

H-France Review Vol. 1 (April 2001), No. 9

Manfred F. Boemeke, Gerald D. Feldman, and Elisabeth Glaser, Eds., *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 Years*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press and The German Historical Institute, 1998. ix + 674 pp. Bibliography and index. ISBN 0-521-62132-1

Review by Joel Blatt, University of Connecticut, Stamford Campus.

Years ago in a Holocaust course I co-taught, I had portrayed the Versailles Treaty as neither harsh nor conciliatory. Lucjan Dobroszycski, a survivor of Auschwitz, a great historian of Jewish history, thought the Treaty dealt harshly with Germany. I indicated the conflict between our interpretations. With a characteristic twinkle in his eyes he asked, "Might we agree that Germans perceived the Versailles Treaty to be harsh, and perceptions play crucial roles in history."

Realities, perceptions, and myths are all analyzed in *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 Years*. These twenty-six stimulating, often provocative, and always informative essays are essential reading for anyone interested in history of the twentieth century. There is surprising agreement, but disagreements endure over reparations, the severity of the treaty, and its impact.

I have been shaped by the same contemporary history and historiography that have shaped the minds of the contributors. My students have also influenced me as some of them, products of what I imagine are typical American primary and high schools, bring a stark simplification of the interwar years: The Versailles Treaty was unbearably harsh, particularly reparations, destroyed the German economy causing inflation and depression, brought Hitler to power, and caused World War II. They espouse monocausal history and cast France as the major villain. These essays help explain why more than eighty years after its creation the Versailles Treaty remains one of the most misunderstood events of the twentieth century.

This book has already received a highly stimulating roundtable discussion and commentary on H-Diplo (x-posted on H-France). The roundtable emphasized that most of the contributors to this volume are senior scholars committed to traditional scholarship rather than post-modernism. Ultimately, the question that ought to be asked of any scholarship is what it contributes to our understanding. In this regard, the essays in *The Treaty of Versailles* expand our knowledge through "traditional" routes but also explore fruitfully several dimensions that are distinctly contemporary either in methodology or in being influenced by recent events. The main themes of the book as well as individual essays will receive more detailed consideration in this review, but I want to highlight some points at the start.

Two correctives in the area of fact alter widespread misconceptions and will surprise many if not all readers. First, William Keylor asserts that Article 231, the so-called "war guilt clause," was not authored by the French but by two Americans, Norman Davis and John Foster Dulles, and (in coordination with Article 232) was designed to foster a practical reparations settlement (pp. 500, 504). Second, Sally Marks regards the reparations controversy as a battle over the postwar balance of power that Germany won. She declares the total figure of German reparations over many years as approximately 21.5 milliard gold marks (p.367—a milliard is the American billion; with approximately

four gold marks to the dollar, her figure is somewhat more than \$5 billion). As a reparations non-specialist, it appears to me that Sally Marks has largely won her thirty year war over reparations (She was not alone as scholars such as Marc Trachtenberg, Stephen Schuker, and others joined her on the same historiographical playing field). A significant caveat though: Marks and Gerald Feldman, who do not agree on much concerning reparations, are in accord that the reparations conundrum was a huge, costly mess that might have been avoided. More on reparations later.

Regarding ways in which this book reflects the modern, first, a number of contributors analyze how unrealistic German, American, and British expectations before the Paris Peace Conference were transformed into bitter condemnations of the Versailles Treaty. A major thread of this publication concerns perceptions and even national identity, which carries it close to what is loosely called "cultural history." Second, this book bears the contemporary imprint of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The end of the Cold War and collapse of Soviet and European Communism diminish sensitivity to the significance of the Communist Revolution in post-World War I international relations. At the same time they sensitize a number of authors to the linkages of 1919 and 1989 and later.

What picture of the Versailles Treaty emerges from this book? The war ended abruptly in November 1918 leaving everyone unprepared for peacemaking as they had been unprepared for a long war. Then the major victors, the United States, Great Britain, and France, scuffled with each other to shape the peacemaking agenda while German leaders labored under the illusion that they would be treated as equals.

