



4 JUNE 2019

THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES A HUNDRED YEARS LATER

PROFESSOR MARGARET MACMILLAN

The common view of the Treaty and indeed the common view of the Peace Conference which settled not just the peace with Germany, but with other defeated nations, is that it was pretty much a disaster and led directly to a second world war twenty years later. The foundations for that view were really laid by John Maynard Keynes in the summer of 1919. A young and brilliant economist, he was an advisor to the treasury he had left Paris in disgust, as one American said because they weren't listening to him which was perhaps a bit unkind. But he wrote a book with what is actually rather dull title, which has been a best-seller ever since. The book is called *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* and in it he sketches a peace conference filled with knaves, charlatans, fools and idiots who are making a mess of things. Here is one passage which gives you a sense of the book if you haven't read it:

"Paris was a nightmare and everyone there was morbid. A sense of impending catastrophe overhung the frivolous scene. The futility and smallness of man before the great events confronting him, the mingled significance of unreality of the decisions. Levity, blindness, insolence, confused cries from without, all the elements of ancient tragedy were there."

And he had particular criticism not to say venom, for the leading statesmen in Paris. Woodrow Wilson the American President, he described as a 'booby', someone who was so spun around by the wily Europeans that he didn't know whether he was coming or going. Georges Clemenceau the French Prime Minister, he described as a giant ape who lay in his chair in the overheated rooms thinking only of revenge on Germany. And Lloyd George the British Prime Minister, he described as coming out of the Welsh mists, half-goat half-man, and those were the bits that his mother didn't make him take out. So that view which was highly influential at the time is the one that, certainly in the English-speaking countries, has remained the dominant view of the Paris Peace Conference and the dominant view of the Treaty of Versailles - that the Treaty of Versailles, the most important of all the treaties because it was made with the most powerful country Germany, was so vindictive, so punitive, it drove the Germans into misery, economic, social and political misery, and led to the rise of Nazism and to the assumption by power of the Nazis in 1933, and therefore led directly to the Second World War. I think the story is more complicated than that and I'm going to look at some of the details and perhaps persuade you that it is a little bit more complicated.

I think my first answer to the question when people say, 'didn't the Treaty of Versailles lead directly to the Second World War?' is what was everyone else doing for 20 years? There are 20 years between 1919 and 1939 and many decisions being made and unmade and we need to respect those 20 years, not see them simply as an interlude between one war and another. It's fair to say that the Treaty of Versailles helped to create (as did the other treaties helped to create) some of the conditions for the Second World War but it's quite possible to argue that Europe had choices before it and needn't have gone down the road to war perhaps at least until the beginning of the 1930s. And the second thing I think we must always keep in mind, is what were they facing when they tried to make peace in 1919? We have a tendency when we look back to the past to be censorious which is understandable, but to blame those in the past for not knowing what was going to happen, for not seeing as we do what was going to happen if they made certain decisions. We need to at least put ourselves in their position, look at the obstacles, look at the difficulties, look at the challenges they were dealing with and also ask could we have done any better? What would we have done differently? Making peace is never easy at the end of particularly great wars. It is often difficult, often contentious.



At the end of wars, the world is often in turmoil especially great wars like the First World War, with huge amounts of destruction both of men and of material but also of societies. Wartime coalitions which will come together in a great struggle to fight a war will fall apart as soon as peace comes. It happened at the end of the First World War, it happened at the end of the Second World War. And there are questions which are not easy to answer but what is the best way to deal with those who are defeated? Do you forgive all, say the past is the past let's get on with it, let's look to the future? Do you bring the defeated nations into the community of nations? That's what happened after the end of the Napoleonic Wars when France sat around a table with the other powers and helped to make a peace at the Congress of Vienna. Or do you make the defeated so aware of their defeat, do you make them so defeated that they don't really have any choice about what is going to happen. At the end of the Second World War, partly because of fears that there would be repeat of what happened after 1919, there was no question about who had been defeated and who had not. The Allied policy during the war had become one of unconditional surrender. Germany and Japan were both defeated and occupied and so the knowledge of defeat was brought home to the German and Japanese people and in fact what the Allies did was not only bring that knowledge home but in the end they rehabilitated both countries and so what is the right way to make peace? Is it better to try and forgive the past which is not always easy and try and bring the defeated nations back into a community of nations, do what you can to rehabilitate them or do you defeat them so utterly there will be no question about who won and who lost? What the problem was at the end of the First World War was that the Allies did neither. They neither brought the experience and knowledge of defeat home to the Germans in a really meaningful way and they treated Germany harshly enough that the Germans could feel as they did a great sense of resentment.

