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The Versailles Treaty of 1919 remains one of the most profoundly misinterpreted international events of modern history. Eighty years after the victors attempted to put “Humpty Dumpty” back together again, a simplistic account of the international conference continues to be deeply embedded in public consciousness and at least some high school curricula. This reading of the Treaty alleges extraordinarily harsh treatment of Germany, featuring ruinous reparations that caused calamitous inflation and later the Great Depression, leaving Hitler and World War II in their wake. William Keylor’s *The Legacy of the Great War* offers a contemporary reassessment in a sagely selected collection of essays in Houghton Mifflin’s Problems in European Civilization series. Keylor is the author of a text on twentieth-century international relations, which provides him with a century-long and international overview, and he has published recently two relevant essays.[1]

In his “Introduction,” Keylor sketches the context of the peace conference, its historiography, and the structure of his volume. He ascribes the negative impressions of the Paris Peace Conference largely to the first fifty years of historiography, which held that a “Carthaginian peace” had undermined Woodrow Wilson’s moral vision. To wit, John Maynard Keynes’s *Economic Consequences of the Peace* “sold like a potboiler” (p. 13). Ray Stannard Baker and Harold Nicolson reinforced these negative images, while “Revisionist” historians in the United States cast doubt on Germany’s responsibility for the outbreak of war. Cold War historiography of the Versailles Treaty remained negative. For example, Arno Mayer and others stressed the influence of anti-Communism on peacemaking in 1919. During the 1970s and 1980s, however, newly opened French archives encouraged more favorable interpretations of the Versailles Treaty, and the essays in this volume are based primarily on new archival material. They also address issues relegated to the back burner at Paris: the rights of minorities, appeals for racial equality and consideration of the “Third World,” conflicting imperialisms and nationalisms in the Middle East, as well as the settlement with Germany.

Part I of the anthology assesses the Versailles Treaty’s territorial settlement. Arthur Walworth provides an overview. The Versailles Treaty emerged from contradictions between, on the one hand, Woodrow Wilson’s ideal of national self-determination and, on the other hand, strategic, economic and political considerations. Would the victors and their populations defend accords that placed German minorities within Poland, in order to provide the latter with an outlet to the sea, and within Czechoslovakia, to make that nation more geographically defensible and more economically viable? Wilson appealed for a peace of “justice, not vengeance” (p. 30).
In the "Fontainebleau Memorandum," David Lloyd George also called for a moderate peace. Having advocated a tough treaty during the election campaign of December 1918, and after achieving a number of his goals, the British Prime Minister changed direction. He worried that a severe peace could destabilize German politics and spread "spartacism from the Urals to the Rhine" (36). He pressed for a peace the Germans could accept. Georges Clemenceau replied in a riveting debate taken from the minutes of the Council of Four on March 27, 1919. When Wilson pressed Clemenceau for "moderation," the French Premier recognized the need "not to abuse our victory" but doubted German and allied conceptions of what was "fair" and "just" would coincide. He emphasized that the United States and Great Britain had achieved naval security against Germany and insisted that France required "an equivalent on land," stating, "America is far away, protected by the ocean. Not even Napoleon himself could touch England. You are both sheltered; we are not" (p. 43). Where Lloyd George advised combating Bolshevism by recognizing "legitimate aspirations," Clemenceau replied that a sense of injustice among the victors might spread Communism at home. The British Prime Minister also requested Clemenceau's territorial restraint. He interjected the views of the South African General Smuts: "Poland cannot exist without the good will of Germany and Russia," and "Germany will remain, despite everything, and it would be folly to believe that we can reconstruct the world without her assistance" (45-46).

Speeches by Hitler in 1938 and 1939 follow, portraying Germany as the victim of the "democratic peace dictators" and the "criminals of Versailles." He justified the annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland by reference to national self-determination and then extended the borders of the German nation back many hundreds of years to rationalize the annexation of the rest of Czechoslovakia, that "abnormal structure" (48). Typically, Hitler projected his own mentality, claiming the Czechs wished to "annihilate" the Sudeten Germans. Hitler railed against "the dictate of Versailles" as the product of "hatred, malice, and unreason" (50-51).

