

## THE OVERBURDENED PEACE: COMPETING VISIONS OF WORLD ORDER IN 1918/19

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### I. Introduction: Two Impressions from the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles

The painter William Orpen was Great Britain's "official artist," commissioned by Prime Minister David Lloyd George to record the Paris Peace Conference. Orpen had access to all conference rooms, produced portraits of all the major politicians, and above all put the signing of the treaty on canvas (Figure 1). Orpen presented the signing of the Versailles peace treaty in the Hall of Mirrors on June 28, 1919, as a historical moment dominated mostly by white men, suggesting the sovereignty of peace makers who represented the architecture of a new global order of peace that would prevent a repetition of the inferno that had started in August 1914. But quite in contrast to the official painting of solemn diplomacy and secured stability Orpen remarked of that scene in the Hall of Mirrors that it "had not as much dignity as a sale at Christie's."<sup>1</sup>

Another impression of that same day highlighted a very different dimension of the peace. Another scene that took place in the same Hall of Mirrors illustrated the emotional charge of the treaty proceedings and the burdening of the postwar order with moral implications of guilt, crime and punishment. Before the German delegation was led into the hall, five severely wounded French soldiers were placed near the table where the German politicians would be required to sign the documents without any discussion. The French Prime Minister Clemenceau added to the drama by silently shaking the hands of the *cinq gueules cassées* before the act of signature. Afterwards, thousands of picture postcards (Figure 2) would raise the five soldiers to a symbol of the French war casualties — indeed, their disfigured features gave a face to the war itself, underlining the perception of German war guilt.<sup>2</sup>

In general, the symbolic overloading of the peace talks and the Versailles treaty with allusions to the German Empire was impossible to

1 William Orpen, *An Onlooker in France, 1917-1919* (London, 1921), 116; Marie-Louise von Plessen, ed., *Idee Europa: Entwürfe zum "Ewigen Frieden": Ordnungen und Utopien für die Gestaltung Europas von der pax romana zur Europäischen Union. Eine Ausstellung als historische Topographie. Katalogbuch zur gleichnamigen Ausstellung des Deutschen Historischen Museums* (Berlin, 2003), 243-244.

2 Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "Die Delegation der 'gueules cassées' in Versailles am 28. Juni 1919," in Gerd Krumeich, ed., *Versailles 1919: Ziele—Wirkung—Wahrnehmung* (Essen, 2001), 280-287; Verena Steller, *Diplomatie von Angesicht zu Angesicht: Diplomatische Handlungsformen in den deutsch-französischen Beziehungen 1870-1919* (Paderborn, 2013), 462-464; Sophie Delaporte, *Gueules cassées de la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 2004).



**Figure 1. William Orpen, *The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, 28th June 1919*. Oil on canvas, 1919. Imperial War Museum, public domain.**

overlook. Thomas Mann, for example, noted the rumor that Clemenceau planned to erect a statue of the Greek goddess Pallas Athena, the personification of wisdom, art, and science, in the hotel lobby where the German delegation would be handed the document. He saw this as a provocative attempt to exclude Germany from the community of Western civilization after the experience of the war. Yet to him it was the German people who were “opposing Bolshevism with the last of its strength and a *Landsknecht*’s rectitude.” “It is remarkable,” he went on, “that the aged Frenchman whose twilight years are brightened by this peace has *slit* eyes. Perhaps he has some right of blood to kill off Western civilization and to bring in Asia and its chaos.”<sup>3</sup>

The aim of my lecture is to contribute to an understanding of war and peace in 1918/19 by identifying the factors that help us better understand the ambivalence of the postwar situation, in which settlement and unsettlement, reconstructions and constructions, continuities and discontinuities often overlapped. I will not provide a detailed analysis of the many competing visions of world order but rather try to identify the frameworks for these visions.

I will advance in two steps, first by looking at the contradictions of the postwar order in more concrete and focused terms, and second by concentrating on the particular legacies of the war from a bird’s eye perspective. Both analytical operations may help us better understand the threshold of 1918/19. The mode of my analysis is more symptomatic than systematic. If I occasionally use numbers for my arguments, consider it typical of the way German academics try to hide the fact that they are close to surrendering to the complexity of a historical situation. But my surrender is not unconditional, I promise.

## **II. The Contradictions of the Postwar Order: Settlement and Unsettlement, Continuity and Discontinuity**

The experience of totalized warfare and the enormous number of victims after 1914 made any peace settlement based on compromise almost impossible. If the sacrifices made during the war were not

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Mann, “[Friede?],” in idem, *Große kommentierte Frankfurter Ausgabe*, vol. 15/1 (Frankfurt a.M., 2002), 249.

to have been in vain, only a peace based on a maximum of political and territorial gains seemed acceptable — this logic fueled and radicalized the discussion on war aims during the war and explains why the war could only end once one side was simply too exhausted in its military, economic and social resources to continue fighting. Ris-

ing expectations thus characterized all states and societies in 1918 combining the internal and external dimensions of politics. Furthermore, and in contrast to earlier end-of-war-constellations, politicians found themselves not only under enormous pressure from the prospect of democratic elections on the basis of reformed franchises, but also from a public remembering the manifold expectations which the war had brought about.