There were disagreements among the Allies and the three key allies really are the United States, Great Britain and France. Japan was counted as a fourth power. It was an ally in the First World War but it was always considered as a lesser part of the great coalition and Italy also was counted as a great power but in the end it was the United States, France and Britain that were going to make the key decisions about Germany. What the United States wanted was a fairer and a better world expressed by the American President Woodrow Wilson who had sketched out in his 14 points and other speeches, a vision of a world in which nations work together, in which trade barriers were lowered so that trade would help to link them together. There's a belief which I think many people still have, that the more nations trade with each other the less likely they are to fight each other. A world in which disarmament would be universal. Everyone would lower the level of their armaments because many people felt the First World War had been set off in part at least by an arms race among the powers in Europe. A world in which nations would come together in a collective body to be known as the League of Nations which would enforce collective punishment for those who broke the peace and provide collective security for its members. And so this was a very powerful idea and the United States put considerable weight behind it.

The Americans kept on saying that they didn't really want anything for themselves which was true in a way but of course they had done very well out of the war. The war had been a tremendous stimulus for American industry, American agriculture - there had been a real boom during the First World War in the United States and American Financiers had become the world's bankers. The United States had gone from being a debtor nation to being a creditor nation and that was a very important shift. The United States was bound to become a world power in any case given its enormous natural resources and population and location, but what the First World War did was speed up that process of turning the United States into a great power. The Americans didn't want territory for themselves, they made it clear that they didn't want to engage in what they saw as the sorts of games that the European powers enjoyed and they very pointedly described themselves not as an ally but an associate which was significant.

Great Britain wanted the German threat to what the British had held dear removed. What they had feared most of all was growing German naval power and the British had achieved that goal of removing that German naval threat before the peace conference opened. The two great German fleets - the submarine fleet and the surface fleet - had been surrendered at the end of the war and were in British ports and therefore in British hands. Britain had also, or parts of the British Empire, had also acquired German colonies in the course of the war and so they were in possession of pretty much everything that they wanted. You were beginning to get people in Britain saying 'you know the Germans are culpable we feel they started the war but in the end they were our biggest trading



partner before the war, in the end we're going to have to work with them in the end we want a prosperous Germany'. And so British attitudes to Germany were partly made up of resentment and bitterness about what the Germans had inflicted on the British public. The costs of the war for Britain were enormous in many ways but there was also a sense that in the long run Britain and Germany were going to have to get on with each other. You also get, which is not an uncommon thing in Britain as we're realising today, a complicated attitude towards the continent of Europe and the British have intervened in the continent when it has suited them, and then they have tended to withdraw, intended to turn outwards to their empire, outwards to their trading relationships around the world and this was beginning to happen at the end of the First World War.

And then you had France, and what the French wanted above all was security. When the French are accused of being vindictive, short-sighted, wanting to keep German power down, you must remember what had happened to France. In most cases, or certainly in the cases of anyone over the age of about fifty, in people's lifetimes, Georges Clemenceau the French Prime Minister had been a young man in Paris (when the German Confederation had invaded in 1870). He had lived through the siege of Paris, he had known what French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War had meant for France and a lot of French people knew that. In 1914, France had not invaded Germany, it had not declared war on Germany, Germany had declared war on France and had invaded France. A great deal of the Western Front ran right through the North of France. It ran through Belgium but it ran through the North of France, an area which in France contained, or had contained, something like 40% of its infrastructure; its mines, its iron mills, its industries, its railways, its bridges, and a lot of that had been destroyed both in the course of the fighting and by the Germans as they retreated finally out of France, out of the occupied territories in the summer of 1918. And so I think you have to understand what it was that the French had experienced, what it was they feared they might be experiencing yet a third time, and that was certainly something that a number of French leaders including Marshal Foch, the supreme Allied Commander in Chief feared.

