The U.S. Role in World War I

World War I began in 1914, but the United States did not take part in the war until 1917. At the start of the war, the United States adopted a policy of remaining neutral. The U.S. perspective was that the fight was between "old world" European powers and that the United States had no significant stake in the outcome. American public opinion was varied, as many immigrants had family ties on both sides.

The first war event that effected the United States was the sinking of the British luxury cruise ship the Lusitania by a German U-boat in 1915. 1,198 innocent civilians died, including 128 of the 159 Americans on board. Outraged countries around the world united in anti-German sentiments.

Then, in January of 2017, the British intercepted the "Zimmerman telegram," which promised Mexico the territories of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona if they would unite with Germany against the United States. On April 2nd, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany to "fight for the ultimate peace of the world." Four days later, the U.S. declared war on Germany.

Though they fought on the side of the allies, the U.S. was never officially an Allied power. Rather, the U.S. referred to itself as an "Associated Power." The U.S. Army in Europe was commanded by General John J. Pershing. The small U.S. Army grew through the draft and volunteers, and there were about 2 million U.S. troops in France by the end of the war. It was just in time; the new troops boosted Allied morale and gave the Allies the encouragement they needed to win the war.

After entering the war, President Wilson, who was the only leader of the time to publicly declare his war aims, issued his Fourteen Points. These were his plans for peace and objectives for the U.S. entry into the war. The Fourteen Points included the goal of establishing a League of Nations to prevent future wars.