History 271
Devine

World War I

Four Major Questions to keep in mind:

1. Why did war break out in Europe in August 1914?

2. How did the United States respond to the European war?

3. Why did the United States enter the war on the side of the Allies (Great Britain and France)?

4. What did Woodrow Wilson hope to achieve by entering the war and presiding over the subsequent peace treaty negotiations?

Beyond these four questions it is also worth examining World War I since it was to become what one observer has called, "the seminal catastrophe of the 20th century."

Out of the First World War came much of the global turmoil that marked the 20th century and with which we still grapple today – the rise of Communism and Fascism; the instability in the Middle East; religious conflict; decolonization; hypernationalism.

Origins of the War

On June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo, a 19-year-old Serbian Slav nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire.

Princip and his associates believed that killing the Archduke might destabilize the already wobbly government of the Empire and result in the emergence of a larger, independent Yugoslav (South Slav) nation consisting of Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians. They miscalculated.

Once it was discovered that Princip was a Serbian, the Austro-Hungarian government sent Serbia an ultimatum that insisted on terms that the Serbs believed they could not accept. The Serbs' primary ally, the Russians (who were also Slavs – explaining their connection to the Serbs), urged the Serbs to placate the Austrians since Russia feared the crisis could lead to a war among the Great Powers in Europe.

The Serbs tried to compromise with the Austrians, but the Germans (the Austrians' main ally) pressured the Austrians to reject any "deals." The Germans likely viewed the crisis as an opportunity to enhance their power in Central Europe and a chance to force the Russians to back off, so they may have even welcomed war.

Once Austria refused to accept any deals with the Serbs and mobilized its army in preparation for an attack on Serbia, the Russians responded by mobilizing their armed forces, hoping this would convince the Austrians to back down before a larger war broke out.

Instead, the Russian mobilization led to the Germans' mobilizing their army.

In short, the crisis was something of a "school yard brawl" – two secondary powers (Serbia and Austria) pulled in their "big brothers" (Russian and Germany, respectively). As a result, what could have been an isolated regional dispute seemed poised to become a broader war.

Within days, the Russians' mobilization led the French to mobilize their forces since they had an alliance with the Russians.

The Germans, convinced (correctly) that their military was stronger than that of the French were eager to attack the French. The French mobilization offered the Germans a pretense to launch an attack on the French.

The easiest way to attack the French was through neutral Belgium, and so the German army invaded Belgium, where it hoped to subdue the Belgians, move across the border into France (doing an end run around the French defenses), and march to Paris. The Germans anticipated a quick victory. They miscalculated.

By invading neutral Belgium, the Germans triggered the provisions of a treaty between France and Great Britain according to which the Brits would declare war against the power that violated Belgian neutrality (in this case, Germany.)

In sum, the assassination of the Archduke, which had initially stirred little response among the powers, ended up becoming the **catalyst** for a war that drew in all of the great European powers.

Causes for War --- Great Power Rivalries and Nationalism

The assassination of the Archduke, however, was more of a pretense for war rather that its actual cause. Tensions between the Great Powers – particularly between Germany and the French and British -- had been simmering for some time.

The Germans resented French and British domination of Africa and Asia and believed they had been “left behind” in the race for colonial possessions (and access to raw materials and foreign markets).

In particular, the German leadership resented the dominance of the British navy and the British imperial trading system which kept other nations from trading directly with British colonies. The Germans feared that unless they could acquire more colonies or at least access to trade in foreign markets, they would not have sufficient raw materials to expand their rapidly industrializing economy.

To gain such markets and access to raw materials, they needed a strong navy and so began constructing new battleships. This military expansion concerned the Brits and stoked British nationalism and anti-German sentiment. As a result, the Brits moved closer diplomatically to their traditional rival, France.

The French were willing to entertain British diplomatic overtures since they too resented the Germans, who had defeated them in 1871 in a war that France had in fact provoked. At the war’s conclusion, Germany took two northern French provinces, Alsace and Lorraine. The French wanted these provinces back, but the Germans refused. This stoked French nationalism and increased the tensions between France and Germany.

The Germans hoped that a European war might result in some of the French and British colonies being transferred to a victorious Germany.

Technological “lag” and wartime casualties

The war itself turned out not to be a “quick affair” as all sides had at first assumed it would be. The carnage on the battlefield is unprecedented. Tens of thousands of men on both sides lose their lives in single battles.

In part, this is due to an uneven development in technologies and innovations.

For example, weapons technology had advanced far more quickly than battlefield tactics. Machine guns slaughtered thousands of men who were ordered to “charge” out of their trenches.

