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The Paris Conference of 1919 Between the Traditions of European Congresses and the "New Diplomacy"

Abstract: The conflicting combination of Old and New Diplomacy imparted to the Versailles treaty, through numerous compromises, a flexibility which tends to be overlooked and which was meant also to gain time in face of quite rabid Allied public opinion in 1919. Many provisions could be modified (reparations for instance), many delays could be shortened (as the occupation of the Rhineland). The treaty could be implemented harshly, as in 1921–1923,¹ or more leniently, as after Locarno (1925).² It was one of the few great international treaties which contained the means for its revision. It is not true that all the disasters of the 1930s were implied by the treaties, even if their legacy was much more short-lived and less successful than that of the Vienna Congress.

Keywords: Versailles treaty, Woodrow Wilson, George Clemenceau, "New Diplomacy", Concert of Europe

From the beginning the "peacemakers" of 1919 worked according to two different scripts. France was finally chosen as the host country (President Wilson would have preferred Geneva...) and thus the Quai d'Orsay was in charge of organising and presiding over the event. French diplomats went back to the precedent of European Congresses since Vienna, and suggested in December 1918 a framework which was not much different from, and fully consistent with, the traditions and methods of the Concert of Europe: after a short negotiation between the main Allies the most important clauses of the future peace treaties, and particularly the territorial ones, would be decided and forced upon the Germans and their allies as "Peace preliminaries" enforcing a new European balance, along the lines of Europe's diplomatic tradition. But then a longer negotiation, including the minor allies and the former enemies on equal footing with the "Principal Powers", as they were called, would settle all the remaining questions

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¹ Gerd Krumeich and Joachim Schröder, eds., *Der Schatten des Weltkrieges. Die Ruhrbesetzung 1923* (Essen: Klartext, 2004).

² Peter Krüger, *Die Aussenpolitik der Republik von Weimar* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985).

and all the complex details. Keeping in mind the old German proverb according to which details are the favourite abode of the Devil...³

Wilson had other views: the main thing was not so much to settle old accounts or to repair ancient grievances, and to satisfy the victors, but to establish a lasting peace based on the Fourteen Points and the “New Diplomacy”. And creating a foremost vehicle for peacekeeping, not through the traditional, secret and slow, diplomacy of the European concert, but through a permanent League of Nations, “openly arriving at open covenants” and guaranteeing all countries, big or small, protection against aggression. Besides, the roots of war would be eliminated by reaching a peace settlement giving all nations borders they could accept and excluding all forms of discrimination, including economic ones. Potential differences would be evoked, discussed and arbitrated at the League.

Let us note here that if most professional diplomats and European politicians were still thinking in terms of balance of power and consultations among major powers, Wilson was not alone, by far, in defending a New Diplomacy and the concept of collective security: since the end of the preceding century a new breed of politicians, experts and jurists had developed such ideas in the context of the two Peace conferences at The Hague.⁴ Belgian journals of International Law were particularly involved in exploring new ways of maintaining peace, more compatible with the needs of smaller countries.⁵

Those deep contradictions led to constant trade-offs between great principles of International law and more egoist claims. The ensuing peace was partially contradictory, torn between Wilsonianism and the traditional European balance of power. Wilson wanted to usher a revolution in international affairs, but he had to make many concessions to his European partners, who remained largely in favour of the balance of power system, despite some lip service to the

³ Pierre Renouvin, *Le traité de Versailles* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969); Manfred F. Boemecke, Gerald D. Feldman and Elisabeth Glaser eds., *The Treaty of Versailles. A Reassessment after 75 Years* (Cambridge UP, 1998); Margaret Macmillan, *Peacemakers. The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War* (London: John Murray, 2001); Gerd Krumeich and Silke Fehleemann, eds., *Versailles 1919* (Essen: Klartext, 2001); Pierre Ayçoberry, Jean-Paul Bled and Istvan Hunyadi, eds., *Les conséquences des traités de paix de 1919-1920 en Europe centrale et sud-orientale* (Presse universitaires de Strasbourg, 1987); Claude Carlier and Georges-Henri Soutou eds., *1918–1925 Comment faire la paix?* (Paris: Economica, 2001); Marc Trachtenberg, *Reparations in World Politics. France and European Economic Diplomacy, 1916–1923* (Columbia UP, 1980).

⁴ Even the French were not immune to those progressive views: Peter Jackson, *Beyond the Balance of Power. France and the Politics of National Security in the Era of the First World War* (Cambridge UP, 2013).

⁵ Vincent Génin, *Le laboratoire belge du droit international. Une communauté épistémique et internationale de juristes (1869–1914)* (Brussels: Académie royale de Belgique, 2018).

