

## Introduction

**F**OR SIX MONTHS IN 1919, Paris was the capital of the world. The Peace Conference was the world's most important business, the peacemakers its most powerful people. They met day after day. They argued, debated, quarreled and made it up again. They created new countries and new organizations. They dined together and went to the theater together, and between January and June, Paris was at once the world's government, its court of appeal and its parliament, the focus of its fears and hopes. Officially, the Peace Conference lasted into 1920, but those first six months are the ones that count, when the key decisions were taken and the crucial chains of events set in motion. The world has never seen anything quite like it and never will again.

The peacemakers were there because proud, confident, rich Europe had torn itself to pieces. A war that had started in 1914 over a squabble for power and influence in the Balkans had drawn in all the great powers, from tsarist Russia in the east to Britain in the west, and most of the smaller ones. Only Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries had managed to stay out. There had been fighting in Asia, in Africa, in the Pacific islands and in the Middle East, but most had been on European soil, along the crazed network of trenches that stretched from Belgium in the north down to the Alps in the south, along Russia's borders with Germany and its ally Austria-Hungary, and in the Balkans themselves. Soldiers had come from around the world: Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders, Indians, Newfoundlanders to fight for the British empire; Vietnamese, Moroccans, Algerians, Senegalese for France; and finally the Americans, maddened beyond endurance by German attacks on their shipping.

Away from the battlefields, Europe still looked much the same. The

great cities remained, the railway lines were more or less intact, ports still functioned. It was not like the Second World War, when the very bricks and mortar were pulverized. The loss was human. Millions of combatants—for the time of massive killing of civilians had not yet come—died in those four years: 1,800,000 Germans, 1,700,000 Russians, 1,384,000 French, 1,290,000 from Austria-Hungary, 743,000 British (and another 192,000 from the empire) and so on down the list to tiny Montenegro, with 3,000 men. Children lost fathers, wives husbands, young women the chance of marriage. And Europe lost those who might have been its scientists, its poets and its leaders, and the children who might have been born to them. But the tally of deaths does not include those who were left with one leg, one arm or one eye, or those whose lungs had been scarred by poison gas or whose nerves never recovered.

For four years the most advanced nations in the world had poured out their men, their wealth, the fruits of their industry, science and technology, on a war that may have started by accident but was impossible to stop because the two sides were too evenly balanced. It was only in the summer of 1918, as Germany's allies faltered and as the fresh American troops poured in, that the Allies finally gained the upper hand. When the war ended on 11 November, everywhere people hoped wearily that whatever happened next would not be as bad as what had just come to an end.

Four years of war shook forever the supreme self-confidence that had carried Europe to world dominance. After the Western Front, Europeans could no longer talk of a civilizing mission to the world. The war toppled governments, humbled the mighty and upturned whole societies. In Russia the revolutions of 1917 replaced tsarism, with what no one yet knew. At the end of the war Austria-Hungary vanished, leaving a great hole at the center of Europe. The Ottoman empire, with its vast holdings in the Middle East and its bit of Europe, was almost done. Imperial Germany was now a republic. Old nations—Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia—came out of history to live again, and new nations—Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia—struggled to be born.

The Paris Peace Conference is usually remembered for producing the German treaty, signed at Versailles in June 1919, but it was always about much more than that. The other enemies—Bulgaria, Austria and Hungary, now separate countries, and the Ottoman empire—had to have their treaties. New borders had to be drawn in the center of Europe and across the Middle East. Most important of all, the international order had to be re-created on a new and different basis. Was the time now ripe for an International Labour Organization, a League of Nations, for agreements on international telegraph cables or international aviation? After such a great catastrophe, the expectations were enormous.

Even before the guns fell silent in 1918 the voices, plaintive, demanding, angry, had started. "China belongs to the Chinese." "Kurdistan must be free." "Poland must live again." They spoke in many languages. They made many demands. The United States must be the world's policeman; or, The Americans must go home. The Russians need help; no, They must be left to their own devices. They complained: Slovaks about Czechs; Croats about Serbs; Arabs about Jews; Chinese about Japanese. The voices were worried, uncertain whether the new world order would be an improvement on the old. In the West, they murmured about dangerous ideas coming from the East; in the East, they pondered the threat of Western materialism. Europeans wondered if they would ever recover and how they would manage their brash new American ally. Africans feared that the world had forgotten them. Asians saw that the future was theirs; it was only the present that was the problem.