The period from 1919 to 1923 differed quite fundamentally from that of the Vienna Congress of 1814/15 in that there could not be a redefinition of the international order with regard to previous premises such as the balance of power. The expectations provoked and fueled by the war prevented a return to another confirmation of the pentarchy of five European powers under different circumstances. What contemporaries expected was no less than a new order transcending the earlier practices of territorial reshuffling designed to guarantee state sovereignty and internal stability and to keep the international system free from ideological polarizations. Both the Bolshevik's and Wilson's promises to combine a new world order with, respectively, the idea of world revolution or democratic values and national self-determination reflected Europe's exhaustion by 1917 as well as the global longing for a model of politics that would combine external security and internal stability in the name of a progressive ideal that would prevent any future war. From this perspective, the postwar era was less one of reconstruction, or restauration, or a return to the pre-1914 *ancien régime* of politics, but a complex and contradictory combination of construction and reconstruction that led to new



**Figure 2. Postcard showing “Les gueules cassées” (1919). Historial de la Grande Guerre — Péronne (Somme).**

entanglements between the spheres of society and public on the one hand and the international system on the other.<sup>4</sup>

The American president, Woodrow Wilson, based his vision on a very suggestive analysis of the factors that in his view had caused the world war: 1914 could not have been an accident. Instead, Wilson interpreted it as the consequence of a misguided European system of militarization, the uncontrolled development of state power, of secret diplomacy and autocratic empires, which had suppressed the rights and interests of national minorities. The counter model that he proposed seemed all the more promising since it stood in contrast to the exhausted models of European liberalism and offered an alternative not just in terms of content but of political style. The traditional focus on the balance of power and the sovereignty of states was shifted to international law, the idea of collective security, the League of Nations as an international forum, and the premise of national self-determination as the basis for redrawing borders. Wilson called for a quasi-universal democratization of both national societies and the international order, thereby bridging the gap between domestic politics and the international system. In this way Wilson's and Lenin's ideas were not just to be applied to national minorities within continental European empires, but from 1917 onwards also took on a global meaning in China and Korea as well as in India or in South America. Yet the result was not a simplistic "Wilsonian Moment," as if one could translate Wilson and American war propaganda into liberation movements seeking emancipation from colonial or quasi-colonial oppression. Instead, the war produced its own version of the tension between universalism and particularism, between universalistic concepts and a rhetoric that allowed particular constellations, conflicts, and interests to be integrated into global entanglements.

At least eight factors seem to characterize the situation after 1918:

(1) The implementation of the new postwar order depended on a complicated cooperation between Wilson, European politicians, and diplomatic elites, all of whom came to Paris with their own views on key concepts such as security, sovereignty, or national interest and with their own particular experience of the war as well as the lessons they derived from it. As a result many visions of world order became compromised and often overshadowed by premises such as the French obsession with security against possible attack by Germany, or the strong anti-Bolshevist position held by Wilson himself and British Prime Minister David Lloyd George.<sup>5</sup> Therefore

4 Manfred F. Boemeke, Gerald D. Feldman, and Elisabeth Glaser, eds., *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 years* (Cambridge, 1998); Krumeich, ed., *Versailles 1919*; Zara Steiner, "The Treaty of Versailles Revisited," in Michael Dockrill, ed., *The Paris Peace Conference, 1919. Peace without victory?* (Basingstoke, 2001), 13-33; Jean-Jacques Becker, *La traité de Versailles* (Paris, 2002); Jeff Hay, ed., *The Treaty of Versailles* (San Diego, 2002); Eberhard Kolb, *Der Frieden von Versailles* (Munich, 2005); David A. Andelman, *A Shattered Peace: Versailles 1919 and the Price We Pay Today* (Hoboken, 2008); Timothy Baycroft and Conan Fischer, eds., *After the Versailles Treaty: Enforcement, Compliance, Contested Identities* (London, 2008); Alan Sharp, ed., *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking after the First World War, 1919-1923*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2008).

5 Caroline Fink, "The Peace Settlement, 1919-1939", in John Horne, ed., *A Companion to World War I* (Malden, Mass., 2010), 543-557.

the five treaties — Versailles with Germany, in June 1919; Saint-Germain with Austria, in September 1919; Neuilly with Bulgaria, in November 1919; Trianon with Hungary, in June 1920; and Sèvres with the Ottoman Empire, in August 1920 — never fully represented the complexity of a new reality.<sup>6</sup>

The postwar settlement was based on competing ideas of a new order and a new narrative of international stability being decided upon in Paris. In fact, fundamental developments during and immediately after the war had already generated their own new realities in a number of conflict zones. Thus the tri-national Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was already in existence and only sought international recognition at the Paris Peace Conference while in the Near East effective boundaries between zones of interest had already been defined by Britain and France during the war on the basis of the 1916 Sykes-Picot-Agreement — and were contradicted by other promises such as that of an Arab state in return for an Arab uprising against Ottoman rule or, according to the Balfour Declaration of November 1917, a homeland for Jews in Palestine.

Contrary to the idea of a break from the past and the promise of national self-determination, the colonial empires of France and Britain were not reduced but actually expanded when former German colonies and mandate zones in the former Ottoman Empire became integrated into the existing colonial empires. The end of the war marked a peak moment in the history of European imperialism and a new relation between apparent centers and peripheries. However, as responses from colonial societies in Asia and Africa proved and as William DuBois would realize at the Pan-African Congress, which started in Paris in February 1919, the response to 1918 was not simply a move toward liberation and decolonization, but rather a broad spectrum: hope for colonial reform, a renewed focus on assimilation, or the fight for a better status within colonial hierarchies — the alternatives were not limited to colonial regime or independence. Very often, as the events in Amritsar in April 1919 as well as conflicts in Egypt proved, local factors played a decisive role in escalating conflicts.

