

# The United States Declares War

## READING FOCUS

- How did Germany's use of submarines affect the war?
- What moves did the United States take toward war in early 1917?

## MAIN IDEA

German submarine warfare helped push the United States into World War I.

## KEY TERMS

U-boat  
Sussex pledge  
Zimmermann note  
Russian Revolution

## TAKING NOTES

Copy this flowchart. As you read, fill in the boxes with some of the major events that caused the United States to declare war on Germany. The first box has been completed to help you get started.

German U-boats begin sinking Allied ships, killing 1,200 aboard the *Lusitania* in 1915.



[Empty box for student input]



Wilson asks Congress to declare war on Germany.

**Setting the Scene** The fighting in Europe continued with no end in sight. In October 1916, *The New York Times* explained why American voters wanted a leader who would keep the United States out of war:

“The voters . . . have seen lives lost, property ruined, privations suffered, on a greater scale than the world had ever known, and they have seen existence become harder, not only for the men who are fighting, but for all the inhabitants of the stricken countries. They have seen nation after nation drawn in, until the roll of the original combatants has been doubled.”

Many Americans hoped that the United States would not be the next country to be drawn in. Nevertheless, friction between the United States and Germany increased from 1914 to 1917. The preparedness movement continued to gain support in the United States, and the pressure to join in the war intensified. Ultimately, actions by the Central Powers pushed Congress and the President into entering the war on the side of the Allies.

## German Submarine Warfare

One action that provoked angry calls for war in the United States was the German use of submarine warfare. This tactic was effective militarily, but it cost the Germans dearly in terms of American public opinion.

The German **U-boat**, short for *Unterseeboot*, or submarine, was a terrifying new weapon that changed the rules of naval warfare. Germany deployed them to prevent munitions and food from reaching Britain's ports. At first, U-boats rose to the surface to allow the crew of merchant ships to abandon ship before their ship was attacked. After Britain armed merchant ships to fire on exposed U-boats, Germany abandoned the old rules and permitted U-boats to remain hidden and fire on merchant ships without warning.

The U-boat enabled Germany to break a stalemate at sea. In the years leading up to the war, Britain and Germany competed to build the largest, strongest



This German poster urged U-boats on their mission. The translation is “U-boats: Go out!”

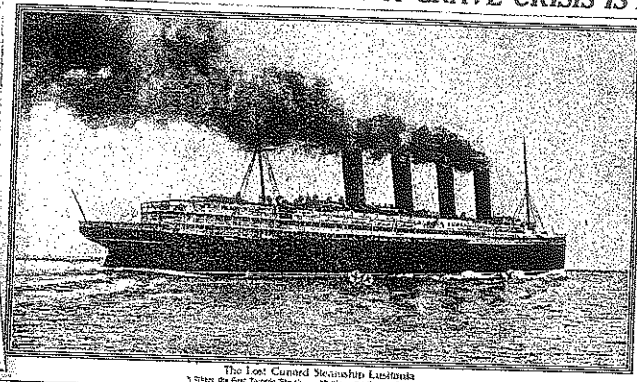
"All the News That's Fit to Print."

## LUSITANIA SUNK BY A SUBMARINE, PROBABLY 1,260 DEAD; TWICE TORPEDOED OFF IRISH COAST; SINKS IN 15 MINUTES; CAPT. TURNER SAVED, FROHMAN AND VANDERBILT MISSING; WASHINGTON BELIEVES THAT A GRAVE CRISIS IS AT HAND

**NOTICE!**  
TRAVELLERS intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies, and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes the waters adjacent to the British Isles; that, in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain, or of any of her allies, are liable to destruction in those waters and that travellers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.

**IMPERIAL GERMAN EMBASSY,**  
WASHINGTON, D. C., APRIL 22, 1915.

**CUNARD**  
EUROPE VIA LIVERPOOL  
**LUSITANIA**  
Fastest and Largest Steamer now in Atlantic Service Sails  
SATURDAY, MAY 1, 10 A. M.  
Transylvania - Fri., May 7, 5 P. M.  
Orchona - Tues., May 18, 10 A. M.  
Tuscana - Fri., May 21, 5 P. M.  
LUSITANIA - Sat., May 29, 10 A. M.  
Densylvania - Sat., May 31, 5 P. M.



**SOME DEAD TRENCH ASSAULT**  
Several Hundred Survivors of Queenstown and Kinsale,  
STRENGTHENED BY DISASTERS  
New English Cruisers into the District Under the New Order into the Empty Fleet.  
SHIP LISTS OVER TO PORT  
It is reported to learn that the British fleet has been ordered to meet the German fleet in the North Sea.  
ATTACHED BY BRITISH NAVY  
The part of the Lusitania which was seen by the British fleet on the 7th of May last was the hull.

