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978-1-107-00821-2 - *The Versailles Treaty and Its Legacy: The Failure of the Wilsonian Vision*

Norman A. Graebner and Edward M. Bennett

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The Versailles Treaty and Its Legacy

The Failure of the Wilsonian Vision

The Versailles Treaty and Its Legacy, a realist interpretation of the long diplomatic record that produced the coming of World War II in 1939, is a critique of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and reflects the judgment shared by many who left the Conference in disgust amid predictions of future war. The critique is a rejection of the idea of collective security, which Woodrow Wilson and many others believed was a panacea, but which was also condemned as early as 1915.

This volume delivers a powerful lesson in treaty-making and rejects the supposition that treaties, once made, are unchangeable, whatever their faults.

Norman A. Graebner was the author, co-author, editor, and co-editor of twenty-six books. He joined the University of Virginia faculty in 1967 as the Edward R. Stettinius Professor of Modern American History, and in 1982 became the Randolph P. Compton Professor. In 1978, he was Harmsworth Professor at Oxford University; he was also one of the founders and early presidents of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAHR). *The New York Review of Books* identified Graebner, along with Gaddis Smith at Yale, as a national leader in diplomatic history. Graebner served as an officer in the major national historical associations, and he received the highest award given to a civilian from the U.S. Military Academy for a program he developed and led at West Point. He died in May 2010 at the age of ninety-four.

Edward M. Bennett is Emeritus Professor of history at Washington State University. The recipient of several outstanding teaching awards, he has written, co-authored, edited, and co-edited ten books dealing with U.S. foreign relations. He is a past member of the executive committee of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association. He has been a member of the SHAHR Graebner Prize Committee, as well as its chair. He was also one of ten American historians selected by the American Historical Association and the American Council of Learned Societies to participate in the colloquia authorized by Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev to assess the Soviet–American relationship in World War II.

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*This book is dedicated to Mary Moon Graebner and
Margery Harder Bennett.*

*Without the many things they did to make its completion
possible, there would be no book.*

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Preface

This volume seeks to explain why the world required two massive world wars, with combined casualties reaching 65 million, to come to terms with Germany. The rise of the German Empire in 1870–1871 did not rest on external aggression; rather it emerged from the willing unification of several dozen historic German states under Prussian leadership. For centuries, these German principalities, amid their disunity, were vulnerable to the external encroachments of Austria and France, the Continent's two major powers. German unification required the symbolic elimination of the powerful external influences of Austria in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 and of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. Both wars, each lasting only six weeks and ending in the total annihilation of both the Austrian and French armies, ended the old European order and revealed Germany, with its powerful army, as the Continent's dominant state.

Germany's sudden acquisition of continental dominance required some adjustment of attitudes and roles in regional politics, especially in Britain and France. Such needed adjustments were not impossible. Germany's dominance did not rest on conquest, although Germany annexed France's Alsace-Lorraine along the German border in the 1871 treaty that ended the war. Germany's dominance was largely endemic, resting on its location, size, resources, industries, and the qualities of its large population. None of these assets was based on conquest. The issue of 1871 was whether Europe would willingly coexist with these realities or seek to eliminate them with war – which was impossible.

Recognizing the insecurities that Germany's unification created, German Chancellor Prince Otto von Bismarck sought, with considerable success, to assure Europe that Germany did not threaten the established interests of the European states. Bismarck understood that the immediate danger for Europe's peace lay in Austro-Russian rivalry. To control these two rivals, Bismarck brought them into the Three Emperors' League. Such levels of statesmanship established the new Germany as a valuable member of Europe's international structure. That statesmanship evaporated suddenly in 1890 when the German

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Kaiser, Wilhelm II, dismissed Bismarck, terminated the Three Emperors' League, established an alliance with Austria, and cast Russia adrift. France, diplomatically isolated and determined to regain Alsace-Lorraine, quickly negotiated an alliance with discarded Russia. This divided Europe into two heavily armed alliance systems – with Britain joining France – that sought in 1914 to settle Europe's burgeoning rivalries with war.

