

*"They write politics, we write government"*

# 1918: AN ALTERNATE HISTORY

What if the Allied line had broken?

*"It has been a close run thing – the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life," – Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, 1815.*

If the goal of a war is to be remembered in history, World War I suffers from its proximity to the only war of greater size and scope. Of course, despite military leaders' desire for fame since time immemorial, we don't generally fight for only glory. In the famous words of von Clausewitz, "war is politics by other means."

But this is little solace to the historians; if a war is not remembered, or is misremembered, how can we hope to gain from its political lessons? Much like its bigger brother 25 years later, World War I became a fight between two incompatible systems of government: those that allow popular involvement and those that give nearly all power to a hereditary monarch. One result of the Great War was the extinguishing of the latter from the Western world. There are still kings and queens in Europe, but they hold little power.

Today we often forget that the outcome of World War I was in serious doubt until its final 100 days, causing us to wonder what would have happened had events evolved with a few slight differences. Perhaps the systems of government in the following decades would have been very different. Perhaps this would be true in the present day.

In our first foray into fiction, we consider precisely this. Could the Central Powers have won the war? What would such a victory have looked like? Would the ensuing global geopolitical events of the last 100 years have still occurred?

- We set the scene: Amiens, France, 1918.
- We change the battle – slightly.
- We think about what happens next.

## **We set the scene: Amiens, France, 1918.**

The Battle of the Marne. The Race to the Sea. Trenches, "over the top," mustard gas, gains measured in yards, at the cost of thousands of lives. This had been the life on the Western Front for nearly four years of war. A lack of strategic vision and creative tactics had produced a

gruesome, horrifying standoff. But this was about to change.<sup>1</sup>

The greatest stalemate the world had ever known was about to come to an end, due to the exit of one ally and the entrance of another. Starting in 1917, a series of revolutions had left Russia in a state of civil war: White versus Red. Far too preoccupied to carry on a fight with a strong external enemy, the nominally-in-control

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<sup>1</sup> Two recent pieces helped to focus my attention on World War I; without them, this piece wouldn't have been written. John Toland's [No Man's Land](#) covers almost the exact period of this piece, in exquisite detail (his *The Rising Sun* is also not to be missed). I also highly recommend Dan Carlin's [six-part podcast on World War I](#), a fine telling of the war.

Communists were forced to sign the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Cleaving off much of Russia's eastern territory,<sup>2</sup> the treaty not only greatly increased the German sphere of influence, but also freed 50 divisions to be redeployed against the French and English on the Western Front.<sup>3</sup> This would create a numerical advantage, but the German High Command knew it would be a temporary one.

When the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917,<sup>4</sup> it had a pitifully small standing army. Thirteen belligerents had larger militaries at that moment. The logistical requirements to move an army across the Atlantic Ocean meant that General John Pershing's American Expeditionary Force (AEF) wouldn't fire its first shot until October. By the end of 1917, only four American combat divisions were in France.

Both the Allies and the Central Powers knew this situation was soon to change. While deliberate, the AEF's buildup carried great momentum. The Americans were laying telephone lines and railroad track. They were building new ports at which they would soon unload masses of men and materiel. A draft would soon swell the military ranks to more than four million men. The Yanks were coming indeed, fresh divisions of Yanks, as many as 10,000 per day by June 1918. The German numerical advantage would be short-lived. Their optimal strategy was in little doubt: they must end the war while they had the chance.

<sup>2</sup> Said territory of course having come into Tzarist Russia's possession when she occupied her previously independent neighbors, who had come into existence when they had previously split from earlier versions of Russia. Be careful when using historical borders to determine proper territorial sovereignty; the result depends on the date from which you start.

<sup>3</sup> As a rule of thumb, a full-strength German infantry division in World War I had 16,000 troops.

<sup>4</sup> We later declared war on Austria-Hungary, but never on the Ottoman Empire or other Central Powers. This prevented the United States from participating on several fronts in the global conflict.

