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WINNING PEACE

*The End of the
First World War:
History,
Remembrance
and Current
Challenges*

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Overburdened Peace: Continuity and Discontinuity in 1918–1919

Jörn Leonhard

The First World War generated a tension between universalism and particularism, between universal concepts such as the right of self-determination and particular conflicts over the definition of new nation states for instance in Central Europe or the future of European colonies in Asia and Africa. The search for peace meant that such particular conflicts were subordinated to universalist conceptions. Against this background, this article presents a structural analysis of 1918–19 by looking at elements of continuity and discontinuity, of reconstruction and new constructs—all of which contributed to the legacy of the overburdened peace.

In late 1918, the experience of total war and the enormous number of victims after 1914, made any peace settlement based on compromise nearly impossible.¹ If the dead were not to have lost their lives in vain, only a peace based on a maximum of political and territorial gains would be acceptable. The focus on victims fuelled and radicalized the discussion of war aims during the war and explained why it could only end once one side was simply too exhausted in its military, economic and social resources to continue fighting. High expectations thus characterized all the belligerent states and societies in 1918, and influenced both domestic politics and international relations. Furthermore, and in contrast to previous peace negotiations, politicians found themselves not only under enormous pressure from the prospect of democratic elections based on reformed franchises but also from a public which referred to the manifold expectations which the war had brought about.

The period from 1919 to 1923 was fundamentally different from that of the Vienna Congress in 1814/15 in that there could be no re-definition of the international order based on now obsolete principles, such as the balance of power. The expectations provoked and fuelled by the war prevented a return to another version of the pentarchy of five European powers. What contemporaries expected was no less than a new order, transcending the earlier practices of territorial reshuffling, to guarantee state sovereignty and internal stability, as well as to keep the international system free from ideological polarizations. Both the Bolsheviks' and Wilson's promises to create a new world order based

1 Jörn Leonhard, *Der überforderte Frieden: Versailles und die Welt 1918–1923* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2018); Leonhard "The End of Empires and the Triumph of the Nation State? 1918 and the New International Order," in Ute Planert and James Retallack, eds., *Decades of Reconstruction: Postwar Societies, State-Building, and International Relations from the Seven Years' War to the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 330–346; Leonhard, "1917–1920 and the Global Revolution of Rising Expectations," in Stefan Rinke and Michael Wildt, eds., *Revolutions and Counter-Revolution: 1917 and its Aftermath from a Global Perspective* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2017), 31–51.

on the idea of world revolution. Focused on democratic values in the former case, national self-determination in the latter, both reflected Europe's exhaustion by 1917 and the global longing for a model of politics which would combine external security and internal stability in the name of a progressive ideal that would prevent any future war. From this perspective, the post-war era was less one of reconstruction, or restoration—i. e. a return to the pre-1914 ancien régime of politics—than a complex and contradictory combination of construction and reconstruction which led to new entanglements between the public sphere on the one hand and the international system on the other.²

The American president based his vision on a suggestive analysis of the factors that, in his view, had caused the world war. 1914 could not be an accident; it had to be interpreted as the consequence of a misguided European system of militarization, the uncontrolled development of state power, secret diplomacy and autocratic empires suppressing the rights and interests of national minorities. Wilson's countermodel seemed all the more promising since it stood against the background of the exhausted variants of European liberalism, and it offered an alternative not only in content, but also in political style. The traditional focus on the balance of power and the sovereignty of states was shifted

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- 2 Manfred F. Boemeke, Gerald D. Feldman and Elisabeth Glaser eds., *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Gerd Krumeich, ed., *Versailles 1919: Ziele - Wirkung - Wahrnehmung* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2001); Zara Steiner, "The Treaty of Versailles Revisited," in Michael Dockrill, ed., *The Paris Peace Conference, 1919: Peace without victory?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 13–33; Jean-Jacques Becker, *La traité de Versailles* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2002); Jeff Hay, ed., *The Treaty of Versailles* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2002); Eberhard Kolb, *Der Frieden von Versailles* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2005); David A. Andelman, *A Shattered Peace: Versailles 1919 and the Price We Pay Today* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008); Timothy Baycroft and Conan Fischer, eds., *After the Versailles Treaty: Enforcement, Compliance, Contested Identities* (London: Routledge, 2008); Sharp, ed., *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking after the First World War, 1919–1923*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

to that of 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 drawing new maps.

Wilson called for a quasi-universal democratization of both society and the international order, thereby bridging the gap between domestic politics and the international system. In that way, Wilson's and Lenin's ideas could be applied not just to national minorities within continental European empires, but also to China, Korea, India or South America. Yet the result was not a simplistic Wilsonian moment. Wilson's doctrines and American war propaganda could not be easily applied to liberation movements seeking emancipation from colonial or quasi-colonial oppression. In this way, the war produced its own variant of the tension between universalism and particularism. Particular conflicts and interests could be integrated into global developments and be interpreted as part of a universalistic trend.

