

100 Years Ago: The Treaty of Versailles. Peace or Armistice?

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June 28, 1918, one hundred years ago...

(An excerpt from Jacques R. Pauwels, The Great Class War 1914-1919, James Lorimer, Toronto, 2016)

On June 28, 1919, exactly five years after the infamous assassination in Sarajevo, the signing of the Peace Treaty of Versailles officially terminates the Great War. In reality, this treaty merely inaugurates a long truce that will expire in 1939, when worldwide warfare will resume, lasting until 1945. Many historians now indeed consider the First and Second World Wars as parts one and two of one single conflict, as a kind of twentieth-century edition of the disastrous “Thirty Years’ War” of the 1600s, with the years from 1918 to 1939 constituting a long intermission . . .

On a dark night toward the middle of November 1918, a ship bound for the United States encountered an oncoming vessel with all lights blazing, which was unheard of in view of the state of war and the danger represented by submarines. Via light signals, it was asked if perhaps the war was finished. The answer was: “No, it is only an armistice.” And indeed, an armistice such as the one signed by military officials at Rethondes did not put an end to the state of war. The state of war officially continued after November 11, 1918, to be terminated only when statesmen would reach an agreement and sign a peace treaty. In the meantime, allied troops entered Germany as conquerors, the Royal Navy continued its blockade of Germany, and in many regions of Eastern Europe fighting continued between withdrawing German troops, the Bolshevik revolutionaries, Polish and Lithuanian nationalists, etc. In France the state of siege, associated with the war, would be lifted only on October 12, 1919.

The peace negotiations took place in Paris. They started on January 18, 1919 and resulted in a treaty signed on June 28 of that same year in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles. The French had decided on that venue in order to obtain some symbolic revenge for the fact that it was from that same room that the German Reich had been proclaimed in January 1871, during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. The Treaty of Versailles officially ended the war between Germany and the Allies, except for the United States and China, which would sign separate peace treaties with Germany. With the Ottoman Empire and the successor states of the Habsburg Empire, Austria and Hungary, peace treaties would be signed with the former at Sèvres in 1920 and with the latter at Lausanne in 1923. The main points of the Versailles Treaty demonstrated all too clearly that the war had not been about freedom, justice, democracy, the defence of small countries such as Belgium, or to put an end to warfare and similar concocted rationales; this type of discourse was, and remains even today, only vulgar propaganda. It was all about consolidating and increasing the power and privileges of the elite. At Versailles the elite was admittedly unable, at least for the time

being, to undo the unpleasant social outcome of the war, the revolution in Russia and major democratic political and social reforms that had been introduced in order to defuse revolutionary situations in Britain, France, Belgium, and elsewhere.

On the other hand, the elite had also unleashed the Great War in order to achieve imperialist objectives for the benefit of banks and corporations, and in this respect the war had produced considerable gains (for the winners, of course), which were enshrined at Versailles. The French, British, Japanese, and even the Belgians were confirmed in the possession of Germany's former colonies in Africa and elsewhere, and of the oil-rich parts of the now-defunct Ottoman Empire. Nobody considered the possibility of independence for any of these regions, except under some undemocratic regime that could be counted on to do the bidding of the British or some other Western power, as in the case of Saudi Arabia. There was no question of independence for India, China was not allowed to provide any meaningful input during the Paris talks, and not a single foreign power contemplated giving up its mini-colonies (called "concessions") in that country. The socialist English poet W.N. Ewer provided the following sarcastic comment on this kind of imperialist gluttony and on the hypocrisy of the statesmen who made the decisions at Versailles in a poem entitled "No Annexations":

"No annexations?" We agree!

We did not draw the sword for gain,

But to keep little nations free;

And surely, surely, it is plain

That land and loot we must disdain,

Who only fight for liberty

.....

Of course it happens — as we know —

That 'German East' has fertile soil

Where corn and cotton crops will grow,

That Togoland is rich in oil,

That natives can be made to toil

For wages white men count too low,

That many a wealthy diamond mine

Makes South-West Africa a prize,

That river-dam and railway line

(A profitable enterprise)

May make a paying paradise

Of Baghdad and of Palestine.