We know something of what it is to live at the end of a great war. The voices of 1919 were very like the voices of the present. When the Cold War ended in 1989 and Soviet Marxism vanished into the dustbin of history, older forces, religion and nationalism, came out of their deep freeze. Bosnia and Rwanda have reminded us of how strong those forces can be. In 1919, there was the same sense of a new order emerging as borders suddenly shifted and new economic and political ideas were in the air. It was exciting but also frightening, in a world that seemed perilously fragile. Today, some argue, resurgent Islam is the menace. In 1919, it was Russian Bolshevism. The difference is that we have not held a universal peace conference. There is not the time. The statesmen and their advisers meet in brief meetings, for two, perhaps three days, and then take flight again. Who knows which is the better way of settling the world's problems?

To struggle with the great issues of the day and try to resolve them, statesmen, diplomats, bankers, soldiers, professors, economists and lawyers came to Paris from all corners of the world: the American president, Woodrow Wilson, and his secretary of state, Robert Lansing; Georges Clemenceau and Vittorio Orlando, the prime ministers of France and Italy; Lawrence of Arabia, wrapped in mystery and Arab robes; Eleutherios Venizelos, the great Greek patriot who brought disaster on his country; Ignace Paderewski, the pianist turned Polish politician; and many who had yet to make their mark, among them two future American secretaries of state, a future prime minister of Japan and the first president of Israel. Some had been born to power, such as Queen Marie of Rumania; others, such as David Lloyd George, the prime minister of Britain, had won it through their own efforts.

The concentration of power drew in the world's reporters, its businessmen, and spokesmen and spokeswomen for a myriad of causes. "One

only meets people off to Paris,” wrote the French ambassador in London. “Paris is going to become a place of amusement for hundreds of English, Americans, Italians and shady foreign gentlemen who are descending on us under the pretext of taking part in the peace discussions.”<sup>1</sup> Votes for women, rights for blacks, a charter for labor, freedom for Ireland, disarmament: the petitions and the petitioners rolled in daily from all quarters of the world. That winter and spring, Paris hummed with schemes, for a Jewish homeland, a restored Poland, an independent Ukraine, a Kurdistan, an Armenia. The petitions poured in, from the Conference of Suffrage Societies, the Carpatho-Russian Committee in Paris, the Serbs of the Banat, the anti-Bolshevik Russian Political Conference. The petitioners came from countries that existed and ones that were just dreams. Some, such as the Zionists, spoke for millions; others, such as the representatives of the Åland islands in the Baltic, for a few thousand. A few arrived too late; the Koreans from Siberia set out on foot in February 1919 and by the time the main part of the Peace Conference ended in June had reached only the Arctic port of Archangel.<sup>2</sup>

From the outset the Peace Conference suffered from confusion over its organization, its purpose and its procedures. The Big Four—Britain, France, Italy and the United States—had planned a preliminary conference to hammer out the terms to be offered, after which they intended to hold a full-scale peace conference to negotiate with the enemy. Immediately there were questions. When would the other allied powers be able to express their views? Japan, for example, was already an important power in the Far East. And what about the smaller powers such as Serbia and Belgium? Both had lost far more men than Japan.

The Big Four gave way, but the plenary sessions of the conference became ritual occasions. The real work was done by the Four and Japan in informal meetings, and when those in turn became too cumbersome, by the leaders of the Four alone. As the months went by, what had been a preliminary conference imperceptibly became the real thing. In a break with diplomatic precedent that infuriated the Germans, their representatives were eventually summoned to France to receive their treaty in its final form.

The peacemakers had hoped to be brisker and better organized. They had carefully studied the only available example—the Congress of Vienna, which wound up the Napoleonic Wars. The Foreign Office commissioned a distinguished historian to write a book on the Congress for guidance in Paris. (He later conceded that his work had almost no impact.<sup>3</sup>) The problems faced by the peacemakers in Vienna, large though they were, were straightforward by comparison with those in Paris. The

British foreign secretary at the time, Lord Castlereagh, took just fourteen staff with him to Vienna; in 1919 the British delegation numbered nearly four hundred. In 1815 matters were settled quietly and at leisure: Castlereagh and his colleagues would have been appalled at the intense public scrutiny of 1919. There were also many more participants: more than thirty countries sent delegates to Paris, including Italy, Belgium, Rumania and Serbia, none of which had existed in 1815. The Latin American nations had still been part of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. Thailand, China and Japan had been remote, mysterious lands. Now their diplomats appeared in Paris in pinstriped trousers and frock coats. Apart from a declaration condemning the slave trade, the Congress of Vienna paid no attention to the non-European world. In Paris, the subjects covered by the Peace Conference ranged from the Arctic to the Antipodes, from small islands in the Pacific to whole continents.

