

The USA enters the war, 1917

History

Lesson 2 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

Enquiry: Why did WWI end in November 1918?

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USA and WWI

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson of the USA said that the country would remain **neutral**. This meant that the USA's government would not support either side. The people of the USA were happy about this decision. They didn't believe that this was a conflict they should be involved in. Many Americans had originally migrated from different parts of Europe. So, staying neutral also meant that there was less chance of creating internal division, which would happen if the USA supported one side over another. Neutrality was good for American business too - they were able to give loans to all the European countries and sell them goods. By 1917 the amount raised by selling goods to Europe reached \$2.25billion.



Public opinion begins to change

Whilst the country was technically neutral, anti-German feelings began to grow in the USA. The Americans were shocked to hear about German actions in Belgium in 1914. These feelings increased when a British passenger ship was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine in 1915. German submarines were in the Atlantic to target armed British **merchant ships** carrying goods from the USA to help the war effort. The RMS Lusitania was an unarmed passenger ship crossing the Atlantic. There were 1198 casualties, 128 of which were American civilians. US public opinion began to turn against Germany. But still, most Americans did not want to enter the war.



The US military

One reason why US government did not want to join the war before 1917 was because USA lacked military resources. The American military in 1916 was only 100,000 men. The USA did have, however, enormous industrial capacity, which could help equip a large army very quickly. By 1916, battles on the Western Front were resulting in casualty numbers as high as 200,000 men. If they joined, the American army could be wiped out in a single battle. Without US public opinion completely supporting involvement in the war by 1916, the US government couldn't expand the army and therefore the USA couldn't realistically join the war.



1917

In January of 1917 Germany announced that its submarines would target neutral ships in the Atlantic to prevent resources from the USA reaching the Allies. In March 1917 several US merchant ships were sunk by German submarines. In the same month the American government released the Zimmerman **telegram** to the press. This was a communication from Germany to Mexico inviting Mexico to join a war against the USA. Germany promised to pay for Mexico's war costs and said Mexico should retake land they lost to the USA in 1848. Public opinion now supported President Wilson when he asked **Congress** to declare war on Germany in April 1917.



US Resources

Once war had been declared against the Germans, US industry began to prepare for war. The Allies needed this desperately because by 1917 they had begun to run out of the resources and money needed to fight the Central Powers. Production of **armaments** increased in American factories and had a positive impact on the American economy. The Americans also gave more loans to the Allies. Between April 1917 and November 1918 \$7,000,000,000 in American loans were given to the Allies for food and arms. The economic contribution of the USA was vital to the success of the Allies as it allowed them to continue fighting.



The US armed forces

Following the declaration of war on Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the USA also began **drafting** men into military service. 4 million men were drafted. These soldiers were then trained and began arriving in large numbers on the Western Front in Spring 1918. By the time of the Armistice in November 1918, 10,000 fresh American troops were arriving each day in France. The US Navy sent a group of battleships to join the British fleet and US submarines were used to help guard ships crossing the Atlantic. The American troops were arriving just as German troops were beginning to run low. Unlike the Allies, Germany did not have a supply of men that could be used to replace their injured troops.



The Russian Revolution, 1917

US involvement in 1917 was also important because of the Russian Revolution of the same year. The Russian Revolution was seen as a military disaster for the Allies. When the Bolsheviks took over (in October), Russian troops stopped fighting. In November 1917 an armistice between the Russians and the Central Powers was signed. German troops could now focus on the Western Front. American involvement in WWI was now crucial in preventing the Allied forces from being defeated.



Glossary

Armaments - military equipment and weapons.

Congress - the group of people who make laws in the United States.

Drafting - an arrangement where people are told they must join the armed forces.

Merchant ships - a ship used for trading rather than military use.

Neutral - not saying or doing anything that would encourage or help any groups involved in a war.

Telegram - a message sent by a telegraph using electrical or radio signals.



Questions

1. What was the USA's position when war broke out in 1914?
2. Why did the USA join the war in 1917?
3. What was the economic impact of US involvement in WWI?
4. What was the military impact of US involvement in WWI?
5. Why was US involvement especially important in 1917?

