

0. A BELLIGERENT MILITARY - Story Preface

1. A WORLD AT WAR

2. THE LUSITANIA

3. MUNITIONS ON BOARD?

4. A TERRIBLE COINCIDENCE

5. TORPEDO ATTACK on LUSITANIA

6. DEATH OF A SHIP

7. VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS

8. AMMUNITION ON BOARD?

9. WAR MOMS

10. A BELLIGERENT MILITARY

11. FATAL RUMORS

12. ALL IN THE FAMILY

13. AMERICA ENTERS WWI

14. THE WAR EFFORT

15. END OF THE WAR



Germany disregards Belgium's neutrality as it overruns the country at the start of World War I. This image depicts the Belgian town of [Diksmude](#) during the early months of World War I. By the end of the war, Diksmude was essentially obliterated. Click on the image for a better view.

[James W. Gerard](#), the United States ambassador to Germany in 1914, was at the center of the diplomatic world in Europe. He heard from all sides as potential combatants lined up. He had access to newspaper accounts wherein Germany disclaimed responsibility when war broke out in late July, 1914.

As ambassador when *Lusitania* sank, Gerard had access to Kaiser Wilhelm II. His recollections provide a fascinating, first-hand account.

Did the Kaiser (the link takes you to his [royal palace](#) at Potsdam) approve of the *Lusitania* sinking? He told the American ambassador he did not. (Gerard [did not believe](#) him.)

Did the Kaiser agree with the "ruthless submarine war" engaged in by his navy? He said not. But many of his powerful military men thought otherwise. And those powerful military leaders were unafraid of American involvement in the war.

Gerard [relates](#) what he knew at the time:

The military, of course, absolutely despised America and claimed that America could do no more harm than it was doing then to Germany; and that possibly the war preparations of America might cut down the amount of the munitions available for export to the enemies of the Empire. As to anything that America could do in a military way, the Navy and the Army were unanimous in saying that as a military or naval factor the United States might be considered as less than nothing.

The Kaiser, who did not share his military's view of America, had responded to President [Wilson's](#) offer to mediate BEFORE Germany and Britain commenced hostilities against each other. Wilhelm II gave Gerard a [handwritten](#) letter [for](#) Wilson. The German leader wanted his [communiqué](#) published. On the advice of an unnamed source close to the Kaiser, however, Gerard withheld the [letter](#) from the press. (This link takes you to a text [version](#)).

It is an extraordinary document, [signed by](#) Wilhelm II. Among other things, it discusses:

Belgian neutrality which had to be violated by Germany on strategical grounds...

What happened in Belgium, of course, was the key to all-out, all-inclusive war. And it was one of the significant events which caused Americans to turn against Germany.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/A-BELLIGERENT-MILITARY-Lusitania-Sinking>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/A-BELLIGERENT-MILITARY-Lusitania-Sinking>

Questions 2 Ponder

When Was America's Military Considered as "Less than Nothing?"

Before the U.S. entered World War I, Germany's military leaders agreed that "as a military or naval factor the United States might be considered as less than nothing."

James W. Gerard, the U.S. ambassador to Germany in 1914, believed that Germany's military leaders intensely disliked America because, among other reasons, the United States was exporting munitions to countries like Britain:

The military, of course, absolutely despised America and claimed that America could do no more harm than it was doing then to Germany; and that possibly the war preparations of America might cut down the amount of the munitions available for export to the enemies of the [German] Empire.

What do you think explains Germany's attitude toward America's military in the early part of World War I?

Before reading this quote, had you ever heard America's military described as "less than nothing?" Explain your answer.

Do you think military leaders, on both sides of a conflict, tend to be over-confident before war begins? If so, why do you think this occurs?

Media Stream



James W. Gerard

Image online, courtesy the U.S. Library of Congress.

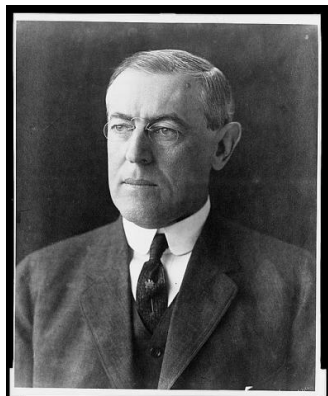
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Royal Palace at Potsdam

Image online, courtesy Brigham Young University Library.

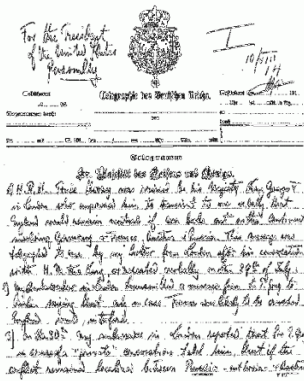
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President Wilson

Image online, courtesy the U.S. Library of Congress.

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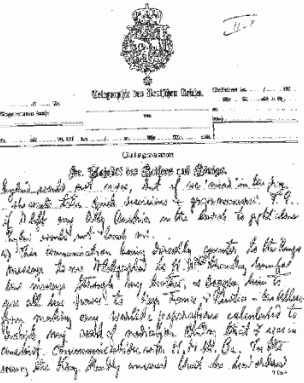


Handwritten Letter from Kaiser Wilhelm to President Wilson

Online, courtesy the [byu.org website](http://www.byu.org). Image of the Kaiser's letter to President Wilson included in *My Four Years in Germany* by American Ambassador to Germany, James W. Gerard.

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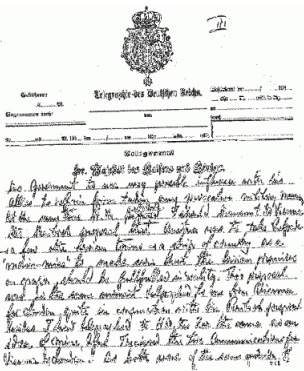


Kaiser Wilhelm - Letter to Woodrow Wilson, Page 2

Online, courtesy the [byu.org website](http://www.byu.org). Image of letter included in *My Four Years in Germany* by American Ambassador, James W. Gerard.

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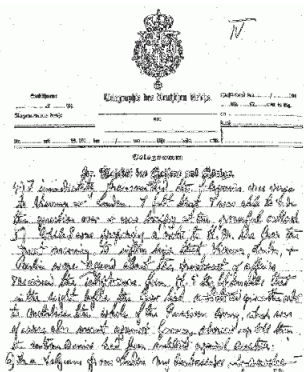


Kaiser Wilhelm - Letter to Woodrow Wilson, Page 3

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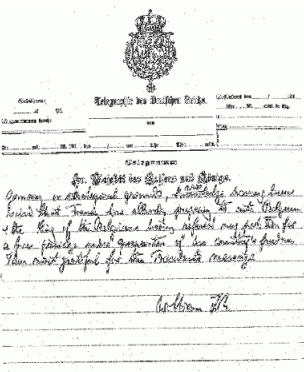


Kaiser Wilhelm - Letter to Woodrow Wilson, Page 4

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Kaiser Wilhelm - Letter to Woodrow Wilson, Page 5

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A BELLIGERENT MILITARY

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