

## Publisher's Note

*Defining Documents in American History* series, produced by Salem Press, consists of a collection of essays on important historical documents by a diverse range of writers on a broad range of subjects in American history. *Defining Documents in American History: World War I (1914-1919)* surveys key documents produced during this period, organized under eight broad categories:

- Opening Volleys
- A Range of Reactions
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- Combat Maneuvers
- Soldiers' Stories
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Historical documents provide a compelling view of this unique period of American history. Designed for high school and college students, the aim of the series is to advance historical document studies as an important activity in learning about history.

### Essay Format

*World War I* contains 60 primary source documents – many in their entirety. Each document is supported by a critical essay, written by historians and teachers, that includes a Summary Overview, Defining Moment, Author Biography, Document Analysis, and Essential Themes. Readers will appreciate the diversity of the collected texts, including journals, letters, speeches, political sermons, laws, government reports, and court cases, among other genres. An important feature of each essay

is a close reading of the primary source that develops evidence of broader themes, such as author's rhetorical purpose, social or class position, point of view, and other relevant issues. In addition, essays are organized by section themes, listed above, highlighting major issues of the period, many of which extend across eras and continue to shape American life. Each section begins with a brief introduction that defines questions and problems underlying the subjects in the historical documents. A brief glossary included at the end of each document highlights keywords important in the study of the primary source. Each essay also includes a Bibliography and Additional Reading section for further research.

### Appendixes

- **Chronological List** arranges all documents by year.
- **Web Resources** is an annotated list of web sites that offer valuable supplemental resources.
- **Bibliography** lists helpful articles and books for further study.

### Contributors

Salem Press would like to extend its appreciation to all involved in the development and production of this work. The essays have been written and signed by scholars of history, humanities, and other disciplines related to the essay's topics. Without these expert contributions, a project of this nature would not be possible. A full list of contributor's names and affiliations appears in the front matter of this volume.

## Editor's Introduction

By April 1917, when President Woodrow Wilson pressed Congress for a declaration of war against Germany, the Great War, as it was known, had been raging in Europe for more than two and a half years. During that time the American people, an ocean away and, by official government policy, politically neutral, could only follow the conflict from afar through news reports, statements from U.S. officials, opinion columns, and, of course, rumor. Most Americans were nearly as confused then about the causes of the war as they are today, although at the time, at least, many knew a relative who had lived in Europe and knew something about the local terrain and the local people and their ways. As for grand alliances such as the Triple Entente (France, Russia, and Great Britain) and the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy—the latter replaced by the Ottoman Empire to form the Central Powers), and the reasons behind the fighting—such matters took time and effort to absorb. Americans could be comfortable in their neutrality because the war did not impact them directly.

### The Lead-Up to U.S. Participation

Central to the decision to eventually go to war were events taking place not only on the Continent but also in the Atlantic Ocean. Early on, Britain had imposed a naval blockade to cut off Germany from needed supplies, including supplies coming from the United States. This did damage to U.S.-British relations, and the Wilson administration protested the action. Britain, in turn, protested the fact that German merchant ships that reached the United States found a safe harbor there. Yet, any brewing animosity between England and America was curtailed when, in early 1915, Germany initiated a policy of submarine (U-boat) warfare against enemy vessels. In May of that year the Germans sank the British passenger ship *Lusitania*, on the grounds that it was carrying war supplies. Over one thousand civilians were killed, including 128 Americans. Meanwhile, reports of German brutality in Belgium and elsewhere began reaching American ears.

Further twists in the area of naval actions, and diplomatic reactions, arose when a passenger ferry in the English Channel, the *Sussex*, was torpedoed (March 1916) by a German U-boat, leaving four Americans dead among the eighty casualties. About that same time, German naval commanders began testing a “stop

and search” policy that was in place for nonmilitary shipping: the U-boat captains attacked whenever a vessel was suspected of carrying munitions or other war contraband. In October 1916, for example, several Allied merchant ships were shot off Nantucket Island, their crews rescued by U.S. destroyers. Despite this aggression, Wilson continued to urge neutrality, running his reelection campaign on the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War!” The fact that Wilson won reelection in November, albeit in a very close race, indicates that he was by no means alone in his views.

