

# U.S. CUSTOMS SERVICE DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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World War I's (WWI) outbreak in August 1914 threw the U.S. Customs Service mission into sharp relief, and its role as protector of the nation's ports and commercial interests became increasingly critical to U.S. diplomatic and military relations. The Customs Service initially helped the nation maintain President Woodrow Wilson's Neutrality Proclamation. The Department of the Treasury, in cooperation with the Department of the Navy, enforced its provisions while the Customs Service was their primary administrator.

## U.S. CUSTOMS SERVICE AND NEUTRALITY



Customs Intelligence Bureau, Port of New York, 1917. CBP Collection.

Collectors of Customs at major ports of entry were in charge of enforcing the Neutrality Proclamation. Neutrality Bureaus assisted with staff to supervise relief vessel loading, ensuring they could not be sunk for carrying contraband. They were also responsible for impounding war material. Agents searched merchant vessel documents and cargo, and granted clearances to foreign-bound ships.



Ship Inspection, WWI, circa 1917-19. CBP Collection.

Customs collectors approved coal and weapons transport, sealed hatches, certified manifests to ensure ships were not carrying contraband, and processed passports for returning U.S. citizens. For a brief time, they even issued war risk insurance. In conjunction with the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation, the Customs Service limited and controlled imported or exported commodities. As it enforced the Neutrality Proclamation, the Customs Service

essentially served as an auxiliary service to the military forces. It reported enemy nations' ship movements, and customs patrols tracked warships in U.S. waters, particularly focusing on locating and keeping track of German U-boats. Customs agents determined which documents needed the stamps required in the October 1914 War Revenue Act. They also worked to divert war supplies sent under false documentation to warring nations, a violation of U.S. neutrality.

## THE CUSTOMS INTELLIGENCE BUREAU

After Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare in early 1917, the U.S. entered the war. The port of New York was a primary staging area for the war effort, and Customs Service agents at major ports confiscated enemy ships in port, impounding luggage, and even inspecting personal correspondence. The service worked in conjunction with other



Customs Intelligence Bureau, Port of New York, circa 1917-19. CBP Collection.

agencies to protect international commercial interests, specifically concerning itself with export control. The government had the power to legislate what could be shipped abroad, and the Customs Service enforced the law. This meant increased responsibility in that the Customs Service had to expand its duties, which required more manpower. To meet that need, New York's collector formed a War Port Squadron. By early 1918, it was folded into the Customs Intelligence Bureau (CIB), which searched vessels and issued and inspected seamen's identification documents. The CIB ultimately replaced the Neutrality Board. It was only in operation at the Port of New York and fell directly under the jurisdiction of the Secretary of the Treasury. The CIB mission was mainly concerned with scanning non-mail communications like sketches, notes, records, photos, or motion pictures for sensitive information or enemy propaganda. The Bureau also searched ships and examined outbound passengers to ensure that they were not transporting valuable or sensitive goods and information. During the Spanish Influenza outbreak in 1918, agents even inspected passengers and fumigated ships to prevent its spread, a dangerous proposition at best.

## CUSTOMS AGENTS HELP TO WRAP UP THE WAR EFFORT



The Cutter Victory 'Going at Half Speed,' March 12, 1919. CBP Collection.

After the November 1918 armistice, goods held back during the war began streaming into the country. Customs agents again supervised military imports and exports, charging the War Department a duty on items brought back from active service, and particularly on European made goods used for the war overseas and brought

for postwar service at home. The American Expeditionary Forces were responsible for taxes on over \$600 million worth of supplies, and the Customs Service wound down its war efforts by making the military pay the tax. The CIB's contributions to the war effort were well-recognized with special commendations from the Secretaries of War and the Treasury, and the bureau was disbanded on July 7, 1919.



U.S. Customs and  
Border Protection

Customs Intelligence Bureau, 1917. CBP Collection.

