

BREAKING THE WORLD'S HEART

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

"History had already poised its gigantic soldier's boot on the antheap."

~LEON TROTSKY

"...and a knell rang in the ears of the victors, even in the hour of their triumph."

~WINSTON CHURCHILL

The War to End All Wars ended on November 11, 1918. The following year the continuance of war was assured.

World War 1 lasted 1563 days, killed 10 million soldiers, wounded 20 million more and cost more than \$300 billion. The war destroyed empires and dethroned dynasties: the Hohenzollern in Germany, Hapsburg in Austria, Romanov in Russia. New regimes were started at the war's final hours in Vienna, Warsaw, Budapest, Prague and Dublin. Revolutionaries roared through Berlin and St. Petersburg.

The killing stopped an hour before noon on November 11, 1918, after four terrible years of unimaginable bloodshed that nearly destroyed European civilization. Much of Europe was in ruins, its economies devastated; millions were dead and millions more were displaced, homeless, hungry, hopeless. Within a week of the Armistice, the 28th President of the United States, Thomas Woodrow Wilson boarded a ship named after the nation's first President to attend a peace conference at Versailles in France.

Meeting at Versailles at the beginning of 1919 were the leaders of the victorious Allies who had defeated the Central Powers. Wilson, who thought of himself and his place in history as a peacemaker, was determined to imprint the great new power of the USA upon the proceedings. After all, the United States had turned the balance of a stalemate --- the opposing armies were exhausted and decimated after more than three years of savage fighting, and whichever side America chose to back with its fresh millions of soldiers would win. It had chosen the British/French alliance over the Germans and Austrians, ostensibly in retort to Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare that sank ships Americans were aboard. Wilson was determined to make his famous "14 Points" the basis of the peace treaty, in particular the final point.

He had announced his 14 Points of peace on January 18, 1918. Most of them dealt with specific details of the war in progress, such as the evacuation of Germany/Austria from the nations they invaded in 1914, but also issues of general importance like freedom of the seas in peace and war, adjustment of colonial claims in the interests of subject peoples (European colonial empires had been at their all-time peak the year World War 1 started and hundreds of thousands of colonial troops were forced to fight on both sides), and the reduction of all nations' armaments to the lowest point consistent to their domestic security. The first point was about treaties: "Open covenants openly arrived at," that Wilson hoped would also form the conduct of the Versailles conference.

The final point, number fourteen, was the most important to Wilson, and the major reason he was in Europe against the advice of his Democratic Party back home --- the formation of a general association of nations with the mission of preserving world peace, with mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small nations alike.

At last to banish war, a dream of millions for millennia; this was Wilson's great dream. He campaigned for a second term as President in 1916 on a slogan that he had kept America out of the European war that had begun two years before. But in 1917 he sent American armies into the slaughter. Historian Garrett Mattingly, writing of an earlier era, captured Wilson's dilemma: "To embark on war was to launch oneself on an irresistible current sweeping into darkness." Now the darkness was past and Wilson was determined that it never happen again. He was obsessed with his responsibility for having sent his countrymen to war and felt a haunting covenant with the dead: "If ye break faith with us who die," poet John McCrae wrote, "We shall not sleep though the poppies grow / in Flanders fields."

Wilson would keep the faith. But humanity responds quicker to hatred and opportunity than for peace for its own sake. Civilizations have profited immensely from wars, and warfare has progressed civilization's expanse and technologies, not only for purposes of making war. Yet war has also turned out the light of civilization: humanity has been set back centuries by its penchant for war --- long periods of decline and retrogression; generations devoid of opportunity or hope. Wilson's purpose was to end these interminable cycles of darkness.

He took charge of the committee that hammered together the first part of the Versailles Treaty, his fourteenth point, the Covenant of the League of Nations. The League was to consist of the signatory nations and others admitted by a two-thirds vote. The members were to protect each other from aggression, to submit disputes to arbitration or inquiry, and to abstain from war for a period of nine months while the League attempted to settle tensions. All treaties between members that were incompatible with League obligations were void; all subsequent treaties were to be registered with the League. The League was to devote itself to problems of international disarmament, labor legislation and health problems.

The Versailles Peace Conference formally opened in Paris on January 18, 1919, with 70 delegates representing 27 of the victorious powers. The Germans were excluded until the treaty was ready to submit to them.

Unfortunately the drafting of the peace treaty was marked by violent conflict between the victors, who treated the conference as a brawl over spoils and acted as if their main purpose was to punish Germany for starting and losing the war.

Germany was forced to acknowledge sole responsibility for starting the war and had to swallow military occupation by the Allies. Harshness of all, Germany had to agree to pay for all civilian damage suffered by Allied peoples during the war.

A \$32-billion reparation bill was presented, but the later rise of German nationalism stopped payments.

Germany also had to give France, Belgium and Italy 25-million tons of coal annually --- and Poland seized mines in Upper Silesia that yearly yielded 45-million tons of coal. Germany needed at least 100-million tons of coal each year to fuel its industry, and got less than half that.

"It was not unlike olden times when the conqueror dragged the conquered at his chariot wheel," Wilson's closest advisor



"READING HIS EPITAPH AGAIN" (1952) BY PARRISH OF THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Col. Edward M. House said. American General Tasker H. Bliss was more perceptive. "We are in for a high period followed by a low period," he said. "Then there will be the devil to pay all around the world."

