The attempt to secure peace in Europe in 1919 failed because the central issue, the German problem, was unresolved

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Summary: The attempt to achieve a full and lasting peace at the conference at Versailles was handicapped by divergent aims among the four principal peacemakers. The Treaty of Versailles with Germany was central to a successful peace in Europe but later events suggest that it was not the degree of severity, or the dictated form, of the treaty which undermined it but political responses to the peace and political problems within Germany, along with weak neighbours to the East.

Questions to consider

How far was the Versailles Treaty weakened by the inability of the Allied leaders to agree on aims?

Why did Eastern Europe prove so unstable after the peace?

What was the 'German problem', 1890-1945?

Was the Treaty of Versailles too harsh on Germany?

How far were the peacemakers' principles of self determination and settlement of the German problem in conflict?

In what ways have historians' views of the peace settlements changed?

The First World War ended on 11 November 1918 with defeat for Germany. In keeping with standard practice at the end of European wars, peace terms were decided at a peace conference, held at the magnificent palace of Versailles, on the outskirts of Paris. It opened on 12 January 1919, less than nine weeks after the last shots had been fired in the war, and deliberated for over five months. The major decisions at the conference were taken, in closed session, by a council, consisting of the leaders of the four major Allied powers: David Lloyd George (Britain), Woodrow Wilson (USA), Georges Clemenceau (France) and Vittorio Orlando (Italy), and their respective diplomatic and legal experts. The representatives of 28 other Allied powers were also in attendance, but Russia, which had begun the war as a key ally of the victorious powers, was not invited because of the pro-Marxist nature of its new revolutionary government which had taken power after the 1917 Revolution.

The problems in making peace

A number of very difficult problems faced the peace-makers in their search for lasting peace. A total of 13 million people were killed, wounded or left permanently disabled as a result of the war. Another 20 million died in a flu epidemic which followed shortly afterwards. The end of the war produced many more problems. The balance of power in Europe was in an uncertain and fragile condition. Four major empires - Imperial Germany, previously ruled by the Hohenzollern dynasty, Austria Hungary (Habsburg) Turkey (Ottoman) and Russia (Romanov) - had fallen. A wide range of diverse nationalities formerly ruled by these autocratic empires in Central and Eastern Europe demanded national self-determination. A further problem gave the peacemakers cause for concern. Communist revolution, already a fact of life in the newly founded Soviet Union, might spread to the rest of Europe.

The political chaos, which the First World War had stimulated, was accompanied by deep economic problems. World trade had collapsed, most European currencies were unstable, and the price of goods was rising. Many soldiers were returning home to unemployment, and those left dead on the battlefield were mourned by wives and children at home. The financial costs of the war resulted in the accumulation of debts by every European power. The material damage of the war left homes, roads railways, farms and livestock destroyed. These political and economic difficulties were made more difficult by the strength of public opinion in most of the Allied countries demanding that Germany and its allies must pay for the costs of the war.

The aims of the peacemakers

It was against this complex background that the peacemakers took the key decisions. The four major victorious powers needed to decide what they had been fighting for, and to establish a lasting peace settlement. Not surprisingly, the leaders of the major powers had differing aims. For Clemenceau, the war was caused by German aggression, and fought to prevent German domination of Europe. Hence, establishing a security framework to prevent a German military revival was a key French aim. Wilson, the US President, did not concentrate exclusively on the ‘German problem’ as he believed the outbreak of the war was due to three key causes: the secretive nature of European diplomacy; the tendency of major powers to deny smaller powers national self-determination; and autocratic regimes which ignored public opinion. Lloyd George wanted to establish a ‘just and lasting peace’ which placed military restrictions on Germany, but was not so punitive as to leave the Germans resentful, bitter and dreaming of revenge. Orlando had no broad vision of a new world order, and primarily wanted to gain territory for Italy as compensation for the heavy losses Italian troops had suffered after entering the war on the Allied side in 1915.

How was Germany to be treated?

A great deal of the discussion at the conference was devoted to the exact terms of the five separate peace treaties at the heart of the settlement. The most important of these was the Treaty of Versailles, which dealt with Germany. It was eventually signed by German leaders, under protest, on 28 June 1919. The peacemakers agreed that German military power and the aggressive ambitions of the Kaiser's autocratic regime were the chief reasons for the outbreak of the war.

Unless the peacemakers took precautions against the revival of German military power there was every prospect of another world war. As a result, military restrictions were placed upon Germany, including the restriction of the German army to 100,000 men, the abolition of conscription and the prohibition of the building of tanks and aircraft. The German navy was left without submarines and battleships with a coastal force of only 36 vessels.