German perceptions and mis-perceptions help explain the extreme German hatred of the Treaty. The war ended with Germany's retreating armies still fighting on enemy territory, not in Germany. The German victors of 1871 paraded on the Champs Elysées while the defeated Germans after World War I paraded through Berlin, presented as "undefeated" (Marks, pp. 348-349). The German government denied war guilt, fearing frankness might undermine appeals to the 14 Points; thus, the new German Republic took on the baggage of its predecessors (Klaus Schwabe and Alan Sharp). Germany anticipated a negotiated "peace of justice" recognizing their country as a great power. Ulrich Graf Brockdorff-Rantzau, German Foreign Office head, sought at Paris to maintain Germany's dignity and status, wanted immediate German entry into the League of Nations, emphasized Germany's potential in combating Bolshevism and restoring European and international economies, advocated Anschluss of Germany and Austria based on self determination, and considered widespread plebiscites in contested territories. Citing a phrase from Ernst Troeltsch, a number of contributors characterize Germany from the cessation of fighting until the Treaty signing on June 28, 1919 as "the dreamland of the Armistice period" (Schwabe, p. 42).

When more severe terms than anticipated punctured their dreams, Germans as diverse as Walter Rathenau, Thomas Mann, and Max Weber responded with bitterness and apocalyptic warnings (Fritz Klein). The emotional German outburst exceeded the bounds of reason (Wolfgang Mommsen). During the "dreamland" hiatus, Germany may have experienced "post-traumatic stress-symptoms" (Antony Lentin quoting Hans-Joachim Koch, p. 238).

Practical recognition of defeat eventually produced a German counteroffer of a 100 billion mark (approximately \$25 billion) long-term indemnity in return for allied concessions. When the allies refused negotiation, Brockdorff-Rantzau resigned and set about destroying the treaty's "legal" and "moral" authority. After debate, the German government signed the Treaty, heeding Matthias Erzberger's warning that rejection could endanger national cohesion (Schwabe and Mommsen).

The chasm between German self-perceptions and expectations and a treaty that although far from a "monstrosity" was not conciliatory either helped lay the bases for malevolent politics on a scale rarely

seen in history. So, too, did long-sustained propaganda by the German government designed to cover up German initiatives in 1914 and to combat the Versailles Treaty.^[1] The propaganda campaign reinforced flight from a realistic public assessment of Germany's own responsibilities for its traumas. To resonate abroad, such propaganda needed fertile ground already sowed. This book elaborates a pattern in which disillusioned Wilsonians helped delegitimize the Versailles Treaty. American (and British) experts journeyed to Paris with "millennial hopes" and a sense of moral superiority (Charles Widenor, pp. 550, 561). Young wartime officials may have brought guilty consciences to Paris and left doubly disenchanted. Versailles Treaty revisionists should be placed within a widespread postwar rebellion against traditional authorities (Gordon Martel). In this instance, history was not "written by the winners" (Martel, 616). Similar to the German story, the gap between pre-conference anticipations and a compromise peace among the victors led American and British revisionists to discredit the Treaty. Americans ultimately focused their ire on the French.

The images of Woodrow Wilson as disinterested and of David Lloyd George as moderate at Paris need modification. The United States and Great Britain seized at once their primary security objective, which was control of the seas. Wilson's "freedom of the seas" meant American naval security and trade. The British delegation contributed some of the hardest demands against Germany. Moreover, both countries followed powerful self interest in restoring the German economy.

Perhaps the book's dominant theme is that the Versailles Treaty was produced through difficult compromises among the victors. The primary reason why the Allies chose not to negotiate directly with Germany was fear that tenuous compromises would not withstand German pressure. The war was fought by a coalition, and the peace was made by patching together compromises (Stephen Schuker, p. 276). There is partial truth in Lloyd George's observation that "the Treaty was the minimum France would accept" (Michael Fry, p. 593), but the Treaty also represented British and American minimums too.

Not only did the peace fall somewhere between Wilsonianism and realpolitik, but idealism and practicality also coexisted within the American President. Wilson's direction of the Armistice process, his strengthening of American naval security, and his attention to economic interests and trade all attest to an under-appreciated pragmatism (Lawrence Gelfand, p. 198). As one example, the United States discontinued wartime interallied economic cooperation and controls in favor of the "Open Door" and liberal economy (Elisabeth Glaser). Moreover, after Germany's imposition on Bolshevik Russia of the draconian Brest-Litovsk Treaty (March 1918), Wilson linked the German people to their government and sought a peace of victory and punishment (Manfred Boemeke).

Nonetheless, as is well known, at times Wilson was insufficiently pragmatic. He made the League of Nations his highest priority, compromising on other issues. Yet Wilson did not guide the Versailles Treaty successfully through the Senate because he failed to cultivate his political supporters and opponents. He also clashed dramatically with Republicans over collective security and the "universalism" of the League of Nations (Gelfand). His advice to Democrats to vote against the proposed compromise of appending "reservations" to the League Covenant doomed American ratification of the Versailles Treaty as a whole. A momentous corollary: the President did not press the Senate to approve the Treaty of Guarantee with France that had Republican support (Gelfand, Lentin).