However, this is by the way;
We do not fight for things like these
But to destroy a despot's sway,
To guard our ancient liberties:
We cannot help it if it please
The Gods to make the process pay.
We cannot help it if our
Fate Decree that war in Freedom's name
Shall handsomely remunerate
Our ruling classes. 'T was the same
In earlier days — we always came
Not to annex, but liberate.

With the Treaty of Versailles, the “ruling classes” were indeed “handsomely remunerated”; at least, those of the powers that emerged victoriously from the war and dictated the terms of the peace. The armistice of November 11, 1918 had not put an end to the war, and the peace treaty signed at Versailles, as well as the other treaties mentioned here, did not produce a genuine peace. On the side of the losers — and even of the winners — there were those who longed for a revanche while the ink on the documents was not yet dry. In fact, nobody was entirely satisfied with any of these treaties, but the least satisfied of all were to be found in Germany, where the once so powerful and ambitious elite had lost many of its feathers, but unfortunately not enough of them to abandon any hope for a military comeback and a revanchist war. On the side of the winners, too, the desire for revenge and the cupidity of the imperialists, reflected in the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, gave many people the nasty feeling that some of them had already experienced during the war itself, namely that even in case of victory over the German “Huns” there would be no question of real peace, but that a new Great War was likely to erupt again soon between the imperialist powers. In 1915 already, in his poem “War,” the writer Joseph Leftwich (or Lefkowitz) had accurately predicted the following:

And if we win and crush the Huns,
In twenty years
We must fight their sons,
Who will rise against
Our victory,
Their fathers', their own
Ignominy.

And if their Kaiser
We dethrone,
They will his son restore,
or some other one,
If we win by war,
War is force,
And others to war
Will have recourse.
And through the world
Will rage new war.
Earth, sea and sky
Will wince at his roar.
He will trample down
At every tread,
Millions of men,
Millions of dead.

The armistice of November 1918, which ended the hostilities, did not inaugurate peace, and the peace officially proclaimed at Versailles in 1919 really amounted to a mere armistice, a truce predestined to expire sooner or later with the resumption of open hostilities and the official return of the state of war. That moment would come in 1939, when a new Great War would break out.

The Great War of 1914-1918 had been a conflict in which two blocs of imperialist powers massacred millions of human beings in order to lay their greedy hands on territories in Europe, Africa, and Asia that could provide their industrial and financial elites with desiderata such as raw materials, markets for finished products, opportunities for investment capital, and cheap labour. At the same time, within each belligerent country, the war also amounted to a class conflict, in which the elite, still a “symbiosis” of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie (or “upper middle class”) fought the plebeians of the lower class. The *formal* result of this imperialist Armageddon was a victory for the French-British duo, a nasty defeat for Germany, and an inglorious demise for the Austrian-Hungarian and Russian empires of the Habsburgs and the Romanovs, respectively. In reality, however, the outcome of the conflict was unclear, confusing and satisfied nobody.

Great Britain and France were the victors, but were exhausted by the enormous demographic, material, financial and other sacrifices that had been required. They were no longer the superpowers they had still been in 1914. Germany, on the other hand, distressed by war and defeat and severely punished at Versailles, lost not only its colonies but also a major part of its own territory, and it was left with only a Lilliputian army. However, it

remained an industrial giant and a major power that could be expected to try again to achieve the imperialist ambitions for which it gone to war in 1914. Furthermore, the war had proved to be an opportunity for two non-European powers to reveal imperialist aspirations, namely Japan and the US. The struggle for supremacy within the restricted circle of imperialist powers, which is what 1914-1918 had been, thus remained undecided. Making the situation even more complex, was the fact that other than Austria-Hungary, yet another major imperialist actor had vanished from the stage, namely Russia. However, its place had been taken by the Soviet-Union. This avowedly anti-capitalist state revealed itself to be a major thorn in the side of all imperialist states, of imperialism *tout court*. The reason: it was a source of inspiration, guidance, and support for revolutionary and radical-democratic movements within each imperialist power as well as for anti-imperialist movements worldwide. The existence of the Soviet-Union thus also constituted a threat to the imperialist powers' fat portfolio of colonial assets. Under those circumstances, Europe and the entire world continued to experience great tensions, conflicts, and aggressions. They would yield a second world war or, as many historians see it, the second act of the murderous "Thirty Years' War" of the twentieth century.

Feature Image: William Orpen: The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles (Wikimedia Commons)

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