David Stevenson rounds out Part I with an assessment of the Russian absence from Paris. The post-World War I settlement proved less stable than 1814-1815 and post-1945 in large measure because of the complexity posed by the nascent Communist Revolution in Russia. Allied policy encompassed both halting attempts to negotiate with the Bolsheviks and military intervention. The latter was sufficient to sow deeper hostility between the Bolsheviks and the West but insufficient to overthrow the revolutionaries. The Peace Conference left relations with Communist Russia unresolved and volatile.

Part II of Keylor's anthology analyzes conflicting schemes for establishing the postwar international system. Lloyd Ambrosius explores the birth of the League of Nations. The US and the UK created the League Covenant in accord with their own conceptions and against those of the French, while they also diminished the roles of smaller countries. Desiring to make the League a continuation of the wartime alliance, the French battled unsuccessfully for the inclusion of a military dimension. Wilson's promises amounted to the assurance that, "When danger comes, we too will come . . . but you must trust us" (75). Robert Cecil, one of the primary British architects of the League Covenant, warned the French that "the League of Nations was their only means of getting the assistance of America and England" (75). He vehemently rejected the notion of the League as an alliance against Germany and threatened the French with being left absolutely alone unless they renounced their calls for a military presence in the League.

An article by Walter McDougall explores how, having lost the struggle for an armed League of Nations, the French sought their postwar security in the Rhineland. Lloyd George warned of a "new Alsace-Lorraine" (85) if France wrenched the territory away from Germany, and he leaned towards the
traditional British foreign policy of seeking to balance the power of a continental victor. Meanwhile, some of Clemenceau’s French critics encouraged Rhenish independence or autonomy. Poincaré and Foch pushed for a strong French presence on the Rhine. Ultimately, Clemenceau acquiesced in the demilitarized Rhineland remaining part of Germany in exchange for a British-American offer of an alliance guaranteeing French security.

This offer proved to be a case of “bait and switch.” Keylor himself tells the extraordinary story of the birth and demise of the “unprecedented” Anglo-American Treaty of Guarantee, a topic that suffered for many years from scholarly neglect. Without consulting their militaries, Lloyd George and Wilson offered the Treaty to the French as a means to head off the separation of the Rhineland from Germany. The Treaty of Guarantee achieved widespread bipartisan support in the United States Senate and in the British Parliament. Republicans in the Senate, including Wilson’s bitter foe, Henry Cabot Lodge, regarded the Treaty of Guarantee favorably. When the Versailles Treaty failed to achieve ratification in the Senate, however, the Treaty of Guarantee sank with it. This led Lloyd George to renege on his commitment, too.

In a second essay on the Anglo-American Treaty of Guarantee, “The Treaty That Never Was,” Antony Lentin suggests that Lloyd George resorted to “premeditated guile” (116), as he peddled “a masterpiece of legerdemain” (117) to Clemenceau. Over time, often unknown to Clemenceau, Lloyd George qualified his proposal. In the end, Great Britain would “only” honor its commitment if the United States ratified the Franco-American alliance first (112-113). That is, fearing that French Rhineland policy threatened British economic and security interests in Europe and future peace, Lloyd George exaggerated his commitment until Clemenceau, a man who kept his word, agreed to settle the Rhineland conundrum with a compromise. According to Lentin, Clemenceau “surrendered the substance for the shadow, the strategic frontier for a piece of paper” (114), just as his critics alleged. As to the ethics of Lloyd George’s policy, Lentin quotes the British Prime Minister in another context: “If you want to succeed in politics, you must keep your conscience well under control” (116).

Part III, “The Wreck of Reparations,” begins with Keynes’s broadside against the economic terms of the Versailles Treaty, followed by contributions from Marc Trachtenberg and Sally Marks that encapsulate much of the recent post-revisionism. In an article published in September 1920, after the United States Senate refused to ratify the Treaty, Keynes appealed for “magnanimity and wisdom” over “revenge and hatred” (120-121). In spite of Wilson’s Hamlet-like failings, Keynes admired the American President as the only leader to have “sought ideal aims” (122). Still, the peace failed on a range of economic issues, particularly by destroying Germany’s economy. Keynes found the reparations and coal components of the Treaty “foolish, idle words” (136) and urged immediate rather than piecemeal revision.

