

WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Ashley Cooper & Stephen Cooper

Nowadays, nobody seriously questions whether the Second World War was a just war, although historians do question whether the saturation bombing of Germany was proportionate and some moralists doubt whether it was necessary to drop those two Atomic bombs on Japan. Contrast the First World War, where Britain's decision to go to war has long been criticised, where it is still commonplace to hear the War decried as a 'pointless' and where the historian Niall Ferguson asked, in *The Pity of War* (1998), whether Germany was really a genuine threat. As we pointed out in an earlier article on this website ("Don't Let's Be Beastly") the First World War has even been described as a "descent into mutual madness." In contrast, we argued that Imperial Germany must indeed bear the major responsibility for the War, as the overwhelming majority on the Allied side thought at the time.

We think it useful to remind readers of the view taken by the American government one hundred years ago, when the USA went so far as to reject an appeal for peace, made by the Pope, no less, in August 1917. A full copy of President Woodrow Wilson's reply is appended below.

A point of minor interest is that Wilson's reply shows goodwill towards 'the newborn Russia'. At first sight this is puzzling; but then we realise that Russia, at the time, was ruled over by the moderate Alexander Kerensky, rather than by Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who did not seize power until October 1917; and that the Soviet Union was not established until 1922. However, the most poignant and relevant paragraph reads as follows:

The object of this war is to deliver the free peoples of the world from the menace and the actual power of a vast military establishment, controlled by an irresponsible Government which, having secretly planned to dominate the world, proceeded to carry the plan out without regard either to the sacred obligations of treaty or the long-established practices and long cherished principles of international action and honour; which chose its own time for the war; delivered its blow fiercely and suddenly; stopped at no barrier either of law or mercy; swept a whole continent within the tide of blood, not the blood of soldiers only, but the blood of innocent women and children, also, and of the helpless poor; and now stands baulked, but not defeated, the enemy of four-fifths of the world.

The letter goes on to make it clear that the "power" referred to here is not the German people, but "the ruthless master of the German people". So what we have is an unequivocal laying of responsibility for the War upon the German government

(or Kaiser) and an unambiguous declaration that the War must continue until Germany accepted that she must change.

Some may say "Well the USA would say that, to justify its entry into the War;" but the Americans had only declared War a few months previously (on April 6th 1917) and they had yet to commit large resources or suffer major losses, so that, of all participants, the USA could have taken the most detached view of the rights and wrongs of the matter, in the August of that year. Further, President Woodrow Wilson, who had been elected in 1912, had kept America out of the War in 1914, and had been re-elected in 1916, using the slogan 'he kept us out of the war'; and the USA had only been provoked into declaring war on Germany by the latter's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare – and by the Zimmerman telegram (which revealed Germany's hostile interference in Mexican affairs). In 1917, there were still many voters with a strong anti-war attitude; and it was not immediately obvious that the American President would reject the Pope's appeal for peace. Yet he did, in no uncertain terms.

From today's perspective, the American reply has a moral force which it is difficult to deny. Above all, however, the reply has a personal resonance for us. Our paternal grandfather, Arthur Cooper was reported missing and then killed in action, on the Western Front, on 12 April 1918, and he is one of the missing commemorated in Tyne Cot Cemetery near Ypres. Our grandmother was sent medals and a medallion which recorded that 'he died for freedom and for honour', in 'the Great War for Civilisation'. Are we wrong to think that this was indeed the nub of the matter, for all the telling criticisms of that War which were made in the film *Oh! What a Lovely War* and the last episode of *Blackadder Goes Forth*? President Wilson's ringing rejection of the peace offer made by the Pope tells us not.

TEXT OF REPLY SENT BY PRESIDENT WOODROW WILSON, AUGUST 27, 1917

To His Holiness Benedictus XV, Pope:

In acknowledgment of the communication of Your Holiness to the belligerent peoples, dated August 1, 1917, the President of the United States requests me to transmit the following reply:

Every heart that has not been blinded and hardened by this terrible war must be touched by this moving appeal of His Holiness the Pope, must feel the dignity and force of the humane and generous motives which prompted it, and must fervently wish that we might take the path of peace he so persuasively points out. But it would be folly to take it if it does not in fact lead to the goal he proposes. Our response must be based upon the stern facts and upon nothing else. It is not a mere cessation of arms he desires; it is a stable and enduring peace. This agony must not be gone through with again, and it must be a matter of very sober judgment that will insure us against it.

