Features

The American Century 1917-2017

365 days that shook the world

1917 opened a trapdoor to the future, less because of the Russian Revolution than because the US seized its chance to lead. It has continued to do so—until now...

ADAM TOOZE

Three years ago the anniversary of 1914 was met with sorrow, puzzlement and nostalgia. Images of that year's long summer evoke a world we have lost, a *belle époque* torn to pieces on the battlefields in a bloody autumn. Three years on, there is another centenary, but it comes without sepia tint. Instead, we recall the revolutionary year of 1917 through the grainy black-and-white shots of the bullet-swept streets of revolutionary Petrograd, as the harbinger of a century that was dynamic, violent and unforgiving. If 1914 dug a trench—a divide with an old world to which there's no going back—1917 was instead a trap door. We dropped through into a brave new world, a world stirred by global ideological conflict and currents of economic and political change on a scale never before seen—a world dominated by new powers, and above all by the United States. One hundred years on, the shock of 1917 still reverberates, even as that "new order" disintegrates before our eyes.

As the world prepares for the Trump presidency, the perspective becomes sharper on 1917 as the point of departure for America's globe-straddling hegemony; because in 2017, it will at last become impossible to ignore the reality that we are living through its end. During the American century, the mission of the US, at least in its own estimation, was to spread liberal values using the enormous financial and military resources at its disposal. Now, it seems that we may be moving into a new era of stripped down realpolitik, where the art of the deal is valued more than the encouragement of democracy or any other value. The US, and countries beside, are increasingly inclined to act openly in their own self-interest, without even the fig-leaf of moral leadership. It is suddenly urgent to ask: is the era of politicised foreign policy, the era that began in 1917, now behind us?

Although a year of radical global upheaval, 1917 was not of course a complete break. History does not permit a total rupture. There were many precursors to 1917: the "second" industrial revolution, the Maxim gun and barbed wire, imperialism and anti-imperialism, the Kishinev pogroms, Boer War concentration camps, the horrors of the Belgian Congo, the wave of revolutions that convulsed Russia, Persia, Mexico and China after 1905 and the quiver of new social movements—mass unionism, suffragettes and anti-colonial nationalism. To these forces, all of them already at work before 1914, the maelstrom of the war added its own ghastly torque. By the end of 1916, well over four million men had been killed. Meanwhile, the home front witnessed a shocking immiseration as inflation bit, supplies ran out and the 19th-century "night-watchman" state failed the challenge of total war.

Historians as a tribe are given to endowing particular dates with totemic significance. Sometimes their importance becomes evident only in retrospect, and requires great effort to establish. But certain moments—1848, 1945, 1989—write themselves into history through the sheer force of events. Whether 2017 could one day rank among them is necessarily an entirely speculative question. But there can be no disputing that 1917 qualifies, because of the way in which four truly transformative shocks converged.

First, there was the revolution in Russia. Second, an upheaval occurred in the politics of India and China, both of which overturned 19th-century stereotypes of Asian fatalism to claim a place for themselves on the world stage. Third, the US entered the Great War, transforming the terms of competition between the European powers and Japan, establishing that America—and above all the American economy—would now be decisive in world affairs. Finally, under the pressure of the war, European politics was transformed: the left grew in strength, the centre accommodated itself to mass democracy and, on the right, 19th-century nationalism underwent a dangerous mutation.

Of these four shocks, it is the twin revolutions in Russia that will inspire a boom in anniversary journalism in the coming

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12 months. But momentous as the collapse of Tsarism was, it could easily have occurred years earlier. If there was one moment in 1917 that flung open the trap door of the 20th century, it occurred in the first weeks of January 1917, not in Petrograd but in Berlin. Like the assassin's bullet in Sarajevo three years earlier, Germany's decision to let its U-boats off the leash in the Atlantic resonated around the world. It transformed Europe's Great War into a World War. It set the stage for American battle, for the defeat and collapse of the Central powers, for Lenin's coup and the unprecedented mobilisation of Asia. From the forge of 1917 emerged a new kind of ideological politics and a new geopolitical order with the US at its heart—an order which was, as we are now learning, destined to last for a century.

