



INTRODUCTION

This book seeks to shed new light on a fundamental question – the question of why no durable international order could be created after the First World War – for Europe and for the wider world. And it argues that this requires reappraising a no less fundamental question: why it proved so extremely difficult, and ultimately impossible, to lay the groundwork for a *legitimate* peace in the aftermath of a war that became the formative catastrophe of the “long” twentieth century, which began around 1860 and has reached its end around 2020. As the following analysis aims to show, to provide new and hopefully more illuminating answers to these questions it is crucial to explore as comprehensively as possible how the protagonists of post-First World War peacemaking dealt with the most profound and indeed pivotal challenge that arose during the war and became acute in its aftermath – and which has not been fully understood. It was the challenge to supersede the still Eurocentric world “order” of the age of imperialism – or rather: the war-prone “disorder” to which it had degenerated by 1914 – and to lay foundations for something unprecedented: a new international system that could no longer be European-dominated, and could not yet be global, but had to be essentially *transatlantic*. In short, the core theme of this book is that at the heart of the search for a new global order after the First World War, which reached a first highpoint but did not end in 1919, lay the first and in crucial respects unsuccessful attempt to found a new Atlantic order. Yet what ensued had far-reaching global implications. In many ways, it indeed turned into a struggle over the terms and rules of an Atlantic *world order* for the long twentieth century.

Unquestionably, the Great War propelled momentous changes in the modern international order. But it is critical to understand that it began to transform the relations between Europe and the United States. It not only led to the demise of Europe’s Eastern Empires and the collapse of the European state-system of the pre-war era but also altered the international role of the United States dramatically. The American republic, which had already become a world power before 1914, emerged not just as the newly predominant economic and creditor power but also as a pivotal political power, whose intervention ultimately decided the outcome of the war. While it had not yet

risen to the position of a clearly pre-eminent hegemon, it was called upon to play a decisive part in setting the terms and rules of the postwar international system. It was a part for which its leading politicians and the wider electorate were insufficiently prepared, and for which the doctrines and traditions that had informed America's pre-war relations with Europe and the rest of the world offered very little guidance. Crucially, the American president Wilson himself had to learn to fulfil this novel role and, essentially, to act as a "first among equals" – or more precisely as *one* of the principal decision-makers – in the process of founding a new order.

The war thus created a novel transatlantic configuration. It led to an unprecedented, though as yet unregulated interconnectedness and, essentially, an asymmetrical interdependence between the United States and Europe. In short, as will be shown, the postwar consolidation of Europe depended in cardinal respects on American cooperation, engagement and systemic leadership in political, financial and economic affairs; but the security and future development of the United States were distinctly less dependent at this stage on what occurred in Europe, though by no means unaffected by it.

Nonetheless, what the Great War made imperative were efforts to forge a new system of international politics that allowed American and European protagonists to come to grips with this new interdependence and to address not only the most pressing but also the more profound and structural problems that it had left in its wake – above all, as will be shown, the problem of how to integrate Germany into the postwar order. It had to be a system that provided a new, more effective security architecture as well as mechanisms and rules that fostered a peaceful settlement of international disputes – disputes that would inevitably arise, particularly in conjunction with the German problem and with the daunting challenge of reorganising Eastern Europe and reconciling, as far as possible, conflicting claims invoking the newly prominent principle of national "self-determination". Here, the question arose how far a novel international organisation, the League of Nations, could furnish such an architecture, and such mechanisms and rules. Yet new transatlantic approaches also had to be found to deal with the immense financial and economic consequences of the war – consequences that would be further complicated by the escalating reparations dispute that came to overshadow the peace conference and its aftermath, and that could not be mastered without the cooperation or at least acquiescence of the newly dominant American power.