(2) If there was a break with the past after 1918, it was the end of monarchical empires on the European continent, but not the end of imperialism or the concept of empire as such — these continued in new forms even after the end of formal empires. In sharp contrast to the settlement of 1814/15, which brought about a reconfiguration and reformulation of the monarchical principle — ranging

6 Ivan T. Berend, *The Crisis Zone of Europe. An Interpretation of East Central European History on the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1986); Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen, eds., *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-building: The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires* (Boulder, 1997); Magda Ádám, *The Versailles System and Central Europe* (Aldershot, 2004).

from parliamentary to constitutional to autocratic variations of monarchy — the watershed of 1919/23 separated the idea of empire from that of monarchy. After 1923 there was no major monarchy left on the European continent east of the Rhine and in the whole Eurasian sphere, since monarchy had already been abolished in China in 1911, and in Turkey the sultanate was no more than a symbolic bridge between the imperial past and the Turkish Republic founded in 1923 following the successful revision of the treaty of Sèvres.<sup>7</sup> If in 1814/15 monarchy had been regarded as a prime instrument to achieve and guarantee internal stability and external security, this belief was delegitimized and destroyed during and by the First World War.

(3) The creation of new states with particular historical legitimacies could take the form of an apparent reconstruction as in the case of Poland. But in fact this had less to do with the peace settlement in Paris than with the 1920 war of liberation started by the Poles under Pilsudski in the shadow of the Great War. This war corresponded to earlier models of nation-building through wars of liberation, amalgamating elements of civil war and inter-state war against a foreign power that was perceived as an imperial oppressor. Here, as in the case of Ireland in 1916, the legacy of nineteenth-century premises of nation-building through war was decisive.

What the Paris settlement established was a new mixture and fragile balance between rump states formed by the former centers of empires — Austria and Hungary as well as the Turkish Republic after the successful revision of the treaty of Sèvres by the treaty of Lausanne in 1923 — and new states in the former peripheries of empires, be it nation states, as in the case of Finland or the Baltic states, or the new creations of bi- and tri-national states as in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. For many of these new states and their societies, “Paris” did not necessarily serve as a positive national narrative: neither Polish nor Irish narratives of their respective nation-state building referred to the Paris treaties in order to gain legitimacy. Many politicians from new states in Eastern Europe felt betrayed by the Little Versailles Treaty they had to sign on June 28, 1919, thereby accepting rules for protecting ethnic minorities in their countries. In their eyes this treaty damaged their newly acquired sovereignty.

In contrast, “Paris” generated suggestive narratives in a negative sense, for Germans, Austrians and Hungarians in particular; for these actors the negative reference fueled aggressive revisionisms

7 A. L. Macfie, “The Revision of the Treaty of Sèvres: The First Phase (August 1920-September 1922),” *Balkan Studies* 24 (1983): 57-88; Sevtap Demirci, *Strategies and Struggles: British Rhetoric and Turkish Response: The Lausanne Conference 1922-1923* (Istanbul, 2005).

or led, as in the case of China and India, to a complicated search for alternative ideologies.

(4) The postwar reconstruction included a number of contradictions that weakened the peacemakers' credibility. Defining and applying the concept of national self-determination depended on political and ideological premises — from the French obsession with national security to the anti-Bolshevik reflex of many European politicians. National self-determination was accepted and welcomed in order to confirm secessionist nation-building in the periphery of former continental empires. But the German Austrians were prevented from joining the German nation state despite their obvious determination.<sup>8</sup>

A number of contradictions emerged when universalistic concepts were discussed with a view to practical politics: traditional connotations of state sovereignty and national interest stood in contrast with the new idea of collective security; bilateralism continued despite the ideal of multilateralism.

The most fundamental contradiction developed around the concept of national self-determination, because it was coupled with the historically or racially defined “maturity” of peoples — and was not applied to colonial contexts. When introduced by Lenin and Wilson, the principle of national self-determination seemed to denote an ideal of simple and clear solutions, following J. S. Mill's premise that free institutions were impossible to imagine in a state with multiple nationalities.<sup>9</sup> But efforts to apply the principle in practice revealed the complex realities of often overlapping or competing identities, especially in borderlands — and large parts of Eastern and Southeastern Europe after 1919 became characterized by features of borderlands. Hence a few plebiscites were held in Upper Silesia and Schleswig, but not, for instance, in Teschen where the situation was so complicated that even experts did not know how to realize a plebiscite. Often the plebiscite presupposed a particular knowledge of national belonging that did not exist in practice. As a result, final decisions were in most cases made by commissions and in consultation with representatives who often had no democratic legitimacy at all. This further weakened the postwar settlement's reputation.<sup>10</sup>

(5) The triumphant ideal of the nation state, which corresponded to the negative narrative of autocratic empires doomed to failure, generated its own problems and cost. Adhering to the model of ethnically homogeneous nation states led to the practice of segregating

8 Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora: Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Munich, 2014), 953.

9 John Stuart Mill, “Considerations on Representative Government” (1861), in John Gray, ed., *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1991), 203-467, here: 291-294.

