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By Adam Tooze

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A century after the outbreak of fighting, Yale historian Adam Tooze takes an entirely new perspective on “the war to end all wars,” focusing on the closing years of the conflict and its aftermath up to the Great Depression. This tumultuous period saw hopes for lasting peace and liberal internationalism collide with violent upheavals and the ultimate rise of totalitarian regimes. And it saw the emergence of a new global order in which all the major powers—the war’s winners and losers alike—saw their fates bound up with those of the United States, now the world’s dominant economic force. All-embracing, powerfully argued, and deeply instructive, *The Deluge* is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the roots of America’s fraught relationship with the world.

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Editorial Review

Review

Winner of the 2015 Los Angeles Times Book Prize -- History

“For anyone seeking to understand how American predominance was achieved in the years after World War I, and why it catastrophically failed to keep the hard-won peace, Adam Tooze has written an essential book. Epic in scope, boldly argumentative, deftly interweaving military and economic narratives, *The Deluge* is a splendid interpretive history.” — *The New York Times Book Review*

“A grand and groundbreaking reinterpretation of World War I and its aftermath.” — *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“A globe-spanning and wide-ranging examination of how America’s historic decision to join that epochal war changed the U.S. as well as the entire world order, ‘The Deluge’ is also a look at a past that is both terribly remote and hauntingly familiar.” — *Salon*

“Massive, well-researched and eminently readable.” — *The Washington Times*

“Tooze guides us through the numerous diplomatic and economic catastrophes that emerged from World War I. Eventually we start to get a well-rounded and extremely comprehensive insight into why Wilson’s American foreign policy was so misguided.... Excellent... provide[s] us with a superb insight into the collapse of a stable Europe.” — *The Daily Beast*

“Tooze’s analysis, particularly of fears the American capitalist juggernaut provoked, should spark debate, especially in scholarly circles.” — *Booklist*

“A thoroughly researched, much-needed reexamination of America’s role in the aftermath of World War I that will appeal to any reader interested in the interwar period.” — *Library Journal*, Michael Farrell, *Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, FL*

“In this landmark study, Tooze offers an elegant account of the reordering of great-power relations that took place after World War I, at the dawn of ‘the American century.’” — *Foreign Affairs*, G. John Ikenberry

“Adam Tooze’s utterly hypnotic study reaches back to a time in which fragile economies across the world were every bit as intertwined and acutely vulnerable, and where unforeseen economic shocks could be enough to trigger apocalyptic bloodshed. What Adam Tooze has done—a huge, formidable achievement—is to reconstruct a vast global web, and to show how the slightest vibrations on its threads had consequences everywhere, almost regardless of individual fears and hates or venomous ideologies. The breadth of his scholarship also frighteningly illuminates the fragility of peace.” — *The Telegraph (UK)*

“Tooze shows, more emphatically than any other scholar I have read, how decisively and how sweepingly the First World War ended this state of affairs.... Tooze’s brilliant account also offers much food for thought for any observer of the current international scene.” — *The Guardian*

“*The Deluge* sets a provocative framework for studies of the Great War, one that places issues of US power

and American history at the center. Its well-written critique of US leadership and its insightful account of the intricate policies of the major powers deserve a wide readership among those who wish to understand how the world careened from the Great War into the Great Depression.” —***Current History***

“Bold and ambitious... *The Deluge* is the work of a fine historian at the peak of his powers, formidable in its range and command of the material, written in strong, muscular prose.... The best of the current deluge of books about the first world war.”—**Ben Shephard, *The Observer* (UK)**

“[Tooze’s] new book confirms his stature as an analyst of hugely complex political and economic issues.... Here, as in his earlier work, Tooze shows himself a formidably impressive chronicler of a critical period of modern history, unafraid of bold judgments.”—**Max Hastings, *The Sunday Times* (UK)**

“Tooze’s book is an invaluable account of why the US and its allies, having defeated Germany in 1918, were unable thereafter to stabilise the world economy and build a collective security system.”—***The Financial Times***

“Amid all the current commemorative news, a clear and compelling rationale as to why it is actually worth going back and looking at the era of the First World War at this particular moment in time.”—**Neil Gregor, *Literary Review***

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

Adam Tooze is the author of *Wages of Destruction*, winner of the Wolfson and Longman History Today Prize. He is the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Professor of History at Columbia University. He formerly taught at Yale University, where he was Director of International Security Studies, and at the University of Cambridge. He has worked in executive development with several major corporations and contributed to the National Intelligence Council. He has written and reviewed for *Foreign Affairs*, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Die Zeit*, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, *Tageszeitung* and *Spiegel Magazine*, *New Left Review* and the *London Review of Books*.

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Introduction

The Deluge: The Remaking of World Order

On Christmas Morning 1915, David Lloyd George, the erstwhile radical liberal, now Minister of Munitions, rose to face a restless crowd of Glaswegian trade unionists. He had come to demand a further round of recruits for the war effort and his message was suitably apocalyptic. The war, he warned them, was remaking the world. ‘It is the deluge, it is a convulsion of Nature . . . bringing unheard-of changes in the social and industrial fabric. It is a cyclone which is tearing up by the roots the ornamental plants of modern society . . . It is an earthquake which is upheaving the very rocks of European life. It is one of those seismic disturbances in which nations leap forward or fall backward generations in a single bound.’¹ Within four months his words were echoed from the other side of the battle-lines by the German Chancellor Theodore von Bethmann Hollweg. On 5 April 1916, six weeks into the terrible battle of Verdun, he confronted the Reichstag with the stark truth. There was no way back. ‘After such dramatic events history knows no status quo.’² The violence of the Great War had become transformative. By 1918, World War I had shattered the old empires of Eurasia – Tsarist, Habsburg and Ottoman. China was convulsed by civil war. By the early 1920s the maps of eastern Europe and the Middle East had been redrawn. But dramatic and contentious as they were, these visible changes acquired their full significance from the fact that they were coupled to

another deeper, but less conspicuous shift. A new order emerged from the Great War that promised, above the bickering and nationalist grandstanding of the new states, fundamentally to restructure relations between the great powers – Britain, France, Italy, Japan, Germany, Russia and the United States. It took geostrategic and historical imagination to comprehend the scale and significance of this power transition. The new order that was in the making was defined in large part by the absent presence of its most defining element – the new power of the United States. But on those endowed with such vision, the prospect of this tectonic shift exerted an almost obsessive fascination.

Over the winter of 1928–9, ten years after the Great War had ended, three such contemporaries – Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler and Leon Trotsky – all had occasion to look back on what had happened. On New Year's Day 1929 Churchill, then serving as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin, found time to finish *The Aftermath*, the concluding volume of his epic history of World War I, *The World Crisis*. For those familiar with Churchill's later histories of World War II, this last volume comes as a surprise. Whereas after 1945 Churchill would coin the phrase 'a second Thirty Years War' to describe the long-running battle with Germany as a single historical unit, in 1929 he struck a very different note.³ Churchill looked forward to the future, not in a spirit of grim resignation, but with considerable optimism. Out of the violence of the Great War it seemed that a new international order had emerged. A global peace had been built on two great regional treaties: the European Peace Pact initialed at Locarno in October 1925 (signed in London in December) and the Pacific Treaties signed at the Washington Naval Conference over the winter of 1921–2. These were, Churchill, wrote, 'twin pyramids of peace rising solid and unshakable . . . commanding the allegiance of the leading nations of the world and of all their fleets and armies'. These agreements gave substance to the peace that had been left unfinished at Versailles in 1919. They filled out the blank check that was the League of Nations. 'The histories may be searched,' Churchill remarked, 'for a parallel for such an undertaking.' 'Hope,' he wrote, 'now rested on a surer foundation . . . The period of repulsion from the horrors of war will be long-lasting; and in this blessed interval the great nations may take their forward steps to world organization with the conviction that the difficulties they have yet to master will not be greater than those they have already overcome.'⁴

These, unsurprisingly, were not the terms in which either Hitler or Trotsky would capture their vision of history ten years after the war. In 1928 the war veteran and failed-putschist-turned-politician, Adolf Hitler, as well as contesting and losing a general election, was negotiating with his publishers over a follow-up to his first book, *Mein Kampf*. The second was intended to collect his speeches and writings since 1924. But since his book sales in 1928 were as disappointing as his electoral performance, Hitler's manuscript never went to press. It has come down to us as his 'Second Book' ('Zweites Buch').⁵ Leon Trotsky for his part had time to write and reflect, because after losing his struggle with Stalin, he had been deported first to Kazakhstan and then in February 1929 to Turkey, from where he continued his running commentary on the revolution that had taken such a disastrous turn since the death of Lenin in 1924.⁶ Churchill, Trotsky and Hitler make for an incongruous, not to say antipathetic, grouping. To some it will seem provocative even to place them in the same conversation. Certainly they were not each other's equal as writers, politicians, intellectuals or moral personalities. All the more striking is the way in which at the end of the 1920s their interpretations of world politics complemented each other.

Hitler and Trotsky recognized the same reality that Churchill did. They too believed that World War I had opened a new phase of 'world organization'. But whereas Churchill took this new reality as cause for celebration, for a communist revolutionary like Trotsky or a national socialist such as Hitler it threatened nothing less than historical oblivion. Superficially, the peace settlements of 1919 might seem to advance the logic of sovereign self-determination that originated in European history in the late Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century this had inspired the formation of new nation states in the Balkans and the unification of Italy and Germany. It had now climaxed in the break-up of the Ottoman, Russian and Habsburg empires. But although sovereignty was multiplied, its content was hollowed out.⁷ The Great War weakened all the

European combatants irreversibly, even the strongest amongst them and even the victors. In 1919 the French Republic may have celebrated its triumph over Germany at Versailles, in the palace of the Sun King, but this could not disguise the fact that World War I confirmed the end of France's claim to be a power of global rank. For the smaller nation states created over the previous century, the experience of the war was even more traumatic. Between 1914 and 1919, Belgium, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Serbia had all faced national extinction as the fortunes of war swung back and forth. In 1900 the Kaiser had brashly claimed a place on the world stage. Twenty years later Germany was reduced to squabbling with Poland over the boundaries of Silesia, a dispute overseen by a Japanese viscount. Rather than the subject, Germany had become the object of *Weltpolitik*. Italy had joined the war on the winning side, but despite solemn promises by its allies, the peace reinforced its sense of second-class status. If there was a European victor it was Britain, hence Churchill's rather sunny assessment. However, Britain had prevailed not as a European power but as the head of a global empire. To contemporaries the sense that the British Empire had done relatively less badly out of the war only confirmed the conclusion that the age of European power had come to an end. In an age of world power, Europe's position in political, military and economic terms was irreversibly provincialized.⁸

The one nation that emerged apparently unscathed and vastly more powerful from the war was the United States. Indeed, so overwhelming was its pre-eminence that it seemed to raise once more the question that had been expelled from the history of Europe in the seventeenth century. Was the United States the universal, world-encompassing empire similar to that which the Catholic Habsburgs had once threatened to establish? The question would haunt the century that followed.⁹ By the mid-1920s it seemed to Trotsky that 'Balkanized Europe' found 'herself in the same position with respect to the US' that the countries of south-eastern Europe had once occupied in relation to Paris and London in the pre-war period.¹⁰ They had the trappings of sovereignty but not its substance. Unless the political leaders of Europe could shake their populations out of their usual 'political thoughtlessness', Hitler warned in 1928, the 'threatened global hegemony of the North American continent' would reduce them all to the status of Switzerland or Holland.¹¹ From the vantage point of Whitehall, Churchill had felt the force of this point not as a speculative historical vision, but as a practical reality of power. As we shall see, Britain's governments in the 1920s again and again found themselves confronting the painful fact that the United States was a power unlike any other. It had emerged, quite suddenly, as a novel kind of 'super-state', exercising a veto over the financial and security concerns of the other major states of the world.

Mapping the emergence of this new order of power is the central aim of this book. It requires a particular effort because of the peculiar way in which America's power manifested itself. In the early twentieth century, America's leaders were not committed to asserting themselves as a military power, beyond the ocean highways. Their sway was often exercised indirectly and in the form of a latent, potential force rather than an immediate, evident presence. But it was nonetheless real. Tracing the ways in which the world came to terms with America's new centrality, through the struggle to shape a new order, will be the central preoccupation of this book. It was a struggle that was always multidimensional – economic, military and political. It was one that began during the war itself and stretched beyond it into the 1920s. Getting this history right matters because we need to understand the origins of the Pax Americana that still defines our world today. It is crucial too, however, to understanding the huge second spasm of the 'second Thirty Years War' that Churchill would look back upon from 1945.¹² The spectacular escalation of violence unleashed in the 1930s and the 1940s was a testament to the kind of force that the insurgents believed themselves to be up against. It was precisely the looming potential, the future dominance of American capitalist democracy, that was the common factor impelling Hitler, Stalin, the Italian Fascists and their Japanese counterparts to such radical action. Their enemies were often invisible and intangible. They ascribed to them conspiratorial intentions that enveloped the world in a malign web of influence. Much of this was manifestly unhinged. But if we are to understand the way in which the ultra-violent politics of the interwar period was incubated in World War I and its aftermath, we need to take this dialectic of order and insurgency seriously. We grasp

movements like fascism or Soviet communism only very partially if we normalize them as familiar expressions of the racist, imperialist mainstream of modern European history, or if we tell their story backwards from the dizzying moment in 1940–42, when they rampaged victoriously through Europe and Asia and the future seemed to belong to them. Whatever comforting, domesticated fantasies their followers may have projected onto them, the leaders of Fascist Italy, National Socialist Germany, Imperial Japan and the Soviet Union all saw themselves as radical insurgents against an oppressive and powerful world order. For all the braggadocio of the 1930s their basic view of the Western Powers was not that they were weak, but that they were lazy and hypocritical. Behind a veneer of morality and panglossian optimism the Western Powers disguised the massive force that had crushed Imperial Germany and that threatened to enshrine a permanent status quo. To forestall that oppressive vision of an end of history would require an unprecedented effort. It would be accompanied by terrible risks.¹³ This was the terrifying lesson that the insurgents derived from the story of world politics between 1916 and 1931, the story recounted in this book.

I

What were the essential elements underpinning this new order that seemed so oppressive to its potential enemies? By common agreement the new order had three major facets – moral authority backed by military power and economic supremacy.

The Great War may have begun in the eyes of many participants as a clash of empires, a classic great power war, but it ended as something far more morally and politically charged – a crusading victory for a coalition that proclaimed itself the champion of a new world order.¹⁴ With an American president in the lead, the ‘war to end all wars’ was fought and won to uphold the rule of international law and to put down autocracy and militarism. As one Japanese observer remarked: ‘Germany’s surrender has challenged militarism and bureaucratism from the roots. As a natural consequence, politics based on the people, reflecting the will of the people, namely democracy (*minponshugi*), has, like a race to heaven, conquered the thought of the entire world.’¹⁵ The image that Churchill chose to describe the new order was telling – ‘twin pyramids of peace rising solid and unshakable’. Pyramids are nothing if not massive monuments to the fusion of spiritual and material power. For Churchill, they provided a striking analogue to the grandiose ways in which contemporaries conceived of their project of civilizing international power. Trotsky characteristically cast the scene in rather less exalted terms. If it was true that domestic politics and international relations would no longer be separate, as far as he was concerned, both could be reduced to a single logic. The ‘entire political life’, even of states like France, Italy and Germany, down to ‘the shifts of parties and governments will be determined in the last analysis by the will of American capitalism . . .’¹⁶ With his usual sardonic humour, Trotsky evoked, not the awesome solemnity of the pyramids, but the incongruous spectacle of Chicago meat-packers, provincial senators and manufacturers of condensed milk lecturing a Prime Minister of France, a British Foreign Secretary or an Italian dictator about the virtues of disarmament and world peace. These were the uncouth heralds of America’s drive toward ‘world hegemony’ with its internationalist ethos of peace, progress and profit.¹⁷

But however incongruous may have been its form, this moralization and politicization of international affairs was a high-stakes wager. Since the wars of religion in the seventeenth century, conventional understanding of international politics and international law had erected a firewall between foreign policy and domestic politics. Conventional morality and domestic notions of law had no place in the world of great power diplomacy and war. By breaching this wall, the architects of the new ‘world organization’ were quite consciously playing the game of revolutionaries. Indeed, by 1917 the revolutionary purpose was being made more and more explicit. Regime change had become a precondition for armistice negotiations. Versailles assigned war guilt and criminalized the Kaiser. Woodrow Wilson and the Entente had pronounced a death sentence on the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. By the end of the 1920s, as we shall see, ‘aggressive’ war had been outlawed. But, appealing as these liberal precepts might have been, they begged fundamental

questions. What gave the victorious powers the right to lay down the law in this way? Did might make right? What wager were they placing on history to bear them out? Could such claims form a durable foundation of an international order? The prospect of war might be terrible to contemplate, but did declaring a perpetual peace imply a profoundly conservative commitment to upholding the status quo, whatever its legitimacy? Churchill could afford to talk in sanguine terms. His nation had long been one of the most successful entrepreneurs of international morality and law. But what if, as a German historian put it in the 1920s, one were to find oneself amongst the disenfranchised, amongst the lower breeds in the new order, as 'fellaheen' amidst the pyramids of peace?¹⁸

For true conservatives the only satisfactory answer was to turn back the clock. They demanded that the liberal train of moralistic international organization should be reversed and international affairs returned to an idealized vision of a *Jus Publicum Europaeum* in which the family of European sovereigns lived side by side in a non-judgemental, non-hierarchical anarchy.¹⁹ But not only was this a mythic history, with little bearing on the reality of international politics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It ignored the force of Bethmann Hollweg's message to the Reichstag in the spring of 1916. After this war, there was no way back.²⁰ The true alternatives were starker. One was a new kind of conformity. The other was insurgency, epitomized in the immediate aftermath of the war by Benito Mussolini. In Milan in March 1919 he launched his Fascist Party by denouncing the emerging new order as 'a solemn "swindle" of the rich', by which he meant Britain, France and America, 'against the proletarian nations', by which he meant Italy, 'to fix forever the actual conditions of world equilibrium . . .'²¹ Instead of a reversion to an imaginary *ancien régime*, he held out the promise of further escalation. What reared its ugly head with this politicization of international affairs was the kind of irreconcilable conflict of values that had made the religious wars of the seventeenth century or the revolutionary struggles at the end of the eighteenth century so lethally violent. Given the horrors of World War I there must either be perpetual peace, or a war even more radical than the last.

Though the danger of such confrontation was clearly real, the severity of this risk depended not only on the resentments that were stirred up and the ideologies that were pitted against each other. In the end, the risks involved in seeking to create and uphold a new international order depended on the plausibility of the moral order to be imposed, its chance of gaining general acceptance on its own merits, and the force mustered to support it. After 1945 in the global Cold War clash between the United States and the Soviet Union, the world would witness the logic of confrontation taken to its extreme. Two global coalitions, self-confidently proclaiming antagonistic ideologies, each armed with massive arsenals of nuclear weapons, threatened humanity with Mutually Assured Destruction. And there are many historians who want to see in 1918–19 a precursor to the Cold War, with Wilson squaring off against Lenin. But though this analogy may be tempting, it is misleading in that in 1919 there was nothing like the symmetry that prevailed in 1945.²² By November 1918 not only was Germany on its knees, but Russia too. The balance of world politics in 1919 resembled the unipolar moment of 1989 far more than the divided world of 1945. If the idea of reordering the world around a single power bloc and a common set of liberal, 'Western' values seemed like a radical historical departure, this is precisely what made the outcome of World War I so dramatic.

