

The First World War and the Reasons behind American Intervention (1914-1917)

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ABSTRACT: *The First World War broke out in Europe in 1914, and was the result of a number of accumulating factors that encompassed the political, the economic, the social and the military. The conflict involved the participation of different countries, and the neutrality of others; among the neutral countries was the United States of America (USA). However, its implication in the conflict against Germany was inevitable mainly because it saw its economic interests threatened in Europe. Therefore, this article tackles the context of the First World War and why the USA took part in the conflict.*

KEYWORDS: First World War, USA, Conflict, Reasons for Intervention, Participation in the War.

الملخص: اندلعت الحرب العالمية الأولى في أوروبا عام 1914 ، وكانت نتيجة لعدد من العوامل المتراكمة التي شملت العوامل السياسية والاقتصادية والاجتماعية والعسكرية. تضمن الصراع مشاركة مختلف البلدان ، وحياد الآخرين. من بين الدول المحايدة كانت الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. ومع ذلك ، فإن آثارها في الصراع ضد ألمانيا كانت حتمية بشكل رئيسي لأنها رأت أن مصالحها الاقتصادية مهددة في أوروبا. لذلك ، يتناول هذا المقال سياق الحرب العالمية الأولى ولماذا شاركت الولايات المتحدة في الصراع.

كلمات مفتاحية: الحرب العالمية الأولى ، الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية ، الصراع ، أسباب التدخل ، مشاركة في الحرب

1. Introduction

The First World War is an important event that took place in the twentieth century. It was the result of a number of accumulating factors, mainly economic and military, and it involved different countries all over the world. Even though the United States of America (USA) was reluctant to

intervene in the conflict, it found itself implicated in it in 1917. Therefore, this paper aims at discussing the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, and the reasons behind the intervention of the USA in the conflict. Hence, the following questions are raised: Why did the First World War break out and how did it evolve? What was the early reaction of the USA? And why did it interfere in the conflict?

2. The European Context before the First World War:

The pre-war period was characterised by a race for economic, military and territorial supremacy among the different existing powers of the period. In the economic and military fields, Great Britain and Germany were taking the lead followed by France, Russia, Italy and Japan. In fact, Great Britain and Germany could produce coal and steel, important components for the industrial sector and had prosperous trading activities with their respective colonies in Asia and Africa. This was further supported by their military strength, conspicuous in their powerful fleets, armaments and number of soldiers. As a result, they considered themselves rivals, and eventually enemies, threatening each other's interests. (Ross, 1983, p2)

All this was supported by a growing feeling of nationalism. This was notably seen in the Pan German Association in Germany, the Pan Slavism in Russia, Pan Serbism in Serbia and the French and German nationalism. For instance, in Germany, the feeling of nationalism was backed up by the ideas of social Darwinism which notably stated: "Nations are engaged in an eternal struggle for survival and domination". (Perry, Chase, Jacob, Jacob & Von Laue, 1989, pp657-660)

As a corollary, suspicion among European countries grew which led to the formation of alliances and the outbreak of conflicts. The alliances included the Triple Alliance made of Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary and Russia, and the Triple Entente which comprised Great Britain, Russia and France. As for the conflicts, they comprised the Franco-German conflicting interests in Alsace and Lorraine and Morocco, the Russian-Japanese War in 1904 and the Balkan Crisis in 1912-13. (Nash & Newth, 1967, pp30-40; Arnstein, 1971, pp200-213; Ross, 1983, p5)

However, attempts to smooth down the general atmosphere and to avoid war were undertaken, and notably in the organisation of the Hague Conferences in 1899 and in 1907. These conferences, which included the

presence of countries like Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, the USA, Japan and Persia, discussed issues related to armament limitations and war rules and crimes. Nonetheless, they came to no solution since no country wanted to make concessions. A third conference was planned, but it was not held because of the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. (Ross, 1983, p5)

3. The Causes and Early Beginnings of the First World War:

The First World War was the result of two direct causes: the first one was the assassination of the heir of the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, which culminated in the invasion of Serbia. The second one was the invasion of Belgium by Germany. On 28 June 1914, Archduke Francis Ferdinand was killed during a visit in Sarajevo, Bosnia, by the young Serbian revolutionary, Young Gavrilo Princip, who hoped to frighten Austrian-Hungarians in order to push them to recognise Serbia's claim for Bosnia. The Austrian-Hungarians accused the Serbian government of having planned such an assassination, and sent an ultimatum, which listed a number of conditions Serbia had to accept, among which the visitation of official Austrians in Serbia to investigate the Archduke's assassination. This was not accepted, and led Austria-Hungary to invade Serbia on 28 July 1914. Germany sided with its ally, Austria, and declared war on Russia on 1 August 1914, and France on 3 August 1914. (Nash & Newth, 1967, pp33-34)

