

## THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE 1919 LEGACIES AND CHALLENGES

By Dr Johnston McMaster

The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 seemed to be stage-managed! History and memory were choreographed. The Conference began on January 18, 1919, which was the anniversary of the coronation of German emperor Wilhelm I in the Palace of Versailles in 1871. This had marked the end of the Franco-Prussian war, the unification of Germany and the German seizure of French provinces, Alsace and Lorraine. Intentional or otherwise, memory was invoked of a harsh settlement Germany had imposed on France almost half a century earlier. Six months later roles were reversed. The work of the Conference continued into 1920 but its important work was done between January and June of 1919. In total some five treaties were produced, meant to be peace agreements, and named after various locations in Paris where they were signed. The best known Treaty was the Treaty of Versailles signed on June 28 1919, five years to the day since a teenage Serbian nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, shot dead the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo. The Treaty of Versailles and the Peace Conference are not synonymous but when we speak of the Paris Peace Conference we tend to think Versailles.

Trench warfare had ended on November 11, 1918. It was not the end of the war but the end of trench warfare. The war for millions of Europeans continued in various brutal forms until 1923. Local wars, civil wars and genocides continued with millions dying and displaced. Parts of Europe were a huge refugee camp. The war did not end in 1918 but continued through to 1923, as did the formal peace process. The end was July 1923, when the Treaty of Lausanne was signed by France, Britain, Italy, Japan, Greece and Romania with the new Republic of Turkey. Lausanne was really a renegotiated Treaty after a 1920 failed Treaty rejected by Turkish forces loyal to their war hero, Mustafa Kemal. The Treaty of 1920 had partitioned Turkey with parts given to France, Britain and Italy, but Kemal deposed the Sultan, threatened war in the Middle-East and forced a renegotiation. Everything coming out of Paris was fragile. The war had claimed 15 million lives, a flu pandemic related to the war, claimed many more lives as did those years up to 1923. Millions were physically and emotionally shattered. A world order had collapsed and Paris was the attempt by the 'victors' to build a new world order, albeit one that they tried to shape in their own image. The Peace Conference was dominated by the 'big four', Britain, France, Italy and the USA. They were all winners and winners not only write history, they try to reshape the world their way, in their self-interests, and they rarely do a good job.

The 'big four' and their delegations came to Paris, in fairness, with a thankless task, perhaps even impossible. The only template they had was the Congress of Vienna 1815, when the winners again tried to reshape Europe after the Napoleonic wars. It was a template with limits. The peace of Vienna was conservative, an attempt to put the clock back, designed to prevent change in a Europe which had only escaped change by a whisker. Austrian Chancellor, Metternich was highly critical of French-style democracy, threatening monarch, Church and property. That he said was 'a disease which must be cured' (Norman Davies, *Europe: A History*, 1997, p762). Europe was not to have a French-style revolution or democracy, but a reinforced status quo. In preparation for Paris the British Foreign Office commissioned a book on the Vienna Congress for guidance, but Vienna was not a template for Paris. It was controlled by a 'big five' and even after the widespread revolutions of 1848, maintained an unchanging and elitist Europe until 1914-1918. In 1919 the peacemakers were to construct a peace without a road map.

The 'big four' dominated but over thirty countries had sent delegates to Paris. Thousands of staff were there. The world came to Paris in 1919. In 1815 the British had brought a party of seven to Vienna. They brought 524 people to Paris. All the losers were excluded and many of those who came were from Asia and Africa, hoping in the light of President Woodrow Wilson's big core theme of the right to national self-determination, to assert their global validity. Ireland also sent two delegates but British pressure saw the Conference refuse the Irish delegation a hearing. In relation to African and Asian delegates, the men in power in Paris believed deeply in the superiority of white people. They never took Africa and Asia seriously. They simply didn't get it that four years of a brutal, catastrophic war had undermined the the ideals of European superiority on which their empires had

been constructed. They still believed themselves to be at the top of the evolutionary pyramid and therefore to still deserve the right to shape the destinies of people around the globe, even without seeking their consent'. (Michael S. Neiberg, *The Treaty of Versailles*, 2017, p31). There was an inherent belief in white supremacy.

