

CHAPTER 7 – CULMINATION: ARMISTICE AND VERSAILLES

“Everything for which America fought has been accomplished.”

Thus did Woodrow Wilson announce to his countrymen the November 11, 1918 armistice ending the Great War’s fighting. It is a statement that history turns upside down. Little for which America had fought had been accomplished. America, to be sure, had wanted the Allies to win, and win they did. But just about nothing else came out the way Wilson or America had intended. The first proof of this emerged in the armistice, when the British and French treated Germany as a soundly defeated enemy for whom every shred of honor would be withheld. This was followed a few months later at the Paris Peace Conference and in the peace treaty. They were to be the culmination of the transforming actions taken by America since it entered the war in spring 1917. That, as earlier chapters relate, dramatically altered the dynamics and balance of the Western Front, giving Britain and France a victory otherwise inconceivable. It consequently gave them the opportunity, which they seized, to punish, strip and humiliate Germany. This certainly was not why America had fought and, in fact, was everything Wilson had said he opposed...

If it was a fateful mistake for America to have entered the Great War, it was still a mistake which could have been rectified by ending the conflict with genuine negotiations and compromise. At the armistice and peace talks, America had a last chance to blunt the long-term, history-changing tragic effects of its having taken sides in the war.

But that Wilson and America failed to do. Instead, the armistice dissolved any possibility of fulfilling Wilson’s repeated vow of a peace without victory, while the Versailles Treaty, as the peace terms came to be known, confirmed that the Allied and American victors would punish Germany unmercifully. So brutal was this punishment that it shocked even those who had authored it. “Immeasurably harsh and humiliating,” said U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing of the treaty. “All a great pity,” was how British Prime Minister David Lloyd George assessed it, adding, “We shall have to do the same thing all over again in twenty-five years at three times the cost.” And Wilson’s press chief admitted, “If I were a German, I think I should never sign it.”

America would have good reason to not sign. The reality of the treaty shattered Wilson’s vision of a compromise peace allowing Germany to emerge from the war healthy and strong enough to be a major player among Europe’s nations (and an essential check on what Wilson feared were France’s aggrandizing ambitions). The reality of the treaty fulfilled the fears Wilson had confided to aides sailing with him to Europe for the peace conference: that “our greatest error would be to give [Germany] powerful reasons for wishing one day to take revenge.” Yet when Wilson and other American negotiators at the peace conference were to try to temper the treaty’s harshest points, they were to be rebuffed by the British and French who openly trivialized the American Expeditionary Force role in winning the war. The U.S. had not earned on the battlefield a right to determine the peace, Wilson and other Americans were to hear in dozens of indirect ways. And not only was Wilson unable to determine the peace, he could barely influence it...

No section of the Versailles Peace Treaty was to be more controversial—the word “notorious” would not exaggerate—than Article 231. It took no territory from Germany, did not punish Germany economically nor placed any military restrictions on Germany. Yet, more than any of the treaty’s 439 other articles, it discredited the peace agreement (abroad as well as in Germany) and tainted the German democracy which had signed it. In this article, Germany was blamed for the war. And blamed solely. It was forced to accept “the responsibility...for causing all the loss and damage” suffered by the victors “as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.” Almost immediately Article 231 became known worldwide as the “war

guilt clause” and the massive resentment of it by Germans was exploited with great success by the Nazis and other ultra-nationalists in their assault on the Weimar Republic.

To Germans then and later, it was infuriating and preposterous and, most of all, extraordinarily unfair to be blamed exclusively for the war. Surely no aspect of the war has been more extensively dissected than its outbreak. Scrutinized minutely by historians have been the words, treaties, cables, once-secret documents and actions of the war’s key players—Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Germany and Russia. From this research scholarly fingers, over the decades, have pointed accusingly first at one and then at another of the combatants. At times, for instance, Russia’s mobilizing its army, the biggest in Europe, has been seen as the war’s main trigger because it panicked Germany, which bordered Russia for some thousand-miles; at other times Austria-Hungary has been the primary culprit, for recklessly threatening war against Serbia (and hence, by proxy, against its protector Russia) after the June 28, 1914 assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Germany has been indicted for its bombastically assertive pre-war global policies and for invading Luxemburg and Belgium, while France has been blamed for igniting the war by pressing Russia to rush and intensify its mobilization. Some historians even have accused Britain of tipping the continent into conflict by sending very confusing and contradictory signals to the major powers and for promising to back France militarily. British historian Ferguson, for one, makes a strong case that it was Britain’s actions, not Germany’s, that made a continental war more likely.

Many World War One experts over the years, including some today, don’t accuse any country at all. Instead, they argue that early 20th Century Europe’s complex web of alliances and commitments, plus the rigorous and unforgivingly rigid national military mobilization schedules, kicked in as if on automatic pilot once the crisis between Austria-Hungary and Russia erupted following the Archduke’s assassination. This “war by timetable,” as it often is known, overpowered all efforts to control or derail a momentum that propelled Europe to a continent-wide war. To Lloyd George, reflecting on this in his memoirs, “the nations slithered over the brink to the boiling cauldron.” More than a half-century later, John Keegan agrees, writing that “the states of Europe proceeded, as if in a dead march and a dialogue of the deaf, to the destruction of their continent.”

If one thing is definite about what is called “this most contentious of topics,” it is that there has been no consensus about how the war started—except on one point. Just about everyone agrees that no single nation or single factor or single miscalculation or single stupid decision started the Great War. This, after all, was not World War Two, with its smoking-gun culprits: Japan invading China and attacking Pearl Harbor and Germany invading Poland. In August 1914, guilt was not Russia’s alone nor France’s nor Austria-Hungary’s. And it was not Germany’s. “Most historians today believe that Germany did not deliberately plan to go to war,” writes World War One expert Hew Strachan in *Foreign Affairs*. Even those very critical of the Germans at most argue, as does Britain’s Gary Sheffield in his 2001 history *Forgotten War*, that Germany’s “behavior in July 1914 was the most important single factor” igniting the conflict. That is quite different from saying that it was the sole factor.

In truth and fairness, blame is shared, to varying extents, by all the Great War’s principal belligerents. At one time, in fact, Wilson would have agreed; in 1916 he talked about “the obscure foundations” of the war and, according to George Kennan, stressed that the U.S. was “not concerned” about its causes. That Article 231 thus branded Germany alone guilty reveals just how determined the victors had become to punish Germany severely. And that article came to typify just how much the treaty had turned Wilson on his head. In place of his “peace without victory,” the peace conference crafted what in just a generation turned into a victory without peace...