

Chapter 21: America and the Great War

DO #4: Explain the conflict over U.S. involvement in WWI.

I. Anti-war sentiment was greatly expressed by certain factions of American society before and after intervention.

A. 1916 United States Presidential Election

- The election was held in wartime and the campaign was focused on the debate between neutrality and intervention
 - At the time, the majority of Americans were opposed to the war, with the **peace faction** of the Democratic Party having great support at the convention
 - **"What did we do? ... We didn't go to war!"** became a prominent slogan of **Woodrow Wilson's** reelection campaign
 - President Wilson spoke that the nation was "too proud to fight"

B. Peace Movement

1. German Americans opposed intervention due to being sympathetic towards Germany and Irish Americans opposed intervention because they had animosity towards the British
2. Leftists were also a large faction of the peace movement, opposing the war because it was a product of the need of wealthy countries to protect their interests abroad
3. **Women** were also leading anti-war activists
 - a) The **Women's Peace Party** was organized by suffragette **Carrie Chapman Catt** in 1915 to oppose any potential war that would result from the tension between Germany and America
 - b) **Jane Addams** and **Charlotte Perkins Gilman** were also leading anti-war feminists.
 - c) In addition to the reasons listed above, women opposed the war due to their **maternal instincts** being biologically against war and for pacifism.
 - d) Once war actually broke out, most women, including those who belonged to the **National American Woman Suffrage Association** supported the war as a patriotic cause and used it to promote the women's suffrage cause due to their great involvement in the war effort

II. External factors regarding the situation in Europe pushed America to intervene on behalf of the Allies.

A. Maritime Trade

- The British imposed a **naval blockade** on Germany such that they couldn't receive wartime supplies
- As a neutral country, America could either trade with both nations or neither nation such that it didn't seem like they were taking sides.
- If America traded with the Germans, then they would antagonize the British no matter what, but if they didn't trade Britain, they would lose an extensive trade network that would destroy the economy, thus they continued trading with the British and didn't trade with the Germans.
- Manufacturing war time supplies that the Allies had requested resulted in an **economic boom** in America, thus it was a favorable trade deal for them.

B. Submarine Warfare

- The British navy was the most powerful navy in the world, but it operated on the surface of the sea and so Germans subverted it using submarine warfare
- On May 7, 1915, the Germans sank the British passenger liner **Lusitania**
 - 128 Americans were killed
 - Great outrage over the incident because the ship was thought to just have passengers
 - **Theodore Roosevelt** called it an "act of piracy"
 - The ship was later found out to have had munitions as well, but it didn't matter in the end
- Wilson asked Germans to respect American neutrality and they said they would, but they didn't
- Allies began arming merchant ships with anti-submarine weapons
 - Germans responded in early 1916 by announcing that they would destroy those merchant ships
 - The French steamer **Sussex** was sunk
 - The ship was unarmed
 - American passengers were injured
- Wilson tried again to stop the Germans from infringing upon American neutrality

C. Russian Revolution

- Russia had been an absolute monarchy fighting in World War I, and because of that, America was wary of fighting alongside them because they shared opposite values
- When the tsar of Russia was overthrown in March 1917 and the country was turned into a republic, America had been freed of an obstacle that prevented their entry into the war.

D. Zimmermann Telegram

- In January 1917, Germany launched an **unrestricted submarine warfare** campaign in which every ship in the Atlantic, including American ships, would be sunk by submarines such that Britain would not have a source of supplies
 - The Germans were aware that this would certainly lead to American intervention
 - They planned to make sure that USW would weaken the Allies enough that they would lose before America would get their forces together
 - They also tried to prevent Americans from getting their forces together using the **Zimmermann telegram**
- On February 25, 1917, the British intercepted a telegram from the German foreign minister, **Arthur Zimmermann**, that was sent to Mexico asking them to invade America in pursuit of the lands they had lost in the Mexican-American War should Germany and America go to war.
 - Sparked public outrage and pushed American public opinion towards intervention
- Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war on April 2, 1917 and it was passed by Congress on April 6.

III. The United States government promoted the war effort and heavily countered public dissent.

A. War Preparations

- **Pacifists** and **interventionists** had their first real debate over whether or not the American government should prepare for the war, with the former against doing so and the latter favoring it.
- The government sided with the interventionists in this case, with Wilson advocating for a **rapid increase** in the nation's **armed forces** in the fall of 1915 and promoting it on a speaking tour in 1916.

B. The Purpose of the War

- President Wilson justified the war by claiming that America didn't have any material gains to be made from the war and that they just wanted to establish a progressive **new world order** in its aftermath.
 - In January 1917, he gave a speech in front of Congress advocating for the establishment of a **league of nations** based on American ideals that would allow every nation's voices to be heard following the war, noting that it could only happen if America was provoked into intervening
- He hoped to use his justification in order to rally Americans behind the war effort

C. Selective Service Act

- **Newton D. Baker** won support of an act to conscript Americans into the United States Army in May 1917 in response to the relatively small number of men enlisted in the army to fight the war.
- 2 million men were conscripted due to the act and formed the **American Expeditionary Force**

D. Anti-Dissent Legislation

- Politicians in Congress were scared that the anti-war minority would disrupt the war effort because they believed that victory could only be attained with a completely unified public
- The **Committee on Public Information** was established by the government and operated by **George Creel**
 - It created pro-war literature that was placed in establishments and living spaces all across the country, promoted films that depicted Germans as savages, and included justifications for the war and morale boosting passages in newspapers, asking newspaper writers to making sure to only emphasize the positive aspects of the war, which was called **self-censorship**.
- The **Espionage Act** of 1917 enabled the government to penalize **sedition** actions, which are actions that counter the authority of the government, that impeded the war effort.
 - The broad definition of the act caused the act to be enforced greatly, restricting the freedom of speech of Americans.
- The **Sabotage Act** of April 20, 1918 and the **Sedition Act** of May 16, 1918 expanded the scope of the Espionage Act all enabled the government to penalize any form of sedition
 - Socialists such as **Eugene Debs**, who was jailed for seditious causes under these acts, were often targeted using these acts

Conclusion: The rapid industrialization of the Gilded Age enabled America to become an imperial power, and as such America wanted to showcase their newfound influence to the European powers that had controlled the world's economy for centuries prior. In the midst of World War I, America saw an opportunity to renounce its traditional isolationism and reshape the ideals of the post-war world, which led to conflict among Americans regarding whether or not to intervene in the war. Some Americans were opposed to intervention in the war due to the selfish motives behind the decision to intervene. However, the threats that the war in Europe posed to the increasing American influence on the international economy coerced the nation into war. Additionally, the desire of the government to exert their superiority led them to utilise tactics that would ensure public support of the war effort. **Although there was significant anti-war sentiment among the general public, the conflict over U.S. involvement in World War I ended with the nation intervening in the war due to the social and economic impacts of the developments in Europe on the nation as well as a push from the government to rally Americans behind intervention.**

Questions:

How can public sentiment regarding World War I be compared to that of the Civil War? (Comparison)

To what extent did the values espoused in the Constitution influence public attitudes towards World War I? (Causation)