Again Paris is best known for the Treaty of Versailles. 'With a total of 440 articles, appendices, and supplementary treaties, the Versailles Treaty between the Allies and the German Empire was at the time the longest and most complex peace agreement in history'. (Jorn Leonhard, *Pandora's Box : A History of the First World War*, 2018, p848). There were no direct negotiations with Germany. Germany could only submit written counter-proposals, all of which were rejected by the Allies. It seemed that Germany would refuse to sign. The Allies gave a five day ultimatum and threatened to occupy Reich territory. In the end Germany was forced to accept terms. The newly formed Weimar National Assembly voted 237-138 to accept the Allies conditions. On June 28 1919, the German Foreign Minister and the Transport Minister, Muller and Bell signed under protest in the Hall of Mirrors at the palace of Versailles. ( Leonhard, pp848-849). Many felt that the Treaty and it's terms were humiliating for Germany. The Allies may well have been driven by vengeance, especially Clemenceau of France. Only fifty or so years earlier France had been humiliated by Germany in the same Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, perhaps even more humiliating on your own home ground.

Perhaps the most controversial article of the Treaty was Article 231 which called on Germany to accept 'the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies'. (Neiberg, p58). This was to establish a legal basis for reparations. Known as the 'guilt clause' it drew some of the fiercest criticism. Are blame and guilt ever that simple?

The key players in Paris were Clemenceau of France, Lloyd George of Britain and Woodrow Wilson of the USA. They each had their own agendas. Clemenceau and Lloyd George were terrified of the Bolsheviks, Clemenceau was paranoid about a continued German threat. Wilson had come with his Fourteen Points rooted in the idea of covenant, possibly shaped by his Presbyterian Reformed theology of Covenant. He drove Clemenceau and Lloyd George crazy with his constant moralism and he had no understanding of Europe, it's history and ethos. Wilson's great catch phrase was national self-determination by which he meant government derived from popular sovereignty, 'the right of a people to have their own state, which would ideally evolve over time and not result from violent revolution'. (Ian Kershaw, *To Hell And Back: Europe 1914-1949*, 2016, p115). But Wilson always had the USA in mind. 'Behind Wilson's apparent idealism, however, lay a calculated aim: if the Great War and the Allied victory had shifted the global balance of power away from Europe and towards the US, the new world order he promoted would cement his country's global dominance, both politically and economically'. (Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why The First World War Failed To End, 1917-1923*, 2016, p173). And America was on its way to the American century and replacing the British Empire. As for Clemenceau and Lloyd George their manoeuvring at Paris was really to maintain 'their grip on their colonial empires and their global hegemony for at least another generation'. (David A. Andelman, *A Shattered Peace, Versailles 1919 and the Price We Pay Today*, 2014, p322). Was Versailles and Paris after all following a Vienna template?

Paris did redraw the map of Europe and much of the world. It wasn't quite Vienna. In 1914 the European Continent had 19 monarchies and 3 republics. At the end of the war it had 14 monarchies and 16 republics. But there was no democratic revolution. It proved illusory. Newly established constitutions were violated by one or other brand of dictator. (Davies, p943). Europe experienced the monster of totalitarianism. Peace is fragile and peace processes are lengthy and difficult. They can be too easily violated and that is not just a concern in the immediacy of 1919! It's more than contemporary in Europe and the larger world.

The Paris Peace Conference took three significant decisions with lasting legacies and consequences.

## THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

The first part of the Treaty of Versailles contained the Covenant of the League of Nations. This consisted of the first 26 Articles of the Treaty and the language was heavily dominated by the language of covenant. Any amendments were only possible under Article 19 of the Covenant, but amending the Treaty was not possible so long as Germany was not a member, and Germany was definitely to be excluded. The League of Nations was to be based in Geneva with an Assembly and a Council. All recognised states belonged to the Assembly. This meant that it was larger than Europe. Twenty-six of the original forty-two members were countries outside Europe. The League may have been Wilson's great idea but when he returned to the US, the Senate refused to be part of it. Russia was not only absent from the Conference but excluded from the League. 'The political arrangements to shape the next stage of European history were entered into without consulting her, though in Eastern Europe this meant the drawing of boundaries in which the Russian government was bound to be vitally interested...the European power which had, potentially, the greatest weight of all in affairs of the continent, was not consulted in the making of a new Europe'. (J. M, Roberts, *The New Penguin History Of The World*, Revised Ed, 2007, pp902-903). It was to no one's advantage that Russia was excluded and we still live with the legacies.

