Chapter 6
The United States Enters the War

Domestic Pressures at the Beginning of 1917

The original protagonists in the war, the Russian and Austrian empires, were now more than ready for peace. The pressures on their home fronts had become almost intolerable. Everywhere there were shortages of food, fuel, and raw materials for industry – the result not so much of Allied blockade as of the insatiable demands on the economy of the military sector. Raging inflation drove consumer goods onto a black market. The beneficiaries were profiteers from war industries whose boldly-flaunted new wealth intensified social tensions. Peasants could still hoard their stocks and resort to a barter economy, so the worst sufferers were the working and lower-middle classes in the cities, who had to queue for hours, often in bitter cold, for such low-quality goods as were available. Strikes and bread riots became endemic throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Domestic hardships, combined with the losses suffered by their armies, left little room for the patriotic sentiment and dynastic loyalty that had sustained the Czarist and Habsburg regimes over the previous two years, and by the end of 1916 it was clear that the two empires were engaged in a race for disintegration. The death of the 86-year-old Emperor Franz-Joseph in November was widely seen to presage the end of the Empire itself. His successor, the young Emperor Karl, at once established 'back channels' with France to discuss peace terms. German influence was still strong enough both to sustain Austria's war

effort and to quash her search for peace; but Czar Nicholas II's western allies could do nothing to help him when, three months later, bread riots in Petrograd spun out of control and brought down his regime.

Those western allies were not yet ready for peace. For one thing efficient and largely uncorrupt bureaucracies could manage their economies competently enough to avoid serious civilian hardship. For another, command of the seas gave them access to the foodstuffs and raw materials of the western hemisphere. The question of payment for these was to store up huge problems for the future, but for the moment credit was plentifully available. War weariness was certainly growing in both France and Britain. In both countries socialists whose pre-war international loyalties had been temporarily overlaid by patriotic fervour were now beginning to argue for a compromise peace, but they were still in a small minority, and political discontent was directed rather at the conduct of the war than at its continuance. In both countries, the increasing mobilization of civilian resources was leading to growing civilian participation in the management of the war itself. In France, the sacrifices of Verdun were blamed on the misjudgements of Joffre, who was replaced by a politically more acceptable general, Robert Nivelle. In Britain Haig's position remained unassailable in spite of the losses of the Somme, but popular discontent found its target in the somewhat lackadaisical administration of Herbert Asquith. In December Asquith was replaced as Prime Minister by David Lloyd George – a 'man of the people', one rightly credited with the creation of the civil infrastructure that supported the war effort and who had the charisma of a natural war leader. The general mood both in France and in Britain at the end of 1916 was not so much in favour of making peace – certainly not so long as the Germans remained in Belgium and north-east France – as of making war more efficiently.

This was the mood also of Germany's military leaders. Whereas in France and Britain military setbacks had led to an assertion of

civilian leadership, in Germany military successes, especially on the Eastern Front, had so enhanced the reputation of Hindenburg and Ludendorff that, when they displaced Falkenhayn in command of the army in August 1916, they virtually took control of the country as well. But, although Falkenhayn had lost office, his ideas had triumphed. The experience of Verdun and the Somme persuaded his successors that the nature of the war had fundamentally changed. It was no longer a conflict to be resolved on the battlefield by superior military skill and morale, but one of endurance between industrial societies in which control of armed forces melded seamlessly into control of production and the allocation of available resources. Civilians were as intrinsic a part of war-making as the military, and so logically should be under military control. The High Command therefore created a Supreme War Office, an *Oberstekriegsamt*, to control both industry and labour, and passed an Auxiliary Service Law, the *Helfdienstgesetz*, which made the entire population liable for conscription. The military in fact created a shadow bureaucracy, paralleling the civilian, and competing with it in running the country. Soldiers became bureaucrats. They also became politicians. Ludendorff's staff fomented a campaign for the triumphalist war aims first set out in the September programme of 1914 – permanent control of Belgium and northern France, together with widespread annexations of territory in Poland and the *OberOst*.