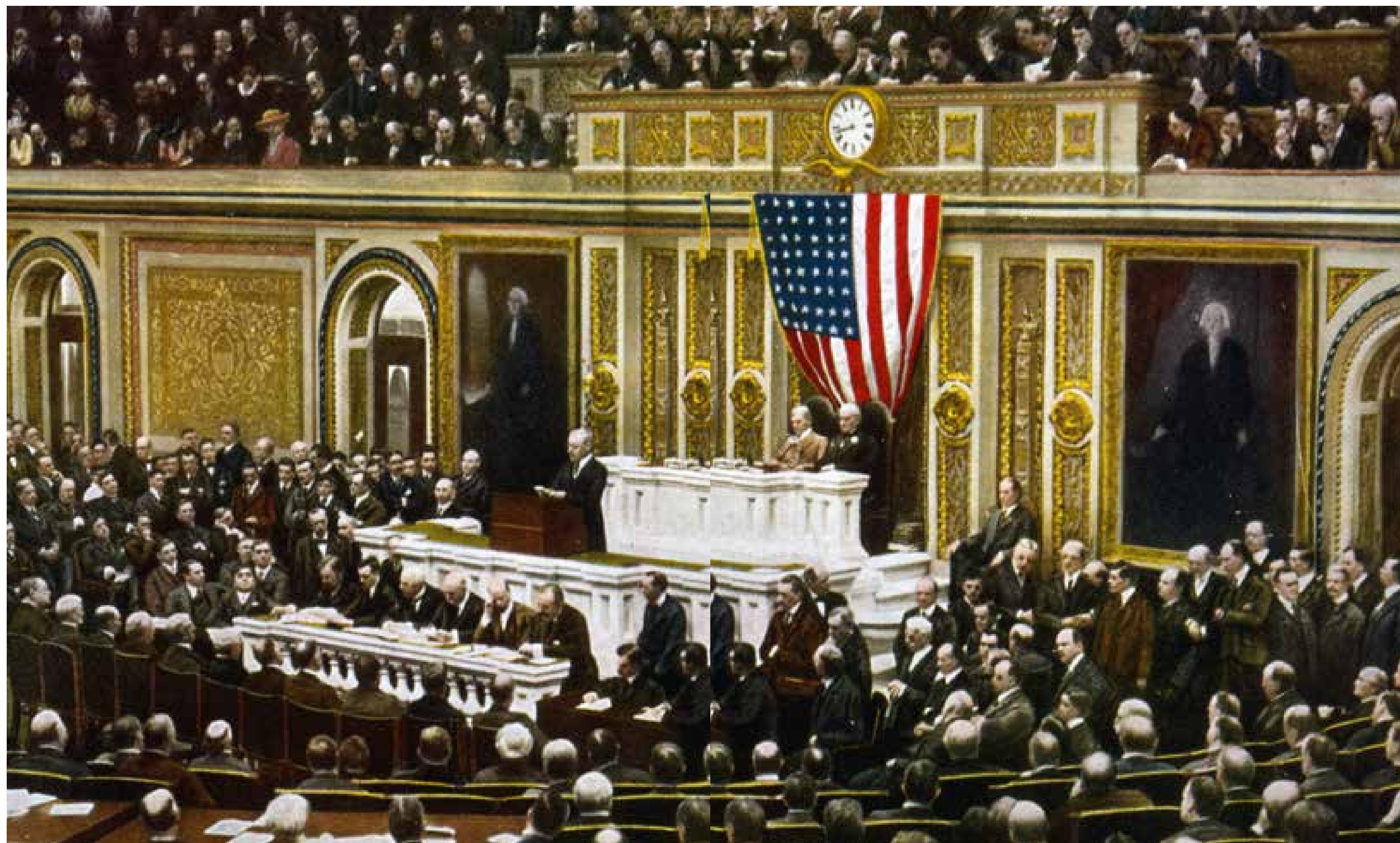
That outcome was prefigured by all the dramatic social change of the 19th century—the consolidation of American power, the weakness of the Romanov, Habsburg and Ottoman dynasties, the modernisation of Asia and the rise of labour. But one of the disconcerting things about this harsh new century would be the enormous significance of contingent, open-ended decisions. Choices, leaders and politics all mattered more than ever before, which was all very well if the politicians knew where they were headed. But the neat stage theories of historical development inherited from the Victorians were among the early casualties of the war.

