

Peacemaking 1919

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Dec 7 - Dec 13/Dec 25, 2004

The Versaille treaty of 1919 is generally considered to have been a mistake, although it is not quite clear in what sense it was a mistake, or whether it really could have turned out otherwise. The treaty was criticised at its inception, not only by its main victim - the defeated Germans, the two main points of contention being the unreasonably harsh and unrealistic reparition demands made on Germany, and the drawing of contentious boundaries, especially in the creation of new nations. The first issue was elequently addressed by Keynes in his book, and the second is the subject of the book under review.

Nicolson, a professional diplomat, states as his intention to reveal what it really was like during those heady months. As contemporary affairs retreat into history, there is the paradox of they being better known and understood, as documentations come to light and are subjected to interpretation; but also on the other hand there is an erosion of knowledge, in the form of the very qualia of the times, as sensed by those privy to its affairs, invariably fading into oblivion. Thus Nicolson warns future readers that they should not be too smug about the deficiencies of those involved in the peacemaking of 1919, and not make the mistake of believing that they would be immune to the follies that marred their efforts, just as they were determined to avoid the mistakes made at the Congress of Vienna about a hundred years earlier.

The mood of the times has to be understood. A most harrowing war had come to a conclusion, the like of which had been known to none, and an outcome of which had been far from clear during most of the time, and even as the Germans agreed to an armistice, the military threat they posed was not to be taken lightly. Into those dark times came the voice of Wilson. A voice filled with idealism and light, so desperately needed at the times, talking about a just peace and beautiful principles of national sovereignty, and an explicit program to end all wars, as expressed in his famous fourteen points. Principles of justice and fairness appealing to friends and foes alike, and in fact the armistice was signed on the mutual understanding that those principles would guide the formation of a just peace. (This being a bone of contention afterwards, the Germans, quite reasonably argueing, that they had been deceived.) Nicolson notes that the ideals and ideas expressed by Wilson were not new and original per se, what was new and original, was that for the first time in history, it seemed that idealism was once wedded to power. USA having entered the war and in fact changed the stalemate into a victory of the Allies, was in a unique position to impose its will. As we all know this did not happen, and the blame for this is squarely laid at Wilson, his narrow-mindedness, his slow-wittedness and inflexibility, and above all his failure to be true to his convictions. Keynes pens a devastating portrait, as funny as insightful, in a few paragraphs. While Nicolson's indictment is more balanced, not as eloquent, but eventually even more damning.

Confusion and hypocrisy were the two major features of the Paris peace conference. Confusion as to whether the treaty would be preliminary or final, or whether it would

be imposed or negotiated. Initially a preliminary treaty to take care of the most pressing business was presumably in the back of most minds, a preliminary treaty to be imposed and later, when public opinion had calmed down, give way to a final and negotiated one. But somehow, no one really knows how, maybe everybody were carried away by the momentum of the process, the preliminary treaty formed into a permanent one, without being changed from an edict into one mutually negotiated. In fact many of the harsh clauses included in the final document had initially been inserted with the intention of being subject to negotiation. Another source of confusion was introduced by the cacophony of new nations and minor powers seeing the opportunity for gain. This confusion also lead to the most apparent feature of the treaty and its process in retrospect, namely the hypocrisy in which matters were settled, at one and every turn violating the principles of which the whole conference was supposed to rest. Why this happened is the ostensibly subject matter of this book.

So how does Nicolson succeed? The book is actually written in two parts. An initial book in which he presents his mature reflections on the Congress, and a concluding one involving the transcriptions of a diary kept during the actual congress. As to the first the author tries to make a seasoned assesment based on philosophical digressions on what is the nature of diplomacy and the relations between nations. Diplomacy is above all about precision, he points out. Treaties should be clearly worded, and facts are more important than idealistic points. (And here he clearly jabs at Wilson). Also politicians should not, contrary to public opinions, seek to establish personal bonds. On the contrary, the more human the contacs are, the more vulnerable to human weakness. It is simply against the grain of man, as a social animal, to always be in opposition, to disagree and to be consistently seen as unreasonable. He also thinks that it was a very great mistake of Wilson to insist on being personally present. He should have left the duties of negotiations, for which he was singularly inept, to the professionals. Having their President away, would have given them a perfect alibi, to stall things, to gain time, to think things over. In the end the Congress of Paris turned out to be even worse than the Congress of Vienna in 1815, because the latter at least knew what they were doing, which cannot be said for the bumbleings of Paris.

But a Congress is more than the official documentation, that which becomes clearer with the passage of time, it is also about the qualia of presence, all those seemingly irrelevant details, that fade away with the memories of those present. In all texts, the reading between the lines, constitutes the true reading. Nicolson tries his hand in the impressionist literary technique to become fashionable at the time. He talks about the sound of ruffled paper, the smell of candles, the weight of briefcases, the contrast between soft carpets and hard wooden floors. Such is the stuff of a diary. But few diaries evoke them, and Nicolson is unfortunately no exception. A true diary is never intended for publication this being at best an afterthought, this means that in its bare, unedited form, it consists mostly of short-hand, names, cryptic remarks, enough to jog the inarticulated memory of the writer, but impossible for the outside reader to dechiffre. Thus in order to make it minimally readable, Nicolson consents to some minor revisions in the form of expansions. A few cryptic words, meaningless by themselves, provokes in the writer vivid scenes, even years later, which it would not only be a pity to withhold but a duty not to do

so.

A diary is by its nature and intention myopic, devoted to the documentation day to day, without longer temporal integrations. So while the first book presents the grand picture, the diaretic notes give a lot of details but little coherence. In the first part he is severely censorious of Wilson, this does not come across at all in the diary notes. On the other hand he does make a few disparaging remarks about Clemenceau, likening him to a jaundiced gorilla.

Most of the daily notes are very short, making references to work, without details, others are more lively, actually telling a story, as when he goes along with Smuts on a mission to Buda Pesth [sic] to assess the seriousness of Bela-Kun, the accidental leader of a Bolshevik short-termed insurrection. The final notes, about being an eye-witness to the signing of the Versailles Treaty is the most compelling. Nicolson is ashamed. The humiliation of the Germans, represented by two meek academics, escorted like petty criminals.

The signing of the Treaty was a relief. There was a worry that the Germans would refuse, because after all would they lose by not signing? Not a thing! The reparations clauses were unduly harsh not to say punitive and might in their unrealism make the signing impossible and lead to Germany joining the Russians and the Hungarian in creating a Red Mittel-Europa.

Most of the diary is taken up with the details of partitioning. Obtuse points, now almost all forgotten, about borders, railway lines, and ethnic considerations. The author is basically the man with a big map and an ability to write clear draft. All that work wears him down, and the hypocrisy sickens him. He makes a point about it to Crowe, his immediate superior, who retorts that either he is not prepared to make the same claims for self-determination on behalf of India, Egypt and Malta in which case he is in no position to talk about hypocrisy at all, or if he is, he better return at once to London. Diplomacy is a cynical business, and Nicolson takes the point well.

Personalities flitter through. There is the great Greek Venizelos, impressing everybody with his eloquence and winning for the Greeks many advantages (abetted no doubt by the rich associations of culture and civilization that Greece engenders in the western mind). Marcel Proust makes two appearances. In both he is pressing Nicolson for details, wanting to find out what is really happening, and pleading that he should not talk so fast. Nicolson proposes that his love for details is a symptom of a literary temperament, but Proust does not take well to this. Andre Gide too is briefly alluded to.

One quickly scans through the pages, as intended by the author, who believes that only a young professional diplomat may conceivably have any interest in reading them as a cautionary tale.