Generals, lacking good communications with the front lines (radio communication was still unreliable) ordered further “charges.” Those at the front knew such instructions were insane, but had to obey.

Likewise, medical innovation lagged behind. For example, Penicillin, which could

have saved countless wounded soldiers from death due to infection, would not be widely available until the war was over.

As the slaughter continued, it became clear that the war was a war of attrition – each side's aim was to starve or bleed out the other. Breaking the stalemate seemed increasingly unlikely and tens of thousands continued to die.

The U.S. Response – "The American Style of Foreign Policy"

When news of the outbreak of the war reached America, Woodrow Wilson, the American President, called for "strict neutrality in mind and deed." The U.S. should not take sides.

Wilson had limited interest in and knowledge of foreign affairs.

Some claimed that he made foreign policy an expression of progressive hopes and aims.

He sought more democracy and obedience to the law; greater justice; less power to the interests and more to the people.

He pursued these aims with a missionary zeal common to many progressive reformers.

When the war in Europe broke out, he saw an opportunity to convert the entire world from its wicked ways into a kind of global United States (or at least a United States that conformed to the progressives' ideal image of the nation.)

Until the progressive era of approximately 1890-1920, the US had been content to deal with autocratic governments even if it drew a sharp contrast between such regimes and that of the US.

The general approach had been to keep the "Old World" at arm's length while the US went its own way.

Previously, Americans had assumed these "Old World" nations would never be truly democratic and there was no point in using U.S. resources to achieve such a goal. By the progressive era, however, many Americans became determined to "rescue" foreign peoples from themselves or to lead them along democratic paths.

(A variation on the "duty" argument that had emerged during and after the Spanish-American War.)

What explains this reversal?

Optimistic Intervention?

Progressives genuinely believed that by intervening in the affairs of other nations, they could create a better, safer, and more humane world. (Much as they believed intervening in the affairs of the less fortunate could create a better, safer, and more humane city.)

Some historians, like Robert Dallek, believe that as Americans expressed concerns about whether their nation's own democratic institutions were weakening as political and economic power became concentrated in fewer hands, they sought reassurance by supporting a drive to promote democracy abroad.

"Like a troubled man angered by his own uncertainty," Dallek has written, "the country aggressively demanded international conformity to democratic goals it now believed might be slipping out of domestic reach."

In plain terms, one might say that frustrated progressive reformers fearing they were facing a losing battle at home began to "project" their hopes and dreams onto the world at large. This was a dangerous vision.

Wilson, a committed progressive reformer and, according to his critics, a self-righteous busy-body, was the ideal leader to preside over this mood.

To Wilson, the US was "chosen…to show the way to the nations of the world how they shall walk in the paths of liberty."

The moral clarity of such sentiments appealed to a generation of Americans plagued by threats to traditional habits. The comforting thought that God had chosen their nation to lead the world to freedom relieved doubts that, due to increasing concentrations of wealth in the hands of the richest Americans, freedom was in jeopardy in the United States.

During the Mexican Revolution, for example, Wilson declared that it was his responsibility (and the United States' responsibility) to "teach the South American republics to elect good men." Wilson's interference in Mexico produced a war scare with that nation just as the war in Europe was escalating.

Critics of U.S. moralizing pointed to the various "un-democratic" features of American society and accused Wilson and his government of hypocrisy. To an extent, such critics were correct, but such a judgment may be beside the point.

The inability of US policy makers like Wilson to recognize that the US often did

not practice what it preached grew not out of hypocrisy or cynicism, but self-righteousness and genuine (if ill-conceived) idealism and unbridled (if misplaced) confidence that American values and ideals were not only superior, but universally applicable.

AMERICANS and THE PROBLEMS OF "NEUTRALITY"

To return to the immediate circumstances of August 1914, however, it should be said that most Americans did indeed support a policy of **neutrality**.

Wilson in particular hoped to **mediate** the European conflict and believed he could only be an honest mediator if he showed no partiality to either side.

Other Americans, like Teddy Roosevelt – in the minority at first – believed the U.S. had to choose sides. Roosevelt argued that Imperial Germany posed a direct threat to the US and therefore the US must get involved on the side of the British and the French in order to defeat the Germans before they posed even more of a threat to the US.

On the other hand, the many German immigrants in the US showed initial enthusiasm for the cause of their old homeland. (So significant was this population that Wilson also embraced neutrality since he feared that if he sided with the British – his own personal inclination – he could end up leading a divided country into war.)

Still other Americans simply wanted consensus and harmony both at home and globally. They might have sympathized with the British and the French, but they wanted no parts of Europe's conflict.

The problem with a policy of "strict neutrality" was that Wilson ignored the reality that the US wasn't really neutral.