The treaty also included a number of territorial losses. In total, Germany lost 13 per cent of its territory, including Alsace-Lorraine, Eupen, Malmedy, North-Schleswig, West Prussia and Posen (Poznan). It was the loss of territory in Eastern Europe which was most bitterly criticised by the German government. Danzig (the modern day Polish city of Gdansk) was made a 'free city', linked by a customs union to the new state of Poland, which also gained Upper Silesia, a major industrial region. Poland was also given a 'corridor' of land to the sea which cut off East Prussia from the rest of Germany. In Western Europe, the Rhineland was turned into a demilitarised zone, and the Saar, a key coal mining region, placed under League of Nations control. All German colonies were turned into mandated territories under the trusteeship of members of the League of Nations

The Allies also insisted that Germany uphold a democratic constitution with free elections. All foreign currency and assets of Germany held abroad were confiscated, and the German government was required to pay substantial financial compensation in order to reflect the gigantic costs suffered by the Allies during the conflict. The final figure, not agreed until 1921, was set at £6,600 million, to be paid by installments until 1983. This represented a yearly tax of around 4 per cent of German industrial production. It was argued this figure could be paid because substantial savings would be gained from Germany not having to keep up its previously enormous defence bill. To justify these financial penalties the Allies inserted in the treaty Article 231, known as the 'War Guilt Clause', which obliged Germany to accept full responsibility for the outbreak of the war.

German resentments

Every German young or old, male or female, rich or poor, greeted the Treaty of Versailles with varying degrees of horror and outrage. It is easy to understand why the Germans reacted in this way. No country likes losing a major war, least of all a nation whipped up into a nationalist frenzy by its leaders. Indeed, most Germans thought that by agreeing to an Armistice a mutually acceptable, even a lenient, settlement would follow. As a result, the Versailles Treaty came as a shock for which most Germans were unprepared. It meant nothing to the average German to be told that Versailles was less harsh than the French had suffered after the Napoleonic Wars at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15, and mild when compared to the terms the Germans had imposed on Russia in 1918 under the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

The real problem with the Treaty of Versailles was not its harshness, but how the German government and most of its population reacted to it. The Germans blamed all their economic and political ills, not on the war, but on Versailles. In 1815, the French had accepted their defeat and the peace settlement which followed. In 1919, the Germans did not accept Versailles from the beginning, and it was a rallying point for German nationalists. This begs the question of what sort of treaty the Germans would have accepted in the circumstances. The answer is an extremely lenient one, which left their defence forces largely intact, and imposed hardly any financial, and few territorial, losses. In sum, a treaty which virtually ignored the consequences of German actions and responsibility before and during the First World War.

The changed map of Eastern Europe

The other remaining treaties decided at Paris dealt with the remaining defeated powers - Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey. The settlement of the former Austro-Hungarian Habsburg Empire proved complex. The promise to ensure that the principle of national selfdetermination was applied to the diverse ethnic minorities of Eastern Europe proved very difficult to implement. The Treaty of Trianon (1920) dealt with Hungary, which lost 66 per cent of its former territory and 40 per cent of its ethnically diverse population. Most of the former Hungarian territory was shared between Romania and the newly formed states of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

The Treaty of St Germain (1919) concerned Austria, which saw most of its former territory awarded to a number of powers. Czechoslovakia gained Bohemia and Moravia, including the Sudetenland, with a German speaking population of 3.5 million. Italy took South Tyrol, Yugoslavia gained Bosnia-Herzegovenia and Dalmatia, Poland was awarded Galicia and Romania was given Bukovina. In addition, the union of Austria with Germany was strictly forbidden. The Treaty of Sèvres (1920) divided Turkey into British, French and Italian spheres of influence, and placed all former Ottoman territories in Africa and the Middle East under British and French administration. However, a Turkish nationalist group, the 'Young Turks', fought against the agreement and, only after further conflict, finally accepted the loss of former Ottoman colonies under the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) in return for the recognition of an independent Turkish state. Under the terms of the Treaty of Neuilly (1919),

Bulgaria lost territory to both Greece and Yugoslavia. To strengthen the principle of self-determination, the peacemakers created two new states, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, and restored the historic state of Poland.

Such fundamental territorial changes were bound to produce divisions, ethnic rivalries and disagreements. Eastern Europe was, arguably, more unstable and divided after 1919 than ever before. The successor states were weak, politically and militarily divided, and in a poor economic condition. What is more, democracy failed to take root in Eastern Europe, and the foreign relations of these Eastern European states was tense.

Beyond Europe

The way the peacemakers dealt with settlement of problems outside Europe was also controversial. The demand by Japan to have a clause proclaiming 'racial equality' inserted into the articles of the settlement was rejected. Representatives of nationalist groups in Africa, the Middle East, and India were informed that the principle of national self-determination would not apply to them. It is, indeed, possible to suggest that imperial rule outside Europe expanded as a result of decisions taken at Paris in 1919. France and Britain assumed control of a large number of former Turkish and German colonies under League of Nations Mandates.