The Assembly itself was to be dominated by the five victors of the War. The five victorious powers had the veto, an inadequate model replicated by the League's successor, the United Nations and its Security Council dominated by seven. China also was outside the League for reasons we shall see shortly. Peace is never realised by exclusion. We do not make peace with our friends and unless all are at the table, peace will not be realised.

The League of Nations was maimed from the start. WW2 killed off the League. Its aims were not realised. 'Covenants of peace were not openly arrived at. Freedom of the seas was not secured. Free trade was not established in Europe; indeed, tariff walls wound up being erected, higher and more numerous than any yet known. National armaments were not reduced. German colonies and the lands of its allies, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, were distributed among the victors as spoils - from the Saar to Shandong, from Serbia to Syria - the wishes, to say nothing of their interests, of their populations flagrantly disregarded. Russia was not welcomed into the society of Nations. Arab portions of the Ottoman Empire were assured neither secure boundaries nor secure sovereignty. Vast territories in Central Europe and the Balkans included millions of inhabitants who were indisputably not native Polish or Czech, Serb or Rumanian, Slovak or Slovene. The League of Nations, emasculated first by the peacemakers in Paris, then by America's failure to join up, was never able to fulfil its vision of political independence for great and small nations alike'. (David A. Andelman, p317).

Even on day two of the Conference, Japan tried to insert a clause on racial equality into the Covenant of the League of Nations, but the Australians were having none of it and in imperial solidarity the British said they 'would not agree to it, probably not in any form'. (Andelman, p270). A month later when the final touches were being put to the Covenant of the League, the Japanese tried to amend the freedom of religion clause by adding a clause on 'racial freedom', but without success. The race issue was dead. The League of Nations was a noble ideal, Covenant even giving it a moral and religious basis, but there was too much self-interest, latent imperialism and even racism to ensure its failure.

## THE PARIS MANDATES

The Paris Conference awarded Mandates over former German colonies in Africa and the provinces of the liquidated Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. The Mandates were to be operated under the League of Nations. The most influential person here was a non-European. Jan Smuts was a South African who has worked his way into an advisory role in Lloyd George's Imperial War Cabinet, and then a prominent role in the Paris Conference. Smuts had feared a German take-over of South Africa in 1914 and he then saw an opportunity for South Africa to take over German colonial possessions in Africa. Smuts wanted South Africa to take over German Southwest Africa. Smuts became 'the key advocate of the mandate system by which the British and French took over effective political control

of large parts of the Ottoman Empire'. (Michael S. Neiberg, p30). Mandates also decided the fate of the German colonies.

Having been given Mandates for the former Ottoman provinces under the direction of the League of Nations, the British and the French in imperial arrogance ignored the Mandates. They drew lines in the sand, created artificial borders and imposed boundaries to suit their interests. Oil was a key factor. The French created Syria and Lebanon. From 1916 and the Balfour Declaration the British played dishonest games with Jews and Arabs. Contradictory promises were made to each as also a few years later to the Irish. French and British politicians, Picot and Sykes drew lines in the sand and Britain had Mandates for Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq, the latter cobbled together out of three incompatible and irreconcilable Ottoman Provinces, Kurdish, Sunni and Shia. It was never going to work and it never has. But then there was oil. Imperial powers have always in history operated from 3Gs, gold, guns and god. Or oil, guns and god, a very unholy trinity.

What the Mandates really meant was that every Arab country had imposed borders and an experience of colonisation. It remains a tinder box suffering repeatedly and still from Atlantic-Western interventionism. Today the region is almost destroyed by war and violence and has major humanitarian crises, Syria, Yemen and Iraq, to name but three, and Israel-Palestine cannot by any stretch be described as a peaceful or resolved situation. Migration from the region to Europe is a major problem, producing walls, fences, racism, even assertions of Christian supremacy, a recession in democracy and human rights. And as Europeans we seem to pretend that we have no responsibility. The abuse of Mandates was an abuse of power and the dark side of imperialism. And the consequences we still have with us.

## THE BETRAYAL OF CHINA

In 1914 five Western imperial powers were present in China. They were France, Britain, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia. They each had political and economic interests and had colonised different regions of China. Germany occupied the eastern province of Shandong and as the war continued, China wanted to take back Shandong from Germany, and so supported the Allied Powers. China offered 50K troops to the British. Britain declined the offer and allowed it's ally, Japan to take Shandong. There had been a recent history of conflict and war between China and Japan. It was then proposed by China to send 300K Chinese workers to Britain and France for non-combatant work on the battle front. The Chinese Labour Corp came and dug trenches, looked for unexploded shells, removed barb wire, and collected and buried corpses, including dead horses. Handling dead bodies was particularly difficult for the Chinese as it was culturally and ritually forbidden.

