
18 December 2023 | PDF: https://issforum.org/to/jrt15-19 | Website: rjissf.org | Twitter: @HDiplo

Editor: Diane Labrosse
Commissioning Editor: Thomas Maddux
Production Editor: Christopher Ball
Copy Editor: Bethany Keenan

Contents

Introduction by Charles S. Maier, Harvard University .............................................................. 2

Review by Beatrice de Graaf, Utrecht University ........................................................................ 8

Review by Andrew Preston, Cambridge University ................................................................. 11

Review by Jennifer Siegel, Duke University ............................................................................. 16

Review by John A. Thompson, University of Cambridge ..................................................... 19

Response by Patrick O. Cohrs, University of Florence .......................................................... 25
Patrick Cohrs’s impressive history of European and American interaction covers the late-nineteenth century through Adolf Hitler’s coming to power. The focus is on the Versailles Treaty—its negotiations and consequences—with a long running start from 1860 and an intensive study of the diplomacy that sought to manage its consequences extending to 1933. At almost 1100 pages, it is a very long book that presents a continuing stream of subtle and well-documented argumentation, but its central thesis is relatively simple. Cohrs argues that the Allies did not create a legitimate peace “order” in 1919, although one briefly emerged with the 1924 Dawes plan for reparations, including the engagement of American capital in Europe, and the treaty of Locarno in the mid-1920s. Unfortunately, the onset of the world depression and the limited recognition by US leaders of their country’s systemic obligations as a “silent hegemon” (959) meant that it would not last. The book is not primarily a narrative in the manner of similar works by William Langer, A.J.P. Taylor, or Zara Steiner, but an extended series of arguments and interpretation of events, which are not merely left implicit but exhaustively presented at each juncture.¹ Thus the volume again takes up the subject of Cohrs’s already substantial work of over fifteen years ago: The Unfinished Peace after World War I.²

The recurring key concept in the present study is the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of an international “order,” which comes closest to a definition with Cohrs’s suggestion that it should be the outcome of a learning process:

> It is actually not easy to define a clear set of criteria for what qualifies as a “durable” peace or a “legitimate” order—and more profoundly what is meant by “stability” and “legitimacy” in the sphere of international history….this study posits that it was elusive to stabilize Europe or the world after the Great War by creating and enforcing a more effective and somehow more legitimate “balance of power” system on new ideological foundations, which uncompromisingly prioritized the power interests of one side—here: the victors—over those of others: notably but not only the vanquished (35-36).

What was required was

> a new, modern international equilibrium: an equilibrium not primarily of power but of rights, security, satisfied interests and developmental prospects, yet also of responsibilities and obligations within the international system….More precisely, it required finding ways to work out legitimate political processes…reordering processes in which all relevant actors…participated and worked out compromises that balanced interests and concerns…(35-36).

Cohrs’s criteria imply, I believe, that the distinction between the victors and vanquished of what had been the most massive war in modern Western history should have been left behind once the guns fell silent. If 1919 could not yield such an outcome, the process of revising the treaty was urgent. Was that feasible? It is unclear whether Cohrs believes that it was, although he regrets that it was not. The centerpieces of Wilsonian foreign

---


policy were self-determination and establishment of the League of Nations. But Cohrs shows that Wilson himself quickly decided that the complexity of national settlements in Central Europe and elsewhere rendered easy solutions for national self-determination very difficult. The New Atlantic Order hovers like a “horizon of expectation,” to use Reinhart Koselleck's formulation for the teleologies inherent in history: a future not yet in the cards, but continually invoked. Ultimately, a stable and legitimate Atlantic order had to include an engaged United States on one side of the ocean and a mollified Germany on the other. Britain could ultimately be counted on to go along with the US, and France, well, France would have to learn that its objectives of continental containment of Germany were going to be out of reach. The ideological struggle from 1914 on “has to be interpreted anew.” (186, author’s italics)

Russia remains a marginal power in this scheme. Cohrs emphasizes in the book, as well as in his response to his critics, that the Versailles settlement was an effort to solve the German problem, not the Bolshevik challenge, although the shadow of revolution also intruded on the stance the Allies took toward Germany. Specifically, the concatenation of domestic labor crises and the spectacle of the Hungarian revolution prompted Prime Minister David Lloyd George to move toward a softer peace than he had earlier articulated for British political consumption. It should be noted that Jennifer Siegel questions this minimalist weighting of the challenge presented by revolutionary Russia in her review below.

Cohrs counts himself a disciple of the late Paul Schroeder, for whom I too shared a great respect. Schroeder argued that the decisive transformation of European international politics occurred in the years 1813–15, when the allies against Napoleon “learned” that they must create a new equilibrium including France, rather than just a renewed balance of power, which could in fact balance only through repeated wars, but also a concertation through periodic conferences. But I think that the argumentation echoes just as closely E.H. Carr’s 1940 book, The Twenty Years Crisis, which argued that the Western Allies had attempted to freeze their declining legalistic privileged order against the more vigorous states that were emerging elsewhere, whether Soviet or fascist. To be fair, the Germany that Cohrs feels was put upon in 1919 was a republican state, one which was shortsightedly excluded from post-war deliberations. But, of course, it had not been a Republic when it decided it had to strike against Russia and France and transform a Balkan conflict into a European one. The Allies had won their hard-fought war against a German empire, which Cohrs agrees had behaved irresponsibly, but which, he argues, the victors sadly could not recognize deserved a new set of attitudes as a fragile republic.

Cohrs plans a sequel (having already written the 700-page prolegomenon), which will presumably discuss how the United States was to supervise a durable Atlantic order after World War II, an outcome that is also discussed in a vast literature. Meanwhile, this massive and self-confident study provides a thoughtful causal narrative for a long and crucial period of international politics. It would be remiss not to call attention to the vast number of historical issues bearing on international relations that Cohrs broaches in this immense survey: periodization, with his concept of a long twentieth century; legitimacy and Realpolitik; the “counterforces” on the socialist Left, etc. This particular reader must give credit to its massive learning and accedes to much of the argumentation. But he recalls that when he offered a somewhat similar compressed argument thirty-two years ago, the “music” was different: far less pro-German, and less critical of the Allies.

---

4 Schroeder, Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848.
Of course, that stream of interpretation in the 1970s had reversed an earlier critique of the Allies for a disastrous peace. Every generation of historians reads the Versailles Treaty order anew.6

The participants in this forum are generally in awe of the massiveness and selective ambition of the book. I can only point to a few leading judgments, both positive and skeptical. Siegel may dissent on the author’s minimizing of the overhanging role of revolutionary Russia, but her review is perhaps the most unalloyedly admiring, with the claim that “it would be impossible to do justice to the textured detail and thematic richness of Cohrs’s work” in a short review. She cites the “masterly archival work” and “admirably extensive reading in the secondary literature.” Beatrice de Graaf credits Cohrs with pulling off “the Herculean job of squeezing the entire history of the transformation of a European centric world order towards an Atlantic world or over the years 1860 until 1933.” But she wonders whether the intent was “descriptive, normative, affirmative, or accusatory,” and whether the world economic crisis made the failure of the steps toward pacification (or in Foreign Secretary Austin Chamberlain’s phrasing, “appeasement,” 951) inevitable.

She also wonders about the counter-factual that is never tested: Would the peace order have persisted if Republican leaders other than Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover have been in charge? De Graaf implies that other American policymakers might have chosen more involvement with the fragile German republic and interwar powers. (Given the even greater degree of non-cooperation in the early 1930s, this seems doubtful, however.) She also regrets the failure to consider what might have been a broader cultural and gendered matrix for policy making. I would have liked her to spell out “the paradigm shift, a cultural transformation in how politics was made in Washington…” She suggests, I believe, that Cohrs is engaged with earlier debates but has not assimilated a newer literature that would have better explained how the postwar debates became frozen in legalist approaches. In any case she reads Cohrs, correctly I believe, as arguing that it was Washington’s shortsightedness, and not Berlin’s revisionism, that aborted the nascent peace order emerging in the years 1924–1928.

