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1917: Lenin, Wilson, and the Birth of the New World Disorder

door Arthur Herman

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31 Highlights

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 699

The English historian Alan (A. J. P.) Taylor once pointed out in an essay on the German statesman Otto von Bismarck, a figure whom both Lenin and Wilson loathed as a symbol of everything that was corrupt and evil about the old world order they set out to overthrow, that “Bismarck fought ‘necessary’ wars and killed thousands, the idealists of the twentieth century fight ‘just’ wars and kill millions.”² That unhappy contrast is, to a great degree, the legacy of Lenin and Wilson and what they started in 1917.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1676

In some ways, this was a strange development. Marx had spent a lifetime despising Russia and all its works. He saw the country as a cesspool of ignorance and reaction, rather than a possible centrifuge for socialist revolution. Marx had scornfully dismissed peasants everywhere as a “sack of potatoes; all different shapes but all the same.” In his view, revolution was possible only in a country with a fully developed capitalist economy and a widespread working class; Russia flunked on both counts. For Marx, it might take at least another forty or fifty years of struggle before the working class in western Europe was even ready for socialism. The idea of Russia getting there first appeared ridiculous.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1681

Yet Plekhanov and his colleagues were saying: take another look. Marx had been wrong. Russia was indeed well advanced on the capitalist path, with growing numbers of factories and railroads crisscrossing the country, and a revolutionary vanguard indeed taking shape. This was Russia’s tiny but steadily growing urban working class. Plekhanov urged his fellow Russian revolutionaries to put their faith in the embryonic proletariat in cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg. With

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1764

What Is to Be Done? marks the birth of Marxism-Leninism, and the idea that revolution comes not through waiting for the right historical conditions. It comes from a dedicated elite bending history to their will, rather than the other way around. It is also the first work Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov signed with his new revolutionary nom de plume, “N.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1823

What was Hegel saying that appealed so powerfully to Wilson? Above all, Hegel saw government, or the state, as the direct reflection of a society's historical evolution. The higher the level of that evolution, the more active and interventionist that government must necessarily become. In that sense, government, including American government, can have no legitimate limits placed on its power, since that power is actually the expression of the objective will of the people. Otherwise, it would not exist at all. Indeed, the state is itself the embodiment

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1839

These were also, it has to be said, a far cry from the ideals that had animated America's Founding Fathers: the necessity of limited government and strict formal limits on its powers as the fundamental foundation of freedom. Wilson never went as far as Croly and other Progressives in denouncing those founding ideals as hopelessly out of date, even socially debilitating, in the modern world. But he did see them as reflecting the narrow historical circumstances of the thirteen colonies in the late eighteenth century, and not some larger insight into human nature and the permanent character of the relation between the individual and government—let alone relevant to America as it had developed by 1908. As Hegel had taught him, there was no fixed human nature, anyway, and no fixed set of political principles that applied in all places and at all times. Wilson's

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1988

In these lean years, the Bolsheviks turned to crime to raise the funds they needed to stay alive as a movement, and the man who emerged as the John Dillinger of the Leninist faction was Stalin. "Sometimes a scoundrel is useful to our party," Lenin wrote, "precisely because he is a scoundrel." Stalin and a henchman of his, named Koma, led a series of raids on local banks. With the booty, Lenin was able to build his own secret stash of funds separate from that controlled by the Social Democratic Labour Party. Even when the party found out and ordered Lenin to stop, he ignored them. In those years, Lenin's Bolsheviks became a truly criminal organization, not only in the eyes of the czarist police, the Okhrana, but for real: a Marxist mafia with Lenin as its don and godfather, and with the kind of ruthless figures, such as Stalin, who would come in handy in establishing Bolshevik rule by force. They would need all the help they could

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 1997

The Bolsheviks were, in the words of Robert Conquest, "a small, defeated sect" in a Social Democratic Labour Party whose entire membership in Russia (according to Leon Trotsky's estimate) numbered perhaps ten thousand. As one of Lenin's closest associates in those years, Vyacheslav M. Molotov (later Soviet foreign minister), confessed many years later, "The First World War found our [Bolshevik] Party in a very weak state, its organization not connected but scattered, and with a very small membership."

