

FROM NEUTRALITY TO WAR:
WHAT THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION HAD TO DO WITH WILSON'S
DECISION TO ENTER THE GREAT WAR

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Abstract

Many books and scholarly articles have been devoted to the study of the United States entry into World War I. President Woodrow Wilson went before Congress on April 2, 1917, to ask for a declaration of war. The main reasons cited in the scholarly literature for this shift from neutrality to warfare are the Zimmermann Telegram incident and the German practice of unrestricted submarine warfare. While these factors are important, what is missing is an emphasis on the March 1917 Russian Revolution, which ended tsarist control in favor of a provisional democratic government. This event occurred just days before Wilson had decided to join the war. This thesis argues that not enough attention has been given to Russia's shift from a monarchy to a democracy and its effect on Wilson's decision to enter the war. To support this thesis, the author examines a representative sample of scholarly literature focusing on Wilson and World War I. This search reveals that scholars have tended to minimize the Russian Revolution in March as a factor in Wilson's decision to go to war. Then the author directly supports the Russian Revolution motivation as important in Wilson's decision-making by studying primary documents, including the writings of foreign ambassadors, of members of the Wilson cabinet, and of Woodrow Wilson himself.

Introduction

It is common knowledge that the United States did not enter either World War I or World War II until it was absolutely necessary or until there was some legitimate event that enabled the United States executive to ask Congress for a declaration of war. As for World War II, the answer was obvious. Because of the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States was able to declare war with almost the entire American population on board. Pearl Harbor was a planned direct attack on the country and its citizens and military. Analyzing the motivation for America to enter the First World War, however, is more difficult. There was never any direct event that led the United States to enter the war.

Yet, perhaps there was. On March 15, 1917¹, the tsar, Nicholas II, abdicated and the Russian Revolution began. On April 2nd, during his second term, President Woodrow Wilson came before Congress and asked for a declaration of war. What connection can be made between these events, and how did the Russian Revolution affect the timing of Wilson's decision to push for the United States entry into war? Scholar Peter Boyle called the “coincidence in time of these two events ... immensely significant.” This coincidence has been highly overlooked in the academic world and in scholarly literature. Little attention has been paid to the revolution as a cause of Wilson's decision of war on April 2nd. To show this, this thesis will look at previously published historical literature concerning Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and relations between the United States and Russia to see how important the March Revolution is portrayed.

Also to be reviewed are the most commonly cited reasons for the U.S. entering the

1 This thesis will use the modern Gregorian calendar for all dates. Russia was still using the Julian calendar at this time.

war. The two main factors have always been the decision of Germany to engage in unrestricted submarine warfare and to play the geopolitical card called the Zimmerman Telegram. While these reasons certainly contributed, this thesis seeks to prove that the spring Russian Revolution was also quite important in Wilson's decision to go to war. There was more going on behind the scenes in Washington, in Woodrow Wilson's cabinet, and in Woodrow Wilson's mind concerning how and when America would enter in the Great War. Primary documents, such as letters, private journal entries, and telegrams provide evidence that the revolution was a major deciding factor for U.S. declaration of war against Germany.

Background to World War I

The causes of World War I have been thoroughly studied. Norman Saul gives a simplified explanation in his book *War and Revolution: The United States and Russia 1914-1921*. He states the reason for the war was that "a developing national consciousness in European empires and states had mutated into a rabid patriotism that restricted and limited compromise and negotiation... they were caught up in complex and historical issues".² A couple of factors played into the outbreak of the war. A strong sense of nationalism had emerged by the late nineteenth century. Class, religion, or localities were no longer the main source of loyalty, as loyalty and pride for the nation became dominant. Before, those peoples with strong senses of nationalism did not have their own independent states. Political science and international relations Professor Steven Spiegel named the unification of Germany as

² Norman Saul. *War and revolution: the United States and Russia, 1914-1921*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 1

“one of the greatest victories for nationalism.”³ It was no longer a separated region, but a stronger more unified independent state. Economic competition and imperialism added to the motivation for the outbreak of war. The Industrial Revolution led to a massive growth in competition, population, and wealth. But the progress and wealth was not evenly distributed among countries. As a country's industrial capacity was growing, so did its ability to challenge other nations for political dominance.⁴

Countries were also in competition for resources and markets which led to increased imperialism. Almost all of the African and Asian continents had been divided among the great powers, allowing for many colonial disputes. Countries clashed over colonies throughout the nineteenth century, but had avoided war with each other up until this point. Europe had a strict system of alliances that enabled just two great powers going to war to include all their alliances to join in as well. As all of these tensions increased, it was becoming more clear to some that war might be an actual possibility, though it was not the first clear option on leaders' minds. Still, Spiegel explains what is called the “cult of the offensive.” This is the idea that whoever attacked first would win the war. This cult of the offensive became a primary strategic doctrine for European military leaders who believed that the next European war would be quick with rapid mobilization. Later, tragically, this would not be the case.⁵

All of these well known long-term reasons triggered the event that sparked a whole continent and overseas countries to declare their participation in the world's first global war. On June 28th, 1914, the archduke Franz Ferdinand, next heir to Austria-Hungary's crown, was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist while on a trip to Sarajevo, the capital of Serbia. Austria

3 Steven Spiegel. *World Politics in a New Era*. (Belmont, CA : Wadsworth Thompson Learning, 2004), 209

4 Ibid., 208.

5 Ibid., 211.

had annexed Bosnia in 1908, but Serbia still claimed this area as its own. In response to the assassination, Austria issued an ultimatum of war to Serbia. There were several demands; some so extreme that there was a slim possibility that Serbia would be likely accept them. Austria used these demands as an opportunity to settle their previous disputes by means of war. After Serbia only accepted some of the terms of the ultimatum, Austria declared war on her on July 28th. The alliance system was put into full force and by August 4th almost every nation in Europe was at war.⁶

The United States Involvement before April 2, 1917

Immediately on August 4th, 1914, at the height of the European chaos, Woodrow Wilson declared neutrality. He stated that “every man who really loves America will act and speak in the true spirit of neutrality, which is the spirit of impartiality and fairness and friendliness to all concerned”.⁷ Then in May of 1915, the British liner *Lusitania* was torpedoed by German submarines. On board were 128 American passengers, all of whom were killed. While this was the first incident of World War I to directly affect the American people, Wilson kept his vow to remain neutral. He did send the German government a note that insisted Americans had the right to travel on belligerent ships. In the world there existed a “sacred freedom of the seas” that entitled all nations to the same use of the oceans. Wilson said that Germany was “disregarding those rules of fairness, reason, justice, and humanity,

⁶ Ibid., 214-15

⁷ Woodrow Wilson, “Declaration of Neutrality.” August 19, 1914. *The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson*. ed. David Cronon. (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill Company Inc., 1965), 302

which all modern opinion regards as imperative.”⁸ Additional letters of protest over the *Lusitania* sinking were written, but by the second letter written by Wilson, it proved to be too much for the Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan. He resigned in June 1915 because he thought the note's language was too stern and would lead the United States into war, something he greatly opposed. Robert Lansing, who was more open to the United States being involved in the war, would take his place.

