Introduction

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This book brings together the proceedings of an international conference on the Treaty of Versailles. The 1919 peace treaty left an enduring mark on twentieth-century historiography. Even now, the reason for the ultimate collapse of the Versailles system remains disputed. A detailed examination of the motives and making of the treaty, as undertaken here, goes a long way toward explaining whether that failure stemmed from inherent weaknesses of the treaty or from postwar revisionism and economic instability. There exists a solid basis for this reevaluation: multiarchival studies that have appeared in the past twenty-five years have minimized national bias, although most have treated a specific national problem or taken a particular national perspective.1 Furthermore, no effort has been made to produce an international research-oriented synthesis.

A group of German and American historians concluded in 1992 that a reassessment of the peace settlement from an international perspective after seventy-five years would therefore be particularly timely. In May 1994 experts from France, Germany, Great Britain, Switzerland, and the United States gathered to reconstruct the making of the treaty by discussing the latest archival evidence and the extant literature. The conference took place under the auspices of the Center for German and European Studies of the University of California at Berkeley and the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C.

The resulting reappraisal, as documented in this book, constitutes a new synthesis of peace conference scholarship. The findings call attention to divergent peace aims within the American and Allied camps and underscore the degree to which the negotiators themselves considered the Versailles Treaty a work in progress. Many of the essays here situate the peace

1 See the historiographical survey later in this chapter and the bibliography at the end of the book.
settlement in the context of postwar conditions in Europe. World War I had produced human suffering, destruction, and economic and political upheaval on an unprecedented scale. Europe in 1919 struck many observers as being closer to another war than to a prolonged peace. Dealing with the sequelae therefore seemed analogous to the process that Tacitus described so aptly: “They make it a wilderness and call it peace.”2 The peace treaty with Germany had to solve the most pressing material questions arising out of the war and simultaneously had to lay the groundwork for a stable international system. Far from aiming at a punitive settlement, as several chapters in this book show, the United States and the Allies sought to preserve Germany, but to contain its power to fight future wars. At the same time, they tried to establish a ring of independent states around the Reich – and to ensure the existence and economic viability of those states.

In the following pages, these proceedings are investigated from the viewpoint of the protagonists. The analysis is limited mainly to France, Germany, Great Britain, and the United States as players or the objects of deliberations. The contributors seek to reconstruct the complex reality of peacemaking; the confluence of diplomacy, domestic pressures, alliances, and political ties; and the problems of material destruction, human loss, and political disruption in Europe.3 Indeed, the arrangements concluded in 1919 affected every aspect of European life.

As a result, many analysts, beginning with John Maynard Keynes, have blamed the treaty for Germany’s subsequent vindictiveness and revisionism. Some see its harsh indemnity provisions as the cause of the German economic and financial crisis of 1929–33, and even of the Depression itself. Others claim that the treaty helped the National Socialists gain power in 1933. And a few even think that it contributed to the outbreak of World War II.4 Those criticisms reflect two main themes: first, that the Versailles Treaty

2 Tacitus, Agricola, chap. 42.
3 This book does not cover Italy’s role at the peace conference, nor the questions of Tirol or the Adriatic. On these subjects, see René Albrecht-Carrié, Italy at the Paris Peace Conference (Hamden, Conn., 1934); Daniela Rossetti, L’America risopera l’Italia: L’Inquiry di Wilson e le origini della questione adriatica, 1917–1919 (Rome, 1992).
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reduced Germany’s chances of improving its social, economic, financial, and political situation; and, second, that Germany’s revisionism weakened the postwar European system. Consequently, the treaty proved unworkable and finally failed. George F. Kennan has recently argued that the “vindictiveness of British and French peace terms” helped pave the way for National Socialism and a renewal of hostilities. World War II resulted, in Kennan’s view, from “the very silly and humiliating punitive peace imposed on Germany after World War I.”

Such revisionist judgments have held sway for several generations. In recent years, however, detailed archival research has underscored the successes of the German peace compact. Whatever its shortcomings, the treaty lent itself to future revision and eventually led to an era of temporary stability between 1924 and 1931. By 1932 the reparations dispute was largely resolved, the Rhineland occupation had come to an end, and Britain and the United States had signaled their readiness to enter into negotiations for a new settlement of the Polish Corridor. By contemporary standards, in short, the treaty did not prove an inflexible instrument. Had a worldwide depression not supervened, the process of peaceful readjustment might have gone further. The peace settlement and its subsequent revisions, viewed from this perspective, represented the most stable arrangement that could have emerged from the contentious peacemaking process in Paris.

