War, Neutrality, and Humanitarian Relief: The Expansion of U.S. Diplomatic Activity during the Great War, 1914–1917

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Introduction

Between the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 and U.S. entry as a belligerent in April 1917, Department of State officials took on unprecedented responsibilities that forever changed the practice of U.S. diplomacy. They rescued stranded fellow citizens across Europe and promoted the welfare of those who stayed behind. They supported herculean private efforts to provide humanitarian aid to civilians on both sides. At the behest of warring governments, U.S. officials also sought to improve the conditions of millions captured soldiers and to protect belligerents’ property in enemy territory.

No more prepared than other governments for the scale and scope of the catastrophe, American diplomats confronted major impediments as they faced vast new responsibilities—poor communications, inadequate operating procedures, insufficient oversight, and myriad personnel difficulties hampered U.S. initiatives. A strikingly small cohort of overworked Department officers serving abroad suffered privation and exhaustion as they attempted to alleviate untold misery. Most importantly, U.S. officials could not compel belligerent states to cooperate in implementing neutral humanitarian policies. Despite monumental efforts and achievements, in the normal fate of mediators, the Department of State encountered criticism from all sides for its efforts.

Through all those difficulties and despite incomplete success, Department personnel both embodied the country’s arrival on the world stage and accomplished remarkable achievements in the service of humankind. In so doing, they demonstrated a professional dedication that triggered reconsideration of the status and structure of U.S. diplomacy. The experiences of 1914–1917 accelerated the Department’s transformation from a modest, loosely-organized agency comprised largely of semi-autonomous foreign outposts into a professionalized, worldwide organization under centralized direction from Washington. The commitment to act as a neutral Great Power forged the foundation of the modern U.S. capacity to promote its vision of global interest in a globalized world.

In contrast to most earlier studies of U.S. diplomacy in WWI that generally focus on the high diplomacy of the time, this study is designed to tell the story of tireless, endless, usually improvised, and often hazardous efforts of U.S. diplomats in support of U.S. citizens, and in the conduct of the “protecting power” humanitarian efforts accepted by the United States in the first days of the war. This study builds upon the original groundbreaking research of Dr. Lindsay Krasnoff describing U.S. diplomatic activities in France during August–December 1914.

(https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.history.state.gov/wwi/views-from-embassy-paris/Views%20from%20Embassy%20Paris%20WWI.pdf) Her work illuminated a
much larger untold story about how U.S. officials in Europe and Washington, DC, strove to reduce the distress generated by the Great War.

Subsequently, Dr. Seth Rotramel, Dr. Charles Hawley, and Dr. William B. McAllister investigated Department of State-related operations in other key countries for the entire 1914–1917 period of U.S. neutrality. Lacking the resources to study every government involved in the war, Department Historian Dr. Stephen Randolph focused the effort on Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Balkan region, planning to extend the effort to include the United Kingdom as resources permit. The Office then secured the services of summer intern Mr. Jack Ulses to conduct the majority of the research for the Russia chapter.

This work focuses on U.S. neutral-humanitarian activity during 1914–1917. It provides the groundwork for additional study of this period, and provides essential perspective on the pathway from the wartime experience to the modern, professionalized Department of State created by the 1924 Rogers Act.

Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of Departmental operations by outlining prewar efforts to place its operations on a progressive, scientific basis, and to professionalize the Diplomatic and Consular Services before and during the war. Chapter 2 highlights the key events during the first weeks of war that set the stage for all subsequent Department efforts to repatriate Americans, to accept the protecting power role, and to facilitate the efforts of private U.S. entities supplying humanitarian aid. Chapter 3 details how Department officials in Germany, especially Ambassador James Gerard, attempted to adhere to the dictates of humanitarian parity under trying conditions. Chapter 4 presents the perspective of Diplomatic and Consular Service officers in Austria-Hungary as they struggled to interpret and enact directives on a daily, person-by-person basis. Chapter 5 focuses primarily on the immense challenges facing U.S. officials who sought to help the millions of prisoners of war languishing in Russia while simultaneously maintaining neutrality. Chapter 6 highlights unique complications that arose in the Balkans, especially with regard to basic Departmental operations and providing support for humanitarian initiatives in the region. Chapter 7 briefly outlines the administrative, personnel, and financial complications generated during the 1914–1917 period of philanthropic neutrality that burdened the Department long after the Armistice concluded hostilities.

The work of U.S. diplomats during the first years of the Great War forged expectations about the American role in global affairs that continue today. When a crisis occurs, U.S. diplomats frequently find themselves on the front line, responding to rapidly-developing events in environments over which they exercise little control. The extent to which they succeed rarely escapes criticism, but the assumption that a U.S. diplomat’s job includes an obligation not only to report, but also to act, stems largely from the precedents established by their forebears during the Great War.
Abbreviations and Terms

**Ambassador**, the highest diplomatic rank recognized by governments. In 1914 the U.S. accredited 11 of its 48 overseas diplomatic posts at the ambassadorial level (Austria-Hungary, Brazil, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Spain, and the Ottoman Empire).

**ANRC**, Records of the American National Red Cross, 1881–2008 (collection 783), held at USNA. The formal name of the American Red Cross, used in the endnotes because the U.S. National Archives uses this designation to identify the record group.

**ARC**, American Red Cross. This designation is used throughout the narrative except in the endnotes (see above).

**Attaché**, diplomatic missions routinely included Military, Naval, and Commercial Attachés. The Department also utilized a non-specific “Attaché” designation to indicate an individual “attached” to a U.S. Embassy or Legation, with the concurrence of the host government. The title facilitated the deployment of additional military and naval observers during the war, and also provided non-military individuals (often private citizens) diplomatic status that enabled them to perform important functions such as POW camp inspections.

