

World War I

Four Major Questions:

1. Why did war break out in Europe in August 1914?
2. What was the United States' response 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?

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 Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Princip and his associates believed that killing the Archduke might destabilize the already wobbly government of the Austro-Hungarian 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" (Russia 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 than 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, in hopes that, together, they might deter any German aggression.

The French were willing to entertain British diplomatic overtures since they too resented the Germans, who had defeated them in a war in 1871 and taken 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 quick victory in a European war might result in some of the French and British colonies being transferred to a victorious Germany.

The war itself turns out not to be a “quick affair” as all sides had 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

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.

He made foreign policy an expression of his own progressive hopes and aims.

He sought more democracy and 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 force them to adopt more democratic policies. 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 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.

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

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

Wilson 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."

The gap between US rhetoric and US policy suggests not the hypocrisy of cynical men but the inability of progressive America to look outward and free itself from strictly internal concerns. Many progressives had little understanding of the politics, cultures, and history of other nations. Some saw no reason to be informed. Their goal was to "make them more like us." This would prove problematic on a number of levels.

As the War began in 1914, most Americans backed a policy of neutrality.

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

Other Americans, like Teddy Roosevelt, 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.

Many Americans simply wanted consensus and harmony both at home and globally. They may sympathize with the British and the French, but they want 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.

(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.

Selling supplies to France and Britain was one thing, but once these nations began borrowing money from the U.S., the claim the U.S. was remaining "neutral" became even harder to sustain.

Once Britain and France were in debt to the U.S., the Americans had a stake in which side won the war. If the Brits and French were to lose, they would not be in a position to repay their debts. Clearly, then, it was in the interests of U.S. bankers that the Brits and French win the war.

The Brits acknowledged these facts and argued that the debt situation gave the U.S. even more reason to enter the war on the Allied side.

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.