

AMERICA ENTERS THE FIRST WORLD WAR



The United States must be neutral in fact, as well as in name, during these days that are to try men's souls. We must be impartial in thought, as well as action, must put a curb upon our sentiments, as well as upon every transaction that might be construed as a preference of one party to the struggle before another.

19th August 1914 - President Wilson's Declaration Of Neutrality.

On 6th April 1917, America declared war on Germany and entered into the First World War – almost two and a half years after the war had started. At the beginning of the war, in August 1917, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed neutrality – a position that was supported by the majority of Americans – but over the next two and a half years a number of factors would test and ultimately turn political and public opinion towards the course of war.

BEFORE THE WAR AND NEUTRALITY

In the years leading up to the beginning of the war, America was in the midst of a **Progressive Era** – a political movement that aimed to introduce a number of social, economic and political reforms. Within this movement, there were two schools of thought regarding intervening in foreign affairs – some saw foreign intervention and imperialism as a way of furthering the Progressive agenda throughout the world, whilst most would rather focus on much-needed domestic reforms. One of the leading forces in the Progressive movement was **Woodrow Wilson**, who became President in 1913. Upon the outbreak of the First World War, Wilson declared that America would remain neutral in the conflict, a position that was supported by the majority of Americans. Despite this statement of neutrality, America – in the midst of an economic recession - capitalised on the war in Europe by supplying munitions and loans to the combatant countries.

EXPORTS IN
1914

CENTRAL POWERS // \$169 MILLION

ALLIED POWERS // \$825 MILLION

Although these exports were an internationally recognised right of a neutral nation, Germany saw the favoured trade with the Allied nations (predominantly Great Britain, France, Russia and Italy) as a breach of America's neutrality – a view that would ultimately lead to a number of flashpoints in the following two and a half years.

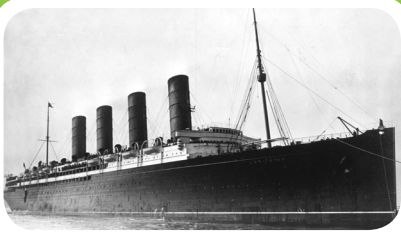
UNDERSTANDING 1917 AND BEYOND

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What was a U-boat?

U-boat is the English version of the German word U-Boot, meaning Unterseeboot (undersea boat). Unable to match the might of the British Royal Navy, the German Navy embarked on a U-boat campaign that aimed to sink Allied ships by taking them by surprise from beneath the waves.



The RMS Lusitania

The Lusitania was a British passenger ship that was launched in 1906 for the purpose of trans-Atlantic crossings. Once the world's largest passenger ship, the Lusitania was considered one of the most luxurious liners of its time. On 7th May 1915, it was returning from New York on its way to Liverpool and while it was passing through Irish waters - within Germany's designated war zone - it encountered a German U-boat. The German U-boat torpedoed the Lusitania and it took just 18 minutes for the liner to sink, killing 1,193 of the 1,960 passengers and crew onboard - including 128 Americans.

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Upon the outbreak of war, both the Allied and Central Powers (Germany, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria) knew that foreign imports would be integral to their war efforts, which led to a British-imposed blockade of Germany in the North Sea. The aim was to stop any food and war supplies from reaching the German mainland, with the overall objective of crippling the Central Powers economically. The Allied Powers intensified this blockade in November 1914, declaring the North Sea a war zone. The initial German response to the blockade was to embark on a U-boat campaign targeting the Allied navy, but as the British intensified their naval campaign, so too did the Germans. Viewing the British blockade as an attack on the non-combatant German population (food was restricted as it was considered "contraband of war"), on 4th February 1915 Germany declared the waters around Great Britain and Ireland a war zone. From 18th February, all enemy ships - war and merchant - encountered in the zone would be destroyed. The declaration also warned that neutral vessels entering the war zone would also run the risk of being destroyed. Although there was hesitation amongst Germany's politicians to proceed with such an aggressive campaign - they did not want to anger any neutral countries - they did so under pressure from the German navy and the German press, who were angered by the British blockade.

Although the American government objected to any blockades that affected their exports reaching Europe, they strongly protested the German declaration of a war zone around Great Britain and Ireland, warning that they would take any necessary steps to protect American lives and property.

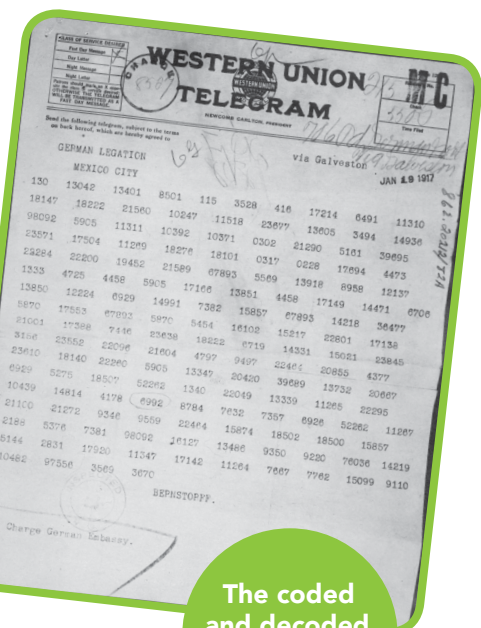
As the Germans proceeded with their tactic of unrestricted submarine warfare, their attacks on unarmed merchant ships began to anger America and its citizens; none more so than the sinking of the **RMS Lusitania**. The sinking of the Lusitania caused anger and outrage in America and Britain, whilst Germany claimed it was fully justified in its actions. Germany claimed that the Lusitania was carrying munitions, destined for the Allied war effort - a claim that was denied by the Americans and British (this detail is still disputed today). Despite pressure from the British to declare war and the continued strain on American-German relations, America remained neutral.

