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Modern Times
Revised Edition

Paul Johnson



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MODERN
TIMES

THE WORLD FROM
THE TWENTIES TO THE NINETIES

REVISED EDITION

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This book is dedicated

*to the memory of my father, W. A. Johnson,
artist, educator and enthusiast*

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'Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a
potter's vessel.

Be wise now therefore, O ye kings:
be instructed, ye judges of the earth'

Psalms, 2: 9–10

A Relativistic World

The modern world began on 29 May 1919 when photographs of a solar eclipse, taken on the island of Principe off West Africa and at Sobral in Brazil, confirmed the truth of a new theory of the universe. It had been apparent for half a Century that the Newtonian cosmology, based upon the straight lines of Euclidean geometry and Galileo's notions of absolute time, was in need of serious modification. It had stood for more than two hundred years. It was the framework within which the European Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the vast expansion of human knowledge, freedom and prosperity which characterized the nineteenth Century, had taken place. But increasingly powerful telescopes were revealing anomalies. In particular, the motions of the planet Mercury deviated by forty-three seconds of arc per Century from its predictable behaviour under Newtonian laws of physics. Why?

In 1905, a twenty-six-year-old German Jew, Albert Einstein, then working in the Swiss patent office in Berne, had published a paper, 'On the electrodynamics of moving bodies' which became known as the Special Theory of Relativity.¹ Einstein's observations on the way in which, in certain circumstances, lengths appeared to contract and clocks to slow down, are analogous to the effects of perspective in painting. In fact the discovery that space and time are relative rather than absolute terms of measurement is comparable, in its effect on our perception of the world, to the first use of perspective in art, which occurred in Greece in the two decades c. 500–480 BC.²

The originality of Einstein, amounting to a form of genius, and the curious elegance of his lines of argument, which colleagues compared to a kind of art, aroused growing, world-wide interest. In 1907 he published a demonstration that all mass has energy, encapsulated in the equation $E = mc^2$, which a later age saw as the starting point in the race for the A-bomb. Not even the onset of the European war prevented scientists from following his quest for an all-embracing General Theory of Relativity which would cover gravitational fields and provide a comprehensive revision of Newtonian physics. In 1915 news reached London that he had done it. The following spring, as the British were preparing their vast and catastrophic offensive on the Somme, the key paper was smuggled through the Netherlands and reached Cambridge, where it was received by Arthur Eddington, Professor of Astronomy and Secretary of the Royal Astronomical Society.

Eddington publicized Einstein's achievement in a 1918 paper for the Physical Society called 'Gravitation and the Principle of Relativity'. But it was of the essence of Einstein's methodology that he insisted his equations must be verified by empirical observation and he himself devised three specific tests for this purpose. The key one was that a ray of light just grazing the surface of the sun must be bent by 1.745 seconds of arc – twice the amount of gravitational deflection provided for by classical Newtonian theory. The experiment involved photographing a solar eclipse. The next was due on 29 May 1919. Before the end of the war the Astronomer Royal, Sir Frank Dyson, had secured from a harassed government the promise

of £1,000 to finance an expedition to take observations from Principe and Sobral.

Early in March 1919, the evening before the expedition sailed, the astronomers talked late into the night in Dyson's study at the Royal Observatory, Greenwich, designed by Wren in 1675–6, while Newton was still working on his general theory of gravitation. E. Cottingham, Eddington's assistant, who was to accompany him, asked the awful question: what would happen if measurement of the eclipse photographs showed not Newton's, not Einstein's, but *twice* Einstein's deflection? Dyson said, 'Then Eddington will go mad and you will have to come home alone.' Eddington's notebook records that on the morning of 29 May there was a tremendous thunder-storm in Principe. The clouds cleared just in time for the eclipse at 1.30 pm. Eddington had only eight minutes in which to operate. 'I did not see the eclipse, being too busy changing plates ... We took sixteen photographs.' Thereafter, for several nights he developed the plates at the rate of two a night. On the evening of 3 June, having spent the whole day measuring the developed prints, he turned to his colleague, 'Cottingham, you won't have to go home alone.' Einstein had been right.⁴

The expedition satisfied two of Einstein's tests, which were reconfirmed by W.W. Campbell during the September 1922 eclipse. It was a measure of Einstein's scientific rigour that he refused to accept that his own theory was valid until the third test (the 'red shift') was met. 'If it were proved that this effect does not exist in nature', he wrote to Eddington on 1 December 1919, 'then the whole theory would have to be abandoned'. In fact the 'red shift' was confirmed by the Mount Wilson observatory in 1923, and thereafter empirical proof of relativity theory accumulated steadily, one of the most striking instances being the gravitational lensing system of quasars, identified in 1979–80.⁵ At the time, Einstein's professional heroism did not go unappreciated. To the young philosopher Karl Popper and his friends at Vienna University, 'it was a great experience for us, and one which had a lasting influence on my intellectual development'. 'What impressed me most', Popper wrote later, 'was Einstein's own clear statement that he would regard his theory as untenable if it should fail in certain tests Here was an attitude utterly different from the dogmatism of Marx, Freud, Adler and even more so that of their followers. Einstein was looking for crucial experiments whose agreement with his predictions would by no means establish his theory while a disagreement, as he was the first to stress, would show his theory to be untenable. This, I felt, was the true scientific attitude.'⁶

Einstein's theory, and Eddington's much publicized expedition to test it, aroused enormous interest throughout the world in 1919. No exercise in scientific verification, before or since, has ever attracted so many headlines or become a topic of universal conversation. The tension mounted steadily between June and the actual announcement at a packed meeting of the Royal Society in London in September that the theory had been confirmed. To A.N. Whitehead, who was present, it was like a Greek drama:

We were the chorus commenting on the decree of destiny as disclosed in the development of a supreme incident. There was a dramatic quality in the very staging: the traditional ceremonial, and in the background the picture of Newton to remind us that the greatest of scientific generalizations was now, after more than two centuries, to receive its first modification ... great adventure in thought had at last come home to shore.⁷

From that point onward, Einstein was a global hero, in demand at every great university

the world, mobbed wherever he went, his wistful features familiar to hundreds of millions, the archetype of the abstracted natural philosopher. The impact of his theory was immediate and cumulatively immeasurable. But it was to illustrate what Karl Popper was later to term 'the law of unintended consequence'. Innumerable books sought to explain clearly how the General Theory had altered the Newtonian concepts which, for ordinary men and women, formed their understanding of the world about them, and how it worked. Einstein himself summed it up thus: 'The "Principle of Relativity" in its widest sense is contained in the Statement: The totality of physical phenomena is of such a character that it gives no basis for the introduction of the concept of "absolute motion"; or, shorter but less precise: There is no absolute motion.'⁸ Years later, R. Buckminster Fuller was to send a famous cable to the Japanese artist Isamu Noguchi explaining Einstein's key equation in exactly 249 words, a masterpiece of compression.