**CDF**, Central Decimal File.

**Central Powers**, in August 1914, Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Ottoman Empire entered hostilities on the side of the Central Powers on October 29, 1914, when Ottoman naval vessels bombarded sites in Russia. Bulgaria entered hostilities on the side of the Central Powers October 14, 1915, by declaring war on Serbia. The prewar Central Power alliance included Italy, but the Rome government declined to enter the war in 1914.

**Clerk**, when capitalized, denotes a career employee of the Diplomatic Service inferior to the position of Secretary. At foreign posts Clerks usually held the most junior position, which involved supervising the non-professional staff. When not capitalized, “clerk” denotes a salaried Department employee not of the Diplomatic or Consular Services.

**Consul/consular**, Department officials responsible for the promotion of trade and commercial ties, protecting U.S. citizens abroad, and determining citizenship status.

**Consular Agent**, a subordinate position, filled by a person who exercised consular authority in the absence of a regularly appointed consular officer.

**Department, or, the Department**, unless otherwise indicated, denotes the Department of State.

**Diplomat/diplomatic**, Department officials responsible for government-to-government relations.
Embassy, the title for missions ranked at the Ambassadorial level.

Entente Powers, Serbia, Montenegro, France, Russia, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Japan all declared war on the Central Powers in August 1914. Italy entered hostilities on the side of the Entente Powers by declaring war on Austria-Hungary on May 23, 1915. Portugal entered hostilities on the side of the Entente Powers on March 9, 1916, when Germany declared war on Portugal. Romania entered hostilities on the side of the Entente Powers on August 27, 1916, by declaring war on Austria-Hungary. In a series of events and pronouncements between mid-June and early July 1917, most notably the abdication of King Constantine and the reinstatement of Eleftherios (also spelled Eleutherios) Venizelos as Prime Minister, Greece severed relations with Central Powers governments and effectively joined the Entente Powers. Colonies and other dependencies joined the war effort at the time the states responsible for their foreign affairs did so. Several Latin American governments as well as China and Siam joined the Entente Powers in the final 18 months of the war.

The United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, and on Austria-Hungary on December 7, 1917, but considered itself an “Associated Power” (rather than an “allied” belligerent) because the Wilson administration did not support many of the war aims espoused by Entente Powers.

Foreign Relations of the United States, The official foreign policy documentary publication of the U.S. government. For the historical development of the series, see https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus-history. To access Foreign Relations volumes see https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments.

HMG, His Majesty’s Government (United Kingdom).

Legation, the title of a diplomatic mission ranked at the Ministerial level.

Minister, highest title accorded to U.S. representatives abroad in the 18th and 19th centuries, which remained the predominant level of accreditation well into the 20th century. The first U.S. Ambassador was named in 1893, and Ambassadorial-level appointments became more common as the 20th century progressed.

Petrograd, the name of the capital city of Russia beginning September 1, 1914.

POW, prisoner(s) of war.

RG 59, Record Group 59, Department of State records, held at USNA.

RG 84, Record Group 84, Records of Foreign Service Posts (Consular records) of the Department of State, held at USNA.
St. Petersburg, the name of the capital city of Russia until September 1, 1914, when the Imperial Russian government renamed the city Petrograd.

Secretary, when in reference to members of the Diplomatic Service, denotes career Department diplomatic personnel below the level of Ambassador or Minister. The First Secretary served as the second in command, roughly the equivalent of today’s Deputy Chief of Mission. Larger missions might have one or more Second Secretaries and Third Secretaries, each tasked with specific areas of responsibility.

U.K., United Kingdom (consisting of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland during the Great War era.) “Great Britain” referred to England, Scotland, and Wales during this time period.

USNA, United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

Note on Converting WWI-Era Dollars into Current Values
Chapter 1
Early Twentieth Century Reform Initiatives to U.S. Diplomatic Practices

Significant impetus for institutional reform of the Department of State arose after the U.S. acquired new diplomatic responsibilities in the wake of the 1898 Spanish-American War. The acquisition by the United States of former Spanish colonial holdings forced Congress to acknowledge the woeful inadequacies of the Department in meeting its new administrative responsibilities.

Since the founding of the republic, the Department operated two types of overseas representation, diplomatic and consular. The Diplomatic Service, members of which worked out of embassies and legations, managed government-to-government relationships. The Consular Service provided support for Americans traveling abroad, promoted the United States’ burgeoning international trade, and increasingly adjudicated cases involving determination of U.S. citizenship. By modern standards, the two services had remarkably little contact with the Department. Few members of either branch visited the Department before voyaging to post. Observers often remarked that the Department of State in Washington was the last place in the world to know what was going on in diplomatic and consular posts abroad. Moreover, the manner in which the Ambassador or Minister exercised “chief of mission” authority over consular officials, and the exact protocol for posts’ communications with Washington, remained less than fully articulated.

Loopholes in recent personnel reforms also rendered it difficult for Department principal officers to exert control. The civil service provisions of the 1882 Pendleton Act did not apply to the Diplomatic or Consular Services, and therefore those positions remained subject to political patronage and bribery. Private individuals—even non-U.S. citizens—could buy appointments or leverage political connections to secure a consular post in hopes of making a fortune by collecting fees on goods imported to the United States. The 1906 Lodge Act addressed some problems by stipulating that consular officials (with the exception of Consular Agents) must be regular employees of the government, paid only by salary. However, the Act failed to bring coherency to consulate management because it classified consular officials into pay grades based on location,
rather than on the basis of rank in the services as the Department had advocated. Because some posts commanded significantly higher salaries than others, Department officials could not control transfers, and the same profit motive stymied standardization.

While the Lodge Act addressed some of the worst inequities of the Consular Service, the political spoils system still controlled the Diplomatic Service, which remained unreformed and jealous of its elite status in relation to the Consular Service. Presidents issued Executive Orders to address other reforms for both services (for example, competitive entrance exams and merit-based promotions), but such promulgations did not enjoy the power of law; they only remained in force at the sufferance of subsequent administrations.