10 Anthony Lentin, “Decline and Fall of the Versailles Settlement,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 4 (1993): 358-375.

multi-ethnic territories. The dimensions of ethnic violence in the name of this principle had become obvious already well before 1914, in particular during the Balkan Wars. But the experience of the world war added to this the dimension of the war state, its infrastructures and its means of violence, the vocabulary of “necessity,” “mobilization,” and “loyalty.”<sup>11</sup> The consequences became clear in the Armenian genocide, which continued well after 1918/19, but also in the mass expulsions and ethnic violence between Greeks and Turks after 1919. Regarding the space for violent social and demographic engineering in the name of the ethnically homogeneous nation state, there was a clear continuity from the prewar period to wartime and into the postwar period. In fact, one could argue that from this perspective the war lasted from 1908 to 1923, at least in the southeastern part of Europe. Here the dividing lines between inter-state war, civil war, and ethnic warfare became blurred.<sup>12</sup>

11 Martin Schulze Wessel, ed., *Loyalitäten in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik 1918-1938: Politische, nationale und kulturelle Zugehörigkeiten* (Munich, 2004).

12 Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Philipp Ther, *Die dunkle Seite der Nationalstaaten: “Ethnische Säuberungen” im modernen Europa* (Göttingen, 2011).

13 Keith Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, 2006).

14 Miron Rezun, ed., *Nationalism and the Breakup of an Empire: Russia and Its Periphery* (Westport, Conn., 1992); Chris J. Chulos, *The Fall of an Empire, the Birth of a Nation: National Identities in Russia* (Aldershot, 2000); Terry Martin and Ronald Suny, *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford, 2001); Susanne Michele Birgerson, *After the Breakup of a Multi-Ethnic Empire: Russia, Successor States, and Eurasian Security* (Westport, 2002); Nick Baron, *Homelands: War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia 1918-1924* (London, 2004).

(6) The postwar settlement’s legitimacy was further weakened by the fact that various actors either withdrew from the political forum of the international system, as in the case of the United States despite their economic and monetary presence in Europe, or were excluded from the new system already in 1919, as in the case of Germany and the Soviet Union. Both were forced to find other means of overcoming their international isolation; in that respect the treaty of Rapallo illustrated the continuity of bilateral diplomacy and its importance over collective security, as did the treaty of Locarno.<sup>13</sup> The case of the Soviet Union was particular from another perspective as well: Despite Lenin’s rhetoric of national self-determination, the political practice of the interwar period revealed a very imperial practice of a multi-ethnic state in which autonomy was the exception, not the rule.<sup>14</sup>

(7) The hitherto unknown number of war victims that had to be legitimized through the results of the peace, thus radicalizing war aims, the ideal of a new international order that would make future wars impossible, as well as the new mass markets of public deliberation and the new relation between “international” and “domestic” politics in an age of mass media and democratic franchise: all these factors contributed to massive disillusion and disappointment when the results of the peace settlement became apparent. Turning away from the new international order, which seemed to have lost its legitimacy very quickly, paved the way for multiple revisionisms. These, in turn, could be easily used in domestic conflicts. Foreign



political revisionism provided the ammunition for political conflicts and ideological polarization within postwar societies. That was the case not only in Germany or Hungary, but also in Italy. Hence the “vittoria mutilata” corresponded well to the various stab-in-the-back-myths and narratives of conspiracy or treason which would further weaken the reputation of postwar liberal political regimes.<sup>15</sup> For the defeated Germans, the economic and monetary legacy of the peace settlement — the reparations — linked any domestic political conflict easily to the trauma of Versailles. This development poisoned German political culture and prevented the evolution of a positive republican narrative after 1918.

In a global perspective a similar disappointment was obvious in China, where protests against Western and Japanese imperialism led to the Fourth-of-May Movement and to a national revolution, as well as in India or the Arab world, where promised independence turned into the reality of mandates in which French and British colonial rule continued. Only Turkey succeeded in overcoming the constraints imposed by the treaty of Sèvres by violence. After 1923 and the establishment of the Turkish Republic it was the only example of a “saturated” power that did not pursue any further revisionist aims.<sup>16</sup>

(8) A last contradiction contained in the settlement can be seen in the tension between the politics and the economics of the treaty system. This was clear to many critical observers of the Paris Peace Conference, as John Maynard Keynes’ contemporary interpretation indicated. In his book on “The Economic Consequences of the Peace,” Keynes argued that the reparations would not only burden the international economic recovery but also contribute to the social instability of Germany.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, 1918/19 witnessed an amalgam of constructions and deconstructions after the First World War in which the spheres of domestic and international politics became ever more entangled.

The idea of an internationalization of political deliberation in the League of Nations proved to be partially successful: now there was a public forum, albeit without executive power to implement collective security, as Japan’s aggression against Manchuria was to demonstrate in 1931/32. But as the examples of the administration of the free city of Danzig, of the Saarland and of the League of Nations mandates proved, the role of the League could be constructive, and in contrast to the prewar period, there now existed a range of institutions

15 Antonio Gibelli, “Italy,” in John Horne, ed., *A Companion to World War I* (Oxford, 2010), 464-478, here: 472-475.

16 Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora*, 963.

17 Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement*, 205-206.

(International Court of Justice in Den Haag, International Labor Office in Geneva) that allowed a public and international focus on minorities as well as on problems of labor and international law.