But for most people, to whom Newtonian physics, with their straight lines and right angles, were perfectly comprehensible, relativity never became more than a vague source of uneasiness. It was grasped that absolute time and absolute length had been dethroned; that motion was curvilinear. All at once, nothing seemed certain in the movements of the spheres. 'The world is out of joint', as Hamlet sadly observed. It was as though the spinning globe had been taken off its axis and cast adrift in a universe which no longer conformed to accustomed standards of measurement. At the beginning of the 1920s the belief began to circulate, for the first time at a popular level, that there were no longer any absolutes: of time and space, of good and evil, of knowledge, above all of value. Mistakenly but perhaps inevitably, relativity became confused with relativism.

No one was more distressed than Einstein by this public misapprehension. He was bewildered by the relentless publicity and error which his work seemed to promote. He wrote to his colleague Max Born on 9 September 1920: 'Like the man in the fairy-tale who turned everything he touched into gold, so with me everything turns into a fuss in the newspapers.'⁹ Einstein was not a practising Jew, but he acknowledged a God. He believed passionately in absolute standards of right and wrong. His professional life was devoted to the quest not only for truth but for certitude. He insisted the world could be divided into subjective and objective spheres, and that one must be able to make precise statements about the objective portion. In the scientific (not the philosophical) sense he was a determinist. In the 1920s he found the indeterminacy principle of quantum mechanics not only unacceptable but abhorrent. For the rest of his life until his death in 1955 he sought to refute it by trying to anchor physics in a unified field theory. He wrote to Born: 'You believe in a God who plays dice, and I in complete law and order in a world which objectively exists and which, in a wildly speculative way, am trying to capture. I firmly *believe*, but I hope that someone will discover a more realistic way or rather a more tangible basis than it has been my lot to find.'¹⁰ But Einstein failed to produce a unified theory, either in the 1920s or thereafter. He lived to see moral relativism, to him a disease, become a social pandemic, just as he lived to see his fatal equation bring into existence nuclear warfare. There were times, he said at the end of his life, when he wished he had been a simple watchmaker.

The emergence of Einstein as a world figure in 1919 is a striking illustration of the dual impact of great scientific innovators on mankind. They change our perception of the physical world and increase our mastery of it. But they also change our ideas. The second effect

often more radical than the first. The scientific genius impinges on humanity, for good or ill, far more than any statesman or warlord. Galileo's empiricism created the ferment of natural philosophy in the seventeenth Century which adumbrated the scientific and industrial revolutions. Newtonian physics formed the framework of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and so helped to bring modern nationalism and revolutionary politics to birth. Darwin's notion of the survival of the fittest was a key element both in the Marxist conception of class warfare and of the racial philosophies which shaped Hitlerism. Indeed the political and social consequences of Darwinian ideas have yet to work themselves out, as we shall see throughout this book. So, too, the public response to relativity was one of the principal formative influences on the course of twentieth-century history. It formed a knife, inadvertently wielded by its author, to help cut society adrift from its traditional moorings and the faith and morals of Judeo-Christian culture.

The impact of relativity was especially powerful because it virtually coincided with the public reception of Freudianism. By the time Eddington verified Einstein's General Theory, Sigmund Freud was already in his mid-fifties. Most of his really original work had been done by the turn of the Century. *The Interpretation of Dreams* had been published as long ago as 1900. He was a well-known and controversial figure in specialized medical and Psychiatric circles, had already founded his own school and enacted a spectacular theological dispute with his leading disciple, Carl Jung, before the Great War broke out. But it was only at the end of the war that his ideas began to circulate as common currency.

The reason for this was the attention the prolonged trench-fighting focused on cases of mental disturbance caused by stress: 'shell-shock' was the popular term. Well-born scions of military families, who had volunteered for service, fought with conspicuous gallantry and been repeatedly decorated, suddenly broke. They could not be cowards, they were not madmen. Freud had long offered, in psychoanalysis, what seemed to be a sophisticated alternative to the 'heroic' methods of curing mental illness, such as drugs, bullying, and electric-shock treatment. Such methods had been abundantly used, in ever-growing doses, as the war dragged on, and as 'eures' became progressively short-lived. When the electric current was increased, men died under treatment, or committed suicide rather than face more, like victims of the Inquisition. The post-war fury of relatives at the cruelties inflicted in military hospitals, especially the Psychiatric division of the Vienna General Hospital, led the Austrian government in 1920 to set up a commission of inquiry, which cailed in Freud. The resulting controversy, though inconclusive, gave Freud the world-wide publicity he needed. Professionally, 1920 was the year of breakthrough for him, when the first Psychiatric polyclinic was opened in Berlin, and his pupil and future biographer, Ernest Jones, launched the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*.

But even more spectacular, and in the long run far more important, was the sudden discovery of Freud's works and ideas by intellectuals and artists. As Havelock Ellis said at the time, to the Master's indignation, Freud was not a scientist but a great artist.¹² After eight years' experience, his methods of therapy have proved, on the whole, costly failures, more suited to cosset the unhappy than cure the sick.¹³ We now know that many of the central ideas of psychoanalysis have no basis in biology. They were, indeed, formulated by Freud before the discovery of Mendel's Laws, the chromosomal theory of inheritance, the recognition of inborn metabolic errors, the existence of hormones and the mechanism of the

nervous impulse, which collectively invalidate them. As Sir Peter Medawar has put it, psychoanalysis is akin to Mesmerism and phrenology: it contains isolated nuggets of truth but the general theory is false.¹⁴ Moreover, as the young Karl Popper correctly noted at the time, Freud's attitude to scientific proof was very different to Einstein's and more akin to Marx's. Far from formulating his theories with a high degree of specific content which invited empirical testing and refutation, Freud made them all-embracing and difficult to test at all. And, like Marx's followers, when evidence did turn up which appeared to refute them, he modified the theories to accommodate it. Thus the Freudian corpus of belief was subject to continual expansion and osmosis, like a religious system in its formative period. As one would expect, internal critics, like Jung, were treated as heretics; external ones, like Havelock Ellis, as infidels. Freud betrayed signs, in fact, of the twentieth-century messianic ideologue at his worst – namely, a persistent tendency to regard those who diverged from him as themselves unstable and in need of treatment. Thus Ellis's disparagement of his scientific status was dismissed as 'a highly sublimated form of resistance'.¹⁵ 'My inclination', he wrote to Jung just before their break, 'is to treat those colleagues who offer resistance exactly as we treat patients in the same situation'.¹⁶ Two decades later, the notion of regarding dissent as a form of mental sickness, suitable for compulsory hospitalization, was to blossom in the Soviet Union into a new form of political repression.

