russia, he took huge sums of money from the Germans for years as he built up his personal power in Russia.

As described by Pipes, Lenin wanted power personally. He frequently changed his proclaimed beliefs when opportunities for power, or threats to his power, were presented. He believed that force, terror, and the annihilation of enemies were proper and necessary. These tactics reveal his character as violent, selfish, and disrespectful of human life or free choice. He saw war as a means to world revolution, which was his end goal.

Lenin did not desire peace; on the contrary, turmoil presented opportunities for change because distressed people were more forceful in their demands. Pipes also claims that Lenin was a coward. When physical courage was required, Lenin was conspicuously absent from the scene. Instead, he bullied his associates into taking risks.

Lenin became the intelligent, bold leader of a radical wing within the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, which became known as the Bolsheviks. He masterminded the growth and training of his Bolsheviks from outside Russia (in neutral Switzerland) because the Tsar wanted to put him in prison. When the Germans gave him money to return to Russia in 1917, Lenin saw his chance and took it.

Pipes writes that, “Lenin treated politics as warfare... he and he alone saw its purpose as conquering power and annihilating all rivals. By annihilation, he meant, not merely eliminating them as competitors, but physically exterminating them. Such a view of politics, of course, gave Lenin great advantages in the struggle for power.”¹

Even though they were a tiny minority, Lenin’s Bolsheviks enjoyed some important advantages over rivals. First, Bolsheviks felt no qualms about resorting to merciless terror.² Rather than violence being an unwanted by-product of the Bolsheviks’ struggle, they used it intentionally as a means to their goal. Like their leader, Lenin, they saw politics as a kind of warfare and were willing to attack their enemies not only with words, but with guns, knives, mobs, and poison—whatever it took to win. In their struggle for power, the Bolsheviks used violence intentionally and apparently without remorse to reach their goals.

Meanwhile, the rival parties, the socialists and, to some extent, the liberals, were populist, believing in the innate wisdom of the Russian people. They believed that if they trusted the Russian people, then Russia would find a way to live peacefully in a just society. They were not prepared to fight, and they lost out to a politician for whom struggle was a normal occupation, and peace a mere breathing-spell for war (42). Lenin and the Communists were therefore like piranhas in a school of goldfish—they easily tore their opponents to pieces.

Lenin also had the dubious advantage of not caring about Russia, which he viewed as nothing more than a stepping-stone to global upheaval; a backward country, populated mainly by an uncouth rural “petty bourgeoisie” in the shape of self-sufficient “middle” peasants and “kulaks.”³ Therefore, he agreed to many “short term” demands as he consolidated his power, knowing full well that he would rescind them in the future because he did not care what happened to Russia ultimately.

1. Richard Pipes, *Three “Whys” of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 40.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 43-44.



In order to gain his ends, Lenin was prepared to offer anyone what they wanted, whether land to peasants, control of production to workers, peace to soldiers, or independence to national minorities. His political opponents were not willing to do the same.

From March Abdication to October Revolution

So much for the leaders of the Russian Revolution to come; now, let me describe the Russian people who followed them. As you may recall, after the embarrassing defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, Tsar Nicholas II's reputation was at a low ebb; both civilians and soldiers expressed anger and resentment towards his leadership. Lenin's Bolsheviks especially blamed the Tsar for his failure to win, and the time seemed right for revolution because, like all European nations, Russia was running out of men and the will to fight.

In February 1917, a widespread revolt began in the Russian capital city of Petrograd. Women, both home-makers and those working at a nearby factory, began the revolt by demanding bread for their families. Tens of thousands of women filled the street, and they were joined other protesters until they numbered 200,000 angry Russians.

The Tsar, Nicholas II, wanted to use the army to make the protesters go home. However, the Russian army was running out of men and near the end of its strength. At that time there were 180,000 troops in or near Petrograd, but many of these men were either injured or untrained, and most of them were already upset about Russian losses during the war and the incompetence of their officers. Only 12,000 or so were really ready to obey the Tsar. When they saw that a large part of the crowd (which outnumbered them by almost twenty to one) were women, many soldiers decided to join the protesters instead of stopping them.

Unable to restore order, Nicholas' advisors urged him to step down and give up his throne. He eventually agreed to do so and abdicated in March 1917. A Provisional Government made up of the Duma (Russia's version of Congress) took over at first, but it did an even worse job than the Tsar. As the Provisional Government suffered yet more military defeats during the next six months between March and October, Lenin's Bolsheviks planned to seize power in a coup so that he might urge outright socialist revolution.

