Books

Review: "A Shattered Peace"

Versailles 1919 and the Price We Pay Today, by David A. Andelman '66JRN (Wiley).

By |
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Germans scrap their war machines in 1919 under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles (Hulton Archive / Getty Images).

The peace settlement after the First World War has been subjected to a steady stream of criticism ever since the leaders of the coalition that defeated Germany and its allies signed the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919. The most pungent

broadsides were unleashed by disenchanted members of the British and American delegations to the peace conference, who lamented the betrayal of the noble project for a just peace proposed by President Woodrow Wilson. John Maynard Keynes's influential jeremiad *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919) set the censorious tone. Ray Stannard Baker's *Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement* (1922) and Harold Nicolson's *Peacemaking 1919* (1933) added damning particulars to the indictment. By the end of the Second World War, the definitive verdict on Versailles was in: The vile, vindictive, "Carthaginian" settlement of 1919 had led inexorably to the darkness that descended across Europe from 1933 to 1945.

This critical assessment of the Versailles peace settlement was tempered by a new generation of historians in the 1970s and 1980s, who had the advantage of access to the recently opened British and French archives. They contended that the peacemakers had been much more moderate and conciliatory than portrayed in these earlier denunciations. They concluded that the Versailles system had failed less because it was too harsh toward Germany than because, through a combination of German recalcitrance and Allied hesitation, it had not been scrupulously implemented. The conclusions of the numerous scholarly monographs produced by this revisionist school were later incorporated in two standard general studies of the subject: Manfred Boemeke et al., eds., *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 Years* (1998) and Margaret Macmillan's *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (2001).

David A. Andelman '66JRN has resuscitated the earlier interpretation in his elegantly written *A Shattered Peace: Versailles 1919 and the Price We Pay Today*. A distinguished former foreign correspondent for the *New York Times* and CBS News, Andelman has revisited his 1965 senior honors thesis at Harvard and punctuated it with insights gained from his own extensive experience as a reporter overseas. As the subtitle suggests, he updates the standard indictment of the peace settlement of 1919 by tracing its long-term consequences even to our own day. Andelman holds the peacemakers at Versailles responsible not only for the horrors of the Second World War, but also for many of the political crises that have plagued mankind since 1945. Relying heavily on Nicolson's acerbic critique of the proceedings in Paris, he portrays David Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, and Vittorio Orlando — Woodrow Wilson's three antagonists at the peace table — as narrow-minded, Machiavellian advocates for their nations' greedy quest for land and loot.

An implicit counterfactual proposition underlies Andelman's narrative: If only the prime ministers of Great Britain, France, and Italy had had the good sense to endorse the American president's bold and imaginative project for the postwar world, the terrible events that caused so much human suffering for the remainder of the 20th century and in the first decade of our own might have been forestalled. The component of Wilson's prescription for international peace and security that is dearest to Andelman's heart is the principle of national self-determination. If only the European statesmen had recognized the need to separate the various ethnic groups in the Balkans instead of fusing them into the "completely artificial nation" of Yugoslavia, the carnage in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s would have been averted.

Unfortunately, the concept of self-determination based on ethnicity and language represented a dire threat to the peace and security of postwar Europe. Consider the paradox, for example, if this principle had been scrupulously applied by the peacemakers of 1919 to the delineation of Germany's postwar frontiers. The resulting reward for that country's military defeat would have been all of the territory that Hitler later acquired or reacquired through diplomatic intimidation or military aggression that finally led to the Second World War: the German-speaking borderland of Czechoslovakia; the German-speaking Republic of Austria; and the German-speaking city of Danzig, together with the largely German-speaking "corridor" connecting it to the newly reconstituted state of Poland. Such an outcome would have been utterly unacceptable, and understandably so, to the victorious Allies that had shed so much blood and expended so much treasure during the four years of the recent war. How could they have been expected to acquiesce in the creation of a postwar Germany with more territory, resources, and population than it had possessed at the beginning of hostilities?

It is worth recalling how the problem of the ethnic German minorities scattered across Central Europe was finally resolved at the end of the Second World War. The Big Three at Potsdam, the successors of the Big Four at Paris who had wrestled with the problem a quarter of a century earlier, cut the Gordian knot. They approved the brutal transfer of more than ten million German speakers from half a dozen countries in Central and Eastern Europe to the shrunken remnant of the Third Reich. This campaign of what we would call today "ethnic cleansing," together with the inter-allied military occupation and the forcible extraction of reparations from its occupation zone by the Soviet Union, constituted a much more severe peace

settlement than the one depicted in the orthodox historiography from Keynes to Andelman.

Where Andelman's brief against Versailles hits the mark is in his perceptive assessment of the European allies' hypocritical refusal to apply the principle of national self-determination to the non-Western peoples of the colonial world. In his "Fourteen Points" address on January 8, 1918, outlining his government's war aims, Woodrow Wilson had called for an impartial adjustment of colonial claims in which "the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims" of the colonial powers. This remarkable and unprecedented proposal, together with the American president's endorsement of the general goal of national self-determination in a subsequent speech, inspired spokespersons for the oppressed populations of India, Indochina, and other European overseas possessions to petition the peacemakers for self-determination for their own peoples. Andelman's evocative representation of Nguyen Ai Quoc, the young Vietnamese patriot working as a busboy at the Ritz Hotel in Paris who would later adopt the pseudonym Ho Chi Minh, is a masterpiece of psychological analysis. Ho's original hopes that his "Eight Claims of the Annamite People" would receive Wilson's support vanished as it became evident that the principle of self-determination would apply only to the white populations of Central and Eastern Europe. Even if Wilson had favored the granting of independence to the colonial peoples — and there is no evidence that this Southerner with retrograde racial views ever entertained such an idea — he would have been hard put to persuade the British and French premiers to dismantle their colonial empires amid the euphoria of victory. States do not normally relinquish territory, resources, and population after winning wars.

In addition to his skillful limning of the future Ho Chi Minh, Andelman provides memorable portraits of the large cast of supplicants who enlivened the Paris proceedings in 1919: Poland's pianist-premier Ignace Jan Paderewski charms the American public with his renditions of Chopin before arriving at the conference to press his newly reestablished country's extravagant territorial claims. The Hashemite Prince Feisal of the Hejaz and his British patron T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia) pressed in vain for the unity of the Arab people and the carving of a vast Arab state out of the defunct Ottoman Empire. Chaim Weizmann, Felix Frankfurter, and other Zionist leaders successfully campaigned for the application of the Balfour Declaration to the proposed British Mandate in Palestine. V. K. Wellington Koo 1908CC, 1912GSAS, the charismatic Chinese diplomat, labored in vain to persuade the Big Four to reject Japan's claim to the former German concessions on the

Shandong peninsula (this single decision spawned the first serious anti-imperialist movement in China, whose supporters included the young militants Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai). These and other character sketches admirably capture the atmosphere of elaborate hopes and bitter disappointments that marked this monumental effort to redraw the map of Europe and establish a new world order of peace and stability after the carnage of the Great War.



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