As my study seeks to underscore, it was thus no longer possible to re-establish after 1918, in one form or another, the world order, or "disorder", of the pre-war era. Yet, as Wilson would have to acknowledge, nor had the time come for an aspirational American president to propose and compel others, particularly the leaders of the principal European victors Britain and France, to accept a novel kind of "American peace". Crucially, however, neither Europe

nor the wider world could be stabilised through a peace settlement imposed by the victors on the basis of more traditional concepts of a “right of the victor” and one-sidedly dominated by their aims and interests. Rather, under the conditions the Great War had created, and after not only but especially Wilson had raised expectations of a peace based on *general* premises of “international justice” and “fair dealing”, foundations for a durable and legitimate postwar order could only be laid through what was especially difficult to initiate at this juncture: something approaching as far as possible an accommodating and integrative peace process.¹ Essential was a process in which, at the core, not only the victors but also the vanquished could negotiate on behalf of their claims, interests and *different ideas of what was “just”*, and that thus opened up the possibility of yielding agreements that were, broadly speaking, mutually acceptable.

What had to be negotiated were not only complex compromises about concrete territorial, security, economic and financial issues but also, at a deeper level, agreements about the principles, ground-rules and political foundations of the new order. For without such a process and such essentially *reciprocal* agreements, no modern peace and no modern international order can be consolidated in the longer run. And without them no legitimate Atlantic peace system could be established after 1918.

Departing from older notions of a “peace by the right of the victor” and paving the way for a wider, balanced accommodation of aims, needs and interests was not merely a question of honouring abstract principles of “reciprocal justice”. It was a cardinal precondition for stabilising Europe – and for avoiding erosive double standards and legitimacy deficits in the making of the new order. In the specific constellation the Great War created, only those who led the victorious powers could initiate such a process. It would be newly important to give due weight to the claims and interests of those who represented smaller states and of those who fought for the aspirations of national movements in Eastern Europe. Eventually, the question arose whether the western powers should also negotiate a *modus vivendi* with the Bolshevik leaders. Above all, however, it was critical to initiate a “legitimate” peace process between the western powers and Germany.²

¹ Wilson message to Congress, 2 December 1918, *PWW*, LIII, p. 276, 277–9.

² As will be seen, the Great War and its aftermath also marked a formative stage in a much wider *global* struggle, particularly between the interests and claims of the remaining imperial powers and anti-imperial nationalists in the “colonised world” who, partly seizing on Lenin’s and Wilson’s proclamations, demanded recognition of their “self-determination” claims. But here the prevailing power structures and the vested interests and adapted strategies of those who sought not only to maintain but even to expand the British and French imperial systems – and those who insisted on maintaining informal US imperial prerogatives – impeded any substantive, let alone transformative changes at this juncture. See Manela (2007); Pedersen (2015).

Yet in a period that was marked by nationalisms that had been radicalised during the war as well as by turbulent democratisation processes, the main American and European decision-makers had to meet one further critical requirement: they had to learn to forge agreements, and rules, that each could legitimise in the specific and often conflict-ridden domestic force-fields in which they operated – and this meant: for which they could gain the requisite parliamentary and ultimately electoral support. This was immensely difficult after a war whose – increasingly and then predominantly *transatlantic* – political and ideological battles had left behind profound divisions, especially but not only between the coalitions that had fought against each other. And it became even more challenging at a juncture of international history that witnessed the emergence of a newly dynamic transnational constellation: a constellation in which the disputes over the thorniest issues of peacemaking not only raged in a plethora of national contexts but also across national and continental boundaries and indeed under the scrutiny and pressure of an unprecedentedly interconnected “global public” or public sphere; and in which an unprecedentedly wide spectrum of opinion-makers and pressure-groups, from more or less enlightened internationalist activists to virulent nationalists, clamoured to influence the peace negotiations as well as “world opinion”.³

Moreover, the catastrophe of the Great War, the ideological conflict it sparked and, notably, the wartime rhetoric of Wilson and other political leaders had also given rise to enormous expectations of what the peace was to generate in terms of security, compensations for the war’s sacrifices and, where this applied, the fulfilment of – or respect for – claims to national “self-determination”. Yet more often than not these expanded expectations of peace tended to clash; and more often than not they also exceeded the realm of the possible and were thus bound to produce dangerous disappointments – not only among the vanquished but also among the victors, and not only in Europe but also on a global scale. By examining and reappraising all of these dimensions, my analysis seeks to clarify why it proved impossible in 1919 to embark on a peacemaking process that fulfilled essential criteria of legitimacy – and why it thus was not possible, either, to lay foundations for an integrative and durable Atlantic order.