You must understand that, by October of 1917, the Russian people were in a desperate condition. There were serious food shortages because the ongoing war had caused railroad transport systems to break down. Inflation caused rising prices, which meant poor people could not buy food. Thousands were starving to death. The country had experienced spasms of democratic reforms, but still heard many cries for radical reform from the Bolsheviks who, led by Lenin, were working to seize power in Russia.

Taking advantage of the situation, Lenin led the Bolshevik Party to urge people to overthrow the Provisional Government, take land from their landlords, take control of factories, and leave their military posts. Because of further defeats between March and October, the Bolsheviks seized the government on October 24th (some say the 25th) of 1917 and declared Lenin their dictation, the head of the new government.

This coup was political and bloodless, but it did not fully establish the Bolshevik regime. Meanwhile, the royal family had been taken prisoner and held in a remote city of Siberia. Lenin ordered that the whole family be executed, thus bringing an end to the Romanov line of Russian tsars and causing Russia to lose its prestige in the eyes of other European nations.



Once Lenin gained control of the Russian government in October of 1917, he immediately sued for peace with Germany. In December of 1917, Lenin's government accepted the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on behalf of the Russian people. The terms of the treaty that Germany imposed on Russia were harsh; Imperial Russia had to give up huge territories and most of its European lands: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

The following year, when the Germans were defeated, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk became null and void. However, Russians long remembered the harshness of the Germans, and this would be a factor in World War II. In the more immediate context of December in 1917, a bloody civil war erupted within Russia because many patriotic Russians were horrified and humiliated by the terms that Trotsky, Lenin's foreign minister, accepted on their behalf.

In this civil war, the Communist Bolsheviks were called the Reds and everyone who fought against them were known as the Whites. They fought all over Russia from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south, to Siberia in the far east. In fact, the Russian civil war continued for several years after World War I ended, and all the fighting was within Russia's borders, so it actually *prolonged* the nation's war-related problems in addition the loss of Russia's prestige (in the sight of European nations), her territory (given up to the Germans by the Treat of Brest-Litovsk), and much Russian blood (in the civil war).

Lenin and the Reds finally won in 1923. Thereafter, Lenin was the dictator of a totalitarian state in Russia. (A totalitarian regime is a political system in which all are subservient to a dictator who rules from a centralized government with total control.) Later totalitarian leaders, such as Hitler, would learn from his methods. As Pipes remarks, "The party which Lenin forged and led was really not a party," but a group based on fanatical loyalty to their leader, which was a sort of "order" that Hitler would later imitate.¹