Additionally, a small number of unarmed, unmarked passenger ships were sunk later in the year. Germany vowed to cease submarine warfare with the Sussex pledge in March of 1916. Before this, they had struck a merchant ship, the *Sussex*, and Wilson threatened to cut off diplomatic relations with Germany. Germany signed the pledge instead of risking the possibility of United States entry in the war. They would stay true to their word for the remainder of 1916.⁹

While still officially neutral, Wilson had several policies that favored the Allies. For example, the United States' economy became closely tied with the economies of the Allied Powers, especially Britain and France. Since the outbreak of the war, the United States received immense amounts of orders for war supplies from Britain and France. This made the U.S. economy thrive. Also, the government allowed for the lending of billions of dollars (roughly three billion) through secured credit from J.P. Morgan and other bankers to Britain and France to finance their war efforts. Still, Newman states that the policies of Wilson “did not deliberately favor the Allied powers,” but since the president “more or less tolerated the British blockade [that blocked the seas to and from Germany] while restricting Germany's

8 Woodrow Wilson, “First Protest Over the Sinking of the *Lusitania*.” May 13, 1917. *The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson*. ed. David Cronon. (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill Company Inc., 1965), 328

9 John Newman, *United States History*. (New York: Amsco School Publications, 2004), 449

submarine blockade,” American economic and financial support favored one side much more than the other.¹⁰

Meanwhile in Russia

In the beginning of the 20th century, Russia was one of the five major great powers of Europe. However, it was considered backward compared to the other powers because it was late in industrializing and late to emerge from feudalism. In addition, it was still controlled autocratically by Tsar Nicholas II. Autocratic rule in Russia had been in place for close to 500 years. The 1905 revolution had many of the same causes that the March Revolution would later have. Workers went on strike, peasants were in complete unrest, the economy was slowing, and there was a war going on: the Russo-Japanese war. Russians, in a large demonstration, presented the tsar with a petition for reforms. The unarmed citizens were met with bullets from troops trying to quell the riots.¹¹ After the revolution, although Nicholas II agreed to establish a nationally elected parliament, legalize political parties and trade unions, “the old habits of autocratic rule and the continued activity of the secret police undermined these concessions”.¹² In the thirty years before the revolution of 1917, there was an increase in national wealth and a spurge of economic growth. Yet, the peasant class remained the overwhelmingly majority at 83%, and did not partake in the economic success. More than eighty percent of the country faced poverty, social exploitation, and increasing unrest.¹³

The winter of 1916-17 was one of the harshest the Russian people had seen. In a

10 Ibid., 449-50.

11 Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets: the Russian people and their revolution, 1917-21*. (New York : Oxford University Press, 1996), 29

12 Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 11

13 Ibid., 10

confidential telegram from the American Consulate General in Petrograd to the U.S. Secretary of State, conditions in the couple weeks before the tsar's abdication were described. North Winship writes there was a shortage of black bread, a Russian staple, and that “all other prime necessities had already gradually disappeared as the winter advanced.” Everyday foods such as milk and eggs were too expensive for anyone but the upper classes to purchase. The beginning of March hosted “isolated demonstrations” and saw long waits in bread lines. Disgruntled workers and women marched and cried for bread, only to be dispersed by the police and cavalymen. Food became scarcer, and soon a famine loomed over many parts of the country. The food supplies they did acquire sometimes did not reach the cities because the railway system, their primary means of transportation, was inadequate. Tens of thousands of working people crowded the streets demanding food and worker reforms. In the few days before the abdication, citizens gathered in crowds, not only to demand bread, but to shout “down with the government” and “down with the Romanoffs”. Their cries were met with police machine gun fire and a heavy loss of property and human life.¹⁴

Russia and World War I

At the same time, Russia was fighting alongside the Allied powers but was failing miserably. Christopher Read called Russian involvement in World War I “disastrous” and as one of the immediate causes for the collapse of tsarism. While the early stages of the war for Russia were relatively favorable, the Russians lost ground in 1915. Though Russia had

¹⁴ North Winship, “Telegram from the American Consulate in Moscow to the U.S. Secretary of State.” ed. David Traill. (Hanover, Indiana: Hanover Historical Texts Project, 2001).

initially made gains in East Prussia, its forces were later pushed back by the Central Powers, led by Germany, which then started making advancements into Russian Poland.¹⁵

By the end of 1916, in less than two years of fighting, Russia incurred 3.6 million casualties and had 2.1 million Russians taken as war prisoners.¹⁶ Because of the great losses, draft calls increased which caused further unrest in the peasants and urban workers, as they were the ones herded into the battlegrounds unarmed and ill-prepared. Russia had been receiving their ammunitions and other war materials from Britain until Britain itself could no longer produce its own supplies and called on the United States. Russia had lost her main war materials supplier. Now shortages of weapons and ammunition existed alongside shortages of food, transportation systems, and adequate communications systems. But Russia did a good job of furthering its already bad situation. Russia's military consisted of a privileged caste system that made it difficult for capable people to immediately act as military leaders. Therefore, it was impossible for those who could better deal with the current crisis of the war to have any real effect on military strategy. The Great War did an amazing job of adding to the suffering of the Russian people. It has even been called the “mother” of the revolution, causing a “bonfire of rage.” The wealth the country had acquired right before the outbreak of the war had vanished.¹⁷

On January 22, 1917, Woodrow Wilson delivered his “Peace without Victory” speech. In it, Wilson proposed peace terms for ending the war by means of peace without victory. He defined the traditional use of victory as the curse to the establishment of real peace among nations because “only a peace between equals can last”.¹⁸ Simply put, Wilson

15 Read, *Tsar to Soviets*, 35.

16 Spiegel, *World Politics*, 219.

17 Read, *Tsar to Soviets*, 35-6.

18 Woodrow Woodrow, “Peace Without Victory”. January 22, 1917. *Woodrow Wilson: Essential Writings and*

did not want the war to be fought so that enemies could conquer each other's territory and material possessions. He even argued that no peace could last that did not “recognize and accept the principle that governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed.”¹⁹ This theme of advocating democracies was also later present in his war message to Congress, later discussed. If a country treated its peoples as if they were “property” peace could not last. This allusion to democracy and its relationship with equality and freedom shows that Wilson truly believes that peace can be achieved if more or all countries were democracies. At this point in time, Russia was still controlled by Tsar Nicholas II.

On the same day as Wilson's speech, over 100,000 strikers filled the streets of Petrograd.²⁰ Between January and March, tensions grew worse with strikes, food riots, looting and demonstrations. It would only be a matter of time before these hostilities would culminate into a day that would change the course for both Russia and the United States.