Departmental reorganization also advanced slowly. At the time of the Spanish-American War, the Department managed its overseas responsibilities through two diplomatic bureaus and two corresponding consular bureaus. The first diplomatic and first consular bureaus managed relations with Europe, China, and Japan, while the second covered Latin America, the Mediterranean region, Russia, Hawaii, and Liberia. After much wrangling, proponents of Departmental reform abandoned hopes for Congressional action and used Presidential Executive Orders to restructure the Department in 1909. Those decrees created four reconfigured diplomatic and four corresponding consular bureaus to oversee relations with Western Europe, the Near East, the Far East, and Latin America.

Further reforms stalled with the assumption of a new party to the White House in 1913. The spoils system remained in effect with regard to ambassadorial and ministerial-level appointments. By the summer of 1914, President Woodrow Wilson had named non-career diplomatic representatives, in almost all cases Democratic Party supporters, to 39 of the 44 extant chief of mission postings. The President, however, supported the merit system for the Consular Service and subordinate diplomatic officers he inherited from previous executive orders. In a March 9, 1914, letter to a colleague, Joseph Grew, First Secretary in Berlin and later Ambassador to Japan, observed both change and continuity:

The Democrats came in last year after having been out of power for 16 years; they were accordingly more hungry than usual and promptly ate up most of the ambassadorial and ministerial posts, thus undoing the good work of forming a permanent Service started by Republicans. There has however, so far as I am aware, never before been such a row in the press all over the country over this looting of the Service. Formerly it was taken for granted that every single official would be changed; now it is spoken of as a scandal that those ministers who have worked their way up from the ranks should be turned out, although the entire Consular Service and all the secretaries have been left alone.
The career of James W. Gerard, U.S. Ambassador to Germany from 1913–1917, exemplifies the longstanding norms of American diplomatic practice. Before his appointment, Gerard was a rising star in the Democratic Party of New York. His political career started after serving as a staff officer in the Spanish-American War. At the conclusion of four years as the chairman of the Democratic Campaign Committee for New York County, he was elected to the New York Supreme Court in 1907, serving until his appointment on July 28, 1913, as Ambassador to Germany. Gerard learned of his appointment en route to a European vacation aboard the German luxury cruise liner Imperator. Gerard’s friend and shipmate Henry Morgenthau, future Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, helped him prepare for his debut at the German imperial court by translating “a little speech for me into German, which I managed to get through after painfully learning it by heart.” Gerard noted later that “now that I have a better knowledge of German, a cold sweat breaks out when I think of the awful German accent with which I delivered that address.”

Upon arriving in Berlin to take up his duties in September 1913, Gerard devoted considerable attention to his housing needs. No fixed Embassy building existed because the U.S. Government typically did not own or rent property in European capitals. Instead, the Department provided the Ambassador an allowance with which to contract his own arrangements. Because the wealthy, politically-connected men who often represented the United States abroad found that stipend inadequate, they used their own funds to secure lodgings appropriate to their station. Gerard found what he described as a “palace” on Wilhelmplatz for both his residence and Embassy offices, conveniently located opposite the Chancellor’s residence and the Foreign Office. However, until the renovations were completed in January 1914, Gerard and his wife, Mary, lived and worked in the world-renowned Hotel Esplanade. To cover the extensive renovations that Gerard contracted, as well as the rent due for the first year, the Ambassador expended over $15,000 (approximately $365,000 in 2017 dollars) of his personal fortune.

When Gerard presented his accreditation Emperor William II in September, he encountered a longstanding dilemma of American diplomacy: tension between representing U.S. republican ideals and European courtly expectations. Gerard noted that “This presentation is quite a ceremony. Three coaches were sent for me and my staff, coaches like that in which Cinderella goes to her ball, mostly glass, with white wigged coachmen, outriders in white wigs and standing footmen holding on to the back part of the coach.” To avoid criticism at home, Gerard bucked diplomatic protocol by not wearing a uniform to his meeting with the Kaiser, although my predecessors, on occasions of this kind, had worn a sort of fancy diplomatic uniform designed by themselves, I decided to abandon this and return to the democratic, if unattractive and uncomfortable, dress-suit, simply because the newspapers of America and certain congressmen, while they have had no objection to the wearing of uniforms
by the army and navy, police and postmen, and do not expect officers to lead their troops into battle in dress-suits, have, nevertheless, had a most extraordinary prejudice against American diplomats following the usual custom of adopting a diplomatic uniform.¹¹

Gerard continued to encounter the myriad political complications of mingling with old world aristocrats, which required him to balance the conceits of the U.S. sense of republican simplicity with the exaggerated pomp of European imperial court life: “Invariable custom requires a new Ambassador in Berlin to give two receptions, one to the Diplomatic Corps and the other to all those people who have the right to go to court. These are the officials, nobles and officers of the army and navy, and such other persons as have been presented at court.”¹² These two receptions, along with a succession of formal balls, in massive chandeliered halls, were extravagant affairs with orchestras dressed in medieval costumes, trumpets, powdered wigs, countesses in gowns with long trains, guards of honor dressed in the uniforms of the time of Frederick the Great, along with wave after wave of nobles and court officials. Gerard dressed, “by night or by day, in the infernal dress-suit.”¹³ Upon returning to the United States in 1917, Gerard reflected on the European diplomatic culture shattered by the war:

Writing of all these things and looking out from a sky-scraper in New York, these details of court life seem very frivolous and far away. But an Ambassador is compelled to become part of this system. The most important conversations with the Emperor sometimes take place at court functions, and the Ambassador and his secretaries often gather their most useful bits of information over tea cups or with the cigars after dinner.¹⁴

As those traditional diplomatic conventions disintegrated during the first year of war, internal division in Washington over the policy of neutrality caused tension and eventually turnover at the pinnacle of the Department. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan’s departure in June 1915 and Wilson’s appointment of Department Counselor Robert Lansing as his replacement resulted directly from disagreement about the issue that most tested the U.S. policy of neutrality. The German submarine sinking of the American-flagged Lusitania in May 1915, which killed 139 Americans, caused a major diplomatic crisis and nearly led to a declaration of war by the United States against Germany. A longtime peace advocate, Bryan resigned instead of supporting Wilson’s protests against the German Government, which the Secretary considered a step toward U.S. involvement in the war. Lansing, second in command at the Department and much more involved in its day-to-day operations, accepted Wilson’s offer to succeed Bryan.