The postwar period was characterized by elements of continuity and discontinuity: There had been no simple antagonism between empires and nation states before 1914, but rather a complex combination between nationalizing empires and imperializing nation states, and after the formal end of the war there was no simple antagonism between the end of “bad” empires and the triumph of “good” nation states. The end of autocratic and monarchical systems and the breaking up of multi-ethnic continental empires were followed by the creation of new nation states, which were often neither democratic nor stable and which sought classic alliances instead of relying on promises of collective security in order to survive in a world of aggressive revisionisms.<sup>18</sup>

If there was a triumph of the homogeneous nation state model, it became more and more dissociated from the democratic principle in practice, and it came at the enormous cost of mass expulsions and ethnic violence, demonstrating the potential of destructive utopias. This triumph of the nation state did not replace the idea of empire; instead, it co-existed with continuities of old empires in new formats — as in the Soviet Union and, to a certain degree, in Turkey as well — with the maximum expansion of the colonial empires of France and Britain and with new imperial aspirations, as in the case of Japan and the United States. The tradition of imperializing nation states certainly resurfaced again during the interwar years, but now in a radicalized form, with revisionism turning into new and radical aspirations for empire — building in Germany and Italy.

### **III. Legacies of the War: 1918/19 and the Threshold of Experiences and Expectations**

#### **(1) The End of State War and the Continuity of Violence**

At the time people were immediately aware that the result of the war was not just a question of the scale of its casualties; the upshot of it all could not be measured by the millions of dead soldiers and civilians. There was something more fundamentally new in the character of the violence. Unlike in the Second World War, the victims were still mostly soldiers, yet there was a new dimension of violence against the civilian population especially in Belgium and northern France,

<sup>18</sup> Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora*, 967-970.

in Serbia, Armenia, and many parts of Eastern Europe. The bleeding of areas affected by the war, the ruined cities, factories, streets, and railroads, gave some idea of what future wars might hold in store. Many of the dead were from hitherto dependent peoples within empires in regions as different as Poland, India, Africa, and East Asia. The lingering effects of the war included the army of wounded and the need for long-term public provision for war invalids. It was they who gave a face to the war in peacetime.

The war had revealed what was possible in the name of the nation and nation state, and what was possible had become evident in the widespread breaking of taboos and loss of inhibitions. A specific kind of “European socialization,” which had developed since the late seventeenth century against a background of religious civil wars, was entering into crisis.<sup>19</sup> That order had been based on the idea of a set of rules to regulate wars, to prevent conflicts between sovereign states from escalating, to channel violence and make it calculable. After the experiences of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, this order had again been successful in the period between 1815 and 1914 — and for a long time the international order had proved flexible in adjusting to new nation states and imperial expansion. But that epoch came to an end with the First World War. Between August 1914 and November 1918, European countries lost the ability to achieve external and internal peace on their own or to trust that it would continue in the long term. This marked a watershed in the global perception of Europe and the credibility of the international model represented by its states.

The victor of the world war was not a nation, a state, or an empire, and its outcome was not a world without war. The true victor was war itself — the principle of war and the possibility of total violence. In the long run, this weighed all the more heavily because it contradicted a *leitmotif* that had developed during the war and for many had been a decisive reason to continue it with all possible means. The belief that a last ferocious war had to be waged against the principle of war itself, the confidence that the world war was “the war that will end war,” would end in bitter disappointment.<sup>20</sup> For as the world war came to an end, and despite all the rhetoric about a new international order, the principle of war — of violent change through the mobilization of all available resources — actually received a boost that would last long after 1918, not only in the areas of the collapsed Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires, but also outside Europe.

19 Michael Geyer, “Urkatastrophe, Europäischer Bürgerkrieg, Menschenschlachthaus — Wie Historiker dem Epochenbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges Sinn geben,” in Rainer Rother, ed., *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918: Ereignis und Erinnerung* (Berlin, 2004), 24–25.

20 Herbert G. Wells, *The War That Will End War* (London, 1914).

The period immediately after November 11, 1918 already showed that military violence was still a method of choice: to establish or round off new nation states, as in Ireland and Poland; to help an ideology to victory in a bloody civil war, as in Russia; or to revise the terms of a peace treaty, as in Turkey.<sup>21</sup> What had begun in the summer of 1914 as essentially an inter-state war branched out in 1917 into new forms of violence, often overlapping with one another, that lasted far beyond the formal end of the war in the West: wars of independence, nation-building wars, ethnic conflicts, and civil wars. These experiences challenge the rigid chronology of the 1914-1918 war. Instead, for Eastern and Southeastern Europe, it was the period stretching from the Bosnian annexation crisis of 1908 through the Balkan wars of 1912/13 to the Peace of Lausanne in 1923 that constituted a relative unity.

Whether used against enemy troops or against civilians in occupied zones, the violence of the world war varied in time and space according to particular constellations. For all the planning euphoria and technological or infrastructural developments, it remained an instrument of domination whose logic and dynamic repeatedly took it beyond the original political or strategic intentions.

It was not the instruments of violence as such but their ideologization that contained elements of total war. After the excesses of the wars of religion, the early modern age had witnessed attempts to decriminalize the enemy, to recognize him as a *iustus hostis*, but now these were giving way to a moralization of politics and a focus on war guilt. As the war went on, the tendency to absolutize and instrumentalize the antagonism between friend and enemy, loyalty and betrayal, gave rise to more radical expectations and utopian visions of victorious peace and territorial control. Attempts were often made to legitimize ethnic violence — the Armenian genocide, for example, or the mass expulsions of Greeks and Turks — by reference to the right to self-defense. Since the distinction between external and internal foes was less and less clear and anyone could suddenly see themselves surrounded by enemies, violence appeared to be an indispensable last resort to ensure survival in hostile surroundings. And the theme of self-defense lived on: in the defeated societies, for example, reference to the continuation of the war in the guise of the peace treaties was often used to justify defensive action even against the state itself on account of its acceptance of the treaty terms. This was a decisive argument for both the radical right and the radical left, for *Freikorps*, vigilante groups, and other paramilitary organizations.<sup>22</sup>

21 Renée Hirschon, *Crossing the Aegean: The Consequences of the 1923 Greek-Turkish Population Exchange. An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange between Greece and Turkey* (New York, 2004).