When he made the Armistice in 1918, he said it is a 20 years armistice because what the French feared as they looked at Germany, was a country which was in the end more powerful than France. It was sitting right there in the middle of Europe, it had been relatively untouched by the war. Of course, Germany had suffered during the war, but very little of the war had been fought on German soil and so the French looked at a Germany where the infrastructure was untouched and where there was a growing population. German women were having more infants than French women were, despite every effort by the French government to encourage French women to do their patriotic duty. The demographic gap was opening between Germany and France. There were more potential German soldiers coming along every year and that was something the French were very aware of. What the French wanted was security. They wanted some of Germany to be broken up into separate states as it had been before 1871 but that was not going to happen as neither Lord George or Wilson would accept that, but they wanted some way of keeping Germany under control. What they also feared, but perhaps second to the fear of Germany was the spread of Russian Bolshevism into France. There was already a very lively left-wing movement in France and on the 1st of May 1919, the Peace Conference virtually came to a standstill in Paris because there were left-wing demonstrations many of which turned violent and then there was an equally violent crackdown by the authorities. It is said, no one will ever know, but it is said that several hundred people may have died in the clashes on the 1st of May. What the French were also afraid of was not just a resurgent Germany, but the spread as they saw it, of a very dangerous political ideology from the east. What they wanted was both a Germany that was kept under control and what they called a 'cordon sanitaire' - a ring of nations around the new Bolshevik State which would somehow try and contain Bolshevism.

So we have different interests coming out, and then of course you have the lesser powers but I will just mention Italy and Japan. The Italians had entered the war partly out of conviction. There were Italians who supported the Allies, seeing them as the forces of liberalism but they'd also entered the war in a very calculated way. They had entered the war hoping to get territory from their great enemy Austria-Hungary, and they had staked out claims to their borders in the north. They wanted what they called their natural borders up to the height of the Alps in the North of Italy. But increasingly they also looked across the Adriatic, to the territories which had now detached themselves from Austria-Hungary and were in the process of becoming part of the new South Slav State of Yugoslavia. And the Italians feared the emergence of a new strong state on the other side of the Adriatic and they began to make noises and more than noises about taking some of the territory at the top of the Adriatic. Possibly



taking some of the islands in the Adriatic, possibly even moving over across the Adriatic and taking an occasional port or two. What the Japanese wanted I think were two things. Firstly they wanted to hold on to what they had taken from Germany in the First World War. Japan had taken German possessions in the Far East in China and in the Pacific. Equally important, the Japanese wanted recognition that Japan was an equal of the Great European and Western powers. The Japanese knew that Western powers United States, Australia, South Africa, my own country Canada, didn't want Japanese immigrants. They treated them as second-class citizens, they feared them on all sorts of overtly racial grounds, and this of course galled the Japanese. What they wanted was to be recognised as the equal of the other great powers and so they came in wanting both very concrete gains and power.

The peace conference started in January 1919. Twenty-seven countries came; this was one of the biggest international gatherings that the world has seen. Initially people thought it would be like the Congress of Vienna which had wound up the Wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. In fact, the British Foreign Office commissioned a history of the Congress of Vienna which was given to all the members of the British delegation so they would be able to see how things were done in Vienna. Every British delegate was issued with something like a thousand visiting cards and they were meant to - not quite put on knee breeches and powdered wigs - but they were certainly meant to go around and distribute their visiting cards to their counterparts. That rapidly stopped when it became quite clear this was a very different sort of peace conference and they weren't going to be proceeding in the same way as the Congress of Vienna. The key issues before the peace conference certainly in its early part were to drop the covenant of the new League of Nations and this was something Woodrow Wilson insisted on, and he was in a fairly strong position to insist on it because the United States had contributed significantly to the victory of the Allies, and furthermore the Allies owed the United States quite a bit of money. So Woodrow Wilson insisted that as he called it the Covenant of the League of Nations be drawn up. And then of course the great issue was what to do with Germany and this was going to be debated through those early months of 1919.