The exigencies of the Great War, along with public demand at home, galvanized Congressional resolve to address the Department’s inadequacies. While the United States remained neutral for the first three years of the conflict, the activities of the Department and the Diplomatic and Consular Services grew exponentially as U.S.
representatives assumed diplomatic responsibilities of belligerent countries, inspected prisoner of war camps, facilitated Red Cross operations, and provided relief to Americans stranded in Europe. Once unknown to most Americans, the Department developed into the principal clearinghouse of domestic inquiry concerning the fate of those traveling or living abroad.

Department officials leveraged the greater exposure of the Diplomatic and Consular Services to convince Congress to pass the Reclassification Act of 1915. Impetus for that reform came shortly before the war when William Phillips, Wilson’s Republican appointee for Third Assistant Secretary of State with oversight of Diplomatic Service personnel, convinced Secretary Bryan in June 1914 to support a bill already before Congress.\textsuperscript{15} After five months of considerable strain on the Diplomatic and Consular Services caused by the war, the bill passed into law on February 5, 1915.

Although vague in its stipulations, the Act enshrined into law Departmental polices and executive orders by mandating the appointment of consular officials based on examination and their promotion based on merit. The law also provided a guarantee of tenure in the Diplomatic Service for diplomatic officers below the ministerial/ambassadorial level. Additionally, the Act applied the system of appointment of classes to individuals rather than posts. The law also prohibited diplomatic officers from leveraging their office to make money in business ventures or by accepting fees for practicing law.\textsuperscript{16} As a result, salaries did not vary by location, which removed the profit motive and eased transfers between posts. Congress appropriated funds to increase staff in Washington, which benefited the Department’s domestic operations. Domestic payroll grew throughout the war—from 234 Department employees in 1910 to 708 by 1920.\textsuperscript{17} Those reforms expanded the Department’s capacity to respond to the massive challenges it faced during the period of wartime neutrality, and represented an interim step toward a modern, professionalized diplomatic service.

\textit{Office of the Historian}

\textit{Dr. Seth Rotramel and Dr. William B. McAllister}

\textit{April 6, 2017}
Notes to Chapter 1


2 Wilbur Carr, Chief of the Consular Bureau until 1924 and Assistant Secretary of State until 1937, noted that before the 1906 reforms appointees to consulates departed for their posts “without ever calling at the Department of State...” Katherine Crane, *Mr. Carr of State* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1960), p. 125.

3 When testifying before the House Committee on Foreign Relations during the second session of the 59th Congress, in January 1908, Secretary of State Elihu Root noted that before the advent of reforms in 1906, “the State Department was the last place for information to be received about anything that went wrong at a consulate.” *Ibid.*, p. 123.

4 Rachel West’s book on Department operations and personnel covering 1913–1914, *The Department of State on the Eve of the First World War* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1978), p. 3, states: “I could not discover what the rules of correspondence from embassies and legations to the department in Washington were; there appear to have been rules, but no one bothered to preserve them.”


11 *Ibid.*, pp. 22–23. Only a few months earlier at the wedding of Wilhelm’s daughter, Grew wore a diplomatic uniform despite the potential domestic criticism. He described it as “the most uncomfortable thing you can imagine with its choking collar and tight Duke of Wellington boots, but [it] is better than a dress suit on such occasions.” Grew, *Turbulent Era*, p. 109.

12 Gerard, *My Four Years in Germany*, p. 20.


16 Public Law, No. 242, S. 5614, February 5, 1915, 63rd Congress. Session III, Chap. 23.—An Act For the Improvement of the Foreign Service.

17 Crane, *Mr. Carr of State*, pp. 176–179; [https://history.state.gov/about/faq/department-personnel](https://history.state.gov/about/faq/department-personnel).
Chapter 2
The Outbreak of War and the American Relief Expedition, 1914

Assassination and Crisis
Like almost all observers, U.S. officials did not think the June 28, 1914, assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand would lead to a Great Power war. Friction in the Balkans, including armed conflict between smaller states in the region, occurred with sufficient frequency that even the murder of the heir to the Austrian throne by Greater-Serbia nationalists did not generate undue alarm. At the cockpit of the dispute in Vienna, Ambassador Frederick Penfield proceeded with plans for a vacation to the United States, Embassy First Secretary U. Grant Smith travelled to London, and the Department approved stateside trips for both Budapest Consul-General William Coffin and Vienna Consul-General Charles Denby.¹ In Germany, Ambassador James Gerard continued his pleasant summer program of Baltic Sea yacht races and sumptuous dinners among the elite.² Neither the Department nor the Tsar hastened newly appointed Ambassador to Russia George T. Marye’s departure for Petrograd.³ U.S. Ambassador to Italy Thomas Nelson Page departed for America via Paris, where Vice-Consul Dewitt Poole dismissed the news from Sarajevo as “simply another Balkan assassination.”⁴