The Chinese had a delegation at the Paris Conference, a group of skilled negotiators. But in the end they counted for little. President Wilson had been for the right of self determination of small nations, not that China was small, but Wilson had no intention of persuading France and Britain to let go of colonial possessions in Asia or Africa. Out of self-interest Britain and France left the Japanese in Shandong and betrayed the Chinese. That is how the Chinese experienced the Paris Peace Conference. The Chinese refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles. Japan gave up Shandong in 1923 but China had been betrayed and humiliated. It was at this point that China turned to Russia and embraced communism. In 1919 as large protests took place in China there was a twenty-five year old called Mao Zedong. He with others embraced communism and rose to political prominence in communist China. This led to his brutal revolution in the 1950s and a terrible famine claiming a total of 40M lives. The betrayal of China in Paris left a terrible legacy. In Paris imperial powers played old imperial games and left fatal legacies. To what extent are those legacies still with us today?

We live now through a period of geopolitical shifts. Easternisation means that political and economic power is moving from the Atlantic -West to the East. China may well be entering it's century as American and European hegemony fades. China's Belt and Road Initiative sees it's economic presence in 82 countries today, including European countries. India too is emerging as a economic power. The future belongs to Asia, something which could not be seen in Paris a century ago. But then it's only the return of Asia's past!

Paris has left us legacies and consequences. They did not have a template from Vienna in 1815, but maybe they repeated the mistakes of Vienna. An elite set about deciding the shape of a new world order in their own image. People were excluded which is never good for peacebuilding.

'They took pains over the borders in Europe, even if they did not draw them to everyone's satisfaction, but in Africa they carried out the old practice of handing out territory to suit the imperialist powers. In the Middle East they threw together people's in Iraq most notably, who still have not managed to cohere into a civil society'. (Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and its Attempt To End War*, 2001, p353).

There were many critics of Paris and many who returned from Paris, including Woodrow Wilson, who shortly after collapsed and died disillusioned. The fiercest critic was from the British delegation, who became the brilliant economist, John Maynard Keynes. He quickly wrote a devastating book on the Paris Peace Conference, *The Economic Consequence of the Peace*, 1919.

'The Treaty included no provisions for the economic rehabilitation of Europe - nothing to make the defeated central empires into good neighbours, nothing to stabilise the new States of Europe, nothing to reclaim Russia; nor does it promote in any way a compact of economic solidarity amongst the Allies themselves....The Council of Four paid no attention to these issues, being preoccupied with others - Clemenceau to crush the economic life of his enemy, Lloyd George to do a deal and bring home something which would pass muster for a week, the President to do nothing that was not just and right. It is an extraordinary fact that the fundamental economic problems of a Europe starving and disintegrating before their eyes, was the one question in which it was impossible to rouse the interest of the Four'. (John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequence of the Peace*, 1919, p89).

There are six important and indivisible strands to peacebuilding and reconciliation. They are the socio-political, socio-economic, socio-legal, socio- environmental, socio-psychological and socio-spiritual. The word socio is used because each strand in peacebuilding and reconciliation is social, and inclusively social and not privatised or individualistic. For Keynes the great failure of Paris was that it did not address the economic strand. There is no peace and reconciliation unless the socio-economic strand is addressed and implemented. If we engage a more literary and historically contextualised reading of St Paul's classic text on reconciliation in II Corinthians 5, we will see the socio-economic vision and strand at the heart of it. Maybe if Woodrow Wilson with his propensity at Paris to moralise, had paid more attention to the Biblical vision of covenant at the heart of the League of Nations and the Treaty of Versailles, he might have realized that Biblical covenant is essentially a radical economic vision rooted in justice, restorative and distributive. It could be that a missing piece of the peace at Paris in 1919, was socio-economic justice.

There is at least one other challenging question from Paris and it is contemporary. 'How can the irrational passions of nationalism and religion be contained before they do more damage? How can we outlaw war? We are still asking those questions'. (MacMillan, p500).

**Dr Johnston McMaster**  
**September 10, 2019**  
**Paris**