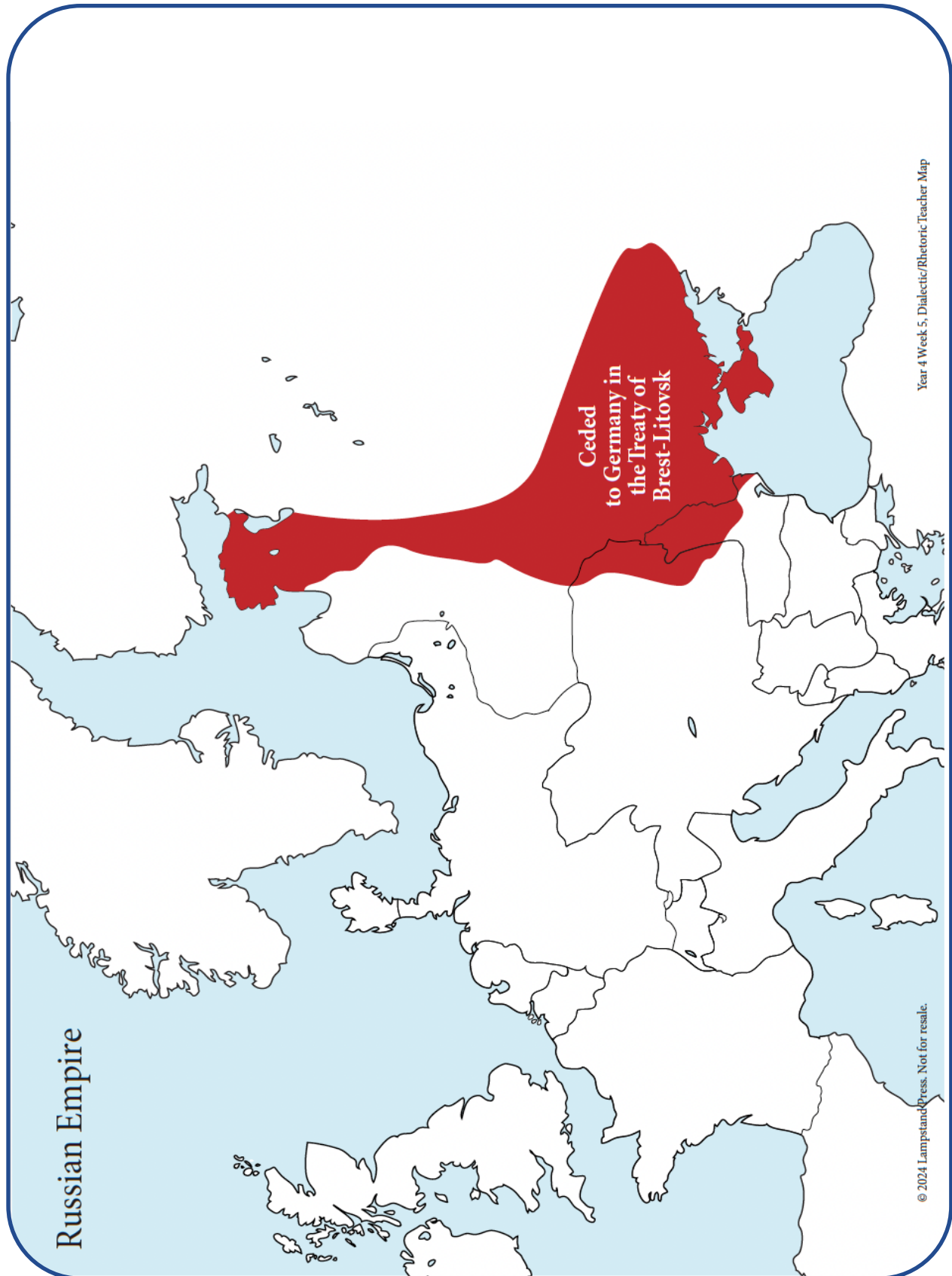
Pipes also notes that, "[T]hese pseudo-parties—the Bolshevik one, first, and the Fascist and Nazi ones later—were exclusive. . . . Elements regarded as unworthy were purged."² They were not really political parties intended to champion certain positions or policies for the people. Rather, "The purpose of totalitarian parties, for which Bolshevism provided the model, was not to become the government but to manipulate the government from behind the scenes."³ Then, "Once in power, the new rulers created a 'dual state' under which ordinary government institutions . . . [concealed] the real authority, which was in the hands of the party."⁴

1. Richard Pipes, *Three "Whys" of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 38.

2. *Ibid*, p. 38-39.

3. *Ibid*, p. 39.

4. *Ibid*, p. 39.





GERMAN RESURGENCE AND THE ITALIAN FRONT

As the guns fell silent on the Eastern Front, Germany shifted its forces and attention elsewhere, looking for other weak targets. Italy, an ally of France and Britain, was one because it had big morale problems. Exhausted from multiple Battles of Isonzo (eleven of them!) that gained the Italians nothing while it bled them dry, there was also widespread discontent in the Italian population, which further demoralized the Italian armies.

Though warned about a combined Austro-Hungarian and German assault at Caporetto, the Italians did little to fortify their defenses, and the enemy gained ground quickly when their assault began in late October of 1917. The Italians gave way, but the Austro-Hungarian reserves and supply lines were insufficient. The enemy was halted after about 10,000 Italians had been killed, 30,000 wounded, and over 295,000 taken prisoner. It took Italy a long while to recover.

As you saw, the crumbling Italian line barely withstood a new joint offensive by Germany and Austria-Hungary. With Russia out, Italy reeling, and French troops ready to mutiny, the end of World War I seemed near. Germany might not be able to conquer Europe, but if they could just get Britain to quit, then all sides might be willing to negotiate a treaty in which no one officially lost the war!

AMERICA ENTERS THE WAR

He Kept Us Out of War!