The Zimmermann Telegram

On February 24, 1917, Woodrow Wilson was presented with a copy of what is now known as the Zimmermann telegram. It was a coded message that had been translated to English. The message was sent by the German Secretary of Foreign Affairs Arthur Zimmermann to the German Minister at Mexico City Heinrich von Eckardt (forwarded by German ambassador Johann Heinrich Graf von Bernstorff). Simply, it was a proposition of a

Speeches of the Scholar-President. ed. Mario Dinunzio. (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 394.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Petrograd was the name of the Russian capital during World War I. Its former name, St. Petersburg, was perceived to be too German sounding, so in 1914, the city was named Petrograd.

secret alliance offered by Germany to Mexico. In the event that the United States would enter the war, Mexico would agree to ally with Germany in return for Germany helping Mexico recover their lost territories of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. British intelligence intercepted the telegram and delivered it to the United States.²¹

A memorandum written by Secretary of State Robert Lansing provides insight to what he and Wilson and he really thought of the affair. Counselor of the Department of State, Frank Polk, spoke with Lansing on February 27th and informed him that the President had “shown much indignation” towards the telegram. Lansing then had his own conversation with Wilson. Wilson was initially uncertain as to whether the telegram was authentic. Lansing explained that it was and that the message was delivered to Mexico on January 19th. Lansing writes that Wilson “showed much resentment at the German Government for having imposed upon our kindness in this way and for having us made the innocent agents to advance a conspiracy against this country.”²² Still, this alone would not be reason enough for the United States to become involved. Wilson only felt “resentment” and his only action regarding the telegram was to publish it in American newspapers. At the suggestion of Lansing, the federal government did not publish it directly. This was done because the United States needed to, after its publication, support the authenticity of the document. The administration did not want to make it seem like the telegram was concocted by the United States in order to pass the Arming Bill being debated in Congress at the time. It is also significant that both, the citizens of the United States and citizens and government officials in Germany, assumed that Zimmermann had sent a *letter* to Mexico, and not a coded message

21 Newman, *United States*, 452.

22 Robert Lansing, “Memorandum on the Message of Zimmermann to the German Minister to Mexico.” March 4, 1917. ed. Arthur S. Link. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 41. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 323.

that had to be ciphered.²³ This fact was kept secret by the United States in order to be able to decode future German messages. This way America could help Britain in its war effort by decoding messages from the German government. At this point, the United States could still keep out of the war but help the Allied side in another important way.

Robert Lansing called the Zimmermann telegram “a stupid piece of business,” and described Arthur Zimmermann himself as an “example of incompetency [and] a man of little ability.”²⁴ It is also made clear in a letter by a former student of Wilson named David Lawrence that the speeches of the German Reichstag expressed the liberals' deploration of the Zimmermann note. Lawrence expressed hope that the liberal force in the Reichstag would “lead an enlightened nation forward as has been the case with the liberal forces in Russia.”²⁵ Therefore, Lawrence wrote to Wilson that it would not be proper to make a declaration for a state of war just on the basis of the Zimmermann note alone. There had to be something else.

Unrestricted German Submarine Warfare

Over and over again, unrestricted German submarine warfare is cited as the main reason for the United States going into war. This act of submarine warfare that upset the United States began early in 1915. On February 4, 1915, Germany declared that “all the waters surrounding Great Britain and Ireland, including the whole of the English Channel, [would] be a war zone.” It was expressed in the note that neutral ships, not only enemy ships,

²³ Ibid., 326.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ David Lawrence, “From David Lawrence to Wilson.” March 31, 1917. Edited by Arthur S. Link. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 41. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 513.

would be exposed to danger in the war zone.²⁶ President Wilson's response is what is known as his “strict accountability” letter sent to U.S. Ambassador in Berlin James W. Gerard. Wilson requested that the German government consider any action it might take “to destroy any merchant vessel of the United States or cause the death of American citizens.”²⁷ If a situation did arise that affected U.S. vessels or citizens, Wilson told Gerard to warn the German government that they would be held to a strict accountability by the government of the United States, and any action deemed necessary to protect American citizens and property would be taken.

A little over of a month later on March 24th, American citizen Leon C. Thrasher was killed when the British steamer *Falaba* was sunk. Wilson wrote a letter to his then Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan providing to him the outline for a note that would be sent to the German government. It included that Germany take responsibility for the incident. He wanted to bring attention to the fact that the use of submarines would make it impossible for Germany to perform what was called the duty of visit and search, as was international law for all vessels to ensure passenger safety. Germany was clearly violating this law.

As previously mentioned, the sinking of the *Lusitania* was a major upset for Americans and for President Wilson. As stated, the first note was sent on May 13, 1915, with Bryan's reluctant approval. It was Wilson's second note to Germany that compelled Bryan to resign for fear the note's words were too severe. Bryan instead argued that Americans should be warned not to travel on ships of belligerent nations. Wilson responded to Bryan in a letter telling him that such a warning, which he thought would merely be more of a request, would

26 “German Admiralty Declaration Regarding Unrestricted U-boat Warfare.” February 4, 1915. *Naval Operations*. ed. Julian S. Corbett. Vol II. (New York: Naval and Military Press, 1920), 260.

27 Woodrow Wilson, “Strict Accountability.” February 10, 1915. *The Political Thought of Woodrow Wilson*. ed. David Cronon. (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill Company Inc., 1965), 321.

be unnecessary as the danger of traveling on belligerent ships was already known. Wilson and next Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, believed the American right to safely travel on any ship should not be in jeopardy because of Germany's malicious actions. A third note written by Wilson was sent to Germany on July 21st. He called the sinking a “needless destruction of human life by an illegal act.” Wilson insisted the United States would continue to contend for the freedom of the seas “without compromise and at any cost” and warned that future infringement of American rights would be considered “deliberately unfriendly.” America had rights as a neutral country that Germany was infringing upon.

President Wilson's constant warnings and demands for the rights of American travelers after the *Lusitania* sinking seemed to be without much avail. Another British liner, the *Arabic*, was sunk in August killing two more Americans. As a result, the President threatened to sever diplomatic relations if Germany continued to attack unarmed passenger liners without warning or providing safety for those on board.²⁸ In response, German Ambassador Johann von Bernstorff sent a letter in October to Secretary Lansing pledging that his government had issued orders to submarine commanders, so that an incident like the *Arabic* would not happen again.²⁹ 1915 had been a year of several incidents of the sinking of vessels by German submarines. Why would Wilson have not been inclined to declare war after a tumultuous year where many Americans' lives had been taken if German submarine warfare was the most important factor in United States' entry? Maybe since Wilson had sent several stern warnings to the German government and they had agreed, in the “*Arabic* pledge,” to cease further sinkings without prior warning, Germany would stay true to their

28 Thomas Knock, *To End All Wars: Woodrow Wilson and the Quest for a New World Order*. (Oxford ; New York : Oxford University Press, 1992), 61.