The Peace Conference had originally been intended to be a preliminary peace conference. The idea was that the Allies would meet, they would agree on the terms to be offered to Germany and the German treaty was always going to be the most difficult and contentious one, although some of the other treaties the Ottoman treaty for example was going to be difficult as well, it was really the German treaty that was a difficult one. The Peace Conference was meant to be preliminary - the Allies would take about a month to draw up their peace terms and then they would call the Germans and there would be a negotiation. That's what the Allies thought, that's what the Germans thought and that didn't happen. And the reason it didn't happen I think was twofold. One, that the work of the Peace Conference just kept increasing. There was so many very powerful people representing powerful nations there in Paris; petitioners came from all over the world, people who wanted countries of their own, people who had causes, women who wanted votes, African Americans who wanted better treatment for their people, people from the colonies the obscure assistant chef at the Ritz called Ho Chi Minh who came and tried to present a petition to them asking for independence for his little country of Vietnam. And so literally hundreds of petitioners came to the Peace Conference asking for things. Whether it was land or whether it was a cause.

What the Powers also found is that without really intending to, they became a sort of world government. The world particularly Europe, was in a very difficult state at the end of the war. The collapse of four empires, the Austro-Hungarian Empire which had dominated the centre of Europe for better or worse for so many centuries, the Russian Empire which had fallen to pieces and then was now course engaged in a civil war, the German Empire which had included Danish and Polish speakers was also falling to pieces, and the Ottoman Empire which still had European territory and of course a lot of territory in the Middle East was about to fall to pieces as well. And so what the Powers found is they were having to deal with the aftermath of this not just in all the territory that was now up for grabs and then whose fate had to be decided, but also because they had very pressing problems of what to do about such things as starvation and hunger and disease. The end of the European Empires in the Centre of Europe meant that not just political structures had collapsed, but so had economic structure. And so, in the winter of 1919 Vienna, which was one of the most prosperous cities in the world, experienced starvation. The Red Cross which was trying to give relief there said they saw diseases they had never expected to see in Europe - diseases caused by hunger or made possible by hunger - and that was because the ending of Austria-Hungary brought new borders; Romania, Hungary as separate States, the new State of Czechoslovakia, meant that



goods were not coming as they once had across the border. The rolling stock that the railways needed was being grabbed by new governments and so Vienna was starving because the food that had once come from Hungary to feed it was not coming for various reasons, or the coal that it needed to bake its bread and to provide its heating was also not coming from either the new State of Czechoslovakia or from Poland.

What the statesmen found in Paris was that they were dealing with a whole host of problems that they hadn't expected to deal with. They finally managed to get the German terms agreed, it was April by the time they did it and it had proved very difficult indeed. The Italians had walked out at one point because they weren't getting the border adjustments that they wanted. The Japanese had threatened to walk out because they didn't feel they were getting the recognition they deserve. They wanted a clause in the Covenant of the League of Nations which said that people should not be discriminated against on the basis of their religion or their race and for various reasons the Allies were not prepared to concede so the Japanese threatened to walk out. The Belgians threatened to walk out because they weren't satisfied with the recompense they were going to get, and the Chinese threatened to walk out. What the leaders feared by April was that if they opened up the whole treaty again and called the Germans in to negotiate, the whole Peace Conference would fall to pieces. And what they knew, and this is something I think we always have to remember, is they knew that their power was diminishing month by month by month. If you look on paper, these are very powerful nations, they control vast armies, navies, new air forces but they were demobilising, they had to demobilise. Their Treasuries, their taxpayers, their peoples, didn't want to keep those giant forces in place anymore, and the soldiers and sailors themselves didn't want to remain in these armed forces anymore. There were mutinies, the French Black Sea Fleet for example mutinied. There were riots in staging camps in Britain, where soldiers who felt that mobilisation was going too slowly, rioted including a number of Canadians who didn't see why they should be kept in a rather miserable rainy camp in Rhyl in North Wales when they could be back in Canada. I'm not sure I can blame them for rioting. And so the very knowledge that their power was shrinking was something that was always there for the peacemakers, and when it came to actually trying to gauge whether Germany would accept the peace terms offered to it, Marshal Foch was very pessimistic about whether he would actually be able to move troops in Germany and what it would cost them. Yes, he said he would do it, but the Germans might well fight house to house, town to town, village to village, and the cost might be horrific which of course was what happened in 1945.