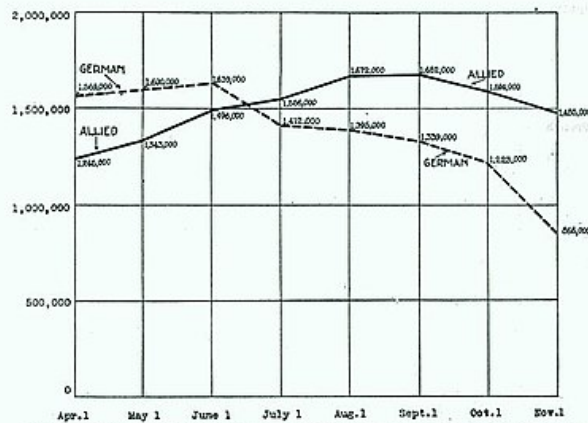


Diagram 45.—Rifle strength of allied and German armies on the western front.

FIGURE 1 - RELATIVE STRENGTH, EASTERN FRONT, 1918

Thus was devised the Spring Offensive. In its first phase, it would consist of four German armies, more than 1,200,000 soldiers.<sup>5</sup> The location of the battle provided a stark reminder of the risks involved. The fiercest fighting would take place in the same fields as the Battle of the Somme, where the British had attempted a breakthrough in 1916. That move "over the top" had caused more than 57,000 casualties in a single day, the deadliest in British history.<sup>6</sup> A repeat of that debacle, taking ground by the yard rather than the mile while losing a generation of her finest soldiers, would soon have left Germany unable to defend itself.

German planning focused on avoiding this outcome. Troops were told to advance rapidly, quickly crossing the repeating lines of trenches. The strike would happen at the textbook weak point of any military force: the joint between two commands. In this case, the spear would point directly at the spot where the British right flank touched the French left; German command expected that the Allied lack of a supreme command would impair coordination. German forces would drive west and then north; should they reach the ports on the English Channel, the British would be isolated and could be pushed back into the sea. The key intermediate objective would be the city of Amiens. Although it was more than 40 miles from the coast, the loss of this key transportation hub would severely inhibit the ability of the British and French to mutually reinforce.

<sup>5</sup> This was about 72 divisions.

<sup>6</sup> The French Army also fought at the Somme, taking an additional 1,500 casualties on the first day.

On the morning of March 21, the Germans began an artillery barrage, eventually launching 3,500,000 shells in a span of just over five hours.<sup>7</sup> The initial attack went well and German soldiers began to occupy the first line of trenches. At this point, however, the retreat was orderly; a defense in depth had been the British plan. But the advance kept coming. In just nine days, the front lines had advanced more than 30 miles. The outskirts of Amiens were in sight for advance German units.

It is on this date, March 28, 1918, when we will depart onto our alternate timeline.

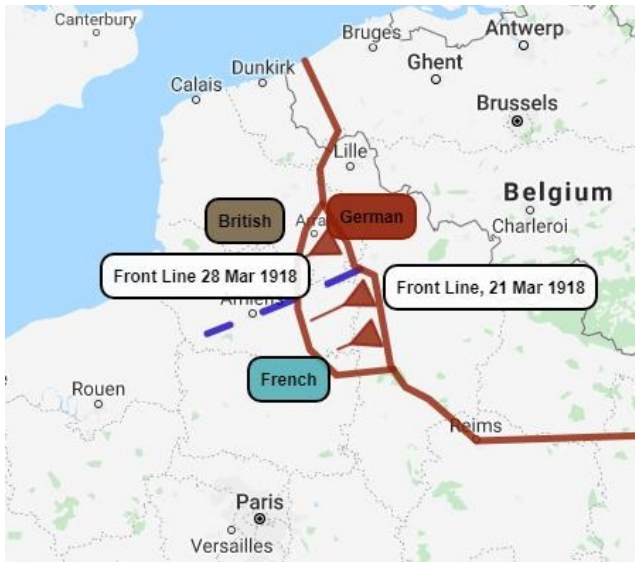


FIGURE 2 - START OF SPRING OFFENSIVE

**We change the battle – slightly**

First, some housekeeping.<sup>8</sup> On exactly this date, an otherwise entirely unremarkable French artillery scored a lucky hit on the headquarters of the 6<sup>th</sup> Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment. Among those killed was an unknown 28-year-old private of Austrian birth. His death was of no importance to the outcome of the war, although his later absence simplifies our narrative.<sup>9</sup>