John Thompson provides the most complete linear summary of the book, and for readers who have not yet wrestled with Cohrs’s volume it may prove the most helpful. He focuses first on the earlier transformative period that led up to the First World War and emphasizes that Cohrs attributes the failure of peace primarily to Britain’s alignment with the French and Russians and the abandonment of its concern for the concert of Europe. (This argument, by the way, echoes Paul Schroeder’s early lament that over the course of the nineteenth century London’s growing lack of concern for preserving the Austro-Hungarian monarchy indirectly but fatally changed the European balance of power.) 7 Thompson praises Cohrs for an account of the peace conference that “is more thorough and analytically penetrating than other narratives,” although he finds it “unquestionably wordy.” He zeroes in on the tension in Cohrs’s account between the inevitability of interwar diplomatic breakdown and the more contingent failures of alternative visions. Thompson writes that “Cohrs explains the course and outcome of the Paris peace conference in much the same terms as [Paul]

---


Schroeder did the Congress of Vienna,” but recognizes, however, that the 1919 leaders faced the pressures of public opinion.

It is true that Cohrs, like Schroeder, emphasizes continued “learning” processes. However, the brunt of Cohrs’s argument is that the Allies never really learned the lesson of 1815: bring your erstwhile enemy into the negotiations. The French “never envisaged even partial or even symbolical negotiations with the ennemis d’outre-Rhin that could have challenged the ‘unity’ of the victors or compromised the French government’s essential interests” (527). It is too bad that Cohrs and Georges-Henri Soutou, the most dispassionate analyst of French policy with all its difficulties, could not have debated directly. The two are not far apart in their judgments, but Soutou presents France’s search for economic and territorial security with far more sympathy. French policy makers, too, hoped for more from Washington in the postwar era, and their demands at the peace conference reflected their realization that it might not be forthcoming.8

As Soutou has noted, historical judgment of the Treaty became far less critical from the 1970s on. The issue for Cohrs, however, is not just to re-revise this revisionism, but to find a new framework in which to place the older judgments, whether relatively pro-French or pro-German. In effect he does so by focusing on the reversion of American policies, which he documents in his discussion of Wilson’s evolution in chapter 10, embedded in his central Part III, “Reorientation and Incipient Learning Processes…” For Thompson, Cohrs reveals a tension between choice and structure. The very detailed account of Wilson’s conceptual evolution traced by Cohrs prods Thompson to argue that American discovery of a new stabilizing role involved elements of contingency that “cast doubt on the essentially teleological meta-history that shapes Cohrs’ book—that the ‘Atlantic order’ established after 1945 was the destined end-point of international politics from the 1860s on.”

Andrew Preston follows the book’s argumentation but regrets its Euro-American focus. The creation of an Atlantic order was a far cry from a global settlement, and he refocuses Cohrs’s effort at periodization as a hundred-year period of Euro-American imperialism. He sees a plurality of periods and orders as more compelling. “By giving himself such a broad chronological remit, Cohrs can fit pretty much anything into his long twentieth century, but that capaciousness also makes it conceptually brittle, as brittle, perhaps, as the transatlantic order itself.” The conjunction of western liberalism with coercive empire is obviously for Preston the broader story, and I think he is correct in spotting why Cohrs, to date, has not written a global history. Indeed, he has written the story that John Maynard Keynes could have written, had he focused on geopolitics and ideas instead of economics.

Cohrs responds by stressing his intention to overthrow previous periodizations and establish a long twentieth century from the 1860s to just yesterday, with the First World War emerging not as the original crisis of the twentieth century, but as “the crucible of the long twentieth century, both for transatlantic and world order.” Implicitly responding to Preston’s critique, he argues that the “new Atlantic order” was the agent of global imperialism that at least impacted the global order through a “dialectical process that reached a first decisive stage at the Paris Conference …but then unfolded over more than five decades.” If I understand his programmatic statement correctly, first European “order,” then Atlantic order, was to require “an architecture of rules and norms for a global order that could be deemed effective and legitimate not just in ‘the West’ but indeed by actors from all regions of the inherently modern world.” He promises that this “bigger picture” is to be revealed, not in his current brief response, but in the third and final part of his trilogy that will run from 1933 to 2022. Meanwhile, his answer to the four commentators goes on to summarize what the detailed narrative of The New Atlantic Order painstakingly reconstructed. Most consequential of the

deficiencies of the Paris negotiations and the Versailles Treaty, he reaffirms, was “the victors’ mishandling of the crucial German question.” Germany was neither diminished nor accommodated, but ostracized. Cohrs recognizes a debt to Schroeder: “But Paul” he adds, “would have been the first to point out that my approach is quite distinctive from his, and goes beyond it in crucial respects, notably in its emphasis on learning, Atlantic and global perspectives, and the expanding requirements for a modern international equilibrium.”

Preempting possible future critiques, Cohrs dissents from Arno J. Mayer by downplaying the Cold War and the conflict with Communism. He argues that the actors at Versailles essentially brandished Bolshevism as a bogey to advance their more traditional ends.⁹

It’s not the job of this chair to keep score among the author and his commentators. I am led to reflect, though, on certain less overt assumptions of a necessarily imperfect debate. The idea that every catastrophe is a “learning experience” can supply an Olympian detachment toward the ongoing course of history if not an alibi, but it must certainly minimize the impact of lived experience. Seventy million dead or more in the course of the two world wars did not have the chance to benefit from their learning experience. Invoking the perspective from a future state of affairs must also shape the perspective of events. As someone who wrote an essay on this basis in 1981, “Two Postwar Eras and the Stabilization of Western Europe,” I realize its opportunities and perils.¹⁰ Finally, the debate confirms that periodization will remain absolutely essential to historical judgments, for it always entails a statement of what developments really “counted” within a given time span. The periodization that I suggested at the beginning of our current century focused on the role “territoriality” played as a global organizing principle.¹¹ It has some similarities to Cohrs’s argument and the same starting point, although I viewed it and still do as running its course by the 1970s. But particular hallmarks aside, periodization can also become a mug’s game. We advance schemes of periodization as statements of what trends are more or less important, and there will always be multiple criteria for establishing that catalogue. To my mind, as I consider the book and the critiques, these are some of the unthematized lessons of Patrick Cohrs’s monumental project, and they should not be lost as we debate the overt claims he has advanced to date.

Contributors:

Patrick O. Cohrs is Professor of International History at the University of Florence. He was Associate Professor of History and International Relations at Yale University, a fellow at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, and Alistair Horne Fellow at St Antony’s College, Oxford. He is the author of The New Atlantic Order: The Transformation of International Politics, 1860–1933 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), which won the 2023 Prose Award in World History, and of The Unfinished Peace after World War I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). He is now working on the third and final volume on the transformation of the modern Atlantic and global order, which will cover the second half of the long twentieth century (1933–2022). For further information and to order his books please visit: www.patrickocohrs.com

---

Charles S. Maier is the Leverett Saltonstall Research Professor of History at Harvard University. His most recent book is *The Project State and its Rivals: A New History of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries* (Harvard University Press, 2023).

Beatrice de Graaf is a historian and a security & terrorism researcher at Utrecht University. Her research focuses on how states and societies try to maintain high levels of security and how these attempts relate to core values and institutions (democracy, freedom, rule of law, constitutional and responsible government). Her most recent publications in English are *Crisis!* (Prometheus, 2022) and *Fighting Terror after Napoleon. How Europe Became Secure after 1815* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). She is a member of the core team of Security for Open Societies (SOS; https://www.uu.nl/en/research/institutions-for-open-societies/security-in-open-societies-sos), in which researchers work together with social partners to find answers to current social issues about security, democracy and freedom.

