



MARGARET MACMILLAN

# Making War, Making Peace: Versailles, 1919

*The leaders who committed their nations to war in 1914 never dreamed that the conflict would drag on for years and claim millions of lives. They never imagined that it would lead to the birth of a massive Bolshevik state while destroying the empires of tsarist Russia, Austro-Hungary, Germany, and Ottoman Turkey. And in the aftermath of the Great War, the individuals at the negotiating table found themselves trying to do nothing less than piece their world together anew. At the centre of the negotiations were three individuals, each a fascinating bundle of enlightenment, narrow-mindedness, tolerance, bigotry, pragmatism, and idealism. And, to a large extent, we are all still living in the world they drew up for us.*

**T**HE OBSERVATION “it is harder to make peace than war” was, as one might expect of someone so witty, that of Georges Clemenceau, prime minister of France at the end of the First World War and during the peace conference that followed. Of course he only half meant it. Yet, there is some truth in the remark as well. What could be harder than the huge, all-demanding struggle that had lasted for four years? War, as Dr Johnson so famously said about the prospect of being hanged, concentrates the mind wonderfully. And a war like the First World War, where the stakes were so very high,

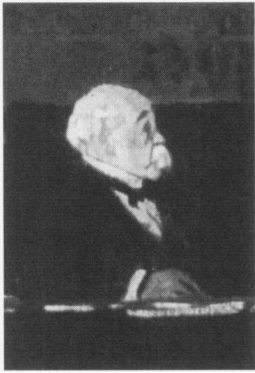
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Woodrow Wilson was hailed in Europe as a champion of a new democratic world.

narrowed the choices before leaders significantly. The most important policy was to win – or, at least, not to lose. All else flowed from that.

However, decisions about the peace settlements that followed after the guns fell silent were also taken under pressure. The peacemakers who met in Paris feared that, unless they moved quickly to wind up the war and to try to set the framework for a better international order, Europe and perhaps the wider world would be plunged into anarchy, revolution, and misery. On the other hand, they faced a great range of possibilities and choices. How should the borders be drawn in the centre of Europe and in the Middle East? What exactly should be the nature of the treaties with Germany and its allies, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire? What shape should the proposed League of Nations take? In the end individuals – surprisingly few of them – had to make such decisions.



**H**OW DO we judge the importance of individuals in events of the past? Clemenceau, the prime minister of France between 1917 and 1920, and his counterpart in Britain, David Lloyd George, were clearly very important in the outcome of what used to be called the Great War. After all, they made the final decisions when and where to wage the war. On the other hand, without French factories or British ships or the millions of men who went to fight, their leadership meant little. One of the great difficulties for historians as we attempt to make sense of momentous events is to strike a balance between explanations that credit only the “forces” of history and those that single out individuals. The “Great Man” theory of history has been discredited in recent years while attention has been focused on the slow, often opaque, movements of economics or ideas or fashions. But does it truly deserve to be abandoned altogether?

My own view is that we must try to understand both the context and the individuals, especially when we are trying to understand great events. Of course the men and women of the past were creatures of their own times, just as we are today. Their attitudes and their beliefs, just like ours, were shaped by the societies in which they lived. They had only the institutions and the technologies of their own times at hand. They thought in certain ways and employed certain concepts because these were the tools they had. If they changed the course of events, if they helped to create new realities, they still did so within the confines of their own times.

The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 was one of those moments in the recent history of the world – like 1945 or 1989 – when society was turned upside down, when it was not clear what the future would be. Great decisions had to be made – about the peace terms to be offered to the defeated nations, about what lines were to be drawn on the maps of Europe and the Middle East, about how to get a badly damaged world working again, and (or so a great many people on both sides of the Atlantic hoped) about how to build a world order that would make it impossible for something like the Great War ever to happen again.

The men (and they were mainly men in those days) who met in Paris for those months in 1919 were aware of the heavy burden they

bore. They were not, as polemicists like John Maynard Keynes would have it, thoroughly vindictive, stupid, and wilfully short-sighted. They were, most of them, among the best their nations could produce. Collectively the Big Three – the leaders of Great Britain, France, and the United States – represented an extraordinary concentration of power. Britain, still the single greatest power, had the world's largest empire and its strongest navy. The United States was well on its way to economic dominance, and its military power was starting to catch up. France, the weakest, was still a major power with, at the time, Europe's most formidable army.