The inability of the French and British to agree on an overall command structure was critical. General Erich Ludendorff, the driving force behind the offensive, was counting on exactly this. Rather than bring fresh French

<sup>7</sup> The largest barrage of the war, up to that point.  
<sup>8</sup> And to clarify the rules, our goal here is to see how small changes in events could have resulted in a vastly different world. Anything not mentioned as having changed will occur as scheduled on our real timeline.  
<sup>9</sup> Yes, I went back in time and killed Hitler.

troops from sectors to the South, a stretch of line between Albert and Montdidier was held by portions of the weary British Fifth Army. Despite quickly depleting German supplies, the onslaught was simply too great. Outnumbered nearly four to one, the heroic British stand on the Ancre River could not hold. By the first of April, the Allies were forced to abandon Amiens, a city that they would never retake.

But the five days on the Ancre proved crucial. Unlike in the “real” 1940, the British Expeditionary Force understood the potential for the Germans to reach the sea. Using the Somme River rail and road bridges to their fullest, the British (and some Belgians) abandoned Dunkirk, Calais, and Boulogne.<sup>10</sup> They planned to hold the port of Dieppe, or, in the worst case, a line along the Somme anchored on the port of Le Havre and the city of Rouen.

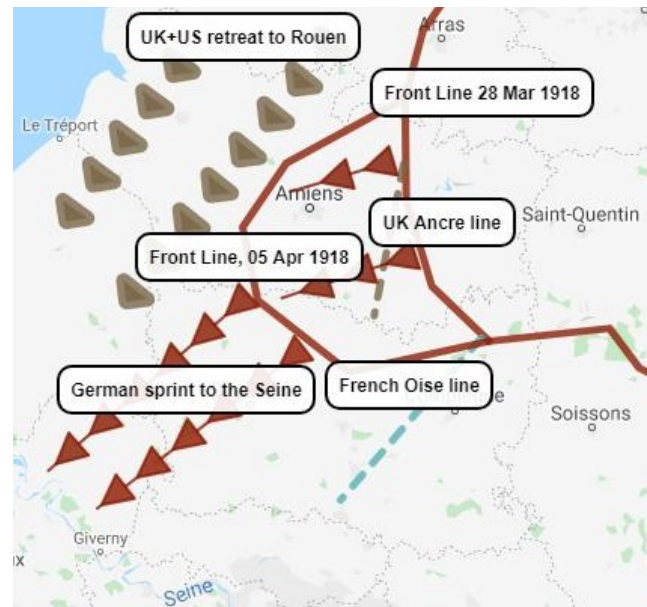


FIGURE 3 - GERMAN BREAKOUT TO THE SEINE

Unfortunately, British pride, hubris, or stupidity prevented their high command from admitting the severity of their situation to their French counterparts. Four years of stasis will do that; having previously counted gains and losses in yards, they didn’t believe that dozens of miles could be taken and held in a single

<sup>10</sup> The region around Boulogne was a training/staging area for the AEF. There were approximately 250,000 partially trained American troops in this region, and they would have joined the well-organized retreat. My premier source for information on the AEF is from the [National Archives](#). No, I did not review the 26,016 cubic feet of AEF documents they claim to have; the [Administrative Staff report](#) proved quite useful.

movement. Just as the British were retreating toward the southwest in order to protect the lifeline of Channel ports, the French retreated to the southeast, behind the River Oise. The strength of that barrier proved to be an ironically double-edged sword; the German Army was able to form a strong defensive line quickly on the opposite side of the Oise. It proved to be one flank of a 25-mile-wide hole in the Allied lines. Rather than sprint to the (abandoned) Channel coast, the Germans aimed instead for the Seine itself. Several bridges over this winding river were intact and nearly unguarded.

Even with little opposition, moving the great Imperial Army from the Somme to the Seine was an immense task. Compared to what we today call *blitzkrieg*, advancing 75 miles in 15 days was downright pedestrian. But with one flank secure and the other challenged only by the remnants of the British Army, the Germans had some time to spare. Crossing the Seine in force on April 25<sup>th</sup>, German dreams were soon to be realized. A bloody battle would be fought in Paris's southern environs, but for the second time in a half century, the City of Light would fall to the Germans.