22 Martin Geyer, *Verkehrte Welt: Revolution, Inflation und Moderne, München 1914-1924* (Göttingen, 1998), 379-396.

## **(2) From Languages of Loyalty to the Ethnicization of Politics**

In all wartime societies, the criteria of national affiliation and political loyalty became more exacting. Struggle against the external enemy was compounded by widespread suspicion of supposedly hostile aliens — businessmen in Moscow, for example, or artisans in London or Boston whose ancestors came from Germany or Austria-Hungary. The Irish in Britain, Jews in Germany, or left-wingers in a number of countries were also looked upon as disloyal elements who tended to weaken or sabotage the national war effort. The result was a practice of inclusion and exclusion, and a sharpening of external and internal enemy images. Putative threats provoked overreactions, nowhere more so than in Anglo-Saxon countries that had previously been spared the direct effects of war. Social conflicts and economic problems, including the demand for fair burden-sharing, showed a striking tendency to become ethnicized: that is, to be viewed in terms of ethnic or racial lines of divide. The war brought a new intensity to social communication, spawning special slangs and vocabularies related to service, duty, and sacrifice, or centered on the exigencies of endurance and perseverance. But many of these linguistic expressions of loyalty fell apart as the gap between expectations and experiences widened. For many people, the ever tighter criteria for national affiliation eventually meant a basic uprooting, a sense of no longer being at home. In this sense, the war may be said to have produced a “utopia,” a no-place.

## **(3) Close Victories and Myths of Betrayal**

Why did the war not end earlier, despite the evident cost-benefit discrepancy and the many peace feelers put out in and after 1916? It ended only when the exhaustion on one side deactivated the mechanism that had ensured its continuation until then. Part of this mechanism was the openness of the military situation right until the final weeks, which made victory appear possible for either side and therefore made any concession seem a potentially serious weakening of one’s own position. Furthermore, the colossal death toll, the army of invalids, and the host of impecunious widows and orphans made peace without victory seem a bleak and compromising prospect, which would devalue the sacrifices and rob any postwar social-political order of legitimacy. Paradoxical though it may sound, the growing number of casualties barred any way back on all sides. But since the outcome was so unpredictable until late in 1918, the eventual defeat of Germany and its allies came as such a surprise,

such an inexplicable turnaround, that many attributed it to treachery behind the lines. This was a critical difference between 1918 and 1945. In May 1945, the unconditional surrender left no room for such constructs; the very principle of the German nation state was set aside. In 1918, there was a lingering sense of an unexplained defeat, or even a victory that Germany had been cheated out of at the last minute. This poisoned the postwar political climate. References to a barely missed victory and guilty parties meant withholding acceptance of the defeat, and obligating the nation state to seek a revision of the treaty because only that could give it legitimacy after November 1918 and June 1919.<sup>23</sup> But this prolonged the war in peacetime — internally within German society and externally in the context of the international order.

#### **(4) Reversing Spaces of Experience and Horizons of Expectation**

The rupture that became so obvious since 1917, and not only in the competing visions of a future order formulated in Washington and Petrograd, points to the particular relation between expectations and experiences that changed radically in the course of the war. Walter Benjamin wrote in 1933:

No, this much is clear: experience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world. ... For never has experience been contradicted so thoroughly: strategic experience has been contravened by positional warfare; economic experience, by the inflation; physical experience, by hunger; moral experiences by the ruling powers. A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.<sup>24</sup>

What was the consequence of this dynamic devaluation of expectations by an explosion of new war experiences since the summer of 1917? German historian Reinhart Koselleck has argued that in the early modern period horizons of expectation (*Erwartungshorizonte*) and spaces of experience (*Erfahrungsräume*) were connected to each other by a cyclical regime of temporality. According to Koselleck's premise of a particular *Sattelzeit* (transition period) of modern ideological vocabularies, this relation changed between 1770 and 1850,

23 Hans-Christof Kraus, *Versailles und die Folgen: Außenpolitik zwischen Revisionismus und Verständigung 1919–1933* (Berlin, 2013), 15–33.

24 Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty (December 1933)," in idem, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927–1934, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 730–736, here: 731–732.

because expectations went far beyond experiences and thus became the motor for modern ideological “isms,” from liberalism and socialism to nationalism. The global war that had started in the summer of 1914 resulted in a process that reversed this basic relation between experiences and expectations. From strategic scenarios to political plans and national anticipations: they were all consumed, devaluated, and questioned by the war in ever shorter time cycles. By 1917 the result was both a vacuum and a growing demand for new visions of world order against a backdrop of increasing numbers of war victims and war burdens all around the world. This explains the rise of new, often much more radical expectations, the almost messianic perception of both Lenin and Wilson, and the highly problematic management of rising expectations on all levels once the war was over. It explains, in other words, the overburdening of peace, which at the same time marked the possible disappointment, the disillusionment, and its translation into revolutionary energies, and into new regimes of violence that transcended 1917, 1918, and 1919.