Looking back from the spring of 1918, Lenin would admit that the Bolsheviks were in power only because history had stopped making sense. They had seized power not in the industrialised west, not in Germany or Britain, but in Russia, the most backward country in Europe. Antonio Gramsci, the leading theorist of Italian Communism, went as far as to celebrate Lenin's revolution as a revolution against Marx's *Das Kapital*: he made that remark approvingly. Marx and Engels had forged their theory in 1848 with 1789 in mind. Seventy years on, 1917 launched revolution 2.0.

In Asia, the upper-class leadership of the Indian National Congress and the Chinese nationalist movement, were almost as shocked as their European colonial counterparts by the tide of radicalism that moved out from the colleges and schools, to the cities, towns and fields, from shopkeepers and small merchants, to the workers and into the peasantry. Mahatma Gandhi and his followers established his first experiment in self-rule, the Sabarmati Ashram, in June 1917. Two years later the man in the loincloth had mobilised tens of millions across the subcontinent, to the bewilderment not only of the British but the Indian elite, and Moscow's HQ of Communist revolution alike.

"2017 is no mere anniversary—it is the end of the American century. Trump is unfit to speak for the world"

Even in Imperial Germany, that great object of admiration at the turn of the century, Prussian discipline and the conservative appeal of the kaiser were—come 1917—no longer enough. The war effort needed new energy, new blood, a new ideology, a new party. It found it in the *Vaterlandspartei*, a wartime patriotic mobilisation, which mass marketed anti-Semitism and a toxic hatred of the left. Following defeat, its fissile products would include the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Workers' Party), an amalgam that would have appeared nonsensical in the orderly world of 19th-century politics, but would soon become known around the world as the Nazi Party.



Woodrow Wilson asks Congress to declare war on Germany, 1917

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Nor was it just the extremes that changed: the centre-ground also required reinvention. The need was most pressing in Britain and France, which had to accommodate the US as an ally. 1917 would require heavy ideological lifting. As America joined battle, the divergent political traditions of France, the UK and the US were hammered together to form a novel synthesis of republicanism, liberalism constitutionalism and popular democracy. The result was a compound notion of "liberal democracy" that was riven with contradictions, but nonetheless now served to define the "democratic west," and to demarcate it from its autocratic, militarist, Prussian counterpart. All four of the indigestible ideological hybrids that would define the 20th century—communism, fascism, anti-colonial nationalism and liberal democracy—were made at this very moment. In their own way, these were all transformative movements, bent on upheaval, whether through conquest, revolution or regime change.

In this last respect these new philosophies carried with them the dizzying dynamism of their formative period. Whereas the Second World War, from Pearl Harbor to VE day and VJ day in 1945, ground agonisingly towards its predictable conclusion, in the last phase of the First World War, the balance of advantage swung back and forth. In a series of twists and turns, first the Entente and then the Central Powers lurched from hopes of victory, to fear of revolution and collapse, and then back again. The result was intensely radicalising. At any moment, as the Marxist thinker György Lukács would write in his 1919 treatise *Tactics and Ethics*, the political actor faced the imperative to act "as if on his action or inaction depended the changing of the world's destiny."

US: from aspiring arbiter to rule-writer in chief

The first politician to rise to the challenge of a world with absolutely everything to play for was Woodrow Wilson. Re-elected in November 1916, Wilson's address to the Senate on 22nd January 1917 saw an American president claim global authority for the first time. Although defining in terms of international power politics, this moment is not much remembered because, in that year of flux, Wilson's own ambitions would soon be remade. The speech that is recalled came a year later: the 14-point address of January 1918, the battle cry of a "liberal democratic" wartime coalition. But, the Wilsonianism of the "14 points" was a product of 1917, the year that knocked Wilson—and everyone else—sideways.

If we rewind the clock to the start of that year, we hear a different Wilson. His address to the Senate in January 1917 was not a manifesto for regime change following victory. It was an appeal—by the leading neutral power, in the name of "liberals and friends of humanity"—for an end to the war. It refused to take sides, and demanded a postwar order founded on a "peace without victory."