The British navy had blockaded Germany and intended to starve the German people into submission. Importing food and other supplies became nearly impossible since British ships would let no other ships into German ports. (Germans later attribute 730,000 deaths over the course of the war directly to the blockade.)

Because of the British naval blockade, no US supplies go to Germany; Brits will confiscate any contraband goods they suspect of going to the Germans thus cutting off trade and violating neutral rights. At first, they paid US carriers for the goods, but as time passed they simply took them.

Meanwhile US supplies were pouring into France and Britain; along with loans from American financiers.

The Brits also control all communications coming from Europe, and so the American public largely receives the “British side” of the story, which is often (and understandably) skewed against the Germans.

Unable to get their ships past the British blockade, the Germans resort to submarine warfare. The subs can circumvent the blockade and sink ships bringing food and military supplies to the British and the French.

According to Wilson, German submarine warfare violates international law because if a ship is to be sunk, it must be warned ahead of time so the crew and civilians aboard can get to safety before the attack occurs.

This isn’t practical since if a submarine surfaces to warn a ship, it risks being rammed and sunk itself.

The Germans accuse the US of allowing the Brits to violate international law (by not challenging their blockade of Germany) but holding the Germans to a strict (and impractical) standard.

May 1915 – German sub sinks the British ship Lusitania killing 128 Americans. The Germans did warn American passengers to stay off British ships carrying contraband, but Wilson asserts that the passengers should not be denied their right to travel safely.

Slowly, however, Wilson comes to realize that if Germany wins the war, there will be no hope for progressive values taking root in Europe.

He also realizes that unless and until he can back his progressive rhetoric with force, he will have little leverage. The Great Powers will not accept the US as a “mediator” if the US has no force to back up its words.

By August 1915, Wilson reverses himself and supports a program of military preparedness. It seems clear that the United States’ “preparations” are for a war with Germany, not Britain and France.

March 1916 – Germans sink the Sussex, a passenger ferry; no American lives lost but Wilson threatens to sever diplomatic relations (one step short of war).

Germans back off and in May 1916 announce the Sussex Pledge which promised a change in Germany's naval warfare policy:

- Passenger ships would not be targeted;

- Merchant ships would not be sunk until the presence of weapons had been established, if necessary by a search of the ship;

- Merchant ships would not be sunk without provision for the safety of passengers and crew.

In the wake of this pledge, Wilson believes he might be able to avoid war and returns his attention to pursuing further progressive reforms and his own re-election. As a new wave of reforms pass Congress, progressives come to believe that involvement in the European war will divert attention from domestic reform and so they are more reluctant to take a tough stand against Germany.

Wilson's slogan in the 1916 election: "He kept us out of War." In fact, Wilson believes that war with Germany is probably only a matter of time – not "if," but "when." He does not share this view with the voters…and he is re-elected to a second term.

The U.S. enters the War

Germany soon realizes that even though it doesn't want the Americans to enter the war on the side of the British and French, it cannot allow ships to continuously supply the British and French with weapons, food, and equipment. The German high command has to decide whether it's worth giving up sub warfare just to keep the Americans out of the war. They decide it is not.

The Germans calculate that the Americans will take at least a year to mobilize. The Germans convince themselves they can win the war on the battlefields of France before the American forces are able to tilt the balance to the Allies.

January 1917 – Germany resumes unrestricted submarine warfare.

The Zimmermann telegram follows on February 24, 1917.

This telegram from Germany to Mexico, offers the Mexican government German support in retaking large areas of the American Southwest lost to the US in the Mexican War in the 1840s.

The Germans hope that, diverted by a war on its border with Mexico, the US will be delayed or even kept from mobilizing its forces for a war in Europe.

When the telegram is "leaked" – thanks to the British – Wilson and the US must respond. (Some thought the Brits themselves may have forged the telegram to get the US involved in the war. Though it was understandable to be suspicious, there was

nothing to this rumor.)

The Mexican government declares immediately that it wants no part of the German "deal." The American public, including many German-Americans who had been opposed to the U.S. entering the war on the side of the British, now is determined to fight against Germany.

Meanwhile, the Russian Revolution has forced the withdrawal of Russia from the war. This is important for Wilson because, in his progressive vision, the purpose of the war was to make the world "Safe for Democracy." If this was his justification for bringing the US into the conflict on the side of the Allies, it was inconvenient that one of the Allies – Russia – was hardly democratic and, in fact, was an autocracy. When the revolutionaries overthrew the Czar and his autocratic rule in March 1917, it became easier for Wilson to make the "idealistic" case for US entry into the war.