By doing so they worsened the tensions that were now beginning to pull German society apart. The Social Democrats, whose voting strength lay among the urban working classes, were the strongest party in the *Reichstag*, which still had the power to vote war credits. In 1914 they had been persuaded to support what had been depicted as a defensive war against Russian aggression. Now the Russians had been soundly defeated. Working-class solidarity was disrupted by the army's intelligent policy of cooperation with the trade unions and lavish wage increases in war-related industries, but agitation was growing for a peace 'without annexations or indemnities', and found growing support in cities where food shortages were already

8. Hindenburg and Ludendorff: masters of wartime Germany

producing bread riots. Failure of the potato crop in the autumn of 1916 forced the urban poor to subsist throughout the winter on a diet largely of turnips. The terrible losses at Verdun and the Somme – a million and a half men dead or wounded – had taken their toll of German morale, both civil and military. However successful the High Command might be in squeezing more productivity out of the German economy, it was increasingly doubtful whether the German people would support the war for another year.

Unrestricted Submarine Warfare

It was against this background that the German government took its fatal decision to strike at the very root of its enemy's industrial strength by resorting to unrestricted submarine warfare. They understood the risk they were running, that this would probably bring the United States into the war, but calculated that by the time American participation became effective the war would have been won. It was, as a German statesman put it, Germany's last card; 'and if it is not trumps, we are lost for centuries'. He was not far wrong.

In 1914 few navies had understood the potential of the submarine. The range of the first petrol-driven models made them suitable only for coastal defence, and even when, shortly before the war, submarines were equipped with diesel-driven engines, they remained basically 'submersibles' – highly vulnerable on the surface and with a very limited submerged capacity. Their potential lethality was demonstrated within weeks of the outbreak of war when, as we have seen, a German submarine had sunk three unwary British cruisers in the Channel. But warships were regarded as fair game. Unarmed merchantmen were not. Over some three centuries of trade warfare the maritime powers of Europe had evolved elaborate rules for the treatment of merchant vessels on the high seas in wartime. Belligerents had the right to stop and search them for 'contraband', – that is, materials of war. If any was found, the

vessel had to be escorted to the nearest port, where a 'prize court' would adjudicate whether the cargo was contraband or not, and confiscate it if it was. If for any reason this was not possible, the vessel might be destroyed, but only after the passengers and crew had been put in a place of safety. For a submarine, none of this was possible. They had no space either for a spare crew to man captured vessels or to accommodate their prisoners. If they surfaced to give warning of attack, they were vulnerable to any armaments their victim might be carrying, and to having their position instantly revealed by his radio; but to sink the vessel without warning and without saving her crew was, in the view of pre-war naval strategists, 'unthinkable'.

None the less, blockade had always been central to the conduct of war between maritime powers, and the advent of industrialization had made it more central than ever. In wars between agrarian societies, blockade could destroy only trade and with it the wealth that enabled states to carry on the war. Populations could still feed themselves. But blockade of industrialized societies, especially ones so highly urbanized as Britain and Germany, would not only interrupt trade and so (it was believed) create financial chaos, but destroy industries by depriving them of imported raw materials, to say nothing of starving urban populations by depriving them of imported foodstuffs. This was the nightmare that had haunted pre-war British planners and publicists when they contemplated the implications of losing 'command of the sea'; and this was the weapon by which the British Admiralty had hoped to achieve victory over Germany without the need for any major military commitment to the Continent.

By 1916 the British blockade was achieving all that had been expected of it. The Germans were able to make marginal evasions through neighbouring neutral powers – Holland, Denmark, and Scandinavia – and their scientists, as we have seen, had devised home-produced substitutes for such essential imports as textiles, rubber, sugar, and especially nitrates for explosives and artificial

fertilizer. None the less, the pressure was becoming quite literally lethal. Mortality among women and small children had increased by 50 per cent and hunger-related diseases such as rickets, scurvy, and tuberculosis were endemic. By the end of the war official German estimates attributed 730,000 deaths directly to the blockade. Probably this was an overestimate: many of the shortages were in fact due to distortions of the economy resulting from the enormous demands of the military. But government propaganda could plausibly attribute all the hardships being suffered by the civil population to British brutality. Why should the British not be made to suffer in their turn?