Wilson had never approached the war as a pacifist: in 1916, he launched the construction of the massive US navy that still anchors America's global power today. Nor did he doubt that America could enter the war and decide it in favour of the Entente, as the Republicans demanded. But that, he said, would be nothing less than a "crime against humanity." America had no stake in the squabbles of European powers. By becoming an ally of the Entente, the US would win the war but forfeit its exceptional position. Its proper role, for this statesman who carried all the prejudice of his southern heritage, was as the back-stop defender of white civilisation against challengers from Asia, like Japan. But the Entente had invited Imperial Japan onto their side.

Wilson understood that for Europe's greatest war to end without victory—under arbitration by Washington—would be humiliating for all European governments. That was precisely the point. At a stroke, Wilson's peace policy would undercut the legitimacy of the entire European *ancien régime*. What Wilson articulated in January 1917 was an exorbitant, unilateral vision of US power. What marked him out from later advocates of American world leadership was his insistence that to be truly distinctive, America's leading edge must be moral, political and economic, not military.

What was so terrifying for London and Paris was that they had no option but to listen. For a start, Wilson was popular with many at home: the Labour Party and the French socialists cheered him to the rafters. More fundamentally, the Entente war effort depended on a supply line of money and resources from the US, brokered principally by the Entente's banker in New York, JP Morgan. The rise of America's economic clout had been evident since the late 19th century. The empires of the European powers had given them remarkable resources and reach, but the US was now demonstrating that it commanded the advantages of continental scale in a single nation state. 1917 was the year when America's economic might emerged as the pivot of world affairs, and Wilson intended to put that might to use.

Days after his 1916 re-election, Wilson instructed the Federal Reserve Board, the co-ordinating centre of the American banking system that he had established in 1913 in Washington, to curb Wall Street's lending to London, Paris, Petrograd and Rome. As 1917 began, the Entente faced the prospect of continuing the war without the security of American supplies. True, the Central Powers, penned-in within continental Europe, had demonstrated that it was possible to fight a world war without the resources of the world economy. But it was unspeakably tough. In Germany by the winter of 1916-17 the home front was hungry. In Austria the cities were starving and the Habsburg regime was perilously close to the edge. Its armies were deserting, held in the field only by a backbone of German officers. Wilson's promise of a "peace without victors and vanquished" was only too welcome in Vienna.

Would another year of war reduce one of the Entente powers to a similar condition? The home fronts of Britain and France were solid enough. But Italy was deeply divided, with the socialist party and a segment of liberal opinion openly opposing the war. And, from the very start of the year, Russia's situation was clearly serious. The food supply to Petrograd and Moscow was failing. There was disillusionment with the tsar's inability to drive home the successes scored by Russia's armies against the Ottomans and Austrians. Was it criminal incompetence, the swelling ranks of his political enemies asked, or a treacherous affinity for Imperial Germany? Either was an inexcusable betrayal of the sacrifice brought by millions of brave Russian soldiers. When the inter-allied war conference convened in Petrograd in January 1917 there was disconcertingly frank talk, even among the Russian delegates, about how the days of the tsar were numbered.

Wilson was, very likely, juggling all these uncertainties in his mind from the start of 1917. But the one thing he could not know as he strode to the rostrum of the Senate on 22nd January to lay ▶

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Images of Mahatma Gandhi, displayed at the site of the Sabarmati Ashram, his first experiment in self-rule which was founded in 1917

down the gauntlet of peace, was that 4,000 miles away Berlin had already decided on its next move.

A hinge forged in Berlin

In 1916, at Verdun and on the Somme, the Germans had felt the weight of shells and explosives supplied from America: Berlin needed to do something to interrupt the supply lines. In 1914 and 1915 it had experimented with an aggressive U-boat campaign against Allied shipping in the waters around the British Isles, but following the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the *Arabic*, and faced with menacing protests from Washington, Germany had pulled back. To give Wilson's peace campaign a chance to work over the winter of 1916-17, Washington implored Berlin not to renew its offensive. The German embassy in Washington sent the same message. JP Morgan and Wall Street might be pushing for war, it advised Berlin, but the Republicans had lost in November 1916, and Wilson was in earnest about ending the war.

For the second time in three years, Berlin now havered over a decision that would decide the fate of the world. In July 1914, Germany's blank cheque had triggered Austria-Hungary's attack on Serbia. It was a potentially fatal mistake, from which the Reich had been saved by the excellence of its soldiers, the weakness of its enemies, and the aggression of its opening campaign. Once it was occupying Belgium, northern France, Poland, Serbia and Romania, it had much to bargain with. Now the weight of Entente pressure on Germany's military and civilian supplies forced a new question: would Germany risk escalating the war to a global level?