The attempt by the peacemakers to improve relations between China and Japan in the Asian-Pacific region was equally unsatisfactory. China had entered the war on the Allied side in 1917, and expected to gain territory it had previously lost to Germany. However Japan, an ally of Britain since 1902, had seized these areas during the war and wanted to hold on to them. The conference decided Japan would retain trading rights in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia but not political control, and also supervise the administration of Shantung. These decisions did not satisfy the Chinese delegation, and provided the basis for a bitter dispute which eventually led to full-scale war between Japan and China in 1937.

The hopes for the League of Nations

The Paris Peace Conference also gave birth to a completely new organisation - the League of Nations. This was designed to provide a new framework to solve international conflict. It was a bold and idealistic attempt to bring the nations of the world into close communication with each other. It had an agreed constitution, outlined in its Covenant, which pledged to respect and preserve against external aggression the territorial integrity and political independence of all members of the League, and also promised to take action through economic sanctions, and collective military action against

any potential aggressor. The League was composed of the 32 Allied powers and a further 12 neutral states. It was described as a 'victors' club' by the defeated powers and a 'capitalist club' by the Soviet Union. A major blow to the credibility of the League was the decision of the US Senate to block US entry. This deprived the organisation of one of its key architects and the most powerful non-European power. The League of Nations was probably an idea ahead of its time, and few contemporary leaders really believed it would replace the self interests of the nation-state.

The doomed peace?

The debate among historians on the Paris Peace Settlement of 1919-20 is dominated by two differing schools of interpretation. There are many historians who take an extremely harsh and critical view of the major decisions taken by the peacemakers. E.H. Carr viewed the settlement as based on unworkable idealistic principles, such as self-determination and collective security, and he also suggested the peacemakers failed to establish a balance of power in Europe which could settle the 'German problem'. For A.J.P. Taylor the events which led to the Second World War were primarily the result of the failed attempt by the peacemakers to get Germany to accept the 'morally vindictive' Treaty of Versailles. On the other side of the debate, there are historians willing to offer a far more sympathetic interpretation. A. Adamthwaite, for example, views the settlement as a bold attempt to deal with a range of intractable international problems, while Ruth Henig, a leading expert on the actual negotiations at Paris in 1919, describes the settlement as a 'creditable achievement' which ultimately failed because of severe underlying economic problems, major divisions among the peacemakers, and the reluctance of the political leaders, especially during the 1930s, to enforce it.

In more recent times, the views of those who take a less judgemental and critical view of the settlement are fast becoming the new orthodoxy on the subject. It is all too easy to argue that it was the Versailles Treaty which caused German militarism during the inter-war period. To accept this view, however, is to accept what German propaganda wanted everyone to believe at the time, that German aggression was caused by the desire of foreign powers to hold back German progress towards great power status. This was a myth dressed up as a justification for German aggression. Later events indicate that the Versailles Treaty was far too lenient, a leniency that increased when the Treaty was subsequently revised in Germany's favour. It is not unreasonable to conclude that a more harsh settlement, properly policed by an effective League of Nations, over a number of generations, would have worked effectively and it would most probably have prevented another world war. This view gathers strength when it is recalled that in 1945, at the end of the Second World War, the Allies actually occupied Germany with troops and they also humiliated the German government with an unconditional surrender and denied Germany any formal peace settlement at all. This incredible harshness did prevent a German military revival and forced Germany to remain at peace with its neighbours. By taking away the ability of the Germans to wage war, the Germans were encouraged along the path of peace and ultimately towards democracy. That there was a German problem may not be accepted easily by some historians, but it is hard to deny it for the

period 1890 to 1945. The peacemakers of 1919, who tried to solve it, should not be held responsible for its existence.

Words and concepts to note

Balance of power: a policy or principle which seeks to avoid the preponderance of one power.

Autocratic: literally, self-rule but mostly used to describe the actions of a person who holds all power.

Self-determination: the principle that those of one nation should govern themselves.

Punitive: punishment.

Conscription: compulsory military service.

Armistice: suspension of fighting in order to discuss peace terms.

Mandate: used here to mean the system whereby the government of certain territories and colonies of Germany and Turkey was transferred to the League of Nations.

Covenant: an agreement publicly signed by all the parties.

Collective security: a strategy whereby states co-operate with each other with the intention to prevent war.

Vindictive: inclined to vengefulness and spite.

Militarism: domination of the military in policy making.

Further Reading: A. Adamthwaite, The Lost Peace: International Relations, London 1980. P.M.H. Bell, The Origins of the Second World War, London, 1986; R. Henig, The League of Nations, Edinburgh, 1973; R. Henig, Versailles and After, 1919-33, London, 1984; A. Lentin, The Versailles Peace Conference: Peacemaking with Germany, London, 1991; S. Marks, The Illusion of Peace: International Relations in Europe 1918-33, London, 1976; H. Nicolson, Peacemaking 1919, London, 1964; G. Ross, The Great Powers and the Decline of the European States System 1914-45, London, 1983; A.J.P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War, London, 1961; M. Trachtenberg, 'Versailles after sixty years' Journal of Contemporary History, vol. 16 (1982).

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