The Allies have this tremendous pressure on them. They are dealing with a great deal, they know that their power is less than it was, and wars are breaking out. There are a number of wars that break out as the First World War comes to an end. As Winston Churchill said 'the Wars of the Giants have ended and the Wars of the pygmies have started'. And there was going to be fighting through much of the centre of Europe, the Caucasus and, the Middle East up until 1923. And some of those wars were not small. There was a very large-scale war between the newly emerging state of Poland for example, and Bolshevik Russia. There were small wars between Poland and Czechoslovakia. And so when the Allies looked out at the world in which they were dealing with they recognised that it was actually very difficult for them to keep control over what was happening. They could barely feed Europe and they also had to try and deal with this very turbulent political situation. There was a moment in what was called the Council of Four, which emerged as a sort of an inner core of the Peace Conference sometime in March 1919, where they were talking about a small war which had just broken out over some disputed territory between the new State of Czechoslovakia and the old but newly emerging State of Poland, and they talked about how they can stop this. They called in Marshal Foch and they say 'no we've got to get troops over there, they're not listening to us you know they're fighting each other it could spread'. Foch says 'of course I'll obey orders, just tell me what to do' as he often did, they said 'well send troops' and he said 'well yes but I'd like to point out railways aren't running, I don't have the railway cars, I'm not sure the troops are reliable', and it was quite clear that he didn't think he could do much. Lloyd George who was always an optimist, said to others he said 'I've got the solution' as they all sat there in a rather disconsolate frame of mind, he said 'I have the solution', they turned to him and he said 'we'll send both sides very stern telegrams'.

So I think we have to recognise that the power of what appeared to be great Powers to actually influence what's going on on the ground is not all that easy and what they were also dealing with was the two other factors which I think made the making of peace perhaps more difficult. One was that they were working under the gaze of public opinion, and this was really a new phenomenon in politics. It had been developing in the course of the 19th



century at the Congress of Vienna in 1814 - 1815. The Statesmen hadn't really had to worry about public opinion. They'd had to worry about their ruler, they'd had to worry perhaps in the case of a British, about a very small, elite group who would be scrutinising what they'd done, but they didn't have to worry about mass public opinion. And because the franchise was so restricted, they didn't have to worry about the next election in the same way that the Statesmen in Paris had to worry about the next election. Public opinion had become a force in the 19th century with the spread of literacy, with the Industrial Revolution, with the growing urbanisation of Europe. Peoples were much more aware of what their own governments were doing. Newspapers had enormous circulations, a million - two million daily newspapers, and so people were in touch with what was going on and were increasingly not shy to express their own opinions either through letters to the editor, complaints to their MPs, riots and demonstrations in Downing Street for example, or through the press and of course through the next election. So what statesmen in Paris had to think about was not just the needs of Europe and how to make peace and how to sort out all the other problems before them, but they also had to think about how they would bring their own publics with them.