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 2796

Both men were obsessed with the power of mind over matter, and held the belief that by sheer force of will, one could send physical events in a certain direction simply by insisting that history dictated such a course of action. This belief would become one of the moral diseases that would afflict the twentieth century until its end. Here,

in April 1917, was where it would start with Lenin and Wilson. And whereas Lenin had Marx to encourage him in this conviction, Wilson had Hegel and his own belief in an omniscient providential God.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 2956

To Wilson, however, it would be worth the sacrifice. By entering the war, America was also transforming the conflict from a competition for empire and national interests into a crusade to make the world safe for democracy and to secure mankind's hopes for future peace. He believed it would transform America as well, making it fully worthy to be the arbiter of a new world order.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 3077

The key to what happened next, in Lenin's mind, was, first, to give up on the war. It had nothing to do with Russian patriotism and was "a predatory imperialist war owing to the capitalist nature of the government," which stood as an obstacle to a truly revolutionary war launched by a "class-conscious proletariat." The second was to abandon all support for the Provisional Government. "The utter falsity of all its promises should be made clear . . . This government, a government of capitalists, should cease to be an imperialist government." Third, even though "in most of the Soviets of Workers' Deputies our Party is in the minority . . . the masses must be made to see that the Soviets of Workers' Deputies are the only possible form of revolutionary government." In the meantime, "as long as we are in the minority we carry on the work of criticizing and exposing errors" and preaching "the necessity of transferring the entire state power to the Soviets of Workers' Deputies, so that the people may overcome their mistakes by experience." These lessons, as inculcated by the Bolshevik deputies, included the abolition of the police, army, and bureaucracy; confiscation of all estates; nationalization of all lands in the hands of "the local Soviets of Agricultural Laborers' and Peasants' Deputies"; and the collectivization of all banks in the country into a single national bank. Above all, there could be no parliamentary republic. To embrace the existing Provisional Government as the real government of Russia would be, in Lenin's words, "a retrograde step." Instead, the Bolshevik Party must now embrace his agenda, which was to collapse the two revolutions into one while overthrowing the Provisional Government.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4399

The CPI's Division of Civic and Educational Cooperation recruited respectable scholars to compose pamphlets urging support for the war; leading Progressives John Dewey and Walter Lippmann happily chimed in. A host of syndicated newspaper columnists were encouraged to spread the pro-war message to their readers, a total of twelve million Americans every day.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4402

Creel didn't stop at the written word or the graphic image. The Division of Films also turned to the motion picture industry, still in its infancy, to mobilize pro-war, anti-German sentiment. Hollywood jumped in with both feet. As a 1917 editorial in Motion Picture News put it, "every individual at work in this industry wants to do his share," so studios large and small got involved in churning out movies with titles such as *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin* and *Wolves of Kultur*. They proved popular; a screening of *To Hell with the Kaiser!* triggered a riot when crowds couldn't get tickets for admission. Recruiting moviemakers was a farsighted policy, not unlike

recruiting social media or Instagram to carry government propaganda today. It also helped burnish the image of an industry that had seemed cheap and sleazy but that very much wanted to be seen as patriotic and respectable. Indeed, if any year marked the emergence of the American cinema as a positive conveyor of moral and civic values as well as entertainment, it was 1917. And the propaganda didn't stop when the picture was over. As the last reel ended and the image faded from the screen, a message would regularly pop up: "Please remain seated. A representative of the government is to deliver an important message." Then, one of the so-called "Four-Minute Men," usually a government official or a prominent local businessman, would step onstage to deliver a rousing speech on America's war aims, registering for the draft, buying Liberty Bonds, going meatless, or not driving your car one day a week—whatever was the latest campaign or narrative Creel and his team were working on.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4428

Later, Creel called the war "a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world's greatest adventure in advertising."⁸ Indeed, slogans crafted by the propaganda machine flew around the country like biblical proverbs. There were even some for Hoover's Food Administration: "If U fast U beat U boats" and "Serve beans, by all means" and "Wheatless days in America make sleepless nights in Germany." Or, at its most direct and simplest, "Pray hard, work hard, sleep hard, and play hard. Do it all courageously and cheerfully."⁹

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4433

Yet, even with Creel's energy and innovative genius, the emphasis on projecting a positive message was not enough. Although Creel had been a vocal critic of censorship, the CPI early on took steps to limit the spread of information that could be deemed "defeatist" or "unpatriotic." It began with setting voluntary guidelines for news media—guidelines that became increasingly nonvoluntary, or compulsory. That pointed the way to the passage, on June 15, 1917, of the Espionage Act, which was aimed ostensibly at halting the activity of German spies but which actually gave government officials wide latitude in limiting the spread of undesirable opinions—otherwise known as limiting free speech. This

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How far was he willing to go to suppress activity, including speeches and publications, he considered treasonous? The Espionage Act gave him and his attorney general, Thomas Gregory, a fierce Texas Progressive, the opportunity to push the envelope.