**Conrad Office Here Besieged for Hours; Fate of 1,916 on Lusitania Long in Doubt**  
While American Consul Long Unconscious  
Nothing Heard from the Well-Known Passenger on Board—Story of Disaster Long Unfolded  
List of Saved Includes Capt. Turner, Vanderbilt and Frohman Reported Lost  
Saw the Submarine 100 Yards Off and Watched Torpedo as It Struck Ship  
Elmer Cowen, a Toronto Newspaper Man, Drowned  
Attack Seemingly Ship's 100-Flame Gun  
Ship's Chief Passenger



**VIEWING HISTORY** Germany warned travelers—including passengers on the *Lusitania*—to stay out of the war zone (top, left). Nevertheless, the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the deaths of 1,200 passengers shocked Americans. Germany did not show much remorse and even designed this medal (above) to commemorate the attack. **Drawing Inferences** How strongly did Wilson respond to the sinking of the *Lusitania*?

navy in Europe. When war came, Germany chose not to risk the loss of its ships and kept all but the U-boats in port.

The German High Seas Fleet did make one attempt to enter the North Sea and confront the British fleet in 1916. The British encountered the Germans north of Denmark, where at the ensuing Battle of Jutland both fleets suffered heavy losses. Neither Britain nor Germany could claim victory, and the German fleet returned to port after the battle. This stalemate meant that the U-boat was the only tool the Germans had to fight the British blockade and to target Allied shipping and transport.

Passenger and merchant ships had no defense against the submarine, which could go undetected nearly anywhere in the ocean. Only gradually did the British develop devices called hydrophones that could detect the sound of a submarine underwater. Although Americans generally accepted Britain's blockade of Germany, the German efforts to blockade Britain with submarine attacks struck many as uncivilized.

The British encouraged such anti-German feelings. Shortly after the war began, the British cut the transatlantic cable connecting Germany and the United States. All news of the European front henceforth flowed through London. The pro-Allied bias of news reports helped shape the opinion of the people in the United States in favor of punishing Germany for its use of submarines against Britain.

American public opinion of the Germans declined further on May 7, 1915, when a U-boat sighted the *Lusitania*, a British passenger liner, in the Irish Sea. Suspecting correctly that the ship carried weapons for the Allies, the U-boat fired on the liner. Eighteen minutes later, the *Lusitania* disappeared beneath the waves along with almost 1,200 passengers. Included among the dead were 128 Americans, who had boarded the *Lusitania* in spite of German warnings to stay off British ships. Nevertheless, the American press wildly denounced what they called Germany's act of "barbarism."

Wilson urged patience. He demanded that Germany stop its submarine warfare and make payments to the victims' families. Germany's reply that the *Lusitania* carried small arms and ammunition did not quiet American anger.

Wilson sent a second, stronger note of protest. In response, Germany promised to stop sinking passenger ships without warning, as long as the ship's crew offered no resistance to German search or seizure.

Still, U-boats continued to torpedo Allied ships. On March 24, 1916, a German submarine torpedoed the *Sussex*, a French passenger steamship. The attack killed or injured 80 passengers, including two Americans. The United States threatened to cut diplomatic ties to Germany. In what came to be called the **Sussex pledge**, the German government again promised that U-boats would warn ships before attacking.

The series of demands and broken promises that led up to the Sussex pledge frustrated Wilson. He could not threaten force without entering the war. During this time, however, Wilson did embrace the concept of preparedness. He also authorized bankers to make a huge loan to the Allies. American neutrality was beginning to weaken.

## Moving Toward War

In the presidential election of 1916, Wilson ran for reelection on the slogan "He kept us out of war." The Republicans, who nominated Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes, criticized Wilson for not taking a stronger stand against Germany. American voters gave Wilson a narrow victory.

Germany soon tested Wilson's patience. On January 31, 1917, Germany informed the United States that it would end the Sussex pledge and resume unrestricted submarine warfare the following day. German strategists knew that it might bring the United States into the war. But they gambled that they could defeat Britain and win the war in France before American entry could make a difference.

Germany's action dashed Wilson's hope of maintaining freedom of the seas—and American neutrality. On February 3, the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Germany. A few weeks later, Wilson asked Congress for permission to arm American merchant ships.

