Chapter 10

Children of the Crucible

August to December 1917

It was the most colossal misfortune of the century that in this great crisis . . . our President should be an absolutely selfish, cold-blooded and unpatriotic rhetorician. Wilson has a great deal of ability of the most sinister type . . . above all in appealing to whatever is evil or foolish in the average man, who . . . also has very noble qualities to which the right appeal could be made. The average man has in him both the Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyl [sic]. Lincoln could successfully appeal to one side of him; Wilson does successfully appeal to the other.

—TR to Arthur Lee, August 17, 1917

Roosevelt opened fire on the Wilson administration in the Metropolitan, where he published his complete correspondence with Baker on the matter of the volunteer division. This action, he explained, was taken to set the record straight in response to scurrilous rumors that he had demanded command of all the volunteers, and that adding the volunteer provision purely in his selfish interest had needlessly delayed both the passage of the draft bill and the dispatch of troops to France. First, TR declared, the correspondence clearly showed that he had never suggested that he be given command of an expeditionary force, only to serve under a regular army general like John J. Pershing. Second, if the volunteer force he had offered in February had been accepted immediately it would have been ready to sail with Pershing’s Regular Army Division. Finally, the Colonel asserted, it was only the agitation led by himself and “strongly endorsed by Gen. Joffre” that obliged the Wilson administration to reverse its decision not to send troops immediately. Consequently, the country was “saved the humiliation of taking no military part in the war through 1917 and part of 1918.”

“Every trouble we have at this moment in this country,” TR wrote to Arthur Lee, was “primarily due to Wilson.” All those who were opposing
the war, or attacking England, or praising Germany were “merely quoting what Wilson said as late as December or January last.” The great danger now was the present “Peace Without Victory” agitation led by the Hearst press, the German papers, and all the pro-Germans and pacifists. William Randolph Hearst supported conscription and the Liberty loans to arm the nation for self-defense, but he crusaded against transporting a large army overseas, much of which, he feared, would be drowned in the Atlantic crossing by marauding submarines. The Anglophobe press magnate continued to rail against the British, writing in the New York American that the “painful truth” was that the United States was being used as a “mere reinforcement of England’s warfare and of England’s future aggrandizement.”

In response, Roosevelt laid out his own 11-part plan in the Metropolitan for a “Peace of Victory,” which included redrawing the map of the postwar world. This scheme began with the restoration and indemnification of Belgium. In addition TR proposed that Luxembourg be joined to either Belgium or France and that the last should get back Alsace and Lorraine. Further, the Danes of North Schleswig should be able to vote whether they wanted to be part of Denmark. To the south, Italy should receive Italia irredenta (“unredeemed Italy”; the 800,000 or so Italian speakers under Austrian rule in the Trentino and around Trieste) with the proviso that Austria be allowed “commercial access to the Mediterranean.” Elsewhere in Austria-Hungary, the “Czechs and their close kinsman outside Bohemia” should be given a new commonwealth, the Southern Slavs joined in a Greater Serbia, and an effort made to keep the Magyars and Roumans together as independent nations. To the east, in TR’s view a democratic Russia “should be entitled to and would not abuse the possession of Constantinople.” And such a Russia could also be safely trusted to “stand as the sponsor” of autonomous states in Finland, Poland, and Armenia, while Lithuania should also have its claims to statehood considered. In a last European point, Roosevelt argued that “surely the time has come” to give Ireland Home Rule within the British Empire “on a basis of resolute justice,” while beyond Europe, Britain and Japan “must keep the colonies they have conquered.”

But before any maps could be redrawn the war still had to be won, which seemed a doubtful prospect for the hard-pressed Allies. When word reached Washington on August 21 from Russia that Riga had fallen, leaving the capital Petrograd (as St. Petersburg had been renamed) vulnerable to attack, Roosevelt’s cousin Franklin commented to his chief Josephus Daniels that if they had “sent TR over to Russia with 100,000 men” this would “not have happened.” Captain Josiah McKean, one of the Naval Operations Officers present, later told Daniels, “It was strange how many folks TR had fooled.” What Russia would do, Roosevelt wrote some weeks later to Archie about the deteriorating situation, “neither I nor any other human being can possibly foretell.” He hoped the nation would “continue to make war, no matter how inefficiently,” but it was impossible to prophesy about “such seething chaos.” Taking advantage of the chaotic situation, the Bolshevik party led by Lenin took control that September of the Petrograd Soviet, positioning