Andrew Preston is Professor of American History and a Fellow of Clare College at Cambridge University. He is the author of *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Harvard, 2006), *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (Knopf, 2012), and *American Foreign Relations: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2019); he is also the editor of seven other books. In 2020-21, he was elected President of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR). His current book, forthcoming from Harvard, is entitled *The Invention of National Security*.

Jennifer Siegel is the Bruce R. Kuniholm Distinguished Professor of History and Public Policy at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. A specialist in modern European diplomatic and military history, she is the author of *For Peace and Money: French and British Finance in the Service of Tsars and Commissars* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia* (IB Tauris, 2002). She has published chapters and articles on financial history and intelligence history, and has co-edited, with Peter Jackson, *Intelligence and Statecraft: The Use and Limits of Intelligence in International Society* (Praeger, 2005). Currently, she is working on a history of the diplomacy of the First World War.

Review by Beatrice de Graaf, Utrecht University

“The Americans Did It (But Could They Have Not Have Done It?)”

It is not often that one comes across a tome that is both so voluminous, classic, and all-encompassing on a topic and field that seemed to be quite well served already: the international relations and the “western system” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Patrick Cohrs pulls of the Herculean job of squeezing into one book the entire history of the transformation of a European-centric world order towards an Atlantic world order over the years 1860 until 1933. He has thereby produced a volume that functions as a portable library for future students to carry with them as they move through their courses on the European Concert, the rise of imperialism, the First World War, the making of the new peaceful world order after 1918 and the dissolution of that same order in the interbellum years.

That said, in this review, I highlight two challenges that Cohrs confronts head on, and one that he leaves out of his already overspilling account.

The first challenge is the one that confronts many historical scholars today: how to find one’s own voice and narrative while struggling with the fact that our field is overflowing with highly specialized experts on countries, cases, historical leaders, individuals, etc.—each guarding their territory anxiously, painstakingly limiting their research question to map their own particular stamp/spot in history. Not many historians today dare to launch an account that is so wide in terms of time and space as to merit the epitaph “global,” or “transcontinental.” Simultaneously, not many historians meet the bar set by David Armitage and Jo Guldi in raising truly important questions and producing grand, long-term narratives.¹

Cohrs confronts this challenge in the classical, descriptive way. In the vein of the venerable twentieth-century works of Henry Kissinger, Hedley Bull, E.H. Carr, and, most notable, in that of Cohrs’s stated spiritus rector, Paul Schroeder and his work on the Transformation of European Politics,² he offers us a bird’s-eye perspective on the history of escalating competition and conflict within the international arena from the second half of the nineteenth century until the First World War. His narrative sets out to explain why the great powers first failed to prevent the First World War, and then missed out on the opportunity of creating a viable military alliance and addressing the underlying social, political, and economic conflicts that would push the world into the abyss of the Second World War.

Cohrs’s grand narrative, which arises from the overwhelming mass of facts, figures, and storylines that the author bestows on us, is that the Versailles peace order was an “unfinished peace,” that was only “the starting-point of a process of stabilization and pacification that still had to be pursued” (901, 907)—especially, since it relied mainly on American economic bribing of European leaders, most notably French and German ones, into keeping them all within the western system. This economic approach, which was tested in London in 1924, secured in Locarno in 1925, and supported by the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 and the Young Plan of 1929, turned out to be unstable and insufficient. When the global economic crisis of the late 1920s erupted, and the pillars of this system, the US and the UK, reverted to the protection of their own national interests, the order started to crumble from the inside. This narrative is convincingly presented and based on


© 2023 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US
a bulk of quotations, references, and primary and secondary sources. What remains somewhat unclear, however, is the epistemic nature of this narrative: is it descriptive, normative, affirmative, or accusatory? I could not quite discover whether the author wants to suggest that this was an inevitable outcome, given the state of the economic crisis, or whether the great success of the Kellogg-Briand Pact (as the author describes it) could have been repeated anew. Cohrs’s narrative seems to frown upon the great powers for falling back into entrenched positions to save their national budget and populations. But does he think that they really missed out on possibilities to mobilize their populations around the existing economic order, or that they could have found a way to increase its domestic and international legitimacy after 1929?

That brings me to the second challenge. If we take Cohrs’s narrative seriously—and we should, with so many pages and sources to underpin it—the only way to test it in an epistemological sense, would be to offer a counterfactual history. If his argument is that the post-Versailles order failed because US leaders (in particular the US Republicans) backed away from a commitment to their own chosen economic approach, this would require in some way or the other an element of “if history” to substantiate the argument a contrario. For example: “Would the peace order have persisted if other Republican leaders than presidents Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover—both of whom are on the receiving end of Cohrs’s misgivings—would have been in charge?” Or: “Would the ‘settlements of London and Locarno’ (ch. 24), with their ‘guarantees and obligations, common rules and understandings for the pacific settlement of disputes, and…quid pro quo agreements’ have been sustained had no world Economic Crisis had broken out?” Obviously, this type of counterfactual history triggers all kinds of methodological and epistemological musings, not least since history is a conservative discipline, interested in explaining the genealogy of the status quo rather than conjuring up alternative stories and pathways.³

Cohrs does not play with conjecture, but keeps his focus on the reality of the choices available for the leading statesmen. Yet, here, one wonders if it would have made his argument more stringent if he would not have relied on primary and secondary sources of the top leaders alone, presenting their decisions as the logical, inevitable outcomes of a linear process of decisionmaking. It would have helped if he had showcased the messiness of such a process, and had taken into consideration the doubts, debates, and power struggles behind the scenes, amongst the layers of second-tier officials and “whisperers behind the thrones” as well. Surely there were voices within the corridors of power who argued against Hoover’s inclination to pull out of the European power political game. For example, Hoover and the even more isolationist Republicans were warned against severing ties with the London and Locarno systems because this would not be in their financial interest in the end. Indeed, Adam Tooze and Jorrit Steehouder have recently argued that many US bankers, financiers, and figures of influence were very much aware of this risk, most notably the well-connected businessman Averell Harriman.⁴ Decades ago, Frank Costigliola made a similar argument, pointing to those kingmakers (and queenmakers!) of the transatlantic economic order, and highlighting the role of these “able American businessmen-diplomats.”⁵ In the end, this makes Cohrs’s narrative a bit of a hybrid argument (even if it is convincing): sometimes it reads as a statement of facts, then a degree of normativity seems to creep in, with Cohrs almost reprimanding the Republicans for their stupidity in not being aware of the combustible mixture that the nondemocratic revisionist powers were brewing in Europe and most

importantly in Germany. Cohrs points to both the systemic conditions that impeded and constrained the peace order, and to the agents of that order whom he credits with enough decisionmaking power to have steered the ship of state in a more national direction. Does this amount to an intentionality that lay behind the dissolution of the system, with the Americans as the main culprits, or was it a systemic transformation that could not be helped?

The third challenge, one that Cohrs does not address, would have perhaps brought some clarity here. Obviously, it is quite impossible to argue that the bulk of this book should have included even more voices. Yet, one cannot help wondering why this monument of policy making in the realm of International Relations (IR), which is compounded by the subtitle that is a direct reference to the celebrated Schroeder work, does not explicitly engage with recent historiography on cultures of cooperation, security, norms, and institutions. As explained above, decisionmaking in the international arena is not only a top-down game for clean-shaven gentlemen in their offices. We know from recent trends in political history and historical IR literature that insights from the emotional turn may help us understand how the international and the domestic, the political and the cultural, are intertwined. Moreover, bringing in members from second-tier epistemic communities, such as officials, including female ones, serves to trace the ways in which norms and attitudes came to matter in the international arena as well. The shift from a belief in collective security and economic cooperation in the period between 1918 and the early 1920s towards the embracing of an Open Door policy in which the US was dominant was not the outcome of the mathematical calculation, but mirrors a paradigm shift, a cultural transformation in how politics was made in done in Washington, with a new generation coming to the fore that relied on different values. It would have been fascinating to read how Cohrs inserted these insights into his explanatory framework.