Defeat in 1918 was all the more bitter for the Central Powers, because in the course of World War I, as we shall see, the military initiative had seemed to shift repeatedly back and forth. Through remarkable staff work, the Kaiser's generals were repeatedly able to establish local superiority and to threaten breakthroughs: in 1915 in Poland, at Verdun in 1916, on the Italian front in the autumn of 1917, on the Western Front as late as the spring of 1918. But these battlefield dramas should not divert us from the underlying logic of the war. Only against Russia did the Central Powers actually prevail. On the Western Front, from 1914 down to the summer of 1918, the record was one of frustration. And one central factor helps to explain this, the balance of military materiel. From the summer of 1916 onwards when the British Army brought an enormous transatlantic supply line to bear on the European battlefield, it was only ever a matter of time before any local superiority established by the Central Powers was turned into its opposite. They were worn down in an

attritional struggle. Though a thin crust of resistance held even in the final days of November 1918, the collapse thereafter was near total. When the great powers gathered at Versailles in an unprecedented global assembly, Germany and its allies were prostrate. In the months that followed, their once proud armies were disbanded. France and its allies in central and eastern Europe were masters of the European scene. But this, as the French were acutely aware, was no more than a start. On the third anniversary of the Armistice, in November 1921, an exclusive club of leaders gathered for the first time in Washington DC to accept a global order defined by America in unprecedently stark terms. At the Washington Naval Conference, power was measured in the currency of battleships, doled out, as Trotsky mockingly put it, in 'rations'.²³ There would be none of the ambiguity of Versailles, nor the obfuscations of the League of Nations Covenant. The rations of geostrategic power were fixed in the ratio of 10:10:6:3:3. At the head stood Britain and the United States, who were accorded equal status as the only truly global powers with a naval presence throughout the high seas. Japan was granted third spot as a one-ocean power confined to the Pacific. France and Italy were relegated to the Atlantic littoral and the Mediterranean. Beyond these five, no other state reckoned in the balance. Germany and Russia were not even considered as conference participants. This it seemed was the outcome of World War I: an all-encompassing global order, in which strategic power was more tightly held than nuclear weapons are today. It was a turn in international affairs, Trotsky remarked, analogous to Copernicus's rewriting of the cosmology of the Middle Ages.²⁴

Figure 1. The GDP of Empires (PPP-adjusted 1990 dollars)

The Washington Naval Conference was a powerful expression of the force that would underwrite the new international order, but in 1921 there were already some who wondered whether the great 'castles of steel' of the battleship era were truly the weapons of the future. Such arguments, however, were beside the point. Whatever their military utility, battleships were the most expensive and technologically sophisticated instruments of global power. Only the richest countries could afford to own and operate battle-fleets. America did not even build its full quota of ships. It was enough that everyone knew that it could. Economics was the pre-eminent medium of American power, military force was a by-product. Trotsky not only recognized this, but was eager to quantify it. In an era of intense international competition, the dark art of comparative economic measurement was a characteristic preoccupation. In 1872, Trotsky believed there had been rough parity between the national wealth of the United States, Britain, Germany and France, each possessing between 30 and 40 billion dollars. Fifty years later the disparity was clearly enormous. Post-war Germany was impoverished, poorer, Trotsky thought, than it had been in 1872. By contrast, 'France is approximately twice as rich (68 billions); likewise England (89 billions); but the wealth of the US is estimated at 320 billion dollars.'²⁵ These figures were speculative. But what no one disputed was that at the time of the Washington Naval Conference in November 1921, the British government owed the American taxpayer \$4.5 billion, whilst France owed America \$3.5 billion and Italy owed \$1.8 billion. Japan's balance of payments was seriously deteriorating and it was anxiously looking for support from J. P. Morgan. At the same time, 10 million citizens of the Soviet Union were being kept alive by American famine relief. No other power had ever wielded such global economic dominance.

If we turn to modern-day statistics to plot the development of the world economy since the nineteenth century, the two-part storyline is clear enough (Fig.1).²⁶ Since the beginning of the nineteenth century the British Empire had been the largest economic unit in the world. Sometime in 1916, the year of Verdun and the Somme, the combined output of the British Empire was overtaken by that of the United States of America. Henceforth, down to the beginning of the twenty-first century, American economic might would be the decisive factor in the shaping of the world order.

There has always been a temptation, particularly on the part of British authors, to narrate nineteenth- and twentieth-century history as a story of succession, in which the United States inherited the mantle of British hegemony.²⁷ This is flattering to Britain, but it is misleading in suggesting a continuity in the problems of

global order and the means for addressing them. The problems of world order posed by World War I were unlike any previously encountered – by the British, the Americans or anyone else. But, on the other side of the balance sheet, American economic power was of a different quantity and quality from that which Britain had ever deployed.

British economic preponderance had unfolded within the ‘world system’ created by its empire, stretching from the Caribbean to the Pacific, expanding through free trade, migration and capital export across a vast ‘informal’ span.²⁸ The British Empire formed the matrix for the development of all the other economies that made up the advancing frontier of globalization in the late nineteenth century. Faced with the rise of major national competitors, some imperial pundits, advocates of a ‘greater Britain’, began to lobby for this heterogeneous conglomerate to be forged into a single, self-enclosed economic bloc.²⁹ But thanks to Britain’s entrenched culture of free trade, a preferential imperial tariff would only be adopted amid the disaster of the Great Depression. The United States was everything that the champions of imperial preference longed for, but the British Empire was not. The United States began as a heterogeneous collection of colonial settlements that in the early nineteenth century had developed into an expansive and highly integrative empire. Unlike the British Empire, the American Republic sought to incorporate its new territories in the West and the South fully into its federal constitution. Given the cleavage in the original founding of the eighteenth-century constitution, between the free-labour North and the slave-labour South, this integrative project was fraught with risks. In 1861, within a century of its birth, America’s rapidly expanding polity shattered into a terrible civil war. Four years later the Union had been preserved but at a price no less terrible in proportional terms than that paid by the major combatants in World War I. In 1914, just over fifty years on, the American political class consisted of men whose childhoods were deeply scarred by that bloodshed. What was at stake in the peace policy of Woodrow Wilson’s White House can only be understood if we recognize that the twenty-eighth President of the United States headed the first cabinet of Southern Democrats to govern the country since the Secession. They saw their own ascent as vindication of the reconciliation of White America and the refounding of the American nation state.³⁰ At a terrible cost America had forged itself into something unprecedented. This was no longer the voraciously expansive empire of the westward movement. But nor was it Thomas Jefferson’s neo-classical ideal of a ‘city on a hill’. It was something judged impossible by classical political theory. It was a consolidated federal republic of continental scale, a super-sized nation state. Between 1865 and 1914, profiting from the markets, transport and communications networks of Britain’s world system, the US national economy grew faster than any economy had ever grown before. Occupying a commanding position on the coastline of the two largest oceans, it had a unique claim and capacity to exert global influence. To describe the United States as the inheritor of Britain’s hegemonic mantle is to adopt the vantage point of those who in 1908 insisted on referring to Henry Ford’s Model T as a ‘horseless carriage’. The label was not so much wrong, as vainly anachronistic. This was not a succession. This was a paradigm shift, which coincided with the espousal by the United States of a distinctive vision of world order.

This book will have much to say about Woodrow Wilson and his successors. But the most elementary point is easily stated. Having formed itself as a nation state of global reach through a process of expansion that was aggressive and continental in scope but had avoided conflict with other major powers, America’s strategic outlook was different from either that of the old power states like Britain and France or their newly arrived competitors – Germany, Japan and Italy. As it emerged onto the world stage at the end of the nineteenth century, America quickly realized its interest in ending the intense international rivalry which since the 1870s had defined a new age of global imperialism. True, in 1898 the American political class thrilled to its own foray into overseas expansion in the Spanish-American War. But, confronted with the reality of imperial rule in the Philippines, the enthusiasm soon waned and a more fundamental strategic logic asserted itself. America could not remain detached from the twentieth-century world. The push for a big navy would be the principal axis of American military strategy until the advent of strategic air power. America would see to it that its neighbours in the Caribbean and Central America were ‘orderly’ and that the Monroe Doctrine, the

bar against external intervention in the western hemisphere, was upheld. Access must be denied to other powers. America would accumulate bases and staging posts for the projection of its power. But one thing that the US could well do without was a ragbag of ill-assorted, troublesome colonial possessions. On this simple but essential point there was a fundamental difference between the Continental United States and the so-called 'liberal imperialism' of Great Britain.³¹

The true logic of American power was articulated between 1899 and 1902 in the three 'Notes' in which Secretary of State John Hay first outlined the so-called 'Open Door' policy. As the basis for a new international order these 'Notes' proposed one deceptively simple but far-reaching principle: equality of access for goods and capital.³² It is important to be clear what this was not. The Open Door was not an appeal for free trade. Amongst the large economies, the United States was the most protectionist. Nor did the US welcome competition for its own sake. Once the door was opened, it confidently expected American exporters and bankers to sweep all their rivals aside. In the long run the Open Door would thus undermine the Europeans' exclusive imperial domains. But the US had no interest in unsettling the imperial racial hierarchy or the global colour-line. Commerce and investment demanded order not revolution. What American strategy was emphatically directed towards suppressing was imperialism, understood not as productive colonial expansion nor the racial rule of white over coloured people, but as the 'selfish' and violent rivalry of France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Russia and Japan that threatened to divide one world into segmented spheres of interest.

The war would make a global celebrity out of President Woodrow Wilson, who was hailed as a great path-breaking prophet of liberal internationalism. But the basic elements of his programme were predictable extensions of the Open Door logic of American power. Wilson wanted international arbitration, freedom of the seas and non-discrimination in trade policy. He wanted the League of Nations to put an end to inter-imperialist rivalry. It was an anti-militarist, post-imperialist agenda for a country convinced of the global influence that it would exercise at arm's length through the means of soft power – economics and ideology.³³ What is not sufficiently appreciated, however, is how far Wilson was willing to push this agenda of American hegemony against all shades of European and Japanese imperialism. As this book will show in its opening chapters, as Wilson drove America to the forefront of world politics in 1916, his mission was to ensure not that the 'right' side won in World War I, but that no side did. He refused any overt association with the Entente and did all he could to suppress the escalation of the war that London and Paris were pursuing and which they hoped would draw America onto their side. Only a peace without victory, the goal that he announced in an unprecedented speech to the Senate in January 1917, could ensure that the United States emerged as the truly undisputed arbiter of world affairs. This book will argue that despite the fiasco of that policy already in the spring of 1917, despite America's reluctant engagement in World War I, this would remain the basic objective of Wilson and his successors right down to the 1930s. And it is this which holds the key to answering the question that follows. If the United States was bent on instituting an Open Door world and had formidable resources at its disposal to achieve that goal, why did things go so badly awry?

II

This question of the derailment of liberalism is the classic question of interwar historiography.³⁴ The wager of this book is that the question takes on a new aspect precisely if we start from an appreciation of quite how dominant the victors of World War I led by Britain and the United States actually were. Given the events of the 1930s this is all too easy to forget. And the immediate answer given by propagandists of Wilsonianism did suggest the opposite.³⁵ Even before it occurred, they were anticipating the failure of the Versailles peace conference. They depicted Wilson, their hero, in tragic terms, vainly trying to extricate himself from the machinations of the 'old world'. The distinction between the American prophet of a liberal future and the corrupt old world to which he brought his message was fundamental to this storyline.³⁶ In the end Wilson succumbed to the forces of that old world, with British and French imperialists in the lead. The result was a

‘bad’ peace that was in turn repudiated by the American Senate and much of the public, not only in America but throughout the English-speaking world.³⁷ Even worse was to follow. The rearguard action put up by the old order not only blocked the route to reform. In so doing it opened the door to even more violent political demons.³⁸ With Europe torn between revolution and violent counter-revolution, Wilson found himself facing Lenin in a foreshadowing of the Cold War. The spectre of Communism in turn animated the extreme right. First in Italy and then across the continent, most lethally in Germany, fascism came to the fore. The violence and increasingly racialized and anti-Semitic discourse of the crisis period 1917–21 hauntingly foreshadowed the even greater horrors of the 1940s. For this disaster the old world had no one to blame but itself. Europe, with Japan figuring as its apt pupil, truly was the ‘Dark Continent’.³⁹

This storyline has dramatic force and has spawned a remarkably rich historical literature. But beyond its usefulness for historical writing, it matters because it actually informed transatlantic arguments about policy-making from the turn of the century onwards. As we shall see, the attitudes of the Wilson administration and his Republican successors down to Herbert Hoover were powerfully shaped by this perception of European and Japanese history.⁴⁰ And this critical narrative was attractive not only to Americans but to many Europeans as well. For radical liberals, socialists and social democrats in Britain, France, Italy and Japan, Wilson provided arguments to use against their domestic political opponents. It was really during World War I and its aftermath, in the mirror of American power and propaganda, that Europe discovered a new sense of its own ‘backwardness’, a point driven home with even greater force after 1945.⁴¹ But the fact that this historical vision of a Dark Continent violently resisting the forces of historical progress had actual historical influence, also harbours risks for historians. The heartbreaking fiasco of Wilsonianism has cast a long shadow. The Wilsonian construction of interwar history saturates the sources to such an extent that it requires a conscious and sustained effort to hold it at bay. This is what gives such a powerful corrective value to the testimony of the incongruous trio with whom we began – Churchill, Hitler and Trotsky. Their vision of the aftermath of the war was quite different. They were convinced that a fundamental change had come over world affairs. They were also agreed that the terms of this transition were being dictated by the United States, with Britain as its willing accessory. If there was a dialectic of radicalization operating behind the scenes that would throw open the door of history to extremist insurgency, as of 1929 it was obscure to both Trotsky and Hitler. It took a second dramatic crisis, the Great Depression, to unleash the avalanche of insurgency. Once the extremists were given their chance, it was precisely the sense that they faced mighty opponents that animated the violence and lethal energy of their assault on the post-war order.

This brings us to the second major strand of interpretation of the interwar disaster, which we will call the crisis of hegemony school.⁴² This line of interpretation starts exactly where we do here, with the crushing victory of the Entente and the United States in World War I, and asks not why the main thrust of American power was resisted, but why the victors, those who held such a preponderance of power in the wake of the Great War, did not prevail. After all, their superiority was not imaginary. Their victory in 1918 was no accident. In 1945 a similar coalition of forces would impose an even more comprehensive defeat on Italy, Germany and Japan. Furthermore, after 1945 the United States in its sphere went on to organize a highly successful political and economic order.⁴³ What had gone wrong after 1918? Why had American policy miscarried at Versailles? Why had the world economy imploded in 1929? Given the starting point of this book, these are questions that we cannot escape and they too resonate down to the present day. Why does ‘the West’ not play its winning hands better? Where is the capacity for management and leadership?⁴⁴ Given the rise of China, these questions have an obvious force. The problem is to find the right standard by which to judge this failure and to provide some compelling explanation for the lack of will and judgement that are the serious shortcomings of rich, powerful democracies.

Faced with these two basic explanatory options – the ‘Dark Continent’ versus the ‘failure of liberal hegemony’ schools – the ambition of this book is to seek a synthesis. But to achieve that is not a matter of mixing and matching elements from both sides. Instead, this book seeks to open the two main schools of

historical argument to a third question, one that reveals their common blind spot. What the historical schemas offered by both the ‘Dark Continent’ and the ‘hegemonic failure’ models of history tend to obscure is the radical novelty of the situation confronting world leaders in the early twentieth century.⁴⁵ This blind spot is inherent in the crude ‘new world, old world’ schema of the Dark Continent interpretation. This ascribes novelty, openness and progress to ‘outside forces’, be they the United States or the revolutionary Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the destructive force of imperialism is vaguely identified with an ‘old world’ or an ‘*ancien régime*’, an epoch that in some cases is seen stretching back to the age of absolutism, or even further into the depths of blood-soaked European and East Asian history. The disasters of the twentieth century are thus ascribed to the dead weight of the past. The hegemonic crisis model may interpret the interwar crisis differently. But it is even more dramatic in its historical sweep and even less interested in acknowledging that the early twentieth century may actually have been an era of true novelty. The strongest versions of the argument insist that the capitalist world economy has since its inception in the 1500s depended on a central stabilizing power – be it the Italian city states, or the Habsburg monarchy, or the Dutch Republic, or the Victorian Royal Navy. The intervals of succession between these hegemons were typically periods of crisis. The interwar crisis was merely the latest such hiatus, in the interval between British and American hegemony.

What neither of these visions can encompass is the unprecedented pace, scope and violence of change actually experienced in world affairs from the late nineteenth century onwards. As contemporaries quickly realized, the intense ‘world political’ competition into which the great powers entered in the late nineteenth century was not a stable system with an ancient lineage.⁴⁶ It was legitimated neither by dynastic tradition nor by its inherent ‘natural’ stability. It was explosive, dangerous, all-consuming, attritional, and in 1914 no more than a few decades old.⁴⁷ Far from belonging in the lexicon of a venerable but corrupt ‘*ancien régime*’, the term ‘imperialism’ was a neologism that entered widespread use only around 1900. It encapsulated a novel perspective on a novel phenomenon – the remaking of the political structure of the entire globe under conditions of uninhibited military, economic, political and cultural competition. Both the Dark Continent and the hegemonic failure models are therefore based on a faulty premise. Modern global imperialism was a radical and novel force, not an old-world hangover. By the same token the problem of establishing a hegemonic world order ‘after imperialism’ was unprecedented. The scale of the problem of world order in its modern form had first crowded in on Britain in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as its far-flung imperial system faced challenges from the heartland of Europe, the Mediterranean, the Near East, the Indian subcontinent, the huge land mass of Russia, and Central Asia and East Asia. It was Britain’s world system that had knit these arenas together, and brought their crises into global synchrony. Far from presiding triumphantly over this panorama, the scale of this challenge had forced Britain into a series of strategic improvisations. Threatened by the emergent powers of Germany and Japan, Britain had abandoned its offshore position and opted instead to commit itself to understandings in Europe and Asia, with France, Russia and Japan. Ultimately, in World War I the British-led Entente would prevail, but only by further intensifying its strategic entanglements and extending them around the world through the global reach of the British and French empires and across the Atlantic to the United States. The war thus bequeathed an unprecedented problem of global economic and political order, but no historical model of world hegemony with which to address it. From 1916 the British themselves would attempt feats of intervention, coordination and stabilization to which they had never aspired in the empire’s Victorian heyday. Never was British imperial history more closely entwined with world history and vice versa, an entanglement that continued perforce into the post-war period. As we shall see, despite the limited resources at its disposal, Lloyd George’s government in the post-war years played a quite unprecedented role as the pivot of European finance and diplomacy. It was also his downfall. The train of crises that reached their nadir in 1923 ended Lloyd George’s tenure as Prime Minister and exposed for all to see the limits of Britain’s hegemonic capacity. There was only one power, if any, that could fill this role – a new role, one that no nation had ever seriously attempted before – the United States.

When President Wilson travelled to Europe in December 1918 he took with him a team of geographers, historians, political scientists and economists to make sense of the new world map.⁴⁸ The spatial sweep of the disorder confronting the major powers in the wake of the war was vast. Throughout the length and breadth of Eurasia the war had created an unprecedented vacuum. Of the ancient empires, only China and Russia were to survive. The Soviet state was the first to recover. But the temptation to interpret the ‘stand off’ between Wilson and Lenin in 1918 as an anticipation of the Cold War is a further instance of the refusal to recognize the exceptional situation created by the war. The threat of Bolshevik revolution was certainly present in the minds of conservatives all over the world after 1918. But this was a fear of civil war and anarchic disorder and it was in large part a phantom menace. It was in no way comparable to the awesome military presence of Stalin’s Red Army in 1945, or even the strategic heft of Tsarist Russia before 1914. Lenin’s regime survived the revolution, defeat at the hands of Germany and civil war, but only by the skin of its teeth. Communism was throughout the 1920s fighting from the defensive. It is questionable whether the United States and the Soviet Union were on the same footing even in 1945. A generation earlier, to treat Wilson and Lenin as equivalent is to fail to acknowledge one of the truly defining features of the situation – the dramatic implosion of Russian power. In 1920 Russia appeared so weak that the Polish Republic, itself less than two years old, decided that this was the time to invade. The Red Army was strong enough to ward off that threat. But when the Soviets marched westwards they suffered a crushing defeat outside Warsaw. The contrast to the era of the Hitler–Stalin Pact and the Cold War could hardly be more stark.

Given the astonishing vacuum of power in Eurasia from Beijing to the Baltic, it is hardly surprising that the most aggressive exponents of imperialism in Japan, Germany, Britain and Italy sensed a heaven-sent opportunity for aggrandizement. The uninhibited ambitions of the arch-imperialists in Lloyd George’s cabinet, or General Ludendorff in Germany, or Goto Shinpei in Japan, provide ample material for the Dark Continent narrative. But violent as their visions clearly were, we must be attentive to the nuance of their war-talk. A figure such as Ludendorff was under no illusion that his grand visions of the total redesign of Eurasia were expressions of traditional statecraft.⁴⁹ He justified the scale of his ambition precisely on the basis that the world was entering a new and radical phase, the ultimate or the penultimate phase in a final global struggle for power. Men like these were no exponents of any kind of ‘ancien régime’. They were often highly critical of traditionalists who in the name of balance and legitimacy shrank from seizing the historic opportunity. Far from being exponents of the old world the most violent antagonists of the new liberal world order were themselves futuristic innovators. They were not, however, realists. The commonplace distinction between idealists and realists concedes too much to Wilson’s opponents. Though Wilson may have been humiliated, the imperialists also found themselves on the back foot. Already during the war the problems inherent in any truly grandiose programme of expansion had become amply apparent. As we shall see, within weeks of its ratification in March 1918 the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the ultimate imperialist peace, was repudiated by its own creators who found themselves struggling to escape the contradictions of their own policy. Japanese imperialists raged impotently against the refusal of their government to take decisive steps to subordinate all of China. The most successful imperialists were the British, their main zone of expansion in the Middle East. But this was truly the exception that proves the rule. Amidst the rivalry of British and French imperial demands, the entire region was reduced to chaos and disorder. It was World War I and its aftermath that made of the Middle East the strategic albatross it has remained to this day.⁵⁰ On the better-established axes of British imperial power, towards the White Dominions, Ireland and India, the main line of policy was one of retreat, autonomy and Home Rule. It was a line pursued inconsistently and with considerable reluctance, but nevertheless it was unmistakable in its direction.

Whereas the familiar narrative of Wilsonian failure pictures the American President as caught up in the irrepressible aggression of old-war imperialism, the actual situation was that the former imperialists were of their own accord arriving at the conclusion that they must search for new strategies appropriate to a new era, after the age of imperialism.⁵¹ A number of key figures came to embody this new *raison d'état*. Gustav Stresemann brought Germany into a cooperative relation with both the Entente powers and the United States.