In an article of 1979, Marc Trachtenberg challenged the “Manichaean interpretation” in which France allegedly pursued “a Carthaginian peace,” while the United States represented moderation and Great Britain fell between them. The reparations issue, wrote Trachtenberg, emerged only after the United States bluntly rejected French requests for the continuation of the Entente’s economic cooperation. After briefly threatening high reparation demands as a bargaining chip with the United States, the French settled into “an essentially moderate reparations policy” (145). Meanwhile, British representatives repeatedly proposed the largest reparations figures at Paris. Indeed, British “intransigence” bore ultimate responsibility for the failure to establish a fixed reparations sum in 1919. German archives reveal additional evidence of French moderation. French disappointment with its allies finally led to an exploration of “collaboration franco-allemand,” but the Germans never tested the
seriousness of these demarches. Trachtenberg interprets French pursuit of economic cooperation with Germany from 1919-1922 as "an initial stage" of "an important strain -- in some respects the dominant strain--in France's postwar foreign policy" (155).

Sally Marks shatters "the Myths of Reparations" in a 1978 article that traces reparations from the Versailles Treaty until the mid-1920s. Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty never used the phrase "war guilt"; instead, it asserted "the responsibility of Germany and her allies" for all the "loss and damages" caused by their "aggression." Yet if Article 231 opened the possibility of unlimited assessments, Article 232 "narrowed" the field of "civilian damages." Broading civilian damages to include "war widows' pensions and allowances for military dependents" accentuated interallied friction and increased the British share of reparations but did not alter the figures established in 1921 on the basis of German capacity to pay. When the Reparations Commission established the London Schedule of Payments in April-May 1921, the figure of 132 billion gold marks as the total German responsibility was illusory. German payments were divided into A, B, and C bonds, with the C bonds, the largest of the German debt, "deliberately...chimerical," meant principally "to mislead public opinion in the receiver countries..." (159). Actually, Germany was asked to pay 50 billion gold marks (approximately $12 1/2 billion). During the summer of 1921, Germany paid 1 billion gold marks in cash, but thereafter paid little in cash until after the Dawes Plan, while in kind payments fell beneath established levels.

During this period, German inflation climaxed. German leaders blamed reparations, while Allied experts (and Marks sides with them) claimed that "Germany was deliberately ruining the mark, partly to avoid budgetary and currency reform, but primarily to escape reparations" (160). In December 1922, the Reparations Commission held Germany in default in timber shipments. In January 1923, after "the thirty-fourth coal default in thirty-six months" (161), France, Belgium and Italy, against British opposition, occupied the Ruhr. For Marks, the Ruhr occupation represented France's "last trump," either victory or "permanent defeat." For Raymond Poincaré, "the fundamental issues were...survival of the Treaty and of France's victory in the war" (163). The British "won the propaganda battle," and the disruption of the German economy aided British exports. But the Ruhr action also made money for the occupiers, while "the astronomic inflation...a result of German policy, not of the occupation itself" (163), ultimately allowed the German government to pay off its debts and benefited some German industrialists.

Ironically, according to Marks, the aftermath of the Ruhr occupation cost France the postwar advantage. Beset by its own financial crisis and by international isolation, France ultimately accepted unfavorable terms in the Dawes Plan and particularly during the London Conference of July-August 1924, which limited future independent French action. "The ultimate effect of German failure to pay reparations in substantial quantity," writes Marks, "was transfer of the burden to the victors...It is evident that the net effect of World War I and the peace settlement was the effective enhancement of Germany's relative strength in Europe . . ." (166). She estimates that Germany ultimately paid total reparations of "just over 20 billion gold marks or $5 billion, which was predominantly financed by foreign loans, many of which were eventually repudiated by Hitler" (166). At bottom, Marks concludes, reparations was "a political issue." The central question was not Germany's capacity to pay but its "will to pay or . . .determination not to pay" (167).