New Diplomacy and what Clemenceau called the “noble candour” of President Wilson, which translates much less flatteringly in French.⁶

The Conflicting International Visions and the Differences about the Way the Conference Should be Managed Led to a Flawed System of Negotiation

It is necessary to keep in mind that, whatever the merits or demerits of the treaties, the negotiating process itself was less than optimal. The differences we have seen between the Allies, coupled with the fact that President Wilson wanted the Covenant of the League of Nations to be part of the Treaty and actually to form its first part, led to simultaneous negotiations about all the topics, through fifty-eight expert commissions. They took their task seriously, but they often preempted the negotiating process through their technical approach, which blurred the broad political picture. The principals (at the end Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau) tried to redress that drift, but they did not always succeed. Each commission wanted to chisel its own masterpiece. At the end the Versailles treaty was a monster of complexity, and the cumulative overall effect of the decisions taken against Germany was bigger than what the participants, sticking to their own particular agenda, realized.⁷

Another consequence was that it took much more time than foreseen, and finally there were no Preliminaries, because the Allies were unable to settle the most important provisions of the Treaty before the end of April: they did not agree on what was the most important, the League, or the territorial and security provisions, as the French insisted. On 7 May the Germans received a complete treaty, and they had no opportunity to negotiate properly, although they did write numerous and often cogent notes to the Allies.⁸ Hence the term “Diktat”, the most fatal of all the accusations against Versailles in Germany at the time.

Apart from the fact that the Peacemakers did not really agree on the very principles of the future peace, beyond their differences on this or that particular point,⁹ the chaotic negotiating process was also due to two other factors: Clemenceau chose to negotiate first on less important issues, so as to make conces-

⁶ Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition* (Cambridge UP, 1987).

⁷ That point was made by Harold Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919* (New York: Grosset & Dunlop, 1974). Olivier Lowczyk, *La fabrique de la paix. Du Comité d'études à la Conférence de la Paix, l'élaboration par la France des traités de la Première Guerre mondiale* (Paris: Economica, 2010).

⁸ Peter Krüger, *Deutschland und die Reparationen 1918/19* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1973).

⁹ Boemecke, Feldmann and Glaser, eds., *The Treaty of Versailles*; MacMillan, *Peacemakers*.

sions and thus garner goodwill for his views when more important topics came on the table. Needless to say it was futile and clogged the proceedings. That he chose that self-defeating tactic was a pity, because he was one of the few statesmen present to understand all the issues: even when he did not agree with Wilson or Lloyd George, at least he understood what they wanted.

Another factor was that there was no Friedrich von Gentz organizing the conference this time: the secretary of the Conference, the French diplomat Dutasta, was not up to his task and he was unable to coordinate the work of the fifty-six commissions.¹⁰

The Wilsonian Aspect of the Treaties

At the time, disillusioned supporters of President Wilson tended to feel he had been outwitted by the European Allies. In my view, it is an excessive claim. Wilson managed to put his imprint on much of the treaties: creation of the League of Nations; international recognition of self-determination (through the stipulation of many plebiscites) for the first time since the Franco-Sardinian Torino Treaty of 1860; rejection of the notion of war costs imposed on the vanquished and the adoption instead of the principle of reparations by the party responsible for the war; internationally supervised duties of the colonial powers towards the indigenous populations.

A major Wilsonian imprint was probably the notion (not formally stated in the treaties, but actually pervasive) that the new European order should rest on democratic Nation-States. The Big Three and also the leaders of the new, reborn or extended countries in Central Europe agreed on this. It had been a major insight since 1848, and again in the years preceding the Great War, that national independence and democracy belonged to each other.¹¹

President Wilson and his team were perfectly aware of the failures of the Treaty. But he was confident he could rely on American economic might after the war (and use the lever of inter-allied debts) in order to redress some glaring problems, like the Reparations settlement, the permanent trade discrimination against Germany, and the failure to admit Germany to the League as soon as peace was achieved. The failure of the Senate to ratify the Treaty (which I believe could have been avoided if Wilson had been more accommodating with Senator Lodge, who was willing to deal...) thus truncated the American role after 1919, with grim consequences.

¹⁰ Jules Laroche, *Au Quai d'Orsay avec Briand et Poincaré 1913–1926* (Paris: Hachette, 1957).

¹¹ Dusan Batakovic, *Les sources françaises de la démocratie serbe (1804–1914)* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2013).

The Balance of Power Aspect

But many aspects of the former Concert of Europe survived: at the Conference itself and later in the Council of the League major powers enjoyed a privileged status, lesser ones were admitted to defend only their “particular interests”. And the new boundaries did not take into account exclusively the will of the peoples or “clear lines of nationality”, but were quite often, as had usually been the case in the past, adjusted according to the economic, political or strategic interests of the victors (particularly those of France in Central Europe), the interdiction of the *Anschluss* between Germany and Austria being a good instance.