To invade France, Germany had to pass through Belgium. But both of Great Britain and Germany had signed a treaty that stipulated that they would not invade it. And in case of invasion, Great Britain would protect Belgium. (Trevelyan, 1942, p478)

When the Germans wanted to pass through Belgium, the Belgians refused. Subsequently, Germany invaded Belgium on 4 August 1914. One consequence was Great Britain's entry into the war by siding with Belgium, and declaring war on Germany and Austria-Hungary on 4 and 12 August 1914 respectively. Great Britain was supported by its colonies and dominions namely, India, Canada, the Union of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. (Nash & Newth, 1967, pp34-38)

These events were followed by war declarations in Europe and elsewhere. This was illustrated in the Ottoman Empire's alliance with

Germany and Austria-Hungary against their enemies in August 1914 and Japan's declaration of war on Germany and Austria-Hungary on 23 and 25 August 1914, respectively. They were followed by Italy's declaration of war on Austria-Hungary on 23 May 1915, and Bulgaria's alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary against Serbia on 15 October 1915. One year later, Rumania declared war on Austria-Hungary on 27 August 1916 and Greece entered the war on 2 July 1917 with Germany and Austria-Hungary, after the French, British and Russian military forces had settled in its territories. As a result, the world was divided into two camps: the Allies made of Great Britain, France, Russia, Japan and Italy, and the Central Powers composed of Germany, Turkey, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Greece. Other countries like Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal and Switzerland remained neutral. (Arnstein, 1971, pp214-217)

The First World War was fought on the Western and Eastern fronts. On the Western front, Germany notably invaded Belgium and fought the French and the British in Mons on 23 August 1914, Le Cateau on 26 August 1914 and the Marne River from 5 to 12 September 1914. The Marne Battle marked the end of the fighting movement and the beginning of the trench warfare, which created a stalemate situation. Other battles followed namely, the Aisne on 12 September 1914, the Arras on 1 October 1914, the Verdun on 21 February 1916, the Somme on 1 July 1916. The eastern front notably witnessed the outbreak of the Gumbinnen Battle on 20 August 1914, the Tannenberg Battle on 26 August 1914, opposing Russia to Germany from 26 to 30 August 1914, which ended in the Russians' defeat and the Masurian Lakes Battle on 9 September 1914, and on 7 February 1915, leading to the Germans' victory. (Arnstein, 1971, pp214-16)

The war was also fought at sea and in the air. The sea war included the wary countries' fleets fighting each other, with the British fleet policy of goods blockade arriving from the USA to Germany, and the German submarines' attacks against the Allies' ships, and later on against all the ships. Air war included the wary countries bombarding each other with dirigibles and military airplanes. The air planes were also used to transport goods, weapons for soldiers on land, and helped intercept submarines. The belligerent countries understood the importance of the air force in the war and decided to modernise it, in particular by developing fighter planes. (Arnstein, 1971, pp222-26) These attacks involved neutral countries such

as the USA, notably in the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 and the French Liner Sussex in 1916.

4. The American Reaction to the Outbreak of the First World War and its Relations with the Wary Countries:

Just after the outbreak of the War, President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) declared that he would not take part in this conflict, and that he would act as a mediator. He notably said, "There is such a thing as a nation being too proud to fight" (Zinn, 2005, p361) This can be explained by the isolationist foreign policy that had been adopted by the Americans through the Monroe Doctrine, which implied that the USA would not interfere in the affairs of other countries. President Wilson also called his citizens to remain neutral and to side with neither camp. However, the Americans of British and German descent decided to establish agencies to justify the reasons why their countries of origin were fighting for, and that each of their enemies was fighting for bad reasons. (Trevelyan, 1942, pp469-70; Brogan, 1985, pp469-70)

However, it was not the view of the opposition, and in particular of the Conservative Republican Theodore Roosevelt, who called for American interventionism. He notably depicted those who opposed war as, "a whole raft of sexless creatures. (Zinn, 2005, p369) Such a view became more and more shared after the sinking of the Lusitania and the death of a number of Americans in 1915.