Germany seemed to do itself no favors when, in early 1917, it declared unrestricted warfare on the seas—largely in response to the blockade that had so depleted its supplies. Its leadership, moreover, was caught out in a rather crude attempt to win Mexico to Germany's side by inviting the Mexicans to recapture territory they had lost to the United States in the previous century. The proposal, put forth in a telegram by German foreign secretary Arthur Zimmerman, was discovered by British officials and turned over to Wilson. The American public became incensed, and Wilson saw that there was now but one course of action. On April 2, 1917, he asked Congress to declare war on Germany. It was, nevertheless, a deeply troubling prospect, as indicated by his words:

There are, it may be, many months of fiery trial and sacrifice ahead of us. It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people into war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance. But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is

wounded or missing). To counter a German offensive near Reims in July, American and British troops joined French forces along the Marne River, succeeding in forcing a German retreat. Then, as a continuation of the Allied counteroffensive, the Americans, along with French troops, engaged the enemy at St. Mihiel (September 12-16), where they captured 16,000 Germans and caused the rest to fall back behind the Hindenburg Line, a defensive position laid down in the early stages of the war. A final massive Allied push occurred in the Meuse-Argonne region, where 1.2 million U.S. troops, along with their French and British partners, fought in a “Hundred Day Offensive” (September 26-November 11) that concluded with the armistice. Over 26,000 American soldiers lost their lives in the Argonne Forest and surrounding area during the battle, marking it as the bloodiest ever fought by the United States.

### **Making the Peace**

Even before the armistice, German officials had broached the idea of discussing a peace settlement based on Wilson’s “Fourteen Points,” an address the president delivered in January 1918. What the German’s liked about the Wilson framework, and the Allies disliked, was that it was generally non-punitive. It emphasized self-determination, open agreements, free trade, and harmonious international relations over post-war obligations and reparations. It epitomized Wilsonian idealism, proposing, among other things, an “association of nations”—an international body—which later became the League of Nations. Wilson went to the Paris Peace Conference in early 1919 as a hero, of sorts, even though the final peace agreement, as embodied in the Treaty of Versailles and related documents, differed substantially from the goals set out in his Fourteen Points. Chief among the differences were that, under the Versailles Treaty, Germany was proclaimed the guilty party in the war and, therefore, was required to pay enormous reparations (over 100 billion gold marks, or about \$25 billion) to the victim nations. In the end, all former belligerents except the United States authorized the treaty. Back home, a Republican-controlled U.S. Senate twice rejected the agreement, primarily because of opposition to the League of Nations. The main concern with the League was that it stood to weaken U.S. sovereignty and might require U.S. troops to defend it or its members. (Some of this was political obfuscation.) Wilson himself suffered a severe stroke in September 1919 and could no longer

argue the case. Thus, only in 1921, under a new president (Warren G. Harding), were separate peace agreements formally concluded with Germany, Austria, and Hungary. The League of Nations did not figure in any of them.

### **Conclusion**

World War I was modern humanity’s most horrendous experience up to that time—and, arguably, remains so to this day. Although the United States entered the war relatively late and did not suffer the destruction of its own territory and civilian population, the nation was severely tested politically and economically by the conflict. It struggled inside its borders to balance the needs of the war machine with the needs of the American people and the freedoms they had traditionally enjoyed. In terms of war casualties, the numbers pale in comparison to those for European powers but still are striking: approximately 108,000 U.S. dead, 190,000 wounded, and 4,900 missing. (In contrast, France, Germany, and Russia suffered ten times the number of dead.) The war produced a great trauma in the national consciousness of the peoples who had taken part in it, a trauma made all the more unfortunate in light of the widespread confusion over why the war had been fought in the first place and why so much blood and treasure had been expended in its prosecution.