In that sense, Cohrs’s tome is a monumental work of history in itself. It speaks to those acclaimed books published in the twentieth century that are mentioned above, whereas I would have loved to see it in conversation with the works of today as well. This, if only to learn more about the way our flawed peace orders need to be sustained with both the hardware of economic and military might and the software of the norms, institutions, and affects that are needed to keep them afloat.

---


Patrick Cohrs does not write short books. At more than 700 pages, his first book, the groundbreaking *The Unfinished Peace after World War I*, was monumental, but at close to 1,150 pages his follow-up makes the first look like a very short introduction. The *New Atlantic Order* covers the same 1919–1932 period that *Unfinished Peace* did, but grounds its argument about a transformational “long twentieth century” in a deeper history stretching back to 1860 and extending to 2020. The *New Atlantic Order* is an enormous achievement, simply too rich and too vast—not just in terms of its sweeping narrative and impressive primary-source base, but in terms of its innumerable historiographical interventions—to assess fully in a single review, so I will focus on some of its larger arguments and contributions.

Cohrs argues that a cohesive 160-year period, from 1860 to 2020 with 1914–1933 as a critical yet incomplete turning point, transformed international order around a *Pax Atlantica* system, and that this order is now coming to an end. It was initially European in content and intent, but after World War I it broadened out to become a truly international order, “essentially a novel Atlantic concert of democratic states that could potentially serve as the nucleus of a new world order” grounded in non-coercive acceptance of common liberal norms (19). The spur for the creation of this Atlantic Order was a growing global interdependence and the ability of states in North America and northern Europe to recognize and learn from the mistakes of 1919–1933 that caused widespread violence, destruction (of wealth as well as lives), and misery. Interestingly, Cohrs portrays the Great War as a catalyst, not a cause, in the emergence of the new Atlantic Order: the war accelerated the forces of global interdependence and domestic popular opinion that would clash in Paris in 1919, but it did not itself stimulate reform of the international system or even lead to the building of structures that would eventually oversee systemic reform. Though Cohrs does not go this far, his perspective on the Great War is akin to Michael Mann’s conception of it as a contingent event, its transformative effects facilitating a power shift from Europe to the United States that was not even probable before 1914, let alone inevitable.2

The failure of the post-1918 settlement was, Cohrs argues, mainly due to the faults of the warriors-turned-peacemakers themselves for prioritizing their domestic political needs over the shared requirements for a durable peace settlement. He sees President Woodrow Wilson as a flawed visionary whose flaws sabotaged his vision, but he also castigates the Republican presidents of the 1920s, particularly Herbert Hoover, for snatching defeat from the jaws of victories reached in London and Locarno in 1924–1925. French leaders, notably French leader Raymond Poincaré, also come in for criticism on similar grounds of narrow nationalism. At least Wilson tried, whereas Hoover and Poincaré had too little imagination to have done so, although, as Cohrs also points out, the new domestic political imperatives facing policymakers from the Great War onwards limited politicians’ room for maneuver, a constraint that Wilson himself was also unable to break. If *The New Atlantic Order* has a hero, it is Charles Evans Hughes, the American statesman who laid the foundations for a stable settlement from the ashes of 1914–1918 and the false dawn of 1919. After the onset of the Depression, when Hoover and other leaders in London, Paris, and Washington let Hughes’s work come undone, the system collapsed and the world once again plunged into war. It was only the carnage of 1937–1945 that convinced Western leaders of the urgent necessity to build a new world order along *Pax Atlantica* lines, and that order survived until a few years ago.

---


© 2023 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US
This brief overview of Cohrs’s main arguments probably does it an injustice, as the book has an incredibly dense empirical base yet is also ambitiously broad, synthetic, and analytical. The book is highly stimulating, its breadth generatively provocative: here is how I was not only stimulated, but provoked.

*The New Atlantic Order* is aptly titled, for Cohrs examines a transatlantic framework for peace and security that took embryonic form in 1919, failed spectacularly, and then successfully took hold after 1945. The order’s chief feature was its legitimacy, as reflected in the fact that people in various countries voluntarily subscribed to its tenets and hegemonic norms and that it created an international ecology of “essentially reciprocal agreements” that was consensual and therefore self-sustaining (3, emphasis in original). This was—and remains—largely true for the North Atlantic West, and it fits the 160-year periodization Cohrs establishes. Yet at frequent points he goes further, claiming that the transatlantic order was in fact a “new global order” (936), and that under its remit “democratisation was also to unfold on a worldwide scale” (23). He argues that “such advances could even lead to the creation of a genuine security community and, in a broader perspective, a more sustainable political equilibrium in Europe and the critical Euro-Atlantic sphere that also greatly enhanced global peace” (958). Elsewhere, he writes of “the transformation of Western Europe and the north Atlantic sphere from a sphere of war that had long affected the entire world to a sphere of order, security and transnational peace-building” (1000).

Yet was the transatlantic order in fact coterminous with world order? On reading Cohrs’s book, it actually strikes me as a thoroughly Eurocentric order. The inclusion of the United States around the time of the Great War did not dilute its innate Europeanness: Cohrs rightly brands the US “a peculiar imperialist power” (30) and “a distinctive world power” (90), but the peculiarities and distinctiveness were found in method and implementation, not basic design or purpose. In ideas, values, and norms about race, development, political economy, sovereignty, and civilization, the United States was a variation on a European outlook, not something different or new. Under Wilson and later President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the participation of the United States in world-order building saw a broadening and strengthening of European worldviews, not their diversification.

What about those on the receiving end of this transatlantic order? The order certainly tried to impose itself on, or later sell itself to, the rest of the world, but did the rest of the world join in? When viewed from the other end of the telescope, we see that Cohrs’s order of peace and prosperity was remarkably limited by geography: after 1945, when it reached full maturation, the transatlantic order not only did little to prevent wars from breaking out in South Asia, Korea, Indochina, Indonesia, Algeria, and East Africa, it actually contributed to and in some instances actually caused those wars—all in the name of upholding the order itself. This continued to be the case during what was arguably the transatlantic order’s apogee—the two decades between 1989 and 2008—when the pace of Western-led extra-European warfare increased even while its scale diminished due to technological advances of the Revolution in Military Affairs.3 A “long peace”

---

3 The literature on the US-led Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) since the 1970s is vast and internally contentious, but for a useful introduction see Keith L. Shimko, “The United States and the RMA: Revolutions Do Not Revolutionize Everything,” in *Reassessing the Revolution in Military Affairs: Transformation, Evolution and Lessons Learnt*, ed. Jeffrey Collins and Andrew Futter (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 16-32. While it’s true that America’s RMA led to mixed results on the battlefield between the first invasion of Iraq in 1991 and withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, its favoring of technology, especially from the air, over mass-level ground forces meant that the scale of destruction was more limited than in previous American wars in Korea and Vietnam. For a persuasive (and prescient) skeptic’s account of RMA’s effectiveness, see Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Moreover, recent literature has insightfully critiqued the RMA by putting it into wider geographical and historical context: see, for example, Wayne E. Lee, *Waging War: Conflict, Culture, and Innovation in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Mark Charles Fissel, ed., *The Military Revolution and Revolutions in Military Affairs* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023).
did prevail after 1945, but only in the home region of the transatlantic order itself (the North Atlantic): elsewhere saw the eruption of the “Cold War’s killing fields,” to borrow Paul Chamberlin’s evocative phrase, not in spite of the transatlantic peace but precisely because of it. The new order was peaceful only for Europeans and North Americans.