For three years (1914-1916), America had stayed out of the war in Europe. The Founding Fathers had grown up in the 1700s when European countries fought war after war. From George Washington forwards, a policy of strict isolationism had kept the United States out of overseas trouble for generations. Woodrow Wilson followed that tradition and kept America out of the war throughout his first term—in fact, ironically, his campaign slogan for reelection 1916 was “He Kept Us Out of War!” Unfortunately, staying neutral wasn’t easy.

America may have been officially neutral on the war, but many individual Americans weren’t. Indeed, the whole national mood had become increasingly hostile towards Germany as the war progressed. As time went on, many influential politicians (like Theodore Roosevelt) were raising their voices along with the public, ready to join the war effort.

Americans favored the Allies was because of a shared past cultural history and current important trading relationships. Also, Germany had lost America’s respect early on when it attacked neutral Belgium in order to attack France. Germany’s betrayal made it easy for America to create trade policies that strongly favored the Allies, including giving the Allies large loans.

You may recall that, near the beginning of the war, the Germans positioned U-boats (submarines) to sink all commercial ships—including American ships—sailing across the Atlantic towards Allied ports in England or France. They had to change that policy before long. In May of 1915, the Germans sunk the *Lusitania*, a British passenger ship, killing over a thousand people, including 128 Americans. Many Americans clamored for revenge, but Wilson still resisted war. Instead, he demanded that Germans stop submarine attacks against all ships bound for England.



Though the German leaders did not openly agree to this demand or put a stop to all their submarine warfare, they secretly ordered their U-boats to cease attacking passenger ships. Unfortunately, another attack occurred, and Wilson issued an ultimatum that unless the Germans publicly stopped their submarine attacks, he would declare war. Knowing that American involvement would cost them the war, the Germans had agreed and issued the Sussex Pledge. The Pledge promised to avoid attacks on neutral shipping (including American shipping), and it stayed in place held for most of the war.

Not So Neutral

You recall that Germany's first long shot attempt to end World War I was that of supporting Lenin, a move which succeeded beyond their wildest dreams? Well, a desire to break Britain's fighting spirit explains the second desperate long shot that Germany launched in January of 1917. Germany decided to try to starve Britain into submission by sinking all England-bound shipping—even neutral ships belonging to America. The desperate Germans, who were themselves starving, gambled that their submarine warfare on British shipping could choke Britain before enough Americans could mobilize to make a difference in Europe.

In February 1917, a German U-boat sunk an American ship, the *Housatonic*. I have two words for this decision: “big mistake.” Wilson cut off diplomatic ties with Germany. Then, in March, the Zimmermann Telegram was made public around the world. This secret note from one German official to another outlined a proposed alliance between Mexico and Germany against the United States, and this incident proved to be the last straw.

The Zimmermann Telegram, also known as the Zimmerman Note, was a secret diplomatic communication sent by Arthur Zimmermann, the German Foreign Secretary, to the German ambassador in Mexico, Heinrich von Eckardt, during World War I. The telegram was sent on January 16, 1917, but it was intercepted and decoded by British intelligence.

In the telegram, Zimmermann proposed a military alliance between Germany and Mexico if the United States entered the war against Germany. He suggested that if Mexico joined the war on the side of Germany, then Germany could help Mexico recover the territories it had lost to the United States in the 19th century, including Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

When the British intercepted and deciphered the Zimmerman Note, they immediately recognized its potential to draw the United States into the war against Germany. At that time, the United States was still officially neutral in World War I, but it had been supplying the Allied powers with resources and loans.

The British government shared the contents of the Zimmerman Note with the United States in late February 1917, and it was made public in March. This revelation of Germany's attempt to incite Mexico against the United States generated outrage among the American public and swayed public opinion still further in favor of entering World War I.

In the first days of April, 1917, after three more American ships were sunk by Germans, Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war on Germany. Congress made that declaration on April 6, 1917. America entered World War I on the side of the Allied powers, a decision that would cost Germany the war.



Wilson's War

Germany rightly feared America's industrial capacity. They knew that the U.S. would be able to declare war, raise and train an army, and send it into battle. However, they were not afraid of America's troops. After all, if millions of trained professional European soldiers had failed to break through the German trenches over four long years, how could farm boys from Tennessee make much difference? Germany believed their U-boats would force Britain into submission before American soldiers could make any kind of progress on the battlefield.