**D**AVID LLOYD GEORGE, Georges Clemenceau, and Woodrow Wilson were men of learning, intelligence, and wide experience. They were also used to making decisions. Lloyd George had made his way from a modest background into the heart of British politics through sheer ability and force of character. As minister of munitions, he had forced through the changes in British war production that had kept the war effort alive. When he became prime minister in December 1916, and the outlook was bleak for the Allies, he brought a new mood of determination and a sense of leadership to the nation. In 1919, he was known as the “Man Who Won the War.”

Clemenceau, although from a more privileged background, had also been an outsider in politics. Again, like Lloyd George, he had been brought into office in the darkest days of the war because his colleagues could not think of anyone better suited to lead them. To the French, he was “Père de la Victoire.” Wilson had tried to keep the

United States out of the conflict, but when he finally decided that German aggression left him no choice he had firmly led his country to a declaration of war. He was widely seen on both sides of the Atlantic as the man who would make a lasting peace and a new world order. As they met in Paris for the conference, each man had solid political backing. Lloyd George's coalition had fought an election in December 1918 and had won a sizeable majority. Clemenceau had been given a virtually free hand by the French parliament to negotiate the peace. Wilson was in a weaker position: Congress was now in the hands of the Republicans, many of whom, however, were prepared to support the right sort of peace. And Wilson, among the three, possessed immense moral authority.

These three men, at the heart of the peace conference, were to make the decisions that affected the fate of millions of people, not just in Europe but around the world. So understanding their personalities, their likes and dislikes, their foibles, is key to understanding the history of the conference. Having said that, we cannot see them apart from the historical context. Is it fair to blame them for the fact that many of the countries, both new and old, that appeared in the centre of Europe were weak and quarrelsome? Or that Germany accepted neither its defeat nor the terms of its treaty? That in 1939 another European war broke out? Or should the blame be placed more on the hand each leader was dealt?

When we look at the past and try to understand why individuals behaved the way they did, what we must do is remind ourselves of the range of choice they really had. The peacemakers in Paris in 1919 were constrained by several considerations. To begin with, they faced in Europe, and further afield, forces that were not easily managed. In Russia, the revolutions had brought the Bolsheviks into power. In 1919, and indeed for some years after, the new Russian leaders had no interest in cooperating with the capitalist powers. Lenin and his commissar for foreign relations, Leon Trotsky, hoped that the spark ignited in Russia would set off, in Lenin's metaphor, a prairie fire throughout Europe which would sweep away the old order. And for a time it looked as though the Bolsheviks were right – as revolutions, consciously modelled on that of October 1917, brought revolutionary governments to power in towns and cities throughout Germany. In Bavaria, a self-proclaimed communist government held power for a week; in Hungary, Bela Kun and his communists ruled for several months, into the summer of 1919.



French troops in the Rhineland, 1923. When the financially strapped Weimar Republic was unable to maintain its reparation payments, France and Belgium occupied the Ruhr and ordered Germans to continue labouring to pay off their debts.

There was another, equally intractable, force confronting the peace-makers, and this was ethnic nationalism. The collapse of four large empires – the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ottoman – opened the doors wide for the ethnic nations who had been struggling for autonomy for decades. By the time the peace conference met in January 1919, a number of nations had already become or were in the process of becoming independent states. Poland reappeared on the map; Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania freed themselves from Russian rule; Ukraine, briefly, was independent; in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and Daghestan also had their brief moments. Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, often described misleadingly as creations of the peace conference, had already established themselves. The role of the peace conference was to grant or withhold recognition and, in some cases, to set the borders. It also tried, usually in vain, to

control the dozens of small wars that broke out as different nations claimed the same territories.

The ability of the peacemakers to influence events was also circumscribed by their own dwindling power. Between the time of the armistice in November 1918 and the signing of the German peace in June 1919, rapid demobilization shrank Allied armed forces by two-thirds. Moreover the troops who remained were of uncertain reliability. The soldiers, and their families, were for the most part relieved that the Great War was over, and were understandably reluctant to contemplate renewed hostilities. When it appeared, in May and June 1919, that the new German government might refuse to sign the peace treaty, there was concern, even consternation, in Paris. The Allied Supreme Command prepared an invasion plan for Germany but with many misgivings.

That Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Wilson were all democratically elected leaders was, at once, their strength and a powerful constraint. Their respective publics had strong and often contradictory views on what they expected from the peace settlements. The British electorate, for example, seems at once to have wanted to punish the authors of the war (among whom they included the German High Command and Kaiser Wilhelm II) and see the establishment of a better and fairer world order. Clemenceau was dealing with a French public which, overwhelmingly, wanted to see Germany punished. Although he knew that it was unlikely that Germany could ever pay reparations on the magnitude of what was being demanded, he dared not say so openly.

**S**O, if we accept that the leading figures at the peace conference had limited options before them, did they make a difference at all? I would argue that they did. To begin with, they managed to work together to produce peace terms that Germany and its allies, in the end, were prepared to accept. The wartime alliance remained in being even though there were moments of great tension when the peace conference nearly fell apart – as when Italy walked out over its own claims. Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Wilson quarrelled, ferociously at times, but they were all determined to make peace settlements. Partly because Wilson insisted on it, the peace conference put the creation of a League of Nations at the top of its agenda – and Lloyd George and Clemenceau, for their own reasons, went along with him. Different men might have produced much less. It is





Close, but not too close – the military brass and their political counterparts grappled with the complexities of modern warfare as the Great War dragged on – but could never truly understand the horrendous suffering of the millions of troops at the front.

hard to see how anyone could have produced much more in the context of the times.

The Versailles Treaty with Germany has been much criticized since, and it is true that it had much wrong with it (many far too specific and niggling clauses for example), but at the time it met with general approval in the Allied countries. And we must ask ourselves what it *should* have looked like. Germany, it was widely believed at the time, was responsible for starting the war, and Germany had lost it. (It was only later that doubts about both of these assertions began to arise.) So should Germany have paid nothing for the terrible destruction in Belgium and the north of France? It was, after all, Germany that had invaded both. As one French newspaper reasonably asked, why should the French taxpayers foot the bill for the damage done to French property by Germany? Should Germany have been allowed to incorporate the German-speaking areas of the defunct Austria-Hungary? The result would have been that the war's loser ended up acquiring large amounts of new territory.

The treaty might have worked to keep Germany firmly anchored within a strong international system if there had been the will to enforce it properly. There was not. Britain turned its attention to its empire, and France was not capable of operating alone. The United States drew back from involvement in Europe. That need not have happened. It was a tragedy that it was Wilson who had to manage the acceptance of the Treaty of Versailles in the American Senate. A different man would have compromised with the moderate Republicans to get the treaty the necessary two-thirds majority. A sick Wilson, his natural stubbornness exacerbated to the point of insanity, refused. In the end the modified treaty failed to be ratified because Wilson ordered his own Democrats to vote against it. The consequences, as we all know, were that the United States never joined the League of Nations.

It is in the non-European world, where the Allies had a relatively freer hand than they did in Europe, that they had, in my opinion, a wider range of choices. And, on the whole, the decisions they made in this sphere were bad and short-sighted. Dealing with the Middle East, for example, both Lloyd George and Clemenceau treated the region in the spirit of nineteenth-century imperialism (Wilson and the Americans had, at that stage, a limited interest in the area). The vast, largely Arab, territories left adrift with the demise of the Ottoman empire were, in their view, up for grabs, and the opinions and wishes of the locals counted for very little.