At least eight factors can be said to characterize the situation after 1918:

(1) The implementation of the new post-war order depended on the complicated co-operation between Woodrow Wilson, European politicians and diplomatic elites who all came to Paris with their own views on key concepts such as security, sovereignty, and 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 a new world order became compromised and were overshadowed by preoccupations such as the French obsession with security against Germany, or the strong anti-Bolshevik positions of both Wilson himself and the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George.³ Against this background, the five treaties—Versailles with Germany in June 1919; Saint-Germain with

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

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—overshadowed the complexity of a new reality, which the treaties did not fully reflect.⁴

The post-war settlement that emerged from Paris was based on competing conceptions of a new order and a new narrative of international stability. In fact, fundamental developments during and immediately after the war had already generated their own new realities in a number of conflict zones. The tri-national Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, for example, was already in existence and only sought international recognition. In the Near East, effective boundaries of zones of interest had already been defined by Britain and France during the war on the basis of the Sykes-Picot-Agreement of 1916, even if these were incompatible with 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 contradicting the idea of national self-determination, the colonial empires of France and Britain were not reduced but expanded when the former German colonies and mandate zones in the former Ottoman Empire became integrated into existing 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. But as responses from colonial societies in Asia and Africa proved, and as William Du Bois would

4 Ivan T. Berend, *The Crisis Zone of Europe: An Interpretation of East Central European History in the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 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* (Milton Park: Taylor & Francis, 1997); Magda Ádám, *The Versailles System and Central Europe* (Burlington, VA: Aldershot, 2004).

realize at the Pan-African Congress which began in Paris in February 1919, the response to 1918 was not simply a move towards liberation and decolonization. Rather, it exhibited a broad spectrum of hopes and demands: for colonial reform, a renewed focus on assimilation, and the fight for a better status within colonial hierarchies. The alternatives were not just a colonial regime or independence. Very often, as the events in Amritsar in April 1919 as well as conflicts in Egypt demonstrated, 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. Yet this was not the end of imperialism or the concept of empire as such—both continued in new forms even after the formal end of empires. In sharp contrast to the settlement of 1814–15, which gave rise to a reconfiguration and reformulation of the monarchical principle, ranging from parliamentary, constitutional to autocratic varieties 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 in China monarchy had already been abolished 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 after the successful revision of the Treaty of Sèvres.⁵ In 1814–15, monarchy had been regarded as a prime instrument to achieve and guarantee internal security and external stability. This belief was delegitimized and destroyed by the First World War.

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

(3) The creation of new states 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 a war of liberation of 1920, started by the Poles under Pilsudski in the shadow of the Great War. This corresponded to earlier models of nation building through wars of liberation, amalgamating elements of civil war and state war against a foreign power which was perceived as an imperial oppressor. Here, as in the case of Ireland in 1916, the legacy of nineteenth-century principles of nation building through war was decisive.

What the Paris settlement did establish was a new mixture and fragile balance between rump states from 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 such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. For many of these new states and their societies “Paris” did not necessarily serve positive national narratives: neither Polish nor Irish narratives of nation-state building referred to the Paris treaties in order to establish legitimacy. Many politicians from new states in Eastern Europe felt betrayed by the Little Versailles Treaty, which they had to sign on 28 June 1919, and which forced them to accept rules for protecting ethnic minorities. In their eyes, this treaty compromised their newly acquired sovereignty. For others, in particular for Germans, Austrians and Hungarians, “Paris” generated powerful negative narratives that fuelled aggressive revisionisms, or as in the case of China and India, led to a complicated search for alternative ideologies.

(4) The post-war reconstruction contained 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 to do so.⁶

Further contradictions were revealed when universalist concepts were discussed with a view to practical politics: traditional conceptions of state sovereignty and national interest stood against the new idea of collective security, and bilateralism continued despite the ideal of multilateralism. The most fundamental contradiction developed around the concept of national self-determination itself, because it was coupled with the idea of a particular “maturity” of peoples—and it was not applied to colonial contexts. When introduced by Lenin and Wilson it seemed to denote an ideal of simple and clear solutions, following J. S. Mill’s premise that free institutions were unimaginable in a state with multiple nationalities.⁷ But when applied in practice, it demonstrated the complex realities of often overlapping or competing identities, especially in borderlands—and large parts of eastern and southeastern Europe after 1919 were now borderlands. Hence a few plebiscites were held in Upper Silesia and Schleswig, but not, for instance, in Teschen (Cieszyn) where the situation was so complicated that even experts could not figure out how to hold a plebiscite. Often a plebiscite presupposed a particular knowledge of national belonging which did not exist in practice. As a result, final decisions were in most