But if Freud's work had little true scientific content, it had literary and imaginative qualities of a high order. His style in German was magnetic and won him the nation's highest literary award, the Goethe Prize of the City of Frankfurt. He translated well. The anglicization of the existing Freudian texts became an industry in the Twenties. But the new literary output expanded too, as Freud allowed his ideas to embrace an ever-widening field of human activity and experience. Freud was a gnostic. He believed in the existence of a hidden structure of knowledge which, by using the techniques he was devising, could be discerned beneath the surface of things. The dream was his starting-point. It was not, he wrote, 'differently constructed from the neurotic symptom. Like the latter, it may seem strange and senseless, but when it is examined by means of a technique which differs slightly from the free association method used in psychoanalysis, one gets from its *manifest content* to its *hidden meaning*, or to its latent thoughts.'¹⁷

Gnosticism has always appealed to intellectuals. Freud offered a particularly succulent variety. He had a brilliant gift for classical allusion and imagery at a time when all educated people prided themselves on their knowledge of Greek and Latin. He was quick to seize on the importance attached to myth by the new generation of social anthropologists such as Sir James Frazer, whose *The Golden Bough* began to appear in 1890. The meaning of dreams, the function of myth – into this potent brew Freud stirred an all-pervading potion of sex, which he found at the root of almost all forms of human behaviour. The war had loosened tongues over sex; the immediate post-war period saw the habit of sexual discussion carried into print. Freud's time had come. He had, in addition to his literary gifts, some of the skills of a sensational journalist. He was an adept neologian. He could mint a striking slogan. Almost as often as his younger contemporary Rudyard Kipling, he added words and phrases to the language: 'the unconscious', 'infantile sexuality', the Oedipus complex', 'inferiority complex', 'guilt complex', the ego, the id and the super-ego, 'sublimation', 'depth-psychology'. Some of his salient ideas, such as the sexual interpretation of dreams or what became known as the

'Freudian slip', had the appeal of new intellectual parlour-games. Freud knew the value of topicality. In 1920, in the aftermath of the suicide of Europe, he published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which introduced the idea of the 'death instinct', soon vulgarized into the 'death-wish'. For much of the Twenties, which saw a further abrupt decline in religious belief, especially among the educated, Freud was preoccupied with anatomizing religion, which he saw as a purely human construct. In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) he dealt with many unconscious attempts to mitigate unhappiness. 'The attempt to procure', he wrote, 'protection against suffering through a delusional remoulding of reality is made by a considerable number of people in common. The religions of mankind must be classed among the mass-delusions of this kind. No one, needless to say, who shares a delusion even recognizes it as such.'¹⁸

This seemed the voice of the new age. Not for the first time, a prophet in his fifties, long in the wilderness, had suddenly found a rapt audience of gilded youth. What was so remarkable about Freudianism was its protean quality and its ubiquity. It seemed to have a new and exciting explanation for everything. And, by virtue of Freud's skill in encapsulating emergent trends over a wide range of academic disciplines, it appeared to be presenting, with brilliant panache and masterful confidence, ideas which had already been half-formulated in the minds of the élite. 'That is what I have always thought!' noted an admiring André Gide in his diary. In the early 1920s, many intellectuals discovered that they had been Freudians for years without knowing it. The appeal was especially strong among novelists, ranging from the young Aldous Huxley, whose dazzling *Crome Yellow* was written in 1921, to the sombre conservative Thomas Mann, to whom Freud was 'an oracle'.

The impact of Einstein and Freud upon intellectuals and creative artists was all the greater in that the coming of peace had made them aware that a fundamental revolution had been and was still taking place in the whole world of culture, of which the concepts of relativity and Freudianism seemed both portents and echoes. This revolution had deep pre-war roots. It had already begun in 1905, when it was trumpeted in a public speech, made appropriate enough by the impresario Sergei Diaghilev of the *Ballets Russes*:

We are witnesses of the greatest moment of summing-up in history, in the name of a new and unknown culture, which will be created by us, and which will also sweep us away. That is why, without fear or misgiving, I raise my glass to the ruins of the walls of the beautiful palaces, as well as to the new commandments of a new aesthetic. The only wish that I, an incorrigible sensualist, can express, is that the forthcoming struggle should not damage the amenities of life, and that the death should be as beautiful and as illuminating as the resurrection.¹⁹

As Diaghilev spoke, the first exhibition of the Fauves was to be seen in Paris. In 1913 he staged there Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*; by then Schoenberg had published the atonal *Drei Klavierstücke* and Alban Berg his String Quartet (Opus 3); and Matisse had invented the term 'Cubism'. It was in 1909 that the Futurists published their manifesto and Kurt Hiller founded his Neue Club in Berlin, the nest of the artistic movement which, in 1911, was first termed Expressionism.²⁰ Nearly all the major creative figures of the 1920s had already been published, exhibited or performed before 1914, and in that sense the Modern Movement was a pre-war phenomenon. But it needed the desperate convulsions of the great struggle, and the crashing of regimes it precipitated, to give modernism the radical political dimension it had hitherto lacked, and the sense of a ruined world on which it would construct a new one. The

elegiac, even apprehensive, note Diaghilev Struck in 1905 was thus remarkably perceptive. The cultural and political strands of change could not be separated, any more than during the turbulence of revolution and romanticism of 1790–1830. It has been noted that James Joyce, Tristan Tzara and Lenin were all resident-exiles in Zurich in 1916, waiting for their time to come.²¹

With the end of the war, modernism sprang onto what seemed an empty stage in a blaze of publicity. On the evening of 9 November 1918 an Expressionist Council of Intellectuals met in the Reichstag building in Berlin, demanding the nationalization of the theatres, the state subsidization of the artistic professions and the demolition of all academies. Surrealism, which might have been designed to give visual expression to Freudian ideas – though its origins were quite independent – had its own programme of action, as did Futurism and Dada. But this was surface froth. Deeper down, it was the disorientation in space and time induced by relativity, and the sexual gnosticism of Freud, which seemed to be characterized in the new creative models. On 23 June 1919 Marcel Proust published *A l'Ombre des jeunes filles*, the beginning of a vast experiment in disjointed time and subterranean sexual emotion which epitomized the new pre-occupations. Six months later, on 10 December, he was awarded the Prix Goncourt, and the centre of gravity of French letters had made a decisive shift away from the great survivors of the nineteenth Century.²² Of course as yet such works circulated only among the influential few. Proust had to publish his first volume at his own expense and sell it at one-third the cost of production (even as late as 1956, the complete *A la Recherche du temps perdu* was still selling less than 10,000 sets a year).²³ James Joyce, also working in Paris, could not be published at all in the British Isles. His *Ulysses*, completed in 1922, had to be issued by a private press and smuggled across frontiers. But its significance was not missed. No novel illustrated more clearly the extent to which Freud's concepts had passed into the language of literature. That same year, 1922, the poet T.S. Eliot, himself a newly identified prophet of the age, wrote that it had 'destroyed the whole of the nineteenth Century'.²⁴ Proust and Joyce, the two great harbingers and centre-of-gravity-shifters, had replaced each other in the *Weltanschauung* they inadvertently shared. They met in Paris on 18 May 1922, after the first night of Stravinsky's *Rénard*, at a party for Diaghilev and the cast, attended by the composer and his designer, Pablo Picasso. Proust, who had already insulted Stravinsky, unwisely gave Joyce a lift home in his taxi. The drunken Irishman assured him he had not read one syllable of his works and Proust, incensed, reciprocated the compliment, before driving on to the Ritz where he had an arrangement to be fed at any hour of the night.²⁵ Six months later he was dead, but not before he had been acclaimed as the literary interpreter of Einstein in an essay by the celebrated mathematician Camille Veltard.²⁶ Joyce dismissed him, in *Finnegans Wake*, with a pun: 'Prost bitte'.