With a strong German force on both sides of the Seine as far south as Fontainebleau by the end of May, many Allied positions became untenable. A British Army, stiffened with the American divisions, retreated south through Normandy and Brittany. The French, retreating to the southeast, fought valiant rearguard actions on the Seine and around Troyes. But the great fortress at Verdun, held at the cost of 163,000 Poilus in 1916, would soon be abandoned. So would the northeast of France, the city of Nancy, and all of Alsace.

This advance, leaving German armies in control of half of French territory, came at the cost of time, materiel, and casualties. And it did little to slow the advance of the AEF, who arrived at a rate of 100,000 troops each month via ports on the Bay of Biscay. Precisely as the Germans feared, the Americans proved decisive. Moving quickly forward from bases near Bordeaux, they soon held a line stretching from the port of St. Malo as far east as Tours on the Loire River. The regrouped British stood fast on the south bank of this river, around Orleans, and controlled the critical Seine tributaries. The French formed a strong line in the Rhone valley, protected by mountains on both sides. By July, both sides began digging trenches again. By August, the systems were

nearly as intricate as those in Flanders had been five months earlier. And there, they waited.



FIGURE 4 - GERMAN ADVANCE; NEW LINES ESTABLISHED

But we must not forget, the Western was not the only front in this war. We've said that we plan to make only small changes to the real timeline. The Italian advance at Vittorio Veneto would still have occurred. The great victory—nearly 500,000 soldiers of the multinational Austro-Hungarian Army taken prisoner—was just as great. Only ten days after the initial advance, the remainder of the once-great Austrian force laid down its arms. Rioting began in Vienna and Budapest. Austrian Emperor Charles I abdicated his throne. The Habsburg family had controlled much of Europe for more than 500 years.<sup>11</sup> Karl was the final sovereign.

This was a serious problem for Germany. A vast area to its southeast, the cauldron from which this whole war had begun, was controlled not by an ally but by mobs on the verge of ethnic war. On the other side of this was the Italian Army, a force of 1,500,000 riding a great victory. There was nothing but mountains separating them from Munich. Should they reach the Bavarian plains, the options were endless. At this point, the Germans (not to

<sup>11</sup> The Habsburgs held the titles of Holy Roman Emperor, Emperor of Austria, Emperor of Mexico, King of the Romans, King of Germany, King of Spain, King of Italy, King of Castille, King of Aragon, King of Valencia, King of Mallorca, King of Leon, King of Sicily, King of Naples, King of Navarre, King of Hungary, King of Jerusalem, King of Bohemia, King of Croatia, King of Portugal, King of Ireland, King of France and, strangely, the King of England, in addition to numerous Grand Dukedoms, Dukedoms, and Counties.



mention the British and French) decided the war had gone on long enough.



FIGURE 5 - ITALIAN FRONT, FALL 1918

The Italians were on the verge of a crushing victory. The Americans, despite having “lost” their front, were not in any sense defeated; that force was still growing and itching for a fight. But the casualties suffered by the French, English, and Germans left them in no position to continue. When these three powers agreed to an armistice, everybody else had little choice but to do the same. The cease fire began at the eleventh hour, on the eleventh day, of the eleventh month.

Early in 1919, the former belligerents would meet in the Berlin suburb of Potsdam to negotiate what would be called the Treaty of Sanssouci.<sup>12</sup> This was still the era when great powers did not annex great pieces of each other’s territory (usually).<sup>13</sup> Still, the winners, Germany and Italy, would receive the spoils.

