

CHAPTER III

It begins – again. To many, the war being remembered by Victor Perantoni on those warm autumn evenings in Orlando, had begun in 1939. More correctly, however, Victor would tell you it had all begun in 1914 – that the events of 1939 were merely another chapter in a bloody and violent horror story, the beginning of which had been 25 years earlier.

Were one to ask him why he felt that way, he would suggest that one remember the Treaty of Versailles, signed on June 28 in 1919, and ostensibly ending the war between Germany and the Allies. That signing had been exactly *five years to the day* after the assassination of Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Was there some symbolism in the choice of that date? It would appear so. The Great War was being kept alive!

Recall as well that Germans of all political leanings criticized the Treaty, this for its blaming Germany for having started the war. Such implication was seen as an insult to the nation's reputation. "*The Diktat*" they called it; its terms having been offered as a "This is all you get" proposal.

In response to what he considered to be overtly high-handed diplomacy, Philipp Scheidemann, Germany's first democratically elected Chancellor, had stood before the National Assembly in March of 1919, and personally vilified the Treaty as a "murderous plan," which – to again use his words – "put us in chains." He said, less caustically, "The Treaty is unacceptable." Thereafter, he elected to resign rather than sign the document.

In retrospect also, it is generally conceded that the severe conditions imposed on Germany, both politically and economically by the Treaty, fertilized the ground from

which, a decade later, would grow the Nazi State and Hitler's rise to power. Sans the shooting, The Great War was still in progress.

Perhaps it may be said that in the mind of Adolf Hitler there had *never* been an armistice. For in June of 1940, when the French government wished to negotiate a Franco-German armistice following Germany's victory in the Battle of France, it was Hitler who chose a site for the event: Compiègne Forest in France, close by the town of the same name. And why that location? Because that had been the site of the 1918 Armistice signing, an armistice that had heaped humiliation on Germany. And here, Hitler decided, he would avenge himself – would avenge Germany – and this at the expense of France's pride. For him it was to be a supreme moment. 1918 was not over; the Great War was not over.

Then to complete the charade, to exacerbate France's absolute ignominy and despite the fact that the object of his desire was in a French museum, Hitler elected to have the the 1940 armistice signed in the very same rail carriage where the Germans had signed the 1918 Armistice. Therefore was the carriage removed from the museum and placed at the very spot where it had been in 1918. World War I was being revisited.

Hitler then sat gloatingly in the very same chair which Marshal Ferdinand Foch had occupied in 1918, when he had faced the defeated German representatives. And to further demean the French, after listening to the reading of the preamble, Hitler left the carriage, leaving the lesser negotiations to General Wilhelm Keitel, his Oberkommando der Wehrmacht.

Three days later, and again at Hitler's order, the Armistice site was demolished. The carriage itself was taken to Berlin as a war trophy. A trophy of the First World War,

acquired in 1940! The *Great War* was not over. And with it went pieces of what had been a large stone tablet bearing an inscription. In French it read, “*Ici Sur le 11 novembre 1918 Succombé La Fierté Criminelle De L'allemand Reich. Vaincu Par Les Peuplades Libres Qu'Il A Essayé d'Asservirench.*” In English one would read: “Here On The Eleventh Of November 1918 Succumbed The Criminal Pride Of The German Reich. Vanquished By The Free Peoples Which It Tried To Enslave.”

Powerful words; dynamic words indeed. But more than that. For whatever may have been the intention of the inscribers, it must be conceded even by neutral observers that the words have an unmistakably inflammatory character.

The Alsace-Lorraine Monument, depicting a German eagle impaled by a sword, was destroyed, the site being obliterated thereafter with the singular exception of a statue of Marshal Foch. This, Hitler intentionally ordered to be left, that it should be honoring only a wasteland. The Great War continued.

In 1945, when Germany could perceive the current war to be lost, Hitler had the railway carriage at issue taken to Crawinkel in Thuringia. There it was destroyed by SS troops, its remains then buried, that it might not be used a third time for a second German surrender. Thus there would freshly remain the memory of the French surrender.

