

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE GREAT WAR: WORLD WAR I, 1914–1918

READING AND STUDY GUIDE

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On May 7, 1915, Ernest Cowper was chatting with a friend aboard the *Lusitania*, a British passenger ship traveling from New York to the British Isles, as it passed the lush, green coast of Ireland. Looking into the water, Cowper suddenly felt a stab of terror when he spotted a German torpedo just seconds before it hit the ship. Peering through the periscope, the German submarine captain watched hundreds of people jumping into the water in a desperate attempt to reach empty lifeboats. The ship sank within eighteen minutes, killing 1,198 passengers, including 128 Americans. Cowper was one of the lucky survivors, a Toronto newsman whose vivid recollections soon appeared in American newspapers.

The sinking of the *Lusitania* was a defining moment for the United States during World War I, often also called the Great War. The nation had remained neutral when the war began nine months earlier in August 1914, refusing to choose sides among the European powers involved, led by Great Britain and France on one side and Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other. When, however, the war spread to the high seas and American business initiated a lucrative arms trade with Great Britain, Americans increasingly found themselves in the line of fire.

American newspapers highlighted the tragic deaths of innocent women and children on the Lusitania, stirring outrage against Germany. One U.S. news report described the corpse of a mother embracing her three-month old baby, noting that “her face wears a half smile. Her baby’s head rests against her breast. No one has tried to separate them.”

Not all Americans, however, blamed Germany for the attack. German Americans pointed out that the Lusitania was secretly transporting munitions from New York to the British Isles. Rural Americans castigated northeast business interests for pursuing a lucrative arms trade with Britain, fearful that favoring Britain and its allies would draw America into the war. President Woodrow Wilson offered a competing vision of the Lusitania’s importance. Through increasingly strident diplomacy, Wilson decided to defend the rights of neutrals to travel wherever they liked. This stance put the United States on a collision course with Germany that resulted in America entering the war two years later. Once America entered the war, President Wilson gave the country a larger purpose than defeating Germany. Introducing a new vision of American world leadership, Wilson promised to achieve a lasting peace by spreading democracy throughout the world.

To mobilize the nation’s economic and manpower resources to fight the grim trench warfare underway along the Western Front, the government unfurled a far-reaching propaganda campaign, offered unprecedented support to labor unions, granted women the vote, and raised a mass army through conscription. Americans suffered severe casualties in a short time, and their war effort helped the Allies defeat Germany by November 1918. The nation expected a peace treaty that embodied Wilson’s promise to make this conflict “the war to end all wars.” Americans held conflicting visions, however, over how to achieve this goal.

Learning Objectives

After a careful examination of Chapter 20, students should be able to do the following:

1. Explain the structure of the European alliance system on the eve of World War I and identify the member nations of the Central Powers and the Allies.
2. Define the term *neutrality* and explain what it means within the context of diplomatic relations during wartime.
3. List the factors that impacted the quality of American neutrality between 1914 and 1917.
4. Identify two major ways in which World War I bolstered the American economy before the U.S. entry as a belligerent.
5. Outline British violations of neutral rights and international laws or norms in the early years of the war.
6. Describe the diplomatic problems that confronted the United States as a result of the German use of submarine warfare.

7. Identify the event that escalated the American debate over neutrality in 1915. Define *preparedness* and explain William Jennings Bryan's stance in the debate. Outline the provisions of the Sussex Pledge.
8. Identify the issues and events occurring in fall 1916 and spring 1917 that finally culminated in the American entry into World War I.
9. Describe the Wilson administration's organization of the wartime economy and list the major government boards responsible for the economy during World War I.
10. Explain the impact of World War I on the lives of women and African Americans.
11. Identify the two amendments that were added to the United States Constitution during World War I.
12. Explain the role of the Committee on Public Information during the war.
13. Identify two Congressional laws designed to suppress dissent against the American involvement in World War I. Discuss how federal efforts to suppress dissent impacted radical groups in America.
14. Discuss the connection between national concerns about loyalty and the treatment of labor unions during World War I.
15. Identify the Selective Service Act and describe life in U.S. military training camps.
16. Identify General John J. Pershing and summarize the role of U.S. troops on the ground in Europe.
17. Outline key provisions of the Fourteen Points and describe the diplomatic philosophy Wilson brought to the Paris Peace Conference.
18. Identify the major players at the Paris Peace Conference.
19. Discuss the political divisions within Congress regarding the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles. Distinguish between the Irreconcilables and the Reservationists. Briefly discuss the issues that led to the failure to ratify the treaty.
20. Define the term *Red Scare* and identify the factors that led to the emergence of American fear of communism after World War I.