29 von Bernstorff, Johann. “Bernstorff and the Arabic Crisis.” October 5, 1915. *The World War I Document Archive*. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1996.

word. If this was the case, the United States would not be needed in the Great War.

However, more Americans would be killed aboard the unarmed French steamer *Sussex* which was torpedoed by a German submarine on March 24, 1916. There were eighty casualties, four of which were American citizens.³⁰ Wilson went before Congress on April 18th to express his sentiments about the attack. He told the men that if Germany did not “consider the sacred and disputable rules of international law and the universally recognized dictates of humanity” the United States would be “forced to the conclusion that there is but one course it can pursue.” The course he meant would be to sever all diplomatic relations with the German government. In the same address, Wilson pointed out that Germany had vowed to the United States that it would “take every possible precaution both to respect the rights of neutrals and to safeguard the lives of non-combatants.” Instead, what actually happened was the opposite. He told Congress that over the last year, the German vessels had been attacking ships with greater frequency and ruthlessness. The President felt that this warning of possibly severing diplomatic relations was necessary because again and again Germany had broken their promises. The United States had reached a point where it could no longer to be patient.³¹

Germany responded to Wilson's ultimatum about two weeks later. At first, Germany does not take complete responsibility for the sinking of the *Sussex* and even says they do not think it was Germany who did the sinking. It is admitted though in a letter written May 4th. Germany's Foreign Minister, Gottlieb von Jagow, wrote a letter in which it assured that all German naval forces would receive the following warning:

30 Knock, *To End All Wars*, 73-75.

31 Woodrow Wilson, “The *Sussex* Affair.” April 19, 1916. *The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. edited by Ray Baker. Vol 2. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1926), 158.

In accordance with the general principles of visit and search and the destruction of merchant vessels, recognized by international law, such vessels, both within and without the area declared a naval war zone, shall not be sunk without warning and without saving human lives unless the ship attempts to escape or offer resistance.³²

While Germany's Naval Minister did not agree with this letter, the German government surely did not want the United States to break diplomatic relations with them or to enter the war. Germany was now claiming that they would be willing to participate in mutual cooperation in order to restore the freedom of the seas.

Yet, as it is not too surprising, on January 31, 1917, Germany declared the resumption of its submarine campaign. A diplomatic note sent by the German government via their Ambassador to the U.S. Count Johann von Bernstorff to the U.S. Secretary of State, Robert Lansing announced a reopening of Germany's policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. In it, von Bernstorff wrote that Germany had always had the condition of the freedom of the seas as one of the leading principles of its political program. Many would be quick to dispute this statement. Also, he said that the Imperial Government “regret[ed] that the attitude of her enemies, who are so entirely opposed to peace, makes it impossible for the world at present to bring about the realization of these lofty ideals.”³³ How interesting that they say their enemies are opposed to peace when in the same document they announce the continuation of torpedoing both belligerent and neutral ships. Germany justified their continued policy by claiming that the British government has been in “brutal contempt of international law” its tyranny has been “mercilessly increas[ing] the sufferings of the world.” The policy set in place a blockade of Britain and her European allies. The German

32 Gottlieb von Jagow, “Germany's Response to U.S. Ultimatum Regarding Use of U-Boats.” May 4, 1916. *Source Records of the Great War*. ed. Charles F. Horne. Vol 5. (National Alumni, 1923).

33 Johann von Bernstorff. “German Ambassador Count Johann von Bernstorff to Robert Lansing, U.S. Secretary of State” January 31, 1917. *Source Records of the Great War*. ed. Charles F. Horne. Vol 5. (National Alumni, 1923).

government argued that such a policy was implemented only as a form of defense.³⁴

Almost immediately, the world responded. Countries everywhere declared their opposition to von Bernstorff's note, and the United States was no exception. President Wilson went before Congress to declare that diplomatic relations with Germany would be severed. He first discusses the events of the year before, mostly the *Sussex* sinking and the assurance Germany had proclaimed, and was now breaking. Therefore, Wilson instructed Lansing to declare that relations would be severed and that the American Ambassador to Berlin be immediately withdrawn.

Still, despite all the ups and downs and broken German promises when it came to submarine warfare, it was not the only reason the United States would enter the war. One of the best pieces of evidence comes from Secretary Lansing, in a personal and private letter written to Woodrow Wilson on March 19th:

I am in entire agreement with you that the recent attacks by submarines on American vessels do not materially affect the international situation so far as constituting a reason for declaring that a state of war exists between this country and Germany.³⁵

These sentiments by Wilson were reaffirmed in a letter Lansing wrote to Colonel Edward House, on the same day, in which he informed House that he had just returned from a conference with the President. Lansing wrote that Wilson “[was] disposed not to summon Congress as a result of the sinking of these vessels.”³⁶ Further, at the cabinet meeting held March 20th, Lansing wrote that Wilson felt that “while the announced policy of Germany had

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Lansing, Robert. “Memorandum of the Cabinet Meeting, 2:30-5 p.m. Tuesday, March 20, 1917.” March 20, 1917. ed. Arthur S. Link. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 41. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 436.

³⁶ Lansing, Robert. “Memorandum of the Cabinet Meeting, 2:30-5 p.m. Tuesday, March 20, 1917.” March 20, 1917. Edited by Arthur S. Link. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 41. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983 429.

compelled the severance of diplomatic relations, he could not bring himself to believe that the German Government would carry it out against American vessels.” What other event then was needed to justify America's involvement in World War I? The coming of a new democratic government in Russia, perhaps?

March 15-16, 1917: New Government

At the time of all this chaos, Nicholas II was visiting army headquarters in Russia. His train was met by emissaries from the High Command and the Duma who respectfully suggested that the Emperor should abdicate. After some discussion, Nicholas “mildly agreed.”³⁷ At 3:05 pm, Nicholas II signed his abdication. The first part addressed the war, acknowledging that it was not progressing favorably and that it should be ended with a “victorious conclusion.” He then addressed his abdication and the future government ideals for Russia:

We thought it Our duty of conscience to facilitate for Our people the closest union possible and a consolidation of all national forces for the speedy attainment of victory. In agreement with the Imperial Duma We have thought it well to renounce the Throne of the Russian Empire and to lay down the supreme power... We direct Our brother to conduct the affairs of state in full and inviolable union with the representatives of the people.³⁸

On this same day, the new Russian Provisional Government was formed. In its announcement, the members of the Temporary Committee of the State Duma were named.

³⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Russian Rev.*, 38.

³⁸ Nicholas II. “Decree of Abdication.” March 15, 1917. *The World War I Document Archive*. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1996).