Part IV explores the colonial settlement, the manner in which the Allies parcelled out the German Empire in Africa and Asia and part of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. Alan Sharp provides an overview. Prior wartime decisions and the trumpeting of high moral standards and expectations
exacerbated the difficulties of colonial peacemaking. The "device of mandates" served as a "figleaf," squaring allied acquisitiveness and Wilsonian scruples. The American President had no qualms about demolishing the German Empire, but he accepted self-determination in the guise of trusteeship. Thus, in the tradition "admired by some as pragmatic realism and condemned by others as hypocrisy" (171), Lloyd George and Jan Smuts, Prime Minister of South Africa, devised the mandate system.

Sharp analyzes the emergence of the modern Middle East during World War I and the Paris Peace Conference. Many factors shaped negotiations regarding the Middle East: the Anglo-French rivalry; the Russian Revolution; the strengthening of Turkey under Mustapha Kemal; and the rise of Arab nationalism and Jewish nationalism (Zionism). Sharp regards the emerging Arab-Zionist conflict from the perspectives of long-term British policy interests and perhaps with a tilt towards Arab nationalism. Sharp's major interpretative thread is the manner in which Anglo-French pursuit of wartime and postwar advantages, "in the worst traditions of the pre-war imperialism" (186), shaped the Middle East settlement. The Anglo-French rivalry was temporarily softened in later 1919 and early 1920 by compromises over territory and oil, but Anglo-French rancor remained, and Arab nationalism had been "disregarded." Arab revolts in 1920 presaged the future.

Next, Keylor, the Editor, balances a letter from Jewish leaders to Woodrow Wilson appealing for recognition of Jewish "aspirations" in Palestine and Prince Faisal's appearance before the Council of Ten calling for self determination and independence for the Arabs.

Arthur Walworth focuses on the intense dispute between Japan and China over the spoils of German defeat. Japan had entered World War I in 1914 and occupied islands and parts of China held by Germany. In 1917, in return for Japanese naval support, Great Britain had agreed to favor Japanese claims to former German holdings in Asia (also see Sharp's excerpt, 174-175). China had entered World War I in August 1917, and at the Paris Peace Conference demanded sovereignty over its own territory. The issue climaxed in late April 1919 at the same moment that Italian leaders had temporarily left the Peace Conference. Wilson feared a threatened Japanese withdrawal from Paris might doom the peace conference and the League of Nations, tempt Germany to reject the Versailles Treaty, and encourage a German-Japanese-Russian alliance. Although widespread sympathies for China abounded in the American delegation, the United States and Wilson acquiesced in Japanese demands for control of Shantung and hoped that the League of Nations would protect China. Ultimately, China refused to sign the Versailles Treaty, complaining that it violated both justice and its own principles.


Carole Fink next traces the dense historical context from which emerged another significant but little-considered aspect of the Paris Peace Conference, the Polish Minority Treaty. Fink terms as "myths" the interpretation of the Polish Treaty as primarily "a Wilson invention, a Jewish victory, or a Polish defeat" (237). On November 22, 1918, Polish forces entered Lemberg (Lwow) and launched a major pogrom against Jews, followed in April 1919, as Polish forces invaded Belorussia and Lithuania, by pogroms in Pinsk and Vilna. Western Jews demanded protection for their co-religionists.
Parenthetically, given the subsequent history, it is a cosmic irony that Germany and Jews frequently collaborated on minority issues in the immediate postwar years. Fink suggests that the Western nations acted out of fear that, if new countries would not assimilate minorities, the resulting turmoil might provoke ground swells of emigration. Polish instability in particular might encourage expansionist responses by Germany and Russia—or even a “German-Bolshevik rapprochement” (232-233).