*Michael Shally-Jensen, PhD*

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## ■ Germany's Appeal to the Americans

**Date:** August 1914

**Authors:** Albert Ballin, Prince Bernhard von Bülow, Matthias Erzberger, Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, Count Reventlow, and others

**Genre:** address; letter

### Summary Overview

Shortly after the outbreak of the World War I in 1914, a group of leading Germans from different walks of life appealed to the United States not to take a hostile attitude toward Germany. They stressed the long history of peace and friendship between the two countries and the many contributions that Germany had made to their shared culture. In contradiction to the common stereotype of German militarism, they stressed the peaceful and economic productivity of the German people, treating German military preparedness as justified by the many threats posed to Germany and German culture, particularly by Russia. The authors also invoked German high culture, which they claimed was incompatible with the stereotype of a militaristic people. The authors stressed the honorable and defensive motives that caused Germany to enter the war, and they declared that the German people stood unified under the kaiser, who is portrayed as a symbol of the nation rather than a political and military leader.

### Defining Moment

August 1914 was marked by the outbreak of World War I in Europe. The assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by a Serbian nationalist in the Bosnian city of Sarajevo had drawn, with stunning speed, all the major European powers into conflict. The conflict began as one between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. Germany entered the war to support its traditional ally Austria-Hungary, although much of the German leadership had seen a European war as inevitable and planned to use it to make major territorial gains in Europe and possibly the colonial sphere as well. Russia supported Serbia, and France supported its ally Russia. Great Britain was allied with France, but

formally entered the war as a result of Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality.

Despite German ambitions, the initial situation faced by Germany was far from advantageous. With only Austria-Hungary as an ally, Germany was confronted on both its eastern and western flanks by the powerful coalition of France, Britain, and Russia. German forces were going to be heavily outnumbered, and Germany faced the difficult challenge of a two-front war, against France and Britain in the west and against Russia in the east, while facing British dominance of the sea as well. Despite the odds, a wide range of Germans from different economic classes and political and cultural positions looked forward to the war with enthusiasm. Many believed the war would unite the German people, divided until then on the basis of political party, class, religion, and region. (This belief, in war as a means to national unification, was not restricted to Germany; it was held in many of the other belligerent nations as well.)

From the beginning of the war, the Germans were concerned about keeping the United States, the one major world power not directly involved in the conflict, neutral. Adding the immensely wealthy and populous United States to the already formidable Allied coalition would render the odds against Germany nearly impossible to overcome. Although the United States had traditionally avoided involvement in European conflicts, the expansion of both Germany and the United States as world powers in the preceding decades had sometimes led to friction between the two. However, in the first year of the war, most Americans, regardless of their sympathy or lack thereof for Germany, were more than willing to stay out of it. Therefore, the American political elite, led by President Woodrow Wilson, promoted the idea of neutrality.

### Author Biography

This statement was issued by a collective group of eminent Germans from government, business, and intellectual and cultural life. Signatories included the retired statesman Prince Bernhard von Bülow; the German-Jewish shipping magnate Albert Ballin, head of the Hamburg America Line; the Catholic politician Matthias Erzberger; Field Marshal Colmar Freiherr Von der Goltz, a well-known military theorist; and the naval officer Count Reventlow.

These well-known Germans—particularly people

like Ballin, who already had connections with the United States through his transatlantic shipping line—added weight to the German declaration. However, the inclusion of military figures, such as Von der Goltz and Reventlow, undercut the document's message of Germany's love of peace. Several of the signatories, including civilians like Erzberger, had ambitious plans for German territorial annexations in Europe that belied the appeal's claim that Germany had been forced into a purely defensive war.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Listen, All Ye People!

Try to realize, every one of you, what we are going through! Only a few weeks ago all of us were peacefully following our several vocations. The peasant was gathering in this summer's plentiful crop, the factory hand was working with accustomed vigour.

Not one human being among us dreamed of war. We are a nation that wishes to lead a quiet and industrious life. This need hardly be stated to you Americans. You, of all others, know the temper of the German who lives within your gates.

Our love of peace is so strong that it is not regarded by us in the light of a virtue, we simply know it to be an inborn and integral portion of ourselves. Since the foundation of the German Empire in the year 1871, we, living in the centre of Europe, have given an example of tranquillity and peace, never once seeking to profit by any momentary difficulties of our neighbours.

Our commercial extension, our financial rise in the world, are far removed from any love of adventure, they are the fruit of painstaking and plodding labour.

We are not credited with this temper, because we are insufficiently known. Our situation and our way of thinking are not easily grasped.

