

4-2019

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Recommended Citation

Anstatt, Matthew (2019) "The United States in the Great War and the Alternate History of the Twentieth Century," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2019.090110

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol9/iss1/10>

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The United States in the Great War and the Alternate History of the Twentieth Century

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The Great War, now called the First World War, was known at the time as the “War to End All Wars.” Characterized by death and destruction on a scale not previously known to the world, the decision to enter this conflict was not one to be taken lightly. Many historians consider the United States in the period before the First World War to have been an isolationist power. And yet, in 1917, America found itself embroiled in this most deadly European war. What led America to enter the war, and is the world better off today for their decision?

The first key in understanding why America entered the First World War is to dispel the myth that America was ever an isolationist power. Since English settlers first began populating the eastern coast of North America, it was clear in which direction they would expand - west. Their plan to carve civilization out of the pristine landscape of this new landmass was thwarted by the fact that there already existed numerous civilizations between them and the Pacific. As the Anglo population of the New World grew, European civilization expanded further and further into the continent, accessing new ecosystems and harnessing new resources as it went. The nation that would become the United States was engaged in a war of expansion from its very conception. For nearly 400 years, the frontier was the front in this bloody war, known today as the Conquest of the New World, in which White settlers slowly battled the Native Americans into submission.

Though the frontier was not formally closed until the 1920s, the fate of the conflict was decided by the conclusion of the War of 1812 in 1815. From that point forward, Amerindians were given three choices: surrender their way of life and assimilate; begin life on a reservation, usually occupying the most undesirable available territory, only to be moved further west at a later date; or fight, becoming another martyr in the long defeat their people were destined to suffer.

Once the question of supremacy within the land claimed by the US was settled, Americans turned their eyes south. Manifest Destiny dictated that many of the lands claimed by Mexico were rightfully American. The Mexican-American War saw the US seize huge swathes of the current American Southwest from Mexico in an unprovoked war of aggression. This land-grab led to internal strife which culminated in the American Civil War. After time was taken to rebuild the nation and heal the wounds from that war, America went back to expansion. In 1898 America launched the Spanish-American War, a land grab justified with a false-flag attack on a defunct US warship. This conflict saw America expand its sphere of influence into the Caribbean and across the Pacific, as far away as the Philippines. The First World War began just 15 years later. So, any historian who claims the US was an isolationist power prior to the First World War is misrepresenting 200 years of American foreign policy.¹

The reasons for the U.S. entry into World War I were numerous, but most come back to one common theme: the prosperity of the American economy. Prior to the war, the United States enjoyed open trade with all major European powers. Once the war began and Anglo-French naval domination was established, trade with the Central Powers of Germany and Austria was cut off in an attempt to suffocate the German and Austrian economies. Trade continued only

¹ Immerman, Richard H. *Empire for Liberty: a History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

with the Entente. This blockade cut off goods ranging from war-making materials to foodstuffs. Germany, being the most densely populated nation on the European continent, relied heavily on imported food to feed their population. The U.S., by choice or not, was complicit in a siege of Germany and Austria, which resulted in the deaths of between 450,000 and 750,000 German civilians from starvation and malnutrition-related diseases. In this way, American neutrality in the early war was not strictly neutral.²

What trade the U.S. was allowed to continue with the Entente was throttled by German unrestricted submarine warfare, a doctrine the people of America saw as cruel and that shifted the sympathies of the American public away from Germany. Public outrage towards Germany in the U.S. reached an all-time high when the RMS *Lusitania*, an ocean liner headed for the UK, was sunk by a German submarine with over 1,900 passengers on board, about 190 of them Americans. The American and British media latched onto this event, covering it in brutal detail. Although the *Lusitania* was carrying over 170 tons of British war materiel and was a valid military target, American popular perception was that this event was an unprecedented atrocity against a neutral third party. This provided the Wilson administration with the popular support it needed to enter the war with the good favor of the American people. But what motivation for entering the war did the Wilson administration have?

The United States, since its conception, was a backwater in the field of international diplomacy. Always a second-rate power, it made its true entry into international power politics with the Spanish-American war of 1898. Spain, once a world superpower, was possessed of a dying empire, and was by all accounts a falling out of glory. The U.S. was on the rise, and comparatively still a new nation. The prompt U.S. victory in the war was the first time America

² Grebler, Leo. *The Cost of the World War to Germany and to Austria Hungary*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940

had truly showcased its war-making capabilities by single-handedly defeating an established European power. America was now counted among the first-rate powers of the world, but how it used its new position of diplomatic power was yet to be seen.³

Wilson handled many issues, from the income tax to the Federal Reserve, with the intent of establishing a legacy. There hadn't been a president from the South since before the U.S. Civil War. The presidency had not been in existence for an incredibly long period of time, but it was already evident that those presidents who were remembered best were wartime presidents.