### **(5) Competing Visions and a Revolution of Rising Expectations**

The war unleashed a succession of ever rising expectations. This was apparent in the aggressive early debates on war aims and in self-images and enemy-images that became ever more radical as the casualties mounted. Actors on all sides promised to mobilize new forces and to win new allies, whether among national movements in the multinational empires or among relatively new nation states, which in the case of Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, or Romania sought to expand their territory and thereby complete the process of nation-building. Hopes that participation in the war might change their place in the imperial configuration were part of this same context — which in the Habsburg monarchy came down to federalization with a greater degree of autonomy and in the British Empire to Home Rule, dominion status, or outright independence. In the end, the appearance of President Wilson on the scene decisively boosted and globalized this dynamic of diverse and often contradictory expectations — among Poles and Italians, Arabs and Indians, as well as in many Asian societies. The war again seemed an opportunity for worldwide restructuring in the name of universal principles, a chance to overcome imperial domination. The concept of national self-determination fueled manifold expectations of a comprehensive recasting of the European and global order. At a point when the military, social, economic, and monetary exhaustion of the European

belligerents had become all too obvious, the entry of the United States into the war decisively contributed to the elevation of Wilson to a kind of messianic savior figure. Clearly, though, his policies led to a final surge of contradictory and ultimately incompatible expectations.

This was the basic problem of the Paris peace treaties and the related attempts to create a new international order. The hopes pinned on the new universalistic promises since 1917 in South America, Asia, Egypt, India, and elsewhere ended in bitter disappointment. The war constantly gave rise to excessive expectations, but since the postwar order blocked them (in China, Egypt, or India) or only partially fulfilled them (in Italy, for example), an unpredictable chain of disenchantment stretched far beyond the immediate victors and losers. This, too, sharpened debate after 1918 over the future viability of political and social models — liberalism and parliamentarism as much as capitalism and colonialism.

#### **(6) From the *Translatio imperii* to the New Tension between Nationalisms and Internationalism**

The war marked the end of the classical European pentarchy as new global players appeared on the scene in the shape of the United States and Japan. This occurred not as a simple dissolution, a kind of *translatio imperii* in the shadow of war, but as a complex and contradictory overlapping process. The end of the continental European empires and the maximization of the British and French colonial empires, the transition from zones of imperial rule to “imperial overstretching” was part of the legacy of the world war. Above all, the war left behind long-term zones of violence in East, East Central, and Southeast Europe, where the accelerated collapse of state structures resulted in cycles of violence, expulsion, and civil war. Here, mistrust of the staying power of political systems and the stability of personal life worlds, together with fears that violence might break out at any time became the signature mark of the twentieth century. Long-term zones of conflict arose out of the collapsing land empires: they still exist today in Yugoslavia, the Middle East, and Kurdish areas. The rise of political Islam after the end of the Ottoman Empire and the demise of the caliphate is another legacy of the war.

Part of the legacy of the war was a new tension between nationalism and internationalism. All European protagonists in the conflict embraced the principle of the nation and the nation state to win new allies, and in each case territorial ambitions drove the decision to join



the war.<sup>25</sup> It also gave rise to contradictory expectations that people could not shake off after the end of the war. Thus not only hopes of political participation but also fully fledged nationalist horizons took shape, especially in the societies of the multinational empires. This explains Tomáš Masaryk's work in exile in London and the United States, the German support for Ukrainian and Finnish nationalists, the competition between Germans and Russians for Polish support in return for a promise of extensive national autonomy, the support of London and Paris for Palestinian and Arab independence movements against the Ottoman Empire, but also the British fears of Ottoman plans to stir Indians into revolt against British rule.

After the war an ethnic-national model caught on in the new states, even though in most of the affected territories it was not possible to draw clear ethnic boundaries. The consequences were complex minority problems. From the 1920s, German-speaking minorities in East Central Europe became a key factor in Germany's foreign policy and its efforts to revise the Versailles treaty. The new states in the region appealed to Wilson's principle of national self-determination, but they also contained large ethnic groups that did not see themselves as part of the nation in question, or were not seen as part of it by the state. This ethnicization of the idea of statehood entailed inadequate safeguards for minorities, since the new nation states regarded the guarantees in the Paris treaties as unacceptable interference in their newly won sovereignty.

Wilson's hoped-for peace settlement under the aegis of democracy and national self-determination proved to be fragile: the nation state did not become the active core of collective security; the "International of Peace" remained a chimera. The League of Nations failed as the forum of a new security culture, because at no point could it offer a significant counterweight to the aggression and revanchist ambitions of nation states. Indeed, by excluding the defeated countries at the outset, it actually encouraged forms of revisionist politics that deviated from its statutes. But the other international utopia also remained in play. The Communist International did not become an institution stabilizing international class solidarity, but rather an instrument of ideological polarization within European societies and the world as a whole.

Nevertheless, the war gave a definite impetus to the internationalization of such problems as the integration and repatriation of refugees and prisoners of war. In Eastern Europe, more than a million prisoners of war were confronted with the fact that their home states had

25 Michael E. Esch, "Zur historischen Verortung von 'ethnischer Säuberung' und Völkermord," in Mathias Beer, Dietrich Beyrau, and Cornelia Rauh, eds., *Deutschsein als Grenzerfahrung. Minderheitenpolitik in Europa zwischen 1914 und 1950* (Essen, 2009), 15-34, here: 27-28.

simply ceased to exist, and that successor states were neither able nor willing to concern themselves with their release and repatriation. These issues stretched across national boundaries, and the activities of the League of Nations and other organizations such as the Red Cross unfolded in this context.