Belgium and Luxembourg, occupied by Germany for four years, were officially added to its sphere of influence. The King of the Belgians remained nominally independent, but the Duke of Luxembourg swore loyalty to the Emperor. The Netherlands, scrupulously neutral through the conflict, was not spared.<sup>14</sup> Queen Wilhelmina, now surrounded by Germany and her satellites, quickly joined this alignment. France gave up all rights to the provinces Alsace and Lorraine (which

<sup>12</sup> The signing would be in a hall of marble, bereft of all mirrors.  
<sup>13</sup> The logic was less about chivalry and more about preserving a balance of power.  
<sup>14</sup> Neutrality also proved to be of no benefit to the Low Countries in the real World War II.

were enlarged); the Pas de Calais was demilitarized, and Germans were given leases on naval bases at three major Channel ports.<sup>15</sup>

The changes in Eastern Europe were even more dramatic. For the fourth time,<sup>16</sup> Poland was partitioned. Germany gained the populous, relatively industrialized western portion, as far as Warsaw and Lublin, as another official satellite. Latvia and Lithuania, both newly independent, also gained territory. The rump of Poland was disbanded and divided into a patchwork of duchies and small republics, a buffer state between Germany and the east.<sup>17</sup>

But the great changes to the map were in Central Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Collapse of the Ottoman Empire, in addition to the Austrian Empire, allowed Italy to reign supreme over the Mediterranean, just as it had 1500 years previously. Italy may have been a poor country relative to the other major powers, but great victories have a way of pulling a country together. For this reason, and because Germany had other issues, the Italians were permitted to do as they wished with the entire region.<sup>18</sup>

Victor Emmanuel III, King of Italy, proved himself more enlightened than his German counterpart.<sup>19</sup> In 1918, Italy was the only victor whose government had significant popular representation. The King unilaterally decided to go further, taking the armistice as an impetus to declare Italy a true constitutional monarchy, of which he would merely be caretaker until a government could form. Unlike the parties at Versailles in the real-life timeline, Victor Emmanuel divided his protectorates based on historical ethnic and cultural lines, rather than in his own

<sup>15</sup> The actual settlement of World War I resulted in changes to colonial possessions, as areas previously controlled by Germany became mandates of the United Nations. In my timeline, the maps of Africa and Asia return to the status quo ante.  
<sup>16</sup> Or fifth, or sixth, or seventh, depending on how you count.  
<sup>17</sup> Of note is the re-emergence of spheres of influence. These had been used in previous negotiated European peace treaties, such as Westphalia and Vienna. The reason they were not used at Versailles was (largely) Wilson’s desire for self-determination (in Europe). With Wilson a marginal figure in our alternate history, there is good reason to think the Great Power tools would have been in full effect.  
<sup>18</sup> If Italy as a rising superpower seems implausible, feel free to write your own alternate history. But remember that, even in the actual timeline, they were the only organized force remaining in this region after Vittorio Veneto.  
<sup>19</sup> Or than the actual Victor Emmanuel III did in real life, for that matter.

best interests.<sup>20</sup> The map of the Balkans looked strikingly similar to the one of today. The new countries experienced the usual fits and starts that all nations face at their inception, but most soon formed stable democracies, republics, or constitutional monarchies.

The Middle East did not split nearly as cleanly. Ibn Saud successfully conquered Najd and the Hejaz, forming Saudi Arabia; Mustafa Kemal similarly took his rightful place as Father of the Turks. But in between, through the Jordan River valley and around the Fertile Crescent, warring nations, little more than clans, fought over what is today Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. One modern nation that never comes into existence in our timeline is Israel.<sup>21</sup> The defeat of Britain meant the cancellation of the Balfour Declaration. The lack of a League of Nations meant no Palestine mandate, and prevented the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Aliyahs.<sup>22</sup>

### **We think about what happens next**

The war was over and the spoils divided. The peace in our timeline had elements that were both more and less enlightened than those in the real world. The fact that virtually none of the fighting had occurred within her borders gave Germany no reason to pursue the sanctions that backfired in the real interwar era. On the other hand, with Wilson on the other side from the victors, there was no movement toward self-determination and no attempt at collective security.<sup>23</sup> This peace went far toward preserving the status quo ante: a Great Power fight focused on spheres of influence, as opposed to outright annexation of each others' territory.

As we said in at the beginning of this piece, World War I was a battle between differing types of government. The Central Powers were capitalistic, semi-autocratic

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<sup>20</sup> Or maybe he saw that avoiding the strife of ethnic civil war was in fact in his nation's best interests. Nothing wrong with this, except that we are again making the King out to be significantly wiser than his historical counterpart.