The notion of writers like Proust and Joyce 'destroying' the nineteenth Century, as surely as Einstein and Freud were doing with their ideas, is not so fanciful as it might seem. The nineteenth Century saw the climax of the philosophy of personal responsibility – the notion that each of us is individually accountable for our actions – which was the joint heritage of Judeo-Christianity and the classical world. As Lionel Trilling, analysing Eliot's verdict on *Ulysses*, was to point out, during the nineteenth Century it was possible for a leading aesthete like Walter Pater, in *The Renaissance*, to categorize the ability 'to burn with a hard, gem-like flame' as 'success in life'. 'In the nineteenth Century', Trilling wrote, even 'a mind a

exquisite and detached as Pater's could take it for granted that upon the life of an individual person a judgment of success or failure might be passed.'²⁷ The nineteenth-century novel has been essentially concerned with the mortal or spiritual success of the individual. A *Récherche* and *Ulysses* marked not merely the entrance of the anti-hero but the destruction of individual heroism as a central element in imaginative creation, and a contemptuous lack of concern for moral balance-striking and verdicts. The exercise of individual free will ceased to be the supremely interesting feature of human behaviour.

That was in full accordance with the new forces shaping the times. Marxism, now for the first time easing itself into the seat of power, was another form of gnosticism claiming to peer through the empirically-perceived veneer of things to the hidden truth beneath. In words which strikingly foreshadow the passage from Freud I have just quoted, Marx has pronounced: 'The *final pattern* of economic relationships as seen on the surface ... is very different from, and indeed quite the reverse of, their *inner but concealed essential pattern*.' On the surface, men appeared to be exercising their free will, taking decisions, determining events. In reality, to those familiar with the methods of dialectical materialism, such individuals, however powerful, were seen to be mere flotsam, hurled hither and thither by the irresistible surges of economic forces. The ostensible behaviour of individuals merely concealed class patterns of which they were almost wholly unaware but powerless to defy.

Equally, in the Freudian analysis, the personal conscience, which stood at the very heart of the Judeo-Christian ethic, and was the principal engine of individualistic achievement, was dismissed as a mere safety-device, collectively created, to protect civilized order from the fearful aggressiveness of human beings. Freudianism was many things, but if it had an essence it was the description of guilt. 'The tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego that is subjected to it', Freud wrote in 1920, 'is called by us the sense of guilt Civilization obtains its mastery over the individual's dangerous desire for aggression by weakening and disarming it and by setting up an agency within him to watch over it, like a garrison in a conquered city. Feelings of guilt were thus a sign not of vice, but of virtue. The super-ego or conscience was the drastic price the individual paid for preserving civilization, and its cost in misery would increase inexorably as civilization advanced: 'A threatened external unhappiness ... has been exchanged for a permanent internal unhappiness, for the tension of the sense of guilt.' Freud said he intended to show that guilt-feelings, unjustified by any human frailty, were 'the most important problem in the development of civilization'.²⁹ It might be, as sociologists were already suggesting, that society could be collectively guilty, in creating conditions which made crime and vice inevitable. But personal guilt-feelings were an illusion to be dispelled. None of us was individually guilty; we were all guilty.

Marx, Freud, Einstein all conveyed the same message to the 1920s: the world was not what it seemed. The senses, whose empirical perceptions shaped our ideas of time and distance, right and wrong, law and justice, and the nature of man's behaviour in society, were not to be trusted. Moreover, Marxist and Freudian analysis combined to undermine, in the different ways, the highly developed sense of personal responsibility, and of duty towards a settled and objectively true moral code, which was at the centre of nineteenth-century European civilization. The impression people derived from Einstein, of a universe in which all measurements of value were relative, served to confirm this vision – which both dismayed and exhilarated – of moral anarchy.

And had not 'mere anarchy', as W.B. Yeats put it in 1916, been 'loosed upon the world'? To many, the war had seemed the greatest calamity since the fall of Rome. Germany, from fear and ambition, and Austria, from resignation and despair, had willed the war in a way that other belligerents had not. It marked the culmination of the wave of pessimism in German philosophy which was its salient characteristic in the pre-war period. Germanic pessimism, which contrasted sharply with the optimism based upon political change and reform to be found in the United States, Britain, France and even Russia in the decade before 1914, was not the property of the intelligentsia but was to be found at every level of German society, particularly at the top. In the weeks before the outbreak of Armageddon, Bethmann Hollweg's secretary and confidant Kurt Riezler made notes of the gloomy relish with which his master steered Germany and Europe into the abyss. July 7 1914: 'The Chancellor expects that a war, whatever its outcome, will result in the uprooting of everything that exists. The existing world very antiquated, without ideas.' July 27: 'Doom greater than human power hanging over Europe and our own people.'³⁰ Bethmann Hollweg had been born in the same year as Freud, and it was as though he personified the 'death instinct' the latter coined as the fearful decade ended. Like most educated Germans, he had read Max Nordau's *Degeneration* published in 1895, and was familiar with the degenerative theories of the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso. War or no war, man was in inevitable decline; civilization was heading for destruction. Such ideas were commonplace in central Europe, preparing the way for the gasp of approbation which greeted Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, fortuitously timed for publication in 1918 when the predicted suicide had been accomplished.

Further West, in Britain, Joseph Conrad (himself an Easterner) had been the only major writer to reflect this pessimism, working it into a whole series of striking novels: *Nostradamus* (1904), *The Secret Agent* (1907), *Under Western Eyes* (1911), *Victory* (1915). These despairing political sermons, in the guise of fiction, preached the message Thomas Mann was to deliver to central Europe in 1924 with *The Magic Mountain*, as Mann himself acknowledged in the preface he wrote to the German translation of *The Secret Agent* two years later. For Conrad the war merely confirmed the irremediable nature of man's predicament. From the perspective of sixty years later it must be said that Conrad is the only substantial writer of the time whose vision remains clear and true in every particular. He dismissed Marxism as malevolent nonsense, certain to generate monstrous tyranny; Freud's ideas were nothing more than 'a kind of magic show'. The war had demonstrated human frailty but otherwise would resolve nothing, generate nothing. Giant plans of reform, panaceas, all 'solutions' were illusory. Writing to Bertrand Russell on 23 October 1922 (Russell was currently offering 'solutions' to *The Problem of China*, his latest book), Conrad insisted: 'I have never been able to find in any man's book or any man's talk anything convincing enough to stand up for a moment against my deep-seated sense of fatality governing this man-inhabited world The only remedy for Chinamen and for the rest of us is the change of hearts. But looking at the history of the last 2,000 years there is not much reason to expect that thing, even if man had taken to flying Man doesn't fly like an eagle, he flies like a beetle.'³¹

At the onset of the war, Conrad's scepticism had been rare in the Anglo-Saxon world. The war itself was seen by some as a form of progress, H.G.Wells marking its declaration with a catchy volume entitled *The War That Will End War*. But by the time the armistice came progress in the sense the Victorians had understood it, as something continuous and almost

inexorable, was dead. In 1920, the great classical scholar J.B. Bury published a volume, *The Idea of Progress*, proclaiming its demise. 'A new idea will usurp its place as the directing idea of humanity Does not Progress itself suggest that its value as a doctrine is only relatively corresponding to a certain not very advanced stage of civilization?'³²