This spread of violence around the world had everything to do with the contested waning of European empires, a subject that Cohrs’s analysis certainly does not ignore but does not fully integrate either. There was indeed a world order that existed during his long twentieth century, but it was a very different one than is envisioned here. The New Atlantic Order actually made me think of a different way to periodize modern international history, not around a 160-years long twentieth century but around a 100-year period that was a genuinely global transatlantic order of European empires. Building on centuries of regional empire-building, the formal system of globally integrated, Euro-American imperial domination began in the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps in 1839 with the outbreak of the First Opium War. It expanded with the establishment of the British Raj, the conquest of the American west and the Russian east, the forced opening of Japan, the imposition of French rule in Indochina, the scramble for Africa, and the carving-up of the Middle East (overseen and legitimated by the League of Nations), and it functioned through a burgeoning process of economic globalization and sub-systems like the treaty-ports in China and the policing of the Caribbean. This century of Europe’s imperial world order began to come to a close in 1937–42, when the Japanese invasions of China and European/American colonies in Southeast Asia created an opportunity for nationalist movements to challenge imperial rule from within (e.g., the founding of the Viet Minh in 1941, the launch of the Quit India Movement in 1942). This was a transatlantic order that operated on multiple levels but was nonetheless cohesive: it was at once liberal and illiberal; consensual and coercive, depending on where one lived; and genuinely global. A city like Shanghai, which was forced to become a treaty port in 1842, transformed into Asia’s leading entrepôt and a playground for the American and European merchant-imperial elite, and occupied by Japan with its assault on the foreign concessions in 1941, was thus as much a fulcrum of this Atlantic imperial order as London, Paris, New York, or Washington. A similar narrative could also be drawn from the history of cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore, or Beirut.

Otherwise, even after 1945, there was never again a single world order; instead, many orders jostled with each other. The Pax Atlantica had global reach and consequences, to be sure, but as a prevailing order it was for the most part regional, not global. The US-led Pax Atlantica that the United States created in 1944–1946—from Bretton Woods to the United Nations to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade—certainly had a global vision, but it was accepted by a relatively small (if powerfully wealthy) part of the world. The century of European imperial global order began collapsing in World War Two, and when transatlantic leaders attempted to replace it with another, new order based on liberal principles, most of the rest of the world chose not to join, which was just as it had been before the imperial century began in the 1830s. Much of the world instead opted for (or was forced to endure) Communism, while many others chose a third way that was not aligned to either the Atlantic World order or the Communist World order. In fact, the prevailing condition of the post-1945 world was division—Germany (with the German question still as unsolved in 1948 as it had been in 1918), China, Vietnam, and Korea were all formally split in two—and millions of people fought back against this new version of the European-led international system.


5 For this reason it’s probably better to follow Lorenz Lüthi’s example and recognize the many interrelated but fundamentally distinct conflicts that characterized international relations after 1945: Lorenz M. Lüthi, Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
Thus the “more substantive transformation process” of “the construction of the Pax Atlantica after 1945” that Cohrs identifies was real, but only partial, and it did not receive anything close to universal acceptance until the end of the Cold War (31). Until then, it was at the very most only a half-world order. The transatlantic order did indeed have a brief moment of global triumph at the supposed “end of history” in the 1990s, when the Berlin Wall fell, China was on a breakneck race for capitalist development, and even the Soviet Union (before it dissolved) supported a US-led, Japanese- and Saudi-funded war to protect the world’s oil markets. President George H.W. Bush wasn’t entirely wrong, or even hubristic, when he pronounced the emergence of “a new world order” in 1990. But that moment was very brief indeed, from the end of the Cold War in Europe to the suicide of US power in Iraq in 2003 and the Great Recession in 2007–2008—not even two decades (Cohrs’s end point of 2020 is thus at least a dozen years too late). Today there is no shortage of hybrid alternatives to a transatlantic liberal order that have adopted some of its aspects (a market economy, consumerism, technological innovation) but not others (democracy, liberalism). Again, Shanghai, which was a major crucible of the Cultural Revolution, yet later the powerhouse of China’s astounding economic revolution since the 1990s and the founding site of the anti-NATO Shanghai Cooperation Organization, stands as an exemplar of the Pax Atlantica’s limited appeal.

This uncertainty over the scope, scale, and indeed very terms of Cohrs’s transatlantic order may stem from the sheer breadth of the period he identifies as an internally consistent unit of historical time. Every attempt at periodization is a necessary contrivance, and those that do not precisely conform to a 10-year decade or a 100-year century usually make more sense than those that do. But do the years 1860 (when slavery and serfdom were still prevalent) and 2020 really belong to the same epoch, even if we confine it to the North Atlantic? Although Cohrs makes a clear case for starting off in 1860, based in large part on the transformations about to unfold in the United States, I am not so sure. Does the period prior to 1890—before, as the economist Robert Gordon famously pointed out, the advent of indoor plumbing, the telephone, the automobile, electricity, and the common acceptance of germ theory, to say nothing of aviation, moving pictures, plastics, nuclear energy, rockets, and the computer later on—really belong in the same continuum as 1940, 1970, or 2000? In 1860, life expectancy for white men in the United States was around 40 years; it was much lower in other parts of the world. Travel from New York to San Francisco was measured in months, not hours. 1860 was not just an age that was different from our own, it was remarkably different even from the world of 1914. The blissfully globalized (and empire-dependent) lifestyle that John Maynard Keynes lamented losing in the Great War (“The inhabitant of London could order by telephone, sipping his morning tea in bed, the various products of the whole earth, in such quantity as he might see fit, and reasonably expect their early delivery upon his doorstep”) is second-nature to us a century later, but was still unfathomable except for futurists not long before the turn of the twentieth century, only a few years before Keynes wrote those words.

By employing such a broad chronological remit, Cohrs can fit pretty much anything into his long twentieth century, but that capaciousness also makes it conceptually brittle—as brittle, perhaps, as the transatlantic order itself. Enduring systems are flexible and adaptable, but Cohrs’s Pax Atlantica system was remarkably transient even in its core regions, coming and going for relatively brief periods and only gaining a kind of permanency after 1945; and beyond those core regions, it was close to non-existent except for an even-briefer period towards the end of its lifespan. Europe’s global order passed for good with the final death throes of its

---

empires in the 1940s–1960s, and while transatlantic liberalism has worked wonders in generating peace and prosperity for Europeans and North Americans, plus a handful of other societies, it is most striking for being parochial rather than global.

This is probably the greatest tragedy of Cohrs’s period: that a socio-economic system that can generate such wealth, social stability, domestic peace, and political legitimacy should be adopted by so relatively few people. But that is probably because of Western liberalism’s historical confluence with forms of coercive empire—from treaty ports at the outset to structural adjustment bailouts and humanitarian intervention towards the end—that made it illegitimate in the eyes of much of the rest of the world. Patrick Cohrs brilliantly reveals how this order worked out its kinks in Europe and North America over the *longue durée*, and how that process made the North Atlantic the most powerful region of the world for a very long time—probably even still today. For those looking for the definitive history of transatlantic international history at its apex, they need look no further than *The New Atlantic Order*. But, despite its length, Cohrs’s impressive book still only tells one aspect of modern international history’s many world orders.
Review by Jennifer Siegel, Duke University

On a recent trip through the security line at Newark Airport, my bag was pulled off the belt. After meticulously opening up each pocket, the TSA agent finally pulled out the offending item. Holding aloft the 1112-plus pages of *The New Atlantic Order* with both hands, she announced, “This book is too big, and too dense,” before running it through the x-ray machine again in its own tray.

