World War I Ended 100 Years Ago Today: The Real Lesson Of 1918

One hundred years ago today, the United States and its allies squandered a hard-won opportunity to prevent the next world war.

November 11, 2018 is the centenary of the end of the Great War, the “war to end all wars.” In light of the even greater war that broke out just two decades later, that epithet has become an iconic symbol of ironic tragedy. But history didn’t have to turn out that way. What the Allied commander-in-chief Ferdinand Foch famously called “not a peace” but “an armistice for twenty years” was a lost opportunity to change Europe forever.

Foch wanted to see the Allies march into Germany and decisively defeat the German forces in the field, on their home territory, in full view of the German people. The politicians, understandably eager to minimize casualties (and expenditures), opted instead to accept a German capitulation. And though the treaty terms made clear that Germany had lost the war, the Allied politicians gave their German counterparts the dignity of accepting an “armistice” instead of the “unconditional surrender” demanded by Theodore Roosevelt and other American hawks.

As a result, Kaiser Wilhelm was allowed to flee to neutral Holland and evade leadership responsibility for the war. Germany’s de facto military dictator, General Erich Ludendorff, retired into civilian life and five years later joined Adolf Hitler in an attempt to overthrow the Weimar Republic. Ludendorff’s nominal superior, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, was elected as Germany’s president in 1925. He’s the one who appointed Adolf Hitler to run the government in 1933, and the rest, as they say, is history.

All three of these leaders were supposed to be tried for war crimes after the armistice, but since the Allies never occupied Germany after World
War I, they had no way to force the German government to deliver them up to justice. Instead of an international trial of the leaders of a criminal war machine, the German government delivered up a series of show trials of a dozen junior officers, nearly all of whom were acquitted. Two ordinary soldiers who stole food from a Belgian restaurant got five years in jail, while two U-boat commanders who sank hospital ships got off scot-free.

Thus the lesson learned by Germany, its citizens, and its leaders was “if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” And not only Germany. Japan also learned that a successful war meant permanent conquest, while an unsuccessful one meant a mere temporary setback. Both Germany and Japan learned that war crimes would go unpunished. And the war crimes of World War I, if not on the scale of World War II, were nonetheless of the same character.

In the 1942 movie classic Casablanca, the French police captain Louis Renault claimed that he was with the Americans “when they blundered into Berlin in 1918.” If only we had, history might have taken a very different turn. It took two defeats to finally subdue Germany, but only one occupation to turn it into the liberal democracy it remains today. Japan, too, was transformed by occupation and re-education. It all should have been done at the end of World War I. If it had, there likely would have been no World War II.

So this Armistice Day, since 1954 known as Veterans Day, remember the service and sacrifices of all American veterans of all wars, and of peacetime too. But also remember the lasting peace that could have been and almost was. No one wants war, but if you have to go to war, get the job done right the first time. That’s the real lesson of 1918, and one that’s just as relevant today as it was then.

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