The German navy was bullish. The calculations of their experts suggested that economic strangulation of Britain was a real possibility. In any case what was the alternative? It was not Germany but the Entente that had chosen to fight the war as a global struggle. It was Britain and France that, since 1914, had imposed a worldwide blockade, cutting off both essential war supplies and food imports, causing suffering, malnutrition and hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths across the Central Powers. Should Germany wait for its population to starve and its armies to be annihilated by the industrial might of the US projected onto European battlefields through the barrel of French and British guns? Berlin did not believe Wilson's refusal to align himself with the Entente. Ignoring the pleas of its Washington embassy, it convinced itself that JP Morgan ruled the roost and that sooner or later the US's financial investment in the Entente would tip it into the war. Better for Germany to strike first.

Despite profound misgivings, Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg now abdicated his responsibility. Deferring to the expertise of the military, on 9th January he stood aside as Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff confirmed the decision to declare the entire maritime zone around the British Isles a free fire zone. Ships would be torpedoed without warning.

While Germany stopped short of directly targeting US shipping and guaranteed the safe passage of one passenger liner per week to Falmouth, it understood the risk it was running. Indeed, anticipating a US declaration of war, on 11th January its foreign office cabled its embassy in Mexico City to offer a military alliance against the US. In the event of victory, Mexico was to be rewarded with territory in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. Berlin hoped that Japan could be persuaded to join the anti-American front too. Unfortunately, in the era of the telegraph, Germany had limited control over the global infrastructure of communications. It was forced to send the soon-to-be infamous "Zimmermann cable" to its Mexican embassy in encrypted form by way of the US embassy in Berlin and telegraph stations near Land's End in Cornwall. There it was promptly intercepted by British military intelligence, decoded and passed on to Washington.

The launching of the U-boat campaign, compounded by the leaking of the Zimmermann telegram, forced Wilson's hand. He had no politically defensible option but to go to war. On 20th March 1917, the day that the cabinet arrived at that solemn conclusion, the decision was reinforced by other urgent news. Washington instructed its embassy in Petrograd to recognise the new Provisional Government of Russia.

The order is rapidly fading

Since the beginning of the year Russia's armaments economy had been shaken by strikers and workers' protests. The army had shown no willingness to restore order and on 15th March Tsar Nicholas II was pushed out of office. With no Romanov willing to succeed him, power passed to a Provisional Government, headed by Prince Lvov, a well-known liberal, and a cabinet drawn from Russia's parliament, the Duma. Meanwhile, Menshevik socialists and agrarian radicals organised the popular revolution into councils of workers, peasants and soldiers (Soviets) across the country.

The revolution promised freedom and democracy. What that would mean in a gigantic, desperately poor country, fighting for its life in an immensely costly war, would remain to be seen. But for the advocates of war in Washington, the overthrow of the tsar came as a huge relief. As Robert Lansing, Wilson's Secretary of State, remarked: the Russian revolution had "removed the one obstacle to affirming that the European war was a war between democracy and absolutism."

Indeed, the overthrow of the tsar triggered a wave of sympathy across the world. In colonial India and among the burgeoning political class of Republican China, it was not Lenin and the Bolsheviks who first caused a stir of sympathetic excitement for revolutionary Russia, but the dramatic coincidence of the overthrow of the tsar and the entry of the US into the war. It was a moment of democratic, not radical socialist, excitement.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the British and French empires, the war was fast becoming a modern crusade. And in London, the government showed signs of reacting. The upsurge in the Indian Home Rule movement was so massive that it caused Lloyd George's coalition on 20th August 1917 grudgingly to define the trajectory of the British Empire as one of "responsible government" for India. What this meant in practice was a ramshackle constitutional scheme including a tiered system of representative councils, which were first elected on a highly restricted franchise, in 1920. In the wake of the massacre of Amritsar and the radicalisation of the Indian nationalist movement, such concessions were too little, too late. But they marked a caesura in a double sense. They were both the last gasp of the 19th-century vision of liberal empire, and the opening chapter in the turbulent history of mass democracy in modern India.