Scholars, although remaining divided, now tend to view the treaty as the best compromise that the negotiators could have reached in the existing circumstances. The delegations in Paris and their entourages had to work quickly. Troops had to be sent home, food shipments needed to enter blockaded ports, and revolutionary movements required containment. None of those endeavors allowed for delay. Still, the labors of the conference proceeded haltingly, owing to the involved bureaucratic structure of the gathering. The progress of the deliberations—from the preliminary preparations to the organization of the League, and from the draft treaty to the final version of the compact—made heavy demands on the organizational skills, patience, mental and physical health, and political survival skills of the participants. Yet the broader public, to judge from newspaper opinion and text-


6 For an insightful analysis of this question, see chapter 26.


book treatment, clings to the impression of a Carthaginian settlement that gave the French too much leeway to play a predominant role in Europe at Germany’s expense. Recently, Hagen Schulze, in a book that seeks to set the tone for German postunification historiography, has denominated the Versailles Treaty “a dictated peace.” He describes the compact as a “destructive middle course” that “put Germany under special laws, took away its military power, ruined it economically, and humiliated it politically.” Nevertheless, the position taken in this book is that it is heuristically preferable to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the peace settlement by distinguishing between long-range economic and political factors and the immediate domestic and diplomatic developments that inevitably loomed so large in the consciousness of the negotiators and their contemporaries.

II

Archive-based research treating the Paris Peace Conference from an international perspective took off in the 1960s when the main belligerents abandoned the fifty-year rule for opening diplomatic records. The resulting works built on a felicitous confluence of new materials and methods. The following selective overview highlights these trends.

Historical studies on the Paris Peace Conference started in World War II, at a time when a reassessment of the earlier peace required no justification. Previous accounts coming from the desks of participants had offered subjective reflections, but rarely systematic analysis. With few exceptions, those memories of the peace severely criticized the motives, making, and execution of the accord. John Maynard Keynes’s cleverly written account of the Council of Four commanded lasting attention among popular writers, although neither enlightened contemporaries nor historians considered it fair-minded or well-informed. Wartime historical investigations provided valuable groundwork for systematic research and included a substantial source publication on the German delegation in Paris as well as a retrospective assessment that became the standard account of the conference used during World War II.

10 Hagen Schulze, Kleine deutsche Geschichte (Munich, 1996), 166.
11 A recent synthesis on the making of the Versailles Treaty that outlines the historiography and provides a useful starting point is Sharp’s Versailles Settlement. For postwar developments, see Sally Marks, The Illusion of Peace (New York, 1989).
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Post-1945 research on Germany’s role at the peace conference, resting on the captured records of the Wilhelmstrasse, set the problem of the Reich’s response to peacemaking in 1918–19 within a comparative framework and employed German as well as non-German sources. A lucid portrait of German diplomacy during the conference provided fresh insights while passing a critical judgment on the treaty provisions.13 Fritz Fischer’s revisionist evaluation of German World War I war aims, first published in 1961, triggered an impassioned controversy in the Federal Republic about the country’s responsibility for the war. That seminal work shaped the subsequent debate on the justice of the Versailles Treaty.14 Fischer’s revelations followed a pioneering work on the Reich’s western war aims that had won considerable acclaim in the United States. Nevertheless, those findings had escaped notice by the general public in West Germany, and Fischer’s study met with fierce criticism at home.15 But reviews from abroad tended to be positive. As a whole, the Fischer controversy promoted fresh research in all the former belligerent countries.

Beginning in the 1970s, German historians began to exploit the German records dealing with Versailles more fully. The resulting studies treat German reparations policy, the Reich’s conference diplomacy in May and June 1919, the fate of the emperor and the German military, as well as the debate about the treaty within the emerging political class of the Weimar Republic. These books provide a balanced review of Germany’s difficulties in 1918 and 1919. The authors stress the continuity of Germany’s foreign-policy aims as well as the constraints on German diplomacy that were imposed by domestic upheaval, the Allied blockade, and resulting isolation.