Lloyd George had fought an election just at the end of the war in November 1918. It was known as the Khaki election and he certainly didn't say it himself but those in his coalition said it, they were going to make the Germans really pay. As one of the MPs running said we're going to 'squeeze the Germans until the Pips squeak' and he had won an overwhelming majority which seemed to suggest that what would be very popular with the British public was a very harsh peace on Germany. Clemenceau worried about losing his support if he was seen to be too soft on Germany. He feared he would lose the bourgeoisie, the middle classes who were his chief support. And so public opinion becomes a factor and like a lot of public opinion, it wasn't always consistent. You had on the one hand, a real hatred of the enemy and the First World War had become a war of civilisations. And the Allies, many of them from the ordinary soldiers to the leaders, felt that they were fighting something called 'Prussianism', fighting a militaristic core of Germany. They recognised there was more to Germany than Prussianism but they really felt that the big State of Prussia at the core of Germany had so dominated German politics and was such a malign force that it had to be contained and Germany had to be somehow changed. And so there really was hatred and fear of Germany, which didn't put people into a forgiving mind. So on the one hand you had the publics saying they must be punished - they started the war, and most people in those days thought that Germany had started the war - they caused us enormous damage, they've caused this huge loss and anyone who was at the Peace Conference in Paris said 'you were aware of the losses, virtually everyone in Paris is wearing black or had a black armband'. The French took the highest proportion of losses of men of military age of any of the Allies with the possible exception of Serbia. The knowledge of those losses was very much with them and their publics were certainly going to tell them. And so on the one hand, public opinion and many of those who went to Paris wanted someone to be punished and that someone was Germany, they wanted someone to pay up for the damage and the loss because the other defeated Allies were in no position to pay anything; Austria-Hungary had vanished, the Ottoman Empire was about to vanish, and Bulgaria had no money of any sort at all. At the same time however, public opinion also wanted a better world and I think that often happens when you have a great catastrophe that you hope that something at least will come out of it that is good.

What Woodrow Wilson said was not something just the Americans supported, it was something that really resonated with Europeans. Many of his ideas had been discussed and publicised in Europe before 1914. The very idea of using arbitration for example to settle disputes among nations, to try and do general disarmament was something the Europeans had been working on for almost a century and in some cases earlier. Thus, public opinion was contradictory. Punish someone, make Germany pay, undo the damage or make up for the damage that's been done, on the other hand let's build a better world. And so, the statesmen who met in Paris were dealing with that as well and having to try and gauge it and to try and think of the next election. Woodrow Wilson on his way to the Peace Conference said to one of his advisers and I think here he did make sense, "What I seem to see - with all my heart I hope that I am wrong -- is a tragedy of disappointment." and I think the Peace Conference was bound to disappoint because the expectations were too high. What we also have to remember is the forces, not just their own public opinions but the forces that the peacemakers felt themselves to be dealing with and were dealing with and there were two: I think in particular, one was ethnic nationalism both forces which people were prepared to die for and fight for, the other was Bolshevism and these were both rising, they were both not yet at the peak.



One of the great differences with the Congress of Vienna in 1814 - 1815 is that those revolutionary fires set off by the French Revolution had effectively been burnt out by this point. People were tired of war, they were tired of revolution, they wanted a calm order, they wanted peace - not everybody, but that was certainly I think the case for much of Europe. But in 1919, ethnic nationalism was on the rise, the disappearance of the empires in fact, had encouraged ethnic nationalism. Suddenly peoples who'd never had or perhaps felt they would not have for generations the hope of having their own land their own state, suddenly saw the possibility. The prison doors had been opened, in fact the prison itself had disappeared. And the fact that Americans and Woodrow Wilson talked about self-determination was something that helped to encourage the growth of new nationalisms. So all over Europe, peoples were trying not only to set up their own countries, but to set up their own countries with the most effective, and in many cases biggest, borders as possible and that was going to lead to endless problems because history had not left all the peoples of a certain ethnicity in a neat box in different parts of Europe. Germans were scattered all over Europe, Hungarians and Poles were scattered all over the Centre of Europe, and so to make ethnically homogeneous countries within very clear borders was almost impossible. It was going to lead to war. It was going to cause much of the troubles that the Centre of Europe was going to experience between 1919 and 1939. And when these various ethnic groups and their leaders were looking to establish States and when they looked to see what sort of borders they'd like, as you can probably guess they didn't say we would like a neat little compact country like Switzerland. What they did is look back through the history and that's the danger of history; you can find almost what you want in it, they would look back to the time when they were very large. Polish nationalists looked back to the great days of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth when Poland controlled a huge swath of the Centre of Europe. The Greeks looked back to the Classical Age, and so they looked into the Black Sea; they looked at Istanbul, they looked at all those islands, they looked at the coast of Asia Minor. The Italians had the Roman Empire, and when they looked across the Adriatic, they said you know that the Romans were there, the Venetians were there that really belongs to us. The Serbs looked back to their greatest national extent probably in the 13th century.