The British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, the eldest son of the Edwardian imperialist firebrand Joseph Chamberlain, shared a Nobel Peace Prize with Foreign Minister Stresemann for their tireless efforts toward a European settlement. The third to receive a Nobel Prize, for the Locarno Treaty, was Aristide Briand, the French Foreign Minister and ex-socialist for whom the 1928 Pact to Outlaw Aggressive War was named. Kijuro Shidehara, Japan's Foreign Minister, embodied the new approach to East Asian security. All of them orientated themselves towards the United States as the key to establishing a new order. But to identify this shift too closely with individual figures, however significant, is to miss the point. These individuals were often ambiguous exponents of transformation, torn between their personal attachment to older modes of policy-making and what they perceived to be the imperatives of a new age. What made the likes of Churchill confident that the new order was robust and what made Hitler and Trotsky so despondent was precisely that it seemed to be founded on foundations more solid than the force of individual personality.

It is tempting to identify this new atmosphere of the 1920s with 'civil society' and the plethora of internationalist and pacific NGOs that sprang up in the wake of World War I.⁵² However, the tendency to identify innovative moral entrepreneurship with international peace societies, cosmopolitan congresses of experts, the passionate solidarity of the international women's movement, or the far-flung activities of anti-colonial activists, backhandedly reinstates the well-worn stereotypes about the recalcitrant persistence of imperialist impulses at the heart of power. Conversely, the powerlessness of the peace movement licenses the cynical realists in their hard-bitten insistence that, in the final analysis, it is only power that counts. The wager of this book is different. It seeks to locate a dramatic shift in the calculus of power, not external to, but within the government machinery itself, in the interaction between military force, economics and diplomacy. As we shall see, this was most obviously the case in France, the most maligned of the 'old world powers'. After 1916, rather than remaining mired in ancient grudges, we will see that Paris's overriding aim was to forge a novel, Western-orientated Atlantic alliance with Britain and the United States. It would thus free itself from the odious association with Tsarist autocracy on which it had relied since the 1890s for a dubious promise of security. It would bring France's foreign policy into line with its Republican constitution. This search for an Atlantic alliance was the novel preoccupation of French policy that after 1917 unified individuals as far apart as Georges Clemenceau and Raymond Poincaré.

In Germany the scene is dominated by the figure of Gustav Stresemann, the great statesman of the Weimar Republic's stabilization period. And from the climactic Ruhr crisis of 1923 onwards, Stresemann was no doubt crucial to anchoring Germany's Western orientation.⁵³ But, as a nationalist of a Bismarckian stripe, he was a late and hard-won convert to the new international politics. The political force that sustained every single one of his famous initiatives was a broad-based parliamentary coalition with which Stresemann in its inception had been bitterly at odds. The three members of this coalition, the Social Democrats, Christian Democrats and progressive Liberals, were the leading democratic forces of the pre-war Reichstag. All three shared the distinction of having been, at one time, bitter foes of Bismarck. What brought them together in June 1917 under the leadership of Matthias Erzberger, the populist Christian Democrat, were the disastrous consequences of the U-boat campaign against the United States. As we shall see, the first test of their new policy came as early as the winter of 1917–18. When Lenin sued for peace, the Reichstag coalition sought as best they could to deflect the heedless expansionism of Ludendorff and to shape what they hoped would be a legitimate and therefore sustainable hegemony in the East. The notorious Treaty of Brest-Litovsk will emerge from this book as comparable to Versailles, not in its vindictiveness, but in the sense that it too was a 'good peace gone bad'. What marked the argument within Germany over the victorious peace of Brest-Litovsk as a significant overture to the new era of international politics, is the fact that it was always as much about the domestic order of Germany as about foreign affairs. It was the refusal of the Kaiser's regime either to make good on promises of domestic reform or to craft a viable new diplomacy that prepared the ground for the revolutionary changes of the autumn of 1918. When Germany faced defeat in the West, it was, as we shall see, the Reichstag majority that dared, not once, but three times between November 1918 and September 1923 to wager the future of their country on subordination to the Western Powers. From 1949

down to the present the Reichstag majority's lineal descendants, the CDU, SPD and FDP, remain the mainstays both of democracy in the Federal Republic and of their country's commitment to the European project.

In this nexus between domestic and foreign policy, and in the choice between radical insurgency and compliance, there are remarkable parallels in the early twentieth century between Germany's situation and that of Japan. Threatened in the 1850s by outright subordination to foreign power, facing Russia, Britain, China and the United States as potential antagonists, one Japanese response was to seize the initiative and to embark on a programme of domestic reform and external aggression. It was this course, pursued with great effectiveness and daring, that earned for Japan the sobriquet of the 'Prussia of the East'. But what is too easily forgotten is that this was always counterbalanced by another tendency: the pursuit of security through imitation, alliance and cooperation, Japan's tradition of new, Kasumigaseki diplomacy.⁵⁴ This was achieved first through the partnership with Britain in 1902 and then through a strategic modus vivendi with the United States. Simultaneously, however, Japan was undergoing domestic political change. The alignment between democratization and a peaceful foreign policy was no more simple in Japan than it was anywhere else. But during and after World War I, Japan's emerging system of multi-party parliamentary politics acted as a substantial check on the military leadership. It was the importance of this linkage that in turn raised the stakes. By the late 1920s, those calling for a foreign policy of confrontation were also demanding a domestic revolution. It was in the 1920s in Taisho-era Japan that the bipolar quality of interwar politics was most manifest. So long as the Western Powers could hold the ring in the world economy and secure peace in East Asia, it was the Japanese liberals who held the upper hand. If that military, economic and political framework was to come apart, it would be the advocates of imperialist aggression who would seize their opportunity.

The upshot of this reinterpretation is that contrary to the Dark Continent narrative, the violence of the Great War was resolved in the first instance not into the Cold War dualism of rival American and Soviet projects, nor into the no less anachronistic vision of a three-way contest between American democracy, fascism and Communism. What the war gave rise to was a multisided, polycentric search for strategies of pacification and appeasement. And in that quest the calculations of all the great powers pivoted on one key factor, the United States. It was this conformism that filled Hitler and Trotsky with such gloom. Both of them hoped that the British Empire might emerge as a challenger to the United States. Trotsky foresaw a new inter-imperialist war.⁵⁵ Hitler already in *Mein Kampf* had made clear his desire for an Anglo-German alliance against America and the dark forces of the world Jewish conspiracy.⁵⁶ But despite much bluster from the Tory governments of the 1920s, there was little prospect of an Anglo-American confrontation. In a strategic concession of extraordinary significance, Britain peacefully ceded primacy to the United States. The opening of British democracy to government by the Labour Party only reinforced this impulse. Both the Labour cabinets over which Ramsay MacDonald presided, in 1924 and 1929–31, were resolutely Atlanticist in orientation.

And yet despite this general conformity, the insurgents were to get their chance, which brings us back to the essential question posed by the hegemonic crisis historians. Why did the Western Powers lose their grip in such spectacular fashion? When all is said and done, the answer must be sought in the failure of the United States to cooperate with the efforts of the French, British, Germans and the Japanese to stabilize a viable world economy and to establish new institutions of collective security. A joint solution to these twin problems of economics and security was clearly necessary to escape the impasse of the age of imperialist rivalry. Given the violence they had already experienced and the risk of even greater future devastation, France, Germany, Japan and Britain could all see this. But what was no less obvious was that only the US could anchor such a new order. Stressing American responsibility in this way does not mean a return to a simplistic story of American isolationism, but it does mean that the finger of enquiry must be pointed insistently back at the United States.⁵⁷ How is America's reluctance to face the challenges posed by the

aftermath of World War I to be explained? This is the point at which the synthesis of the ‘Dark Continent’ and hegemonic failure interpretations must be completed. The path to a true synthesis lies not only in recognizing that the problems of global leadership faced by the United States after World War I were radically new and that the other powers too were motivated to search for a new order beyond imperialism. The third key point to establish is that America’s own entry into modernity, presumed in such a simple way by most accounts of twentieth-century international politics, was every bit as violent, unsettling and ambiguous as that of any of the other states in the world system. Indeed, given the underlying fissures within a formerly colonial society, originating in the triangular Atlantic slave trade, expanded by means of the violent appropriation of the West, peopled by a mass migration from Europe, often under traumatic circumstances, and then kept in perpetual motion by the surging force of capitalist development, America’s problems with modernity were profound.

Out of the effort to come to terms with this wrenching nineteenth-century experience emerged an ideology that was common to both sides of the American party divide, namely exceptionalism.⁵⁸ In an age of unabashed nationalism, it was not Americans’ belief in the exceptional destiny of their nation that was the issue. No self-respecting nineteenth-century nation was without its sense of providential mission. But what was remarkable in the wake of World War I was the degree to which American exceptionalism emerged strengthened and more vocal than ever, precisely at the moment when all the other major states of the world were coming to acknowledge their condition as one of interdependence and relativity. What we see, if we look closely at the rhetoric of Wilson and other American statesmen of the period, is that the ‘primary source of Progressive internationalism . . . was nationalism itself’.⁵⁹ It was their sense of America’s God-given, exemplary role that they sought to impose on the world. When an American sense of providential purpose was married to massive power, as it was to be after 1945, it became a truly transformative force. In 1918 the basic elements of that power were already there, but they were not articulated by the Wilson administration or its successors. The question thus returns in a new form. Why was the exceptionalist ideology of the early twentieth century not backed up by an effective grand strategy?

What we are pushed towards is a conclusion that is hauntingly reminiscent of a question that still faces us today. It is commonplace, particularly in European histories, to narrate the early twentieth century as an eruption of American modernity onto a world stage.⁶⁰ But novelty and dynamism existed side by side, this book will insist, with a deep and abiding conservatism.⁶¹ In the face of truly radical change, Americans clung to a constitution that by the late nineteenth century was already the oldest Republican edifice in operation. This, as its many domestic critics pointed out, was in many ways ill-adjusted to the demands of the modern world. For all the national consolidation since the Civil War, for all the country’s economic potential, in the early twentieth century the federal government of the United States was a vestigial thing, certainly by comparison to the ‘big government’ that would act so effectively as the anchor of global hegemony after 1945.⁶² Building a more effective state machinery for America was a task that progressives of all political stripes had set for themselves in the wake of the Civil War. Their urgency was only reinforced by the disturbing populist upsurge that followed the economic crisis of the 1890s.⁶³ Something had to be done to insulate Washington from the alarming rise in militancy that threatened not only the domestic order but America’s international standing. This was one of the principal missions both of Wilson’s administration and its Republican predecessors early in the twentieth century.⁶⁴ But whereas Teddy Roosevelt and his ilk saw military power and war as powerful vectors of progressive state construction, Wilson resisted this well-trodden, ‘old world’ path. The peace policy that he pursued up to the spring of 1917 was a desperate effort to insulate his domestic reform programme from the violent political passions and the wrenching social and economic dislocation of the war. It was in vain. The calamitous conclusion to Wilson’s second term in 1919–21 saw the coming apart of this first great twentieth-century effort to remake American federal government. The result was not only to unhinge the Versailles peace treaty but to precipitate a truly spectacular economic shock – the worldwide depression of 1920, perhaps the most underrated event in the history of the twentieth century.

If we bear these structural features of America's constitution and political economy in mind, then the ideology of exceptionalism can be seen in a more charitable light. For all its celebration of the exceptional virtue and providential importance of American history, it carried with it a Burkean wisdom, a well-founded understanding on the part of the American political class of the fundamental mismatch between the unprecedented international challenges of the early twentieth century and the peculiarly constrained capacities of the state over which they presided. Exceptionalist ideology carried with it a memory of how recently the country had been torn apart by civil war, how heterogeneous was its ethnic and cultural make-up, and how easily the inherent weaknesses of a republican constitution might degenerate into stalemate or full-blown crisis. Behind the desire to keep a distance from the violent forces unleashed in Europe and Asia, there lay a recognition of the limits of what the American polity, despite its fabulous wealth, was actually capable of.⁶⁵ For all their forward-looking vision, progressives both of Wilson's and Hoover's generation were fundamentally committed not to a radical overcoming of these limitations, but to preserving the continuity of American history and reconciling it with the new national order that had begun to emerge in the wake of the Civil War. This then is the central irony of the early twentieth century. At the hub of the rapidly evolving, American-centred world system there was a polity wedded to a conservative vision of its own future. Not for nothing did Wilson describe his goal in defensive terms, as one of making the world safe for democracy. Not for nothing was 'normalcy' the defining slogan of the 1920s. The pressure this exerted on all those who sought to contribute to the project of 'world organization' will be the red thread that runs through this book. It connects the moment in January 1917 when Wilson sought to end the most calamitous war ever fought with a peace without victory, to the depths of the Great Depression fourteen years later, when the all-consuming crisis of the early twentieth century claimed its last victim – the United States.

The tumultuous, blood-soaked events recorded in these pages turned the proud national histories of the nineteenth century on their head. Death and destruction broke the heart of every optimistic Victorian philosophy of history – liberal, conservative, nationalist, and Marxist as well. But what was one to make of this catastrophe? For some it betokened the end of all meaning in history, the collapse of any idea of progress. This could be taken fatalistically, or as a licence for spontaneous action of the wildest kind. Others drew more sober conclusions. There was development – perhaps even progress, for all its ambiguity – but it was more complex, more violent than anyone had expected. Instead of the neat stage theories projected by nineteenth-century theorists, history took the form of what Trotsky would call 'uneven and combined development', a loosely articulated web of events, actors and processes developing at different speeds, whose individual courses were interconnected in labyrinthine ways.⁶⁶ 'Uneven and combined development' is not an elegant phrase. But it well encapsulates the history we tell here, both of international relations and of interconnected national political development, stretching around the northern hemisphere from the United States to China by way of Eurasia. For Trotsky, it defined a method both of historical analysis and of political action. It expressed his dogged belief that whilst history offered no guarantees, it was not without logic. Success depended on sharpening one's historical intelligence so as to recognize and seize unique moments of opportunity. For Lenin, similarly, a key task of the revolutionary theorist was to identify and attack the weakest links in the 'chain' of imperialist powers.⁶⁷

Taking the side, not of the revolutionaries, but of the governments, the political scientist Stanley Hoffmann, writing in the 1960s, offered a rather more graphic image of 'uneven and combined development'. He described the powers, great and small, as members of a 'chain gang', a lurching, shackled-together collective.⁶⁸ The prisoners were differently proportioned. Some were more violent than others. Some were single-minded. Others exhibited multiple personalities. They struggled with themselves and with each other. They could seek to dominate the entire chain, or to cooperate. As far as the chain would give, they could enjoy some degree of autonomy, but in the end they were locked together. Whichever of these images we adopt, they have the same implication. Such an interconnected, dynamic system can be understood only by studying the entire system and by retracing its movements over time. To understand its development, we must narrate it. That is the task of this book.

ONE

The Eurasian Crisis

1

War in the Balance

Viewed from the trench lines of the Western Front, the Great War could appear static – a struggle waged over a handful of miles at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. But this perspective is deceiving.¹ On the Eastern Front and in the war against the Ottoman Empire the battle-lines were fluid. In the West, though the front line barely moved, this stasis was the result of massive forces locked in a precarious balance. From one month to the next the initiative shifted from one side to other. As 1916 began, the Entente were planning to crush the Central Powers between a concentric series of assaults delivered in sequence by the French, British, Italian and Russian armies. It was in anticipation of this onslaught that the Germans on 21 February seized the initiative in launching its assault on Verdun. By attacking a key point in the French fortress chain they would bleed the Entente to death. The result was a life-and-death struggle which by the early summer had sucked in more than 70 per cent of the French Army and threatened to turn the Entente's concentric strategy into little more than a series of ad hoc relief operations. It was to seize back the initiative that at the end of May 1916 the British agreed to bring forward their first major land offensive of the war, on the Somme.

As the combatants strained to the limit, their diplomats worked urgently to drag more countries into the maelstrom. In 1914 Austria and Germany had lured Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire onto their side. In 1915 Italy came in on the side of the Entente. Japan had joined the cause in 1914, snapping up Germany's Chinese concessions in Shandong. By the end of 1916 Britain and France were luring the Japanese navy out of the Pacific to do escort duty against Austrian and German submarines in the eastern Mediterranean. Vast amounts of cash and every conceivable means of diplomatic pressure were brought to bear on the last remaining central European neutral, Romania. If it could be flipped into the Entente camp it would pose a mortal threat to the soft underbelly of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. But there was only one power in 1916 that could truly transform the balance of the war, the United States. Whether in economic, military or political terms, its stance was decisive. It was only in 1893 that Britain had seen fit to upgrade its legation in the American capital to the status of a full embassy. Now, less than a generation later, European history seemed to hang on the posture that Washington would adopt towards the war.

I

The success of the Entente's strategy depended on combining a devastating series of concentric military offensives with the slow economic strangulation of the Central Powers. Before the war the British Admiralty had prepared plans not only for a naval blockade but also for an annihilating financial boycott of all central European trade. But, in August 1914, in the face of fierce protests from America, they shrank from the rigorous enforcement of these plans.² The result was an uneasy standoff. Britain and France compromised the effectiveness of their ultimate maritime weapon. But the blockade even in its partial form was hugely unpopular in the United States. The American navy regarded the British blockade as 'untenable under any law or custom of maritime war hitherto known . . .'³ But even more politically charged was the German response. In an effort to turn the tables on the Entente, in February 1915 the Kriegsmarine deployed its U-boats in the first all-out assault on transatlantic shipping. They managed to sink almost two ships per day and an average of 100,000 tons per month. But the shipping resources of Britain were deep and if continued for any period of time this assault seemed bound to force America into the war. The Lusitania in May and the Arabic in August 1915 were only the best-known casualties. Anxious to avoid further escalation, at the end of August the Kaiser's civilian government retreated. With the backing of the Catholic Centre Party, the progressive Liberals and the Social Democrats, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg issued orders to restrict the U-boat campaign. Just as the Entente could not properly enforce its blockade for fear of antagonizing

America, Germany's counterstroke miscarried for the same reason. Instead, in the spring of 1916, the German navy tried to break the maritime deadlock by luring the British Grand Fleet into a North Sea trap. On 31 May 1916 in the battle of Jutland, 33 British and 27 German capital ships clashed in the largest naval confrontation of the war. The result was inconclusive. The fleets slunk back to base, henceforth to exert their influence from offstage as massive, silent reserves of naval power.

In the summer of 1916, as the Entente struggled to regain the initiative on the Western Front, the politics of the Atlantic blockade remained unresolved. When the French and British sought to tighten their grip by blacklisting American firms charged with 'trading with the enemy', President Wilson could barely contain his anger.⁴ It was 'the last straw', Wilson confessed to his closest advisor, the urbane Texan Colonel House, 'I am, I must admit, about at the end of my patience with Great Britain and the allies.'⁵ Nor did Wilson content himself with expostulation. The American Army might be small, but even in 1914 the American fleet was a force to be reckoned with. It was the fourth largest in the world and unlike the Japanese or the German navies it actually had a proud memory of having clashed with the Royal Navy in 1812. To the followers of Admiral Mahan, America's great theorist of naval power from the gilded age, the war presented a priceless opportunity to outbuild the Europeans and to establish undisputed control over the oceanic waterways. In February 1916 President Wilson fell in with their demands, launching a campaign to gain congressional approval for the construction of what he boasted would be 'incomparably the greatest navy in the world'.⁶ Six months later, on 29 August 1916, Wilson signed into law the most dramatic naval expansion plan in American history, appropriating almost \$500 million over three years to build 157 new vessels, including 16 capital ships. Less dramatic, but no less consequential in the long run, was the establishment in June 1916 of the Emergency Fleet Corporation to oversee the construction of a merchant shipping fleet to rival that of Britain.⁷

When in September 1916 Colonel House and Wilson discussed the likely impact of America's naval expansion on Anglo-American relations, Wilson's view was blunt: 'let us build a navy bigger than hers and do what we please'.⁸ The reason that threat was so ominous for Britain was that, once roused, the United States, unlike Imperial Germany or Japan, clearly had the means to make good on it. Within five years America would be acknowledged as Britain's naval equal. From the British point of view, in 1916 the war thus took on a fundamentally new aspect. As the twentieth century began, containing Japan, Russia and Germany had been the chief priorities of imperial strategy. Since August 1914 all that counted was the defeat of Imperial Germany and its allies. In 1916, Wilson's evident desire to build an American naval force equal to that of Britain raised an alarming new prospect. Even at the best of times a challenge by the United States would have been intimidating. Given the demands of the Great War it was a nightmarish prospect. Nor were America's naval ambitions the only fundamental challenge facing the Europeans in 1916.⁹ The rising economic power of America had been evident from the 1890s, but it was the Entente's battle with the Central Powers that abruptly shifted the centre of global financial leadership across the Atlantic.¹⁰ In so doing, it redefined not only the locus of financial leadership, but what that leadership actually meant.