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The coming of war, however, revived the IWW's fortunes. Its numbers swelled into the tens of thousands, but when it tried to organize strikes against the war mobilization, the members and their president, Bill Haywood, found themselves on the receiving end of the violence, by angry miners in the West. In Montana, IWW organizer Frank Little was lynched, and in Bisbee, Arizona, twelve hundred striking copper miners who had joined the IWW were loaded onto cattle cars and shipped to the middle of the New Mexico desert, where they were dumped without food or water.¹¹ Copper was one of the vital strategic metals for the war effort, and Bernard Baruch of the War Industries Board was determined not to let any strike interfere with the flow of

copper to American munitions factories. Baruch and mine owner John D. Ryan found a ready ally in the Citizens Protective League, an offshoot of the American Protective League, a semi-vigilante group that sprang up in May 1917 to root out spies and traitors in the nation's midst, and that wasn't afraid to go where legal authorities feared to tread. By June, the APL had grown to a quarter million members; with the support and connivance of Attorney General Gregory, it became the unofficial enforcement arm of the Espionage Act.¹²

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4461

Under siege from Wilson, the APL, the Justice Department, and statutory law, the IWW didn't stand a chance. When Bill Haywood wrote to Wilson protesting the Bisbee incident, Wilson contemptuously handed the letter to Gregory, saying Haywood was only aiming to be a "martyr," and adding in his own letter to American Federation of Labor (AFL) president Samuel Gompers, "[W]e must oppose at home the organized and individual efforts of these dangerous elements who hide disloyalty behind a screen of specious and evasive phrases."

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4466

With Wilson's approval, Gregory set out to destroy the IWW once and for all. On September 5, investigators raided IWW offices in thirty-three cities, looking for evidence of the group's having received covert German financial support. When none was found, Gregory's attorneys sifted through the mountains of files, memos, and diaries until they had found enough evidence to support charges of sedition under the ever-useful Espionage Act. Three weeks later, on September 28—just as Douglas Haig was getting ready to renew his attack along the Ypres Salient—no fewer than 166 IWW organizers were indicted on charges relating to the Espionage Act and other laws. When their case went to trial the next year, many drew sentences of twenty years' imprisonment. They were the lucky ones. In Tulsa, Oklahoma, local authorities turned over seventeen Wobblies to the Ku Klux Klan, who tarred and feathered them. Their crime? Not having bought Liberty Bonds. When the IWW men were on trial for their "crime," five people testified on their behalf; they wound up being tarred and feathered, too.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4482

All the same, radicals don't easily tolerate the presence of other radicals, and Wilson was radical in his vision of an America marching in lockstep into war with a unity of industry, government, and labor that would brook no opposition or dissent—a vision that later would be known as corporatism, or even fascism.¹⁷

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4486

Trotsky and Lenin shared aspects of that vision. Later, they would put in place a version in Russia that would make Wilson's look remarkably laissez-faire. In 1917, what separated them, and American radicals and socialists like Bill Haywood from Wilson was the issue of the war. For Wilson, it was going to serve as a springboard to a bright new future. For them, it would be more of the same: capitalism oppressing, cheating, and killing the masses, not in factories or mines this time but on the battlefield.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 4496

The Sedition Act, which Wilson signed on May 16, 1918, made it illegal to speak, print, write, or publish any “disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language” about the government, the Constitution, the military, or the flag—certainly the single most restrictive gag on free speech and freedom of the press in U.S. history.

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Yet this was absolute power over a country in ruins. A third of Russia’s prewar landmass was gone; so was a quarter of its population, having vanished into the new nations created after Brest-Litovsk, including Poland and the Baltic states. The economy had been wrecked almost beyond recognition. Industrial production had fallen to 10 percent of prewar levels; Russian manufactured-goods production stood at 12.9 percent of what it had been in 1913. Production of cast iron, for example, was less than 2.5 percent of the total in 1913. The ruble was worth 1 percent of its prewar value.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 7298

Russia’s major cities stood deserted. Three-quarters of the population of Petrograd and almost half that of Moscow had fled or been killed. Russia’s agriculture sector had completely collapsed. For the first time since the 1880s, famine stalked the land. During the winter of 1921–22, no fewer than three million Russians died of starvation.