> "In November 1917 Russia would organise the largest election, not just in Russian history but anywhere in the world up to that point"

China broke off diplomatic relations with Germany at the same moment as the US. Its citizens, en route to the western front to serve as "coolie" labour, were in danger from U-boats too—543 drowned in the sinking of the *SS Athos* in the Mediterranean in February 1917. The ensuing struggle between factions in Beijing over the terms of China's entry into the war would mark both a new phase in the country's politicisation. While regional military factions contended for power in Beijing and pushed for China to join the war under the sponsorship of Japan, Sun Yat-Sen and the nationalist Kuomintang demanded an independent foreign policy, and withdrew to a base camp in the south. When China entered the war on 14th August 1917, the anniversary of the Boxer uprising, it was not a moment of celebration. But it did gain China a place at the Versailles Peace Conference and set the stage for the popular mobilisation that would follow on 4th May 1919. Mass indignation over the humiliating concessions that were granted to Japan at China's expense at the Paris peace talks would mark the starting point of modern Chinese nationalism.

In Europe, the impact of Russia's revolution was dramatic on both sides of the barbed wire. In Britain it helped to stir a spring of industrial strikes. In Germany it was profoundly unsettling, because the menace of "Cossack barbarity" had been the main rationale for the left-wing SPD, the country's largest party, to support the kaiser's war. With the tsar gone, the SPD split, with the radical USPD backing up calls for an immediate negotiated peace with mass strikes. The only way for the kaiser and chancellor to hold the loyalty of the larger MSPD was by promising that democratic reforms would follow victory.

Given the condescension often heaped on Russia's first generation of revolutionary leaders, who would soon be swept away by Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin and others, this global excitement may seem misplaced. But the Provisional Government, which by May 1917 had gained the support of a nationwide system of Soviets, was not the shadow it is often made out to be. The transformation of Russia's legal and constitutional order was dramatic. The death penalty and anti-Semitic discrimination were abolished.

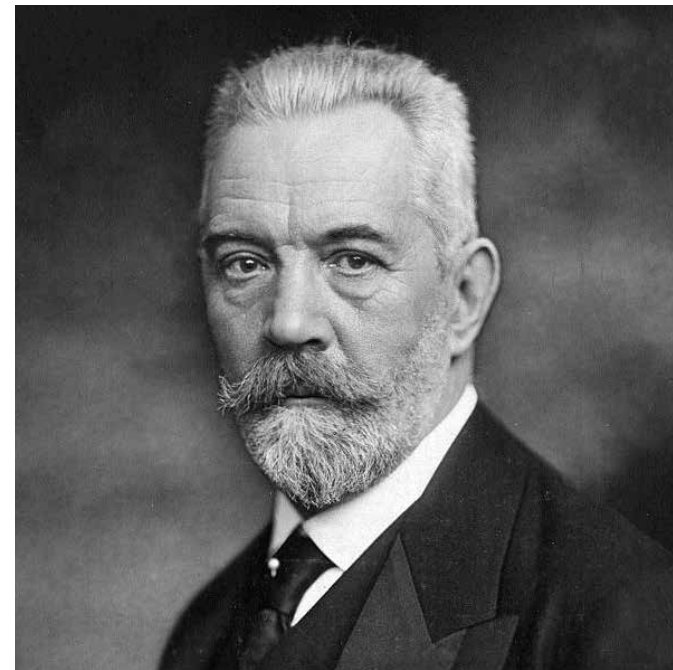
Russia became, overnight, the freest country on earth. The extraordinary efflorescence of modernist culture often associated with the Bolsheviks began already in early 1917. In November 1917 Russia would organise the largest election, for the abortive Constituent Assembly, not just in Russian history but anywhere in the world up to that point. At least 44m men and women voted, almost three times as many as had turned out for Wilson's hotly contested re-election in 1916. Though the parties of the revolution—Menshevik, Social Revolutionary and Bolshevik—were split, 90-plus per cent of the population endorsed the overthrow of the old order.

Changed, changed utterly

But in Russia, as in Germany, the US and the wider world, the most pressing question was, what did the revolution mean for the war? The overthrow of the tsar was fuelled by a deep frustration at its privations. It had all begun, after all, with a bread riot.