Some revisionist accounts have emerged as well. An acerbic monograph on French plans for the settlement with Germany concludes that Paris’s ambitious territorial aims limited Germany’s options for domestic political reform. The critical debate about the treaty in the Federal Republic in the wake of the Fischer controversy became more nuanced. Historians sought an open exchange with their colleagues in other countries.16 A landmark

14 Fritz Fischer, Germany’s War Aims in the First World War (London, 1967).
15 Hans Gatzke, Germany’s Drive to the West: A Study of Germany’s Western War Aims During the First World War (Baltimore, 1950).
16 See the contributions in Helmut Rössler, ed., Ideologie und Machtanalytik 1919: Plan und Werk der Pariser Friedenskonferenzen 1919 (Berlin, 1966). See also Peter Krüger, Deutschland und die Reparationen, 1918–1919: Die Genesis des Reparationsproblems in Deutschland zwischen Waffenstillstand und Versailler Friedensschluss (Stuttgart, 1973); Peter Krüger, Die Aussenpolitik der Republik von Weimar (Darmstadt, 1985), 1–76; Udo Wengst, Graf Brockdorff-Rantzau und die aussenpolitischen Anfange der Weimarer
study of German and American policies from the armistice to the peace
exploited archives on both sides of the Atlantic with equal diligence and
delineated the divergence between German expectations of the Fourteen
Points and the practical demands of Realpolitik that confronted President
Woodrow Wilson at the end of World War I. Those studies of German reac-
tions to the armistice and the peace complemented an array of investigations
that had concentrated on Germany’s domestic situation in 1918–19 at the
expense of diplomatic background.\textsuperscript{17} An important monograph treated
the response of official German historiography to the military defeat and the
peace settlement. The author explained why German historians embraced
revisionism and how they shaped public opinion during the 1920s.\textsuperscript{18} Pro-
blems pertaining to German demobilization have been examined in an essay
collection. A massive study of the German inflation analyzes social and eco-
nomic problems of demobilization and views them in the larger context of
wartime and postwar financial instability. And a recent work traces the dip-
lomacy of Bavaria from the armistice to the peace.\textsuperscript{19}

The reevaluation proceeded apace in the former Allied nations during the
1960s. The first generation of international histories of the peace con-
ference used American official records and British private collections. They
studied British and American war aims and yielded insights about the transi-
don from war to peace diplomacy.\textsuperscript{20} A revisionist interpretation of the

\textsuperscript{17} Klaus Schwabe, Deutsche Revolution und Wilson-Frieden: Die amerikanische und deutsche Friedensstrategie
zwischen Ideologie und Machtpolitik, 1918–1919 (Düsseldorf, 1971); Klaus Schwabe, Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary
Germany, and Peacemaking, 1918–1919: Missionary Diplomacy and the Realities of Power (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985);
cusses the literature on Germany’s domestic situation in 1918–19.

\textsuperscript{18} Heinrich August Winkler, Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der
Weimarer Republik, 1918–1924 (Bonn, 1985), 206–27; Peter Krüger, “German Disappointment and Anti-
Western Resentment, 1918–1919,” in Hans-Jürgen Schröder, ed., Confrontation and coopera-
Heinemann, Die verdrängte Niederlage: Öffentlichkeit und Kriegsschuldfrage in der Weimarer Republik
(Gottingen, 1983).

\textsuperscript{19} Henning Köhler, Novemberrevolution und Frankenreich: Die französische Deutschlandpolitik, 1918–1919
(Düsseldorf, 1980); Wolfgang J. Mommsen, ed., Die Organisation des Friedens: Demobilisierung, 1918–1920
(Göttingen, 1983); Siegfried Sutterlin, Munich in the Cobweb of Berlin, Washington, and
Moscow: Foreign Policy Tendencies in Bavaria, 1917–1919 (New York, 1995); Gerald D. Feldman, The
Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914–1923 (New York, 1993),
99–155.

\textsuperscript{20} Seth P. Tillman, Anglo-American Relations at the Paris Peace Conference (Princeton, N.J., 1961);
Lawrence E. Gelfand, The Inquiry: American Preparations for Peace, 1917–1919 (New Haven, Conn.,
1963); David E. Trask, The United States in the Supreme War Council: American War Aims and Inter-
period as a clash between Anglo-American efforts to reconstitute the liberal economic and social order and the “forces of movement” represented by socialism and Soviet communism broadened the scope of inquiry, yet confined analysis of diplomatic sources largely to printed documents.21