President Wilson knew that Germany wasn't afraid of the United States military, and why should they be? America has an all-volunteer army, only about 200,000 men strong, with a small budget and little real combat experience. To solve this problem, Wilson asked Congress to pass a Selective Service Bill, a "conscription" also known today as a "draft," which increased the size of the American army from 100,000 to 2.8 million men. Wilson then appointed a capable, intelligent, and well-respected general, John J. Pershing, to lead the American Expeditionary Forces.

The American army largely stayed out of the fighting in 1917, although they transported 660,000 men to France by June and a total of 2 million men by December. The Americans stayed out of the fighting because Wilson wanted American soldiers to be commanded by American generals, while the French and British wanted them to be put in wherever they were needed under whichever general (French or British) was in command. Given the hundreds of thousands of lives wasted by such generals, it seems like a wise decision. Additionally, Wilson knew that Americans would be key to winning the final victory and he wanted some of the credit for that victory to help him in negotiations during the peace process.

At home in America, Wilson set out to put the entire country on a war footing. He set up special war agencies that placed private industry under the control of the government so that wartime necessities could be produced. The Food Administration did not actually enforce rationing on Americans but did strongly encourage them to eat less or different food so that more could be sent to the army. The Fuel Administration oversaw the use of coal, of which there was a shortage in 1918 that caused factories and schools to be closed down during the winter. Citizens were asked to conserve food and energy in order that supplies be directed toward the war effort.

The Railroad Administration tried to smooth out traffic jams that occurred when different railroad companies tried to rush multiple trains down the same length of track. They succeeded in sorting out the schedules but piled up over a billion dollars in debt doing so. Finally, the War Industries Board told private companies which manufacturing contracts to fill first. An order for 10,000 rifles, for example, had to be completed before an order for 10,000 teapots could be started.

Propaganda and Censorship

Wilson knew that not all Americans supported the war effort at first, and he thought they must be made to support it. Wilson insisted, "It's not an army we must train, it is a nation."¹ He was willing to use propaganda (communication that tries to influence people's thoughts, beliefs, or actions in a specific way), censorship ((the control or limitation of what people can see, hear, read, or express, often involving the suppression or restriction of information, ideas, or artistic expression), exaggeration, coercion, even lies and abridgement of constitutional rights, to achieve this end.

1. J. Callan, *America in the 1900s and 1910s* (Facts On File, 2006), p. 99.



Wilson created the Committee on Public Information, which became the source of war propaganda—“the world’s greatest adventure in advertising.”¹ The Committee created films, posters, and pamphlets that showed American soldiers as heroes fighting to make the world safe for democracy, while enemy soldiers were shown as brutal barbarian sub-humans. America became a ferocious foe in part because Wilson used propaganda and censorship to whip the nation into a fighting fury.

There are both benefits and dangers to wartime censorship and propaganda. There are secrets that must be kept in wartime, as the saying goes: “Loose lips sink ships!” However, propaganda is often unjust and written or said to twist the truth in favor of the government’s political ends, making enemies seem worse than they are, or making one’s own country (and leaders) seem better than they are.

In America’s World War I propaganda, American soldiers were characterized as heroes fighting to make the world safe for democracy, while enemy soldiers were made to appear as brutal sub-humans fighting to establish barbarism. Wilson’s use of propaganda that dehumanized enemy soldiers mischaracterized the real people who were fighting for their own ideals.

Wartime propaganda contradicts the commands of the gospel. Even the worst and most evil enemy is still a human being that Jesus died to save. Propaganda teaches people to despise and hate their enemies, but Jesus told us to love them and pray for them. Also, God would not have us look upon enemies as sub-human, but as humans made in His image just as we are. Their sin natures are the same as ours. Thus, propaganda tempts people to sinful beliefs about others.

Teaching a nation to hate is unwise because it starts it down a slippery slope that can hard to climb back up. Wilson, who—remember?—was a boy during the Civil War, understood what he was doing. He thought that turning America into a nation prepared to fight might cause them to “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 the very fiber of our national life, infecting Congress, courts, the policeman on the beat, and the man in the street”² Yet, he carried out his plan of propaganda. Did I not tell you that war is terrible?

Even with the lies and distortions, not everyone believed the propaganda. Many patriotic Americans still thought Wilson’s war was a dangerous mistake. And they said so! These dissenting voices kept America from being completely unified in support of the war. Wilson thought that was a problem. His administration decided it wasn’t enough to just show how important the war was. They had to silence those with different opinions.