The crisis came to a head several weeks later. On July 5, Emperor Wilhelm assured the Austrian government that Germany would support retaliatory action against Serbia. Through mid-July officials of the two states negotiated the precise wording of an ultimatum to be delivered to Belgrade. As a pretext for invasion, on July 23 Austria presented Serbia with a list of demands that threatened Serbian sovereignty. The next day marked the beginning the “July Crisis.” Although Belgrade accepted all but one clause of the ultimatum, Vienna nevertheless rejected—with Berlin’s blessing—the conditional acceptance. Up to this point, few people knew of the Central Powers’ machinations, but on July 24 the Austro-German intransigent position became public. The system of Great Power alliances magnified the regional conflict into a European conflagration: Russia backed Serbia, causing Germany to promise Austria-Hungary full support, which triggered Russia’s alliance with France. On July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and Russia mobilized for war. On August 1, Germany declared war on Russia. By August 3, Germany declared war on France. A day later, Germany invaded Belgium, in response to which the United Kingdom declared war on Germany. The same day, August 4, President Woodrow Wilson declared U.S. neutrality, extolling Americans to remain neutral “in thought as well as in action.” By then the Department had directed its vacationing officials scattered on both sides of the Atlantic to return to post as soon as feasible amid the unpredictable travel disruptions that accompanied the march to war. For example, Consul-General Coffin required twelve days to travel from France to Budapest, entirely by automobile, “owing to repeated arrests and detentions and detours necessary to avoid zones of military operations.”⁵ Consul-General Denby
made it all the way to Washington by August 3, only to receive orders to return immediately on USS North Carolina along with ten other consular officials. His journey back to Vienna took over three weeks.⁶

Financial Collapse
The July Crisis triggered a global financial meltdown, which posed the most immediate challenge to U.S. diplomatic representatives in Europe. The open, integrated nature of prewar financial markets rendered them fragile, which exacerbated the severity of the crisis. Capital flowed freely throughout the world via the financial houses of London, the epicenter of global credit and banking. War tensions caused the closure of the Bank of England, European and American stock exchanges shuttered their doors for almost six months, and nearly all exchanges across the world closed for at least six weeks. Austria’s ultimatum initiated a massive sell-off of assets in exchange for sterling, already unstable owing to tensions between Catholic Irish Nationalists and Protestant Ulster unionists. The crisis deprived foreign banks of their ability to cover end-of-month short-term call loans, causing London’s key financial markets to collapse within a week. The rising cost of sterling (owing to its sudden scarcity) when coupled with the pound’s strict fidelity to gold convertibility, rapidly increased gold prices in London and on the Continent relative to New York. On July 29, the sterling/dollar exchange rate increased sufficiently to entice profit-seeking U.S. firms to ship gold to London. By July 31, the exchange rate exceeded all records. Gold shipments between July 27 and August 1 totaled more than $30 million (approximately $750 million in 2017 dollars), equivalent to one-sixth of the Bank of England’s pre-crisis gold reserve.⁷ As a consequence, numerous gold-laden ships plied the Atlantic just at the moment when Europe went to war.

The Department of State and its representatives abroad suddenly found themselves called upon to facilitate the security and transfer of U.S. citizens’ private assets. For example, the German-flagged luxury liner SS Kronprinzessin Cecilie, carrying over $10,000,000 in U.S. gold, failed to arrive on schedule in Britain. The company insuring the gold for U.S. bankers feared the German government had rerouted the ship to a home port to steal the gold, and quickly requested Secretary Bryan to “…kindly take up this matter at once with the German government and make proper representations that this gold is the property of neutrals and that all their rights should be recognized and strictly observed.” Bryan immediately cabled Gerard concerning the suspected foul play but, indicative of the confusion in the first days of the war, his instructions admitted that the “Department is in doubt as to real ownership of this gold…” Bryan left it to his Ambassador to investigate: “…but in case you ascertain that it is the property of the American consignors you will make immediate and suitable representations to the German Government with a view to protect the interests of Americans in the shipment.” Gerard already knew, however, that the German government had ordered Kronprinzessin Cecilie to return to the United States to avoid capture, and thus he could do nothing to address U.S. bankers’ concerns.⁸
Launching the American Relief Commission
The chaotic global financial collapse determined the U.S. government’s first relief priority: repatriating an unknown but substantial number of Americans stranded in Europe. The breakdown rendered letters of credit from British or American banks worthless on the Continent. U.S. citizens vacationing or residing in Europe, including President Wilson’s sister, suddenly found themselves unable to access funds to secure food, lodging, or transportation.\textsuperscript{11} Moreover, European militaries commandeered all available land and seaborne conveyance for mobilization and operations; even those holding prepaid tickets often found their trips cancelled without advance notice. Chapter 3 illustrates the unprecedented degree to which U.S. citizens besieged their embassies, legations, and consulates across the Continent for help.

Congress acted quickly to provide repatriation assistance by appropriating government-owned gold and creating a Relief Commission to oversee disbursement of the funds. On August 3, a joint resolution allocated $250,000 for transport of Americans home from Europe with the provision that aid recipients reimburse the taxpayer.\textsuperscript{12} Two days later, another joint resolution appropriated an additional $2,500,000 and granted the president authority to deploy government personnel, utilize military transport and supplies, and charter private vessels necessary to effect repatriation.\textsuperscript{13} The State, Treasury, and War Departments coordinated to requisition a Navy cruiser, USS Tennessee, to transport the gold and Relief Commission personnel. The cruiser USS North Carolina conveyed additional Commission staff as well as vacationing Department officials hurriedly returned to their assigned to European posts. Collier USS Vulcan was assigned to supply U.S. warships operating in European waters.\textsuperscript{14} Assistant Secretary of War Henry Breckinridge led the Commission, accompanied by three Department of State officials, two Treasury Department officials, five representatives of U.S. banks, and more than 20 U.S. Army officers (assigned to oversee distribution of the gold). Ernest P. Bicknell, National Director of the American Red Cross (ARC), accompanied the contingent in order to reconnoiter the situation in war-torn Europe and make recommendations about how his organization might provide assistance.\textsuperscript{15}
At 9 o’clock in the evening of August 6, Tennessee left New York harbor destined for Falmouth, England. The ship carried around 90 wooden casks filled with gold, each weighing 200 pounds and bearing the seal of the Treasury of the United States. $1,500,000 was allocated to aid stranded Americans, and banking firms shipped an additional $3 million. Cash in hand, it was not until Tennessee was underway that the Commission decided the expedition’s destinations. The relief force was to be divided into three groups, each of which was led by a major in the Army. The Commission directed the officers to establish headquarters in London, Paris, and Berlin. From those bases, individuals from these groups could visit different sections of their respective territories.¹⁶