<sup>21</sup> Disclaimer: Nothing in this timeline is intended to imply any ethical, moral, or political view on the topic of Israel, its government, or its relationships with the Palestinians or its other neighbors. But I see no path toward the creation of a Jewish homeland during in middle of the twentieth century without an Anglo-French victory in World War I.

<sup>22</sup> Migrations of Jews to Israel. I would still posit, however, that the Jews fare better in my timeline.

<sup>23</sup> Or course, the League of Nations never achieved much, partially due to the unwillingness of the United States to join. And the clumsy self-determination in the Treaty of Versailles didn't exactly lend itself toward stability. It also looks not-so-enlightened in the eyes of history, because it applied only to European countries.

empires; the Allies were republics.<sup>24</sup> In our timeline, the victors made it difficult for unaligned political systems to exist in 1920s Europe.

The U.K. government under David Lloyd George fell immediately after the armistice. George V abdicated the throne, exiled to the Caribbean. The new government was headed by Stanley Baldwin, but relied heavily on the views of the up-and-coming Oswald Moseby. Neither of these men were believers in popular rule; Parliament quickly began to devolve power back to the Throne, in the person of Edward VIII. Edward soon took the title of British Emperor, one which no previous member of his line had claimed.<sup>25</sup> Members of the court and nobility reclaimed powers not held for more than two centuries; Parliament reverted to its 15<sup>th</sup> century form, a tax-granting authority whose power did not derive from a wide franchise.<sup>26</sup>

The French government of President Raymond Poincaré and Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau fell as well. But France, without a monarchy, shorn of much of her territory, her military humiliated and a generation lost in battle, was unable to maintain any stability. Elections were held, but with parties split by region there was no way to cobble together a majority. More elections were held; these grew violent, and the German Army entered in order to keep the peace. In 1923, fully five years after the last shots were fired, France was a unified country in name only. Real power fell to a patchwork of regional governments representing historical regions: Normandy, Aquitaine, Anjou, and several others.

At the same time—and perhaps in response to these changes—the government of Italy continued to liberalize and become more democratic. Wealth from her colonies, spheres, and trading relationships in the Mediterranean enriched a merchant and industrial class that expected political power. A new constitution was passed; it included civil rights modelled on those in the United States, but with an enshrined hereditary monarchy. This

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<sup>24</sup> A simplification, but one that is permissible. Russia began as an autocracy, but the entity that lost its war was a republic of socialist proclivities. I don't know exactly what you call the Italian government of this era, but Italian citizens did have ways to affect their government's activity via a political process.

<sup>25</sup> Matilda, whose sovereignty in England was never secure, was Holy Roman Empress by marriage, but never held the title in Britain.

<sup>26</sup> Ireland took this opportunity to accelerate its transformation into a fully independent republic, encompassing all 32 counties on the island of Eire.

new republic would foster development of free nations in Central Europe and the Balkans.

The United States would follow a highly different tack in our timeline. They had been on the losing side of the Great War, but they had not been defeated, rather just tardy. At home, the public was bewildered; they might have accepted losing a war, but not missing one entirely. They had pride in their armed forces, which now included the world's largest Army. American land forces had all the modern equipment, perfect training, and advance deployment into a European continent experiencing a power vacuum.<sup>27</sup> Rather than turning inward toward isolation, they would attempt to use their power for influence and monetary gain. The fractious French government was in no place to demand their removal from the Loire Valley and Southwestern France. Instead, the Americans would requisition supplies needed for their adventures in Eastern Europe and North Africa.

Despite the bitter war that had just concluded, Germany, Italy, the United States, and the U.K. agreed on one major point: the Red Army could not be permitted to take control of Russia. As in the real timeline, the nations of Western Europe organized an intervention in favor of the White Russian troops. Unlike the real timeline, this intervention was organized; goals were clear and coordination was planned. And the United States was seriously invested in the conflict. In addition to encouraging the independence of the Baltic countries, this expeditionary force fought alongside the White Russian Army, pushing the Communists out of St. Petersburg, then out of Moscow, then behind the Ural Mountains. There they would remain, working for decades to consolidate Communist control over central Asia and Siberia. This U.S.S.R. was poor, depopulated, and technologically archaic; it would never near the status of a superpower. Western Russia was divided into a number of smaller states. These republics, constitutional monarchies, hereditary duchies, and free