The announcement claimed the Committee had “attained such a large measure of success over the dark forces of the old regime [and could] undertake the organization of a more stable executive power.” The principles to be used by the cabinet in their work were also given. They granted the freedom of speech, press and assembly as well as the abolition of restrictions based on class, religion, and nationality. Elections would be based on universal, equal, and direct suffrage and secret ballot.³⁹ These initiatives closely resemble many aspects of American and democratic principles. Much of their wording is almost identical to what is written in the United States Bill of Rights. Also noteworthy is the final statement in the announcement which stated that the new government would have “no intention whatsoever of taking advantage of the military situation to delay in any way the carrying through of the reforms” they just stated. This is noteworthy because of the previous corruption in the military and police systems. By the time of the revolution, there were only a few remaining loyal troops following orders from the Imperial Duma. Troops present to quell riots in Petrograd and other cities were “always without officers” as the men would kill their own leaders to carry out their own orders. Also, according to a report North Winship from the American Consulate, many of the soldiers were intoxicated as they looked for weapons and performed other tasks.⁴⁰ The new Russian government would strive to change these conditions and not use the military as an agent to suppress those who were in disagreement with the government.

When Nicholas II abdicated, he wished to transfer his throne to his brother Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich. One day after Nicholas stepped down, Duke Mikhail published his own manifesto. He revealed that had made a hard decision to:

39 “Public Announcement of the Formation of the First Provisional Government.” March 16, 1917. *The World War I Document Archive*. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1996).

40 Winship, *Telegram*.

accept supreme power only in the event that it shall be the will of our great people, who in nationwide voting must elect their representatives to a Constituent Assembly, establish a new form of government and new fundamental laws for the Russian State.⁴¹

This manifesto essentially ended the monarchy and as Winship wrote, also prevented any further civil war since all parties agreed to await a constitutional convention.

Aside from the already published announcements, North Winship also reported to Secretary of State Lansing the occurrence of these events. Also on March 20th another telegram was sent, this one from Moscow. The Consulate General in Moscow wrote that life has assumed its normal course, but did not ignore that there still existed an undercurrent of unrest in the transition. It is certain that the Wilson administration was aware of the democratic efforts and conditions.

Previous Scholarly Literature

There are numerous books and studies that cover foreign relations between Russia and the United States during this time period. It is easy to find many that just focus on the Russian Revolution and the United States. The problem however, is that the revolution, in many cases, refers to the events in the fall of 1917. The fall revolution brought Bolshevism to the country and created the beginning of the Soviet Union. Less attention is given to the spring events, which saw the abdication of the tsar and setting up of a provisional democratic government.

If there is one person in the academic world who knows more about Woodrow

41

Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich, "Manifesto." March 16, 1917. *Source Records of the Great War*. ed. Charles F. Horne. Vol 5. (National Alumni, 1923).

Wilson, that person would be Arthur S. Link. As a leading American historian, he focused his studies on the Progressive era and studied anything concerning Wilson. He has written several biographies and, of course, edited the sixty-nine volume, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. Also, he wrote several history textbooks and was a member of the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the Southern Historical Association. In his *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War and Peace*, Link included a chapter called “Wilson and the Decision for War.” it was surprising to find that only one sentence speaks of the Russian Revolution, and it read: “Enthusiasm for war was further stimulated by the news of the overthrow of the czarist regime and the establishment of a provisional democratic government in Russia.”⁴² Just one other page in the book is the revolution mentioned again, simply stating that Wilson “rejoiced” over the revolution of March 1917.⁴³

Norman E. Saul, professor of history, has written over a dozen books concerning Russian history and Russian relations with the United States. *War and Revolution: The United States and Russia 1917-1921* is a 445 page account that covers in great detail World War I, the revolution, Soviet power and American intervention. To his credit, Saul does devote several pages to the March revolution and a few to America's response. Americans greeted the March changes with “general approval, if not elation, reminding many Americans of their own revolutionary origins.” The section “America's Reaction” is not as much as a direct reaction to the revolution from diplomats, politicians and American citizens as one would have expected. Instead, Saul included accounts of people who were able to see the events firsthand, as they had been working in Russia during the time. These ambassadors

42 Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace*. (Arlington Heights, IL : Harlan Davidson Inc., 1979), 70

43 Ibid., 12

describe what was happening in the streets of Petrograd, such as the marches and violence.⁴⁴

He included that Americans had a special interest in the Russian revolution because there were American connections with the new provisional government. One example is Paul Miliukov who was a leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party who then was the actual head of the government.⁴⁵ In a section entitled “In the United States,” Saul says the revolution came as a “surprise” to Americans because they had been focusing on other events, such as the civil war in Mexico and the recent election and inauguration of Wilson. Some people were skeptical that Russia would be able to leave the monarchy easily, while others wished to celebrate the ending of the old regime. A short paragraph points out links between the revolution and American participation in the war. He cites Andrew Dickinson White as saying that the revolution “seemed to awaken every sort of warlike hope... Americans are talking now not merely of defense but of sending troops to Europe.”⁴⁶ Still, this is not enough for an argument that the revolution would influence Wilson's decision to enter the war. White is only one person and his words seem vague as there is no clear way to know what “Americans” he is speaking of. Also, Saul later cites the German submarine sinking of three American merchant ships as being the most crucial factor in the war decision.

Georg Schild's *Between Ideology and Realpolitik: Woodrow Wilson and the Russian Revolution, 1917-1921* deals with the philosophical and moral side of Wilson's politics and how that influenced his actions in Russia between 1917 and 1921. Once again, the revolution referred to in the title is the November revolution. He discusses Wilson's decision to enter the

⁴⁴ Saul, *War and Rev.*, 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

war and says it was “based on complex ideological and political decisions.”⁴⁷ Schild writes that U.S. policy after the March revolution had to achieve two goals: secure Russia's participation in the war and support the forces of democracy. Schild does include that the revolutionary change in government “helped the president in his efforts to join the [Allied] Entente in the war.”⁴⁸ Credit to Schild is due, however, as he does include a statement which says that the spring revolution made it possible for Wilson to join the war effort on the side of the Allies who were fighting autocrats. He is one of the few who have directly linked the revolution to U.S. entry and that it made Wilson's efforts for coming into the war easier. However, he also goes on to say that Wilson's knowledge of Russian problems was limited, so this seems to almost undo any argument he previously made about the revolution.

In Betty Miller Unterberger's essay “Woodrow Wilson and the Russian Revolution,” Unterberger examines the principles that Wilson used to guide his foreign policy during his presidency. She spends only about half a page speaking of the March revolution, as the essay focuses on Wilson's response and reaction to Bolshevism. What little she does say however shows that there is something important to the events in March. She writes that Wilson had been reluctant to enter the war with an autocratic Russia but “now found in a democratic Russia a 'fit partner for a league of honor.’”⁴⁹ Wilson wanted the United States to aid in every way the advancement of democracy in Russia, but later “his hopes were doomed to disappointment” as Bolshevik leaders seized power later that year. What I have just reported is almost all that is included in Unterberger's essay about Wilson and the March revolution.