Everyone is aware that we have produced great philosophers and poets, we have preached the gospel of humanity with impassioned zeal. America fully appreciates Goethe and Kant, looks upon them as corner-stones of elevated culture. Do you really believe that we have changed our natures, that our souls can be satisfied with

military drill and servile obedience?

We are soldiers because we have to be soldiers, because otherwise Germany and German civilization would be swept away from the face of the earth. It has cost us long and weary struggles to attain our independence, and we know full well that, in order to preserve it, we must not content ourselves with building schools and factories, we must look to our garrisons and forts.

We and all our soldiers have remained, however, the same lovers of music and lovers of exalted thought. We have retained our old devotion to all peaceable sciences and arts; as all the world knows, we work in the foremost rank of all those who strive to advance the exchange of commodities, who further useful, technical knowledge.

But we have been forced to become a nation of soldiers, in order to be free. And we are bound to follow our Kaiser, because he symbolizes and represents the unity of our nation. Today, knowing no distinction of party, no difference of opinion, we rally around him, willing to shed the last drop of our blood.

For though it takes a great deal to rouse us Germans, when once aroused, our feelings run deep and strong. Everyone is filled with this passion, with the soldier's ardour. But when the waters of the deluge shall have subsided, gladly will we return to the plow and to the anvil.

It deeply distresses us to see two highly civilized nations, England and France, joining the onslaught of autocratic Russia. That this could happen, will remain one of the anomalies of history. It is not our fault: we firmly believed in the desirability of the great nations working together, we peaceably came to terms with

France and England in sundry difficult African questions.

There was no cause for war between Western Europe and us, no reason why Western Europe should feel itself constrained to further the power of the Czar.

The Czar, as an individual, is most certainly not the instigator of the unspeakable horrors that are now inundating Europe. But he bears before God and Posterity the responsibility of having allowed himself to be terrorized by an unscrupulous military clique.

Ever since the weight of the crown has pressed upon him, lie has been the tool of others. He did not desire the brutalities in Finland, he did not approve of the iniquities of the Jewish Pogroms, but his hand was too weak to stop the fury of the reactionary party.

Why would he not permit Austria to pacify her southern frontier? It was inconceivable that Austria should calmly see her heir apparent murdered. How could she?

All the nationalities under her rule realized the impossibility of tamely allowing Serbia's only too evident and successful intrigues to be carried on under her very eyes.

The Austrians could not allow their venerable and sorely stricken monarch to be wounded and insulted any longer. This reasonable and honourable sentiment on the part of Austria has caused Russia to put itself forward as the patron of Serbia, as the enemy of European thought and civilization.

Russia has an important mission to fulfill in its own country and in Asia. It would do better in its own interest to leave the rest of the world in peace. But the die is cast, and all nations must decide whether they wish to further us by sentiments and by deeds, or the government of the Czar.

This is the real significance of this appalling struggle, all the rest is immaterial. Russia's attitude alone has forced us to go to war with France and with their great ally.

The German nation is serious and conscientious. Never would a German Government dare to contemplate a war for the sake of dynastic interest, or for the sake of glory. This would be against the entire bent of our character.

Firmly believing in the justice of our cause, all parties, the conservatives and the clericals, the liberals and the socialists, have joined hands. All disputes are forgotten, one duty exists for all, the duty of defending our country and vanquishing the enemy.

Will not this calm, self-reliant and unanimous readiness to sacrifice all, to die or to win, appeal to other nations and force them to understand our real character and the situation in which we are placed?

The war has severed us from the rest of the world, all our cable communications are destroyed. But the winds will carry the mighty voice of justice even across the ocean. We trust in God, we have confidence in the judgment of right-minded men. And through the roar of battle, we call to you all. Do not believe the mischievous lies that our enemies are spreading about!

We do not know if victory will be ours, the Lord alone knows. We have not chosen our path, we must continue doing our duty, even to the very end. We bear the misery of war, the death of our sons, believing in Germany, believing in duty.

And we know that Germany cannot be wiped from the face of the earth.

