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civilization, not just all those lives, but their very political, social and economic structures. Russia had started down the path to revolution in 1917, and, as the old regime collapsed, parts of the great Russian empire broke away. In the Caucasus, peoples such as the Armenians, the Azerbaijanis, and the Georgians, tried to set up independent states. Ukraine briefly had its own independent government. Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania fought for their freedom. Further west, the Austria-Hungarian Empire, that enormous empire, which had for so many centuries occupied the heart of Central Europe, fell into pieces in the last month of the Great War. The German Empire had collapsed and the monarchy had been replaced by a republic.

The peacemakers did their work in atmosphere of fear: first that they would never be able to put European civilization back together again but also that there was worse still to come. An image, used often during the Peace Conference, was that of being on the edge of a volcano which was about to blow up. This was not an unreasonable apprehension when you think of what they had already experienced by 1919. The Russian Revolution was still working itself out. The Civil War, between the Bolsheviks on the one hand, and a collection of anarchists, liberals, nationalists of various stripes, and the remnants of the old regime, was going on. It was not at all clear yet that the Bolsheviks would win. It was also very difficult to get any reliable information about what was happening in Russia. Most of the communications had been cut and virtually all foreign diplomats, journalists, and aid workers had left. In 1919 Russia was as unknown a country as Iraq was before the coalition defeated the forces of Saddam Hussein.

The Bolsheviks called on the left-wing forces of the world to rise up against their rulers and it seemed, for a time at least, that their call was successful. The fall of the monarchies in Austria-Hungary and Germany was marked by revolutionary upheavals. In a number of cities soviets—consciously named after the model in Russia—of workers and soldiers took power. Bavaria had a communist government briefly in the winter of 1919, and Hungary had one for several months in the spring and summer. Depending on your political perspective there were grounds for fear or for hope, that revolution was going to spread