And some of the worst provisions of Versailles were modified in the traditional secret diplomatic way, following direct exchanges between the French and the Germans in Berlin in March. It was decided there would be a plebiscite in Upper Silesia and it would not be attributed outright to Poland, with its annual forty million tons of coal; and the Reparations Commission would keep tabs on German economic life, but it would not control it as the Ottoman Debt administration controlled Turkey before 1914.¹²

In the same vein Paris had provisions introduced in the Saint-Germain Treaty (articles 222 and 267) which would preserve the possibility of recreating a Danube economic area in which Vienna would retain much of its former role. Evidently the French did not wish Germany to take over a ruined Austria! At the same time even for the *Anschluss* the principle of self-determination was not completely discarded: article 10 of the Covenant made it possible if the League Council so decided... The difficult negotiations produced once again complex compromises between the two main opposed systems.

The Case of the League of Nations: Where Old and New Thinking Overlap

Another case was the League. The main concept of the New Diplomacy was “collective security”: security would be from now on established not *against* a potential enemy, but *with* him, by including him in the new international system. That was the whole point of the League. Wilson was convinced Germany should and would join it as early as possible. But the French saw the League as the continuation of the wartime alliance and blocked that idea.

But it soon became evident that the League would at best be an international forum and a loudspeaker for various problems and grievances, but not an efficient body able to enforce peace. The French tried in 1919 to redress that, suggesting that the League should be able to designate an aggressor by majority vote, and not necessarily by a unanimous one, and should be able to

¹² Gorges-Henri Soutou, «La France et l'Allemagne en 1919», in J.-M. Valentin, J. Bariéty and A. Guth, eds., *La France et l'Allemagne entre les deux guerres mondiales* (Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1987).

apply military sanctions. But they were not supported as the Americans and British had an international debating society in mind, not a real executive.

The League was supposed to replace the Concert of Europe. But it was prevented to achieve that by the indecisive stipulations of the Covenant and also by its work methods and its very ideology. Europe no longer had a system of regulation, even informal. That was probably the major failure of the Conference.

But the Europeans Themselves, Apart from Wilson, Could not Restore the Former Concert of Europe

Even the more traditionally minded Europeans could not restore the former Concert of Europe, because some of its most important mainstays were no longer there. Soviet Russia was out of the system and very much against it. The Ottoman Empire was floundering. And the Allies did not really wish to restore the previous European system: they agreed, even Wilson, that Germany should be excluded, until it was fully democratized and accepted the new world order. But German power was not decisively curtailed: the Reich retained the main instruments of might in the twentieth century, its industry and its economic organization. The Germans themselves knew it and considered themselves as temporarily, but not definitively, hampered.¹³

The Worst of Both Worlds? Or Rather a Complex Overlapping and Evolving System?

It could be argued that the treaties ended up as a combination of the worst of both worlds, with the Central Powers being punished either in the name of Wilsonianism, or in the name of European balance, depending on which of the two was less favourable for them.

At the same time, it could be argued that despite its numerous failures the treaties were not a complete break with the former Concert: for instance the minorities treaties which the new States were obliged to sign were not a rupture, but an evolution following the Vienna, Paris (1856) and Berlin (1878) Congresses and their provisions concerning religious minorities. The treaties were an important stage in the development of the international system, and not an aberration or a regression, despite their many failures.

And the conflicting combination of Old and New Diplomacy imparted to the Versailles treaty, through numerous compromises, a flexibility which tends to be overlooked and which was meant also to gain time in face of quite rabid Allied public opinion in 1919. Many provisions could be modified (repa-

¹³ Georges-Henri Soutou, «La République de Weimar: une grande puissance bridée», in *La moyenne puissance au XX^e siècle*, ed. Jean-Claude Allain (Paris: FEDN, 1988).

rations for instance), many delays could be shortened (as the occupation of the Rhineland). The treaty could be implemented harshly, as in 1921–1923,¹⁴ or more leniently, as after Locarno (1925).¹⁵ It was one of the few great international treaties which contained the means for its revision. It is not true that all the disasters of the 1930s were implied by the treaties, even if their legacy was much more short-lived and less successful than that of the Vienna Congress.

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¹⁴ Gerd Krumeich and Joachim Schröder, eds., *Der Schatten des Weltkrieges. Die Ruhrbesetzung 1923* (Essen: Klartext, 2004).

¹⁵ Peter Krüger, *Die Aussenpolitik der Republik von Weimar* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985).

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