## GLOSSARY

**clique:** a small, exclusive group of friends or associates

**pogrom:** an organized persecution or elimination of an ethnic group, especially one aimed at Jews

**temper:** disposition or frame of mind

### Document Analysis

The document is addressed to the American people. In line with much German propaganda throughout the war, it attempts to portray Germany as a fundamentally peace-loving country on which war has been forced. The authors faced a challenge in that German culture was frequently stereotyped as being militaristic, so they emphasize the non-warlike activities that Germans engage in and paint a picture of German “national character” that emphasizes peacefulness.

The document begins with an idyllic picture of a peaceful and productive Germany on the eve of war. Readers are told, somewhat improbably, that no one in the country was thinking of war. The authors allude to the fact that, since the founding of the German Empire in 1871, Germany had not engaged in a war in Europe (although the founding of the empire itself was the result of a series of wars). Although Germany had engaged in bloody colonial conflicts in Africa and elsewhere, they go unmentioned—perhaps because Europeans and Americans regarded colonial conflict, particularly against peoples of color, as being in a different category from European war.

The author refers to Germany’s accomplishments in the fields of high culture, invoking the hallowed names of poet and novelist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and philosopher Immanuel Kant. In addition to appealing to these prestigious German figures (perhaps less well-known in the United States than the authors realized) to influence Americans favorably toward Germany, they reinforce a theme common to much World War I German propaganda—the defense of German high culture, or *Kultur*, against Anglo-French materialism and Russian barbarian despotism. The author also invokes German technical innovation and creativity. German economic growth is attributed to hard work rather than bold, adventurous strokes. The authors refer to the large American population of German descent as evidence of the peaceful and hardworking nature of the German people.

The appeal treats German military power as fundamentally defensive. According to the authors, the creation of armies and fortresses was forced upon the Germans because of their uniquely vulnerable position in the center of Europe, exposed to attack from the west and east. However, Germany now stands resolute and united under the leadership of the kaiser.

In their analysis of the outbreak of the war, the authors focus on the villainy of autocratic Russia, while

treating relatively democratic Britain and France as misled rather than malevolent in their posture toward Germany. This position might appeal more to Americans, sympathetic to democracies, particularly France, and paints Germany as a relatively “progressive” country in contrast to Russia, “the enemy of European thought and culture.” Russian atrocities, such as the pogroms against the Jews, are invoked to further darken the Russian name. The Austrian reaction to the Serbian nationalist assassination of the archduke is treated as required by the demands of honor.

### Essential Themes

The arguments made in this open letter for Germany’s love of peace proved ultimately unconvincing, and the opposing portrayal of Germany as a militaristic country constantly seeking to profit from the difficulties of its neighbors were a staple of Allied propaganda, both international and domestic. Britain, in particular, carried out an active propaganda campaign in the United States, emphasizing German atrocities and portraying Germany as a menace to not only the Allies, but also the entire civilized world. Although some Americans began the war sympathetic to the German cause, or at least neutral in a conflict largely perceived as outside the realm of US national interest, public opinion shifted as the conflict wore on. The combination of Allied propaganda and the eventual German attacks on American and Allied shipping, along with diplomatic blunders, such as the Zimmerman telegram (which offered Mexico an alliance against the United States), alienated Americans from Germany. Germans were increasingly portrayed in American writing and journalism as militaristic fanatics driven by the need to dominate.

The German high culture that the authors hoped would be a bond between Germany and the United States came increasingly under suspicion as the American cultural climate became more hostile to Germany and Germans. Even the German language, still spoken widely in parts of the United States at the time, came under suspicion. The German immigrants and German Americans to whom the authors refer were suspected of disloyalty and were referred to sneeringly as “hyphenated Americans.” Nor were the document’s optimistic predictions regarding Germany itself justified by reality. The vaunted German unity of which the document boasts did not last for the duration of the war, as many Germans became discontented with the failures of their government.

Ironically, the claims made in the appeal would become more credible a few years after the war, when the American reaction against the war and resentment of its erstwhile allies, France and Great Britain, would lead some to reconsider the German case. “Revisionist” historians, like Harry Elmer Barnes, would accept much of the German case, although their work did not become the dominant interpretation of the war and its origins.

—William E. Burns, PhD

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