

## Paris:1919

*Margaret MacMillan*

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Great granddaughter of Lloyd George, one of the three key players, thus an apposite chronicler of the event. The purpose of the book is to focus on the peace negotiations in the first half of 1919 and how they may have influenced subsequent developments for the future. About the war itself very little is said. Many critics have thus remarked that it constitutes the perfect pendant to Barbara Tuchmann's 'The guns of August', the latter explaining the folly that set it all out, and the present book the consequences of that folly.

The book is thus intentionally anachronistic. Terminology like 'ethnic cleansing' and 'establishing facts on the ground' are freely employed. It does cover a lot of ground. The break-up of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire along with that of the Ottoman, and thus the reestablishment of a whole slew of new countries. The re-emergence of Poland and the Baltic States. The territorial claims of Italy. The creation of Arabic states. The division of the German colonies. And finally the dealings with the Germans themselves.

The emphasis is on individuals, their personalities, quirks, and prejudices. Foremost on the big three. The idealistic Woodrow Wilson, with his fourteen points and his idea of a League of Nations do make away with war forever. The vindictive Clemenceau, cynical, hard-boiled and determined to achieve one concrete thing, the emasculation of Germany. Lloyd George, the grand orator, somewhere between. Those three men are the big players, wielding the greatest power. Their task is a momentous one, to redraw the map of Europe, just as it had been redrawn one century earlier in Vienna, after the downfall of the Napoleonic empire. A task to which they brought a mixture of 'real-politik' and 'idealism'. To both to try to make a just peace, as well as an effective one. Arranging for plebiscites, as well as for taken into consideration defensible borders. In life, as opposed to the purer sciences, consistency is never an option, and the result became a mish-mash of conflicting interest and motivations.

In addition to the three main players there were a whole host of subsidiary ones. The Italians, the two Japanese, and then representatives from Poland, Rumania, Greece, Serbia, all wanting to get their piece of the cake. Subsidiary players in politics, devoid of power, easily appear slightly ridiculous, and MacMillan does very little to play this down, in fact she takes a pleasure in emphasizing the vanities, the petty national interests, the enthusiastic greed, and most damningly the lack of a general and principled picture. The Poles claim a large part of the globe, as a negotiator sarcastically commented, the Rumanians manage, although their war effort was belated and insignificant, drastically enlarge their territory at the expense of the Hungarians. The Italians take a large chunk of the Dolomites, and lobby ineffectually for a large part of the Eastern Adriatic coast. The Greece show great hunger as well, setting their sight on the former Constantinople. The Japanese wants the German lease of the Shantung peninsula, over the interests of the Chinese (represented by a very able young man - Koo, who survived until 1985, surely one of the longest-living actors of the peace conference). The great three often reveal shaky

command of geography, although they spend a large time leaning over maps, drawing borders. The downfall of the Austrian-Empire produces a great variety of hapless orphans, including the Austrians themselves, none of which claim any responsibility, all instead emphasizing their roles of victims. The Czechs, as well as the Poles, include large minorities of Germans, as well as Hungarians. The Hungarians briefly have a Communist revolution, but it is not as effectively and ruthlessly led as the Russian, and is squeezed between invading Czech and Rumanian forces. The Hungarians end up losing the most of their territory and population.

The notion of a national identity, developed during the previous century, plays a paramount role, and the principles of national self-determination promoted by Wilson receive an enthusiastic response all over the globe. But to implement it in practice is something different, people are mixed and connected by various kinds of loyalties, as religious and linguistic in addition to the recent nationalistic. It is not so easy to draw neat borders of what is essentially an interlocking mess. The formation of the South Slaves into one coherent National State - Yugoslavia, is one obvious example, the total eruption of which would take seventy odd years to manifest itself. The reconstitution of Poland after the second World War, is another, less obvious one. Also trouble was set in the Middle-East with the artificial creation of Iraq, and the British Mandate over the Palenstine, which would later turn into Israel. And Minor Asia itself was about to be divided, had not Ataturk risen and created the Modern state of Turkey, expelling Greek attempts of coastal annexation. It is very tempting to conclude that most of the conflicts that have ridden the last decade of the last century, spilling over into the next, can be directly traceable to the more or less haphazard and ill-thought out decisions of 1919. But people are only human, they worked hard and with determination, often guided by idealistic principles; and whatever had been done, would most certainly have created grievances for generations to come.

Germany itself, the vanquished foe, was the last, but not the least issue, that faced the men of 1919. Germany had won on the eastern front, subjugated the Red Russians and set the stage for the emergence of Poland, the Baltic States and Finland (the Baltic States only marginally touched upon, and the Finns almost not at all), but had lost on the western front. In the balance the gains on one hand could not compensate for the losses, and the German army was a beaten one, at least according to MacMillan, who claims confidently that, contrary to post-war popular opinion, the Germans were not undefeated, but only the higher command realised that, because as due to exhaustion the Allied never pressed forward as an occupying power. The subsequent meekness of the Germans corroborates this claim. How should Germany be punished? Because it was clear to the victors that she, and she alone, had started the war, had committed unmentionable atrocities in Belgium, caused havoc on French soil, and ruined the economy of its northeast. There would be territorial losses. Alsace and Lorraine so ignominiously lost by the French almost fifty years earlier, were obvious. The emergence of Poland necessitated adjustments in the East, if for no other reason to allow Poland access to the Baltic, which lead to insoluble topological problems in the plane. The French was even contemplating going further. The Rhineland, the lands on the left of the Rhine, with its Catholic population, and its opposition to the Preussians, could be considered on par with the Alsacians and the Lorraines, German

speaking, but French at heart. Foch, the implacable general, pressed very hard for their inclusion. Eventually the French settled for a time-limited occupation. As to the overseas possessions it was clear that they all should be parceled out, and the Australians, New Zealanders and the Japanese showed quite an interest in the Pacific arena, while the British saw an opportunity to connect their territories on the African scene. But equally, if not more important was the question of reparations. The French had to pay a lot to Germany after its loss, and that was the rule of war and victory at the time. Finally the German Navy should be destroyed, until then the third largest in the world, and a ceiling put on its army, whose function should not go beyond the merely police.

The terms with the Germans were harsh. And alone among all those who lost, Germany was not allowed negotiations. They were presented with a *fait accompli*, only allowed to make comments. At this stage the British delegation started to feel that they had gone too far. Maybe prompted by an instinctive sympathy for their fellow Germans. They admitted shame at the terms, congratulated the Germans on their good sense and their excellent counter-suggestions. But it was too late. Until the very end the Germans stalled. The Italians had already at that stage refused to sign due to extreme displeasure at the denial of their Adriatic claims, and the Japanese were threatening to call it all off, on the basis of being denied Shantung. (At this stage Wilson, whose sympathies had been with the Chinese, stepped down; after all it would have been looking bad if so many of the victorious parties had not been present). The ceremony was set out to be particularly humiliating to the Germans, and the reception of the imposed Treaty was met with general national mourning.

Was the Versailles treaty so bad for the Germans? Did it really set it on a course of vindication and the total catastrophe of twenty years later? MacMillan argues that the Germans only ended up paying a fraction of the imposed reparations, which were proportionally less than those France had been forced to pay. The territorial losses were rather modest as well, and with the emergence of Poland a welcome buffer against the Russian empire, now emerging as the Soviet Union, had been created. Furthermore there had been negligible destruction of the country itself, which had been spared fighting. The responsibility of future developments should not be laid solely on the terms of the Versailles treaty, but on the accumulated decisions and dealings of the decades to come. A most reasonable opinion.

May 5, 2004 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*