

Debating peacemaking in 1919

The opening phase of the debate on the 1919 settlement was dominated by the memoirs of former members of the British and American delegations to the Peace Conference. John Maynard Keynes's *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* and Harold Nicolson's *Peacemaking, 1919* are foremost among the British, and Ray Stannard Baker's *Woodrow Wilson and the World Settlement* among the American. Keynes denounced the Paris peace as both vindictive and ruinous; Nicolson blamed the chaotic organization for what he described as a botched peace; while Baker defended Wilson as the champion of a moderate peace and criticized the selfish Europeans, especially the vindictive French, for what became a punitive one. Between the two world wars, these criticisms by disillusioned 'insiders' resonated powerfully with revisionist scholarship on the causes of war and the 'war guilt' question. For many, the coming of the Second World War confirmed that the Paris peacemakers had blundered. Few now took issue with Jacques Bainville's 1919 verdict that the Versailles Treaty was 'too gentle for all that is in it which is harsh'.

After a period of some scholarly neglect, the ideological polarization and the political turmoil of 1960s America gave rise to a fresh interpretation. In *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles* (London, 1968), Arno Mayer argued that the peacemakers, alarmed by the spectre of Lenin and the threat of Bolshevism, were more concerned about reversing the revolutionary tide in Europe than about founding a truly just social, economic and political order. Although many took issue with Mayer's portrayal of peacemaking after 1918 as a contest between the 'forces of order' and the 'forces of movement', the historiographical debate benefited from his shift in focus away from the German question to the broader ideological and domestic political influences working on the minds of the peacemakers.

In the early 1970s the French archives opened for research. The new sources initiated not only a positive reassessment of French policy, but also a full challenge to the negative verdicts of the inter-war writers. Several historians argued, for example, that the French were more moderate and flexible in their peace aims, for instance on German reparations, and, conversely, that the Americans and the British were more punitive and inflexible in theirs, than had been previously supposed. The long-held assumption that reparations were an impossible burden beyond Germany's capacity to pay was widely questioned. Historians now see the Paris settlement as a workable compromise, and perhaps the best one possible under such difficult circumstances. Mistakes of course were made, so the revisionists admit, but the peacemakers did not pave the way for Hitler, nor did they condemn Europe to another great war.