Following the war, themselves unwilling to let matters rest, the French used German POWs to restore the Armistice site. And rather than make a new one, pieces of the broken stone tablet were recovered and then reassembled; a replica of the railway carriage was also crafted and placed at the restored site. The Alsace-Lorraine monument and its memorials were rebuilt from scratch. Taking five years to complete. It was finally re-dedicated in 1950. The French had redeemed their 1918 victory.

In light of all this, it is easily seen that neither the Germans nor the French were, or are, of a disposition to forget ‘the Great War;’ nor seemingly is anyone else, there appearing to be a *raison immortelle* that it continue. Thus do others see history as did Victor?

And such was his feeling because, and without any doubt, it may be said that in 1914 of our common era war truly came into its own. In that cardinal year, peace was taken away from the earth. For this was to be no European war; nor was this to be a war in Asia or in Africa, or in the Middle East. This was to be war on a colossal scale – a scale never before even conceived. Indeed, had they but seen it, the Caesars, Genghis Khan, Hannibal and others of their sort would have stood in stunned amazement. For that which had been called war in previous centuries, suddenly paled to the level of a street brawl when compared with the staggering volume of brutality, butchery and bloodletting that was The Great War, World War I.

Not only was the capacity for killing elevated to new and terrible levels, but there was now introduced the ability to kill with less compunction than ever before, or with none whatever. From the fertile womb of bellicosity there came the warplane; there came the tank and the machine gun, affording ones the ability to kill from a remote distance; to kill without ever even seeing one’s enemy. In the warriors’ mind, murder in the name of nationalism was being sophisticated; war was being sanitized.

And perhaps we should reflect seriously on the words of columnist Joe Chapman. Writing about The Great War, in *The Spectator* of Hamilton, Ontario, he said: “How innocent, how mercifully ignorant, was the world of August, 1914!

“And yet, in many ways, the First World War, in a macabre sense at least, may well deserve the title ‘great.’ It was the first war which could, with justification, be called a world conflict, involving nearly every important nation, with campaigns fought on many fronts, from Arctic wastes to steaming jungles.

“It was the first ‘total’ war, in which entire nations became deeply involved, with the complete apparatus of civilian life becoming an integral part of the war effort.”

Mr. Chapman commented also to the effect that, “the war was a turning point in more than a military and technological sense. It was a social and cultural revolution and the old way of life was shattered utterly.”

Then after reflecting on the state of the ante-1914 world, and the changes since then, he said regarding the impact of World War I on society: “Not even the Second World War, to which the Nazis added new dimensions of brutality, and the atomic bomb slaughter, seems to have had such an effect upon us as did the First World War.

“Somehow, we had become conditioned to the idea of total war and numbed, or desensitized by history, and not even Hiroshima or Dresden had the same impact as the first carnage, the awful carnage of the *great war’s* Western Front.

“Perhaps that is why the veterans of the earlier struggle seemed men set apart, much less able to adjust to the new world than those from 1945. Nothing in their lives had prepared them for the reality of the trenches, and nothing since has equaled their experiences.”

Even so, despite its sanguinary scope – its total dead can never be accurately counted – and despite the destruction of property, the value of which is likewise incalculable; the priceless lesson – penned in sacred blood across the pages of world

history – was lost. Sanity had been lost. For now the world of mankind had been set on a path that would inevitably lead to its own demise. It would never recover. True, that throughout the world revolts and coups would continue; there would be elections, and successions within monarchies; but the reins of the war chariot were now in the hands of madmen. Witness 1939.

With a global society not yet fully healed; with governments still bleeding – still reeling under the economic and social impact of the events of twenty-one years previous, Europe's own particular madman, Adolf Hitler, sent the German killing machine rolling eastward. In Asia, Japan was engaged in bloody combat with China. In 1941, the United States of America would become an active belligerent in the second of those wars to be described as global – World War II.

And now, in 2001, over eighty-seven years removed from the events of 1914-1918, what may be said as to the possibility for a global peace? What progress has truly been made so that humanity is more secure? The rational mind is left with no other reply: Precious little!