To make them do so appeared not only possible but, in the eyes of most Germans, entirely legitimate. The British had already stretched if not broken international law when in November 1914 they had declared the whole of the North Sea a 'war zone' in which neutral shipping could proceed only if licensed by the Royal Navy. The Germans retaliated the following February by declaring all approaches to the British Isles a war zone in which they would seek to destroy all hostile merchant ships, 'without being able to guarantee the safety of the persons and goods they were carrying'. Three months later the British further escalated the situation by announcing their intention of seizing and confiscating any goods they suspected of being destined for Germany, whatever their ownership or alleged destination – thus effectively imposing a total blockade of all trade with Germany irrespective of neutral rights and legal definitions of contraband. This aroused huge protests in the United States, which had gone to war with Britain 100 years earlier over precisely this issue; but hardly had these got under way when, on 6 May 1915, a German U-boat sank the British luxury liner the *Lusitania* off the south coast of Ireland on a voyage from New York. The vessel was certainly carrying contraband in the shape of ammunition, and the German consulate in New York had warned American citizens that they travelled on it at their own risk. But nevertheless 128 of them did and most of them perished, together with over 1,000 fellow-passengers.

The shock to world opinion was comparable to the sinking of the *Titanic* three years earlier, and was exploited to the hilt by British propaganda as yet another example of German 'frightfulness'. It was now clear that, in the battle for American public opinion, Germany was at a major disadvantage: whereas the British blockade cost the Americans only money, the German cost them lives. After another passenger ship, the *Arabic*, was sunk the following August, even though only two US lives were lost, American protests became so violent that the German navy forbade their U-boat commanders to sink at sight, and withdrew them from the Atlantic and the Channel altogether. This meant that German U-boat commanders now had to operate according to the laws of 'cruiser warfare', which involved surfacing to identify and halt suspected vessels (which were often armed, and might even be British warships disguised as unarmed neutrals) and ensuring that passengers and crew were safely in their lifeboats before sinking their ship, thus giving time for their victims to radio their position and that of their attackers. Even so, the losses they inflicted were serious. By the end of 1915 they had sunk 885,471 tons of Allied shipping; by the end of 1916, a further 1.23 million tons. The Royal Navy seemed powerless to stop them. What might they not do if their hands were untied?

The German Naval Staff set up an expert study group to consider this question, which came up with some remarkable results. It concluded that the British had available only some eight million tons of shipping for all purposes. If the rate of sinking could be increased to 600,000 tons a month and neutral shipping were scared off, within six months Britain would run out of such essential foodstuffs as grain and meat; her coal production would be hit by lack of Scandinavian timber for pit props, which would reduce her production of iron and steel, and that in its turn would reduce her capacity to replace the lost shipping. British surrender within six months was thus statistically certain, whether or not the United States came into the war.

Even for many in Germany who were not privy to these calculations the case for unrestricted submarine warfare now seemed overwhelming, and a public debate was waged over the question throughout the latter half of 1916. On the one side were the navy, the High Command, and the political forces of the right. On the other were the Foreign Office, Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg, and the Social Democrats in the *Reichstag*. Bethmann Hollweg did not trust the statistics. He was convinced that unrestricted submarine warfare would bring the United States into the war, and that this would guarantee Germany's defeat. But he could see no alternative except making peace; and the only peace terms the High Command was prepared to contemplate were ones that the Allies would certainly not accept.

The Failure of Peace Efforts

The President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, had been urging the belligerents to make peace since the beginning of the war. American public opinion tended to favour the Allies on ideological grounds, strengthened by social links between the 'Wasp' (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) ascendancy of the east coast and the British ruling classes. There was strong pressure led by ex-President Theodore Roosevelt for immediate intervention on the side of the democracies. Sympathy for the Central Powers was slight, and the image of Germany as a militaristic monster projected by her behaviour in Belgium, her use of poison gas, and her ruthless conduct of the war at sea, all powerfully magnified by Allied propaganda, did nothing to increase it. But the British were not generally popular either. In addition to the substantial Irish vote in the cities of the east and the ethnic German communities further west, there were many who regarded Britain not as a natural ally but as the traditional enemy against whom the United States had already fought two major wars and might have to fight another if she were to establish her rightful place as a World Power. Still, the overwhelming majority of Americans favoured keeping out of a war that was none of their business. Yet as the war went on an

9. President Wilson: Prophet of Peace

increasing amount of that business consisted in supplying war material to the Allies – not necessarily out of ideological sympathy, but because they could not get it to the Germans. If that trade were interrupted, then the war would become their business, whether they liked it or not.