On the other hand, the consummate politician among the Big Three, David Lloyd George, achieved naval security, expanded the British Empire, cut a large slice of the reparations pie, and then became a "fixer" at the conference. Erik Goldstein correlates the Prime Minister's policies at Paris with his strength at home. According to Goldstein, at Paris "the Welsh wizard" blocked French "hegemonic aspirations" and softened reparations. Other authors demur. German sabotage in France as the war was ending justified reparations. Moreover, Lloyd George inserted pensions and allowances into reparations in order to benefit British taxpayers (Lentin). The British, not the French, proffered the high

reparations sums bandied about at Paris (Marks). The British leader returned to his country's traditional policy of balancing France and Germany (Keylor). Lloyd George and Wilson hoped to reintegrate a more reasonable Germany reconciled to its reduced status (Fry citing Sharp, p. 597). It was the British Prime Minister who resolved the Rhineland conundrum by offering the Anglo-American Treaty of Guarantee to France, but Lloyd George subsequently abandoned his commitment after the United States rejected the Versailles Treaty.

The Anglo-American Treaty of Guarantee, I would argue, was the central compromise of the Versailles Treaty. The failures of Wilson and Lloyd George and their countries to honor their promises to France created one of the largest vulnerabilities of the Versailles system. That Wilson and Lloyd George walked away from such an essential component of the Versailles Treaty structure was as remarkable as it was shameful. It also reflected the decline in French power. Frequently from 1918-1940, the Americans and British wanted European stability but were unwilling to pay the price for it.

Georges Clemenceau fares relatively well in this volume. Straightforward, his priority was French security, and he distrusted Germany. He recognized the terrible human losses and material destruction that his country had suffered, all magnified by German superiority in population, economy, and power (Schuker). French Rhineland policies in 1919 contained an element of expansionism (David Stevenson and Georges-Henri Soutou), but when faced with vetoes by his foremost allies, Clemenceau settled for the security guarantee as a compromise. Ultimately, the Premier trusted France's allies too much (Soutou) and failed, after making the "disagreeable trade-offs," "to educate" his people (Schuker, p. 306). Clemenceau obtained the best deal possible under the circumstances (Soutou and Schuker).

The more positive interpretation of France's role carries over into more favorable assessments of the Versailles Treaty itself, what I call post-revisionism. The Editors of this volume write, "Whatever its shortcomings, the treaty led to an era of temporary stability between 1924 and 1931(p. 3). In contrast, some contributors cite Jacques Bainville's reading of the Treaty as "trop douce pour ce qu' il y a de dur" ("too gentle for what is in it that is harsh") (Stevenson, p. 108). Still, might the Versailles system have provided sufficient strength and flexibility if the Great Depression had not carried away its vulnerable foundations?

The most contested subject in this volume remains reparations. In an essay encapsulating post-revisionism, her third on the subject over thirty years and her most comprehensive, Sally Marks characterizes reparations as the "primary battlefield" of the postwar "continuation of war by other means" (pp. 338, 370; her first two forays into reparations are in *Central European History*, 1969 and 1978). Northeastern France had been destroyed, Germany had taken French factories and cattle into Germany, and retreating German Armies had flooded French coal mines. If France confronted domestic war debts, interallied debts, and reconstruction while Germany only faced the former, Germany would "reverse" its defeat. Reparations was a tug-of-war over the postwar balance of power. "For political reasons," the London Schedule of Payments of 1921 established an ostensible 132 billion gold marks figure for reparations but then deposited all but 50 billion gold marks in "never-never land" (p. 346). "Comparative moderation" was hidden "in apparent rigor" (p. 367). From 1919 until 1932, Germany only paid approximately 21.5 milliard marks (somewhat more than 5 billion dollars) (p. 367). Marks states, "A substantial degree of scholarly consensus now suggests that paying what was actually asked of it was within Germany's financial capacity" (p. 357). What would have happened if Germany had raised taxes to allied levels and launched a "liberation loan" similar to France from 1871-1873 (pp. 347, 357)? Marks criticizes the Allies, too. They should have opened negotiations in 1919 in response to the German counteroffer of 100 billion gold marks. The Allies suffered from "psychological blindness" towards German feelings of "humiliation" (p. 358). Marks concludes, "It is always unwise to impose heavy burdens on a major power unless it has been brought to acceptance by full awareness of military defeat and unless the instruments to compel obedience are at hand" (p. 369).