At the Great War's end in 1918, Germany, although defeated, remained Europe's most powerful nation. Because of the extreme wartime hatreds, the Allied powers barred Germany from sending a delegation to the Paris Conference of 1919. Without a voice in the Paris deliberations, German leaders rejected the Versailles Treaty, with its territorial and military impositions, and signed it only under duress. Sustaining the Paris decisions against German (and Japanese) opposition required the perpetuation of the alliance that had produced them. President Woodrow Wilson discounted this requirement through his advocacy of collective security, as embodied in the new League of Nations. This eliminated, for the victors, the necessity and responsibility for sustaining the provisions of the Versailles Treaty. Critics warned at the outset that collective security would never function unless the League, in any crisis, had the power to coerce collective action.

In the absence of that power, the League stood helpless when Hitler, after 1933, unleashed his long successful assault on the military and territorial provisions of the Versailles Treaty. Franklin Roosevelt's Washington, supported by the other Allied victors, discovered the defense of the Versailles territorial provisions in the status quo doctrines of non-recognition and peaceful change. Unfortunately, such defenses of the Versailles arrangements proved ineffective. Eventually, Hitler, along with Italy and Japan, gained their territorial objectives in China and Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, leaving the victors with the unappetizing choice of the total disintegration of the Versailles order or war. On the unresolved issue of Danzig and Hitler's assault on Poland in September 1939, Britain and France, having refused repeatedly to defend the Versailles Treaty, chose war rather than further retreat. It was a futile gesture. The victors at Versailles had over-reached. Now they, along with the undefended victims of Nazi aggression, would pay the price.

Norman A. Graebner, who received his Ph.D. degree from the University of Chicago, was persuaded to take a realist view of foreign policy partly through the writings of Hans Morgenthau. Edward M. Bennett was a Graebner student at the University of Illinois, Urbana, who absorbed the same realist perspective in the classes and seminars of Professor Graebner. That viewpoint followed the simple formula for effective foreign policy presented by Professor Morgenthau – success rests on a balance between commitments and power, and between power and diplomacy, and if either is out of balance, failure of policy will follow.

Both authors came to see that Woodrow Wilson failed to understand these requirements for effective foreign policy, and that it was his overweening

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confidence in his perception of the world he dealt with that led to the defeat of the very instruments he had formulated to protect the world from a future major war. Ironically, it was a similar failure of perception on the part of Neville Chamberlain, and overwhelming confidence in his (Chamberlain's) singular direction of policy, that led to an equal failure in Britain at the crucial juncture in the late 1930s.

To understand the failures of the period following World War I, it is necessary to examine how the world managed to avoid disastrous consequences by means of the balance-of-power system that prevailed in the nineteenth century, and then study what forces prevailed to upset this most successful system of balances. Professors Graebner and Bennett both delved deeply into the rich British archival source material. Graebner had a full year to look at various archives when he was Harmsworth Professor at Oxford University. He knew that Bennett had spent part of two professional leaves – first at the old Public Records Office near the British Museum and later at the new state-of-the-art facility at Kew Gardens – looking at the diplomatic archives that led to his book on the Chamberlain–Roosevelt rivalry. Therefore, Professor Graebner proposed in 2005 that he and Professor Bennett co-author a volume examining the failure of the Versailles Treaty to accomplish the task intended for it by its signatories. This book is the result of that collaboration.

Unhappily, Professor Graebner died in May 2010. It is therefore left to me [Bennett] to thank everyone at Cambridge University Press for the roles they have played in accepting this volume for publication and getting it into production. In particular, I would like to thank Lew Bateman, Senior Political Science Editor, for urging its acceptance in the first place and for his encouragement, and Senior Editorial Assistant Anne Lovering Rounds, who shepherded the book along the publication trail, acting with all due speed to get it off the ground. My thanks also to Ronald Cohen for his excellent editorial work on the manuscript and for imparting a smooth, vital quality to the text. Finally, special thanks to my wife and fellow historian, Margery Harder Bennett, who has been my research assistant in searching the archives and my typist and in-house editor for this and every book I have ever written.