

SSUSH15 – Analyze the origins and impact of U.S. involvement in World War I

a. Describe the movement from U.S. neutrality to engagement in World War I, including unrestricted submarine warfare and the Zimmerman Telegram.

In August 1914, war broke out in Europe with Austria-Hungary and Germany on one side and France, Great Britain, and Russia on the other side. The intense fighting soon spread beyond the fields, forests, and hillsides of Europe to include the seas around Western Europe and out into the eastern Atlantic. In the United States, tensions ran high, especially as newspapers reported on the destruction and loss of life in Belgium, a neutral country. Americans, who in large part came from the nations at war, tended to support their native lands. President Woodrow Wilson was worried that supporters of each side would drag the United States into the war. Furthermore, Wilson worried that violence might occur in the United States between Americans supporting one side or the other. To calm the potential for violence, Wilson went before Congress on August 19, 1914 to ask for a declaration of neutrality, stating that, “The United States must be neutral in fact, as well as in name....”

Even with the Congressional declaration of neutrality, the actions of the United States tended to favor the Allies (i.e., the British and the French). The United States was in a recession in 1914. American businessmen and farmers saw the war as a business opportunity. The United States was eager to trade throughout Europe, but the British had established a blockade not only against German ports but neutral ports as well. Bethlehem Steel was soon sending munitions to England, while the Morgan Bank provided loans that were used by the French and British to pay for war goods. By 1917, American loans to the Allies soared to \$2.25 billion; loans to Germany stood at a paltry \$27 million.

Germany also relied heavily on imported foodstuffs to feed its population and chemicals for its industries. The British Royal Navy outnumbered the German Imperial Fleet and was able to place an effective blockade on Germany’s Baltic Sea ports, as well as neutral ports in northwest Europe. By early 1915, Germany decided to expand submarine attacks from strictly Allied warships to also include any commercial ships belonging to both belligerent and neutral nations. This action began what is known as unrestricted submarine warfare. America's neutrality was in jeopardy.

German submarines were very effective, sinking an average of two ships each day in the first quarter of 1915. To counter German successes, the British admiralty ordered British cargo ships to fly a neutral flag. The British sometimes loaded critical materials aboard fast liners and other passenger ships, believing the Germans would not dare sink a passenger ship. German commanders ignored the ruse and sank all shipping vessels. In March 1915, the first American was killed off the British coast. The United States reacted with outrage. Attacks on ships carrying Americans increased until May 1915, when the British liner *Lusitania* was sunk off the Irish coast. There were 128 Americans on board the *Lusitania* and all were killed. President Wilson reacted by issuing a series of notes to Germany warning against further attacks on American shipping. Germany acquiesced but then on August 19, 1915 the *Arabic* was sunk, killing three Americans. The Germans feared that the United States would declare war and ordered submarine commanders to cease attacks on passenger liners.

The year 1916 proved critical for both the Allies and Germany, who suffered heavy casualties in a series of failed offensives. The German High Command decided to renew unrestricted warfare to force the British to sue for peace. The Germans believed that they would have six months to complete operations before the United States would declare war. President Wilson was re-elected in 1916 on a peace platform and offered to mediate peace talks between the warring nations the next year.

Unrestricted submarine warfare was renewed in February 1917. Anticipating reaction by the United States, the German government instructed its ambassador to the United States to approach the Mexican government and ask them to join Germany in a war against the United States. The telegram was sent by Germany's foreign minister, Arthur Zimmerman, and was not favorably received by the Mexican government. The secret communication was intercepted by British intelligence and given to President Wilson. American neutrality was no longer prudent. The security of the United States was being threatened.

In February 1917, President Wilson responded to German attacks and threats by severing diplomatic relations with Germany. Public opinion in the United States was split over whether to get involved in the European war. Some groups favored continuing the neutrality policy. Some groups favored war and loyalty was divided between both sides. However, when the **Zimmerman Telegram** was published in the newspapers, American public opinion swelled to support war

against Germany. The President reluctantly knew after this point, war with Germany was inevitable. Despite his reticence, Wilson went before Congress on April 2 to ask for a declaration of war, which was granted.

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Unrestricted Submarine Warfare

Zimmerman Telegram

- 1. Why did the U.S remain Neutral?**
- 2. How did unrestricted warfare lead the U.S. from neutrality to engagement during World War 1?**
- 3. What is the Lusitania? What happened to it?**
- 4. How did Zimmerman Telegram lead the U.S. from neutrality to engagement during World War 1?**