An Injury to Civilization

The war against armed imperialism is over.

—Woodrow Wilson, November 11, 1918

THE WAR HAD barely begun when Woodrow Wilson volunteered the good offices of the United States to end it.* Expecting France to lose the battle of the Marne, then raging, the American ambassador in Berlin, James W. Gerard, secretly proffered generous terms to the Germans: They could demand indemnities and colonies from France—so long as they agreed to restore the territorial status quo ante in Europe. Deputy Foreign Minister Zimmermann rejected the president's mediation: "A treaty on the pattern offered here" was not acceptable. Germany wanted more than money and Morocco, as a document drawn up for the German chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, that same day, September 9, reveals.[1]

The so-called September Program, reflecting the appetites of the

* "If I had been President," Theodore Roosevelt wrote to the British ambassador to the United States, Cecil Spring-Rice, on October 3, 1914, "I should have acted on the thirtieth or thirty-first of July, as head of a signatory power of the Hague treaties, calling attention to the guaranty of Belgium's neutrality and saying that I accepted the treaties as imposing a serious obligation which I expected not only the United States but all other neutral nations to join in enforcing." Simeon Strunsky, "Theodore Roosevelt and the Prelude to 1914," *Foreign Affairs* 4, no. 1 (October 1925): 151. "Some support for Roosevelt's argument came from Russia, which replied to Wilson's August 4 offer of good services that the offer came 'too late' and 'should have been made earlier.'" Kendrick A. Clements, "Woodrow Wilson and World War I," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (March 2004): 71, n 36.

industrial interests identified with the names Thyssen, Hugenberg, and Krupp, laid down the war aims pursued by Germany until October 1918. "The general aim of the war [is] security for the German Reich in west and east for all imaginable time," the document noted with the same pre-Marne megalomania in which the army struck a medal commemorating the entry of German troops into Paris. Belgium "must be reduced to a vassal state" and France's "revival as a great power made impossible for all time." France must also give up its ore fields, and pay an indemnity so crushing as to rule out an armaments buildup. Bethmann was being moderate, having rejected the kaiser's "bizarre idea" to render areas of Belgium and France "free of human beings," or at least Belgian and French ones; "deserving [German] NCO's and men" would settle the vacated territory. A German-dictated peace would see the creation of a "central European economic association . . . under German leadership." "Mitteleuropa, politically and economically our world-historical task," would encompass Europe "from the Pyrenees to Memel, from the Black Sea to the North Sea, from the Mediterranean to the Baltic . . . in a single customs unit [to match] the over-mighty productive resources" of the United States. In the east, Bethmann beat back Pan-German demands to annex St. Petersburg. It would be enough for Russia to surrender Poland, Lithuania, Courland, Livonia, Estonia, and the Ukraine.[2]

The prospect of victory on the Marne prompted Bethmann to formulate Germany's war aims. Their victory on the Marne stirred the Allies to propound their own September Program. Meeting in Petersburg on September 13–14, the French agreed to support Russia's annexation of the Straits and a chunk of eastern Poland in return for Russia's support not only for the return of Alsace-Lorraine but for France's annexation of "as much of Rhenish Prussia and the Palatinate as she wished."[3]

"It is no lust of conquest that inspires us," the kaiser promised the Reichstag on August 4 as the war began. Lust took a month. Death excused it. Germany required a peace, Bethmann wrote to the kaiser, "which is felt by the German people to recompense it in full for the enormous sacrifices which it has made." The deaths of thousands justified the deaths of millions. The argument from "in vain" masked Germany's designs on Lithuania, Russia's on Constantinople, Britain's on the Middle East, and France's on the Rhineland.[4]

By November 1914, General von Falkenhayn had seen enough of trench warfare to conclude that Germany could not win a two-front war. "So long as Russia, France and Britain held together, it would be impossible to defeat our enemies decisively enough to get a decent peace," he informed Bethmann. "Either Russia or France must be chiseled off." Falkenhayn urged Russia. The tsar's mother belonged to the Danish royal family, and in December, through Copenhagen, Bethmann sounded out the Russians. "The Tsar and Sazonov [are] confident of victory," Bethmann's Danish contacts reported.[5]