The War in Europe helped the American economy, including the American industrialists and agriculturalists, to grow as a result of the wary countries' rising demand for food, weapons, munitions and other essential goods. The American contribution was also through the government loans to the Allies; in 1917, these loans exceeded \$2 billion. (Malone & Rauch, 1960, p22)

The American contribution was also through mediation. This was conspicuous in the different peace missions that were undertaken by President Wilson's Personal Advisor, Colonel Edward. M. House in January 1915 and 1916, his election campaign slogan elaborated by his rank and file "He Kept Us of War", which helped him win the Presidential elections in 1916, and the different proposals for mediation he sent to the belligerent countries, in which he analysed the causes of the war, asked them to list their aims and to accept compromises, all under the formula

“peace without victory”. He also called for the organisation of a conference to settle the issue. However, all these attempts came to nothing. (Brogan, 1985, pp473-74)

The American contribution resulted in the outbreak of a number of problems. The British began their policy of blockade, which consisted in stopping American ships in order to check them, and to prevent food and necessary goods from arriving to Germany. They also redefined the products that were supposed to be sold by the neutral countries. As a result, Germany declared the British sea a war zone to be attacked by its submarines. As it has been mentioned earlier, the German submarines sank both of the British Liner Lusitania in 1915, which was suspected of carrying contrabands leading to the death of 128 Americans, and the French Liner Sussex in March 1916 causing the death of two Americans and the injury of some others. President Wilson declared that both the blockade and the submarine’s attacks were violations of the neutral countries rights to trade freely. (Brogan, 1985, p437; Zinn, 2005, p369)

These events made President Wilson start the Preparedness Movement, which sought to convince the Americans to take part in the war. It included strengthening the armament sector, raising the size of the regular army. There was also the creation of the Council of National Defence, whose task was to prepare the nation’s industry and resources in case of war and the US Shipping Board to regulate the rates and services, and the privately-owned ships engaged in domestic and foreign commerce, and to own, operate or lease ships. (Brogan, 1985, pp472-74) This preparation was justified since the Americans entered the war against Germany in 1917.

5. The Causes of the American Intervention, and its Entry in the First World War:

The American declaration of war on Germany was due to three reasons namely the German attacks on the American ships, the intercepted Zimmermann’s message and the American aspiration to defend and spread democracy all over the world, in particular after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and the fear to see military and autocratic nations controlling Europe.

On 1 February 1917, Germany declared its decision to start submarine warfare attacks against all the ships, including the American ones. This decision aroused discontent among the American administration, and made President Wilson cut his diplomatic relations with Germany. (Brogan, 1985, p474)

On 25 February 1917, the German Foreign Minister, Arthur Zimmermann sent a harmful message to the Mexican government, calling the Mexican government to side with Germany against the USA. In return, the Germans would help them take back the lost territories they had been forced to give up to the Americans such as New Mexico, Texas and Arizona. This message was decoded and interpreted by the British Intelligence, and given to the Americans. When this message was published by the American press on 1 March 1917, Arthur Zimmerman did not deny it, which rendered the situation even worse. (Brogan, 1985, p475)

The Wilson administration believed strongly in democracy and its spread all over the world. When autocratic Germany and Austria-Hungary started to gain ground against democratic countries like Great Britain and France, the American administration felt its democratic aspirations threatened. Indeed, once Europe was affected, it could spread, reach and menace the United States of America. The Bolshevik Revolution, which broke out in Russia in 1917 and led to the end of Tsarist Russia and the establishment of a Communist government led by Nicolai Lenin, also represented a threat. The Revolution notably pushed Russia to withdraw from the conflict, which weakened the Allies, and permitted the propagation of undemocratic communist ideas. (Perry, Chase, Jacob, Jacob & Von Laue, 1989, pp676-678)

On 2 April 1917, President Wilson stated his intention to go on war against Germany. He claimed that the reason behind such a decision was the defence of human rights and the freedom of all the nations. This declaration was approved of by a vote in the Senate with 82 to 6, and in the House with 373 to 50. This resulted in the American official declaration of war on Germany on 6 April 1917. (Leon & Winthrop, 1987, p578) Such news was welcomed by the Allies given the fact they were almost defeated by the Central Alliance. Their reaction was conspicuous in the decoration of Paris' streets with American flags, and the British

MPs' applause of President Wilson's decision during a Parliamentary session. (King, 1986, p460)

6. Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that the event of the First World War, which started in 1914, was inevitable owing to the economic and military reasons that prevailed in Europe. It involved the entry of several countries from different continents such as Great Britain, Russia, Turkey and Japan. Other countries decided to remain neutral, notably the USA, which played the role of the neutral mediator. Nevertheless, neutrality did not last long for the USA entered the conflict against Germany in 1917, when its interests were under German threat.

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