A Wilson biographer and history professor, H.W. Brands, published *Woodrow Wilson*

⁴⁷ Schild, *Ideology*, 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁹ Unterberger, Betty Miller. *Woodrow Wilson and the Russian Revolution*. ed. Arthur S. Link. Woodrow Wilson and a Revolutionary World. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 51.

in 2003. It is a good account of his early life and upbringings, time at Princeton, the 1912 campaign, and of course his role as president. Concerning World War I, a significant amount is written about Germany's submarine campaign and that it hit Wilson "hard" when it resumed in January 1917 after Germany had previously proposed peace efforts. The Zimmermann telegram is noted as only increasing American anger towards Germany. The revolution is once again, like in many other scholarly works, mentioned only in one paragraph. Brands writes that the revolution was greeted with hope and that the "moral case for intervention on the side of the Allies became much clearer." What is also said is that it was unknown at the time that the provisional government would simply be a "way station in route to a regime more despotic than the old."⁵⁰

George F. Kennan was an American diplomat who joined the Foreign Service in 1926 spending much time in Moscow during his political and historical career which specialized in Russian relations and history. Yet, even his detailed accounts in his first volume which covers 1917 to 1920, he does not give enough attention to the March revolution and the impact it had on American policy. He calls it "one of the least understood of the great political changes in history" and briefly notes some causes for the fall of the tsar.⁵¹ Kennan argues that the resumption of German submarine warfare "virtually sealed" American participation and now it was only a matter of *when* the United States would enter. The first Russian revolution, Kennan writes, appeared to change the ideological composition of the members the U.S. would now fight alongside. The revolution only changed the American perception of the purpose for going into the war but that "America's entry into World War I

⁵⁰ Brands H.W., *Woodrow Wilson*. (New York, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003), 79.

⁵¹ George Kennan, *Soviet-American Relations, 1917-1920, Russia Leaves the War*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1956), 8

was in no wise occasioned by the Russian Revolution.”⁵² Instead, it was only used as a convincing factor to create support for the American war effort. Like other scholars, Kennan regards the March revolution as “immediate historical background” to the bigger events which would come later in the year.

Lloyd Gardner's *Safe for Democracy: The Anglo-American Response to Revolution, 1913-1923* covers not only the Great War but the Russian revolution and others occurring in China and Mexico. The Anglo-American response in the title refers to both Woodrow Wilson in the United States and Lloyd George in Great Britain. An entire chapter is devoted to the spring revolution in Russia, but much of the text deals with British reaction more so than American reaction. Encouragement to Wilson to recognize the new Russian government from Ambassador David Francis and Colonel House is included. Gardner writes that Wilson had been waiting for the right issue to justify his entrance into the war. It is also told that Americans were aware of the possibility of Russia's revolution later being transformed into socialism so American involvement was needed in order to continue the success of the revolution. More focus is given to the Provisional Government and the events before November. Gardner's footnotes put these worries later in April *after* the war declaration. Therefore, the majority of the Russian revolution chapter is dedicated to events that occurred once Wilson had already asked Congress for a declaration of war.

Overall, it is difficult to find sources that completely devote their study to the March Revolution and the impact it had on Woodrow Wilson's decision to go to war or the sentiments it raised by people in the United States. I am in no way saying there is a complete lack of study on the March Revolution, but it is minimal, as more focus is given to the Bolshevik events that would happen later that year. The fall of the tsar and the setting up of a

⁵² Ibid., 15.

provisional government seem as a side note or precursor to the more radical events of November. The March Revolution receives mostly terse mentions and is treated as background to the longer more complex foreign relations that the United States and the then Soviet Union would have. Therefore, the best way to discover what Wilson and his administration thought and felt about Russia in March of 1917 is to look at primary sources written by his cabinet, his close advisors, and Wilson himself.

American Reaction to the Revolution- March 1917

Reading personal and private letters between Woodrow Wilson and his closest personal advisors sheds insight to the thoughts of these inner-government officials. However, President Wilson was not going to ask Congress for a declaration of war unless the American people were also on board. It is necessary, in order to get a broad sense of the sentiments of both public and private citizens, to look at both government documents and articles from prominent newspapers at the time.

Word of the revolution in Russia spread quickly throughout the world. There are records of both letters from Wilson's advisors and of newspaper articles printed just the very next day. Robert Lansing requested that Professor Samuel Harper⁵³ write his views concerning the revolution. As a frequent visitor and scholar on Russia, Lansing sought Harper's comments over the previous day's events in order to relay them to the President. Harper reported that the Russian government under the tsar had not been taking adequate measures to prevent the food crisis occurring in Russian urban centers and that "previous

⁵³ A Russian language professor at the University of Chicago and interpreter of the events of the Russian Revolution

efforts to persuade the Emperor to trust [the] people” had not worked. Lansing’s goal was to explain to Wilson who was involved in the revolution and its participants.⁵⁴ Colonel Edward House also wrote to the President about the March 15th events. He advised Wilson that the United States should:

aid in every way the advancement of democracy in Russia for it will end the peril which a possible alliance between Germany, Russia and Japan might hold for us... Your first inaugural address, your Mobile speech, and similar utterances have accelerated democracy throughout the world, and I am not too sure that the present outcome in Russia is not largely due to your influence...Others have preached democracy, but you are the only potential ruler that has done so, and that makes the difference.⁵⁵

Wilson had already begun to introduce the idea of democracy as a reason for the United States to become involved in the war. His advisors were also in agreement that an ideological reasoning for war would create a much better argument, than an argument rooted in economic reasons (trading rights) or political reasons (connections to the Allies, especially Britain and France). Lansing wrote to Colonel House on March 19th informing House that he had urged the President that the present was the “psychological moment” for declaring war in view of the Russian Revolution. He hoped that this revolution might even cause revolution in Germany.⁵⁶ In a private letter written to Wilson on the same day, Lansing provided the President with his own “premise for immediate participation.” The Allies represented the principles of democracy, while the Central Powers represented the principles of autocracy. In order for there to be world peace, the democratic powers needed to win. Lansing urged the

54 Robert Lansing, “From Robert Lansing, with Enclosure from Samuel Northrup Harper.” March 16, 1917. ed. Arthur S. Link. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 41. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 415.

55 Edward Mandell House, “From Edward Mandell House.” March 17, 1917. ed. Arthur S. Link. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 41. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 422.

