**The War:**

The Great War bore little resemblance to what had been anticipated. It was not a romantic war; in fact, for the most part, it was brutal and ugly. It was a war among whole peoples, involving millions, both on the front lines and at home. Raymond Aron, the historian-sociologist, has described our time as “a century of total war.” All are expected to participate. This is a continuation of the tradition of the French Revolutionary wars, but with enormously increased destructive powers as a result of the industrial revolution and mass production.

The German strategy was put into effect with great speed. Marching through Belgium and Luxembourg, the German soldiers were expected to destroy the French army in six weeks, and then turn to the east to face the Russians. The plan failed. In the Battle of the Marne (with many of the French troops being brought to the front by Parisian taxi cabs), begun on September 6th, 1914, the French managed to stop the German advance. This gave the Russians time to effect their mobilization. Now the Germans had to face a two-front war, something they had wished to avoid at all costs. The western frontwas established in France in late 1914. It would remain virtually the same for the next two and a half years.

On both fronts the fighting took on the aspect of a series of attempts to penetrate fixed trench positions. However, because of the length of the fronts, any offensive move had to be made directly against enemy lines, not from a flanking position. Thus hundreds of thousands of men were lost in attempts to advance a short distance. It was clear that the defenders were in a stronger position than the attackers, and the war often bogged down in the trenches, each side seeking an advantage against the deadly machine gun, the best defensive weapon of the time. Henri Barbusse, in his novel Under Fire, tried to realistically capture the feelings of men engaged in trench warfare. Here is his description of the experiences of one soldier at the Battle of Verdun of 1916, a battle in which the Germans tried to break through French lines to no avail, resulting in five hundred thousand deaths:

*A shower of bullets spurts around me, increasing the number of those who suddenly halt, who collapse slowly, defiant and gesticulating, of those who dive forward solidly with all the body’s burden, of the shouts, deep, furious, and desperate, and even of that hollow and terrible gasp when a man’s life goes bodily forth in a breath. And we who are not yet stricken, we look ahead, we walk and we run, among the frolics of the death that strikes at random into our flesh.*

*The wire entanglements—and there is one stretch of them in we go along to where it has been gutted into a wide and deep opening. This is a colossal funnel-hole, formed of smaller funnels placed together, a fantastic volcanic crater, scooped there by the guns.*

*The sight of this convulsion is stupefying; truly it seems that it must have come from the centre of the earth. Such a rending of virgin strata puts new edge on our attacking fury, and none of us can keep from shouting with a solemn shake of the head—even just now when words are but painfully torn from our throats— “Ah, Christ! Look what hell we’ve given ‘em there! Ah, look”.,.*

*A terrible volley bursts point-blank in our faces, flinging in front of us a sudden row of flames the whole length of the earthen verge. After the stunning shock we shake ourselves and burst into devilish laughter—the discharge has passed too high. And at once, with shouts and roars of salvation, we slide and roll and fall alive into the belly of the trench!*

The entry of Japan on the side of the “Allies”—which put it alongside England, France, Russia, and other states fighting with them—in August 1914 and of Turkey on the side of Germany and Austria- Hungary in late 1914, and the switch of Italy to the Allies in 1915 did not change the course of the war. Japan spent nearly all its efforts on getting hold of German possessions in the Far East and on gaining imperial concessions from China. Turkey harassed Russia in the Black Sea but was too weak to make a formidable difference in the balance of power. Italy abandoned the Triple Alliance in 1914, not wishing to go to war over the Balkans, claiming that the alliance was a defensive one, and that Austria-Hungary’s actions towards Serbia were offensive. Both sides bargained with Italy, the Allies gaining it as a friend by the treaty of London of 1915, which promised much of the Irredenta to Italy should the Allies, be victorious. The Italian front further helped to weaken the Austro-Hungarian Empire and hastened its demise.

Each country, however, had limited agricultural and industrial resources, and the war at sea determined the extent of additional resources available to each. Britain used its na- val supremacy to attempt a blockade of German ports. The challenge to the big British ships lay in the ingenious submarine, or U-boatas it was known in Germany, used in great numbers by Germany. The use of the submarine raised a series of diplomatic questions for Germany— what to do about neutrals, particularly United States shipping. If Germany were to allow shipping from the United States to go unchallenged on the seas, it would mean allowing goods to go to the Allies. The U.S. was neutral, but it did not trade with Germany, thus it was not at war, but clearly the U.S. has chosen the side it wished to support.

The question was whether the United States would continue to remain officially neutral and not bring its resources and fresh troops into the war against Germany. There was also strong sentiment in the United States that it should continue its traditional policy of not becoming involved in European conflicts. The United States President, WoodrowWilson, continually tried to mediate between the powers and proposed many plans and conferences. He campaigned for a second term in 1916 on the slogan “He kept us out of war.” However, the problem of German attacks on United States ships in British and neutral waters became in 1917 the major bone of contention between Germany and the United States.

The problem was a difficult one for the German high command. In 1915 Germany attempted a blockade of Britain and announced that shipping in these waters would be fired upon. Wilson was angered by this policy, and public opinion supported him. However, in May 1915 the British passenger ship Lusitania (passenger ship that was also used to carry limited amounts of war material) was destroyed by German submarines, resulting in approximately 1200 deaths, over one hundred of whom were Americans. The outcry in the United States was so great that Germany felt it wiser to retreat from such a policy, fearing that another incident of this sort would bring the United States into the war.

By 1917, however, the situation had changed for the Germans. They began to feel the shortage of resources as the English blockade was becoming more effective. They decided to gamble. In January 1917 Germany adopted a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, knowing the United States would probably thus enter the war, but hoping that Germany would be able in this way to defeat England before the full effects of the United States entry would be felt.

The decision proved effective, as many tons of Allied shipping were sunk by Germany through the summer of 1917. However, United States policy and public opinion turned away from neutrality as United States ships were sunk by German submarines. This, along with German overtures which attempted convince Mexico to attack the American Southwest. This plan was communicated to Mexico by German foreign minister, Zimmerman, through a secure telegraph line, which was being illegally monitored by the British, and likely the United States. By April, Wilson, the Congress of the United States, and the vast majority of the public felt there was no alternative. On April 6, 1917, the United States joined the Allies by declaring war against Germany.