The problem that eclipsed all others at Versailles was to quickly restore the productivity of a world impoverished by four years of war. The war's aftershocks were felt all over Europe; hunger, cold, shortlived communist uprisings in Bavaria and Hungary, pogroms against Jews in Russia, emergency food sent to the Balkans and the Middle East. The Paris peacemakers acted as if these problems were unrelated to them, as if they were saving civilization by redrawing maps instead. Germany, even prostrate was still potentially the greatest producer of Europe, which denied its industry and energy had little chance of swift recovery. Greedy for land and treasure, determined to exact revenge, the Great Powers never gave Germany the chance to undo the damage it had initiated in the only manner it really could.

Although Wilson's first point had insisted on "open covenants openly arrived at," the conference was crippled by secret treaties that poisoned the cooperation that might have prevented the greater butchery of World War 2 twenty years later. Hardly anyone had the sense to realize that the Versailles Treaty's punishment of Germany was so iniquitously cruel that it would ultimately precipitate the Nazi counterrevolution that caused the next war.

The secret treaties between the other Allies triumphed over Wilson's 14 principles because they were vehemently defended by their perpetrators. While Wilson took the high moral road toward world peace the Allies gorged on the decayed corpse of the Central Powers, breaking up the Austro-Hungarian empire and grabbing Germany's overseas colonies. By impressing an onerous peace upon Germany the peacemakers continued the war by political vengeance and ignored, in S.L.A. Marshall's words, "History's moral that war is mere butchery unless it gives rise to a more stable peace."

"How can I talk to Wilson?" remarked French Premier Georges Clemenceau, whose intransigent hatred of Germany was a major obstacle to a just peace and a major factor leading to World War 2. "How can I talk to a fellow who thinks himself the first man in 2000 years who has known anything about peace on earth. Wilson imagines he is the second Messiah." (Clemenceau,

the 'Old Tiger', challenged England's Prime Minister David Lloyd George to a duel during the conference, which an exasperated Wilson barely thwarted.)

Wilson's high moral tone was no more palatable to the primarily Republican Senate back home --- particularly Henry Cabot Lodge, his arch political foe --- than it was to Clemenceau and the feasting Allies.

Article X of the Covenant was especially vexing to the Senate, by which Wilson had pledged the U.S. to join its allies of the League of Nations "to preserve against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing independence" of any member. That struck to one of America's bedrock fears: becoming entangled in Europe's perpetual wars. Involvement in World War 1 was only tolerated by the possibility it would put an end once and for all to warfare. At least the public supplying the troops and money was led to believe that opportunity. Political and business leaders feared more the supremacy of Germany in Europe, even though few had much love for either Britain or France.

But Wilson, perhaps because the final responsibility for dispatching the soldiers across the Atlantic Ocean was his, truly believed America's purpose should be a crusade for lasting world peace. Unhappy with the peace treaty that came out of Versailles yet hopeful U.S. participation would moderate its harsh features, Wilson became its most ardent salesman, particularly for his beloved covenant for the League of Nations.

Wilson returned home in July 1919, convinced the Senate, which under the Constitution decides upon treaties made by a President, would be forced to approve this one by the mere fact of its accomplishment and what he thought was the powerful influence of world opinion. He misjudged the temper of his political foes, who were already upset that he did not include any of them in the peace negotiations in Paris and that he had not informed Congress of its proceedings. The first anyone on this side of the Atlantic learned of the Treaty was through a leak by the Germans, who had purloined an earlier rough-draft copy.

If Wilson had been more conciliatory and less arrogant about the Treaty he might have seen it pass through the Senate with very few reservations. Instead, he refused any amending of it --- perhaps rightly claiming that Congress could not change what a union of nations had decided upon. He was wrong. The struggle over the Treaty regressed into a partisan brawl between Wilson Democrats and Senate Republicans, led by Lodge and a handful of "irreconcilables" who opposed the Treaty in any form. This Senate of 1919 retained bitter memories of Wilson's attempt to pack it with Democrats the previous election year; yet he still might have got the Treaty passed if he had made a few compromises early in the fight for ratification.

Wilson attempted to appeal to America's not entirely justified sense of itself as a compassionate nation. He emphasized the duties of a strong nation, and in 1919 as it was later in 1945, the USA was the most powerful in the world: it must not act as a master but as the servant to humanity, he said. He called the Treaty of Versailles "a great peace...the crowning achievement of my life to sign." It was, he said, "a people's treaty...the first of its kind...a Magna Carta for labor and for women and children" --- it was "the great humane document of our time."

Above all, the Treaty contained Wilson's cherished covenant for the League of Nations. The League did not guarantee there would not be any more wars, he said, but it made war "violently improbable" by setting up elaborate arbitration and a cooling off period that was the equivalent of a normal pregnancy.

Wilson insisted that America's historical isolation from world affairs was over. Technology and the process of history had made Earth "a single whispering gallery." The U.S. would not survive peacefully or prosperously in a violent impoverished world. The nation was unable to "disentangle itself from the rest of humanity." He warned that without a League of Nations the



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