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Not all these statistics can be blamed on the Great War or the Russian Civil War. The root cause was Lenin’s failed crash program of mass collectivization as part of “war communism,” which had led to chaos in the villages and on factory floors. As 1921 began, Lenin and Russia were staring catastrophe in the face. With extreme reluctance, therefore, in March 1921, Lenin was forced to backtrack on collectivization with his New Economic Policy, or NEP, which allowed a return to some private holdings and to limited market forces in order to prevent widespread famine—although repression and mass arrests of recalcitrant workers and miners continued.⁵

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It was still not enough. In desperation, Communist Russia turned to, of all places, the United States and the new Republican administration of Warren G. Harding. Herbert Hoover—the man who had fed Belgium’s wartime refugees, had overseen America’s food supply for Woodrow Wilson, and was now feeding postwar Germany and Europe as head of the American Relief Administration—directed millions of tons of food from U.S. farmers to Russia, and saved Lenin’s regime from collapse. The system Lenin most despised, American capitalism, had rescued the system he had created to stamp it out, Soviet communism. The irony was lost on him, and probably also on Hoover (who would be the American president in less than half a decade), but it should not be lost on anyone else. A

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 7384

In the end, Wilson blamed capitalism for the revolution. The inequities capitalism had unleashed in Russia had caused Russians “to see red,” as he put it—perhaps forgetting his own role in denying Russians the means to resist the Bolshevik juggernaut. Indeed, he blamed most of the ills in the modern world on what he saw as unbridled capitalism, but also ended by saying, “[O]ur civilization cannot survive materially until it be redeemed spiritually.”¹² It was a strange admission from the man who had labored so hard, as Lenin had, to change the world through politics, and whose devotion to bringing about a new global order had ended, as Lenin’s had, only in leaving behind a nation in far worse shape than it was when he took power. The day he had returned to Washington from Paris in July 1919, race riots in the nation’s capital left fifteen dead. In Chicago, similar riots left thirty-eight dead. That summer, twenty-five American cities saw the worst race violence since the Civil War.¹³

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 7393

At almost the same time, the country was also in the grip of the Red Scare, led by former Progressive labor lawyer and attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer and triggered by a series of terrorist bombings that were blamed on Bolshevik agitation. This led to the worst police repression the United States had seen in its history. On one day, January 2, 1920, police and federal officials rounded up three thousand foreign-born leftists in thirty-three cities. Deportations became America’s way of dealing with radical political dissent, and groups such as the IWW found themselves renewed targets of mobs and the police.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 7397

The violence and hysteria of the Red Scare compounded an economic depression started by Wilson’s Federal Reserve, as it sharply raised interest rates at the war’s end to tamp down fears of postwar inflation. “The deflationary impact was drastic,” writes economic historian Adam Tooze. “[T]he abrupt tightening of credit tipped the American economy over the cliff.”¹⁴ By January 1921, as Warren Harding was preparing to enter the White House, industrial unemployment was estimated at 20 percent. American agriculture was hit by a crisis from which it would not recover for the rest of the century, even after the New Deal’s efforts at price supports and government-mandated cuts in farm production.¹⁵ Inflation, followed by deflation and depression, also helped to fuel the revival of extremist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan in the Deep South and the Farm Belt, and created industrial unrest elsewhere, including a strike against U.S. Steel that left twenty dead. In short, all that Wilson’s Progressivism had promised—racial harmony, better pay and a higher standard of living for the average worker and the little guy, a booming but more just economy carefully micromanaged by the experts at the Federal Reserve, and staying out of war—had turned out to be lies. It would take two Republican administrations, under Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge, to turn America around. By the time Wilson died six months into Coolidge’s presidency, his legacy was a wreck. He was a man forsaken by his party and his country.

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 7412

Lenin’s rival Alexander Kerensky would live on until June 1970, in the United States. When he died in New York City, Russian Orthodox churches refused to bury him because he had allowed Bolshevism to come to

power in 1917—when in fact he had been the last hope for keeping Russia on the road to democracy. Before Kerensky died, a British television interviewer asked him why he never had Lenin arrested or even killed. Kerensky could only answer quietly, “Because I never took him seriously.”¹⁶

Highlight (Geel) | Locatie 7449

Both were admirers of the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who taught them (in Lenin’s case, via his primary intellectual influence, Karl Marx) that all history has an end point, a culmination in human perfection toward which all great thinkers and reformers and other world-historical figures consciously or unconsciously direct their energies to realizing. Indeed, Wilson and Lenin both convinced themselves that making this perfection one’s conscious goal ipso facto turned one into a world-historical figure. In their minds, the sacrifices they demanded of themselves, their wives and families, and their fellow human beings, sometimes truly horrific sacrifices, were all worth the final goal: the equivalent of paradise on earth.