Were it not for the looming boarding time for my plane, I would have stopped to explain where her assessment was flawed. Yes, the book is big. Yes, the book is tightly packed with detail. But Patrick Cohrs has offered in this volume a highly readable and carefully crafted tome, which elaborates upon the oft-told story of the Paris peace negotiations and agreements in 1919 and places them within the much broader historical context of the previous decades and the decade that followed. For Cohrs, it is not only the years of the Great War or the origins of that conflict that are relevant for understanding the attempts at constructing a postwar order; one must look all the way back to the nineteenth-century Bismarckian Great Power system and, in part, forward to the peacemaking after World War Two, to appreciate what the trial run of the 1920s did to influence the post-45 “Atlantic order.” Cohrs’s central undertaking is to unpack the “novel” construction of the transatlantic security and economic structures that he says replaced the fractured European order of the long nineteenth century with the transatlantic order of the long twentieth. It is a process that, he argues, can only be understood by interrogating the limits and deficiencies of the “incomplete” 1919 peacemaking process (chapter 14).

It is no great secret that Cohrs sees this book as a methodological and theoretical successor to the seminal (and almost as lengthy) work by Paul Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848*, which describes the period in question as a dynamic system of individual states, first dragged down by ideas about a balance of power, later buoyed by the practices of national restraint, collective security, and political equilibrium developed through the congress system. For both authors, the system of international politics, defined by Cohrs as “the constituent rules, norms, understandings and assumptions that govern a common and at the same time inherently competitive practice or pursuit” (33), is key, although, as both authors make clear, international systems are just as likely to heighten insecurity and provoke conflicts as they are to foster stability, peace, and prosperity. For Schroeder, the transformation of the international system took place abruptly, in 1813–1815, as the European Great Powers worked to abandon the aggressive balance-of-power politics of the eighteenth century and construct the more cooperative Congress system that brought relative peace and stability until the Revolutions of 1848 and the Crimean War. Cohrs’s transformation is no less focused, emerging out of what he calls the “tectonic changes” of the First World War (chapter 6). But he makes clear that the postwar peacemaking was an important stage, but “not a real turning point” (5) in a process that began in the 1860s and did not come to complete fruition until the post-World War II reordering. The foundations for the post-World War I transatlantic peace can be located much earlier in the nineteenth century, with the emergence of European and American official and non-governmental networks that sought to promote a progressive Atlantic international community in the interest of preserving peace. For Cohrs, the “longue durée” approach is absolutely vital if one is to understand the challenges that hindered the development of a European and global order in the post-war period, and the solutions that were attempted.

One of the great strengths of this volume is the way in which Cohrs has transcended the traditional caesuras of war and revolution to create his own periodization. Furthermore, while Cohrs is treading on ground that many diplomatic historians have traveled before him, he steps away from many of the standard works on the international history of the early twentieth century in his emphasis on the transatlantic nature of the new

---

order constructed at Versailles. Whereas Zara Steiner, for example, saw the international system that came out of the peace conference to be one that was, essentially, a European international system, Cohrs insists that the key relationships are the transatlantic ones. While the United States might have stayed out of the League of Nations, it was by no means out of the international regime that emerged from 1919. And, as Cohrs insists, the peacemaking after the Great War was not just an attempt to reorder Europe, or to redistribute and reorganize the European imperial possessions along with the encouragement and quashing of anti-imperial hopes, but “to establish a novel transatlantic peace system” (17). The creation of a security architecture that would firmly link the United States and Europe together was, he argues, one of the crucial goals of the entire peacemaking process. The key transformation for Cohrs is the relocation of the geographical pivot of international order. No longer would it be located on the Elbe or the Danube. It now could be found somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic. This relocation produced “a qualitatively different, modern international system [that] eventually supplanted the still essentially Eurocentric, and war-prone ‘order’” (5).

This reorientation of the fulcrum of international order can in part be explained by the exclusion of Communist Russia from the international system in the years after the October Revolution in 1917, which brought Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin and his cohort to power. But Cohrs’s commitment to his thesis and his focus on the all-pervading Transatlantic Order or, perhaps, Der Primat des Transatlantiks—resting firmly on the Anglo-American relationship, with the next two Great Powers thrown in with decreasing weight the further east one travels—can just as likely be seen to be determinant of Russia’s secondary import. Tsarist and Bolshevik Russia play a subordinate role for Cohrs in the international history of the period, and in the book. He takes great pains, at several different points in the book, to argue that the “Bolshevik factor”—i.e., fears of the spread of Bolshevism (“the Bolshevik menace”), the withdrawal of Russia from the international trade regime, the upheaval and humanitarian crisis of the Russian Civil War, etc.—was not that significant vis-à-vis the peacemaking and reordering processes after World War I. (Under-discussed is a key component of that Bolshevik factor—the very real challenges produced for the domestic economies of several of the key allied powers stemming from the post-revolutionary nationalization of all property in Russia, both foreign and domestically owned, and the spoliation of all Tsarist debt, a great deal of which had been in private hands, particularly in France). According to Cohrs, American president Woodrow Wilson, British prime minister Lloyd George, and French premier Georges Clemenceau each, at times, exaggerated the potency of the Bolshevik menace as a means of promoting their own visions of an alternative postwar order to their allies and occasionally to the Germans. He does not dismiss altogether the “potent alternative vision that challenged older as well as more progressive ‘western’ concepts of both international and domestic order” (315) of Lenin and his colleague in revolution, who was People’s Commissar first for Foreign Affairs and then for Military and Naval Affairs, Leon Trotsky, but Cohrs insists that it was not decisive.

Cohrs is not off base when he argues that 1919 was not the critical moment in which the twentieth century struggle of east vs. west, of Communism vs. capitalism, of the American Eagle vs. the Russian Bear, came into being. And his argument is clearly focused on the contemporaneous competition between Wilsonian and Leninist aspirations for control of the post-war ethos, if not the more practical systems that undergirded the order. Wilson saw Lenin’s ideas as a challenge to his vision for a progressive postwar transatlantic order.

---

4 The classic work on the competition between Wilsonianism and Leninism is, as the title divulges, Arno J. Mayer, Wilson vs. Lenin: Political Origins of the New Diplomacy 1917-18 (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1959). Mayer argues that
Lenin’s opinion of Wilson’s platform was equally unforgiving, as he predicted that the new position of the United States as the pre-eminent liberal-capitalist power would lead to growing conflict between the United States and its former allies, what Cohrs calls “a new transatlantic inter-capitalist antagonism” (780).

That said, Russia and the Bolsheviks have minimal agency in Cohrs’s discussion. The policy positions of Lenin and his foreign minister Gregorii Chicherin are essentially unexplored, and seen almost entirely through the eyes and responses of the leaders of the western democracies. Of course, even Lloyd George and Clemenceau are bit players in Cohrs’s tale when compared to Wilson. One need only take a quick glance at the index, where nearly one and one-half pages are devoted to the US president—compared to a half page for Lloyd George and only a quarter for Clemenceau—to recognize that this tale of transatlantic ordering is Wilson’s show. If this book, which is more interested in systems than in human actors, has a protagonist, it is Woodrow Wilson.

For those who take a different view on whether the Russia question was consequential at the Paris Peace Conference, and feel Soviet Russia’s significance and influence on the international system in the twenties was inescapable, even while it was mostly excluded from that system and only slowly recognized by the various great powers, the relative short shrift that Cohrs gives Russia may be problematic. That said, Cohrs’s insistence on the primacy of the transatlantic relationships for the design and execution of the post-war order is extremely persuasive. The strength and force of his convictions can be very convincing, and his dismissal of Russia’s import and influence can, therefore, be understood.