The Congress of Vienna also took place when the great upheavals set off by the French Revolution in 1789 had subsided. By 1815 its effects had been absorbed, but in 1919 the Russian Revolution was only two years old, its impact on the rest of the world unclear. Western leaders saw Bolshevism seeping out of Russia, threatening religion, tradition, every tie that held their societies together. In Germany and Austria, soviets of workers and soldiers were already seizing power in the cities and towns. Their own soldiers and sailors mutinied. Paris, Lyon, Brussels, Glasgow, San Francisco, even sleepy Winnipeg on the Canadian prairies had general strikes. Were these isolated outbreaks or flames from a vast underground fire?

The peacemakers of 1919 believed they were working against time. They had to draw new lines on the maps of Europe, just as their predecessors had done in Vienna, but they also had to think of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. "Self-determination" was the watchword, but this was not a help in choosing among competing nationalisms. The peacemakers had to act as policemen and they had to feed the hungry. If they could, they had to create an international order that would make another Great War impossible. And, of course, they had to draw up the treaties. Clearly Germany had to be dealt with, penalized for starting the war (or was it just for losing, as many suspected?), its future set on more pacific lines, its boundaries adjusted to compensate France in the West and the new nations in the East. Bulgaria had to have its treaty. So did the Ottoman empire. Austria-Hungary presented a particular problem, for it no longer existed. All that was left was a tiny Austria and a shaky Hungary, with most of their territory gone to new nations. The expectations of the Peace Conference were enormous; the risk of disappointment correspondingly great.

The peacemakers also represented their own countries, and since most

of these were democracies, they had to heed their public opinion. They were bound to think ahead to the next election and to weigh the costs of appeasing or alienating important sections of opinion. They were thus not completely free agents. It was also a time to bring out the old demands and the new ones. Clemenceau complained to a colleague: "It is much easier to make war than peace."<sup>4</sup>

In their months in Paris the peacemakers were to achieve much: a peace treaty with Germany and the bases for peace with Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria. They drew new borders through the middle of Europe and the Middle East. Much of their work, it is true, did not last. People said at the time, as they have ever since, that the peacemakers took too long and that they got it wrong. It has become a commonplace to say that the peace settlements of 1919 were a failure, that they led directly to the Second World War. That is to overestimate their power.

There were two realities in the world of 1919, and they did not always mesh. One was in Paris and the other was on the ground, where people were making their own decisions and fighting their own battles. True, the peacemakers had armies and navies, but where there were few railways, roads or ports, as in the interior of Asia Minor or the Caucasus, moving their forces was slow and laborious. The new aircraft were not yet big enough or strong enough to fill that gap. In the center of Europe, where the tracks were already laid, the collapse of order meant that even if tracks, engines and cars were available, the fuel was not. "It really is no use abusing this or that small state," Henry Wilson, one of the cleverest of the British generals, told Lloyd George. "The root of evil is that the *Paris writ does not run*."<sup>5</sup>

Power involves will, as the United States and the world are discovering today: the will to spend, whether money or lives. In 1919 that will had been spent in Europe. The leaders of France, Britain and Italy no longer had the capacity to order their peoples to pay a high price for power. Their armed forces were shrinking day by day and they could not rely on the soldiers and sailors who were left. Their taxpayers wanted an end to expensive foreign adventures. The United States alone had the capacity to act, but it did not see itself as having that role, and its power was not yet great enough. It is tempting to say that the United States lost an opportunity to bend Europe to its will before the competing ideologies of fascism and communism could take hold. That is to read back into the past what we know about American power after another great war. In 1945, the United States was a superpower and the European nations were much weakened. In 1919, however, the United States was not yet significantly stronger than the other powers. The Europeans could ignore its wishes, and they did.

Armies, navies, railways, economies, ideologies, history: all these are important in understanding the Paris Peace Conference. But so, too, are individuals because, in the end, people draw up reports, make decisions and order armies to move. The peacemakers brought their own national interests with them, but they also brought their likes and dislikes. Nowhere were these more important than among the powerful men—especially Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Wilson—who sat down together in Paris.