What ensued was this very difficult set of forces, ethnic nationalism seeing the possibility to establish their states and not really prepared to take no for an answer, and the other one was Bolshevism. Because what had happened in Russia was not yet clear but what people thought was happening in many cases depended on what they wanted to think. A lot of people around the world thought what was happening in Russia with the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, was a better society. They thought a new world was being built. A world that was better than the one that had caused the catastrophe of the First World War which caused the many problems of capitalism, the many miseries of the early Industrial Revolution and the injustices and the inequalities and so Bolshevism was, and was going to remain, an enormously important force. It was going to provide inspiration and a beacon for peoples around the world and the Bolsheviks themselves, even as they fought desperately against the whites to try and maintain the power, were aware of this. They had hoped that their revolution would set off a series of revolutions around the world and they had hoped that they would be able to be the builders of a New World Order. Lenin had very consciously talked about how a new world order would arise in which the old ruling classes would be overthrown, the proletariat would be in charge, there would be one large proletarian world and national borders wouldn't really matter anymore. That nations would no longer divide themselves up on the basis of nationality because that was something the capitalists have done. I mean he was wrong, but it was a very powerful vision. And he set up the Communists International in Moscow which was meant to be the headquarters for worldwide revolution. So the peacemakers are dealing with a sense that they've got these huge and often intractable problems and they also have a sense that if they don't sort them out things are going to get worse rather than better. There's a real fear that Europe is going to collapse into anarchy and further misery and it's in these circumstances the Treaty of Versailles is being drawn up and this is not to excuse it, but again I think it's important to understand it.

I will not go through all the 440 articles of that treaty, but it is important to mention the main divisions of it:

- Part 1 was the League of Nations and its covenant: the Germans were not going to join immediately although it was argued that once they behaved themselves and reformed, then they could, so that was



something the Germans resented. They had to sign a treaty setting up an organisation which they weren't allowed to join.

- Parts 2 & 3 dealt with Germany's new borders and Germany was going to shrink. They were going to lose Alsace-Lorraine which they had taken from France in 1871. They did not lose much more, they lost other parts of territory in the West. They did lose considerable territory in the East, mainly territory which they had themselves, or Prussia itself, had seized from Poland at the end of the 19th century.
- Part 4 dealt with German rights and interests outside Germany, Germany had lost its colonies and concessions.
- Part 5 dealt with military naval and air force issue: the Weimar Republic - the new Republic in Germany - was meant to have a small army of no more than a hundred thousand men, it was not allowed to have an air force at all, it was to have a very small Navy, it was only to have certain kinds of equipment. The problem with those clauses - again it was intended to be a preliminary to a more general disarmament - was the Germans felt they were being unfairly singled out to disarm when others weren't yet doing so. And the other problem was there was no mechanism for enforcement. It was a joke and pretty much everyone knew that the Germans were evading the terms of that Treaty. There was a joke in the musicals in Berlin by the end of the 1920s about the man who wanted to build a baby carriage for his brother-in-law whose wife was expecting, the sister was expecting a baby, and so the man was working in what was said to be a baby carriage factory and he got bits from the assembly line from his friends and he smuggled them out bit by bit and gave them to his brother-in-law and said look I've got all the parts of the baby carriage out for you now, put it together and when the new baby arrives it will have a carriage. And after about a week he said to his brother-in-law 'so how is the baby carriage looking?' the brother-in-law said, 'I don't know, I'm doing something wrong. Every time I put it together I get a machine gun'. Jokes often tell you what is going on.
- Part 6 dealt with issues such as prisoners of war and war graves.
- Part 7 was the issue of penalties: should the Kaiser and others be tried for what they had done?
- And part 8 was one that was going to probably cause the most difficulty and be most disliked by the Germans even before the disarmament clause, and that was reparations. How much should Germany pay for the damage which it was accused of doing by starting the war in 1914? The Germans had to sign a treaty without knowing what the amount was and the amount was not set until 1921. Partly because it was difficult to just simply assess what the damage was worth, how much it would cost to set it straight, and it also took into account how much Germany could pay. The Allies knew that Germany would never pay that much. They knew that it was probably foolish to try and drive Germany to pay too much because it would drive the German economy into ruin and that would be damaging to everyone. Germany had been the powerhouse of the European economy before the First World War and many Europeans even French, recognised that it was going to have to be incorporated into Europe again if Europe was going to be economically recovering and economically successful.

