

A pivotal point in history

The 20th century's three titanic events — World War I, World War II and the Cold War — were formally ended at this week's Paris summit.

Not with mighty fanfare, rather sadly, but with yawns from the assembled world leaders, many of whom were seen to doze off during long speeches about brotherhood and a new world order.

Such, I suppose, is the price one must pay for peace and a result of the overdose we've had of dramatic news over the past year.

The Paris summit was also overshadowed by impending war in the Gulf and domestic political challenges to French prime minister Rocard and Britain's Iron Lady, a badly dented Maggie Thatcher. Even so, what transpired at Paris was truly an epochal event, one that marks a major turning point in history.

By agreeing to massive conventional arms cuts, the Soviet Union finally ended its efforts to dominate Western Europe by sheer brute force. By giving up its military advantage, the USSR managed to achieve at Paris a key goal of Soviet foreign policy — inclusion into Europe. No longer are the Soviets to be treated like Mongols at the gates. From now on, they are respectable, bona fide members of the European club.

Ironically, the only thing that seems to be working these days in the Soviet Union is its foreign policy. The Paris agreements will still leave the USSR with the most powerful conventional military force between the Atlantic and China. They will also ensure that Moscow will be a leading player in future European politics.

Soviet diplomacy has accomplished what all of its mighty tank armies could not.

What the wily Mikhail Gorbachev did at Paris reminds me very much of Soviet policy at the 1918 treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

By 1917, Russia's armies had collapsed and the nation was gripped by revolution and civil war. Lenin, desperate above all to preserve the infant Communist party, signed a separate peace with Germany, with whom Russia was at war.

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At Brest-Litovsk, the Soviets gave almost everything away. They granted independence to Poland, the Baltic states, Ukraine and Georgia. Lenin followed the time-honored Russian strategy of trading land for time. He gambled — correctly, it turned out — that by ceding vast territories, he could buy enough time to save the communist revolution and then return to fight another day.

Stalin, in the ensuing decades, not only recovered all the losses of Brest-Litovsk but added to the Soviet Empire.

I suspect Gorbachev was following Lenin's example. The USSR is on the verge of economic collapse and political disintegration. Just as Russia was in 1917 and Germany was in 1918. In many ways, the Cold War was a repeat of World War I's long contest of economic attrition in which the Central Powers, led by Germany, finally collapsed first out of sheer exhaustion.

The same thing happened to the modern-day USSR. It simply went bankrupt trying to sustain the ruinously expensive, hi-tech Cold War against its rich foes, the U.S., Western Europe and Japan.

The big difference between 1918 and 1990 is in the policy of the victors.

The Allies, at the end of the Great War, knew exactly what they wanted. Imperial Britain and France ground Germany into the dirt, divided up the Ottoman Empire and imposed their influence on much of the world.

At Paris, by contrast, the victorious western allies did no such thing. Instead of World War I's Carthaginian peace, they treated the defeated USSR with kid gloves and have so far promised more than \$20 billion in emergency economic aid to Moscow. In fact, one might even say the West, led by the U.S., has won the Cold War but doesn't know what to do with its victory.

This may not be bad. The rapaciousness and cruelty of the World War I victors led directly to the rise of Hitler and World War II. At Paris, by contrast, the mood was similar to the end of World War II, when the U.S. wisely acted to democratize and rebuild defeated Japan and Germany rather than emasculate them, as Britain and France had tried to do to defeated Germany in 1918.

Another important difference: In 1945, the U.S. became the great power in Europe. The Paris accords, along with the emergence of a united Western Europe in 1992, will likely portend the rapid decline and perhaps even final exclusion of the U.S. from Europe's affairs. While the USSR has got into the club of Europe as a very junior member, the U.S. is being shown the door — ever so politely, but firmly.

Europe will now go on to become the centre of world affairs and, I suspect, will also gradually begin elbowing the U.S. out of its Mideast Raj.

Pretty exciting stuff, all this, and certainly worthy of more than the yawns we saw at Paris.