His Holiness in substance proposes that we return to the status quo ante bellum, and that then there be a

general condonation, disarmament, and a concert of nations based upon an acceptance of the principle of arbitration; that by a similar concert freedom of the seas be established; and that the territorial claims of France and Italy, the perplexing problems of the Balkan States, and the restitution of Poland be left to such conciliatory adjustments as may be possible in the new temper of such a peace, due regard being paid to the aspirations of the peoples whose political fortunes and affiliations will be involved.

It is manifest that no part of this program can be successfully carried out unless the restitution of the status quo ante furnishes a firm and satisfactory basis for it. The object of this war is to deliver the free peoples of the world from the menace and the actual power of a vast military establishment controlled by an irresponsible government which, having secretly planned to dominate the world, proceeded to carry the plan out without regard either to the sacred obligations of treaty or the long-established practices and long-cherished principles of international action and honor; which chose its own time for the war; delivered its blow fiercely and suddenly; stopped at no barrier either of law or of mercy; swept a whole continent within the tide of blood, not the blood of soldiers only, but the blood of innocent women and children also and of the helpless poor; and now stands balked but not defeated, the enemy of four-fifths of the world. This power is not the German people. It is the ruthless master of the German people. It is no business of ours how that great people came under its control or submitted with temporary zest to the domination of its purpose; but it is our business to see to it that the history of the rest of the world is no longer left to its handling.

To deal with such a power by way of peace upon the plan proposed by His Holiness the Pope would, so far as we can see, involve a recuperation of its strength and a renewal of its policy; would make it necessary to create a permanent hostile combination of nations against the German people who are its instruments; and would result in abandoning the newborn Russia to the intrigue, the manifold subtle interference, and the certain counter-revolution which would be attempted by all the malign influences to which the German Government has of late accustomed the world. Can peace be based upon a restitution of its power or upon any word of honor it could pledge in a treaty of settlement and accommodation?

Responsible statesmen must now everywhere see, if they never saw before, that no peace can rest securely upon political or economic restrictions meant to benefit some nations and cripple or embarrass others, upon vindictive action of any sort, or any kind of revenge or deliberate injury. The American people have suffered intolerable wrongs at the hands of the Imperial German Government, but they desire no reprisal upon the German people who have themselves suffered all things in this war which they did not choose. They believe that peace should rest upon the rights of peoples, not the rights of Government, the rights of peoples great or small, weak or powerful to their equal right to freedom and security and self-government and to a participation upon fair terms in the economic opportunities of the world, the German people of course included if they will accept equality and not seek domination.

The test, therefore, of every plan of peace is this: Is it based upon the faith of all the peoples involved or merely upon the word of an ambitious and intriguing government on the one hand and of a group of free peoples on the other? This is a test which goes to the root of the matter; and it is the test which must be applied.

The purposes of the United States in this war are known to the whole world, to every people to whom the truth has been permitted to come. They do not need to be stated again. We seek no material advantage of any kind. We believe that the intolerable wrongs done in this war by the furious and brutal power of the Imperial German Government ought to be repaired, but not at the expense of the sovereignty of any people,

rather a vindication of the sovereignty both of those that are weak and of those that are strong. Punitive damages, the dismemberment of empires, the establishment of selfish and exclusive economic leagues, we deem inexpedient and in the end worse than futile, no proper basis for a peace of any kind, least of all for an enduring peace. That must be based upon justice and fairness and the common rights of mankind.

We cannot take the word of the present rulers of Germany as a guaranty of anything that is to endure, unless explicitly supported by such conclusive evidence of the will and purpose of the German people themselves as the other peoples of the world would be justified in accepting. Without such guaranties treaties of settlement, agreements for disarmament, covenants to set up arbitration in the place of force, territorial adjustments, reconstitutions of small nations, if made with the German Government, no man, no nation could now depend on. We must await some new evidence of the purposes of the great peoples of the central powers. God grant it may be given soon and in a way to restore the confidence of all peoples everywhere in the faith of nations and the possibility of a covenanted peace.