It would be impossible in a short review as part of a roundtable discussion to do justice to all of the textured detail and thematic richness of Cohrs’s work. This book abounds in particulars, and is based on masterly archival work in the archives of the four great powers that interest Cohrs most as well as admirably extensive reading in the secondary literature. Cohrs goes beyond the traditional diplomatic players of government ministries and leaders to incorporate other voices of civil society, such as non-governmental domestic and internationalist social movements, although they do remain secondary to the political and institutional policymakers. Readers who work their way through the various sections of the book, stretching from the Congress of Vienna to the ultimate creation of Pax Atlantica after World War Two, will be greatly rewarded for their effort.

Wilson challenged the traditional order as much as Lenin, although they came at this challenge from very different angles. For a more recent take on these competing visions, see, for example, the relevant chapters in Kyle M. Lascurettes, Orders of Exclusion: Great Powers and the Strategic Sources of Foundational Rules in International Relations (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

As well as to his father, Patrick Cohrs dedicates this book to the memory of Paul Schroeder. This is an appropriate acknowledgement of an intellectual debt (also fully acknowledged in the text and footnotes), as both the perspective and some of the key concepts of this work reflect Schroeder’s influence. Indeed, it seems that Cohrs has conceived it as a chronological successor to Schroeder’s *The Transformation of European Politics 1763–1848*, the title of which is echoed in this book’s subtitle.1 Accordingly, Cohrs’s prime concern throughout is with the evolving nature of the international system which, again like Schroeder, he sees as formed not only by the number, identity and relative capabilities of great powers “but also, and more profoundly,” by “the prevalent rules, norms, principles and practices of international politics.”(5) Schroeder contended that the establishment of a stable and largely peaceful order required a consensual, rule-based system that was benignly underpinned by the power of a hegemon or hegemons. His model was what he saw as the pattern of European politics in the decades following the 1815 Congress of Vienna, when the conception and institution of a Concert of Europe led to a consultative management of disputes and respect for the rights of small as well as large states. In Schroeder’s optimistic reading of history, this system had superseded the competitive inter-state relations, governed by the pursuit of an elusive “balance of power” that had prevailed in the eighteenth century and generated a continuous series of wars. This “transformation” was the product of a “learning process” on the part of key statesmen.2 A focus on individual policymakers, and on the rationales for their decisions, is thus seen as the methodological approach that best explains historical outcomes. The Vienna system gradually eroded and can hardly be said to have outlasted the 1840s, and the fundamental question driving Cohrs’ book is why a comparably stable and peaceful international order was not established until after the Second World War. In particular, the great majority of his detailed narrative and analysis addresses the failure of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 to establish such an order.

In the first part of this thousand-page book, Cohrs presents “a global bird’s-eye” perspective on the evolution of international politics from the 1860s to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 (41-168). Although most of the narrative is familiar enough, Cohrs’s account is distinctive in its focus on the relationship of the course of events to the requirements of a peaceful order. Thus, he highlights the continuing but declining influence of the idea of a Concert of Europe, which was manifested in the 1878 Congress of Berlin but disregarded in the July Crisis of 1914. An important reason for this trajectory, Cohrs suggests, is that “British decision-makers no longer made a consistent commitment to maintaining overall European peace.” Cohrs attributes this partly to belief in the “erroneous Cobdenite maxim” that greater international trade would bring peace, but also because of rivalry with other powers over imperial expansion in the under-developed world. (74-6). These aspects of British policy contributed to a broader development that, Cohrs argues, made some such catastrophe as 1914, if not strictly “unavoidable,” “harder to prevent”—a reversion to the mentality of power politics in which decisionmakers “came to think in terms of a global balance of forces” (138-139, 77).

In these years, the rapid growth of its economy propelled the United States into the ranks of potential world powers, and Cohrs notes the ideas of those elite Americans, such as Theodore Roosevelt, who envisaged a greater participation in world politics, but he recognises that there was little public support for this. Americans did, however, play a more active role in the unofficial peace groups that sought to eliminate, or at least moderate, international conflicts through the promotion of arbitration and some sort of world court.

---


Seeing this movement as containing the seeds of an alternative international system, Cohrs traces its history and the variety of ideas and impulses manifested by its supporters not only in Britain and the United States, but also in continental Europe. This part of the book concludes with a chapter on the outbreak of the Great War, in which Cohrs insists that the decisionmakers were not “sleepwalkers,” and also retained some agency despite the network of commitments: “what really proved fatal was that by 1914 the European concert had been completely destroyed,” and in particular that Britain “came to act as a decidedly partisan power, placing Entente considerations over general systemic concerns” (163, 143).

The second part of the book sets the scene for the 1919 peace conference by analysing what Cohrs sees as the most pertinent effects of the war. He makes the conventional observations that the unprecedentedly total and sustained mobilization of modern industrial societies not only greatly expanded state capacity, but also led to increasing demands being made upon it, and that the conflict “spawned more aggressive forms of both offensive and defensive nationalism” among the populations of the belligerent countries (197). At the systemic level, by drawing in “an ascending American power,” the war “made it imperative to establish some kind of new Atlantic architecture of order” (180). At one point, Cohrs goes so far as to state that the United States had been “catapulted” into the “position of a hegemonic power in the international system,” but at another he describes it as only “one among several pre-eminent powers” and “by no means a superpower” (172, 184).

Nevertheless, the trans-national appeal of the “messianic” war aims that President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed as justification for US intervention in 1917 led to what Cohrs calls “a more far-reaching ‘ideologisation’ and ‘moralisation’ of international politics than had ever been witnessed before” (184, 190). Wilson’s peace program, and alternative versions, grew out of the efforts of non-official groups, particularly in Britain and the United States, and Cohrs provides a full account of these and also of the wider public debate about the causes of the war and the responsibility for it. (Here, as elsewhere, his use of German-language sources and scholarship gives his treatment of developments in that country an unusual depth.) But, while recognising that unofficial groups and organisations played a more prominent role in international politics than ever before, Cohrs stresses that their influence was limited, and that “the salient processes that reshaped international order in the aftermath of the First World War took place in the sphere of inter-state and inter-governmental relations” (39, 229).

Accordingly, in Part III, Cohrs moves on to less familiar ground by examining in detail the way that the agendas which the leading powers brought to the peace conference were developed, and the reasons for them. These thoroughly researched chapters are among the strongest in the book. Thus, by paying close attention to the wording of Wilson’s various statements, he brings out more clearly than most historians the President’s wavering course on the kind of League of Nations he envisaged—whether a universal organisation or one which was limited to countries that met certain criteria. This issue bore particularly, of course, on the question of whether, or when, Germany would be admitted to membership, and Cohrs shows how Wilson gradually came to adopt the position that the new republic should first serve a “probationary” period. (214-220, 279-280, 293, 297-298, 356-357) This was of a piece with a general hardening of the President’s attitude to the vanquished foe as the conference approached, but, by also affirming his consistent commitment to the principles proclaimed in his January 1917 address, Wilson’s position remained sufficiently ambiguous for many in Germany to hope and expect that he would compel the allies to agree to “a peace without victory” (297-298). However, in what Cohrs describes as a “learning process,” Wilson in practice came to recognise that neither America’s own strength, nor “the ultimately diffuse power of ‘world opinion,’” would enable him to dictate the terms of the peace settlement and that, in order to achieve his prime goal of a

---


© 2023 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US
League of Nations, he would need to “make compromises with the elected leaders of the other key powers, notably [British prime minister David] Lloyd George and [French premier Georges] Clemenceau” (378-380).