More important than this legacy and the international cooperation to overcome it was the utopian dimension of internationalism and its promise of an end to war between states. The abstract line from individual through family and nation to a single humanity was already a major theme for many people during the war. In 1916 Ernst Joël referred “to the paradoxical fact today ... that the community of the truly patriotic is an international, supranational” community.<sup>26</sup> Henri Barbusse, the author of the savagely critical war novel *Le Feu*, emphasized in 1918: “Humanity instead of nation. The revolutionaries of 1789 said: ‘All Frenchmen are equal.’ We should say: ‘All men.’ Equality demands common laws for everyone who lives on earth.”<sup>27</sup> This hope, that the war and its gigantic sacrifices should not have been in vain and must lead to the creation of a new global order, has still not lost its normative claim today. But no one will claim that humanity, however much closer it has become, is a real subject of action. The disappointment of global hopes — “a war that will end war” — became a basic experience for people living in the twentieth century.

26 Ernst Joël, “Kameradschaft,” in *Das Ziel: Aufrufe zu tätigem Geist*, ed. Kurt Hiller (Munich, 1916), 156-166, here: 162.

27 Henri Barbusse, *La lueur dans l'abîme* (Paris, 1920), 92.

28 Reinhart Koselleck, “Patriotismus. Gründe und Grenzen eines neuzeitlichen Begriffs,” in idem, *Begriffsgeschichten* (Frankfurt a. M., 2006), 218-239, here: 238-239.

29 Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, eds., *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington, Ind., 2013); Jörn Leonhard, “Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe’s First World War — A Commentary from a Comparative Perspective,” in Jochen Böhrer, Włodzimierz Borodziej, and Joachim von Puttkamer, eds., *Legacies of Violence. Eastern Europe’s First World War* (Munich, 2014), 319-326.

The transformation of the discourse on foreign policy into a domestic policy of the world indicates that conflicts have not been resolved but re-emerge in a different form: we are no longer confronted with state wars but with asymmetric civil wars and eroding boundaries between war and terrorism, between armies and militias, between combatants and non-combatants.<sup>28</sup>

The global conflict zones in Eastern Europe, in the former Yugoslavia, and in the Near and Middle East remind us of the “shatterzones” of multi-ethnic empires and the long shadow of empires after their collapse.<sup>29</sup> If Pandora’s Box was opened in August 1914, some of the violent legacies of this war are still with us today. This past is and will remain very present.

#### IV. Outlook: The Tenses of History

Anyone who wishes to understand the First World War would do well not to treat it as a chronological unit with a simple “before and after”; consideration of the range of diversity and the thresholds of difference is enough to cast doubt on the idea of a simple continuum.

This war, seen from within the time of those who experienced it, is a particularly striking piece of evidence for the openness of the “future past” tense of history. At best, therefore, even in retrospect a degree of uncertainty remains about the outcome of things that had hitherto seemed familiar.<sup>30</sup>

From this perspective, it is too simplistic to see the First World War as the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth — for it always had elements of both continuity and discontinuity. The generation of frontline combatants might have become the ideal targets for political-ideological mobilization, yet despite all the hardships the war did not lead to an ongoing brutalization of all societies in the interwar period. There was no straightforward continuum from the trenches to the regimes of ideological violence in the 1920s and 1930s. The war did not simply continue in calls for a revision of the peace settlement; numerous veterans, as in France after 1918, rejected war in principle on the basis of their own experiences.

What did change was how the potential for violence was seen in light of a new kind of perplexity, an age of fractures that made it necessary to come up with new categories. No new stable order, whether social, political, or international, was discernible after 1918. But the new models of the Bolsheviks or the Italian Fascists turned unmistakably against the liberal legacy of the nineteenth century, not least in their propensity to violence and terror. This had to do with the diverse experiences of the world war, the passages from inter-state war to revolution and civil war, as well as with the disappointed expectations common in many societies. At any event, by 1930 the model of the liberal-constitutional state and parliamentary government seemed to have its future behind it.

After 1945, the history of unfettered violence amid the catastrophes and disintegration of the first half of the century gave way, at least in Europe, to a peaceful age marked by cold war stability and the advent of democratic mass society, first in the West and after 1989/91 also in the East. It seemed as if the second half of the century was being used to heal the wounds inflicted since August 1914. When the last surviving soldiers of the Great War died a few years ago, when the transition from communicative recollections to cultural memories was nearing its completion, the public attention given to this temporal marker reflected a deeper layer of experience. The fact that this was much more intense in Britain and France than in Germany had historical reasons: it pointed to a continuing tendency in Germany

30 Henning Ritter, *Notizhefte*, 4th ed. (Berlin, 2010), 266.

for the Second World War and the Holocaust to be superimposed on the memory of the First World War; here the First World War is not the past but the pre-past. For a moment, the death of the last *poilu* and Tommy made visible those strata of time in which the earlier shines through in the later: that is, in our necessary knowledge of the essentially cruel and destructive history of violence, of what human beings can do to one another in modern warfare. That was and is not simply a deposited history, precisely not a pre-past, but an understanding of how we have arrived in the present.

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