All the main European combatants began the war with what were by modern standards remarkably strong financial balance sheets, solid public finances and large portfolios of foreign investments. In 1914 fully a third of British wealth was held in private overseas investment. As the war began, the mobilization of these domestic and imperial resources was compounded by an immense transatlantic financing operation. This involved all the governments of Europe, but above all the British in a new form of international action. Before 1914, in the era of Edwardian high finance, London's leading role was generally acknowledged. But international finance was a private affair. The conductor of the gold standard orchestra, the Bank of England, was not an official agency but a private corporation. If the British state was present in international finance, its influence was subtle and indirect. The UK Treasury remained in the background. Under the extraordinary pressures of the war, these invisible and informal networks of money and influence were quite abruptly solidified into a claim to hegemony of a far more concrete and overtly political kind. From October 1914 the

British and French governments put the weight of hundreds of millions of pounds of government loans behind the ‘Russian steam roller’ that was to crush the Central Powers from the east.¹¹ Following the Boulogne agreement of August 1915, the gold reserves of all three major Entente Powers were pooled and used to underwrite the value of sterling and the franc in New York.¹² Britain and France in turn assumed responsibility for negotiating loans on behalf of the entire Entente. By August 1916, in the wake of the terrible cost of the Verdun battle, France’s credit had sunk to such a low ebb that it fell to London to underwrite the entire New York operation.¹³ A new network of political credit had been created in Europe with London at its centre. But this was only one leg of the operation.

In accounting terms the financing of the Entente’s war effort involved an enormous reshuffling of national assets and liabilities.¹⁴ To provide collateral, the UK Treasury organized a forced purchase scheme for private holdings of first-class North American and Latin American securities, which were exchanged for domestic UK government bonds. The foreign assets, once in the hands of the UK Treasury, were used to provide security for billions of dollars’ worth of Entente borrowing from Wall Street. The liabilities that the UK Treasury incurred in America were counterbalanced in Britain’s national balance sheet by vast new claims on the governments of Russia and France. But to imagine this gigantic mobilization as the effortless redirection of an existing network underplays the historic significance of the shift and the extreme precariousness of the financial architecture that emerged. After 1915, the Entente’s war borrowing upended the political geometry of Edwardian finance.

Before the war billions had been lent by private lenders in London and Paris, the rich core of Imperial Europe, to private and public borrowers in peripheral nations.¹⁵ As of 1915, not only had the source of lending shifted to Wall Street, it was no longer railways in Russia or diamond prospectors in South Africa queuing up for credit. The most powerful states of Europe were now borrowing from private citizens in the United States and anyone else who would provide credit. Lending of this kind, by private investors in one rich country to the governments of other rich developed countries, in a currency not controlled by the government borrower, was unlike anything seen in the heyday of late Victorian globalization. As the hyperinflations after World War I were to demonstrate, a government that had borrowed in its own currency could simply print its way out of debt. A flood of new banknotes would wipe out the real value of the war debt. The same was not true if Britain or France borrowed in dollars from Wall Street. The most powerful states in Europe became dependent on foreign creditors. Those creditors in turn extended their confidence to the Entente. By the end of 1916, American investors had wagered two billion dollars on an Entente victory. The vehicle for this transatlantic operation, once London took charge in 1915, was a single private bank, the dominant Wall Street house of J. P. Morgan, which had deep historic ties to the City of London.¹⁶ This was a business operation for sure. But it was coupled on the part of Morgan with an unabashedly anti-German, pro-Entente stance and a backing within the United States for President Wilson’s loudest critics, the interventionist forces within the Republican Party. The result was a quite unprecedented international combination of public and private power. In the course of the gigantic Somme offensive over the summer of 1916, J. P. Morgan spent more than a billion dollars in America on behalf of the British government, no less than 45 per cent of British war spending in those crucial months.¹⁷ In 1916 the bank’s purchasing office was responsible for Entente procurement contracts valued in excess of the entire export trade of the United States in the years before the war. Through the private business contacts of J. P. Morgan, supported by the business and political elite of the American Northeast, the Entente was carrying out a mobilization of a large part of the US economy, entirely without the say-so of the Wilson administration. Potentially, the Entente’s dependence on loans from America gave the American President huge leverage over their war effort. But would Wilson actually be able to exercise that power? Was Wall Street too independent? Did the Federal government have the means to control the activities of J. P. Morgan?

In 1916 the question of war finance and America’s relations with the Entente became embroiled in the debate that had been raging for more than a generation over the governance of American capitalism. In 1912, forty

years after it had recommitted itself to the gold standard in the aftermath of the Civil War, the United States had still lacked a counterpart to the Bank of England, the Bank of France or the Reichsbank.¹⁸ Wall Street had long lobbied for the establishment of a central bank to act as a lender of last resort. But banking interests were far from happy when in 1913 Wilson signed into existence the Federal Reserve Board. For the tastes of the Wall Street interests, notably J. P. Morgan, Wilson's Fed was far too politicized.¹⁹ It was not a truly 'independent' institution on the model of the privately owned Bank of England. In 1914, as war broke out in Europe, the new system had survived its first test. The Fed and the Treasury intervened to prevent the closure of the European financial markets from causing a collapse on Wall Street.²⁰ Between 1915 and 1916 the American economy was driven upwards on a vast export-led industrial boom. To meet the needs of the European war, the factory towns of the Northeast and the Great Lakes were sucking in labour and capital pell-mell from all across the United States. But that only increased the pressure on Wilson. If the boom was allowed to proceed unchecked, America's investment in the Entente war effort would soon become too big to be allowed to fail. The American government would in fact lose the freedom of manoeuvre that promised to give it such power in 1916.

Might the Entente for its part have done better to rely rather less on the resources of the United States? Germany after all fought the war without the benefit of such largesse.²¹ But that comparison demonstrates precisely what the importance of American imports actually was (Table 1). After the draining battles at Verdun and on the Somme in the summer of 1916, Germany remained on the defensive on the Western Front for almost two years. The Central Powers limited themselves to less expensive operations on the Eastern and Italian fronts. Meanwhile, the blockade took a heavy toll on their civilian populations. From the winter of 1916–17 the city dwellers of Germany and Austria were slowly starving. Ensuring the supply of food and coal to the home front was not an incidental consideration in World War I, it was an essential factor in deciding the eventual outcome.²² Economic pressure took time to force the issue, but in the end its influence was decisive. When the Germans launched their last great offensive in the spring of 1918, a large part of the Kaiser's army was too hungry to sustain the offensive for long. By contrast, the relentless offensive energy of the Entente in 1917 – the French offensive in Champagne in April, the Kerensky offensive in the East in July, the British assault in Flanders in July – and the final drive in the summer and autumn of 1918, would have been impossible both in military and political terms without North American backing. In London, at least until the end of 1916, there were voices calling for Britain to escape dependence on American loans. But they were by the same token calling for a negotiated peace. They were overridden by the advent of the Lloyd George coalition government in December 1916 committed to delivering a 'knock-out blow'. What no one seriously contemplated was continuing the war at full force without relying on supplies and credit from the United States. From 1916, once the Allies had taken up their first billion dollars in credit in their first major effort to break the Central Powers through concentric assaults, the momentum was cumulative. The assumption behind all subsequent offensive planning was that it would be sustained by substantial transatlantic supplies. And this then reinforced the dependence. As the billions piled up, maintaining payments on the outstanding debts, avoiding the humiliation of a default, became overriding preoccupations both during the war itself and even more in its aftermath.

Table 1. What the Dollars Bought: The Share of Vital War Materials Purchased by the UK Abroad, 1914–18 (%)

II

In any case, the transatlantic struggle over the future course of the war was never merely economic or military. It was always eminently political. It was on politics that the willingness to continue the war depended and this too was a transatlantic question. But here the contours of the argument were far less clear-cut than they were with regard to economic and naval power. The image that we have of the relationship between American and European politics in the early twentieth century is profoundly shaped by the later

experience of World War II. In 1945 well-fed, self-confident GIs appeared in Europe amidst the ruins of war and dictatorship as heralds both of prosperity and democracy. But we should be careful in projecting this identification of America with an alluring synthesis of capitalist prosperity and democracy too far back into the early twentieth century. The speed with which the United States claimed pre-eminent political leadership was as sudden as the emergence of its naval and financial power. It was a product of the Great War itself.

Not surprisingly, against the backdrop of its terrible civil war, America's democratic experiment had attracted mixed reviews in the half century that separated 1865 from the outbreak of 1914.²³ The newly unified Italy and Germany did not look to America for constitutional inspiration. Both had their own home-grown tradition of constitutionalism. Italy's liberals modelled themselves on Britain. In the 1880s the new Japanese constitution was modelled on a blend of European influences.²⁴ During the heyday of Gladstone and Disraeli, even in the United States the first generation of political scientists, the young Woodrow Wilson amongst them, looked across the Atlantic to the Westminster model.²⁵ Of course, the Union side had its own heroic narrative with Abraham Lincoln as its great tribune. But it was only after the shock of the Civil War had dissipated that a fresh generation of American intellectuals could affirm a new, reconciled national narrative. As the western frontier closed, the continent was unified. The Spanish-American War of 1898 and America's conquest of the Philippines in 1902 added swagger. The industrial dynamism of the United States was unprecedented. Its agricultural exports brought abundance to the world. But, among the progressive reformers of the gilded age, America's self-image was ambiguous. America was a byword for urban graft, mismanagement and greed-fuelled politics, as much as for growth, production and profit. In search of models of modern government, it was to the cities of Imperial Germany that American experts made pilgrimage, not the other way around.²⁶ Looking back from 1901, Woodrow Wilson himself remarked that though 'the nineteenth century' had been 'above all others a century of democracy . . . the world' was 'no more convinced of the benefits of democracy as a form of government at its end than it was at its beginning . . .' The stability of democratic republics was still in question. Though the commonwealths 'sprung from England' had the best track record, Wilson himself admitted that the 'the history of the United States . . . has not been accepted as establishing their tendency to make government just and liberal and pure'.²⁷ Americans themselves had reason to trust in their own system, but as far as the wider world was concerned, they still had much to prove.

Nor should we assume that with the outbreak of war the tables were immediately turned. Until the death toll became unbearable, the European combatants saw the great mobilization of August 1914 as a miraculous vindication of their nation-building efforts.²⁸ None of the combatants were full-blown democracies in a late twentieth-century sense, but nor were they *ancien régime* monarchies or totalitarian dictatorships. The war was sustained if not by patriotic ecstasy then at least by a remarkably extended consensus. Britain, France, Italy, Japan, Germany and Bulgaria all fought the war with their parliaments in session. The Austrian parliament reopened in Vienna in 1917. Even in Russia the early patriotic enthusiasm of 1914 brought a revival of the Duma. On both sides of the front line, soldiers were above all motivated to defend the systems of rights, property and national identity in which they felt themselves to have a profound stake. The French fought to defend the Republic against a hereditary foe. The British volunteered to do their bit to defend international civilization and put down the German menace. The Germans and Austrians fought to defend themselves against French resentment, Italian treachery, the overbearing demands of British imperialism and the worst menace of all, Tsarist Russia. Though open calls for mutiny were suppressed and though strikers could find themselves incarcerated or drafted to dangerous sectors of the front, open talk of negotiated peace was commonplace in a way that would have been unthinkable on either side in the latter stages of World War II.

When the British government was reconstructed in December 1916 under Prime Minister Lloyd George, it was precisely so as to reassert the ultimate goal of delivering a 'knock-out blow' to Germany, against increasingly vocal calls for a compromise peace. Most of the important cabinet seats were claimed by the

Tories, but the Prime Minister himself was a liberal radical with a sure instinct for the popular mood. Already in May 1915 his predecessor Asquith had introduced trade unionists into the British cabinet. Early twentieth-century European politics was more inclusive than it is often given credit for. In France, the socialists were an essential part of the Union Sacrée, the cross-party alliance that saw the Republic through the first two years of the war. Even in Germany, though the government remained in the hands of the Kaiser's appointees, the Social Democrats were the largest party in the Reichstag. Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg consulted with them routinely after August 1914. When in the autumn of 1916 generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff put the war economy into top gear, they relied on the co-opted support of the trade unions.

The reaction of Americans of Teddy Roosevelt's stripe to this spectacle of European mobilization was not one of superiority, but of awed admiration.²⁹ As Roosevelt put it in January 1915, the war might be 'terrible and evil, but it is also grand and noble'. Americans should 'assume' no 'attitude of superior virtue'. Nor should they expect Europeans to 'regard' them as 'having set a spiritual example . . . by sitting idle, uttering cheap platitudes, and picking up their trade, whilst they had poured out their blood like water in support of ideals in which, with all their hearts and souls, they believe'.³⁰ For Roosevelt, if America was to vindicate its emergence as a legitimate great power, it must prove itself in the same struggle, by throwing its weight behind the Entente. But to Roosevelt's immense frustration, the pro-war forces were a minority in America even after the sinking of the Lusitania in May 1915. Millions of German-Americans preferred neutrality, as did many Irish Americans. Jewish Americans were hard pressed not to celebrate the advances of the Imperial German Army into Russian Poland in 1915, where they brought welcome relief from Tsarist anti-Semitism. Neither the American labour movement nor the remnants of the agrarian populist movement, which had assembled around Wilson's bid for the presidency in 1912, were pro-war. Wilson's first Secretary of State was none other than William Jennings Bryan, the evangelical fundamentalist, pacifist and anti-gold standard radical of the 1890s. He was profoundly suspicious of Wall Street and its connections to European imperialism. As the clock ticked towards the July crisis of 1914, Bryan toured Europe signing a series of mediation treaties that would avoid the possibility of American involvement in a war. When war broke out he advocated a truly comprehensive boycott of private lending to either side. Wilson overrode this proposal and in June 1915, following the sinking of the Lusitania, Bryan resigned in protest when Wilson threatened Germany with hostilities if it did not cease U-boat attacks. But Wilson himself was anything but a pro-interventionist.

Before he was hailed as a world-famous liberal internationalist, Woodrow Wilson rose to prominence as one of the great bards of American national history.³¹ As a professor at Princeton University and the author of best-selling popular histories, he had helped to craft for a nation still reeling from the Civil War a reconciled vision of its violent past. One of Wilson's earliest memories of childhood in Virginia was of hearing the news of Lincoln's election and the rumours of a coming civil war. Growing up in Augusta, Georgia, in the 1860s – what he would describe to Lloyd George at Versailles as a 'conquered and devastated country' – he experienced from the side of the vanquished the bitter consequences of a just war, fought to its ultimate conclusion.³² It left him deeply suspicious of any crusading rhetoric. Nor was it just the Civil War that scarred Wilson. The peace that followed was, if anything, even more traumatic. Throughout his life he would denounce the Reconstruction era that followed, the effort by the North to impose a new order on the South that enfranchised the freed black population.³³ In Wilson's view it had taken America more than a generation to recover. Only in the 1890s had something like reconciliation been achieved.

For Wilson as for Roosevelt the war was a test of America's new self-confidence and strength. But whereas Roosevelt wanted to prove the manhood of the US, for Wilson the war raging in Europe challenged his nation's moral equilibrium and self-restraint. By America's refusal to become embroiled in the war, its democracy would confirm the nation's new maturity and immunity to the inflammatory wartime rhetoric that had done such harm fifty years earlier. But this insistence on self-restraint should not be misunderstood for modesty. Whereas interventionists of Roosevelt's ilk aspired merely to equality – to have America counted

as a fully fledged great power – Wilson’s goal was absolute pre-eminence. Nor was this a vision that scorned ‘hard power’. Wilson had thrilled in 1898 to the excitement of the Spanish-American War. His naval expansion programme and his assertion of America’s grip on the Caribbean approaches was more aggressive than that of any predecessor. In order to secure the Panama canal, Wilson in 1915 and 1916 did not hesitate to order the occupation of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and intervention in Mexico.³⁴ But thanks to its God-given natural endowments, America had no need of extensive territorial conquests. Its economic needs had been formulated at the turn of the century by the ‘Open Door’ policy. The US had no need of territorial domination, but its goods and capital must be free to move around the world and across the boundaries of any empire. Meanwhile, from behind an impenetrable naval shield it would project an irresistible beam of moral and political influence.

For Wilson the war was a sign of ‘God’s providence’ that had brought the United States ‘an opportunity such as has seldom been vouchsafed any nation, the opportunity to counsel and obtain peace in the world . . .’ – on its own terms. A peace accord on American terms would permanently establish the ‘greatness’ of the United States as ‘the true champions of peace and of concord’.³⁵ Twice, in 1915 and 1916, Colonel House was despatched to tour the capitals of Europe to offer mediation, but neither side was interested. On 27 May 1916, only weeks before the British began their Wall Street-financed offensive on the Somme, Wilson spelled out his vision of a new order in a speech to a gathering of the League to Enforce Peace, at the New Willard Hotel in Washington.³⁶ Agreeing with the Republican internationalists who hosted the event, Wilson pronounced himself willing to see the United States join any ‘feasible association of nations’ that would underwrite a future peace. As twin foundations of that new order, he called for freedom of the seas and limitations of armaments. But what differentiated Wilson from most of his Republican rivals was that he coupled this vision of America’s role in a new world order with an explicit refusal to take sides in the current war. To do so would be to forfeit America’s claim to absolute pre-eminence. With the war’s ‘causes and its objects’, Wilson announced, America was not concerned.³⁷ In public he was content to remark simply that the war’s origins were ‘deeper’ and more ‘obscure’.³⁸ In private conversation with his ambassador in Britain, Walter Hines Page, Wilson was blunter. The Kaiser’s U-boats were an outrage. But British ‘navalism’ was no lesser evil and posed a far greater strategic challenge for the United States. The atrocious war was, Wilson believed, not a liberal crusade against German aggression, but a ‘quarrel to settle economic rivalries between Germany and England’. According to Page’s diary, in August 1916 Wilson ‘spoke of England’s having the earth and of Germany wanting it’.³⁹

Even if 1916 had not been an election year and even if Morgan had not been one of the most prominent backers of the Republican Party, the enmeshing of a large part of the American economy on the side of the Entente at the behest of pro-British bankers would have posed a dramatic challenge to Wilson’s administration. As the electoral campaign entered its final stages, the tensions produced within the United States by the war boom came to a dangerous head. Since August 1914 the huge credit-fuelled boost in exports had driven up the cost of living. The much-vaunted purchasing power of American wages was melting away.⁴⁰ It was the American worker who was paying for business war-profiteering. Over the summer Wilson approved moves by the populist wing in Congress to impose a tax on exports to Europe. In the last days of August 1916, in response to the threat of a general strike on the railway network, he intervened on the side of the unions, forcing Congress to concede the eight-hour day.⁴¹ In response, American big business rallied as never before around the Republican presidential campaign. The Democrats, for their part, pilloried the Republican Charles Hughes as the ‘war candidate’ in the service of Wall Street profiteers. After this poisonous campaign that produced the biggest electoral turnout in American political history, the manner of Wilson’s victory did little to calm the savagely partisan mood. Though Wilson won a solid popular majority, in the Electoral College he prevailed only thanks to California by a margin of just 3,755 votes. Wilson thus became the first Democrat to be re-elected as President for a second term since Andrew Jackson in the 1830s. As far as the Entente and their backers in America were concerned, it was a sobering outcome. A large part of the American public had declared its desire to stay outside the conflict.

III

Given Wilson's re-election, to count on American acquiescence in the growing economic demands of the Entente war effort was clearly risky. But the conflict had a dynamic of its own. With the German onslaught on Verdun reaching its horrific climax, the Entente decision to bring forward the first major British offensive on the Somme was taken on 24 May 1916, three days before Wilson first announced his vision of a new world order at the New Willard Hotel.⁴² Though the British offensive failed to achieve a breakthrough, it threw the Germans onto the defensive. Meanwhile, on the Eastern Front the Entente's grand strategy came close to decisive success. There, the might of the Imperial Russian Army, backed by the financial and industrial capacity of the Entente, could be brought to bear against the tottering Habsburg Empire. On 5 June 1916 the energetic cavalry commander General Brusilov hurled the cream of the Russian Army against the Austro-Hungarian lines in Galicia. In a remarkable few days of fighting, the Russians laid waste to Habsburg military power. But for an urgent injection of German troops and military leadership, the southern half of the Eastern Front would have collapsed. The shock to the Central Powers was so dramatic that it threatened to unleash a chain reaction.