Until the end of 1916 President Woodrow Wilson's primary concern had been to keep the United States out of the war. But the longer the war went on, the more difficult this became. His problem was less to persuade the hard-pressed Allies to make peace: that could always be done by cutting off their credits and supplies, which Wilson showed himself quite ready if necessary to do. It was how to persuade the victorious Germans, who were not getting American supplies anyway. Throughout 1915 and 1916 Wilson's personal emissary, the Anglophile Colonel House, had been exploring possibilities of a settlement, but the German armies were still too successful, and the Allies too hopeful of eventual military success, for either side to consider it.

By the end of 1916 the situation was changing. In November Wilson was elected President for a second term, and, although both his personal inclination and his government's official policy were still to keep America out of the war, his hand had been strengthened against the isolationists. In Europe the pressure for peace was becoming too strong for any belligerent government to ignore. Even Ludendorff had to take account of the plight of his Austrian ally and the growing demand within the *Reichstag* for a peace 'without annexations or indemnities'. Shortly after his re-election Wilson invited the belligerents to state their peace terms. The Allies were happy to do so, knowing that these would command American sympathy. They involved, first and foremost, the restoration of Belgian and Serb independence with full indemnity for the damage done by their occupiers. In addition, they required 'the restitution of provinces or territories wrested in the past from the Allies by force'; Alsace-Lorraine, obviously, but perhaps other territories as well. Italians, Slavs, Rumanians, Czechs, and Slovaks were to be liberated from foreign domination (the fact that Italy had been promised extensive Slav territories by the Treaty of London was left unstated). Poland was to be granted independence – a concession that the Czar, under intense Allied pressure, had already accepted for the Polish territories under his control. Finally, the Ottoman Empire was to be dismembered, though on what lines was left unspecified.

The terms sought by the German High Command, on the other hand, were so extreme that Bethmann Hollweg dared not make them public for fear of their effect, not simply on the Americans but on the *Reichstag*. He confidentially communicated to Wilson a watered-down version, explaining that these were the best that he could make acceptable to his colleagues. Belgium would not be annexed outright, but her independence would depend on political, economic, and military guarantees that would make her virtually a German protectorate. Not only would Alsace and Lorraine remain in German hands, but France should also surrender the neighbouring ore-bearing land around Briey. In the east, German protectorates would be established over Poland and the Baltic

provinces that would ensure their continuing Germanization. Austrian dominance should be restored in the Balkans, and colonial territories yielded in Africa. Had the Germans won the war, these were probably the best terms that the Allies could have expected. The same would have been true of the Allied terms for a defeated Germany. But neither side was yet defeated. In spite of war weariness, their governments were prepared to fight on rather than make peace on the only terms available.

To pacify the *Reichstag*, the German government issued a 'Peace Note' on 12 December. While declaring a general readiness for peace, this stated no specific war aims, and its bellicose tone made it easy for the Allies to reject it out of hand. This rejection gave the High Command the excuse it needed. The decision was taken on 9 January, but it was not until 31 January that the German Ambassador in Washington informed the American government that unrestricted submarine warfare on all vessels approaching the British Isles would commence the following day.

Wilson immediately broke off relations with Germany. He did not yet declare war. 'Armed neutrality', whereby the United States would arm and protect its own shipping, still seemed a possible alternative. But the German government assumed that war was now inevitable. On that assumption the German Foreign Minister, Arthur Zimmerman, had already on 16 January cabled the Mexican government, which was in a condition of intermittent hostilities with the United States, proposing an alliance in which they should 'make war together, make peace together, with generous financial support and an understanding on our part that Mexico is to reconquer the lost territories in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona'. The British had intercepted and decoded this remarkable document as soon as it was sent, but they did not reveal its contents to Wilson until 24 February. Natural suspicions that it might be a British forgery were laid at rest by Zimmerman himself, who frankly acknowledged its authorship.

The reaction in the United States, especially in the hitherto isolationist west, was cataclysmic. It took only a few more sinkings to convince Wilson himself that he had no alternative but to invite Congress to declare war. This he did on 5 April 1917. There was now no talk, as Wilson had suggested a few months earlier, of 'Peace without Victory'. This war would be, in his words, a crusade 'for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself free.' Admirable as these intentions were, they were very different from those with which the peoples of Europe had gone to war three years earlier.