

THE UNITED STATES AND WORLD WAR I

I. QUESTIONS ABOUT THE US AND WORLD WAR I

- Why did the United States enter World War I?
- Could the U.S. have prevented or stopped WWI? Could it have stayed out of the war? If so, how?
Note: WWI did vast harm to the world, causing Lenin & Stalin, and Hitler & World War II. Ouch!
- Effects of U.S. entry on the U.S.: good or bad? Effects of U.S. entry on the world: good or bad? Effects of allied victory: good or bad?
- Were the ideas of the 1919 Versailles peace settlement wise or foolish? Were they grounded on valid or false factual and theoretical assumptions?
- Lessons: what can we learn from this episode?

II. BACKGROUND FACTS AND EVENTS, 1895-1914

- A. The U.S. is not a factor in European politics in 1914.
 - 1. The U.S. had vast economic strength but small military forces in 1914.
 - 2. The U.S. was not allied with any European power (or any other power). What if the U.S. had forged defensive alliances with some European states before 1914?
- B. The U.S. economy in 1914 was in a deep cyclical recession.
- C. Britain appeased the U.S., 1895-1914 --> U.S.-British amity. German belligerence toward U.S., 1898-1914 --> chilly U.S.-German relations.
- D. Britain had global naval supremacy in 1914. Germany and the U.S. lagged in naval power, even in combination (GB = 2,714,000 tons, US+Ger = 2,290,000 tons). Germany had Europe's strongest army.
- E. International maritime "rules," 1914: quite pro-neutral, pro-free trade:
 - 1. Neutral states can ship any goods other than war materiel ("contraband of war") to belligerents, except through a blockade.
 - 2. A blockade must be effective to be recognized (requiring a "close" blockade). Neither Britain nor Germany could impose a close blockade on the other, so U.S. non-contraband trade with both was allowed.
 - 3. Contraband is narrowly defined as weapons and war material.
 - 4. Even belligerents' merchant ships cannot be sunk without warning.
- F. Woodrow Wilson: a huge ego. Much hubris. He thought he knew the answer to the war problem, hoped to impose it on the world. The American people: innocents abroad.

III. CHRONOLOGY

- A. World War I begins, August 1, 1914. Germany is the chief instigator. The Triple Entente (Britain, France, and

Russia) fights the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary).

- B. The U.S. adopts a strict neutrality policy, August 1914. It restricts U.S. loans to belligerents to inhibit them from buying U.S. weapons and war materiel and asserts a U.S. right to trade with both sides.
- C. Britain conducts a propagandea campaign in the U.S.: "The Western Hemisphere is the Kaiser's next target!" and "This is a war for democracy!"
- D. The U.S. abandons its neutrality policy, late 1914. Key decisions:
 - Washington decides to permit large U.S. arms sales to belligerents.
 - Washington accepts severe British restrictions on U.S. trade with Germany--contrary to U.S. rights under international law (see above).

Net result: the U.S. arms and trades with Britain but not Germany.

Contending explanations:

- Wilson is shortsighted. He doesn't foresee that this will provoke Germany to war-causing belligerence against the U.S.
- Wilson is pro-ally for security reasons and/or cultural reasons.
- Economic forces--the U.S. needs export trade to mitigate its recession.
- E. Germany retaliates in fits and starts, 1915-1917. It sinks the Lusitania, May 1915; starts unrestricted submarine warfare, January 1917; and pursues a German-Mexican alliance, as revealed in the Zimmermann telegram, early 1917.
- F. The U.S. decides for war, March 1917. But what kind of war--a limited naval war or something bigger? Answer: a bigger war--a naval war plus a ground war.
- G. U.S. war aims grow, 1917-1918, from "war without victors" to total defeat of Germany.
- H. Allies win the war, November 1918. Total cost to U.S.: 117,000 U.S. battle dead. Allies impose Versailles Treaty, 1919. Key elements of Versailles:
 - A League of Nations will keep peace and provide security.
 - Germany loses its colonies, pays moderate reparations. But Germany is not occupied or partitioned. Was this a mistake?
 - The U.S. and Britain guarantee French security.