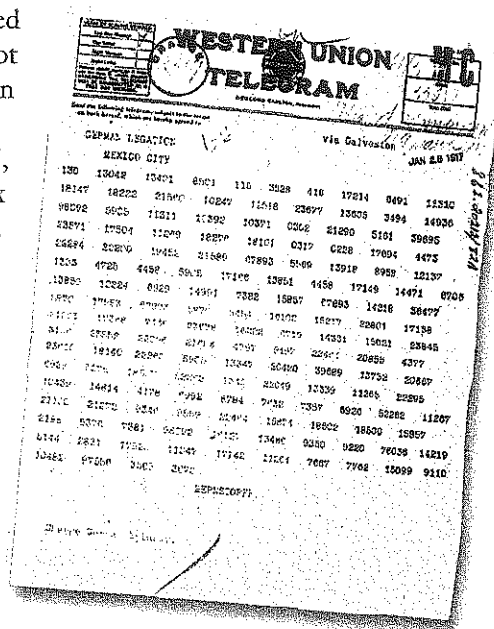
**The Zimmermann Note** Despite the announcement, the German Navy avoided attacking American ships in February. As a result, the American public continued to hope for peace. In the Senate, a group of antiwar senators tried to prevent a vote on Wilson's initiative to arm ships. While these senators stalled the initiative, the British revealed the contents of an intercepted German telegram. In the note, Arthur Zimmermann, Germany's foreign secretary, made a secret offer to Mexico. If Mexico declared war on the United States, he wrote, Germany would reward it with American land in the Southwest.

“We shall endeavor to keep the United States neutral. In the event of this not succeeding, we make Mexico a proposal of alliance. . . : Make war together, make peace together, . . . and . . . Mexico is to reconquer the lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.”

—Arthur Zimmermann

### READING CHECK

Why did Germany resort to submarine warfare?



**VIEWING HISTORY** The Zimmermann note, shown here in its original code, infuriated many Americans with its promise to give American land to Mexico. **Recognizing Cause and Effect** Why did the Zimmermann note threaten Americans more directly than German submarine attacks?

## Focus on CITIZENSHIP

**The Price of Pacifism** One of the fifty votes against the House war resolution came from Montana's Representative Jeannette Rankin, the first woman elected to Congress. Elected only a few months earlier, she said, "I want to stand by my country, but I cannot vote for war." Rankin faced a strong backlash over her vote. The Republican Party refused to nominate her for the Senate in 1918. She ran as an independent candidate but lost.

Rankin returned to Congress in 1941. When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor that December and the President asked Congress for a declaration of war, Rankin voted no once again.



Neither Wilson nor Mexico took the **Zimmermann note** seriously. Already divided by civil war, Mexico could not have launched a successful invasion of the United States. The telegram's release, however, scored another public relations victory for Great Britain. The United States edged closer to war.

**Revolution in Russia** By early 1917, Russia already had suffered enormous casualties in the war: more than 1.5 million killed, roughly 2.5 million taken prisoner, and millions more wounded. Austro-Hungarian and German forces had advanced deep into Russian territory. Poorly fed and miserably equipped, the Russians fell back farther and farther into their country's interior.

Then, in March 1917, Czar Nicholas II, Russia's autocratic leader, was forced to give up the throne. The Russian monarchy was replaced with a republican government. This **Russian Revolution** cheered the prowar faction in the United States. Concern over being allied with the autocratic government of the czar had slowed the nation's move toward entry into the war. The fall of the czar removed a last stumbling block to joining the Allies.

**The War Resolution** Between March 16 and March 18, Germany sank the United States ships *City of Memphis*, *Illinois*, and *Vigilancia*. Wilson's patience had run out. On March 20, the President's Cabinet voted unanimously for war. Casting the issue in idealistic terms, Wilson told Congress on April 2 that "the world must be made safe for democracy." He stated:

*"It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance. But the right is more precious than peace."*

—Woodrow Wilson

Members of Congress, ambassadors, and Supreme Court justices stood up and cheered the President's call to war. A war resolution passed 82 to 6 in the Senate and 373 to 50 in the House. On April 6, 1917, the President signed it.

## Section

## 2

## Assessment

### READING COMPREHENSION

1. Why did Germany's use of **U-boats** lead to conflict with the United States?
2. (a) How did the **Sussex pledge** affect relations between the United States and Germany? (b) Why did Germany end the pledge?
3. Why did the **Zimmermann note** enrage Americans?

### CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

4. **Identifying Alternatives** Consider the causes that brought the United States into World War I. (a) What would the United States have had to do to avoid the conflict altogether? (b) Why did the United States not take such steps?
5. **Writing to Inform** Write a paragraph explaining why President Wilson asked Congress to arm American merchant ships.



### Take It to the NET

#### Activity: Creating a Poster

Research some of the women's organizations that contributed to the war effort in Europe. Create a recruitment poster encouraging women to join one of these organizations. Use the links provided in the *America: Pathways to the Present* area of the following Web site for help in completing this activity.

[www.phschool.com](http://www.phschool.com)