With minority issues bubbling in Eastern Europe, on May 1, 1919 President Wilson established a committee to draw up a Polish Minority Treaty. The leaders of the new states protested this incursion on their national sovereignty, but Wilson affirmed that the great powers “cannot afford to leave elements of disturbance unremoved which they believe will disturb the peace of the world” (233). “Moments” after the German signing of the Versailles Treaty on June 28, 1919, Polish leaders reluctantly signed the Polish Minority Treaty, which spelled out Poland’s obligations to its minorities. This accord became the model for treaties with Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and later with the Baltic states, demanding “full and complete protection of life and liberty to all inhabitants . . . without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race, or religion” (234). The Committee hammered out compromises on thorny fundamental issues such as citizenship, language, education, and religious observance. Future disputes were turned over to the League of Nations, which tended to sympathize more with the new states than with their minorities. For all its failures, Carole Fink adjudges the Minority Treaty “a genuine accomplishment,” even though, in the end, neither the United States nor the Allies nor the League defended these accords.

In Keylor’s final selection, Paul Gordon Lauren describes the dramatic, unsuccessful Japanese struggle at Paris for racial equality. Smarting from severe discrimination against Japanese in the United States, Canada, and Australia, desiring recognition as a great power, and encouraged by Wilson’s words, the Japanese proposed inclusion of “racial equality” in the League Covenant. But Japanese representatives ran into an American, British, and Australian wall. The southerner Wilson had defended segregation publicly, while Prime Minister William Hughes had bluntly proclaimed his commitment to “a White Australia” (244). British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour characterized the American declaration “that all men are created equal” as a false “eighteenth-century proposition.” In response to the opposition, a divided Japanese delegation toned down its amendment, requesting only an affirmation of “the principle of equality of nations and just treatment of their nationals” (248). Although the Japanese were supported by the Italians, French and others, Wilson, pressured by segments of American public opinion, ultimately blocked an eloquent appeal by the Japanese delegate Baron Makino before the League of Nations Commission. At the last plenary meeting of the Commission, Makino characterized the racial issue as “a standing grievance which might become active at any moment.” He also returned to the initial Japanese phrasing of the question with direct reference to “race” (252). Thus Japan became “the standard bearer of the colored cause” at Paris (254).

With William Keylor’s anthology as the stimulus, let me add some observations about the Versailles Treaty, its durability, its role in the coming of World War II, and its place in twentieth-century history. “The Carthaginian Peace” interpretation always rested on shaky foundations. The key question about the Versailles Treaty’s alleged harshness ought to be: COMPARED TO WHAT? The Treaty of Brest Litovsk imposed by Germany on Russia in March 1918 was significantly harsher than the Versailles Treaty, as was the peace of 1945. Bismarck’s Peace of Frankfurt in 1871 at the end of the Franco-Prussian War was arguably harsher. In contrast, the Treaty of Vienna of 1815 was more moderate. Keynes’s standards for judging the Versailles Treaty were Anglocentric, focused on economics, and
contrasted the outcome of the peacemakers’ work unfavorably with the maximum potentials of Wilsonian idealism.

The German propaganda assault against Article 231’s “war guilt” allegation provided another pillar of “the Carthaginian Peace.” In one of the century’s most effective propaganda campaigns, the German government systematically distorted the historical record about Germany’s role in the coming of World War I, coerced German historians, and enticed American historians to take the German side.[2]

Keylor’s volume demolishes the legend of “the Carthaginian Peace.” Yet, if not “Carthaginian,” then what was it? A middle-level peace, neither harsh nor conciliatory; a hard compromise among the victors. Germany lost some continental territory and its colonies, but its heartland remained fundamentally intact. Germany paid reparations but never huge sums, and some reparation was surely legitimate. Much of northeastern France and Belgium lay in ruins, as the Schlieffen Plan failed to bring quick German victory but ensured that the Western Front would run through its enemies’ territories rather than its own. To compound wartime French losses, Germany sabotaged French coal mines and other resources during the retreat of 1918. Then, when the engines of destruction threatened to roll into Germany in 1918, Germany sought and received an armistice, saving itself for another attempt at hegemony.