Ultimately, however, the resumption of submarine warfare – more so than the Zimmermann Telegram or the fall of the Czar – forced Wilson's hand. He asks Congress for a Declaration of War in April 1917.

Wilson not only mobilizes the US Armed Forces for war. Through the "Committee on Public Information," he launches an anti-German propaganda campaign to raise pro-war sentiment and morale.

The campaign arouses anti-German passions that often go too far. German-Americans (and any Americans who show insufficient enthusiasm for the war effort) become subjects of attacks and are often denied basic civil liberties.

This seems an example of "social control" progressivism → if you don't adhere to the "progressive" position, you will be punished. It marks an attempt to impose "national unity" for a "good cause" without taking into account the rights of those who might be "loyal" Americans but find themselves in disagreement with government policy.

The End of the War…and the 14-Point Peace

The Germans severely miscalculated. The Americans, though slow to mobilize, did mobilize faster and to greater effect than the Germans had anticipated.

Though the "Doughboys" (Allied Expeditionary Force) played a relatively small role in the military victory (compared to the sacrifices of the British and French), their presence and the flow of supplies from America tipped the balance and ended the military stalemate.

Because the U.S. military contribution did end up playing a significant role in ending the war sooner rather than later, the U.S. believed it would have some leverage at the peace talks that followed the war.

The American vision for peace are embodied in Wilson's 14 Points (See powerpoint slides). These principles were largely Wilson's answer to how to solve the problems that had caused the war in the first place.

If secret alliances had caused the war to escalate, the peace treaty should call for open diplomacy.

If submarine warfare and naval blockades had fueled the war, the peace treaty should call for freedom of navigation on the seas.

If trade barriers had caused some nations to feel excluded or shut out from selling their goods in foreign markets, then the peace treaty should remove trade barriers and encourage free trade.

If the build up of arms and war ships had caused carnage on the battlefields and the high seas, the peace treaty should call for arms reductions.

If some ethnic groups and colonial peoples felt oppressed by governments not of their choosing, they should have the right (self-determination) to choose their own governments.

Though the people of Europe hailed Wilson as a hero and most European governments agreed, in theory, with Wilson's points, there were significant hurdles to clear.

First, in Wilson's "peace without victory," the defeated powers (particularly Germany) were not represented at the peace conference. Hard to see how the Germans would see this as a "peace without victory" if they had no say in the peace.

More importantly, some of Wilson's points seemed unworkable. For example, how could each ethnic group exercise the right of "self-determination" if people from that group lived in regions that contained multiple ethnic groups scattered all around.

Finally, Point 14, which created the League of Nations, seemed to take power from the hands of Congress and put it in the hands of the League.

The most controversial part of Point 14 was "Article Ten" which stated that if a League member was attacked by another nation, all other League members were obliged, by the terms of the treaty, to declare war on the aggressor nation.

Congressmen in the US claimed that THEY, and not the League, would determine when the US would declare war, and against whom.

This provision ends up sinking the League and the US Senate rejects the peace treaty.

Moreover, the treaty contained provisions that the Germans found unacceptable – particularly their obligation to pay war reparations and to accept full responsibility for the war ("war guilt").

This anger with the harshness of the treaty would, in time, fuel German anger and lead to the rise of Adolph Hilter.

ASSESSMENT

The treaty was arguably the worst of all outcomes. In simple terms, it was harsh enough to make the Germans angry and eager for revenge, but lenient enough to leave German industrial infrastructure strong enough so that it could exact revenge.

In sum, the Allies won the war but failed to secure a lasting peace. Some have blamed Wilson's stubbornness and self-righteousness for the failure. To an extent, such criticisms are fair, but also minimize the forces stacked against Wilson from the start.

The Allied governments, particularly the French, could not swallow Wilson's notion of a "peace without victory." The French leader, Georges Clemenceau, likely spoke for his people when he remarked darkly that, to him, "There were 20 million Germans too many." In such a climate, Wilson's idealistic principles wilted quickly.

More broadly, support for crusading idealism eroded in America. Many (arguably, a majority) were exhausted and disillusioned with Wilsonian rhetoric and progressive reform. They were ready to turn inward, not to focus on the nation's domestic problems again, but to turn inward even more to focus on individual pleasure and indulgence.

The young generation in particular was put off by the crusades of its elders. They emphasized the hypocrisy just under the surface of progressive rhetoric and had little patience for "Great Causes."

And yet, in looking at what Wilson was suggesting in his 14 Points, we see in hindsight that he was on solid ground and not in a cloud of idealism. His points, if followed, may well have prevented (or at least delayed) war. And, in fairness to Wilson, the leaders of the 1920s and 1930s proved no more able to insure peace and stability in Europe with their "realistic" policies than did Wilson.