But in the spring of 1917 in Moscow and Petrograd only a minority advocated peace at any price: one of the main causes of indignation against the tsar was the suspicion that the tsarina was a German agent. It was no coincidence that Bolshevik leaders who dared to advocate revolutionary defeatism, the idea that workers had more to gain from their country's defeat in an imperialists' war, were beneficiaries of German largesse. Weaponising the Bolsheviks was another of Germany's radical war-fighting strategies—a counterpart to Britain's sponsorship of Arab rebellion against the Ottoman Empire: Lenin vs Lawrence of Arabia.

The war party in Petrograd were the Liberals, who briefly dominated the cabinet of the Provisional Government and viewed the revolution, on the model of the French revolution, as the occasion for a patriotic national rally. The Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries who took over by May, wanted peace, but not at any price. They scorned the idea of shameful separate negotiations with Germany that would leave Russia isolated and risk the hostility of the rest of the Entente. Their hope was for a negotiated democratic peace that would honour and strengthen the revolution, a peace without defeat—a peace, in other words, without victors or vanquished.



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Accidental revolutionary: Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg acquiesced in the fateful unleashing of the German U-boats

One of the bitterest ironies of 1917 is that the peace programme of the Russian revolution echoed that espoused by the American president only a few months earlier prior to America's entry into the war: a peace without victory, without annexations or indemnities and based on self-determination. If Wilson had been able to stay out of the war a few weeks longer, or the tsar's regime had fallen a few weeks sooner, the revolutionary regime in Petrograd might have offered the president precisely the wedge that he needed to drive Britain and France to the negotiating table. Germany's gamble on the U-boats voided that fateful juncture.

The US declaration of war on 6th April 1917 changed everything. It was first and foremost a defeat and disappointment for Wilson himself. The 20th century would be America's century but it did not get to make it, as Wilson had envisioned, on terms of its own choosing. The mobilisation unleashed American militarism and nationalism as never before. As progressives who had supported Wilson's peace policy had feared, entering the war unleashed a wave of xenophobia. The paranoid style in American politics took a new turn. After the U-boats and the Zimmermann telegram, only "100 per cent Americanism" could make America safe.

In London and Paris too, the US entry into the war hardened the opposition to any talk of peace, especially that coming from the socialists in revolutionary Russia. In Berlin, the reality of America's engagement—although expected—produced a deep shock. As the U-boat campaign unfolded, despite initial successes, it was clear that the predictions of imminent Entente collapse were over-optimistic. In response, the majority parties in the German parliament rallied around a call for peace. The parties that gathered at that moment—the Christian Democrats, the SPD and the progressive liberals—had a two thirds majority. They were to form the bedrock of German democracy throughout the 20th century and still govern the Federal Republic today. In the summer of 1917 it seemed as though they might use the threat of US power as a wedge to force democratisation in Germany and belatedly to take up the offer of peace negotiations that Wilson had floated over the winter. But the dizzying historical illogic of 1917 was not yet played out.

Russia was clearly the weak link in the newly-minted democratic coalition against Imperial Germany. Financial and material support was flooding in. The US dispatched a mission to help rebuild the Trans-Siberian railway and speed the delivery of supplies via the Pacific. But what the democratic revolutionaries needed was not American money. What they needed was an urgent end to the war. What little remained of the authority of the Russian state was crumbling fast.

On the left, the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries were threatened by the intransigent radicals of the Bolsheviks under the leadership of Lenin, who enjoyed particular popularity among frontline soldiers. If the government played for time, and hunkered down in the ragged trench lines, they risked losing what little grip they still had on the troops. Rather optimistically, the first set of revolutionary leaders hoped that they might mobilise their contacts with the French Socialists, the British Labour Party and the German SPD to initiate a peace conference in Stockholm. Perhaps, they fancied, the social democratic parties could negotiate a people's peace without their governments.

But this bold initiative was stymied by Paris and London. Now that America was on side, they had no need to negotiate. As a last resort, revolutionary Petrograd made one last desperate throw of the dice. To force the British and French to talk peace, Russia would launch a final offensive. If they could achieve a decisive victory against Austria's depleted armies, as the tsar's generals had managed in the summer of 1916, the new regime could legitimately demand peace talks from their Entente allies.