56 Robert Lansing, “ Robert Lansing to Edward Mandell House, with Enclosure.” March 19, 1917. ed. Arthur S. Link. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 41. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 429.

president to encourage and strengthen the new democratic government in Russia, and soon. If support was delayed, “conditions might change and the opportune moment when our friendship may be useful may be lost.”⁵⁷

Woodrow Wilson must have surely agreed with these opinions as the United States was the first to recognize the new Provisional Government in Russia. David R. Francis, the U.S. Ambassador to Russia, asked the State Department for permission to promptly recognize the new government. Permission was granted, making the United States the first foreign power to formally do so. Great Britain, France, and Italy were soon to follow, as they hoped to keep Russia in the war against Germany. In a diary entry dated March 23rd, from Secretary of the Navy, Robert Daniels, it was written that at the March 20th cabinet meeting, Wilson “stated his pleasure that America was the first nation to recognize the new Russian government.”⁵⁸

Herman Bernstein, a Russian correspondent to the *New York Times* and who documented the Russian revolution for the *New York Herald*, wrote to the President on March 23rd in order to congratulate him on his “wise and noble act” of recognizing the new government. That fact would serve as a “beautiful inspiration” to both the United States and Russia. He included that those who were now at the head of the Russian government had been influenced by American ideals and guided by American traditions. Bernstein believed that Wilson had done more than any other president to extend the influence of American democracy.⁵⁹ Academic and former president of Harvard University, Charles William Eliot,

⁵⁷ Robert Lansing, “Two Letters from Robert Lansing.” March 19, 1917. ed. Arthur S. Link. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 41. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 425.

⁵⁸ Josephus Daniels, “From the Diary of Josephus Daniels.” March 23, 1917. ed. Arthur S. Link. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 41. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 461.

⁵⁹ Herman Bernstein, “From Herman Bernstein.” March 23, 1917. ed. Arthur S. Link. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 41. Princeton, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 457.

also wrote to Wilson about the revolution. He asked the President if it would be possible for Wilson to include in his address to Congress that the war was a means for advancing democracy in Europe. He cited the Russian Revolution as providing a natural occasion to prove this was the case; he believed it was the best outcome of the war up to that point.⁶⁰ What Eliot must not have known was what was discussed during the cabinet meeting held March 20th which is discussed in the coming section. Wilson was already preparing to use democracy as a justification for U.S. entry into war. As shown, many Wilson advisors and outside academics had hugely positive feelings toward the recent events in Russia.

It seemed the American public did as well. The *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* began their circulations in the second half of the 19th century. By 1917, they were among the most widely read publications in the country and major sources of information for the American public. On March 16th, the *New York Times* reported the events occurring in Russia. They wrote that the Russian Ministry, which had been charged with corruption and incompetence, had been expelled from office. They provided a history of the unfavorable living conditions before the revolution, including food riots, labor strikes and clashes between the revolutionaries and armed government forces. The *Times* reported that because of the revolution, Russia emerged from the “nightmare” and “figuratively smiled under a brilliant flood of sunshine.” Banks, stores and businesses reopened their doors. Basic foods such as bread, sugar, tea, and meat were now becoming available.⁶¹ The following day, the *Times* detailed the workings of a group called the Executive Russian Committee. This committee was formed because they believed the revolution would be permanent and that a

⁶⁰ Charles William Eliot. “From Charles William Eliot.” March 27, 1917. ed. Arthur S. Link. *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, Vol 41. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 481.

⁶¹ "Revolution in Russia; Czar Abdicates; Michael Made Regent, Empress in Hiding; Pro-German Ministers Reported Slain: Leading Figures in Russian Revolution." March 16, 1917, *New York Times (1857-Current file)*, 1.

United States of Russia would eventually arise. Russia would be stronger and richer than it ever was. They quoted a Columbia professor as saying that the new cabinet members were a “capable body of administrators who had the best interests of Russia at heart.”⁶² Harold Williams, a contributor for the *Times*, wrote that the new government was the strongest possible under the conditions, and that the new leaders showed a supreme patriotism, a “beacon of light for the great days through which the Russian people will now pass to create its destiny.”⁶³ In another article published on March 18th, it was written that other countries were pleased with the revolution as well. Spain and England, for example, were responding positively to the news. The *Times* painted a positive image of the revolution and certainly contributed to America’s sympathies to their cause.

The *Wall Street Journal* was also covering the conditions and changes in Russia. In the March 16th paper, the *Journal* explained that the Duma had created a provisional government which would work to accept the wishes of the people and enjoy the people’s confidence. The corrupt ministers of the Imperial government no longer existed and instead were jailed. The new ministers had already ordered railroads, troops and the population to resume their regular activities.⁶⁴ The events in Russia were also having an “enormous influence” on the people of Europe not already under democratic governments, the *Journal* wrote on March 19th. In Germany especially, the Russian developments were creating an articulate public opinion which the autocrats could not suppress or destroy. So not only were prominent government officials supporting the revolution, it seemed the media and American public opinion was also.

62 "Russians here aid new cause..." March 17, 1917. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), 1.

63 Harold Williams, "Praises Patriotism of Russian Leaders..." March 18, 1917. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), 2.

64 "Berlin Reports State of Revolution in Russia..." March 16, 1917. *Wall Street Journal* (1889-Current file), 6.

The “Most Historic” Cabinet Meeting- March 20, 1917

The cabinet meeting held just four days after the announcement of Russia's new Provisional Government was a very significant one. There was only one topic to be discussed, the war in Europe. A great resource that is available to get a real sense of the tensions and discussion of the meeting is Robert Lansing's memorandum. In it, he provided much insight to what President Wilson and the other cabinet members thought about the United States entering the war. Lansing called this meeting the “most historic” of any cabinet meeting he had attended thus far in his career as Secretary of State, because it concerned the “question of war with Germany and the abandonment of the policy of neutrality which has been pursued for two years and a half.”⁶⁵ Wilson had two questions to ask his cabinet members in which he sought their advice. Should he ask for Congress to meet earlier than the April 16th meeting date already planned? And if so, what should he bring and say before them?

Wilson began the meeting by talking about the general political situation, especially the revolution against the autocracy in Russia, which he believed had been successful. Then it was the turn of the cabinet members to speak their opinions and give the President their advice. Many men spoke out adamantly for entering the war at the present moment. These men included William McAdoo, the Secretary of the Treasury, David Franklin Houston, the Secretary of Agriculture, Newton Baker, Secretary of War, Thomas Watt Gregory, the Attorney General, William Redfield, Secretary of Commerce, and Lansing himself. McAdoo

⁶⁵ Lansing, Cabinet memorandum, 438.

was the first to speak. He said that war, to him, seemed like a certainty and that he could see no reason for delaying the acceptance of that fact. Secretary Houston, who followed McAdoo, agreed with him and said he feared an unfortunate impression on America if they were to wait any longer to take a firm stand.