On 27 August Romania finally abandoned its neutrality and declared war on the side of the Entente. Instead of the wagons of Romanian oil and grain, on which the Central Powers had come heavily to depend, a fresh enemy army of 800,000 drove westwards into Transylvania. Improbable though it may seem, in August 1916 it was not President Wilson but Prime Minister Brătianu in Bucharest who appeared to hold the fate of the world in his hands. As Field Marshal Hindenburg commented in retrospect: 'Truly, never before was a state as small as Rumania, handed a role of such world historic significance at such an opportune moment. Never before have potent great powers like Germany and Austria been exposed in such a way to a state which had perhaps only one twentieth of their population.'⁴³ At the Kaiser's HQ the news of Romania's entry into the war 'fell like a bomb. William II completely lost his head, pronounced the war finally lost and believed we must now ask for peace.'⁴⁴ The Habsburg ambassador in Bucharest, Count Ottokar Czernin, predicted 'with mathematical certainty the complete defeat of the Central Powers and their allies if the war were continued any longer'.⁴⁵

In the event, Romania defied the odds in its favour. A German-led counter-attack turned defeat into victory. By December 1916, with German and Bulgarian forces converging on Bucharest, the Romanian government and what was left of its army found themselves as refugees in Russian Moldavia. But it is this dramatic train of events that forms the essential backdrop to the confrontation between the Entente, Germany and Woodrow Wilson over the winter of 1916–17. Berlin's path towards escalation was marked out at the end of August 1916 when the Kaiser replaced Erich von Falkenhayn, the discredited mastermind of Verdun, with Field Marshal Hindenburg and his chief of staff, Erich Ludendorff, as the Third Supreme Army Command (3. OHL). Having over the previous two years been confined exclusively to the war against Russia, for Ludendorff and Hindenburg a close inspection of the Western Front came as a severe shock. The German effort at Verdun had been huge. But the extraordinary intensity of the British Somme offensive set a new benchmark. In response, Hindenburg and Ludendorff's first move was to hunker down into a defensive posture. If they were to have any hope of matching the Entente's globalized war effort, Germany would need a new mobilization of its own. Dubbed the 'Hindenburg programme', it was designed to double ammunition output within the year. Its targets were met, though at a huge cost to the home front. In the meantime, it was this same defensive rationale that led the 3. OHL to back the navy in calling for the U-boats to be unleashed. If Germany was to survive, the transatlantic supply lines had to be severed. Hindenburg and Ludendorff would not launch an attack immediately. They would give Bethmann Hollweg a chance at peace mediation. The German socialists needed to be reassured that they were supporting a purely defensive war.⁴⁶ The risks of escalating the U-boat war were obvious. Americans would be antagonized. But to continue to hold back was simply to play into British hands. In economic terms, North America was fully committed to the Entente in any case.

Not surprisingly the Entente, who faced the daunting task of raising a further billion dollars' worth of loans in the United States in the near future, were rather less sanguine about the inevitability of American support. Nevertheless for Britain and France, even more than for the Germans, a negotiated peace was unattractive. After two years of war, Germany's armies occupied Poland, Belgium, much of northern France and now Romania. Serbia had been erased from the map. In London in the autumn of 1916 it was the argument over strategic priorities in the third year of the war that brought down the Asquith government.⁴⁷ Ironically, those who were most open to Wilson's idea of a negotiated peace were those who were most suspicious of the long-term rise of American power. This was particularly true of old-school liberals, such as the British Chancellor Reginald McKenna. As he warned the cabinet, if they continued on their current course 'I venture to say with certainty that by next June [1917] or earlier the President of the American Republic will be in a position, if he so wishes, to dictate his own terms to us.'⁴⁸ McKenna's desire to avoid falling further into dependence on America was the obverse of Wilson's distaste for European politics. As seen from both sides, the best way to minimize future entanglement was to halt the war as soon as possible. But by December 1916, McKenna and Asquith were out of office. In came Lloyd George at the head of a coalition dedicated to defeating Germany decisively. Ironically, though the posture of the coalition was fundamentally out of kilter with Wilson's desire to end the war, it was the most Atlanticist in its basic commitments.⁴⁹ As Lloyd George informed Robert Lansing, Wilson's Secretary of State, he looked forward most enthusiastically to a permanent international order founded on the 'active sympathy of the two great English-speaking nations'.⁵⁰ As he put it to Colonel House earlier in 1916, 'if the United States would stand by Great Britain the entire world could not shake the combined mastery we would hold over the seas'.⁵¹ Furthermore, the 'economic force of the United States' was 'so great that no nation at war could withstand its power . . .'.⁵² But, as Lloyd George had been arguing already since the summer of 1916, American loans established not simply Britain's subordination to Wall Street, but a condition of mutual dependence. The more that Britain borrowed in America and the more it purchased, the harder it would be for Wilson to detach his country from the fate of the Entente.⁵³

2

Peace without Victory

As 1916 drew to a close, both blocs of European combatants were preparing to take huge risks on the assumption that the financial entanglement between America and the Entente would sooner or later force Washington to align itself on the side of the Entente. Nor was this a secret of state. The assumption was widely shared. In his exile in Zurich the Russian radical, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, was in June 1916 putting the final touches to what was to be one of his most famous pamphlets, 'Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism'.¹ This cast commonplace assumptions about the necessity of American involvement into an iron-clad theoretical dogma. According to Lenin, states in the age of imperialism were drawn into the fight as tools of national business interests. On this logic it was apparent that Washington must sooner or later declare war on Germany. What none of these speculations could account for, however, was the remarkable course of events between November 1916 and the spring of 1917. The American President, re-elected with a mandate to keep America out of the war, tried to do something far more ambitious. He attempted not just to preserve neutrality but to end the war on terms that would place Washington in a position of pre-eminent global leadership. Lenin may have declared imperialism to be the highest stage of capitalism, but Wilson had other ideas.² So, it turned out, did the combatants. If a return to the pre-war world of imperialism was impossible, revolution was not the only alternative.

I

Throughout October 1916 the banking house J. P. Morgan was in urgent discussions with the British and the French over the future of Allied finance. For their next season of campaigning, the Entente proposed to raise at least 1.5 billion dollars. Realizing the enormity of these sums, J. P. Morgan sought reassurance both from

the Federal Reserve Board and from Wilson himself. None was forthcoming.³ As Election Day on 7 November approached, Wilson began drafting a public statement to be delivered by the governor of the Federal Reserve Board warning the American public against committing any more of their savings to Entente loans.⁴ On 27 November 1916, four days before J. P. Morgan planned to launch the Anglo-French bond issue, the Federal Reserve Board issued instructions to all member banks. In the interest of the stability of the American financial system, the Fed announced that it no longer considered it desirable for American investors to increase their holdings of British and French securities. As Wall Street plunged and sterling was offloaded by speculators, J. P. Morgan and the UK Treasury were forced into emergency purchasing of sterling to prop up the British currency.⁵ At the same time the British government was forced to suspend support of French purchasing.⁶ The Entente's entire financing effort was in jeopardy. In Russia in the autumn of 1916 there was mounting resentment at the demand by Britain and France that it should ship its gold reserves to London to secure Allied borrowing. Without American assistance it was not just the patience of the financial markets but the Entente itself that would be put at risk.⁷ As the year ended, the war committee of the British cabinet concluded grimly that the only possible interpretation was that Wilson meant to force their hand and put an end to the war in a matter of weeks. And this ominous interpretation was reinforced when London received confirmation from its ambassador in Washington that it was indeed the President himself who had insisted on the strong wording of the Fed's note.

Given the huge demands made by the Entente on Wall Street in 1916, it is clear that opinion was already shifting against further massive loans to London and Paris ahead of the Fed's announcement.⁸ But what the cabinet could not ignore was the open hostility of the American President. And Wilson was determined to raise the stakes. On 12 December the German Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, without stating Germany's own aims, issued a pre-emptive demand for peace negotiations. Undaunted, on 18 December Wilson followed this with a 'Peace Note', calling on both sides to state what war aims could justify the continuation of the terrible slaughter. It was an open bid to delegitimize the war, all the more alarming for its coincidence with the initiative from Berlin. On Wall Street the reaction was immediate. Armaments shares plunged and the German ambassador, Johann Heinrich von Bernstorff, and Wilson's son-in-law, Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo, found themselves accused of making millions by betting against Entente-connected armaments stocks.⁹ In London and Paris the impact was more serious. King George V is said to have wept.¹⁰ The mood in the British cabinet was furious. The London Times called for restraint but could not hide its dismay at Wilson's refusal to distinguish between the two sides.¹¹ It was the worst blow that France had received in 29 months of war, roared the patriotic press from Paris.¹² German troops were deep in Entente territory in both East and West. They had to be driven out, before talks could be contemplated. Nor, since the sudden swing in the fortunes of the war in the late summer of 1916, did this seem impossible. Austria was clearly close to the brink.¹³ When the Entente met for their war conference in Petrograd at the end of January 1917, the talk was of a new sequence of concentric offensives.

Wilson's intervention was deeply embarrassing, but to the Entente's relief the Central Powers took the initiative in rejecting the President's offer of mediation. This freed the Entente to issue their own, carefully worded statement of war aims on 10 January. These demanded the evacuation of Belgium and Serbia, and the return of Alsace Lorraine, but more ambitiously they insisted on self-determination for the oppressed peoples of both the Ottoman and Habsburg empires.¹⁴ It was a manifesto for continued war, not immediate negotiation, and it thus raised the inescapable question: how were these campaigns to be paid for? To cover purchases in the US running at \$75 million per week, in January 1917 Britain could muster no more than \$215 million in assets in New York. Beyond that, it would be forced to draw down on the Bank of England's last remaining gold reserves, which would cover no more than six weeks of procurement.¹⁵ In January, London had no option but to ask J. P. Morgan to start preparing to relaunch the bond issue that had been aborted in November. Once more, however, they had reckoned without the President.

At 1 p.m. on 22 January 1917 Woodrow Wilson strode towards the rostrum of the US Senate.¹⁶ It was a

dramatic occasion. News of the President's intention to speak was only leaked to the senators over lunch. It was the first time that a President had directly addressed that august body since George Washington's day. Nor was it an occasion only on the American political stage. It was clear that Wilson would have to speak about the war and in so doing he would not merely be delivering a commentary. Commonly, Wilson's emergence as a leader of global stature is dated a year later to January 1918 and his enunciation of the so-called '14 Points'. But it was in fact in January 1917 that the American President first staked an explicit claim to world leadership. The text of his speech was distributed to the major capitals of Europe at the same time that it was delivered in the Senate. As in the 14 Points speech, on 22 January Wilson would call for a new international order based on a League of Nations, disarmament and the freedom of the seas. But whereas the 14 Points were a wartime manifesto that fit snugly into a mid-century narrative of American global leadership, the speech that Wilson delivered on 22 January is a great deal harder to assimilate.

As the door to the American century swung wide in January 1917, Wilson stood poised in the frame. He came not to take sides but to make peace. The first dramatic assertion of American leadership in the twentieth century was not directed towards ensuring that the 'right' side won, but that no side did.¹⁷ The only kind of peace with any prospect of securing the cooperation of all the major world powers was one that was accepted by all sides. All parties to the Great War must acknowledge the conflict's deep futility. That meant that the war could have only one outcome: 'peace without victory'. It was this phrase that encapsulated the standpoint of moral equivalence with which Wilson had consistently staked his distance from the Europeans since the outbreak of the war. It was a stance that he knew would stick in the gullet of many in his audience in January 1917.¹⁸ 'It is not pleasant to say this . . . I am seeking only to face realities and to face them without soft concealments.' In the current slaughter the US must take no side. For America to ride to the assistance of Britain, France and the Entente would certainly ensure their victory. But in so doing America would be perpetuating the old world's horrible cycle of violence. It would, Wilson insisted in private conversation, be nothing less than a 'crime against civilization'.¹⁹

Wilson was later to be accused of the idealistic belief that the League of Nations could by itself ensure peace, of shrinking moralistically from the question of power. The failure to face up to the question of international enforcement was denounced as the birth-fault of internationalist 'idealism'. But in that sense Wilson was never an idealist. What he called for in January 1917 was a 'peace made secure by the organized major force of mankind'. If the war ended in a world divided between victors and vanquished, the force necessary to sustain it would be immense. But what Wilson aspired to was disarmament. At all costs he wanted to avoid the 'Prussianization' of America itself. This was why a peace without victory was so essential. 'Victory would mean peace forced upon the loser . . . It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand . . .' 'The right state of mind, the right feeling between nations, is as necessary for a lasting peace as is the just settlement of vexed questions of territory or of racial and national allegiance . . . Any peace which does not recognize and accept this principle will inevitably be upset. It will not rest upon the affections or the convictions of mankind.'²⁰ It was precisely to create the necessary conditions for a peace that could be upheld without a costly international security system that Wilson in January 1917 was calling for an end to the war. The exhaustion of the warlike spirits of all the powers, the demonstration by example that war had lost its utility, would make the League self-supporting.

But if this was what Wilson meant by a peace of equals, it had a further implication. Wilson is famous as the great internationalist amongst American presidents. However, the world he wanted to create was one in which the exceptional position of America at the head of world civilization would be inscribed on the gravestone of European power. The peace of equals that Wilson had in mind would be a peace of collective European exhaustion. The brave new world would begin with the collective humbling of all the European powers at the feet of the United States, raised triumphant as the neutral arbiter and the source of a new form

of international order.²¹ Wilson's vision was neither one of gutless idealism nor a plan to subordinate US sovereignty to international authority. He was in fact making an exorbitant claim to American moral supremacy, rooted in a distinctive vision of America's historic destiny.

II

Unlike the response to the 14 Points in 1918, the reaction to Wilson's call for a 'peace without victory' in January 1917 was distinctly mixed.²² In the US the President was cheered by his progressive and left-wing supporters. By contrast much of the Republican Party reacted with fury to what they understood as an unprecedented partisan intervention by the executive branch. Following the bitterly contested election of 1916, the President's address was, one Republican fumed, a 'stump speech delivered from the throne', an unprecedented abuse of the Senate as a platform for a partisan executive branch.²³ Another member of the audience was left with the impression that Wilson 'thinks he is the President of the world'. Charles Austin Beard, the noted progressive historian, commented to *The New York Times* that the only conceivable reason Wilson would have taken such an initiative was that, as in 1905 when President Roosevelt mediated the Russo-Japanese War, one of the sides in the conflict was on the point of bankruptcy and needed urgently to end the struggle.²⁴ That Wilson meant to bankrupt them was precisely what the Entente feared. For Paris and London the questions raised by Wilson's speech went beyond constitutional niceties. His vision threatened to drive a wedge into the solidarity of the Allied home front that had so far enabled the war to be continued in large part on a volunteer basis without draconian domestic repression. What was even more alarming was that Wilson was entirely aware of what he was doing. 'Perhaps I am the only person in high authority amongst all the peoples of the world,' the President proclaimed before the Senate, 'who is at liberty to speak and hold nothing back.' 'May I not add,' he went on, 'that I hope and believe that I am in effect speaking for liberals and friends of humanity in every nation and of every program of liberty?' Indeed, Wilson went further: 'I would fain believe that I am speaking for the silent mass of mankind everywhere who have as yet had no place or opportunity to speak their real hearts out concerning the death and ruin they see to have come already upon the persons and the homes they hold most dear.'

It was here that the true import of Wilson's address became clear. The American President was calling into question the representative legitimacy of all of the combatant governments. And on the Entente side, the far from silent organizations that claimed to represent that 'mass of mankind' responded to Wilson's cue. As Wilson spoke on 22 January the British Labour movement was meeting in Manchester – 700 delegates, including a minister in Lloyd George's new government, representing two and a quarter million members, more than four times the number at their first meeting in 1901.²⁵ The general tone of the discussion was patriotic. But at the mention of Wilson's name the anti-war faction organized in the Independent Labour Party burst into a well-orchestrated ovation.²⁶ Though this earned them a reprimand from *The Times*, the Manchester Guardian applauded.²⁷ In the French chamber on 26 January, 80 Socialist deputies called on the government to express its agreement with Wilson's 'elevated and reasonable' sentiments.²⁸

All of this ought to have presented a truly historic opportunity for Germany. The American President had weighed the war in the balance and had refused to take the Entente's side. When the blockade revealed what Britain's command of the seaways meant for global trade, Wilson had responded with an unprecedented naval programme of his own. He seemed bent on blocking any further mobilization of the American economy. He had called for peace talks whilst Germany still had the upper hand. He was not deterred by the fact that Bethmann Hollweg had gone first. Now he was speaking quite openly to the population of Britain, France and Italy, over the heads of their governments, demanding an end to the war. The German Embassy in Washington fully understood the significance of the President's words and desperately urged Berlin to respond positively. Already in September 1916, after extended conversations with Colonel House, Ambassador Bernstorff had cabled Berlin that the American President would seek to mediate as soon as the election was over and that 'Wilson regards it as in the interest of America that neither of the combatants

should gain a decisive victory'.²⁹ In December the ambassador sought to bring home to Berlin the importance of Wilson's intervention in the financial markets, which would be a far less dangerous way of throttling the Entente than an all-out U-boat campaign. Above all, Bernstorff understood Wilson's ambition. If he could bring the war to an end he would claim for the American presidency the 'glory of being the premier political personage on the world's stage'.³⁰ If the Germans were to thwart him, they should beware his wrath. But such appeals were not enough to halt the logic of escalation that had been set in motion by the Entente's near breakthrough in the late summer of 1916.

Hindenburg and Ludendorff were the generals who had saved Germany from Russia in 1914 and conquered Poland in 1915. But they owed their rise to the Supreme Command to the crisis of the Central Powers in August 1916. This experience of near disaster defined the politics of the war in Germany from this moment onwards. In 1916, Germany had sought to bleed France dry at Verdun, but out of concerns about America it had withheld the U-boats. The Entente had survived. Over the summer of 1916 the blows dealt to Austria had been near fatal. Given the force mobilized by the Entente in the meantime, any further restraint would be disastrous. The leading figures in Berlin never took seriously the idea that Wilson might actually manage to stop the war. Whatever the nuances of American politics, they insisted its economy was ever more committed on the Entente side. The effect was self-fulfilling. By acting on their deterministic beliefs about American politics, the Kaiser's strategists tore the ground from beneath Wilson's feet. On 9 January 1917, overriding the hesitant objections of their Chancellor, Hindenburg and Ludendorff rammed through the decision to resume unrestricted U-boat warfare.³¹ Within less than two weeks the depths of their miscalculation were to become obvious. Even as Wilson strode to the Senate rostrum on 22 January 1917 to call for the war to be brought to an end, Germany's U-boats were battering their way through winter seas to assume battle stations in a wide arc surrounding the British and French Atlantic coastline. As Ambassador Bernstorff informed the State Department in anguished terms, it was too late for them to be recalled. At 5 p.m. on 31 January he handed Secretary of State Lansing the official declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare against the supply lines of the Entente in the Atlantic and the eastern Mediterranean. On 3 February, Congress approved the breaking of diplomatic relations with Germany.

The German decision cast 'peace without victory' into historical oblivion. It drove America into a war that Wilson detested. It robbed him of the role to which he truly aspired, the arbiter of a global peace. The resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare on 9 January 1917 marked a turning point in world history. It forged another link in the chain of aggression stretching back to August 1914 and forward to Hitler's relentless onslaught between 1938 and 1942, which held fast the image of Germany as an irrepressible force of violence. Already at the time unrestricted U-boat warfare was the subject of anguished self-examination. As Bethmann Hollweg's diplomatic advisor, Kurt Riezler, noted in his diary, 'the fate that hangs over everything suggests the thought that Wilson may in fact have intended to pressure the others and had the means to do so and that that would have been 100 times better than the U Boat war'.³² For nationalist liberals such as the great sociologist Max Weber, one of the most penetrating political commentators of the day, Bethmann Hollweg's willingness to allow the military's technical arguments to override his own better judgement was damning evidence of the lasting damage done to Germany's political culture by Bismarck.³³

But if we allow the peculiar pathology of German political history alone to explain the derailment of 'peace without victory', we underestimate the significance of the rift between Washington and the Entente over the winter of 1916–17. Wilson's challenge was not to Germany in particular, but to European power as a whole. Indeed his challenge was principally directed at the Entente. From the Somme offensive of July 1916 onwards, it was the Entente that took the initiative in replying to Wilson's obvious desire for a negotiated peace, by widening and intensifying the conflict. The fact that this caused Germany to tip America into the Entente's camp should not obscure the fact that the Entente too was running huge risks. To compound the irony, the Entente ran them on assumptions that were complementary to those on which Germany committed itself to its disastrous course of aggression. If London and Paris entwined America ever more into their war

effort, Wilson's hand would be forced. But it was, in fact, only Germany's anticipation of that logic that made it real. This would be obscured by hindsight, but it was not forgotten by contemporaries. It would return to haunt them in the politics of the armistice in October 1918. But even after the opening of the U-boat campaign it was not clear that all was decided.

III

Following the severing of diplomatic relations with Germany, there were many in Wilson's administration, perhaps most notably Secretary of State Lansing, who now wanted to commit completely to the Entente. America, he demanded, should align itself with its 'natural' allies in the cause of 'human liberty and the suppression of Absolutism'.³⁴ The pro-Entente voices in the Republican Party led by Teddy Roosevelt were in full cry. The British government was only too keen to seize this opportunity of a transatlantic political alliance. Having belatedly come to the realization that, as their ambassador to Washington put it, 'Morgans cannot be regarded as a substitute for the proper diplomatic authorities in conducting negotiations likely to affect our relations with the United States', London hurriedly dispatched a Treasury team to Washington in the hope of initiating government-to-government contact.³⁵

Atlanticism came easily to the Entente by 1917.³⁶ Since before the war, starting with the Second Moroccan Crisis at Agadir in 1911, it had become increasingly commonplace to stress the political solidarity of Britain and France against the bullying imperialism of Germany. Deeply disappointed by the failure of his hopes for an Anglo-German rapprochement, Lloyd George came to see France as 'Britain's ideological counterpart in Europe'. Upholding their alliance against the 'throned Philistines of Europe' was essential.³⁷ In his wartime speeches Lloyd George did not hesitate to associate British democracy with the European revolutionary tradition. The knock-out blow to Imperial Germany, he promised, would deliver 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' for all.³⁸ To assert a common Atlantic heritage in the struggle for liberty and freedom was simply the next step in this chain of historical and ideological associations.