What killed the idea of orderly, as opposed to anarchic, progress, was the sheer enormity of the acts perpetrated by civilized Europe over the past four years. That there had been a unimaginable, unprecedented moral degeneration, no one who looked at the facts could doubt. Sometime while he was Secretary of State for War (1919–21), Winston Churchill jotted down on a sheet of War Office paper the following passage:

All the horrors of all the ages were brought together, and not only armies but whole populations were thrust into the midst of them. The mighty educated States involved conceived – not without reason – that their very existence was at stake. Neither peoples nor rulers drew the line at any deed which they thought could help them to win. Germany, having let Hell loose, kept well in the van of terror; but she was followed step by step by the desperate and ultimately avenging nations she had assailed. Every outrage against humanity or international law was repaid by reprisals – often of a greater scale and of longer duration. No truce or parley mitigated the strife of the armies. The wounded died between the lines: the dead mouldered into the sea. Merchant ships and neutral ships and hospital ships were sunk on the seas and all on board left to their fate, or killed as they swam. Every effort was made to starve whole nations into Submission without regard to age or sex. Cities and monuments were smashed by artillery. Bombs from the air were cast down indiscriminately. Poison gas in many forms stifled or seared the soldiers. Liquid fire was projected upon their bodies. Men fell from the air in flames, or were smothered often slowly in the dark recesses of the sea. The fighting strength of armies was limited only by the manhood of their countries. Europe and large parts of Asia and Africa became one vast battlefield on which after years of struggle not armies but nations broke and ran. When all was over, Torture and Cannibalism were the only two expedients that the civilized, scientific, Christian States had been able to deny themselves: and they were of doubtful utility.³³

As Churchill correctly noted, the horrors he listed were perpetrated by the 'mighty educated States'. Indeed, they were quite beyond the power of individuals, however evil. It is a commonplace that men are excessively ruthless and cruel not as a rule out of avowed malice but from outraged righteousness. How much more is this true of legally constituted states, invested with all the seeming moral authority of parliaments and congresses and courts of justice! The destructive capacity of the individual, however vicious, is small; of the state, however well-intentioned, almost limitless. Expand the state and that destructive capacity necessarily expands too, *pari passu*. As the American pacifist Randolph Bourne snarled, on the eve of intervention in 1917, 'War is the health of the state.'³⁴ Moreover, history painfully demonstrates that collective righteousness is far more ungovernable than any individual pursuit of revenge. That was a point well understood by Woodrow Wilson, who had been re-elected on a peace platform in 1916 and who warned: Once lead this people into war and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance The spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into every fibre of our national life.'³⁵

The effect of the Great War was enormously to increase the size, and therefore the destructive capacity and propensity to oppress, of the state. Before 1914, all state sectors were small, though most were growing, some of them fast. The area of actual state activity averaged between 5 and 10 per cent of the Gross National Product.³⁶ In 1913, the state's total income (including local government) as a percentage of GNP, was as low as 9 per cent in America. In Germany, which from the time of Bismarck had begun to construct a formidable

apparatus of welfare provisions, it was twice as much, 18 per cent; and in Britain, which had followed in Germany's wake since 1906, it was 13 per cent.³⁷ In France the state had always absorbed a comparatively large slice of the GNP. But it was in Japan and, above all, in Imperial Russia that the state was assuming an entirely new role in the life of the nation by penetrating all sectors of the industrial economy.

In both countries, for purposes of military imperialism, the state was forcing the pace of industrialization to 'catch up' with the more advanced economies. But in Russia the predominance of the state in every area of economic life was becoming the central fact of society. The state owned oilfields, gold and coal mines, two-thirds of the railway system and thousands of factories. There were 'state peasants' in the New Territories of the east. Russian industry, even when not publicly owned, had an exceptionally high dependence on tariff barriers, state subsidies, grants and loans, or was interdependent with the public sector. The links between the Ministry of Finance and the big banks were close, with civil servants appointed to their boards.³⁹ In addition, the State Bank, a department of the Finance Ministry, controlled savings banks and credit associations, managed the finances of the railways, financed adventures in foreign policy, acted as a regulator of the whole economy and was constantly searching for ways to increase its power and expand its activities.⁴⁰ The Ministry of Trade supervised private trading syndicates, regulated prices, profits, the use of raw materials and freight-charges, and placed its agents on the boards of all joint-stock companies.⁴¹ Imperial Russia, in its final phase of peace, constituted a large-scale experiment in state collective capitalism, and apparently a highly successful one. It impressed and alarmed the Germans: indeed, fear of the rapid growth in Russia's economic (and therefore military) capacity was the biggest single factor in deciding Germany for war in 1914. As Bethmann Hollweg put it to Riezler, 'The future belongs to Russia.'⁴²

With the onset of the war, each belligerent eagerly scanned its competitors and allies for aspects of state management and intervention in the war economy which could be imitated. The capitalist sectors, appeased by enormous profits and inspired no doubt also by patriotism, raised no objections. The result was a qualitative and quantitative expansion of the role of the state which has never been fully reversed – for though wartime arrangements were sometimes abandoned with peace, in virtually every case they were eventually adopted again, usually permanently. Germany set the pace, speedily adopting most of the Russian state procedures which had so scared her in peace, and operating them with such improved efficiency that when Lenin inherited the Russian state-capitalist machine in 1917–18, it was to German wartime economic controls that he, in turn, looked for guidance.⁴³ As the war prolonged itself, and the losses and desperation increased, the warring states became steadily more totalitarian, especially after the winter of 1916–17. In Germany the end of civilian rule came on 9 January 1917 when Bethmann Hollweg was forced to bow to the demand for unrestricted submarine warfare. He fell from power completely in July, leaving General Ludendorff and the admirals in possession of the monster-state. The episode marked the real end of the constitutional monarchy, since the Kaiser forewent his prerogative to appoint and dismiss the chancellor, under pressure from the military. Even while still chancellor Bethmann Hollweg discovered that his phone was tapped, and according to Riezler, when he heard the click would shout into it 'What *Schweinhund* is listening in?'⁴⁴ But phone-tapping was legal under the 'state of siege' legislation, which empowered area military commands

censor or suppress newspapers. Ludendorff was likewise authorized to herd 400,000 Belgian workers into Germany, thus foreshadowing Soviet and Nazi slave-labour methods.⁴⁵ In the last eighteen months of hostilities the German élite fervently practised what was open-ly termed 'War Socialism' in a despairing attempt to mobilize every ounce of productive effort for victory.