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<sup>27</sup> I'm thinking of my United States as being a democracy, just more in thrall to its military-industrial complex.

port cities were too small to have a significant impact on geopolitics.<sup>28</sup>

This was the state of the western world by the mid-1920s.<sup>29</sup> Northern Europe was controlled by illiberal monarchies, centered in London and Berlin, and controlling an area as far south and west as Paris. Central and Southern Europe were filled with small republics. Unable to defend themselves, they had been given firm guarantees of collective security and mutual defense; Italy acted as their guarantor. These two blocs of nations eyed each other warily; diametrically opposed systems of government tend to do so. The United States loomed large; its army in France made it a factor in all European affairs.

The Twenties still roared, until they still crashed. We have no reason to expect that the factors that caused the stock market crash of 1929 or the ensuing Great Depression would have started any differently. In the real timeline, German reliance on American finance meant that she was especially affected by the Depression;<sup>30</sup> in this world, the pain is similarly felt most by the losers of the war: France and the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom had a "solution" to the problem, centralizing more control in an autocratic government. This "worked" in the sense that it allowed the Pound to remain strong enough to import the quantity of food needed for that nation to survive.<sup>31</sup> France fared worse; what government there was lost all authority, especially outside of major cities.<sup>32</sup> German and American troops were forced to create governmental structures under

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<sup>28</sup> Although their educational systems, freed from the purges in the real Soviet Era, would have succeeded in producing world-class scientists and engineers. Along with their abundant raw materials, Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and the St. Petersburg Autonomous Oblast would all eventually catch up with the modern world, as long as they could avoid devastating wars.

<sup>29</sup> The oriental world would likely have changed little from the true timeline. China would have followed the concept of Sun-Yat Sen before eventually falling prey to a glorified warlord in the vein of Chiang Kai-Shak. Japan would still have taken control of the Korean peninsula and Manchuria, although perhaps not China proper. The need to defend these territories would have caused its government to militarize under the imperial figurehead. South Asia would have remained a colonial possession of the United Kingdom.

<sup>30</sup> Which led to the rise of Hitler. But, thankfully, we killed Hitler a while ago.

<sup>31</sup> Although many English still suffered and some starved.

<sup>32</sup> Which themselves became depopulated as residents went to the countryside in search of food.

their control, an arrangement that proved difficult to unwind.<sup>33</sup>

The exit from the Great Depression again followed from the weaponized Keynesianism of an arms race. The three economic superpowers, Germany, Italy, and the United States, began a Cold War, worldwide in scope, universal in front.

The World War had shown the value of a strong air force. It could strike terror, serve as a surveillance system and a deterrent to ground forces. The commercial importance of flight was also becoming apparent. By 1925, every country that hoped to compete on the world stage would need to look up, literally. The Luftwaffe, Aeronautica Militare, and U.S. Army Air Forces began to order aircraft by the thousands. The need for airplanes created a need for airfields; world powers would race to control far-flung islands in a manner reminiscent of the real-world Pacific Theater of World War II—The Azores, Malta, Crete, Heligoland, Saipan, Guam, Midway, Luzon, and New Britain. Each would soon be home to squadrons, projecting force across distant lands.

The need for airbases meant the need to supply airbases. Merchant marines would be necessary, and surface navies necessary to protect them.<sup>34</sup> The admirals, still believers in the dreadnaught doctrine of big ships and big guns, showed little interest in aircraft carriers. They believed that aircraft could cause terror against enemy cities, but did not predict how effective they could also be against sea vessels. It would take a war for them to learn this lesson, but in the meantime battleships ruled the waves. More than two dozen were launched annually somewhere on the globe. And they kept getting bigger, with more guns and more armor. This generation of ship featured fearsome machines.