Such thinking came even more easily to French Republicans. Already before the war, many in the Third Republic had looked upon the Entente with Britain as a 'liberal alliance' that would help France offset its regrettable dependence on an alliance with the autocracy of Tsarist Russia.³⁹ When André Tardieu, one of Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau's closest collaborators, was dispatched to Washington in May 1917, his mission was to deliver an appeal for the 'two democracies, France and America' to stand together in proving the point that 'republics are in no way inferior to monarchies when they are attacked and have to defend themselves'.⁴⁰ And there were, of course, plenty of voices in the United States willing to chime in. In the spring of 1917, French delegations to Washington and New York were feted as the heirs of Lafayette who had helped to win freedom for the colonists in 1776. But what both the Entente strategists and the Germans had not reckoned with was the White House and the substantial body of American opinion that President Wilson represented. Despite German aggression, America was not yet at war, and the President and his circle continued to cold-shoulder the Entente.⁴¹

Wilson's reluctance to become involved in the European conflict derived in part from his belief that wider issues were at stake. As we shall see in chapter 5, in the spring of 1917 the President was deeply preoccupied with events in China. Japan's role as an ally of the Entente disturbed him greatly. Over the winter of 1916–17 the strategy of American leadership that lay behind his call for a peace without victory was explicitly spelled out in racial terms. Given China's vulnerability and the dynamic expansion of Japanese power, what was at stake for Wilson in suppressing the self-destructive violence of European imperialism were not just the petty quarrels of the old world, but nothing less than the future of 'white supremacy on this planet'.⁴² As the US cabinet met to debate the news from Europe in late January 1917, one witness recorded Wilson's thought as follows: The President was 'more and more impressed with the idea that "white civilization" and its domination in the world rested largely on our ability to keep this country intact, as we

would have to build up the nations ravaged by the war. He said that as this idea had grown upon him he had come to the feeling that he was willing to go to any lengths rather than to have the nation actually involved in the conflict.⁴³ When Wilson said it would be a ‘crime against civilization’ for America to allow itself to become sucked into the war, it was ‘white civilization’ that he had in mind. In Britain there were plenty who shared Wilson’s racial vision of world history. But it was precisely so that Britain could concentrate its main force in Asia, they believed, that Germany must be tamed. The war in Europe was not a distraction from the worldwide struggle, it was an essential part of it. Why then was the President so reluctant to see America’s essential interests engaged? Despite the efforts by the Entente to align their cause with the values of America, Wilson remained deeply sceptical. And if we trace the development of Wilson’s political personality back to its origins in the nineteenth century, it becomes clear why.

As a conservative Southern liberal, Wilson’s view of history was shaped by two great events: the disaster of the Civil War, and the drama of the eighteenth-century revolutions as interpreted by the writings of the Anglo-Irish conservative, Edmund Burke.⁴⁴ In 1896 Wilson contributed a glowing preface to one of Burke’s most famous speeches on ‘Conciliation with the Colonies’. Originally delivered in 1775, Burke’s oration became for Wilson a statement of a fundamental distinction. Whereas Burke showered praise on the freedom-loving American colonist, he ‘hated the French revolutionary philosophy and deemed it unfit for free men’. Wilson heartily agreed. Looking back over a century of revolution, he denounced the legacy of that philosophy as ‘radically evil and corrupting. No state can ever be conducted on its principles. For it holds that government is a matter of contract and deliberate arrangement, whereas in fact it is an institute of habit, bound together by innumerable threads of association, scarcely one of which has been deliberately placed . . .’ Contrary to the delusional idea that self-determination could be realized in a single revolutionary spasm, Wilson insisted that ‘governments have never been successfully and permanently changed, except by slow modification operating from generation to generation’.⁴⁵ With the French experiences of 1789, 1830, 1848 and 1870 in mind, Wilson in an earlier essay had opined that: ‘democracy in Europe has acted always in rebellion, as a destructive force . . . It has built such temporary governments as it has had opportunity to erect . . . out of the discredited materials of centralized rule, elevating the people’s representatives for a season . . . but securing almost as little as ever of that everyday local self-government which lies so near to the heart of liberty’.⁴⁶ Even in 1900 he saw in the French Third Republic a dangerously unsteady descendant of absolute monarchy, the ‘eccentric influence’ of which had brought the entire project of democracy in the modern world into disrepute.⁴⁷

True freedom was for Wilson indelibly rooted in the deep-seated qualities of a particular national and racial way of life. Failure to recognize this was the source of a profound confusion about American identity itself. Americans of the gilded age, Wilson remarked, were apt to think of themselves as having lost the revolutionary ardour which they imagined to have propelled the founding fathers. They thought of themselves as inoculated by ‘experience . . . against the infections of hopeful revolution’. But this sense was based on an ‘old self-deception’. ‘If we are suffering disappointment, it is the disappointment of an awakening’. Those who romanticized America’s eighteenth-century revolution ‘were dreaming’. In truth, ‘The government which we founded one hundred years ago was no type of an experiment in advanced democracy . . .’ Americans ‘never had any business harkening to Rousseau or consorting with Europe in revolutionary sentiment’. The strength of democratic self-determination, American-style, was precisely that it was not revolutionary. It had inherited all its strengths from its forebears. ‘It had not to overthrow other polities; it had only to organize itself. It had not to create, but only to expand self-government . . . It needed nothing but to methodize its way of living.’⁴⁸ In words that were to echo through his views about World War I, Wilson insisted: ‘there is almost nothing in common between popular outbreaks such as took place in France at her great Revolution and the establishment of a government like our own . . . We manifested one hundred years ago what Europe lost . . . self-command, self-possession.’⁴⁹ He thus gave his peculiar personal inflection to the general sense of alienation with which many Americans regarded the ‘old world’. What Wilson was determined to demonstrate amidst the crisis of the world war was that America had not

lost the ‘self-possession’ he prized above all else.

Wilson was no doubt more comfortable with the British than the French and wrote eloquently about the merits of the British constitution. But precisely because Britain was the nation from which America’s own political culture had historically derived, it was essential for Wilson that Britain itself must remain fixed in the past. The thought that it might be advancing along the path of democratic progress, alongside rather than behind America, was deeply unsettling. The fact that the Prime Minister who took office weeks after Wilson’s re-election, Lloyd George, was perhaps the greatest pioneer of democracy in early twentieth-century Europe, was lost on the White House. Wilson was only too happy to fall in with radical critics who denounced the Prime Minister as a reactionary warmonger.⁵⁰ Colonel House, when he visited London, much preferred dealing with Tory patricians, such as Lord Balfour and old-school Liberal Grandees like Sir Edward Grey, who fitted Wilson’s aspic image of British politics far better than the populist Lloyd George.

IV

Faced with this wall of stereotypes, it was tempting for the Europeans to respond with their own version of the stylized transatlantic difference. At Versailles, Georges Clemenceau was to remark that he found Wilson’s sanctimoniousness easier to stomach when he reminded himself that the American had never ‘lived in a world where it was good form to shoot a Democrat’.⁵¹ But Clemenceau, perhaps out of politeness, perhaps from sheer forgetfulness of his long career, failed to note that he and Wilson did in fact share a common point of reference in a truly violent period of political struggle not in Europe, but in America itself. Though half a century in the past, the Civil War spoke directly to the deepest source of Wilson’s discomfort with the rhetoric of just war so eagerly taken up in the spring of 1917 by both the Entente and their cheerleaders in America.

If Wilson’s Southern childhood was marked by the Civil War, Clemenceau was defined by his inheritance of the French revolutionary tradition.⁵² His father had been arrested for resisting the Bonapartist usurpation of the 1848 revolution and narrowly escaped deportation to Algeria. In 1862 Clemenceau himself served time in the infamous Mazas jail for seditious activity. In 1865, broken hearted and with nothing to hope for in Napoleon III’s France, Clemenceau shipped out to that great battleground of nineteenth-century democratic politics, Civil War America. With his recently minted medical degree he meant to volunteer as a medic in the service of Lincoln’s Union Army, or to make a life for himself as a frontiersman in the American West. Instead, he settled in Connecticut and New York and over the following years produced for the liberal newspaper *Le Temps* a remarkable series of reports on the bitter struggle over the effort to complete the defeat of the South by means of comprehensive reconstruction. True to his convictions, Clemenceau saw Reconstruction as a heroic effort to complete a victorious just war with a ‘second revolution’. It was a battle that concluded, to Clemenceau’s delight, with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in February 1869, promising voting rights for African Americans. For Clemenceau, the radical Republican abolitionists were the ‘noblest and finest men of the nation’, inspired by ‘all the wrath of a Robespierre’.⁵³ Coming from Clemenceau, this was the highest compliment. The partisans of Reconstruction were fighting to save the United States from ‘moral ruin’ and ‘misfortune’ in the face of abusive, self-interested heckling from Southern Democrats.

Amongst that crowd was to be found Woodrow Wilson, who as a young man impressed all his acquaintances with his dogged adherence to the Southern cause. As the author of best-selling popular histories in the 1880s and 1890s, Professor Wilson concluded his triumphant narrative of the American nation state with a celebration of the reconciliation between North and South, which had condemned Reconstruction and consigned the black population to a disenfranchised underclass. For Wilson, the heroes of Clemenceau’s reports were the architects of a ‘perfect work of fear, demoralization, disgust and social revolution’. In their determination to ‘put the white South under the heel of the black South’, the advocates of Reconstruction had

inflicted on the Southern states a policy ‘of rule or ruin’.⁵⁴ One cannot help wondering what the future American President might have thought if during his adolescence as a young Southerner he had happened to stumble across the following lines dispatched to Paris in January 1867 by the future leader of wartime France: ‘If the Northern majority weakens and the nation’s representatives let themselves be persuaded in the interests of conciliation or of States’ Rights to let the Southerners reenter Congress easily, there will be no more internal peace for a quarter of a century. The slavery party of the South combined with the Democrats of the North will be strong enough to defeat all the efforts of the abolitionists, and the final and complete emancipation of the coloured people will be deferred indefinitely.’⁵⁵ As the first Southerner to be elected President since the Civil War, Wilson owed his career to that postponement of justice.

If Clemenceau was too distracted in 1917 to spend much time dredging up memories half a century old, for Wilson’s American opponents the historic resonances of ‘peace without victory’ were too strong to resist. The German declaration of U-boat warfare on 30 January 1917 overshadowed not just Wilson’s Senate speech but also one of the most savage attacks upon it by Teddy Roosevelt.⁵⁶ He was quick to identify the conservative historical lineage of Wilson’s stance on the war. In the colonial era, it had been the ‘Tories of 1776’, Roosevelt reminded his listeners, who had wanted compromise with Britain, who had ‘demanded peace without victory’. In the agonizing final stages of America’s own civil war, in 1864 it had been the so-called ‘Copperheads’ who ‘demanded peace without victory . . .’⁵⁷ Now ‘Mr Wilson’ was asking ‘the world to accept a Copperhead peace of dishonor; a peace without victory for the right; a peace designed to let wrong triumph; a peace championed in neutral countries by the apostles of timidity and greed.’⁵⁸ The Copperheads were the faction of the pro-slavery Democratic Party that clung to political survival in the North during the Civil War, notably in Lincoln’s home state of Illinois. At the climax of the struggle in 1864 they had advocated a compromise peace with the rebellious slaveocracy of the South. The partisans of a total Northern victory had named them after a venomous snake.

V

As March began in 1917, America was not yet at war. To the frustration of much of his entourage, the President still insisted that it would be a ‘crime’ for America to allow itself to be sucked into the conflict, since it would ‘make it impossible to save Europe afterwards’.⁵⁹ In front of the entire cabinet he rejected Secretary of State Lansing’s contention that ‘an essential of permanent peace was that all nations should be politically liberalized’.⁶⁰ Wilson wanted the world pacified, for sure. A peace without victory would see to that, but a country’s political complexion was a different matter. It was an expression of its inner life. To think that a country could be ‘liberalized’ at a stroke from without was to fall into the fallacy of French revolutionary thought. A nation must be given time and the protection of a new international order to develop of its own accord. Under the ideological cloak of a liberal crusade Wilson feared that the old-world vice of militarism would find fertile new soil in America. ‘Junkerthum . . . would creep in under cover of . . . patriotic feeling’.⁶¹ He continued to insist that ‘probably greater justice would be done if the conflict ended in a draw’.⁶² It was only as the full extent of Germany’s disastrously ill-timed lurch into aggression became clear that Wilson was finally forced to abandon his position of moral equivalence. The U-boats were not the last word.

In late February 1917 British intelligence plucked a top-secret telegram from the transatlantic wires. In it the German Foreign Office authorized its embassy in Mexico City to propose an anti-American alliance to the Mexican government of General Carranza in conjunction with Japan. In exchange for military assistance from Germany, Mexico would launch an immediate attack on Texas, New Mexico and Arizona.⁶³ By 26 February, Washington was informed. The news became public a day later. Amongst pro-German circles in the US, the initial response was one of disbelief. As the American-German activist George Sylvester Viereck protested to the newspaper proprietor William Randolph Hearst at the end of February 1917, ‘the alleged letter . . . is obviously a fake; it is impossible to believe that the German Foreign Secretary would place his

name under such a preposterous document . . . the Realpolitiker of the Wilhelmstrasse would never offer an alliance based on such ludicrous propositions as the conquest by Mexico of American territory . . .’⁶⁴ In Germany too there was astonishment. For the Reich to be offering Texas and Arizona to Mexican ‘brigands’ whilst simultaneously angling for an alliance with Japan, the leading German industrialist Walther Rathenau wrote to General Hans von Seeckt, was ‘too sad even to laugh about’.⁶⁵ But however hallucinogenic these associations may have appeared, the bizarre German scheme to seize the military initiative in the western hemisphere was the logical extension of Berlin’s *idée fixe* that America was already committed to the Entente and that a declaration of war was under any circumstances inevitable. Despite Wilson’s obvious unwillingness to go to war, on Saturday 3 March 1917 the German Secretary of State, Arthur Zimmermann, publicly acknowledged the authenticity of the reports.

Added to the now-routine sinking of American ships by German U-boats, the refusal of Berlin even to deny this unprovoked aggression left Wilson with no option. On 2 April 1917 he went before the Senate to demand a declaration of war. For men like Roosevelt and Lansing the declaration of war was simply a relief. Germany had demonstrated once and for all its true, aggressive character. For Wilson, by contrast, to be forced to abandon his vision of ‘peace without victory’ and to throw his country’s weight onto the side of the Entente was a stomach-churning reversal. As one of his most insightful biographers puts it, in characteristically exalted terms, Wilson’s declaration of war was his ‘Gethsemane’.⁶⁶ Certainly, there were tones of Lutheran heroics in the final lines of his address to the Congress: ‘America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.’ But what was Wilson committing himself to? Even as he entered the war, he held back.

America was joining the war 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 peoples of the world such a concert of purpose and of action as will henceforth insure the observance of those principles . . .’ ‘A steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations,’ Wilson continued. ‘No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants.’ In such a struggle, it was ‘no longer feasible or desirable’ for America to remain neutral. This appeared to concede the argument to Lansing and Roosevelt, who had always insisted that it was impossible for America to uphold a position of equivalence between the two sides. But examined closely, there was a remarkable selectivity in Wilson’s declaration. He did not include Germany’s main allies, the Ottomans or Habsburgs, in his declaration of war or his denunciation of autocracy. Nor did he squarely endorse the Entente powers as representatives of democracy or examples of self-government. His objectives were stated in abstract and prospective terms. Having failed in his effort to force an end to the war from without, Wilson was determined to shape the order of a new world from within. But to do so he had to preserve his distance. Rather than formally allying America with the Entente, Wilson insisted on his detached status as an ‘associate’.⁶⁷ At the crucial moment, this would give him the freedom he needed to throw his weight onto the scales, not behind London and Paris, but so as to restore America’s role as the arbiter of global power.

On 6 April 1917 America entered the war, swinging the balance of force decisively in favour of the Entente. In retrospect it would come to seem a foreordained turn in world history. But at that very moment, it became obvious what extraordinary risks the Entente had been running in escalating the war in the face of American opposition. It became clear how finely balanced the war had been and how much traction Woodrow Wilson’s January appeal for a ‘peace without victory’ might have acquired, if only he had been able to keep America out of the war a few months longer. On 20 March 1917, the same day that Wilson reluctantly agreed with his cabinet to ask Congress for a declaration of war, Washington instructed its embassy in Petrograd to

recognize the new Provisional Government of Russia.¹

After a week of strikes and demonstrations and the refusal of the Petrograd garrison to follow orders, on 15 March the Tsar had abdicated. With the authority of the Romanov dynasty in tatters, the Tsar's brothers refused to take the throne.² As America moved toward war, Russia was not yet officially a Republic, but the Provisional Government that had constituted itself from progressive elements of the Duma, the Tsar's rump of a parliament, announced that a Constituent Assembly, elected on a 'universal basis', would meet within the year. Following the example of its illustrious American and French precursors, this revolutionary Convention would decide the most fundamental and contentious questions bequeathed by the old regime – the political constitution of the country, the land question, and future relations between Russia and the tens of millions of non-Russians gathered under the oppressive rule of the Tsars. In the meantime the chief new sources of revolutionary legitimacy were the assemblies known as Soviets, which constituted themselves on the initiative of radical soldiers, workers and peasants in every city, town and village. By the early summer these Soviets would hold their own national congress and enter into a coalition with the Provisional Government.

Though permanent constitutional change awaited the Constituent Assembly, there was an overwhelming and immediate consensus about certain features of the new order. Freedom was the watchword of the revolution. The death penalty was abolished. All restrictions on assembly and free speech were lifted. The civil equality of Jews and other ethnic and religious minorities was proclaimed. Feminist demonstrators loudly and successfully demanded that women, as well as men, must elect the Constituent Assembly. Order number one of the Petrograd Soviet granted to the rank and file of the Russian Army the same catalogue of rights now enjoyed by other citizens. Brutal corporal punishment was outlawed. Even desertion was no longer punishable by death. Soldiers were granted the full freedom of political discussion and organization. In a breath-taking reversal, Russia, formerly the autocratic bugbear of Europe, was remaking itself as the freest, most democratic country on earth.³ The question was: What implications did this great victory for democracy have for the war?

I

To men like Robert Lansing, Wilson's Secretary of State, this was the moment of truth.⁴ Since 1916 he had been the most influential advocate within the administration of the cause of the Entente. Britain and France's reliance on the armies of the Tsarist autocracy had been the biggest obstacle to his championing of the cause of the 'democratic Entente'. Now, as Lansing put it to his cabinet colleagues, 'the revolution in Russia . . . had removed the one objection to affirming that the European war was a war between democracy and absolutism'.⁵ And in his declaration of war, Wilson himself welcomed the 'wonderful and heartening things that have been happening within the last few weeks in Russia'. The foreign autocracy that had ruled Russia had been 'shaken off and the great, generous Russian people have been added in all their naive majesty and might to the forces that are fighting for freedom in the world . . .'⁶ London and Paris were swept with enthusiasm for a democratic Russia. Georges Clemenceau shared Lansing's excitement about the prospects for a transatlantic democratic coalition. In the spring of 1917 he welcomed the coincidence of America's declaration of war and the overthrow of the Tsar in terms that were nothing short of ecstatic: 'the supreme interest of the general ideas with which President Wilson sought to justify his actions', in declaring war, 'is that the Russian Revolution and the American Revolution complement each other in a miraculous way, in defining once and for all the moral stakes in the conflict. All the great peoples of democracy . . . have taken that place in the battle that was destined for them. They work for the triumph not of one alone, but of all.'⁷ Russia's democratic revolution would re-energize the war effort, not end it.

And these hopes were not entirely misplaced. In the spring of 1917 the Russian revolution was first and foremost a patriotic event. Of all the scurrilous rumours spread about the Tsar and Tsarina, by far the most

damaging were those alleging treacherous contacts with their cousins in Germany. How else was one to explain the Tsar's obstinate refusal to embrace the uplifting spirit of reform and mobilization that had swept Russian liberals and even many Russian socialists to his side in August 1914? On the Northern Front Russia's armies had suffered heavy defeats at the hands of the Germans. But not everything had gone wrong in Russia's war. In 1915 its armies had thrashed the Turks. In the summer of 1916 General Brusilov's devastating offensive had crippled the Austrians and tipped Romania onto the side of the Entente. It was the failure to make good those victories that turned draft riots, agrarian protest and strikes into a political revolution. With the Tsar out of the way, there could be no talk of surrender. Anyone who insulted the revolutionary patriotism of the great, grey-coated mass of peasant soldiers, who dominated every assembly in Petrograd, ran the risk of lynching.⁸ Revolutionary honour and the sacrifice of millions of dead were at stake. Furthermore the strategists in the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet had to consider the wider consequences. If Russia entered into separate negotiations with Imperial Germany, the Allies would surely retaliate by cutting off the flow of credit from London, Paris and New York. A peace in the East would allow the Germans to concentrate all their forces on winning a crushing victory in the West. Then they would turn back against Russia.