I. The Overarching Theme

Peacemaking after the First World War and the Transformation of the Transatlantic Order in the Long Twentieth Century

Pursuing a wider, overarching theme this book thus seeks to open up new perspectives on a longer-term and indeed seminal transformation process that

³ See most recently Huber and Osterhammel (2020).

still has to be elucidated: the transformation of the transatlantic political, economic and cultural-intellectual order in what will be called here the long twentieth century. It dawned in the 1860s and seems to approach its dusk roughly 100 years after the Paris Peace Conference – in crucial respects it became an Atlantic century. My study posits that the peacemaking efforts of 1919 marked an important, though ambivalent, stage *but not a real turning-point* in this process. At the core, it was a process through which the prevalent international system was fundamentally recast, not just in terms of the distribution of power and influence but also, and more profoundly, with a view to the prevalent rules, norms, principles and practices of international politics. In short, a qualitatively different, modern international system eventually supplanted the still essentially Eurocentric, and war-prone “order” that had taken shape in the first decades of the long twentieth century – when, from *circa* 1860, the modern states began to emerge that would eventually face each other in the Great War and when developments set in that would culminate in the global competition of the era of high imperialism – and that ultimately would make the catastrophe of 1914 not inevitable, but extremely difficult to avoid.⁴

The new system that came to replace this “order” could only be consolidated after a Second World War, and under the conditions of the Cold War. Yet it developed – in the second half of the long twentieth century – into a remarkably durable and legitimate Atlantic order whose basic foundations had been laid by the mid-1950s and in which the United States came to assume a pivotal hegemonic role. This process went hand in hand with the transformation of the world economic system where the United States came to replace Britain as the pre-eminent power. In this sense, the First World War was not, as George F. Kennan famously put it, the *original* “great seminal catastrophe” of the twentieth century.⁵ Nor was its higher meaning that it became the initial cataclysm of a “short” twentieth century that then, as Hobsbawm argued through the prism of the Cold War, came to be dominated by the antagonism between globalising US or western liberal capitalism and Soviet-led global communism.⁶ Rather, it should be reinter-

⁴ For different interpretations and approaches to periodisation, which generally situate the beginning of the Atlantic or American Century later, in the 1890s, see Nolan (2012); Ellwood (2012), pp. 22 ff.; Winkler (2019), pp. 121 ff., 173 ff. For a more expansive interpretation see Weisbrode (2015), pp. 1–3. My conception of the long twentieth century is thus also intended to point beyond, and challenge, Eric Hobsbawm’s in many respects still very compelling interpretation of a “long nineteenth century” that began with the eighteenth century’s “dual revolution” – the “more political French” and the “(British) industrial” revolution – and ended with the First World War. See Hobsbawm (1962), esp. p. 2; Hobsbawm (1975); Hobsbawm (1987); Bayly (2004) and Osterhammel (2009).

⁵ Kennan (1979), pp. 3–4.

⁶ Hobsbawm (1994), pp. 1–17, 21 ff.

puted, and understood, as the crucible of the long twentieth century, both in an Atlantic and in a global perspective.

The ultimately frustrated bid to build an Atlantic peace system in the aftermath of the Great War thus has to be illuminated in a wider context – not the context of what has been called the twentieth century’s “Thirty Years’ War”, where allegedly one catastrophic war inevitably led to an even more total Second World War, but rather the context of a “fifty-year” process of successive bids to remake the international order. It has to be interpreted as the initial and formative stage of a process that was never linear but in many ways dialectical, a process in which over time, in response to successive and profound systemic crises – two world wars and one world economic crisis – a new and ultimately more sustainable international system was created. And it has to be understood as a process in which those who forged this system effectively built on, yet also drew lessons from what had been tried in 1919 – and ultimately went beyond the limits of the Paris Peace Conference.