The result was the disastrous Kerensky offensive, launched at the precise moment that the democratic majority in the German parliament was rallying for a negotiated peace. As the kaiser's forces hurled back Russia's attack and went over to the counter-offensive, driving along the Baltic coastline to Petrograd, they dealt a crushing blow to the prospects of democracy, both in Russia and at home. And they gave a definitive answer to three successive appeals for peace—from Wilson, the Petrograd Soviet and their own Reichstag—that could have changed the course of 1917, and the century that would follow.

There would, however, be no peace without victory in 1917; in the east, Germany had achieved a decisive win. Hindenburg and Ludendorff had succeeded where Napoleon had failed. They had brought Russia to its knees. On 7th November (25th October by the old calendar) Trotsky and Lenin used their support in the Petrograd Soviet and in the army to seize power. And while disposing of Russia's fledgling constitutional democracy they opened talks to settle the terms of German victory at Brest Litovsk.

But whereas before April 1917 a Russian exit would have spelled victory for the Central Powers, having forced America into the war, Germany now faced having to win a final round of even more terrible battles in the west. The dizzying escalation set in motion in 1917 would not finally come to a halt until the armistice of 11th November 1918.

The world we could have won

Faced with this extraordinary chain of events and its awesome consequences, the question is inevitable: what if 1917 had gone ▶

differently? What if Wilson had managed to stay out until the early summer? What if the Russian revolutionaries had decided to break ranks with the Entente, and open talks with Germany in the summer of 1917? Might Russian democracy have survived? Would Imperial Germany and the Habsburgs have escaped the catastrophe of defeat and all that followed from it? Versailles? Hitler? Would the British and French empires have crumbled faster if they had not been boosted by victory in 1918? Might Wilson's vision of a peace without victory have prevailed?

And what, indeed, if the 20th century had been a century of American soft power? The questions are inescapable, necessary and useful, but ultimately unanswerable precisely because 1917 is not an incidental moment, but the crucible from which the only historical reality that we know emerged. Unthinking such fundamental events soon leads one down a spiral to entertaining but empty counterfactual fiction. We can, however, meaningfully ask which 20th century it was that began in 1917? One version of it ends in 1991 with the Soviet collapse—what Eric Hobsbawm called the "short 20th century." From the vantage point of the 1917 centenary, this seems unduly short. The story of China's re-emergence that began with its entry into the First World War is nowhere near over. The same is true for Indian nationalism.

From an Atlanticist perspective, though, 2017 marks more than an anniversary—it is the end of the American century. Not that America's military power, its technological prowess or its financial resources are exhausted. But its authority, the capacity to speak for the world, the authority first claimed by Wilson in January 1917, is gone. President Obama had the good grace no longer to claim it very loudly. Trump is unfit even to attempt the role. In political terms, the American century is ending not as it began, with a modernist bang, but in embarrassing atavism.

Speaking of atavism, it is more than conceivable that 2017 may mark a terminus also in another sense. With the real possibility that Brexit could trigger the dissolution of the UK, we may witness the end of the European state whose global empire anchored the trans-Atlantic alliance. Given this outlook, it may be useful to recall that from the moment of its ascent, the arc of American power was always complex and it began with failure, indeed a double failure. Between January and April 1917, Wilson's dream of soft power leadership was turned on its head by the violence of the European war. In 1919 it was dealt a second devastating blow when Wilson's vision of a victorious liberal peace, embodied in the Versailles Treaty and the Covenant of the League of Nations was repudiated by a resentful, nationalist Congress dominated by the Republicans.

When the journalist Henry Luce coined the phrase "American century" in February 1941, he meant it as a rallying cry, calling on his fellow Americans to overcome their first botched effort at world leadership, to break out of isolation and to join the good fight against Nazi Germany. In answer to that call the US built an unprecedented hegemony based on political, economic, technical and military dominance. The combination was always volatile and could, as it did in Iraq in 2003, lead to disaster.

The Trump presidency finally buries the claim to political leadership. But America's military, economic and technical preponderance remain. How the world will react to power on this scale unmitigated by pretensions to moral leadership, a power that makes no apology for its own self-interest and that promises to treat others in the same spirit, is the radical question facing us today. And another follows: will future historians find themselves looking back with nostalgia to the 20th century? P

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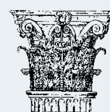
'The most magnificent performances of Renaissance music one could wish to hear and in most appropriate settings.'



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