6 Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora: Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2014), 953. (English translation: *Pandora’s Box. A History of the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

7 John Stuart Mill, “Considerations on Representative Government” (1861), in John Gray, ed., *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 291–294.

cases made by commissions, and in consultation with representatives who often had no democratic legitimacy at all. This further weakened the legitimacy of the post-war settlement.⁸

(5) The triumphant ideal of the nation state and 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 de-mixing multi-ethnic territories. Ethnic violence in the name of this principle had become apparent already well before 1914, in particular during the Balkan Wars. However, 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.”⁹ 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. There was a clear continuity from pre-war to war to post-war with respect to violent social and demographic engineering in the name of the ethnically homogeneous nation-state. 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 boundaries between state war, civil war, and ethnic warfare were permeable.¹⁰

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

9 Martin Schulze Wessel, ed., *Loyalitäten in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik 1918–1938: Politische, nationale und kulturelle Zugehörigkeiten* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2004).

10 Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Philipp Ther, *Die dunkle Seite der Nationalstaaten: “Ethnische Säuberungen” im modernen Europa* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

(6) The legitimacy of the post-war settlement was further weakened by the fact that various actors either withdrew from the political forum of the 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 ways of overcoming their international isolation. The treaty of Rapallo, for example, underlined the continuity of bilateral diplomacy and its importance for collective security, as did the treaty of Locarno.¹¹ The case of the Soviet Union was unique in another aspect as well: Despite Lenin's rhetoric of national self-determination, the inter-war period was characterized by imperial political policies in a multi-ethnic state where autonomy was the exception, not the rule.¹²

(7) The hitherto unknown number of war victims which had to be justified through the results of the peace, the progressively radicalizing aims at the peace conference, the ideal of a new international order which would make future wars impossible, the new mass market of public opinion and the new relation between "international" and "domestic" politics in an age of mass media and democratic franchise. All these factors contributed to a massive disappointment when the results of the peace settlement became apparent. Turning away from the new

11 Keith Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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

international order, which appeared to have rapidly lost its legitimacy, paved the way for multiple revisionisms. In turn, revisionist demands could be instrumentalized in domestic conflicts. In this way, foreign political revisionism provided the munitions for political conflicts and ideological polarization within post-war societies. That was the case not only in Germany or Hungary, but also in Italy. Hence the “vittoria mutilata” corresponded to the various stab-in-the-back-myths and narratives of conspiracy or treachery which would further weaken the reputation of post-war liberal political regimes.¹³ For the defeated Germans, the economic and monetary legacy of the peace settlement — reparations — linked any domestic political conflict to the trauma of Versailles. This poisoned German political culture and prevented the evolution of a positive republican narrative after 1918.

From 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. Disappointment was also visible in India and the Arab world, where promised independence turned into the reality of mandates, in which French and British colonial rule continued. Only Turkey succeeded in breaking this pattern, when it overcame the Treaty of Sèvres by violence. After 1923 and the establishment of the Turkish Republic, it was the only example of a “saturated” power which did not profess revisionist aims.¹⁴

(8) A last contradiction of the settlement can be seen in the tension between the politics and the economics of the treaty system. This was clear for many critical observers of the Paris Peace Conference, as Keynes’ contemporary interpretation in his book on “The Economic

13 Antonio Gibelli, “Italy,” in John Horne, ed., *A Companion to World War I*, 472–475.

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

Consequences of the Peace,” indicated. There he argued that reparations would not only burden the international economic recovery but would also contribute to social instability in Germany.¹⁵

In sum, 1918–19 witnessed an amalgam of constructions and de-constructions after the First World War in which the domestic and international sphere of politics became ever more entangled.

The idea of internationalization in the League of Nations proved to be partly successful: An international public forum now existed, even if it remained without executive power to effectively implement collective security, as became clear in the case of Japan’s aggression against Manchuria in 1931–32. But as the examples of the administration of the free city of Danzig, the Saarland and the mandates proved, the role of the League could be constructive. And in contrast to the pre-war period, there now existed a range of institutions (the International Court of Justice in The Hague, the International Labour Office) that allowed for a public and international focus on minorities, as well as on problems of labor and international law.

The post-war 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 of 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 classical alliances instead of relying on promises of collective security in order to survive in a world of aggressive revisionisms.¹⁶

15 Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement*, 205–206.

16 Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora*, 967–970.

If there was a triumph of the model of a homogeneous nation-state, it became more and more dissociated from democratic principles in practice, and it came with the enormous costs 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, rather, it co-existed with continuation of old empires in new forms—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. And the tradition of imperializing nation-states certainly resurfaced again during the inter-war years, but now in a radicalized form, with revisionism fuelling new and radical aspirations for empire-building in Germany and Italy.