What would eventually be superseded but could not yet be fundamentally transformed after 1918 was the inherently unstable international system that had evolved in the decades before 1914. It was a system that – despite transnational efforts of socialists and liberal “internationalists” to promote fundamental reforms – was dominated by two modes of international politics that were not only intricately intertwined but also decidedly conflict-prone: a European mode of highly competitive balance-of-power politics; and a global mode of ever less restrained imperialist rivalry. At the same time, it was a system that had been transformed by the dynamics of a hierarchical – economic, political, and cultural – globalisation process that the imperialist rivalries between expanding power states had spawned. What escalated across the globe was an essentially limitless competition in which not only the principal European powers but also Japan and the United States participated, the latter as a distinctive imperialist power in East Asia and the Pacific and as the self-proclaimed policing power of the western hemisphere. Their competitive behaviour was premised on the dominant assumption that in an all-embracing struggle, which often came to be interpreted in social Darwinist terms, not only a great power’s standing and prosperity but its very survival depended on succeeding as a world power and on pursuing world politics.

What came to prevail in Europe – markedly influenced by this global competition – was the pursuit of high-stakes, “zero-sum” balance-of-power politics, which spurred the emergence of increasingly rigid alliances and alignments that in the end came to divide Europe’s more or less highly industrialised and militarised great powers into two antagonistic coalitions. By the time Britain and France concluded the *Entente Cordiale*, in 1904, these changes had largely corroded the European peace system of the earlier nineteenth century, the Vienna system of 1815, in which the rules and practices of the European concert had long maintained a legitimate equilibrium between

the great powers, protected the integrity of smaller states like Belgium, and indeed fostered global stability.⁷ The nineteenth century's European order thus turned into a system in which in the end no rules, norms, understandings and mechanisms existed any longer that could have prevented the escalation of a regional – Balkan – crisis into an all-out war between the great powers in 1914.

What finally supplanted the unsustainable “old order” that broke down in 1914 and the ill-founded, then reformed but ultimately failing order that emerged after 1918 was an international system that took shape after 1945 and differed from all previous systems of order in modern history. It indeed furnished new ways and mechanisms to cope with the challenges of twentieth-century international relations and the short- and long-term consequences of the era of the two world wars. At the core, it was a distinctive transatlantic system of international politics that was built around a nucleus formed by the United States and the states of western Europe, including (western) Germany, yet eventually extended towards Eastern Europe. It was a reconfigured transcontinental system of sovereign states in which the United States would play decisive part, coming to act not as a novel, more or less benevolent empire but rather as an overall benign hegemon. This system came to be based on an unprecedented – and overall remarkably legitimate and durable – architecture of international agreements, mechanisms and transnational networks, notably the European Recovery Program, the North Atlantic Alliance and the more wide-ranging cooperative links and relations that emerged through and around them. And it was a system that came to be based on distinctive norms, rules and practices, above all those of transatlantic collective security and European supranational integration.

Yet the Euro-Atlantic processes that gave rise to this system also had a formative significance beyond the transatlantic sphere – indeed a universal significance. For they provided a key impetus to the emergence of norms and rules that have remained integral to what one may call the modern world order to this day, however imperfectly they have often been observed, and however forcefully they have been challenged, particularly since the beginning of the twenty-first century: norms and rules designed to protect the sovereignty and integrity of (nation-)states under international law, for the peaceful settlement of international disputes and, crucially, of collective security. What emerged concurrently were new ground-rules for an eventually overall liberal world economic system and a rule-based architecture of international finance that came to be based on the institutions of the Bretton Woods system. The latter provided an essential framework for a remarkable, though far from universal, period of postwar recovery and revitalisation before facing demise

⁷ See Schroeder (1994), pp. vii–xiii; Schroeder (2004), pp. 158–91.

in the 1970s and massive reform needs ever since, which have become more acute than ever in the era of “total globalisation”.