The rapid crisis response, coupled with transportation and communications difficulties, required U.S. officials to engage in an interagency coordination process in conjunction with non-government actors. A spot coal shortage caused Tennessee to depart New York harbor without full bunkers, forcing it to travel at a slower speed to conserve fuel. The voyage to Falmouth consumed ten full days, which enabled the American Relief Commission to work out most of the details of its aid program. They prepared a 26-page Manual of Instructions for Relief Work, complete with blank receipt forms to ensure proper accounting of funds distribution, sample letters of credit, and a guide to the U.S. legal code pertaining to who should be considered a U.S. citizen (and therefore eligible for relief).¹⁷ The Manual cited General Orders, No. 2, August 8 (presumably promulgated by Breckinridge while on board Tennessee), which emphasized the Army’s leading role in the expedition and noted that inadequate facilities must not deter the Commission from accomplishing its mission. Although the authors of the Manual dedicated much energy to fulfilling their charge, the day before their arrival at Falmouth Bicknell noted that “...all these plans, at this writing, must be regarded as tentative. For nine days the expedition [h]as been at sea, both literally and figuratively. Although the Tennessee is equipped with a wireless station, the amount of world news which has been received on board has been so fragmentary that we shall land in England with very little knowledge of the conditions which we are to find.”¹⁸

Under these circumstances, it was inevitable that the Commission adopted assumptions that did not fully encompass the realities they faced. They presumed they would encounter primarily “a class of people used to the greatest comfort of living. It is likely that much nervousness, impatience and irritability will be encountered. Our concern is that no provocation be permitted to ruffle our patience. Everyone must be treated with patience, toleration and infinite consideration.”¹⁹ General Orders, No. 2 also assumed that only about 20,000 required immediate transportation home, and calculated the removal could be accomplished by six transatlantic American ships each carrying six to seven thousand passengers. Those estimates did not fully appreciate the scale of the removal, the socio-cultural diversity of Americans seeking refuge, nor the difficulty in securing ground transportation to ports and passage aboard westbound Atlantic steamers.
In an era when governments did not require passports for travel, determining the
citizenship of those seeking aid comprised the most immediate and complex task relief
officials faced. The Manual required officials to recognize multiple forms of
identification unfamiliar to almost all Americans. Illustrating the modest U.S.
requirements for international travel, the Manual assumed it only “probable” that U.S.
citizens possessed passports, or certificates of registration, or certificates of
naturalization. Two kinds of U.S. passports existed: the “ordinary” passport, issued by
the Secretary of State and valid for two years, and the “emergency” passport, issued by a
diplomatic mission or selected consular officials and valid for six months. Consuls’
responsibilities included registering any American living in their district, thus a
Certificate of Registration could also verify U.S. citizenship. Various local courts in the
United States issued Certificates of Naturalization, commonly called “Citizen Papers” at
the time, which also constituted proof of citizenship. Moreover, absent any of those
records, the Manual enjoined relief officials to consider other documents that might
establish citizenship. Even as the Commission crossed the Atlantic, Department officers
throughout Europe fielded thousands of emergency requests for certification of U.S.
citizenship, which generated additional non-standard documentation. Avoiding fraud or
misrepresentation under such circumstances presented a challenge for relief officials.
Through the remainder of 1914 and in subsequent years, the Department issued a series
of instructions, amendments, and responses to specific questions to further clarify rules
under which European officers should issue emergency passports.20

Upon determination of valid citizenship, the Manual prioritized relief officials’ options
and required extensive record keeping. Relief-in-kind comprised the preferred form of
aid, such as meals, lodging, and transportation; “Only in an unusual case will relief be
extended by cash advances.” Applicants could offer bank drafts, money orders, or
securities of any kind in exchange for cash. However, if a stranded American possessed
none of those, they could obtain cash by signing a promissory note to repay the U.S.
government. Anticipating difficulties, the authors of the Manual offered tips on how to
avoid fraudsters when making cash advances:

While the greatest care should be taken in satisfying yourself of the safety
in making advances as above mentioned, it should also be borne in mind
that in general, greater care must be exercised in making advances to
males than females, because of the fact that it will be in this nature of
advances that you will have to deal most largely with dishonest and
irresponsible people. It has been widely advertised that the United States
Government is sending to Europe two and a half millions of gold for the
relief of Americans in distress.21

The Relief Commissioners understood that cooperation with Department of State
officials already in country would bolster the integrity of the operation. The Manual
instructed each relief party, which consisted of one “chief” and one “special disbursing
agent,” to consult with diplomatic and consular officials whenever possible. They should jointly appoint relief committees, or recognize those committees already in existence, which would manage the clerical work of organizing the distribution. The Manual stated “while relief parties are solely under the authority of the Special Commissioner, it is expected that they will work in close cooperation with the diplomatic and consular officials, seeking advice from them whenever necessary as, owing to their official position, they will best be able to advise.”

In fact, Department personnel played a greater role in directing relief efforts than the Manual anticipated because many European posts quickly formed committees independently. In some cases, Embassy officers and staff not only performed much of the work assisting stranded Americans, but also donated considerable amounts of their own money to aid the effort. Owing to their familiarity with the documents proving citizenship and their local knowledge, the direct involvement of diplomatic and consular officials played a crucial role in facilitating repatriation and preventing fraud during the distribution of relief.