But if capitulation was not an option, nor could the revolution continue the Tsar's war. The men who dominated the early phase of the revolution – figures such as Alexander Kerensky, the Labourite social democrat shuttling between the Provisional Government and the Soviet, or Irakli Tsereteli, the charismatic Georgian Menshevik internationalist who led foreign policy discussion in the Petrograd Soviet – had no desire to continue the war for the conquest of imperialist objectives such as the Dardanelles. What the revolution needed was a peace with honour, a peace without defeat. Furthermore, if this was not to be a separate peace Kerensky and Tsereteli needed to bring the rest of the Entente along. Russia's democratic revolutionaries thus faced precisely the dilemma that Wilson had been struggling with only a few weeks earlier – how to end the war in a way that would offer no encouragement to triumphalism but inflict no stinging defeat on either side. Furthermore, Russia's revolutionaries were aware of this parallel. Though it had been directed primarily to London and Paris, the significance of Wilson's challenge to the Entente over the winter of 1916–17 had not been lost on the Russians. As stated by Nikolai Sukhanov, one of Tsereteli's Menshevik colleagues in the Soviet, the first demand of the Soviet in 1917 should be to revoke the belligerent answer that the Entente had given to Wilson's Peace Note of December 1916.⁹ On 4 April, the day the US Senate voted for war with Germany, the executive committee of the Petrograd Soviet laid down a peace formula with three key demands: self-determination, no annexations and no indemnities. The Russian Army would remain in the field until assured of a peace on those terms, a peace without selfish victory, but a peace that would bring honour to the revolution precisely by denouncing the Tsar and by placing Russia at the forefront of world 'democracy'.

Within days the 'Petrograd formula' had been adopted by the Provisional Government. In May its pro-Entente Foreign Minister, the liberal Pavel Miliukov, was removed at the behest of the Soviet, for his adherence to traditional, 'annexationist' war aims.¹⁰ The Soviet's policy of 'revolutionary defensism' was one not of dogmatic socialist dictatorship but of compromise. Defence of the revolution was a posture around which Kerensky and Tsereteli hoped to rally all the 'live forces' in Russian politics: Marxists, agrarian Social Revolutionaries and liberals. The Bolsheviks barely figured in the discussion. Lenin was waiting in exile for his transport to be organized by the Kaiser's secret service. The Bolsheviks on the spot were an undistinguished group who were tempted to fall in with the Soviet majority. Lenin did not return to Petrograd until the night of 16 April, when in his famous 'April theses' he immediately announced his hostility to any agreement between the revolutionary Soviet and the inherited authority of the Provisional Government.¹¹ Any compromise was a betrayal of the revolution.

Over the coming year Lenin was to do his violent best to ensure that Tsereteli and Kerensky were swept into the dustbin of history. But their position should be taken seriously. Revolutionary defensism was a patriotic

strategy. Democratic Russia would not surrender to Imperial Germany. But Lenin's opprobrium notwithstanding, it was revolutionary too. To advocate peace in the spring of 1917 was not to advocate the pre-war status quo, but to call for the political transformation of Europe. It was the Petrograd Soviet that loudly proclaimed what had been left tacit in Wilson's Senate address. Given the sacrifices already made by all sides by 1917, a 'peace without victory' could only be contemplated by a government willing to break with the past. It implied the utter futility of the most costly war in history. It required governments willing to dissociate themselves, like Wilson, from the question of war guilt and to criticize imperialism on all sides. Only such a government could accept a peace without victory as something other than a humiliation. It was precisely for that reason that the political class of Britain and France had so doggedly resisted Wilson's call. They could not accept his moral equivocation. They understood that they had no place in his vision of the political future. Ill-timed German aggression had tipped Wilson onto their side. But if the Russian revolution had started a few months earlier, if Germany had postponed its decision to resume unrestricted U-boat warfare until the spring, or if Wilson had been able to stay out of the war until May, what might have been the result? Could the war have continued? Might democracy in Russia have been saved? As the departing German ambassador to Washington Count Bernstorff noted in agonized retrospect: If Germany over the winter of 1916–17 had 'accepted Wilson's mediation, the whole of American influence in Russia would have been exercised in favour of peace, and not, as events ultimately proved, against' Germany. 'Out of Wilson's and Kerensky's Peace programme', Germany could surely have rescued a peace offering all that 'we regarded as necessary'.¹² It is these unfathomable counterfactuals that give such vast significance to the near coincidence between the Russian revolution and the American entry into the war. But even with Wilson on the side of the Entente, the Russian revolution sent shockwaves through both sides. It came close over the summer of 1917 to bringing the war to an end with something like a 'peace without victory'.¹³ It was a bitter irony that it was America's entry into the war that did more than anything else to put paid to that possibility. The consequences for Europe and for Russia in particular would be momentous.

II

After the terrible third winter of the war, the energy that had carried the combatants through 1916 was ebbing away. On the Eastern Front there had been no serious fighting since the overthrow of the Tsar. Whilst they waited to see whether a separate peace could be arranged with the revolutionary government, the Germans held off from any offensive. Within Germany, the Russian revolution had shaken popular resolve to continue the struggle. Defending Germany against the aggression of autocratic Tsarism had been the main motive for the Social Democratic Party to support the war. With the Russian revolutionaries renouncing any annexationist intentions, that was now thrown into doubt. On 8 April 1917 at the insistence of Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, who was desperate to hold the SPD behind his government, the Kaiser issued his Easter proclamation, promising immediate constitutional reform in Prussia at the end of the war. One-man-one-vote would replace the three-tier-class voting system that had hitherto excluded the left from the Prussian state parliament that controlled two-thirds of Germany. But it was too little too late. In mid-April 1917 the SPD, the great mother-ship of European socialism, split.¹⁴ The more radical left wing gathered within the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), demanding an immediate peace on the terms now being offered by the revolutionary Soviet in Petrograd, a resolution enthusiastically endorsed by 300,000 striking workers in the great industrial centres of Berlin and Leipzig. The Majority SPD (MSPD) continued to give their support to the national war effort, but they insisted more urgently than ever that it must remain a defensive struggle. Through neutrals and with the indulgence of the Reich government they took the lead in opening negotiations with their socialist comrades in Russia.

These tremors within the political fabric of the Central Powers were all the more significant because they coincided with the spectacular failure of the Entente's latest bid for military victory. On 18 April 1917, after softening up operations by the British, the French Army once more crashed into the German line. But despite the optimism radiated by their youthful new commander General Nivelle, the attack failed. The German lines

held and French morale drained away. On 4 May the first units in the French Army refused orders. Within days, mutiny had spread to dozens of divisions. Whilst the ruthless General Pétain struggled to restore order, the French Army was paralysed. Paris did its best to cover up the crisis and there was no corresponding reaction in the British trenches. But by May 1917 a wave of discontent had engulfed the British Isles. In the House of Commons 32 Liberal and Labour MPs voted demonstratively in favour of a motion calling for peace on the basis of the Petrograd formula.¹⁵ Meanwhile, industrial districts of Britain were wracked by what was by far the most serious bout of industrial unrest seen since the start of the war.¹⁶ Hundreds of thousands of skilled engineering workers ignored the instructions of the official trade unions and laid down their tools. In early June, Lloyd George, rather than celebrating the prospect of a great democratic crusade, was scaring the cabinet with talk of a British Soviet. Fearful of a popular backlash, the House of Windsor let it be known that the homeless Romanovs were not welcome at Buckingham Palace. As George V confided to a confidant, there was too much 'democracy in the air'.¹⁷

The mounting sense of paralysis gripping the Entente was heightened by the impact of the U-boat blockade. Between February and June 1917 the Germans sank over 2.9 million tons of shipping. To maintain its own imports, Britain cut back the allocation of tonnage to Italy and France. Struggling to contain the collapse in morale, Paris was forced to prioritize food imports over the needs of armaments production.¹⁸ In Italy, which was even more dependent on foreign supplies, the situation was truly critical. By the early summer of 1917 Italian coal deliveries were running at half the required level.¹⁹ On 22 August 1917 food stocks had reached such a low ebb in Turin, the heart of Italy's war economy, that shops were closed for all but a few hours per day. Whilst strikers closed the railway network, crowds led by anarcho-syndicalist agitators looted, attacked police stations, and torched two churches. The army cordoned off the city. Eight hundred rioters were arrested and an uneasy calm was restored, but not before 50 workers and 3 soldiers had been killed.

However, despite the impact they were having on the Entente, as far as Berlin was concerned, the U-boats were a deep disappointment. In January 1917 the navy had promised that Britain would be starving before the year was out. By the summer it was clear that despite the losses they were inflicting, Germany simply did not have enough submarines to overcome the merchant fleet that the Entente was able to mobilize from every corner of the earth. The dawning realization of this defeat completed the profound political reorientation in Germany. With both wings of the SPD now more vociferous than ever in their calls for peace, in early July 1917 they were joined by spokesmen both for the populist wing of the Catholic Centre Party and the progressive Liberals. The outlines of this coalition had been visible since the 1912 Reichstag election, when the three parties that had once been the antagonists of Bismarck gained almost two-thirds of the popular vote. The Social Democrats, Christian Democrats and progressive Liberals now formed a standing committee to press their demands for democratization at home and a negotiated, non-annexationist peace.²⁰ On 6 July the Reichstag majority found its voice when Matthias Erzberger, the leading spokesman of the left wing of the Centre Party, who in 1914 had been amongst the most boisterous advocates of expansive war aims, made a dramatic call for Germany to face the consequences of the failure of the U-boat campaign. Germany must seek a negotiated peace.²¹ Bethmann Hollweg scrambled to contain the crisis by extracting from the Kaiser another promise of democratization in Prussia after the war. But it was not enough. The Chancellor had failed to resist the disastrous escalation of the U-boat war and must now pay the political price. He was dismissed and on 19 July the Reichstag voted by a large majority to approve a peace note. This called for a 'peace of understanding' and the 'permanent reconciliation of peoples', which could not be based on 'forced territorial acquisition' or 'political, economic or financial oppression'. They called for a new and equitable international order based on the liberal principles of free trade, the freedom of the seas, and the establishment of an 'international judicial organization'. Though the Reichstag majority avoided any direct echo of either Petrograd's or Wilson's language, there was no mistaking their general concordance. The Russians, Erzberger hoped, would be won over 'in a matter of weeks'.²²

Peace without victory was no longer merely a slogan or wishful thinking. Given the exhaustion of all the

European combatants, by the summer of 1917 it seemed increasingly a fact. And in early May the Russian revolutionaries looked poised to take advantage. The Provisional Government had been recognized by the United States and the Entente. Given the huge sacrifices it had made, Russia as a loyal member of the alliance was within its rights to ask for the question of war aims to be reopened. Meanwhile, the Petrograd Soviet, as an unofficial body, was free to pursue a parallel campaign of international solidarity and peace propaganda. Pressure from within the Entente itself, both from above and below, would achieve what Wilson could not. It would force London and Paris to negotiate, allowing Russia to escape the choice between an odious separate peace and fighting the war to an imperialist finish. In April 1917 British and French delegations, headed by leading figures in their respective Labour and Socialist parties, travelled to Petrograd charged by their governments with the mission of convincing the Russians to stay in the war. They found the revolutionary defensists set firmly against a separate peace with Germany, but insistent that the Entente must reconsider its war aims. Both Arthur Henderson and Albert Thomas, leading pro-war socialists in Britain and France respectively, were deeply concerned about the possible derailment of the democratic revolution in Russia. In the hope of warding off the Bolsheviks, they agreed to persuade their comrades at home to attend the international socialist conference that Petrograd had called to meet in Stockholm on 1 July.²³ The French Socialists duly withdrew their ministers from the French cabinet. But, after General Pétain had restored order to the Western Front by court-martialling several thousand French mutineers, Paris was not about to risk further pacifist contamination. The passports of the French Socialists were summarily cancelled and Lloyd George's government promptly followed suit. The effect was to split the British labour movement, between the pro-war majority and a vocal oppositional minority that now stretched beyond the ranks of the Independent Labour Party.

To the Russian Socialists, the obduracy of London and Paris came as little surprise. What was more disappointing was the attitude of Washington.²⁴ Even following America's entry into the war, the revolutionary defensists still counted on Wilson for support. And Wilson fully appreciated their dilemma. He regarded the secret Entente agreements of 1915 and 1916 in which Imperial Russia was entangled as odious. He knew, as he put it to a British confidant, that the Russians 'in setting up their new government and working out domestic reforms' might arrive at the point at which they found 'the war an intolerable evil and would desire to get to an end of it on any reasonable terms'. When the Petrograd Soviet issued its formula for peace that so obviously echoed Wilson's own 'peace without victory' appeal, it caused real embarrassment in Washington.²⁵ If Wilson had been able to throw the weight of the United States behind Petrograd's call for peace, the effect might have been dramatic. But the headlong aggression of Germany in the spring of 1917 appears to have convinced Wilson that so long as Imperial Germany remained a threat, there was no prospect of calming the militarist impulse in Britain and France.²⁶ Germany and thus the old world as a whole could be tamed only through force. To ensure that this pacification did not become another imperialist war of conquest, America must have leadership of the war effort. It was one thing for the President of the United States to arbitrate a world settlement, it was quite another to allow the Russian revolutionaries to dictate the pace of peace politics. Nothing good could come of an undisciplined socialist peace conference in Stockholm in which America had no substantial voice. Having been forced to opt for war, Wilson was not about to lose control of the politics of peace. When the Russian government made its official appeal for the Entente to revise their war aims, London and Paris were only too happy to let Wilson be the first to reply. On 22 May the American President issued a response to the Russian people in which he began by reaffirming the deadly menace posed by Imperial Germany. The apparent willingness of the Kaiser's government to accept reform was designed 'only to preserve the power they have set up in Germany . . . and their private projects of power all the way from Berlin to Baghdad and beyond'. Berlin remained at the centre of 'a net of intrigue directed against nothing less than the peace and liberty of the world. The meshes of that intrigue must be broken, but cannot unless wrongs already done are undone. . .'²⁷ A lasting peace could not simply reinstate the status quo ante 'out of which this iniquitous war issued . . . that status must be altered in such a fashion as to prevent any such hideous thing from ever happening again'. The vital precondition was that Germany

must be defeated first. And there must be no hesitation ‘... we may never be able to unite or show conquering force again in the great cause of human liberty. The day has come to conquer or submit . . . If we stand together, victory is certain and the liberty which victory will secure. We can afford then to be generous, but we cannot afford then or now to be weak . . .’ This resonant language of Republican militancy, so at odds with Wilson’s stance of only a few months earlier, pleased London and Paris enormously. The Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, remarked gleefully that Wilson’s volte-face had been necessary to ‘counteract [the] effect which some of his earlier [pacifist] pronouncements have apparently had in Russia’.²⁸

With France and Russia on the point of exhaustion, it was Britain that led the effort to re-energize the war and for this, American assistance was indispensable. In the summer of 1917 the greatest threat to the British war effort were not the U-boats, nor the threat of a Soviet in Leeds, but the very real possibility of default on the loans contracted in Wall Street since 1915. In this regard the American declaration of war provided immediate relief. Already by the end of April, Washington had provided Britain with an unprecedented official advance of \$250 million, pending congressional approval of as much as \$3 billion in loans. As it turned out, Congress took longer than expected, which only served to highlight the state of complete dependence into which the Entente had slipped. In the last days of June, Britain came within hours of insolvency.²⁹ But with the US as a co-belligerent, there was no longer any real risk of disaster. The Entente had moved from its precarious reliance on the vagaries of the private capital market, to the new ground of openly political government-to-government lending. It was this backing that allowed Britain’s Field Marshal Haig to begin preparing a huge new offensive drive. The preparatory barrage for what was to become infamous as the Passchendaele offensive began on 17 July. Over a two-week period over 3,000 British guns delivered 4.238 million rounds onto the German trenches. At an estimated cost of \$100 million this storm of steel was a further demonstration of the potency of the transatlantic war effort.³⁰ In military terms the assault aimed to sweep the Germans from their toehold on the Flanders coastline. But the offensive’s rationale was eminently political. Passchendaele was an expression of the British government’s grim determination to silence once and for all the talk of peace without victory.³¹

For Russia’s democratic revolutionaries this show of belligerence was a disaster. If neither London nor Washington would countenance this talk of peace, this left Petrograd with two options. The Petrograd Soviet might have embraced the risky course of entering into separate peace talks with Germany. In July, if it had not already been otherwise committed, it could have seized on the Reichstag peace resolution, and challenged the rest of the Entente to respond. Despite his distaste both for the Germans and the Russian socialists, could Wilson really have refused such an appeal? What would have been the impact in Britain and France? In the House of Commons, the Independent Labour Party was demanding a positive response to the Reichstag note. The discontent of the workforce was undeniable.³² But in Russia neither the Provisional Government nor the majority in the Soviets could bring themselves to take a first step toward Germany. To usher in the new revolutionary era by suing for a separate peace would be a fundamental betrayal. Russian democracy could have no future in isolation.

Was there a more radical alternative? On the left wing of the revolution the Bolsheviks were a growing force. Lenin was making waves with his violent hostility to any compromise between the forces of the revolution and the hangovers from Tsarist-era liberalism and parliamentary conservatism that still clung to ministerial positions in the Provisional Government. His slogan was ‘all power to the soviets’. Only with power securely in the hands of the revolution would it be possible to formulate a clear choice between a truly democratic peace and a revolutionary continuation of the war. For Lenin, the Petrograd Soviet’s peace formula was not enough. Self-determination and no annexations might sound like progressive principles, but why should a revolutionary accept the endorsement of the pre-war status quo implied by ‘no annexations’?³³ The only truly revolutionary formula was unqualified support for ‘self-determination’. Whereas liberals and reformist progressives shrank from such a formula because of the violence and inter-ethnic conflict it could easily stir up, Lenin espoused the slogan precisely because he expected it to unleash a whirlwind. The harbinger of the

future, as far as Lenin was concerned, was the uprising that had taken place a year earlier in Dublin. On Easter Monday 1916, 1,200 Sinn Fein volunteers had taken on the British Army in a sacrificial act, which as we shall see was to turn Irish politics on its head and set the stage for the open struggle for independence. Whereas more orthodox Marxists dismissed Sinn Fein as suicidal putschists who lacked substantial working-class backing, for Lenin they were a vital pointer to the revolutionary future: ‘To imagine that social revolution is conceivable without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie with all its prejudices . . . to imagine all this is to repudiate social revolution . . .’ Anyone, who expected a ““pure” social revolution”, made only by the working class, would ‘never live to see it . . . We would be very poor revolutionaries if, in the proletariat’s great war of Liberation for socialism, we did not know how to utilise every popular movement . . .’³⁴ Lenin demanded an immediate revolutionary peace. But, as anyone familiar with his writings would soon realize, this slogan was easily misunderstood. Lenin wanted urgently to halt the all-consuming, imperialist World War that was threatening to extinguish any hope of historical progress. But he wanted this peace only because he hoped that it would unleash an even more encompassing international class war – the ‘proletariat’s great war of Liberation’. A revolutionary peace concluded by an all-Soviet Russian regime would cause an uprising of the German proletariat. That liberals and Mensheviks shrank from such a course, fearing that it would unleash civil war in Russia, was precisely what marked it for Lenin as the correct revolutionary line. He was no pacifist. His aim was to turn meaningless imperialist slaughter into historically progressive class war. But what even Lenin did not dare to advocate in the summer of 1917 was a separate peace, a peace at any price with the Kaiser’s regime.³⁵

Barring that, what was the alternative? Petrograd might simply have adopted a defensive posture. The Germans certainly showed little sign of wishing to take military advantage of Russia’s disorder. In the hope that the Russians would come round to a separate peace Ludendorff refrained from any offensive operations in the East. When the first high-level American mission headed by Elihu Root visited Petrograd in June 1917, it too recommended inaction. So long as Russia remained loyal to the Entente, America was willing to provide aid. On 16 May the US Treasury agreed to provide the Provisional Government with an immediate loan of \$100 million. Supplies were piled high at Vladivostok, if only they could be moved along Russia’s disintegrating railway system. To address this bottleneck Wilson authorized the immediate despatch of a technical railway mission to restore the capacity of the Trans-Siberian railway. In July the railway commission authorized the procurement in the US of 2,500 locomotives and 40,000 wagons.³⁶ Perhaps it was not yet too late to stabilize Russian democracy as part of a joint war effort against Germany.