Key Terms & Definitions:

Allies (World War I) Initially composed of Britain, France, Belgium, and Russia, and would eventually total eighteen nations, including Italy and the United States. (594)

Central Powers Initially Germany and Austria-Hungary, expanded by 1915 to include the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria. (594)

The Schlieffen Plan A military plan that called for Germany to attack and quickly defeat France while the cumbersome Russian army mobilized. (596)

Western Front Complex system of trenches and earthworks that ran for 550 miles from the North Sea to Switzerland that pitted Germany against Belgium, France, Britain, and the United States. (596)

U-boat German submarine, a new weapon that launched surprise torpedo attacks against Allied merchant and naval ships. (598)

Lusitania British passenger ship sunk by a German U-boat on May 7, 1915, an attack that killed 1,198 passengers, including 128 Americans. (598)

Zimmermann Telegram German foreign minister Arthur Zimmermann offered to help Mexico recover Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona if Mexico would start a borderland war with the United States and ask Japan to join them. (600)

Fourteen Points Speech by Woodrow Wilson to Congress on January 8, 1918, that outlined a postwar world dominated by democracy, free trade, disarmament, self-determination, the settlement of territorial disputes in Europe, and a league of nations to mediate future international crises. (601)

self-determination Giving people a voice in selecting their own government. (601)

Nineteenth Amendment Constitutional amendment that granted women the right to vote; it was ratified August 26, 1920. (605)

Committee on Public Information Government agency that controlled the flow of information and shaped public opinion about the war with posters, Four-Minute Men, pamphlets, and films. (605)

war bonds Short-term loans that individual citizens made to the government that financed two-thirds of the war's costs. (606)

Espionage Act (1917) Legislation that made it a crime to obstruct military recruitment, to encourage mutiny, or to aid the enemy by spreading lies. (606)

Sedition Act (1918) Legislation that went even further than the Espionage Act by prohibiting anyone from uttering, writing, or publishing "any abusive or disloyal language" concerning the flag, constitution, government, or armed forces. (606)

conscientious objectors Those who opposed participating in military service because of religious, philosophical, or political belief. (609)

American Expeditionary Forces Two million American soldiers who fought overseas under the command of General John J. Pershing. (612)

Spanish Influenza A lethal flu virus that killed millions worldwide. (614)

Versailles Peace Treaty The controversial treaty that required Germany to pay reparations and disarm. (615)

League of Nations An international collective security organization composed of member nations where member nations agreed to mediate future international disputes to prevent wars and work together to improve global human conditions. (615)

Study Questions:

What meaning does this poster attach to the sinking of the *Lusitania*? (592)

What role did nationalism and imperialism play in bringing about World War I? (594)

Why did the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand spark a general European war that soon spread to the world? (595)

What miscalculations stymied German expectations of a short war? (596)

What competing visions did Americans offer on the question of trading with warring European nations? (597)

Why was the sinking of the *Lusitania* a turning point in the neutrality debate? (598)

How did Wilson link domestic and foreign issues during the 1916 presidential campaign? (599)

Why did the United States finally decide to fight Germany? (600)

How did the Fourteen Points lay the foundation for future domestic and international debates? (601)

What varying strategies did the government use to mobilize economic resources? (602)

How did workers and unions fare during the war? (603)

What class and regional tensions did the war reveal in the African American community? (604)

What competing arguments and strategies did moderate and radical female suffragists develop? (605)

What effect did revelations of German spying and wartime propaganda have on the public? (606)

How did visual depictions of the Germans compare to media images of the Spanish during the Spanish-American War? (607)

How does this song capture the tension between preventing espionage and protecting civil liberties? (608)

Why did the government choose to draft the wartime army? (609)

What factors constrained or influenced York's choice to serve? (610)

Take these intelligence tests yourself. Who would fare well on these tests and why? (611)

What was it like to fight in the trenches along the Western Front? (612)

What differing perspectives do these charts and trench diagram offer on the U.S. battlefield experience? (613)

Did the Allies win the war, or did Germany lose it? (614)

What opposition did Wilson face overseas and at home to his peace plan? (615)

What complaints did critics make about the Versailles Peace Treaty? (616)

What significance did the re-drawn maps of Europe and the Middle East have? (617)

What competing views do these political cartoons offer on the question of ratifying the Versailles Treaty? (618)

Who has the more compelling argument regarding the League of Nations, Wilson or Lodge? (619)

Why did Americans feel disillusioned at the end of World War I? (620)