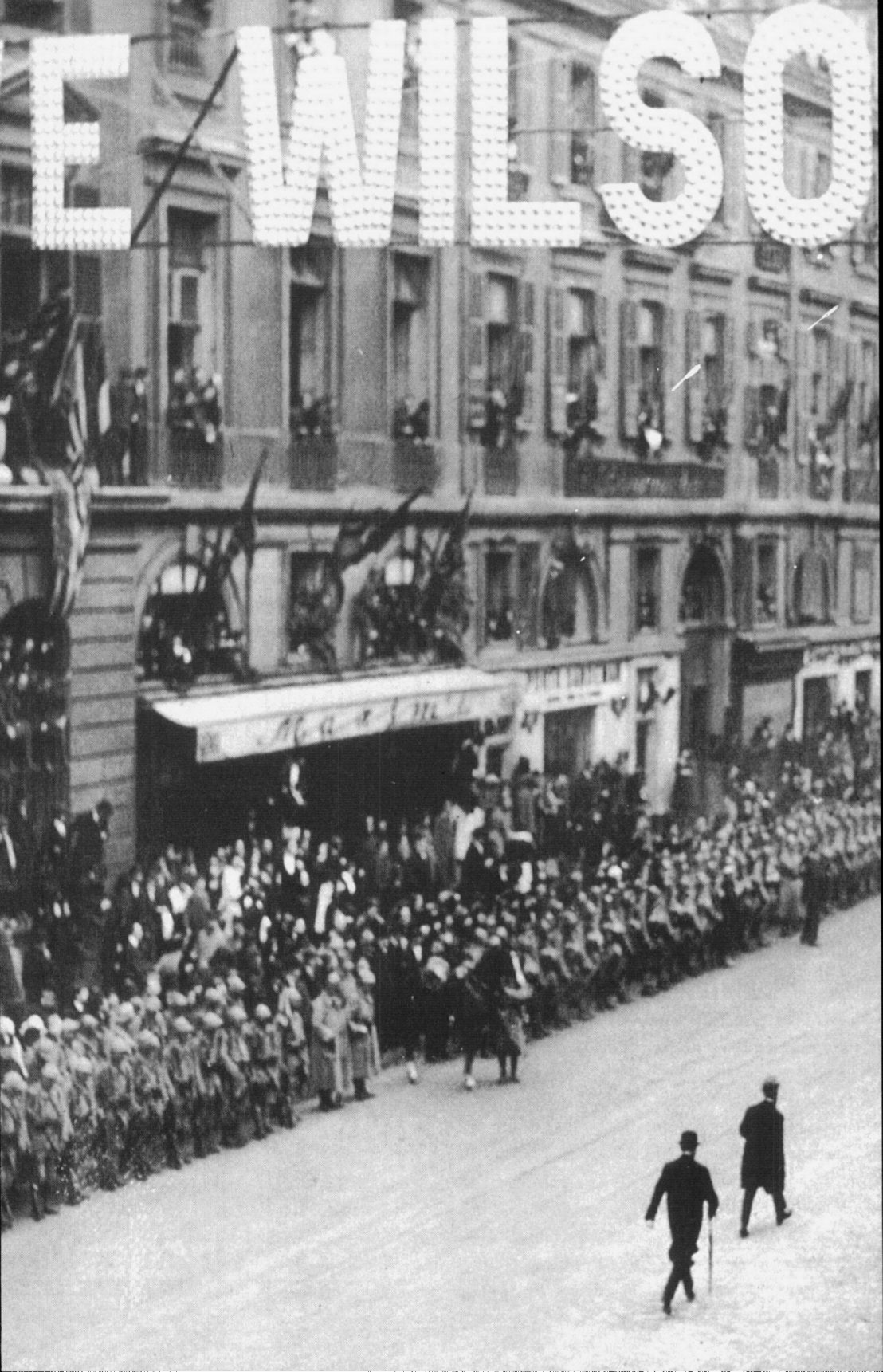
The list of their contradictory undertakings is well-known: the Sykes-Picot agreement to divide the Arab world between France and Britain, the British promise to the Arabs of an independent Arab kingdom in return for an Arab revolt against the Ottomans, and the promise to the world's Zionists of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The result of all this was that the Arab world was left with a deep sense of betrayal and would grow increasingly resentful of Western meddling (a feeling that still colours Arab perceptions of the West today); worse, that resentment came to settle on the developing Jewish presence in Palestine and later on the independent Jewish state of Israel.

**H**ISTORY is not biography, but there are times when *who* is making the decisions, about war or peace for example, will have enormous ramifications. Would Germany have gone down the path that led to war, to genocide, and to its own catastrophic defeat without Adolf Hitler at its helm? Would the Soviet

Union have been so ill-prepared for that war if Stalin had been a different sort of dictator? Or, to take a more recent example, would the United States have decided on the course of action which led it first into Afghanistan and then into Iraq if it had had different advisors around a different president?

Individuals, with all their biases, quirks, strengths, and weaknesses, can push the great movements of history in one direction or another. In 1919, that turbulent year, the Big Three who met in Paris made their own choices about how they played the hands they had been dealt.





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