But the prospect of hunkering down in the ragged trench lines to hold out for another season of indecisive campaigning went fundamentally against the spirit of revolutionary Petrograd. There was a serious risk that if the army was left inactive throughout the summer, the Provisional Government would lose whatever capacity it still had to counteract Bolshevik subversion. The signs that the British were already discounting Russia as a military force were deeply ominous. Whatever Petrograd did, they had to bring the Entente along with them, but what leverage could they exercise if they were no longer an active participant in the war? Like Wilson, Russia’s democratic revolutionaries were forced to gamble that they could alter the course of the war from within. To force the rest of the Entente to take seriously Russian democracy’s appeals for a negotiated peace, in May 1917 Kerensky, Tsereteli and their colleagues set themselves frantically to rebuilding the army as a fighting force. They were not unrealistic enough to imagine that they might defeat Germany. But if Russia could deliver the kind of blow against Austria that Brusilov had pulled off in 1916, the Entente would surely have to listen. It was an extraordinary wager that reveals, not the timidity, but the desperate ambition of the February revolution.³⁷

III

Certainly Russia was not suffering from any shortage of materiel. Thanks to its own mobilization efforts and

the now abundant Allied supply line, the Russian Army of the early summer of 1917 was better equipped than at any previous point in the war. The question was whether its soldiers would fight. In May and June, Kerensky, Brusilov and a hand-picked group of political commissars waged a desperate struggle to rouse the Russian Army from its apathy and to counteract the increasingly pervasive influence of Bolshevik agitators preaching Lenin's heretic gospel. It was the revolutionary democrats of February 1917, not Lenin and Trotsky, who first introduced political commissars to the Russian Army, to deliver the slogans of the revolutionary war effort. In his memoirs Kerensky describes the breathless moment on 1 July 1917 as the barrage lifted ahead of the fateful assault: 'Suddenly there was a deathly hush: it was zero hour. For a second we were gripped by a terrible fear that the soldiers might refuse to fight. Then we saw the first lines of infantry, with their rifles at the ready, charging toward the frontlines of German trenches.'³⁸ The army advanced. In the south, under the dynamic command of the young war hero, Lavr Kornilov, they made inroads against the shaky Habsburg forces. But where Bolshevik subversion was most serious, in front of the Germans in the north, the majority of the troops refused orders and remained in their trenches. On 18 July, with the Russians off balance, Germany counter-attacked.

The result was to pivot not just Russian but German history as well. At the very moment, on 19 July 1917, that Erzberger introduced the peace resolution in the Reichstag, the premise on which he made his challenge to the Kaiser's regime was overturned. The U-boats might have failed, but in the East, the German Army was poised to win the war. Within hours of the German assault, the Russian defences collapsed and a rout ensued. Whilst the British got bogged down in the terrible slaughter of Flanders, on 3 September 1917 the Kaiser's army marched triumphantly into Riga, once the capital of the Teutonic knights. In a mirror image of events in the autumn of 1916, when the Entente had seemed close to victory, this time it was the prospect of German triumph that obliterated the possibility of a negotiated peace. Within days of their entry into Latvia, Hindenburg and Ludendorff began shuffling seven of their crack Baltic divisions thousands of kilometres to the south, to positions on a tightly concentrated sector surrounding the Italian town of Caporetto.³⁹ On 24 October, German shock troops crashed through the Italian lines. Swinging south towards Venice, they unhinged an entire segment of the front line.⁴⁰ Within a matter of days the Italian Army suffered 340,000 casualties, of whom 300,000 were taken prisoner. A further 350,000 soldiers retreated in disarray. With the Germans and Austrians advancing on Venice, 400,000 civilians fled in terror. Italy survived the crisis. A government of national unity took office in Rome. French and British reinforcements poured in. The Austro-German advance was halted on the Piave river line. But in Germany militarism had gained a new lease on life. The summertime parliamentary onrush of Erzberger, the SPD and the Reichstag majority was halted. Hundreds of thousands of enraged nationalists flocked into the newly formed German Homeland Party (Deutsche Vaterlandspartei), determined to prevent the traitorous democrats from sabotaging the final push for victory.⁴¹

In Russia, the impact of the failure of Kerensky's democratic war effort was even more dramatic. The advocates of revolutionary defensism were humiliated. The peasant soldiers, many of whom had reluctantly steeled themselves for one last offensive, now abandoned the cause en masse. On 17 July, as the tide on the battlefield was about to turn, radicalized military units in the garrisons around Petrograd marched on the centre of the city to put an immediate end to the war. They acted seemingly without orders from Bolshevik headquarters, but as the demonstrations escalated, Lenin and the party leadership threw themselves behind the rebellion. The uprising was not put down until the following day. The revolution was now openly and violently divided against itself. Despite their profound commitment to democratic freedoms, the Petrograd Soviet had no option but to order the mass arrest of the Bolshevik leadership. It was the first time that any such measures had been used since the overthrow of the Tsar. Fatally, however, the Provisional Government did not disarm the rebellious garrison units that formed the real base of Bolshevik strength, nor were they willing to decapitate the Bolshevik organization. The death penalty remained taboo.

Table 2. The Biggest Event in Democratic History: The Outcome of the Russian Constituent Assembly

Election, November 1917

millions

% tabulated votes

Socialist Revolutionaries (agrarian)

15.9

38

SD Bolshevik

9.8

24

SD Menshevik

1.4

3

minor socialist

0.5

1

Constitutional Democrats, Kadets (liberal)

2.0

5

other non-socialist parties

1.3

3

Ukrainian (mainly SR)

4.9

12

Islamic parties

0.9

2

other nationalities

1.7

4

unclassified

3.4

8

41.8

100

Having survived an attack from the left wing, the main danger to Russian democracy was now from the right. With Brusilov's reputation in tatters, the obvious Bonapartist pretender was General Kornilov, who Kerensky had approved as commander-in-chief.⁴² After weeks of open conspiracy, on 8 September 1917 Kornilov mounted his coup, only to find himself foiled by precisely the same force that had doomed the summer offensive. The mass of the army was no longer willing to take orders for decisive action. Kornilov was arrested. But who was to govern? Kerensky, who had launched the disastrous offensive and appeared to have colluded with Kornilov, was utterly discredited. Tsereteli and the Mensheviks on the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet were struggling for legitimacy. They could not resist calls for the release from prison of notorious Bolshevik agitators, such as Trotsky and Alexandra Kollontai. The last resort was the Constituent Assembly. Due to tactical manoeuvrings and the formidable difficulties of staging a general election in a country the size of Russia at a time of war and civil disorder, the date for the Constituent Assembly elections had been repeatedly put back. In August it was irrevocably fixed for 25 November. It is commonly said that it was a dangerous power vacuum that opened the door to Lenin in the autumn of 1917. But what really defined the situation and compelled Lenin and Trotsky to act was the prospect that the Constituent Assembly would soon fill that vacuum with a potent source of democratic authority. On 23 October, during a conspiratorial meeting in Petrograd, Lenin blurted out: 'Now was the moment for seizing power, or never . . . it is senseless to wait for the Constituent Assembly that will obviously not be on our side . . .' ⁴³

As far as the Bolsheviks were concerned, the Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of universal suffrage, including the bourgeoisie as well as workers and peasants, could never be anything more than a cloak for bourgeois power. 'All power to the Soviet' had been Lenin's slogan from the start. After the embarrassment of the Kornilov putsch, the all-important Petrograd Soviet was firmly under the sway of the Bolsheviks. With Trotsky in command, Petrograd voted to call a full session of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets to meet on 7 November. This national congress would provide a plausible substitute for the Constituent Assembly. But by the same token, the Bolsheviks were less certain of their grip on the All-Russian Congress than they were of their hold over the Petrograd Soviet. Lenin had not forgotten the scorn heaped on his 'peace' policy by the majority of Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries at the summer session of the All-Russian Congress. To ensure that there was no repeat, Trotsky planned to launch a pre-emptive coup, overthrowing the remnants of the Provisional Government and installing an all-socialist government in Petrograd, thus facing Lenin's critics with a fait accompli. On the evening of 6 November, one

day before the All-Russian Congress of Soviets was due to meet, Red Guards occupied every key point in the city. After a largely unopposed seizure of power, at 10.40 p.m. on the evening of 7 November (25 October old style) Lenin felt confident enough to allow the All-Russian Congress to convene. It promptly overturned the prevailing majority of Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries and voted in a new Central Executive Committee dominated by Lenin and his comrades. On the day after the coup, Lenin proposed that the Constituent Assembly elections be cancelled altogether. There was no need for such an exercise in ‘bourgeois democracy’. But he was overruled by the Bolshevik Executive Committee, which decided that to flout the democratic hopes of the February revolution so openly would do more harm than good.⁴⁴

The elections duly went ahead in the last week of November (Table 2). Too frequently overlooked, they deserve to stand, not only as a monument to the political capacities of the Russian people, but as a milestone in the history of twentieth-century democracy. At least 44 million Russians cast a vote. To date it was the largest expression of popular will in history. Almost three times as many Russians voted in November 1917 as Americans had done in the 1916 presidential election. Not until the 1940s was any Western election to outdo this spectacular event. Turnout ran at just short of 60 per cent. Participation was somewhat higher in the ‘backward’ countryside than in the cities. There was little or no evidence of fraud. The Russian electorate cast their ballots in a manner that clearly reflected both the basic structure of Russian society and the course of national political events since February 1917. As the foremost historian of this long-forgotten episode comments: ‘We may conclude . . . that there was nothing fundamentally wrong with the election . . . When burghers vote for property rights, soldiers and their wives for peace and demobilization, and peasants for land, what is there about the spectacle that is abnormal or unreal?’ They may have had little experience of democracy, but ‘in an elemental way, the electorate’ of revolutionary Russia ‘knew what it was doing’.⁴⁵

Taken together, the parties of the revolution – the agrarian Socialist Revolutionaries and their Ukrainian sister party, the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks – commanded almost 80 per cent of the vote. The parties of revolutionary defensism – the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and Mensheviks – were still the most popular, even after the Bolshevik coup. But by the autumn of 1917 their positions were painfully incoherent. By contrast, a large and energetic minority clustered around the urban areas and above all around Petrograd, giving their backing to the Bolsheviks. Since the spring of 1917, the SRs and Mensheviks had been imploring the Bolsheviks to form a broad-based revolutionary coalition. But this was of no interest to Lenin and Trotsky. Instead, they allied themselves opportunistically with the extreme left wing of the agrarians, the Left SRs, whose advocacy of class war was even more militant than their own. The first meeting of the Constituent Assembly was postponed until January 1918 and in the meantime the Bolsheviks set about consolidating a Soviet regime and making good on Lenin’s most popular slogan: ‘Land, Bread and Peace’.

IV

In the aftermath of the coup, in a last desperate bid to save Russia’s democratic revolution, Viktor Chernov, the veteran leader of the agrarian Social Revolutionaries, appealed to London, Paris and Washington to provide him with a sensational foreign policy breakthrough, with which to answer Lenin’s seductive promise of an immediate peace. But he hoped in vain. There was no reaction. After the revolutionary contagion had threatened to spread westwards in the summer, the Allies had decided to quarantine the Russian menace. In Washington, at least, there was some sense of the scale of the impending disaster. Following the collapse of the Kerensky offensive in early August 1917, Colonel House had written to Wilson that he felt an urgent move towards an immediate peace was vital: ‘It is more important . . . that Russia should weld herself into a virile Republic than it is that Germany should be beaten to her knees. If internal disorder reaches a point in Russia where Germany can intervene, it is conceivable that in the future she may be able to dominate Russia both politically and economically. Then the clock of progress would indeed be set back.’ If, on the other hand, democracy were to be ‘firmly established’ in Russia, House urged, ‘German autocracy would be compelled to yield to a representative government within a very few years.’⁴⁶ For the sake of progress,

America must use its leverage to impose an immediate peace on the basis of the status quo ante, together with some face-saving ‘adjustment’ over Alsace Lorraine. Paris might object, but House thought it likely that France would in any case ‘succumb’ that winter. Wilson faced ‘one of the great crisis [sic] that the world has known’.⁴⁷ House prayed that Wilson would ‘not lose this great opportunity’.⁴⁸ Before rivers of American blood were spilled, before Washington’s engagement became irrevocable, he should renew the project of peace without victory.

If House had come to his appreciation of the strategic importance of a democratic Russia in May, rather than in mid-August 1917, if Wilson had been willing to respond constructively to the peace feelers of the revolutionary defensists, or to signal his acceptance of a separate peace, perhaps democracy in Russia might have been saved. But neither response was ever forthcoming. America’s entry into the war shut the door on the peace and Wilson refused to reopen it. Colonel House’s insights into the geopolitics of progress were out of season. At the end of August, Wilson contemptuously swatted aside a peace initiative from the Vatican, insisting, to the indignation of his former supporters, that no peace could be negotiated with the Kaiser’s regime.⁴⁹ The last desperate appeals from Russia received no reply. As the leading historian of the doomed agrarian party has commented, we will never know whether the determination of the Allies to continue the war ‘killed outright’⁵⁰ the possibility of a democratic alternative to the Bolsheviks, or ‘merely created an atmosphere in which that idea could not live. But that it was one or the other, there can be no reasonable doubt.’⁵¹ As the Bolshevik Red Guards occupied the Winter palace, Kerensky made his escape in a convoy under the protection of the American embassy flag.

4

China Joins a World at War

On 21 July 1917 in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of Kerensky’s offensive in Russia, the liberal American journalist and China-hand Thomas Franklin Fairfax Millard, whose weekly *Review of the Far East* was published in Shanghai, laid down a remarkable challenge to Washington:

Yes, it is very inconvenient for democracy, at the time when the issue of a world-war is narrowing down to a test of the fate of democracy, to have two great nations like Russia and China trying republicanism for the first time, and under precarious conditions . . . but just because the local and general conditions are rather unfavourable, and further because of the linking of these experiments with the cause of democracy throughout the world by reason of the war, it becomes virtually impossible for the US to remain a mere spectator of the course of events in Russia and China. Action to hearten, encourage, and support Russia already has been taken by the US government. Action to hearten, encourage, and support China in her effort to maintain a Republic ought to be devised and undertaken without delay.¹

By the 1940s we are used to seeing Chinese and Soviet Russian history as conjoined under the sign of Communism. But in 1917 for a fleeting moment, a different kind of connection seemed possible. China and Russia would join the United States in a democratic coalition. What seemed to beckon, if only the will could be found to grasp the opportunity, was the intoxicating prospect of a liberal future for Eurasia. Nor, as we shall see, was this merely the imagining of a lone American journalist. In China just as in Russia, what was at stake in 1917 was the future of a republican revolution. As in Russia this domestic struggle became intertwined with the global war. And just as in Russia, a year that began with a surge of patriotic republican enthusiasm ended in a disastrous descent towards civil war. As a result, by the end of 1917, though the Western Front remained deadlocked, the political order in the vast expanse of Eurasia was shaking from end to end.

I

The crisis in Beijing that prompted Millard to his startling call for action was precipitated in February 1917 by Woodrow Wilson's decision to break off diplomatic relations with Germany and his invitation to the other neutral powers to join him in doing so. Wilson took his stand in the name of 'just and reasonable understandings of international law and the obvious dictates of humanity', and bluntly stated that he took it 'for granted' that all other neutrals would 'take the same course'.² For the Chinese political class this was a direct challenge. Even less than the United States had China been able to insulate itself from the conflict. In September 1914 Japan had abruptly occupied the German concession in the city of Qingdao on the Shandong Peninsula. As of 1916 Chinese volunteers were doing labour service for the Entente. While Germany intensified its U-boat campaign in the first days of March 1917, 500 Chinese labourers drowned when the French troopship *Atlas* was torpedoed. Was Beijing not under the same obligation as Washington to protect its citizens against German aggression? Not to have joined Washington in taking a stand would have amounted to a humiliating admission of incapacity. Furthermore, it would have been to miss out on a heaven-sent opportunity to align the fledgling Chinese Republic with the United States and thus to complete the political transformation that began with the Chinese revolution in the winter of 1911–12.³

The fact that the centuries-old Ch'ing dynasty finally collapsed in February 1912 to be replaced by a republic marks one of the true turning points in modern history. Republicanism had arrived in Asia. It caused consternation amongst conservatives in China. But it also came as a nasty shock to the Japanese, who after the Meiji Restoration had as recently as 1889 settled on a monarchical constitution modelled on that of Imperial Germany. After thousands of years of dynastic rule China might not seem to be propitious soil for a republic. It was easy then, as now, for Chinese strongmen to find Western academics happy to confirm that Asian values 'required' authoritarian leadership.⁴ But throughout decades of turmoil China's transition from monarchy to republic was to prove remarkably durable.⁵ The first Chinese general election of 1913 was held under a franchise restricted to men over the age of 21 with elementary education. But by the standards of the day that was hardly ungenerous. Even allowing for the failure of the majority of the Chinese electorate to turn out, the 20 million votes cast made this one of the largest democratic events on record.⁶ Furthermore, despite rampant corruption, the leading party of the revolution, the Guomindang, achieved a clear majority for its republican and parliamentary programme.

Before they could exploit their victory, however, the Guomindang's parliamentary leader was gunned down by an assassin linked to President General Yuan Shi-kai. After a short-lived rebellion, concentrated mainly in the southern provinces, Sun Yat-sen and the rest of the Guomindang leadership fled into exile. Yuan prorogued the parliament and suspended the provisional constitution drafted by the revolutionaries. Backed by a foreign loan brokered by London and Japan, but boycotted by Wilson's administration in Washington, Yuan attempted to initiate a fresh authoritarian turn. Yuan, who had come to national prominence in the last years of the empire as the commander of the New Model Army in North-Central China, was a military modernizer who had no faith in new-fangled constitutions.⁷ But what he did not reckon with was the opposition of the majority of the Chinese political class. When over the winter of 1915–16 Yuan made a bid to install himself as monarch, the result was nationwide revolt.⁸ By the spring of 1916 the southern provinces, the traditional counter-weight to Beijing, abetted by Japanese agents provocateurs, were in open opposition, demanding a federalist constitution.⁹ More threateningly, the younger leaders of Yuan's own militarist grouping, General Duan Qirui of Anhui province and General Feng of Zhili, declared against their former patron. China's energetic new press mounted a furious nationalist clamour against Yuan's bid for absolute power.¹⁰ Realizing that he was risking national disintegration and thereby opening the door to Japanese and Russian intervention, Yuan humiliatingly renounced any monarchical ambition and appointed General Duan as his Prime Minister. Duan was certainly no liberal. He had received his military training in Germany and was loyal to Yuan's vision of authoritarian consolidation. But he was what the Germans would later dub a *Vernunftrepublikaner*, a republican out of realism.¹¹

When the discredited Yuan died suddenly in June 1916, he was succeeded as President by Li Yuanhong, one

of the figureheads of the original uprising of 1911 and the Guomindang's preferred candidate for president back in 1913. Li's first move was to restore the constitution of 1912 and to recall the parliament that Yuan had disbanded with its substantial majority of Guomindang MPs. Under the leadership of the Vice Chairman of the Senate, the Yale-educated C. T. Wang, the parliament set to work drafting a new constitution. In February 1917 the parliament voted to disestablish Confucianism as an official religion. A new generation of Western-influenced intellectuals took charge of Beijing University, including the first generation of Chinese Marxists. Briefly, it seemed as though Chinese politics might be entering a period of constructive reform. A foreign policy that aligned the Chinese Republic with President Wilson seemed the ideal complement to this policy of republican consolidation.

Against Japan and the European imperialists, America had emerged as the great hope of many Chinese. As the youthful nationalist student Mao Zedong wrote to a friend in early 1917: 'Japan is our country's strong enemy.' Within 'twenty years', Mao was convinced, 'China would have to fight Japan, or go under'. Sino-American friendship, by contrast, was fundamental to the nation's future. 'The two Republics East and West will draw close in friendship and cheerfully act as reciprocal economic and trade partners.' This alliance was 'the great endeavour of a thousand years'.¹² America's ambassador in Beijing, the progressive political scientist Paul Reinsch, was only too happy to encourage such talk. Though he was temporarily without telegraph connection to Washington, in early February 1917 Reinsch on his own initiative offered China a loan of \$10 million to enable it to make war preparations and follow America in breaking off relations with Germany.¹³ But as both Reinsch and the British Embassy reported, there was deep anxiety in Beijing. To remain inactive might be humiliating. To join in an association with America was certainly tempting. But because the United States had set itself so publicly apart from the Entente, how would France, Britain and above all Japan interpret a Chinese alignment with it? As Reinsch reported to Secretary of State Lansing, President Li and Prime Minister Duan were hesitating because they feared that if China was to become a combatant and if this were to require a 'more adequate military organization', this would enable the Japanese to demand a 'mandate' from the Allies 'to supervise such organization'.¹⁴ If Beijing refused, could China count on America's support? Much now depended on President Wilson.

By contrast with the enthusiasm of the American Embassy in Beijing, the mood in Washington was cautious. On 10 February 1917, having read the cables from Reinsch, Wilson commented to Lansing: 'these and earlier telegrams about the possible action of China make my conscience uneasy. We may be leading China to risk her doom.' '...(I)f we suffer China to follow us in what we are now doing,' the President went on, 'we ought to be ready to assist and stand by her in every possible way . . . can we count on the Senate and on our bankers to fulfil any expectations we may arouse in China?'¹⁵ Secretary of State Lansing concurred.¹⁶ Any move to strengthen China's own military capacity was bound to be considered a 'menace that would justify Japan in demanding control'. If Washington were to encourage an independent Chinese effort, Lansing cautioned, they would have to be 'prepared to meet Japanese opposition'.¹⁷

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