Niall Ferguson and Gerald Feldman disagree with Marks but agree that German leaders played domestic politics with reparations. Ferguson concludes that in 1921 reparations placed an "intolerable strain on the state's finances." Therefore, reparations were "ultimately responsible for the inflation" (Barry Eichengreen's phrase), meaning that no Weimar government could have raised taxes or cut spending sufficiently to pay reparations and balance the budget" (Ferguson, p.425). Ferguson, though, only estimates a "total value of unrequited transfers from Germany to the Allies" of approximately 19 billion gold marks from 1919-1932 (p. 424). And Ferguson shows German governments utilizing budget deficits and currency depreciation to avoid paying reparations and, a decade later during the Great Depression, turning to deflation in order to end reparations, achieving "diplomatic success" at the price of domestic political catastrophe (pp. 438-439).

Gerald Feldman castigates the Versailles Treaty as a "horrendous failure." He appears to agree with what he regards as the prevailing view that the Treaty was too hard given the means of enforcement and too soft to block "a second German grasp for world power" (p. 441). Feldman disputes Marks' linkage of reparations to the balance of power and denies any "scholarly consensus" that Germany could have paid the reparations. Feldman believes that the appropriate time for German stabilization would have been November 1922 while Ferguson cites 1920. Feldman concludes that reparations "undermined German democracy and were instrumentalized to promote inflation in the beginning of the Republic and deflation at its end" (p. 447).

Reassertions by Ferguson and Feldman of the decisive role of reparations in disrupting the German economy, focusing on a specific moment in 1921, appear to be a rear-guard historiographical action. Marks' and Ferguson's figures are strikingly modest. They are comparable to those regarded in 1919-1920 as feasible by one of the Treaty's harshest critics, John Maynard Keynes. To assert that German attempts to avoid reparations contributed to inflation and depression is very different than to claim that reparations themselves caused these economic catastrophes. To be sure, reparations did not help the German economy, but they did not destroy it either. The figures, a far cry from 132 billion gold marks or 100 billion or 50 billion, do not bear the weight placed on them.

Several authors reinforce Marks' critique. Diane Kunz observes, "The German government's decision not only to sabotage the Versailles Treaty but to manipulate its economy for short-term political gain triggered the financial chaos of this period" (p. 528).

Provoked by the tenacity of myth, William Keylor presents a full-fledged post-revisionist interpretation. New scholarship offers "a much more nuanced portrait" of peacemakers at Paris acting "with a remarkable degree of flexibility, pragmatism, and moderation..." (p. 471). "There was no war guilt clause" and "the most egregious popular misconceptions" surround Article 231 (pp. 500, 504). Two Americans on the Reparations Commission, Norman Davis and John Foster Dulles, were responsible for the clause, not the French. They anticipated Article 231 would assert German "moral responsibility" and "legal liability" while Article 232 would imply German "financial incapacity." By providing psychological balm for British and French reparations hard-liners, the two Americans thought they were establishing the bases for a pragmatic solution (pp. 500-501). Furthermore, Keylor cites Stephen Schuker's book showing that Germany suffered "no net reparations," paying with money borrowed from the United States during the 1920s and defaulting on the loans during the early 1930s (p. 502).[2]

The historical trends of the last decade resonate in essays considering national self determination and minority rights. Carole Fink studies the Polish Minority Treaty, which Wilson favored following pogroms in Poland. She emphasizes that the Peace Conference and the League of Nations impeded implementation of the minority treaties in order to strengthen the new states of eastern Europe. Implications for the present leap from Fink's assessments of attempts in 1919 to grapple with minority rights in volatile settings. Piotr Wandycz explores the Polish Question and, similar to Fink, provides excellent historical background and context. Wandycz doubts that the creation of Poland sowed the

seeds for World War II. Concerning the Polish corridor dividing east Prussia from the rest of Germany, not only had it existed "for several centuries" until the eighteenth-century Partitions of Poland, but "there really was no viable alternative" in 1919 (Wandycz, pp. 334-335). The Versailles Treaty did not endure because of post-Peace Conference events "for which the peacemakers were not responsible," and Poland has withstood the test of time (334-335). In contrast, Ronald Steel, who compares and contrasts 1919, 1945, and 1989, doubts that national self-determination in its 1990s guise is compatible with order, tolerance, and freedom, and seems to cast a nostalgic eye on the pre-World War I Austro-Hungarian Empire. The 1990s, the fallout from the end of the Cold War also cast a long shadow over assessments of the weight of Bolshevism on the creation of the Versailles Treaty. A number of contributors downplay Arno Mayer's thesis, which asserts the influence of the Russian Revolution on the peacemaking of

