

How Will the Ukraine War End? WW 1 Provides Clues

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An invading army mounts a surprise attack against a peaceful neighbor. Expecting a “walk over” with a bold plan, the invader meets unsuspected resistance. The invader suffers huge losses of men and material and gets bogged down. Both sides settle into trench warfare, with static defenses and constant fighting. The invasion becomes a war of attrition, with both sides firing thousands of rounds of artillery and enduring thousands of casualties.

A war that the invader expected to last weeks drags on for years. Both sides, desperate to win, pour more men and material into the struggle. Each side believes it can win if it can just hold out longer than its foe.

This is Ukraine in February 2022 — but it could also describe Germany’s invasion of France in August 1914.

While the war in Ukraine has reached the one-year mark, World War I, which Germany expected to last a few weeks, lasted 4 ½ years. Until August of 1918, both sides were convinced they could win if they just held out a little longer and fed more men into the meat grinder.

Could the Ukraine War follow this course?

Military experts in recent weeks have suggested different outcomes ranging from a sudden Russian collapse to a long, drawn-out stalemate with a negotiated peace. While we can’t predict the future, a brief review of the last months WW I in 1918 shows how a stalemate can end in a sudden collapse.

August 6. A [massive Allied attack](#) using 456 tanks punches a wide hole in a German salient. The Allies advance seven miles and capture 13,000 German prisoners in one blow and thousands more in follow-up attacks. General Ludendorff calls the retreat “the black day of the German Army.”

October 3. Germany and Austria send a formal note requesting a ceasefire to President Wilson. They hope to obtain easier terms by bypassing archenemies France and the U.K. Wilson declines to intervene and defers to Allied Supreme Commander Ferdinand Foch, who

immediately rejects the request. At this point, German military leaders believe a ceasefire will give them a few months' time to regroup, refit and launch a new offensive.

November 3. Austria-Hungary, with many of its soldiers surrendering en masse, abandons Germany and concludes an armistice with the Allies. In Germany, the sailors in the main fleet mutiny. Angry [riots demanding peace](#) break out in Hamburg, Munich and Berlin. Germany's leaders reluctantly conclude the war is lost; their only hope is a negotiated peace.

November 7. A delegation of German parliamentary leaders, headed by Matthias Erzberger, arrived at Compiègne, France to negotiate an armistice. Field Marshall Paul Von Hindenburg declines to participate, hoping to avoid blame for the defeat. The next day, November 8, Kaiser Wilhelm abdicates and flees to neutral Holland; Germany is now a republic. Parliamentary leader Erzberger will be assassinated by right-wing extremists in 1921.

November 11. At 5 a.m. the German delegates sign the armistice. It becomes effective at 11 a.m., on the eleventh day of the eleventh month.

January 18, 1919. The Paris Peace Conference opens at the Versailles Palace; 32 nations send delegates, but the final decisions are made by U.S. President Wilson, French Prime Minister George Clemenceau and British Prime Minister Lloyd George. Ultimately Germany must surrender all of her Navy, much of her army and is assessed \$132 billion gold marks (U.S. \$33 billion in current dollars).

Russian Collapse Unlikely

Could the current Ukraine war end like WW I, with a sudden collapse of the invader's armed forces and civilian riots?

It is possible, but unlikely. Putin's Russia is more like Hitler's Germany in 1945 than the semi-democratic nation of 1918. In WW I, Germany's Reichstag had a small but vocal opposition party. Anti-war pamphlets had circulated for months. Germany had strong labor unions which held strikes and a relatively free press which kept the public (more or less) informed about the war's progress. In addition, the British naval blockade was highly effective, forcing Germany to drastically reduce food rations. By 1918 many civilians were desperate from hunger and deaths from malnutrition rising.

The situation in Putin's Russia is much different. There is no opposition party, no free press and dissent is ruthlessly repressed. Economic sanctions, so far, have not been very successful.

If the stalemate continues could the war be settled by negotiations?

So far, both sides remain mobilized and confident of victory. The leaders of Ukraine and several of its allies have insisted that Russia must be completely defeated. Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin said in January that "Ukraine has to win. I don't see another choice."

This kind of talk is often heard among warring parties before negotiations begin. As Robert Cialdini, a professor of psychology at Arizona State University and the author of *Influence: the Psychology of Persuasion* [observed](#):

“The truly gifted negotiator, then, is one whose initial position is exaggerated enough to allow for a series of concessions that will yield a desirable final offer from the opponent yet is not so outlandish as to be seen as illegitimate from the start.”

Although Ukrainian and Russian diplomats held a series of meetings shortly after the war began in February 2022, no agreements were reached and no talks have been held recently.

If serious peace negotiations do begin, the diplomats involved should remember the lessons of WW I. The [Treaty of Versailles](#), signed in June 1919, crippled the young German Republic and set the stage for the rise of the Nazi Third Reich.

Some prescient observers warned about this outcome as the Versailles talks concluded.

Economist John Maynard Keynes, an advisor to the British delegation declared it “one of the most serious acts of political unwisdom for which our statesmen have ever been responsible.”

French Field Marshall Ferdinand Foch, [warned](#) that "This is not peace, this is an armistice for 20 years."

Although Woodrow Wilson was unhappy with many terms of the final treaty, calling the reparations “harsh” and predicting that it would result in the German people “dreaming of vengeance,” he returned to America hoping to sell it and membership in the new League of Nations to Congress.

He failed. A newly elected Republican Congress rejected the peace treaty (the first time the U.S. had rejected a treaty ending a war) and declined to join the newly formed League of Nations. Wilson suffered a serious stroke in October 1919 and died in February 1924. His initial dream, that “the world must be made safe for democracy” died with him. ###