Nevertheless, there was at least one area in which the Allies treated Germany harshly: Pride. And pride matters. The War Responsibility Clause (a more apposite phrase, taking Sally Marks’ essay into account) was gratuitously provocative. Barring Germany from the negotiations of 1919, in contrast to the inclusion of defeated France in the Congress of Vienna, wounded German pride. Excluding Germany and Communist Russia, potentially the two most powerful continental countries, from the peacemaking in 1919 virtually guaranteed the future of integral revisionism against the postwar settlements.

Another conclusion suggested by these essays is that after the Great War “the struggle for the mastery of Europe” (A.J.P. Taylor’s phrase) was far from over. The cycle of German-French wars had not ended. It was only in 1945, when Germany’s defeat was so total, its crimes so monstrous, its power so contained, that the German phase of the struggle for supremacy in Europe seemed finished—or at least postponed for decades. What would it have taken to have ended the cycle of violence in 1919? Could another sort of peacemaking have avoided a third German-French war?

The Versailles Treaty did not cause World War II. Rather World War I, previous and ongoing trends, and massive economic convulsions largely separate from the Versailles Treaty triggered the Second World War. Mountainous problems faced the peacemakers of 1919. The damage was vast, while the Bolshevik Revolution presaged a major intensification of ideological conflict. As Keylor shows so well, around the edges of the conference flickered the sparks of global change. Despite its shortcomings, the Versailles Treaty was potentially viable. But its successful implementation required wisdom and strength. Instead, divisions among the wartime allies, due at least as much to the United States and Great Britain as to France, augured ill for its survival. What does Keylor’s anthology tell us about the victors? At the top of a pecking order of power, the Anglo-Saxon countries treated France shabbily, and their failure to honor their promises to France had long standing consequences. France’s enormous human losses and precarious economic and financial condition allowed its two allies to get away with this abdication of responsibility. Too often during the interwar years, the United States and Great Britain asked much of the French and offered too little or nothing in return. At Paris, both the United
States and Great Britain first secured their own interests—naval security, trade, oil—and then took the moral high ground in response to French demands for equal treatment. The Treaty of Guarantee could have soothed French worries about security and provided a strong underpinning for Franco-German reconciliation—maybe even a peaceful revision of the Versailles Treaty before Hitler destroyed the postwar rules of the game. The lost Guarantee contributed significantly not only to the French catastrophe of May-June 1940, but to Great Britain’s lonely, desperate, heroic summer and fall of 1940. It also led to Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944. My students believe that the United States rescued France during World War II, which is partially true, but it is as accurate to say that the United States, by its failure to honor the Treaty of Guarantee and its absence in 1940, played a major role in making D-Day necessary. The Anglo-American misreading of power and the narrowness of their self-interestedness in 1919 and during the interwar years contributed as much as French policies to dooming the Versailles Treaty.

Keylor’s *Legacy of the Great War* achieves its goal of convincing us of the significance for the twentieth century of the things “not done” at Paris, such as Wilson’s refusal to countenance a meeting with African-Americans about Africa’s future and the rejection of Japan’s eloquent appeal for racial equality. Japan, like the other major powers, had dirty hands, combining a compelling defense of human rights with exploitation of its Chinese neighbor. One also can contrast China’s battering in 1919 with its position at the start of the twenty-first century, when the China Question occupies a position comparable in some measure to the German Question at the beginning of the preceding century.

On another paramount issue of the twentieth century, the essays by Sharp and Fink provide images of both Jews and Arabs as victims. The clash between Israelis and Palestinians has always seemed to me to be primarily a conflict between victims. Perhaps recognition of the other’s victimization might eventually provide a basis for a compromise Middle East peace. Finally, mass murders of minorities have preoccupied the international community during the last decade and pose similar dilemmas to those faced by the peacemakers of 1919. The quandary over minority rights again recently threatened the peace of the Balkans in a manner similar to before World War I.

Keylor’s anthology is designed for college students. It offers students opportunities to analyze a range of interpretations in secondary sources as well as a number of primary sources. The book includes the following helpful appendages: a “Chronology of Events,” an annotated list of the major participants in the creation of the Versailles Treaty, relevant maps, and an extensive bibliography.

NOTES