1919. They emphasize that containment of Germany rather than containment of Bolshevism was the peacemakers' main motivation (Lentin, p. 242). Nevertheless, there are references in the volume to anti-Bolshevism, and an essay by Jon Jacobson focuses on Soviet policy towards "the Versailles order" during the 1920s. Still, Diane Kunz is on the mark when she emphasizes "the empty-chair attitude" of the British and Americans towards the Soviet Union (p. 529). It would be impossible to overestimate the importance for France of the Soviet absence from the international order established in 1919. Geography mandated the capital position of Russia to Germany's east. Without Russia in 1870-1871, France foundered. With Russia and Great Britain in 1914, France survived—barely. Without the Soviet Union at France's side in 1940, Germany again decisively defeated France. From 1918-1940, the absence of the Soviet Union deprived France of a countervailing force and threw France into onerous dependency on Great Britain and the United States. Michael Fry regards Germany as better placed than France to woo Communist Russia after the Peace Conference (p. 601). Did France have to follow such a fatalistic policy towards Communist Russia? From 1891-1894, France had escaped German imposed isolation by securing a military alliance with a reactionary Russian regime but refused to pursue a similar alliance during the 1930s with the Communist Soviet Union. Granted, Stalin was one of history's worst psychopathic mass murderers, but France's survival was at stake. After all, the greatest western hero of World War II (deservedly so), Winston Churchill, among the interwar's most arch-anti-Communists, said, "If Hitler invaded Hell, I would at least make a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons." And the victorious alliance that necessity soldered between the summer 1940, 22 June 1941, and 7 December 1941 included prominently the Soviet Union. This volume might have added more explicit consideration of the impact of the ideological dimension posed by the Communist Revolution on the power equations at Paris. In conclusion, this publication is particularly rich in exploring the consequences of gaps that emerged between self-perception, sense of identity, and expectations on the one hand and results on the other. We can now see more clearly that Germany did not accept its defeat in World War I, neither before nor after the Paris Peace Conference. The disillusioned in Germany, the United States, and Great Britain contributed to the postwar revisionist deluge. One can hope, though, that the simplifications of revisionist historiography and of public perceptions will be superseded by denser analysis of the Paris Peace Conference and its aftermath.

In assessing the Versailles Treaty, the question ought to be: Compared to what? The Treaty should be compared and contrasted with the Treaties of Vienna (1815), Frankfurt (1871), Brest-Litovsk (March 1918), the peacemaking after World War II, post-1989, and other postwars. In comparison, the Versailles Treaty was neither harsh nor conciliatory nor wise. It consisted of tradeoffs among the victors, relatively lenient in German territorial losses, leaving the German heartland intact.

Nevertheless, the Treaty was hardest on German pride, and pride matters a lot. Germany should have been included in the Paris negotiations. Finally, when did the slide towards World War II begin? For the Editors, "Krieg ist der Vater aller dinge" (p. 20). Some contributors blame the Versailles Treaty, while others point to German propagandists and disenchanting Anglo-Saxon idealists. According to Sally Marks, France lost the postwar following the Occupation of the Ruhr, especially in the Dawes

Plan of 1924. Fritz Klein finds "a path" from the Versailles Treaty to Hitler but accentuates "choice" by Germans; Hitler's rise to power was not "inevitable" (p. 220). For David Stevenson, the crucial failure was the renunciation shortly after Hitler reached power of the clauses limiting Germany's military. In my opinion, the treaty was viable, especially if the Treaty of Guarantee had been included, but required a mixture of firmness and flexibility in its defense woefully absent during the interwar years.

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NOTES

[1] Holger Herwig, "Clio Deceived: Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany After the Great War," in *Forging the Collective Memory: Government and International Historians through Two World Wars*, ed. Keith Wilson (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn, 1996), 87-127.

[2] Stephen A. Schuker, "American 'Reparations' to Germany, 1919-33: Implications for the Third-World Debt Crisis." *Princeton Studies in International Finance*, no. 61, July 1988. Princeton: International Finance Section, Department of Economics, Princeton University, 1988.

Joel Blatt
University of Connecticut, Stamford Campus
JOEL.BLATT@UCONN.EDU

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ISSN 1553-9172