At the same time, transatlantic processes had a crucial influence on the conceptualisation and actual “construction” of both regional and global international institutions and mechanisms, from the League of Nations to the United Nations, from the aforementioned European Recovery Program and the institutional underpinnings of European integration to, eventually, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. And they likewise propelled remarkable advances in the codification not only of international rights and obligations of states but also of international guarantees for human rights – first, collective rights such as the rights of minorities, then – after 1945 – explicitly *individual* human rights. This way they, finally, played a crucial role in creating a systemic framework and unprecedented development prospects for the evolution of what may be called a transatlantic international society in an increasingly interdependent north Atlantic world, which again had a wider, global significance – and manifold global repercussions. Ultimately, the reconfiguration of the transatlantic order thus also had a formative impact on how the *global* order was reconfigured in the long twentieth century.

The following study seeks to highlight that pursuits of peace and order in the aftermath of the Great War gave some essential impulses to but could only mark a beginning, and in many ways an ambivalent and fraught beginning, of this longer and indeed epochal transformation process. In some ways these pursuits, and the ideas that informed them, prefigured those that gave rise to what became the *Pax Atlantica*, rather than *Pax Americana*, of the era after the Second World War – indeed they did so to a much greater extent than has been acknowledged. Yet it will also have to be elucidated why in other, crucial respects they were so strikingly different, and more limited.

II. The Interpretative Context

A Century of Controversies – and a New Consensus?

The quality and consequences of the efforts to make peace and establish a new order after the Great War became the subject of immense controversy even before the Paris Peace Conference came to a close. And they have remained at the centre of scholarly and public debates to this day – roughly 100 years later. In different ways, and against different historical backgrounds, these debates have all revolved around the question of what kind of peace, and what kind of order, could be established in the aftermath of the epochal cataclysm that ended the long and European-dominated nineteenth century. Yet directly or indirectly, they have also always revolved around the underlying question of what kind of peace, and what kind of order, *should* have been founded. And,

ultimately, they have centred on the question why the original peace system that emerged in 1919, the treaty system of Versailles, proved so distinctly more unstable and short-lived than the last major peace settlement that preceded it, that forged at the Congress of Vienna in 1814–15, or – in a different, global constellation – the order that emerged after 1945, and under the conditions of the Cold War. This analysis seeks to challenge some of the most influential interpretations that have dominated this long-standing debate and, in different ways, influenced our understanding of what was and what could be achieved in the aftermath of the Great War.

For a long time, scholarly as well as more popular studies of attempts to remake world order after the First World War have mainly concentrated on the Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles. And they have been particularly interested in assessing whether the settlement of 1919 was either too harsh or too lenient; whether the so-called Versailles system was bound to collapse within a generation; and how far it even prepared the ground for the Second World War.⁸ But more recently there has also been a growing interest in examining the global implications of the post-1918 reordering processes.⁹ And there have been efforts to capture their significance for the longer-term history of twentieth-century international relations.¹⁰ The debates

⁸ On the peace of Versailles see Boemeke, Feldman and Glaser (1998); Sharp (I/2008); Macmillan (2002); Steiner (2005), pp. 15–70; and the important recent contributions of Leonhard (2018); de Sédouy (2017); Conze (I/2018); Smith (2018); Payk (2018) and Schwabe (2019). Of course, there have also been numerous different appraisals of American and European contributions to post-First World War peacemaking. But the prospects of establishing a transatlantic international order in 1919 have never been systematically examined. To cite but a few notable examples: for studies of Wilson and American diplomacy see Knock (1992); Walworth (1986); Ambrosius (1991); Kennedy (2009); Manela (2007); on different European perspectives see the contributions to Boemeke, Feldman and Glaser (1998); Macmillan (2002); on British perspectives see Fry (2011); Goldstein (1991); Egerton (1978); on French perspectives see Stevenson (1982) and the important study by Jackson (2013); the most thorough study of Wilson's impact on Germany in this period remains Schwabe (1985), the most substantive analysis of German policies remains Krüger (1985).