In the West, too, the state greedily swallowed up the independence of the private sector. The corporatist spirit, always present in France, took over industry, and there was a resurgence of Jacobin patriotic intolerance. In opposition, Georges Clemenceau fought successfully for some freedom of the press, and after he came to supreme power in the agonizing month of November 1917 he permitted some criticism of himself. But politicians like Malvy and Caillaux were arrested and long lists of subversives were compiled (the notorious '*Carnet B*' for subsequent hounding, arrest and even execution. The liberal Anglo-Saxon democracies were by no means immune to these pressures. After Lloyd George came to power in the crisis of December 1916, the full rigours of conscription and the oppressive Defence of the Realm Act were enforced, and manufacturing, transport and supply mobilized under corporatist war boards.

Even more dramatic was the eagerness, five months later, with which the Wilson administration launched the United States into war corporatism. The pointers had, indeed, been there before. In 1909 Herbert Croly in *The Promise of American Life* had predicted that could only be fulfilled by the state deliberately intervening to promote 'a more highly socialized democracy'. Three years later Charles Van Hise's *Concentration and Control: A Solution of the Trust Problem in the United States* presented the case for corporatism. These ideas were behind Theodore Roosevelt's 'New Nationalism', which Wilson appropriated and enlarged to win the war.⁴⁶ There was a Fuel Administration, which enforced 'gasless Sundays', a War Labor Policies Board, intervening in industrial disputes, a Food Administration under Herbert Hoover, fixing prices for commodities, and a Shipping Board which launched 100 new vessels on 4 July 1918 (it had already taken over 9 million tons in its operating control).⁴⁷ The central organ was the War Industries Board, whose first achievement was the scrapping of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, a sure index of corporatism and whose members (Bernard Baruch, Hugh Johnson, Gerard Swope and others) ran the kindergarten for 1920s interventionism and the New Deal, which in turn inspired the New Frontier and the Great Society. The war corporatism of 1917 began one of the great continuities of modern American history, sometimes Underground, sometimes on the surface, which culminated in the vast welfare state which Lyndon Johnson brought into being in the late 1960s. John Dewey noted at the time that the war had undermined the hitherto irresistible claims of private property: 'No matter how many among the special agencies for public control decay with the disappearance of war stress, the movement will never go backward.'⁴⁸ This proved an accurate prediction. At the same time, restrictive new laws, such as the Espionage Act (1917) and the Sedition Act (1918), were often savagely enforced: the socialist Eugene Debs got ten years for an anti-war speech, and one man who obstructed the draft received a forty-year sentence.⁴⁹ In all the belligerents, and not just in Russia, the climacteric year 1917 demonstrated that private liberty and private property tended to stand or fall together.

Thus the war demonstrated both the impressive speed with which the modern state could

expand itself and the inexhaustible appetite which it thereupon developed both for the destruction of its enemies and for the exercise of despotic power over its own Citizens. As the war ended, there were plenty of sensible men who understood the gravity of these developments. But could the clock be turned back to where it had stood in July 1914? Indeed, did anyone wish to turn it back? Europe had twice before experienced general settlements after long and terrible wars. In 1648 the treaties known as the Peace of Westphalia had avoided the impossible task of restoring the *status quo ante* and had in large part simply accepted the political and religious frontiers which a war of exhaustion had created. The settlement did not last, though religion ceased to be a *casus belli*. The settlement imposed in 1814–15 by the Congress of Vienna after the Napoleonic Wars had been more ambitious and on the whole more successful. Its object had been to restore, as far as possible, the system of major and minor divine-right monarchies which had existed before the French Revolution, as the only framework within which men would accept European frontiers as legitimate and durable.⁵⁰ The device worked in the sense that it was ninety-nine years before another general European war broke out, and it can be argued that the nineteenth Century was the most settled and productive in the whole history of mankind. But the peacemakers of 1814–15 were an unusual group: a congress of reactionaries among whom Lord Castlereagh appeared a revolutionary firebrand and the Duke of Wellington an egregious progressive. Their working assumptions rested on the brutal denial of all the innovatory political notions of the previous quarter-century. In particular, they shared avowed beliefs, almost untinged by cynicism, in power-balances and agreed spheres of interest, dynastic marriages, private understandings between sovereigns and gentlemen subject to a common code (except *extremis*), and in the private ownership of territory by legitimate descent. A king or emperor deprived of possessions in one part of Europe could be ‘compensated’, as the term went elsewhere, irrespective of the nationality, language or culture of the inhabitants. They termed this a ‘transference of souls’, following the Russian expression used of the sale of an estate with its serfs, *glebae adscripti*.⁵¹

Such options were not available to the peacemakers of 1919. A peace of exhaustion, such as Westphalia, based on the military lines, was unthinkable: both sides were exhausted enough, but one, by virtue of the armistice, had gained an overwhelming military advantage. The French had occupied all the Rhine bridgeheads by 6 December 1918. The British operated an inshore blockade, for the Germans had surrendered their fleet and their minefields by 2 November. A peace by *diktat* was thus available.

However, that did not mean that the Allies could restore the old world, even had they wished. The old world was decomposing even before war broke out. In France, the anti-clericals had been in power for a decade, and the last election before the war showed a further swing to the Left. In Germany, the 1912 election, for the first time, made the Socialists the biggest single party. In Italy, the Giolitti government was the most radical in its history as a united country. In Britain the Conservative leader A.J. Balfour described his catastrophic defeat in 1906 as ‘a faint echo of the same movement which has produced massacres in St Petersburg, riots in Vienna and Socialist processions in Berlin’. Even the Russian autocracy was trying to liberalize itself. The Habsburgs anxiously sought new constitutional planks to shore themselves up. Europe on the eve of war was run by worried would-be progressives, earnestly seeking to satisfy rising expectations, eager above all

cultivate and appease youth.

It is a myth that European youth was ruthlessly sacrificed in 1914 by selfish and cynical age. The speeches of pre-war politicians were crammed with appeals to youth. Youth movements were a European phenomenon, especially in Germany where 25,000 members of the *Wandervögel* clubs hiked, strummed guitars, protested about pollution and the growth of cities, and damned the old. Opinion-formers like Max Weber and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck demanded that youth be brought to the helm. The nation, wrote Bruck, 'needs a change of blood, an insurrection of the sons against the fathers, a substitution of the old by the young'.⁵² All over Europe, sociologists were assiduously studying youth to find out what they thought and wanted.