Owing to the sophisticated development of cabinet machinery by Sir Maurice Hankey and the long traditions of the Foreign Office, British records on the armistice and the peace conference were richer than those of other countries and allowed a detailed reconstruction of decision making. The release of the official British files at the end of the 1960s stimulated a series of investigations of David Lloyd George, the British delegation, and Foreign Office and Treasury planning and responses to the conference. A number of meticulously researched studies analyzed the evolution of British war aims, plans for the League of Nations, and the work of the Council of Four. Not surprisingly, controversial interpretations of Lloyd George’s stand on reparations emerged (which are reflected in this book as well).22 Together, those works led to a deeper understanding of British policy and the qualified success of the British Empire at the peace conference. A recent two-volume study provides a definitive account of British political, military, and naval strategy in the last two years of the conflict.23

France, the staunchest defender of the Versailles peace, stood at the forefront of international scholarly inquiry. Paris’s postwar quest for security


22 See chapters 5, 10, and 24 in this book.

received widespread attention in the scholarly community. The opening of French archival records on the peace conference in the 1960s and 1970s stimulated works on war aims, the armistice, and public opinion, as well as a broadly gauged investigation of French politics and society during the war and the peace settlement. As early as 1962, a pathbreaking book on French policy toward Czechoslovakia and Poland appeared.\(^\text{24}\) New studies since the late 1970s, based on records in several countries, likewise explored postwar alliance diplomacy. Those publications set Franco–German and French–American relations within the broader context of wartime conditions and the evolution of postwar economic, financial, and political relations. A monograph that examines domestic and foreign factors in French reparations policy leading to the Dawes Plan offers a model for international history in the postwar era.\(^\text{25}\) A recent multiarchival study on German and Allied material war aims has set a new standard for comparative historical investigation that emphasizes political and economic motives as well as decision-making processes in Paris, London, Washington, and Berlin. On the whole, those bilateral or multilateral works provide valuable case studies on France’s role in the making and execution of the treaty.\(^\text{26}\) Future research on the peace conference will profit from a new edition of Paul Mantoux’s notes of the Council of Four.\(^\text{27}\)

Studies on the American role in the peacemaking, with the exception of a monograph on economic peace planning, have concentrated biographi-


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Critically on Wilson and to a lesser extent on Edward House, Wilson's chief adviser. A first work on the president was written in the heat of World War II, and the experience of the war may have influenced the critical assessment of his diplomacy. After 1945 the tone of interpretations became markedly more positive. A series of exhaustively researched biographical studies based on the Wilson papers followed, including detailed volumes on the president's diplomacy during the early stages of the war. Out of those endeavors grew a publication of Wilson's papers that by general acknowledgment sets the standard for scholarly manuscript editions. Recent biographies of the president and his role in the peacemaking process include some studies that depart from the hagiographic tradition in Wilson biography. However, one notable account reaffirms the positive evaluation of Wilson's aims for the League of Nations and the peace.

A selective edition of House's diary in the 1920s first depicted his role in the negotiations. A later study, though based on careful research, adopted an uncharitable tone, and House still awaits a dispassionate biographer. Likewise, the role of other American delegates and their advisers remains underresearched. A recent monograph, however, has outlined the role of American historians in peace planning. German–American relations after 1919 form the subject of a detailed account that analyzes mutual diplomatic ties, changing economic interests, and America's role in solving the reparations question. An examination of the German–American peace treaty of 1921 characterizes it as an attempt by the State Department to secure the substantive advantages of the treaty after the Senate had rejected that document.


Germany’s neighboring countries and the League of Nations, vital subjects of the Paris deliberations, take a prominent place in the historical literature on Versailles. A revealing account of Belgian diplomacy during the Paris Peace Conference inspired further multiarchival research on the smaller powers and newly erected states.\(^{31}\) Several studies have dealt with plans for the League of Nations.\(^{32}\) Meanwhile other international bodies that emanated from the peace treaty have not received much scholarly attention. A lucid account of the Conference of Ambassadors constitutes an exception.\(^{33}\)

III

Our reexamination of the peace starts in part one with an analysis of American and Allied war aims and the making of the armistice. It then portrays in part two the leading peacemakers and their interaction with domestic interlocutors during the conference. The shaping of the territorial, economic, and financial provisions of the treaty forms the subject of the next part. The treaty’s impact on Poland and Russia, as well as its consequences for the postwar international system, receive attention in the fourth part. The last part deals with contemporary reflections and reactions to the peace conference.

The opening part compares the original American, British, and French schemes for a settlement with Germany. It emphasizes the haste with which the belligerents concluded that the armistice left critical issues, except for military and naval provisions, unresolved. As a consequence, the peace conference faced an immense workload.

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