After arriving in London and ascertaining European conditions, the Relief Commission continued their pragmatic flexibility by adjusting the initial plan. As originally intended, the bankers’ committee representatives deposited $3 million of private gold with the Bank of England. The Commission concluded, however, that “the American Committee in London had the work of relief very well in hand and, in truth, needed no assistance from us whatever except in the matter of money.” Although they had originally planned to disburse only $50,000 of the government gold in London, the Commissioners deposited $300,000 with U.S. Ambassador Walter Hines Page, “to be expended according to his discretion through the American Committee,” as well as $100,000 with two U.S. Army officers for distribution. They divided remaining Army personnel into disbursement teams bound for the Continent with gold and copies of the Manual, unsure whether other U.S. posts would have matters as well in hand as London.

Tennessee carried additional government-owned specie because U.S. officials operating in Europe required gold to function. The salaries of diplomats, consuls, Treasury Department special commissioners, and military attaches, as well as foreign nationals employed by posts could only be paid by exchanging gold for local currency. The Department routinely incurred bills for office rent, utilities, supplies, insurance, and other necessities. Telegram expenses skyrocketed, and cable operators soon refused to extend credit; they demanded cash before transmission. The private money of government officials also accounted for some of the gold shipped to Europe because Ambassadors at major posts contributed significantly to the upkeep of their missions. For example, at Gerard’s request the Department arranged for Relief Commission officials bound for Berlin to convey $32,000 of his personal funds.
Deploying and Supporting the Red Cross

Department officers also played a key role in supporting another extraordinary endeavor at the outset of war, the American Red Cross initiative to set up hospitals for wounded soldiers in all the belligerent countries. By 1914, the ARC acted as a *de jure* extension of the U.S. government; the Red Cross moved quickly to establish military-medical units staffed by U.S. doctors and nurses in England, France, Belgium, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Serbia, and Russia, which bolstered the Wilson administration’s policy of even-handed neutrality. The hospitals’ success and their relationship to diplomatic and consular officials illustrate another way U.S. representatives reacted to unprecedented challenges brought on by the war. Although established and funded by the ARC, the hospitals fell under the *de facto* authority of diplomatic and consular officials. With minimal direction from the Department, U.S. representatives in Europe developed *ad hoc* systems to support—and sometimes even manage—these American civilians embodying U.S. neutrality, who sometimes operated perilously near the front lines.

Active involvement in the ARC’s initiative created an exemplar of coordination between Department personnel and philanthropic organizations, thereby broadening the scope of responsibilities U.S. diplomats must be prepared to undertake in subsequent decades.

The ARC’s institutional relationship to the federal government provided the basis for coordination between the Red Cross and the Department of State. The development and incorporation of the ARC as an extension of the government began as a consequence of the U.S. Civil War and the international Red Cross movement. The first Red Cross organization in the United States formed in 1881 along the lines prescribed by the 1864 international treaty that created the International Committee of Relief for the Wounded in War (renamed the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1876). The “American National Association of the Red Cross” subsequently operated through several reincorporations as an independent association with only minimal direct ties to the U.S. government. As a result of poor performance during the Spanish-American War, Congress reincorporated the Red Cross again in 1905 on the premise that “the importance of the work demands a repeal of the present charter and a reincorporation of the society under Government supervision.” The law instructed the president to choose one representative each from the Departments of State, War, Navy, Treasury, and Justice to serve with 59 other individuals on the “body corporate and politic.” Those federal government officials comprised five members of the Central Committee, along with six elected by state and territorial societies, and another six elected by the incorporators, plus a chairman appointed by the president. The Central Committee devolved decision making responsibilities onto a seven-member Executive Committee that included several federal officials. During the period of neutrality, Woodrow Wilson acted as the President of the Society, former President William Howard Taft served as Chairman of the Central Committee beginning in 1915, and the Executive Committee included Robert Lansing (Counselor of the Department and then Secretary of State), Interior Secretary Franklin Lane, the Surgeons General of both the U.S. Army and Navy, and Mabel T. Boardman, the organizational dynamo of the ARC who also
served as Chairman of the War Relief Board. This structure necessitated some level of Department involvement in any overseas ARC initiative.

Upon news that the war had begun, the Red Cross and the federal government wasted no time. In early August 1914, a joint meeting of the ARC’s International and War Relief Boards decided to contribute trained personnel and hospital supplies to every European state at war. The U.S. government consented and the Department communicated with the belligerents in accordance with the stipulations of the Geneva Treaty.\textsuperscript{27} To convey medical teams and supplies in light of wartime shipping shortages, on August 20 Congress authorized the ARC to charter a ship of foreign registry.\textsuperscript{28} The Hamburg-Amerika Line donated SS \textit{Hamburg} for one Atlantic crossing. Congress passed a special act to rename the ship SS \textit{Red Cross} and reflag it under the neutral stars and stripes for the voyage.\textsuperscript{29}

The Executive Committee also supported U.S. neutrality policy by declaring that donors could choose which country’s ARC efforts they wished to support (in addition to hospitals, primarily designated for belligerents’ national Red Cross societies). Churches and community organizations across the country typically conducted the donation drives. This directed-donation approach implicitly acknowledged deep divisions among the American public between supporters of the Entente Powers (led by France, the U.K., and Russia) and proponents of the Central Powers (led by Germany and Austria-Hungary). Ingeniously, the policy both adhered to the dictates of neutrality and encouraged participation, while skirting domestic dissention. The donations enabled the ARC to sponsor 16 hospitals across Europe for a year.\textsuperscript{30} The Red Cross withdrew most hospitals from Europe in late 1915 for several reasons (see Chapter 3, Germany), but the directed-donation policy continued to generate considerable, and remarkably evenly-distributed, contributions. From October 1914 until September 1915, total Red Cross expenditures on its hospitals in Europe totaled at least $194,000.\textsuperscript{31} The Entente countries received only marginally more donations than the Central Powers. Since the ARC hospital in Munich remained in operation after October 1915 (as did the Belgian hospitals, for which all donations are not represented in the charts below), U.S. donations for Red Cross hospitals in the Central Powers actually exceeded those of the Entente through December 1916. By any calculation, the scope of donations is impressive. The three hospitals in Germany received more than $40,000 during the first year of war, and after other Red Cross units withdrew, Munich received another $24,000 between October 1915 and December 1916. In addition, the ARC simultaneously operated separate donation drives for each belligerent’s national Red Cross societies. In the period from October 1914 until November 1916, the German Red Cross received nearly $100,000 (approximately $2.5 million in 2017 dollars) in donations from U.S. citizens.\textsuperscript{32}