Congress passed wartime laws which censored the press and punished unpatriotic speech. The Espionage Act of 1917 suppressed basic American freedoms, making it a crime to aid the enemy. This was interpreted broadly and led to wide discretionary powers for the postmaster general, who could now censor private mail.

Furthermore, the censorship involved in the propaganda campaign during this era suppressed Americans’ first amendment rights, largely through the Sedition Act of 1918. Federal officials were given authority to censor the press and stifle criticism of the war. Some who criticized the war were arrested and imprisoned. For example, some socialist and labor leaders (like Eugene Debs and Bill Haywood) were sentenced to long prison terms.

1. Anne Bausum, *Unraveling Freedom: The Battle for Democracy on the Home Front During World War I*, (National Geographic Kids, 2010), 41.

2. J. Callan, *America in the 1900s and 1910s* (Facts On File, 2006), p. 98-99.



These measures hit German-Americans especially hard. German newspapers were shut down; German books were removed from libraries; in some places, the use of any foreign language was forbidden. Towns with German-sounding names often changed to something patriotic. Even sauerkraut—a German recipe for cooking cabbage—was called “liberty cabbage” instead. Many American citizens of German ancestry were threatened and even persecuted in a way that sometimes escalated into vigilante violence. Their rights were seldom protected by law officials.

SEA AND AIR WARFARE

As you may recall, a key reason for the arms race in Europe before World War I started was Germany’s decision in 1900 to build a navy that would outclass Britain’s. Not to be easily outdone, Britain responded by building dreadnoughts—modern battleships—and increasing its navy.

The first phase of the war at sea lasted from July to December of 1914. Britain and her allies succeeded in confining Central Power shipping to port and sweeping German warships from the high seas. The second phase of the sea war occurred between January of 1915 and February of 1917. During this period, the Germans experimented with attacks on merchant shipping that supplied the Allies with war materials, as the Allied blockade effectively strangled their ability to supply their populations with basic necessities. German U-boats (submarines) became highly effective at destroying merchant shipping, and the Allies’ only real defense became convoying (a group of merchant ships sailing together, protected by Allied war vessels).

The final phase occurred in February 1917 when a desperate German high command gambled that it could destroy enough of Britain’s shipping to force a British withdrawal from the war. They further gambled that the United States would not enter the war as a result of unrestricted submarine warfare, or, if they did, that they would not be able to mobilize quickly enough to become a determinative force in the war.

Although everyone at the beginning of World War I saw the importance of naval power, aircraft were too recently invented to be a known and measured source. Though all nations involved in the conflict saw the potential of airplanes, and though they developed amazingly during the war, they were never a decisive factor.

As we discussed in the last chapter, airplanes were used almost solely for scouting at first. Then, as enemy planes began to meet in the air, pilots started carrying pistols and rifles. The French, British, and Germans all outdid one another at various phases trying to make aircraft that would fly faster, be handier, and mount machine guns that could shoot forward through the whirling propeller blades.

The Germans also built a fleet of zeppelins (a craft that harnessed multiple hot-air balloons) for reconnaissance and bombing missions, but the zeppelins were too fragile to be of much use after the Allies developed weapons that could set them on fire. (Zeppelins did scare London residents when they appeared overhead, however!) All in all, World War I saw the potential of airplanes as weapons, but it would be World War II before that potential became fully developed into a fighting force that could rival the importance of a navy.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can see that Wilson's leadership really mattered during World War I. For three years he led America in staying out of the war, although many Americans wanted to join the war. His reelection victory was based on the campaign slogan, "He Kept Us Out of War." The Germans believed that Wilson was too isolationist to change his position. They thought that no matter what they did, Wilson would keep America neutral, but they calculated wrong. When the Germans started sinking American ships, Wilson went to war.

Once he had decided on war, Wilson went about fighting it without holding back. He had led the Americans in peace, now he led them in waging war. He used a mandatory draft to recruit millions of soldiers, spent huge amounts of money to arm and equip them, took government control over the economy, and controlled what American citizens knew or said through censorship and official propaganda.

Wilson and Congress shut down anyone who opposed the war effort through government censorship. This was not exactly legal, but it was effective. Next week we will see the fruits of their efforts when American soldiers finally tipped the balance of the war towards the Allies.