Redfield followed with “his usual certainty of manner and vigor of expression; he was for declaring war and doing everything possible to aid in bringing the Kaiser to his knees.” Baker said things similar to the men who spoke before him, but he added that Congress should meet before April 16th. He also included details regarding how they would raise, equip, and train a large military force.⁶⁶

Lansing’s comments during the meeting were best recorded, because as he said, it was easier for him to remember everything he presented. He was, of course, for the United States entering the war and he wanted it to happen as soon as possible. He provided some of the best evidence that the war would be justified as democratic countries fighting against autocratic ones. He said:

the revolution in Russia, which appeared to be successful, had removed the one objection to affirming that the European War was a war between Democracy and Absolutism; that the only hope of a permanent peace between all nations depended upon the establishment of democratic institutions throughout the world; that no League of would be of value if a powerful autocracy was a member, and that no League of Peace would be necessary if all nations were democratic; and that in going into the war at this time we could do more to advance the cause of Democracy than if we failed to show sympathy with the democratic powers in their struggle against the autocratic government of Germany.⁶⁷

That time was the best time to act since it would have a great moral influence in Russia, according to Lansing. Lansing had more of an influence on Wilson than most are willing to believe. This is proven by the remarks in the meeting and what Wilson will later say in his

⁶⁶ Ibid., 439

⁶⁷ Ibid., 440.

war message to Congress. During the meeting, Wilson asked Lansing how he would be able to incorporate a war for democracy or Russia's revolution into his address to Congress. Lansing advised him to attack the character of autocratic governments, among other democratic versus autocratic ideological reasoning. Wilson responded with: "possibly." Looking at Wilson's war message to Congress however, proves that Wilson definitely took his advice. A deeper examination of the text of his war message will follow in a consequent section. At this cabinet meeting, Lansing would once again bring up the fact that declaring war solely based on the reasoning that American ships had been sunk would cause debate. Now that Russia was no longer an autocratic system, a "sounder basis" for democratic nations suppressing autocratic governments could be used.

Other cabinet members such as Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels and Postmaster General Albert Sidney Burleson, who were not as animated and aggressive proponents for the war (and had even been previous, were still in agreement that this was the time the United States should be involved. Another insight into the happenings of the meeting is provided by Secretary Daniels. In his private diary, on an entry dated March 23, 1917, Daniels wrote that Wilson had expressed hope that the revolution would be permanent. Wilson, with a smile, said the revolution "ought to be good... because it has a professor at the head."⁶⁸

By the end of the meeting, it was clear that there was a unanimous decision by Wilson's cabinet members that not only was United States involvement inevitable, but that this was the opportune moment to call Congress into a special session. As the cabinet meeting was adjourning, Wilson called back Lansing and Burleson to ask what they thought would be an appropriate time to call for a session. Because it would take some time to prepare necessary legislation needed to submit to Congress, it was agreed that Monday, April

68 Daniels, *Diary*, 461.

2nd would be the earliest date Congress could be conveniently summoned. It was officially decided, just a couple days after the Russian Revolution, on March 20th that Wilson would speak before Congress and ask for a declaration of war.⁶⁹

The World Must be Made Safe for Democracy... and Beyond

There were “very serious” choices of policy to be made, told President Wilson to Congress on Monday, April 2, 1917. It would become one of the most famous presidential addresses to the United States Congress. The war in Europe had begun almost three years ago. Millions of lives had already been lost, property and cities destroyed. It was at this was the time when the United States would join the cause on the side of the Allies. In his address, Wilson first discussed Germany's unrestricted submarine attacks, their promises of cessation, and their continuation of attacks despite their pledged words. Wilson then said he wanted to make sure America's motives and objects were. He spoke

our object is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power and to set up amongst the really free and self-governed people of the world such a concert of purpose and of action as will... the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people.⁷⁰

Wilson would have not been able to speak these words if he was joining the fight alongside an autocratic government of Russia, especially if in the address he planned on saying that no autocratic government could be trusted in the development of peace. It had to be a league of

⁶⁹ Lansing, *Cabinet Memorandum*, 441.

⁷⁰ Woodrow Wilson, “Message to Congress.” April 2, 1917. *Woodrow Wilson: Essential Writings and Speeches of the Scholar-President*. ed. Mario Dinunzio. (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 400.

honor without corruption in the heart of its members.

Wilson also speaks of Russia specifically, asking if “not every American [felt] that assurance has been added to our hope for the future peace of the world by the wonderful and heartening things” that had been happening in Russia in the recent weeks. With the autocracy gone, the Russian people could use their majesty and might to join the forces that were fighting for freedom, justice, and peace in the world. Wilson told Congress Russia was now a fit partner for a league of honor.⁷¹ Concluding, Wilson said the United States was going to fight for what was nearest to our hearts, democracy, and for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their government. Four days later, on April 6th, a joint resolution signed by Speaker of the House, Champ Clark and President Woodrow Wilson, was signed declaring that a state of war existed between the United States and the Imperial German Government.

The idea of fighting for democracy went past just the address to Congress on April 2nd. President Wilson issued a proclamation to the American people on April 15th, asking them to “do their bit for America.” Again, he said it was a war democracy for for human rights. He asked Americans to contribute to the war effort in every way they could, but especially spoke to industrial workers, farmers, miners, and young men to join the forces. If all these people worked together, the United States would be able to show the world the efficiency of a great democracy.⁷² Former president, William Howard Taft, delivered an address at Union College in New York about the reasonings for American entry into the war. Certainly, he spoke of Germany breaking international laws by their submarine attacks, but he also mentioned Russia. Russia had become a democracy, so the United States was fighting

⁷¹ Ibid., 401.

⁷² Woodrow Wilson, “Do your bit for America.” April 15, 1917. *The World War I Document Archive*. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1996).

shoulder to shoulder with the democracies of the world against the military dynasties of the world. This was the “issue at present.” He argued that when a form of government has a “visible policy against the welfare and happiness of the rest of the world family, we have a right and duty to see that such a foreign policy is stopped and stamped out forever.”⁷³

Conclusion

So was it just a coincidence between the timing of the March Russian Revolution and the prompt declaration for war? With all the evidence presented, it shows that indeed, that Russia's shift from an autocratic government to a democracy greatly helped President Wilson justify America's involvement in World War I. It provided for a more sound argument. The Zimmermann telegram and Germany's policy of unrestricted submarine warfare were surely factors in the decision, but they were not the only events that deserve attention in scholarly literature. Correspondence between Wilson and his advisors, cabinet members, and academic friends prove that the Russian Revolution is entitled a closer look and should be considered a major reason for American involvement, in addition to the two factors already immensely researched. As is popularly known, Russia would later fall into the hands of the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, and remain the Soviet Union unless its collapse in 1991. For a couple of months in 1917, however, Wilson and the rest of the world had hope Russia would become a strong democratic nation, and the United States took this opportunity to do what it could in the assistance of this endeavor, even if that meant joining the First World War.

⁷³ William Howard Taft. “Address at Union College, Schenectady, New York.” June 13, 1917. *Source Records of the Great War*. ed. Charles F. Horne. Vol 5. (National Alumni, 1923).

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