⁹ See esp. Steiner (2005); Cohrs (2006); Boyce (2009); Mulligan (2014); and the in many ways thought-provoking contribution of Tooze (2014) and, most recently, Leonhard (2018). See also Graebner and Bennet (2011). For studies of the long-term legacy of Versailles see Kennedy and Hitchcock (2000); Sharp (2010); Graebner and Bennett (2011); for general syntheses, and “realist” interpretations, see Marks (2002); Keylor (2011).

¹⁰ For studies of the long-term relevance and legacy of Versailles see Kennedy and Hitchcock (2000); Sharp (2010); Graebner and Bennett (2011) and Conze (I/2018), pp. 491 ff. For a recent study re-examining the significance of Wilson and the Paris peace for the rise of “liberal internationalism” see Ikenberry (2020), esp. pp. 1–25, 100–40.

and interpretative perspectives are still evolving. But most recent studies have overall presented a more favourable assessment of the post-First World War peace settlements, particularly the Treaty of Versailles. Essentially, they have concluded that despite their deficiencies and contradictions they represented the best outcome that could be attained under very unfavourable conditions. And they have – rightly – underscored that the peace of Versailles did not inevitably lead to another world war.¹¹

Interpretations of the processes and outcomes of 1919 have had a long history of their own. There were early – partisan – endeavours to defend the treaty and peace of Versailles as both just and either appropriately severe or comparatively lenient.¹² But there were even earlier and highly influential critiques that have had a long-term impact not only on scholarly but also on more general perceptions of Versailles in and beyond the twentieth century. In many ways most consequential was the harsh denunciation of what he termed a “Carthaginian peace” that the economist John Maynard Keynes, who had resigned from the British peace delegation in protest, presented in his famous and unsettling tract on *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. Keynes, who pursued a distinct transatlantic perspective, argued that Wilson had failed to withstand the power-political machinations of the principal European leaders, and the victorious powers had consequently imposed on Germany a settlement that was dictated by erroneous preoccupations such as “frontiers and nationalities”, the “balance of power” and Germany’s “future enfeeblement”. In his view, they had thus utterly failed to make peace on solid, rational premises – premises that would buttress Europe’s postwar reconstruction and took into account the essential realities of international – and at the core transatlantic – interdependence, particularly in the financial and economic spheres. Above all, Keynes criticised that the Versailles Treaty’s economic terms and reparations clauses placed excessive burdens on Germany and thus threatened to erode the “central support” of Europe’s economic and political system. He warned that the peace of 1919 would thus precipitate economic turmoil on and beyond the European continent and ultimately provoke another “war of vengeance”.¹³

¹¹ See notably Boemeke, Feldman and Glaser (1998); Macmillan (2002); and the more recent and nuanced appraisals in Steiner (2005), pp. 67–70, Sharp (2010), pp. 211–19; Leonhard (2018), pp. 1254–80; Schwabe (2019), pp. 8–9; For different interpretations see Conze (I/2018) and Cohrs (2006), pp. 20–67.

¹² An important and substantial defence is Tardieu (1921). For Lloyd George’s “truth” about the peace treaties see Lloyd George (1938).

¹³ Keynes (1919), pp. 9–10, 35 ff. See Skidelsky (1983), pp. 384–8; Markwell (2006). Keynes’ appraisal was eventually followed by a number of studies that have emphasised the centrality of the underlying financial and economic interests and forces that influenced the remaking of world order after 1914. See above all Trachtenberg (1980), Soutou (1989), and Krüger (1973); Leonhard (2014), pp. 784–96, and Tooze (2014), pp. 8–16, 288–304.