And of course what youth wanted was war. The first pampered 'youth generation' went enthusiastically to a war which their elders, almost without exception, accepted with horror or fatalistic despair. Among articulate middle-class youth it was, at the outset at least, the most popular war in history. They dropped their guitars and seized their rifles. Charles Péguy wrote that he went 'eagerly' to the front (and death). Henri de Montherlant reported that he 'loved life at the front, the bath in the elemental, the annihilation of the intelligence and the heart'. Pierre Drieu la Rochelle called the war 'a marvellous surprise'. Young German writers like Walter Flex, Ernst Würche and Ernst Jünger celebrated what Jünger called 'the heroic moment' of August 1914. The novelist Fritz von Unger described the war as a 'purgative', the beginning of 'a new zest for life'. Rupert Brooke found it 'the only life ... a fine thrill, like nothing else in the world'. For Robert Nichols it was 'a privilege'. 'He is dead who will not fight', wrote Julian Grenfell ('Into Battle'), 'and who dies fighting has increased.' Young Italians who got into the war later were if anything even more lyrical. 'This is the hour of the triumph of the finest values,' one Italian poet wrote, 'this is the Hour of Youth.' Another echoed: 'Only the small men and the old men of twenty' would 'want to miss it.'⁵³

By the winter of 1916–17, the war-lust was spent. As the fighting prolonged itself endlessly, bloodied and disillusioned youth turned on its elders with disgust and rising anger. On all sides there was talk in the trenches of a reckoning with 'guilty politicians', the 'old gang'. In 1917 and still more in 1918, all the heiligerem regimes (the United States alone excepted) felt themselves tested almost to destruction, which helps to explain the growing desperation and savagery with which they waged war. Victory became identified with political survival. The Italian and Belgian monarchies and perhaps even the British would not have outlasted defeat, any more than the Third Republic in France. Of course, as soon as victory came, they all looked safe enough. But then who had once seemed more secure than the Hohenzollerns in Berlin? The Kaiser Wilhelm II was bundled out without hesitation on 11 November 1918, immediately it was realized that a German republic might obtain better peace terms. The last Habsburg Emperor, Charles, abdicated three days later, ending a millennium of judicious marriages and inspired juggling. The Romanovs had been murdered on 16 July and buried in a nameless grave. Thus the three imperial monarchies of east and central Europe, the tripod of legitimacy on which the *ancien régime*, such as it was, had rested, all vanished within a year. By the end of 1918 there was little chance of restoring any one of them, still less all three. The Turkish Sultan, for what he was worth, was finished too (though a Turkish republic was not proclaimed until 1 November 1922).

At a stroke, the dissolution of these dynastic and proprietary empires opened up packages of heterogeneous peoples which had been lovingly assembled and carefully tied together over centuries. The last imperial census of the Habsburg empire showed that it consisted of a dozen nations: 12 million Germans, 10 million Magyars, 8.5 million Czechs, 1.3 million Slovaks, 5 million Poles, 4 million Ruthenians, 3.3 million Romanians, 5.7 million Serbs and Croats, and 800,000 Ladines and Italians.⁵⁴ According to the 1897 Russian imperial census the Great Russians formed only 43 per cent of the total population;⁵⁵ the remaining 57 per cent were subject peoples, ranging from Swedish and German Lutherans through Orthodox Latvians, White Russians and Ukrainians, Catholic Poles, Ukrainian Uniates, Shia, Sunni and Kurdish Muslims of a dozen nationalities, and innumerable varieties of Buddhists, Taoists and animists. Apart from the British Empire, no other imperial conglomerate had so many distinct races. Even at the time of the 1926 census, when many of the western groups had been prised away, there were still approximately two hundred peoples and languages.⁵⁶ By comparison the Hohenzollern dominions were homogeneous and monoglot, but they too contained huge minorities of Poles, Danes, Alsatians and French.

The truth is that, during the process of settlement in eastern and central Europe, from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries, and during the intensive phase of urbanization which took place from the early eighteenth Century onwards, about one-quarter of the area had been occupied by mixed races (including over ten million Jews) whose allegiance had hitherto been religious and dynastic rather than national. The monarchies were the only unifying principle of these multi-racial societies, the sole guarantee (albeit often a slender one) that all would be equal before the law. Once that principle was removed, what could be substituted for it? The only one available was nationalism, and its fashionable by-product irredentism, a term derived from the Italian *Risorgimento* and signifying the union of an entire ethnic group under one state. To this was now being added a new cant phrase, 'self-determination', by which was understood the adjustment of frontiers by plebiscite according to ethnic preferences.

The two principal western Allies, Britain and France, had originally no desire or design to promote a peace based on nationality. Quite the contrary. Both ran multiracial, polyglot overseas empires. Britain in addition had an irredentist problem of her own in Ireland. In 1918 both were led by former progressives, Lloyd George and Clemenceau, who under the agony of war had learned Realpolitik and a grudging respect for the old notions of 'balance', 'compensation' and so forth. When, during the peace talks, the young British diplomat Harold Nicolson urged that it was logical for Britain to grant self-determination to the Greeks in Cyprus, he was rebuked by Sir Eyre Crowe, head of the Foreign Office: 'Nonsense, my dear Nicolson.... Would you apply self-determination to India, Egypt, Malta and Gibraltar? If you are *not* prepared to go as far as this, then you have not [sic] right to claim that you are logical. If you *are* prepared to go as far as this, then you had better return at once to London.'⁵⁷ (He might have added that Cyprus had a large Turkish minority; and for that reason it has still not achieved self-determination in the 1980s.) Lloyd George would have been happy to strive to keep the Austro—Hungarian empire together as late as 1917 or even the beginning of 1918, in return for a separate peace. As for Clemenceau, his primary objective was French security, and for this he wanted back not merely Alsace-Lorraine (most of whose people spoke German) but the Saar too, with the Rhineland hacked out of Germany as

French-oriented puppet state.

Moreover, during the war Britain, France and Russia had signed a series of secret treaties among themselves and to induce other powers to join them which ran directly contrary to nationalist principles. The French secured Russian approval for their idea of a French-dominated Rhineland, in return for giving Russia a free hand to oppress Poland, in a treaty signed on 11 March 1917.⁵⁸ By the Sykes—Picot Agreement of 1916, Britain and France agreed to strip Turkey of its Arab provinces and divide them between themselves. Italy sold herself to the highest bidder: by the Secret Treaty of London of 26 April 1915 she was to receive sovereignty over millions of German-speaking Tyroleans, and of Serbs and Croats in Dalmatia. A treaty with Romania signed on 17 August 1916 gave her the whole of Transylvania and most of the Banat of Temesvar and the Bukovina, most of whose inhabitants did not speak Romanian. Another secret treaty signed on 16 February 1917 awarded Japan the Chinese province of Shantung, hitherto in Germany's commercial sphere.⁵⁹

However, with the collapse of the Tsarist regime and the refusal of the Habsburgs to make a separate peace, Britain and France began to encourage nationalism and make self-determination a 'war aim'. On 4 June 1917 Kerensky's provisional government in Russia recognized an independent Poland; France began to raise an army of Poles and on 3 June 1918 proclaimed the creation of a powerful Polish state a primary objective.⁶⁰ Meanwhile in Britain, the Slavophile lobby headed by R.W. Seton-Watson and his journal, *The New Europe* was successfully urging the break-up of Austria-Hungary and the creation of new ethnically defined states.⁶¹ Undertakings and promises were given to many Slav and Balkan politicians-in-exile in return for resistance to 'Germanic imperialism'. In the Middle East, the Arabophile Colonel T.E. Lawrence was authorized to promise independent kingdoms to the Emirs Feisal and Hussein as rewards for fighting the Turks. In 1917 the so-called 'Balfour Declaration' promised the Jews a national home in Palestine to encourage them to desert the Central Powers. Many of these promises were mutually incompatible, besides contradicting the secret treaties still in force. In effect, during the last two desperate years of fighting, the British and French recklessly issued deeds of property which in sum amounted to more than the territory they had to dispose of, and all of which could not conceivably be honoured at the peace, even assuming it was a harsh one. Some of these post-dated cheques bounced noisily.