Still, Nicholas remained vulnerable to his manners: "He will not refuse to discuss a settlement through the king of Denmark." Further soundings convinced Bethmann that a separate peace was not in the cards. The Russians were too afraid of revolution to risk bringing the army home from the front, where relief was anticipated in a supply crisis (predicted by Peter Durnovo) that saw living soldiers taking their rifles off dead ones and units without rifles fighting with clubs. "Ruling circles in Petersburg hope that the Straits will soon be opened and that they will receive all necessary material by this route," he wrote to Falkenhayn. That deliverance depended on the British attack on the Dardanelles succeeding.[6]

Such illusory hopes sustained the war. Gas would bring victory. Submarines would. Tanks would. Nothing did. "Some way there must be out of this bloody entanglement that was yielding victory to neither side . . . Every day came the papers with the balanced story of battles, losses, destructions, ships sunk, towns smashed. And never a decision, never a sign of a decision," H. G. Well's Mr. Britling reflects. Writing on the war's ninetieth anniversary, a contemporary historian echoes Wells in 1917: "A war that was supposed to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, had a middle and a middle, and then another middle, and then another year and another battle and another last push, and a middle that went on and on."[7]

Duration mattered in this war, and not just because the longer it went on, the more men died. Consider if it had ended early in 1917. "There would have been no collapse in Russia followed by Communism, no breakdown in Italy followed by Fascism, and Germany would not have signed the Versailles Treaty, which has enthroned Nazism in Germany," Winston Churchill told an American journalist in 1936. But

"Europe 1916" by Boardman Robinson

U.S. entry into the war renewed the lust for conquest (and revenge) on the Allied side, while Russia's withdrawal from it after the Bolshevik revolution in October similarly inflamed the Germans.[8]

Nineteen seventeen brought the hard men to power—Lloyd George in Britain, Clemenceau in France, Hindenburg and Ludendorff in Germany, Alexander Kerenksy in Russia. The provisional government installed by the February revolution that toppled Nicholas II had since fallen under the sway of Kerensky, the charismatic war minister who imitated Napoleon to the point of tucking his right arm into his tunic; and in June, overruling his generals, Kerensky unleashed an abortive offensive against the German lines. Desertions exceed the nearly four hundred thousand casualties, "trench Bolshevism" spread among the soldiers who stayed with their units, and millions of square miles were lost to the counterattacking Germans.[9]

Before U.S. belligerency consigned peace to the lost history of 1917, there were two scenarios for ending the war. One was Lloyd George's "fight to the finish" won by "a knockout." In a January speech to Congress, Woodrow Wilson predicted that such a victor's peace "would

leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand." Wilson's alternative was "peace without victory." Their armies deadlocked and their regimes shaking above the earthquake of war, the combatant nations, he believed, must soon turn to the still-neutral United States to broker a compromise peace.[10]

But peace without victory also would have rested upon quicksand—of power not resentment. With the German army unbroken and Germany still under authoritarian rule, the war's roots remained intact. After the United States joined the Allies, the president himself recognized this, blaming the conflict on "Prussian militarism" and embracing as one of its goals the liberation of the German people from the "military clique in Berlin." Under Wilson's peace, a war to realize the territorial ambitions of the September Program and end Germany's vulnerability to a starvation blockade might have broken out even sooner than in 1939. As it was, the armistice came before the war and the November 1918 revolution that brought the socialists briefly to power had completed the destruction of the old order in Germany. This was notably preserved in the civil service and the judiciary, which were not purged of personnel appointed under the monarchy; in the schools, which as before the war trained German youth to despise democracy; in the universities, where the professoriate remained "inveterate supporters of a dead past"; and, above all, in a Prussian officer corps that blamed the Diktat of Versailles on the civilian government, "barely tolerated" the republic, and hankered for a restoration of authoritarian rule.[11]

If in the fall of 1918 the Allies had spurned German peace overtures, continued their offensive, and occupied Germany, they might have achieved a victory on the 1945 model. But that would have taken harder men, a longer war, and many more casualties. The Allied publics would not have stood for a real "knockout" blow. So World War I ground on to its inconclusive end on November 11, 1918, in the railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne, having by then inflicted what Woodrow Wilson saw would be "an injury . . . to civilization . . . which can never be atoned for or repaired."[12]