

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

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

Also, with the declaration of war, the US began sending hundreds more ships filled with supplies to Europe. The German submarines could not keep up – they did not have enough subs to sink the increased number of ships. The Germans hadn't accounted for this.

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.

Wilson's 14 Points (See powerpoint slides) were largely his 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 crafting the peace terms.

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.

If a League member was attacked by another nation, the other members were obliged, by the terms of Article 10 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.