But it was the third phase of military buildup that would have the largest lasting effect. In our timeline, Jewish physicists do not emigrate from Germany. Hungarian physicists are allied with their Italian sponsors. American industrial might ensured their place in the starting blocks of the nuclear race. In our timeline, with no Nazis to scatter the great minds of central Europe, each step that [we outlined in the development of nuclear weapons](#)

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<sup>33</sup> Apologies to my French readers, but this really isn't my fault. Losing World War I would have turned out especially badly for you.

<sup>34</sup> And underwater boats would also be helpful to destroy the others' merchant marines.

would have come sooner. Who would have won the race? Heisenberg, Frisch, Meitner, and the heavyweights at the University of Berlin? Szilard, Fermi, and Teller working in Milan and Budapest? Or would the United States still have created the Manhattan District in New Mexico, with Robert Oppenheimer in control?<sup>35</sup> Whoever developed the bomb first would have been tempted to use it, before other nations developed a strategic deterrence.

Thus, one of my favorite premises also fell clearly into place: the development of nuclear weapons was a preordained result of our gains in knowledge. I'll add another premise: learning the true destructive power of nuclear weapons could truly happen only by their use in war. In the real timeline, only two weapons have been used against hostile populations, and only small weapons at that. Without minimizing the devastation caused, maybe this is the best we could have hoped for.

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We began our tale with Wellington, speaking 100 years before our story, after the battle of Waterloo. Napoleon could easily have won at Waterloo, and what might he have done then?

We made only a small change to our timeline. A few divisions advancing a few extra miles through an otherwise nondescript portion of France. But this breakthrough, coupled with and created by the inability of the Allied Powers to answer the threat, created enormous ripple effects that would reverberate a century later. Of course, not every outcome followed naturally; my attempts to change as little as possible still left me with many choices to make. But the basis of a strong Germany, fallen France and England, and non-isolationist United States seem to be clear results.

Both World Wars were caused by differing political systems. In World War I, democracies defeated semi-autocratic hereditary empires. In World War II, an admittedly polyglot mix of democracies and communist states allied to defeat the military dictatorships. In both cases, the post-war world was no longer hospitable for styles of government on the losing side. This is the

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<sup>35</sup> I would expect the American physics establishment to have been buttressed by exiled British, French, Polish, and Russian physicists. There would be no Einstein or von Neumann at Princeton, but still plenty of brains to compete.



principle I've attempted to apply, although the negotiated result led to a strange mix of ongoing systems.

Mixed together, this asks the question of whether there would have been an alternate World War II, and who it would be between. Today we minimize the likelihood of wars between European powers, but such a long period of peace<sup>36</sup> is the exception rather than the norm. The world created here has elements of stability: a strong, if autocratic, Germany; popular rule in the Baltics and Balkans; the United States involved in world affairs, with the potential to contribute to collective security. It also has major destabilizing elements: failed states in France and Russia; uncertain futures for colonial powers around the world, and what do we make of the alternate United Kingdom?

The last surviving veteran of World War I was Florence Green. She was in the U.K. Women's Royal Air Force in a support capacity. She died in 2012 at the age of 110. Soon, there won't be anybody left who remembers it personally, even among those who were too young to fight in the war. It is understandable that the Great War has faded from our consciousness, preceded by the Civil War on our soil and superseded by the even larger war that followed barely two decades later. But, in terms of changes to society, it was of immense importance. Before the Great War, democracies and autocracies existed in rough moral equivalence. Today, we shun supreme leaders in North Korea and Iran and cast wary glances at prospective autocrats in Russia and China. World War I also began the process of the global moral aversion to war itself. In 1914, the exercise was expected to be a gentlemanly affair; this is not how it turned out.<sup>37</sup>

I take several lessons from World War I. In the way it began, we learned the dangers of complex, interlocking, bilateral alliances and the benefits of collective security.<sup>38</sup> In its end, we learned that popular representation in government did not make soldiers weak; the initiatives fostered in a free society could in fact be beneficial. As I hope to have demonstrated in my timeline, war has a highly random nature, and even small changes can lead to a result from which we would have learned very different things.

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<sup>36</sup> Relatively speaking.

<sup>37</sup> Of course, there had been highly brutal wars in the past, and contemporaneously outside of Europe. The "more gentlemanly" nature applied to Europe—at best—for a period of two centuries.

<sup>38</sup> Which we soon forgot.