

## FROM CHAPTER TWO – AMERICA WATCHES A WAR

When the war in Europe erupted in August 1914, there was no sense in America (or elsewhere, for that matter) that this ever would become America's war. Throughout its history, after all, the U.S. resolutely had refused to get involved in Europe's battles. When Europe exploded, therefore, President Woodrow Wilson's first response was to proclaim the nation's neutrality and declare that Europe's war "cannot touch us."

Even had Wilson toyed with the notion of taking sides (which he certainly did not), it would not be clear which side America would favor. Looking back a century from our day, it may be hard for us to understand how thoroughly divided were American sympathies in 1914. There were, naturally, deep feelings for and bonds with the British—through the obvious elements of common language, shared democratic values and systems and a great deal of intermingled history. But American feelings for and bonds with Germany were nearly as strong and nearly as historically grounded...

America's largest immigrant group, it perhaps now is forgotten, was the German, with the 1910 Census recording 8,262,618 who checked Germany as country of origin—nearly nine percent of the nation's 92 million population. To this add another 15 million Americans estimated to come originally from German stock. This means that over a quarter of the American population in 1914 had some affinity for Germany. Indeed, the German stamp was readily in evidence, with huge communities in Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Des Moines, Milwaukee, New York City and St. Louis, all with their influential local social and political clubs and churches (at least 6,000 Lutheran congregations nationwide).

Second only to the Germans in size as an immigrant group were the Irish, with 4,504,000 checking Ireland as country of origin in the 1910 Census. By 1914, they were playing leading roles in America's labor movement, wielding enormous influence in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church and were beginning to take control of big city politics. What counted for Germany was that almost all America's Irish were deeply hostile to Britain.

Then there was the Russia factor. This was no small matter. Poles, Jews and Finns, also huge immigrant communities, all had fled to America to escape Tsarist Russia's dark and brutal repression. Surely they would oppose any U.S. help for hated Imperial Russia, the key ally of Britain and France in the war. And indeed they did. Meirion and Susie Harries, in *The Last Days of Innocence*, describe these communities' strong opposition to Russia and cite efforts by Russian Jews in Cincinnati "to raise a volunteer regiment to fight the Tsar." More broadly, according to a study of American Jewish attitudes during the war, "immigrant Jews prayed that the 'more civilized' Germans would free their oppressed brethren in Eastern Europe from Russian persecution."

The Russia factor also played a role beyond immigrant communities, influencing many liberals and Progressives, a key (and perhaps dominant) component of the electoral coalition giving Wilson his 1912 presidential victory. They were extremely troubled by any U.S. actions helping the Tsar and his autocracy, which they regarded (correctly) as vastly less democratic and more oppressive than the Kaiser's Germany. In fact, only after revolution in March 1917 toppled the Tsar did many Progressives rally to Wilson's increasing hostility to Germany.

American ties to and sympathies with the belligerents thus clearly were divided at the war's outbreak. Whether the pro-Allied or pro-Central Powers forces in America were equally matched may be unanswerable. But it is certain that a pro-British and Allied tilt was far from inevitable or desirable. The reality of August 1914 was that no tilt at all would be America's best policy. Each camp in the U.S. was large enough to make it politically unappetizing for any official to take sides in the European conflict. And no officials were tempted to do so.

Thus, as the war began in Europe, it seemed certain that it would not become America's war. That it eventually did so and that America thirty-one months later declared war on Germany, joined the Allied side and mobilized four million troops was a decision that profoundly influenced subsequent history, setting the course for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the West.

So why, in a fateful April 6, 1917 decision and action, did once determinedly neutral America declare war on Germany? The answer is found in the fabric of interwoven threads, which, over the thirty-one months, persuaded America that Germany was a dangerous predator aggressor, that Britain and France needed saving and that only America could save them. These threads included:

- Britain's skilled propaganda campaign in the U.S. aimed at bringing America into the war by portraying Germany as the aggressor and (unfairly, as history has concluded) as a perpetrator of disgusting atrocities;
- Germany's flawed and ham-fisted propaganda efforts in the U.S. aimed at keeping America neutral;
- Growing American economic reliance on sales of war materiel, food and other goods to Britain, France and Russia;
- German submarine attacks on shipping, designed to break Britain's strangling blockade of Germany but which, by killing some Americans, outraged the American public, convincing it that Germany was an international thug which could not be allowed to win the war;
- The Russian Revolution of March 1917, which overthrew the Tsar and introduced some democracy into Russia, thus eliminating the repressive autocracy that had been making it difficult for U.S. liberals and Progressives to back the Allies;
- Washington's lenient response to London's harsh wartime actions, contrasted with its very tough response to Berlin's, which gradually made a mockery of neutrality, inexorably nudging the American public toward viewing Germany as *the* enemy.