But what the Allies did was deceive their own people by making it appear that Germany was going to pay a lot. It's very technical but they divided the reparations into three tranches: one quite small, which Germany paid almost immediately; the second was larger, but still not the largest amount which Germany was to pay over schedule which went on through the 1920s; the third part which was very much the largest, would not be paid until the first two parts had been paid.

You can probably work out what happened. The Germans didn't want to pay. They didn't feel they should pay, and this leads me to the reason why the Treaty in the end became so unpopular. Germany or many Germans, came think that they had not lost the war. They had been kept in the dark by their own high command. The demands of the high command for an armistice in the autumn of 1918 had come as a real shock to the civilian government, to many Germans. Germany had in fact been defeated on the battlefield but the High Command was able to avoid responsibility for this and gradually the story began to spread that it was only the civilian government that had lost its nerve, that Germany could have fought on, that it was no way collapsing although in fact it was in the summer of 1918, and that the only reason Germany hadn't been able to fight on was the cowardice of the civilian government and those German people who had stabbed Germany in the back; those who had demonstrated on the streets, those who had mutinied, those who had said we can't go on, and you can imagine as



the 1920s went on who those treasonous peoples were. They were the Left, they were the Liberals, and increasingly they were the Jews and this was a very pernicious but very powerful myth.

What also began to happen is that Germany felt that it had been promised by Woodrow Wilson if it became a republic, if it got rid of the Kaiser in the old regime, that it would be treated fairly and Wilson himself had said expressly he wanted a piece of no annexations, no contributions, no punitive indemnities. Germany's argument was 'we are now Republic why should we pay for the sins of our predecessors?' The third factor that began to undermine all the legitimacy of the Treaty, was that increasingly in the 1920s Germany, and indeed many people in English-speaking countries, came to believe that Germany hadn't in fact started the First World War. That the First World War had happened, or it had been the result of a balance of power in Europe or everyone had contributed to it and so if Germany was not responsible then why should it pay reparations? If it hadn't lost the war why should it pay reparations? And if it had transformed itself and become a republic why should it pay reparations? The German government made a very conscious decision to attack the Treaty on all those three grounds. Having said that, and recognising how unpopular the treaty was with Germany, I think we should remember that in fact things were beginning to look up in Europe and the world in the 1920s and this is why I think we should not assume that everything was bound to end in catastrophe in 1939.

Germany did eventually negotiate down its reparations bill. It did join the League of Nations. It did recognise, at least in the West, its territorial losses. It accepted that it would not try and change them by war. And European recovery appeared to be going ahead, European production was going up. I think if it had not been for the Great Depression and the impact that had on politics in countries such as Germany and Japan, which enabled the more radical nationalist elements to come to the fore, I think the world might have managed to avoid a war. The great German statesman Gustav Stresemann who had done so much in the 1920s to try and bring Germany back into the community of nations and try and deal with some of the outstanding issues from the peace said "but we do dance on volcanoes and sometimes the fires below subside" and I think there is a good chance those fires could have subsided in the 1920s. But the 1930s came along, the Great Depression came along, and did not give Europe and the world time for those fires to go down. So the world did get a second World War. The Treaty of Versailles certainly contributed to it and the other resentments and unsatisfied business from the Peace Conference contributed to it, but I think still, the world could have avoided war. And I think we need to ask ourselves: why did we get a lasting peace after 1945? And are we any better at making peace today? And I suspect the answer to the second question will be no, we're not.

©Professor Margaret Macmillan, 2019