After the sinking of the Lusitania and a number of other high profile ships during 1915-16, Germany promised to revise its targeting of passenger and merchant ships by issuing first, the **Arabic Pledge** (1915) and then the **Sussex Pledge** (1916). As the war raged on through 1916, Germany became convinced that if they reinstated their policy of **unrestricted submarine warfare** they could defeat the British and end the war before the Americans could get a chance to mobilise. On 1st February 1917, the Germans resumed unrestricted submarine warfare. In response, President Wilson broke off all diplomatic relations with Germany on 3rd February.

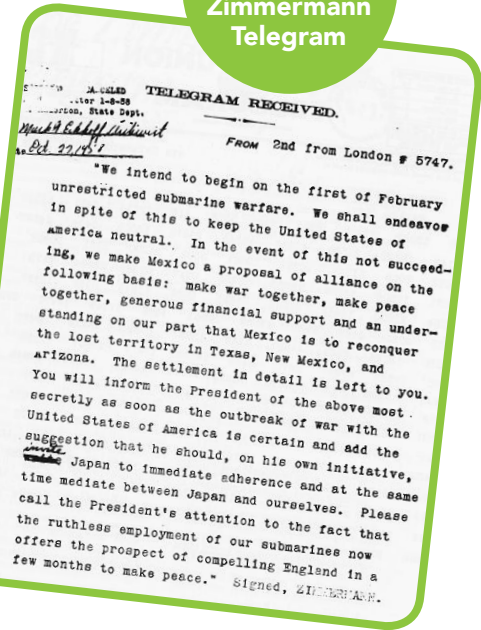
With America and Germany moving closer to war and American public opinion slowly turning towards support for war, the sinking of several American ships combined with the interception of the **Zimmermann Telegram** finally convinced the U.S. that Germany was a threat. With anger growing over the increasing number of American ships being sunk by German U-boats, the Zimmermann Telegram became the final push that convinced America and the American public to join the war. America declared war on Germany on 6th April 1917.

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The coded and decoded Zimmermann Telegram



Why did the discovery of the Zimmermann Telegram play such an important role in convincing the American public to join the war?

“...unless the Imperial German Government should now immediately declare and effect an abandonment of its present methods of warfare against passenger and freight-carrying vessels, this Government can have no choice but to sever diplomatic relations with the Government of the German Empire altogether.

19th April 1916 - After the attack on the S.S. Sussex, President Wilson issues an ultimatum to Germany.

”

The Arabic Pledge

The S.S. Arabic, was a British passenger ship that was sunk by a U-boat on 19th August 1915. 44 passengers and crew died, three of which were American. Fearing that the America would sever relations with Germany, the Arabic Pledge was issued on 18th September 1915. Orders were issued to U-boats that instructed them that they were only allowed to sink passenger ships after warnings were issued and all passengers were removed.

The Sussex Pledge

A further pledge was issued on 4th May 1916 after the attack on French passenger ferry, the S.S. Sussex (the attack occurred on 24th March 1916). Although the Sussex didn't sink, 50 people were killed in the attack and hundreds were injured, including three Americans. Not wanting America to enter the war against them, Germany issued the Sussex Pledge, promising to no longer attack any passenger ships; merchant ships would only be sunk if weapons were proven to be on board, after all passengers had been removed.

The Zimmermann Telegram

In preparation for the resuming of unrestricted submarine warfare, German foreign minister Arthur Zimmermann sent a telegram to Mexico seeking a Mexico-German alliance in the event of war between Germany and the America. As part of the alliance, Germany was offering Mexico the American states of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. The message was intercepted by the British and passed onto the U.S. on 24th February 1917 in the hope of encouraging America to join the war. The telegram was leaked to American media and published to the general public on 1st March.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Summarise the reasons why America's neutrality ended in August 1917.
- 2 Analyse the British and American response to the sinking of the Lusitania - why there was so much shock and anger?
- 3 Why may Germany have felt that despite America's neutrality, they showed favouritism towards the Allied forces? Describe how you think this affected the relationship between Germany and America.
- 4 Do you believe America's decision to enter the war was justified? Why do you think this?

GROUP TASK



In pairs, use the table on page 6 to discuss and list incidents which you believe angered America and Germany. Discuss the short term and long term consequences of these actions. After you have completed the list, discuss whether or not you believe neutrality was doomed to failure.



RESEARCH TASK

Read the article "Why was the Zimmermann Telegram so important?" from the Further Reading section (below). Summarise and evaluate the role the British played in the incident.



ICT TASK

(DESKTOP PUBLISHING / DIGITAL STORYTELLING)

In pairs, research, storyboard and create a comic which explains why America entered the First World War.

Identify and explain two major incidents which you believe contributed to America ending its neutrality and analyse any immediate consequences of these incidents. Research and save relevant images and information in order to complete the task.

FURTHER READING

- For further information on the Zimmermann Telegram, search online for "The U-Boat Campaign That Almost Broke Britain" from Imperial War Museums.
- For further information on the Lusitania, search online for "Lusitania: Who was to blame for the deaths of 1,201 people?" from BBC iWonder.
- For further information on the Zimmermann Telegram, search online for "Why was the Zimmermann Telegram so important?" from BBC News.

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ON THE ARROWS TO GO
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PROVOCATIONS AGAINST GERMANY

WAS NEUTRALITY
EVER GOING TO
LAST?

PROVOCATIONS AGAINST AMERICA

NOTES

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