To complicate matters, Lenin and his Bolsheviki seized control of Russia on 25 October 1917 and at once possessed themselves of the Tsarist diplomatic archives. They turned copies of the secret treaties over to western correspondents, and on 12 December the *Manchester Guardian* began publishing them. This was accompanied by vigorous Bolshevik propaganda designed to encourage Communist revolutions throughout Europe by promising self-determination to all peoples.

Lenin's moves had in turn a profound effect on the American President. Woodrow Wilson has been held up to ridicule for more than half a Century on the grounds that his ignorant pursuit of impossible ideals made a sensible peace impossible. This is no more than a half-truth. Wilson was a don, a political scientist, an ex-President of Princeton University. He knew he was ignorant of foreign affairs. Just before his Inauguration in 1913 he told friends 'It would be an irony of fate if my administration had to deal chiefly with foreign affairs.'

The Democrats had been out of office for fifty-three years and Wilson regarded us diplomats as Republicans. When the war broke out he insisted Americans be 'neutral in fact as well as name'. He got himself re-elected in 1916 on the slogan 'He kept us out of war'. He did not want to break up the old Europe system either: he advocated 'peace without victory'.

By early 1917 he had come to the conclusion that America would have a bigger influence on the settlement as a belligerent than as a neutral, and he did draw a narrow legal and moral distinction between Britain and Germany: the use of U-boats by Germany violated 'human rights', whereas British blockade-controls violated only 'property rights', a lesser offence. Once in the war he waged it vigorously but he did not regard America as an ordinary combatant. It had entered the war, he said in his April 1917 message to Congress, 'to vindicate the principles of peace and justice' and to set up 'a concert of peace and action which will henceforth ensure the observance of these principles'. Anxious to be well-prepared for the peacemaking in September 1917 he created, under his aide Colonel Edward House and Dr S.E.Mezes, an organization of 150 academic experts which was known as 'the Inquiry' and housed in the American Geographical Society building in New York.⁶⁴ As a result, the American delegation was throughout the peace process by far the best-informed and best-documented, indeed on many points often the sole source of accurate information. 'Had the Treaty of Peace been drafted solely by the American experts,' Harold Nicolson wrote, 'it would have been one of the wisest as well as the most scientific documents ever devised.'⁶⁵

However, the Inquiry was based on the assumption that the peace would be a negotiated compromise, and that the best way to make it durable would be to ensure that it conformed to natural justice and so was acceptable to the peoples involved. The approach was empirical, not ideological. In particular, Wilson at this stage was not keen on the League of Nations, a British idea first put forward on 20 March 1917. He thought it would raise difficulties with Congress. But the Bolshevik publication of the secret treaties, which placed America's allies in the worst possible light as old-fashioned predators, threw Wilson into consternation. Lenin's call for general self-determination also helped to force Wilson's hand, for he felt that America, as the custodian of democratic freedom, could not be outbid by a revolutionary regime which had seized power illegally. Hence he hurriedly composed and on 8 January 1918 publicly delivered the famous 'Fourteen Points'. The first repudiated secret treaties. The last provided for a League. Most of the rest were specific guarantees that, while conquests must be surrendered, the vanquished would not be punished by losing population or nationality to be the determining factor. On 11 February Wilson added his 'Four Principles' which rammed the last point home, and on 27 September he provided the coping-stone of the 'Five Particulars', the first of which promised justice to friends and enemies alike.⁶⁶ The corpus of twenty-three assertions was produced by Wilson independently of Britain and France.

We come now to the heart of the misunderstanding which destroyed any real chance of the peace settlement succeeding, and so prepared a second global conflict. By September 1918 it was evident that Germany, having won the war in the East, was in the process of losing it in the West. But the German army, nine million strong, was still intact and conducting an orderly retreat from its French and Belgian conquests. Two days after Wilson issued his 'Five Particulars', the all-powerful General Ludendorff astounded members of his government by telling them 'the condition of the army demands an immediate armistice in order to avoid

catastrophe'. A popular government should be formed to get in touch with Wilson. Ludendorff's motive was obviously to thrust upon the democratic parties the odium of surrendering Germany's territorial gains. But he also clearly considered Wilson's twenty-three pronouncements collectively as a guarantee that Germany would not be dismembered or punished but would retain its integrity and power substantially intact. In the circumstances this was as much as she could reasonably have hoped for; indeed more, for the second of the 14 Points, on freedom of the seas, implied the lifting of the British blockade. The civil authorities took the same view, and on 4 October the Chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, opened negotiations for an armistice with Wilson on the basis of his statements. The Austrians, on an even more optimistic assumption, followed three days later.⁶⁸ Wilson, who now had an army of four million and who was universally believed to be all-powerful, with Britain and France firmly in his financial and economic grip, responded favourably. Following exchanges of notes, on 5 November he offered the Germans an armistice on the basis of the 14 Points, subject only to two Allied qualifications: the freedom of the seas (where Britain reserved her rights of interpretation) and compensation for war damage. It was on this understanding that the Germans agreed to lay down their arms.

What the Germans and the Austrians did not know was that, on 29 October, Colonel House, Wilson's special envoy and US representative on the Allied Supreme War Council, had held a long secret meeting with Clemenceau and Lloyd George. The French and British leaders voiced all their doubts and reservations about the Wilsonian pronouncements, and had them accepted by House who drew them up in the form of a 'Commentary', subsequently cabled to Wilson in Washington. The 'Commentary', which was never communicated to the German and Austrians, effectively removed all the advantages of Wilson's points, so far as the Central Powers were concerned. Indeed it adumbrated all the features of the subsequent Versailles Treaty to which they took the strongest objection, including the dismemberment of Austria-Hungary, the loss of Germany's colonies, the break-up of Prussia by a Polish corridor, and reparations.⁶⁹ What is still more notable, it not only based itself upon the premise of German 'war guilt' (which was, arguably, implicit in Wilson's twenty-three points), but revolved around the principle of 'rewards' for the victors and 'punishments' for the vanquished, which Wilson had specifically repudiated. It is true that during the October negotiations Wilson, who had never actually had to deal with the Germans before, was becoming more hostile to them in consequence. He was, in particular, incensed by the torpedoing of the Irish civilian ferry *Leinster*, with the loss of 450 lives, including many women and children, on 12 October, more than a week after the Germans had asked him for an armistice. All the same, it is strange that he accepted the Commentary, and quite astounding that he gave no hint of it to the Germans. They, for their part, were incompetent in not asking for clarification of some of the points, for Wilson's style, as the British Foreign Secretary, A.J. Balfour, told the cabinet 'was very inaccurate. He is a first-rate rhetorician and a very bad draftsman.'⁷⁰ But the primary responsibility for this fatal failure in communication was Wilson's. And it was not an error on the side of idealism.

The second blunder, which compounded the first and turned it into a catastrophe, was one of organization. The peace conference was not given a deliberate structure. It just happened, acquiring a shape and momentum of its own, and developing an increasingly anti-German pattern in the process, both in substance and, equally important, in form. At the beginning

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