IV. COULD THE U.S. HAVE PREVENTED THE WAR?

Would a U.S. defensive alliance with France and/or Russia, or (even more implausibly) with Germany have prevented the war? Should the U.S. have pursued such alliances?

V. COULD THE U.S. HAVE AVOIDED THE WAR? ALTERNATE U.S. POLICIES, 1914-1917

- A. Full U.S. neutrality, 1914ff. Either compel both sides to

- allow U.S. trade with the other, or halt trade with both.
- B. Limited U.S. naval war against Germany. Convoy U.S. shipping to Britain and France but otherwise leave Germany alone. (Like the US-Iran "tanker war" of the 1980s.)
- C. Use America's vast economic and military leverage during 1914-1917 to force the belligerents to make peace.

VI. EVALUATING U.S. ENTRY, 1917: A GOOD IDEA?

- A. What threats were averted? (If Germany had won the war-- then what?)
- B. What benefits did victory provide? (Hitler, Naziism, World War II ... can you spot a problem here?)

VII. EXPLAINING U.S. ENTRY: CONTENDING THEORIES

- A. Three economic explanations:
 1. Neutral rights, commerce protection--"we must protect our 2-way trade with Britain, to capture the efficiencies of the international division of labor."

What kind of U.S. war does this explanation predict?
A limited U.S. war to protect U.S. commerce with Britain, with no land war on the continent against Germany?
 2. Neutral rights, business cycle variant (export protection)--"we must protect our 1-way exports to Britain, to ease U.S. unemployment."

What kind of U.S. war does this explanation predict?
A limited U.S. war at sea to protect U.S. commerce with Britain? A strategy of prolonged stalemate rather than a push for decisive victory?
 3. "Merchants of Death"--protection of munitions makers--
"we must protect/expand our munitions exports to Britain to keep U.S. munitions makers and workers prosperous."
Again, does this explanation predict U.S. pursuit of decisive victory or prolonged stalemate?
- B. National security/balance-of-power. The U.S. fought to contain German military power.
What does this explanation predict we should find in the U.S. archives? In U.S. public rhetoric justifying the war? What should be the prospects for German victory in early 1917? Should the U.S. be seeking a compromise peace in 1916?
- C. U.S. mobilization strategy made the U.S. unable to prevent the war and tempted Germany to cut U.S. trade with Britain before the U.S. could move forces to Europe.
What does this explanation predict we should find Germans saying about the U.S. in the German archives?
- D. U.S. misperceptions. Wilson didn't foresee a long war, the German sub campaign, or the growth of U.S. dependence on exports to allies.
- E. Common U.S./allied democratic culture.
- F. British propaganda, manipulation of U.S. opinion.
- G. Wilson's enormous ego: "I shall lead the world to peace!"

VIII. IDEAS THAT GUIDED WILSON AT VERSAILLES: TRUE OR FALSE?

Liberal ideas:

National self-determination ---> peace.

Colonial rivalries ---> war.

Free trade and economic interdependence among states ---> peace.

Power-balancing and alliance making ---> war.

Open diplomacy ---> peace.

Democracy ---> peace.

Other ideas:

Large armies and navies ---> war.

Were these the real causes/lessons of WWI? Today people point to out-of-control militaries in Germany, Austria, & Serbia; and to hypernationalism. Wilson overlooked this stuff.

IX. GENERAL IMPLICATIONS AND LESSONS OF WWI

- A. Interdependence ---> war? (Was the U.S. sucked into WWI by interdependence?)
- B. War ---> wider war? (Does WWI show that wars have a propensity to spread, and to engulf the U.S.?)
- C. If a member of congress wanted to get the U.S. into a big war, how would they do it? Would they push for small involvement, hoping that this would lead to larger involvement? See, e.g., proposals that the U.S. establish safe zones in Syria today. Some fear this would draw the U.S. into Syria's civil war, or into war with Iran or Russia.

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