Facing challenges that only days earlier would have seemed unimaginable and even though the country remained neutral, the Wilson administration embarked on an array
of commitments that inextricably embroiled the United States in the complexities of an unprecedented global war. U.S. officials met their primary responsibility by immediately generating a coordinated interagency response to rescue fellow citizens in peril. But Washington also facilitated the insertion of American Red Cross units into all belligerent countries, which portended a new, deeper type of involvement in the European crisis. Moreover, by the time the Relief Commission arrived in Falmouth, the U.S. government had agreed to represent the interests of multiple belligerent states in enemy countries, a responsibility that quickly entailed extraordinary obligations no one could have anticipated. For Department of State officials charged with implementing U.S. policy in the field, their world changed suddenly, and forever.
Office of the Historian

Dr. Seth Rotramel and Dr. William B. McAllister

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Notes to Chapter 2


3 Phillips to Mayre, August 27, 1914, USNA, RG 59, CDF 1910–1929, 123M361/8. For the complexities of Russian-U.S. relations at the beginning of the war, see Chapter 5, Russia.


5 Coffin to Bryan, August 13, 1914, USNA, RG 59, CDF 1910–1929, 123C651/96; Penfield to Bryan, undated (received August 14, 1914), USNA, RG 59, CDF 1910–1929, 873.72/402.


9 Gerard later reported to the Department of State that he learned of the German Government’s telegraphic instructions to the SS Kronprinzessin Cecilie on July 31, 1914, USNA, RG 59, CDF 1910–1929, M367, Reel 14, 763.72/830. The ship made port in Bar Harbor, Maine, where it offloaded $10,679,000 in gold, approximately $3 million in silver, and 1,216 passengers, including British Army reservists. In accordance with Wilson’s neutrality policy, the Coast Guard interned what U.S. newspapers dubbed the “Treasure Ship,” eventually turning it over the Navy when the United States entered the war in April 1917. United States Coast Guard, Historian’s Office, “Androscoggin, 1908” https://www.uscg.mil/history/webcutters/Androscoggin1908.pdf.

10 U.S. government officials offered estimates ranging from 50,000 to 150,000 Americans living, working, studying, or touring in Europe when war erupted. New York Times, August 5, 1914, p. 4.


15 For a complete list of passengers aboard USS Tennessee see USNA, ANRC, Central File 1881–1916, Box 46, 618.61 Americans in Europe.

16 USNA, ANRC, Central File 1881–1916, Box 46, 618.61, Americans in Europe.

17 Ibid. The Manual was created under the direction of 28-year-old Breckinridge, serving as Special Commissioner, Percival Dodge, Special Representative of the Department of State, James Wilmetal, Official Representative of the Department of the Treasury, Bicknell, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Allen and Major A. Logan of the U.S. Army, and H.D. Gibson, Vice-President of Liberty National Bank.

18 Report by Bicknell, titled “Relief of Americans in Europe,” undated, ANRC, Central File 1881–1916, Box 46, 618.61 Americans in Europe. For example, Gerard notified Washington only that day (August 15) that the German Government granted the Relief Commission permission to travel to Berlin and begin operations. USNA, RG 59, CDF 1910–1929, 840.48/264.


USNA, ANRC, Central File 1881–1916, Box 46, 618.61, Americans in Europe, Manual, p. 16.


McAdoo to Bryan, August 4, 1914, USNA, RG 59, CDF 1910–1929, 102.102/44. See for example telegram from Mallett (Acting Budapest Consul-General) to Penfield, August 6, 1914, USNA, RG 84, Austria, Vol. 364: “No funds at Consulate and no means of obtaining any. My personal resources exhausted. Food supply in Hungary will not suffice for long. Banks will not buy my drafts. Foreign money worthless. No funds for cables. Please repeat to Department.”

Telegram from Gerard to Bryan, August 6, 1914, USNA, RG 59, CDF 1910–1929, 123G31/10.

Public Law 58–4, 58th Congress, Session III, Ch. 23, 1905.


Public Law 63–43, 63rd Congress, Session II, Res. 33, 1914.

Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, August 21, 1914, USNA, ANRC, Central File 1881–1916, Box 15, 114.22, Minutes of the Central and Executive Committees of ARC 1911–1915. Like the Relief Commission, the doctor-nurse teams on board Hamburg made good use of their travel time by receiving lectures on surgical procedures, studying sanitary protocols, and practicing bandaging. See multiple documents in USNA, ANRC, Central File 1881–1916, S.S. Red Cross. See also Foreign Relations of the United States, Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, 1914. Supplement, The World War, pp. 824–831.

Two each in Britain, France, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Belgium, three in Germany, and three in Serbia.

The figures on ARC expenditures are compiled from expense reports sent from the ARC Executive Committee to the Secretary of State found in USNA, RG 59, CDF 1910–1929, Volumes: 851 through 854, and USNA, ANRC, Central File 1881-1916, Box 69, 951.52, Germany, Munich American Red Cross Hospitals.

The figures on ARC donations to the German Red Cross are compiled from USNA, ANRC, Central File 1881–1916, Box 63, 900.02, German Red Cross. An initial $29,000 was donated to European Red Cross societies in September 1914, but the breakdown by country is not known. (Lansing to Charles Magee, Secretary, ARC, December 19, 1914, USNA, RG 59, CDF 1910–1929, Volume 852, 811–142/392.)