Wilson had already shown that he was not afraid of using U.S. military might to achieve diplomatic goals abroad. In 1910 a revolutionary war broke out in Mexico in which the United States supported the Mexican government. Wilson used the arrest of a few American sailors in Mexico as justification for U.S. occupation of the Mexican port city of Veracruz, a major blow to the revolutionary cause.⁴

This new war in Europe, the largest ever, was an opportunity for Wilson not only to cement his legacy as a president, but to influence the way the United States interacted with the world for generations to come. Once it was decided war was favorable, Wilson set about on a campaign of propaganda and censorship, silencing those who opposed the war effort. Wilson had set America on the path to war, and neither the level heads in Congress nor the good sense of the American people could stop it.⁵

The United States entered into the First World War on the side of the Entente on April 6, 1917. At this point in the war, the Russian Empire was experiencing a violent revolution and had

³ Young, Ernest William. *The Wilson Administration and the Great War*. Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1922

⁴ Ambar, Saladin. "Woodrow Wilson: Foreign Affairs." *Miller Center*, 29 Aug. 2017, millercenter.org/president/Wilson/foreign-affairs.

⁵ Daly, Christopher. "How Woodrow Wilson's Propaganda Machine Changed American Journalism." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 28 Apr. 2017, www.smithsonianmag.com/history/how-woodrow-wilsons-propaganda-machine-changed-american-journalism-180963082/.

withdrawn from the conflict, closing the Eastern Front and allowing Germany to transfer troops back to the Western Front to focus on fighting the Western Allies. In France, Britain, and Germany alike, war fatigue was growing, and all three nations were seriously considering surrender. The U.S.'s entry into the war was vital at this point for the morale of the western allies. The U.S. had a population and, perhaps more importantly, an industrial capacity that dwarfed those of the European combatants. American military might, when introduced to the war in its late stages, would no doubt decide the victor. As we know, the United States threw in its lot with the Entente.

Had the US thrown its weight behind the central powers, we would live in a very different world today. Many mainstream historians believe that the post-war economic slump and national disgrace of Germany following the First World War lead directly to the Nazis taking power in Germany.⁶ Had Germany won the First World War, which they undoubtedly would have with U.S. support and may have had the US stayed out completely, these conditions would never have existed, and the Kaiserreich would still have been in place through the 1940's.⁷ Without the Nazis coming to power in the 1940's the Second World War would not have been nearly as significant a conflict as it was. Without the *casus bellum* of Nazi aggression, the Soviet Union would never have expanded as far as it did, and the Iron Curtain could never have been erected. This means no atrocities from the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe like the Holodomor.

Had a war not been raging in Europe, the Western democracies would likely have devoted more resources towards the Nationalist Chinese cause. The Nationalist Chinese under

⁶ Berman, Sheri. "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic | World Politics." *Cambridge Core*, Cambridge University Press, 13 June 2011, 429. doi:10.1353/wp.1997.0008

⁷ Peck, Michael. "How Germany Could Have Won World War I." *The National Interest*, The Center for the National Interest, 7 May 2014, nationalinterest.org/feature/how-germany-could-have-won-world-war-i-10398.

Chiang Kai Shek, largely weakened in our timeline from fighting the Japanese, may have triumphed. This would avoid the rise of Mao and the atrocities of the Great Leap Forward.⁸

Without the empowerment of the Comintern, the Western democracies would not have had an opposite pole to wage the Cold War against. This means all of the proxy wars that resulted from that conflict, from Indochina to Africa to the Balkans to South America to the Middle East may have largely been avoided.

There are, of course, those who think American intervention in WWI on the side of the Entente was necessary. The chief reason for US entry into the conflict on the side of the Entente is chalked up by modern day historians to be the fact that German unlimited submarine warfare was restricting Americans' human right to free travel and free trade. In actuality, this right was already being restricted by the British, who cut off trade between the Central Powers and all neutral countries in 1914, slowly hurting all neutral economies as well as starving out the German people. The vast majority of Americans did not support intervention, seeing the war as a conflict between German Militarism and British Imperialism.⁹

When completing an exercise in alternate history, it is impossible to fully measure how the effects of a single event can ripple over the course of a hundred years. However, what can be safely assumed is that the US not involving itself in WWI would have minimized the potential for WWII to occur on the scale that it did, and it may have fully eliminated much of the Cold War and its fallout from the pages of history.

⁸ March, G. Patrick. *Eastern Destiny: Russia in Asia and the North Pacific*. Praeger, 1996.

⁹ Doenecke, Justus D. *Nothing Less than War: a New History of America's Entry into World War I*. University Press of Kentucky, 2011.

About the author

Matthew Anstatt is currently a first-year student attending the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. While not yet set on a major, he is considering double majoring in History and Economics. His primary fields of interest are Early American history and the U.S. Civil War.

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