The shape of British policy, Cohrs argues, underwent a significant shift during the war, and especially after American intervention in 1917, from “balance-of-power’ strategies’ focused on Europe to “a dominant Atlantic orientation” inspired by “the novel conception...of a shared Anglo-American hegemony”; in January 1918 Lloyd George set out the features of a “broad democratic peace” along lines similar to those that Wilson proclaimed in his Fourteen Points address a few days later. (220-224). Cohrs shows that British planning for the peace conference was largely shaped by the Prime Minister and his key aides, who sought to adapt Wilson’s principles, and particularly the form of the League of Nations, so that they would legitimate and strengthen the British Empire as well as help to secure a peaceful world order. The dominant British policymakers also expected to align with Wilson in seeking moderate peace terms, except on the issue of reparations, where Lloyd George felt committed to the extravagant expectations he had raised during the “Khaki election,” which was held shortly after the armistice (425-78). The approach of French policymakers to the peace, as is generally recognized, was fundamentally shaped by distrust of Germany and fear of its much greater intrinsic power. This led to a broad political consensus in favour of a settlement that would weaken the defeated enemy in a lasting way. But Cohrs emphasizes that Clemenceau and his strategic adviser André Tardieu attached great importance also to some sort of continuing commitment to France’s security by its wartime allies, Britain and the United States. Accordingly, on the eve of the peace conference, Clemenceau abandoned his previous public scepticism about the League of Nations and came to endorse the project, though the French continued to press strongly for the firming up of its enforcement mechanisms (495-506). Meanwhile, as Cohrs shows in an interesting chapter, the new German government indulged and fostered unrealistic hopes and expectations that Wilson and western public opinion would compel the allies to honour the terms of the pre-Armistice agreement strictly, and that the new republic would immediately be admitted to the League of Nations, of which they now became fervent supporters. Cohrs is very critical of this “Atlanticist peace strategy,” of which the former ambassador Count Johann Bernstorff and the Hamburg banker Max Warburg were prominent advocates, and argues that German leaders would have done better to have addressed French security concerns and offered financial reparations (533-570, 813-834).

Part IV consists of a detailed account of the peace conference itself. Following the order in which questions became the focus of the principal participants’ attention, successive chapters discuss: the drawing up of the League of Nations Covenant; the conflict over French demands for the Rhineland and the way this led Lloyd George and Wilson to commit themselves to treaties guaranteeing French security; the drawing of new frontiers in eastern Europe; the role played by the challenge of Bolshevism; and the reparations issue. In line with the theme of the book, the focus is always on the issue of why the settlement failed to produce a stable, consensual international order. Crucial here, Cohrs argues, was the refusal to engage in direct negotiations with the former enemy, and he chronicles the stages in which this uncompromising stance came to be adopted, suggesting plausibly that the ultimate insistence that the German representatives submit their objections to the draft treaty on paper arose from a fear that further discussion would re-open issues on which the victor powers themselves were divided, and thus threaten their hard-won unity. Also fatal to the possibility of reconciliation, Cohrs acknowledges, was the “war guilt” clause in the treaty itself. Like other recent scholars, Cohrs recounts how this was drafted, rather naively, by the young future Secretary of State

---


© 2023 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US
John Foster Dulles in order to provide some sort of legal cover for reparation claims that clearly went beyond the terms of the pre-Armistice agreement.5

Analysing the internal policymaking of the principal governments as well as the negotiations between them, Cohrs’s account of the peace conference is more thorough and analytically penetrating than other narratives.6 The sixty-five page bibliography reveals that it is based on primary sources in five countries as well as a vast number of secondary works in different languages. The amount of research and detail are partial justifications for the huge size of this book, which must run to well over 400,000 words. But the length is also a product of the way it is written. The prose is admirably clear, and indeed elegant, but is unquestionably wordy. Cohrs does not use one adjective when three may be found, or express thoughts just one way when there is also another that can be added. The enormous length of the book is definitely a weakness, if only because it will deter most people from reading it right through. (Indeed, judging by the number of misprints or omitted words, the size of the manuscript exceeded the stamina of the Cambridge University Press’s proof-readers).

The distinctiveness of Cohrs’s treatment of the peace conference resides in the way that he places it in the context of his longer narrative by continually contrasting what actually happened with what should have been done—what was “imperative,” in a much-used term—in order to create a stable world order that was generally regarded as legitimate.7 On why these better alternative paths were not taken, Cohrs’s position is somewhat ambiguous, or at least nuanced. At times, he observes that “it was inconceivable to ‘settle’ or create a stable peace in the immediate aftermath of a cataclysm such as the Great War had become”, and that, for example, “it was simply not possible” to find a frontier “that not only satisfied Polish aspirations but also gained acceptance in Germany” (576, 724). Yet Cohrs also insists that “it was not inevitable” that the conference “ended with a peace foisted on the vanquished” (810). Responsibility for this outcome, he argues, lay with Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau because, “for all the constraints they faced,” they were the “actors who had most agency and room to manoeuvre” (16, 888, also 40, 304, 348-349). There is no doubt that the “Big Three” were the ultimate authorities as the treaty of Versailles was being negotiated and drafted, but Cohrs sharpens their individual responsibility for its terms by attributing their attitudes and decisions less to the political pressures upon them, than to their own beliefs and perceptions, ascribing the evolution of these to the extent and nature of the “learning process” the three men individually experienced. Cohrs thus explains the course and outcome of the Paris Peace Conference in much the same terms as Schroeder did the Congress of Vienna, despite his implicit recognition that, as leaders of twentieth-century democracies operating in the cynosure of modern publicity, Wilson, Lloyd George, and Clemenceau were much more immediately accountable to their own publics than were Klemens von Metternich, Lord Castlereagh and Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord in 1814–1815.8

This crucial issue of how the actions of the Big Three can best be explained may be explored by examining in a little more detail the key case of Woodrow Wilson. Cohrs attentively traces how, between the Armistice in November 1918 and the signing of the treaty in June 1919, Wilson gradually abandoned his call for a “peace without victory” and adopted harsher attitudes towards the defeated foe. In particular, Cohrs highlights how the president changed his position on whether Germany would fully participate in the final stages of the peace conference, and on whether it should be an initial member of the League of Nations (293, 354-357, 360-361).

5 For a thorough analysis of how and why the clause came to be drafted, see Peter Clarke, Keynes in Action: Truth and Expediency in Public Policy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023), chapters 1-2.
7 For some (by no means all) of the uses of this adjective: 2, 19, 180, 325, 576.
8 For examples of the invocation of the concept of a “learning process”, see: 35-37, 173, 324, 349-350, 355, 577. For the implicit contrast with the character of the Congress of Vienna, see: 340-342, 577, 587-588.
406-407, 545, 693, 839-840). In these months, as Cohrs recognises, there was increasing evidence of the hard-line character of public and congressional opinion in the United States, and also that the public support for Wilson’s liberal peace program in Europe was not politically strong enough in itself to compel the British and French governments to cooperate with him in establishing the League of Nations (285-287, 374, 411). Yet, while acknowledging that “at one level, Wilson’s re-orientation can be seen as a reaction to external pressures,” Cohrs insists that the president “did not change his outlook on the peace settlement because he sought to adapt to these views and currents”; instead, it was “the outgrowth of a more fundamental change in his peace conception”: “what ultimately determined his actions was, rather, his own judgment of what constituted an appropriately severe but essentially ‘just’ peace” (356-357, 842). For, whereas in his wartime speeches Wilson had stressed that it was not the German people as a whole who were responsible for the country’s aggressive actions but their militaristic rulers, he now came to argue that it would be “profitable” for them “as a nation” to “learn once and for all what an unjust war means” (840). Moreover, whereas in 1918 Wilson had continually called for a representative, democratic government in Germany, ultimately implying that regime change was a condition of the armistice, as he came to argue for an ever longer “probationary period” before Germany was admitted to the League of Nations he increasingly cast doubt on the extent to which the new government was really different from its predecessor, and indeed “on the capacity of the German people to construct a lasting democratic order” (842, 406-412). As Cohrs points out, these expressions of scepticism about the genuineness, or even the possibility, of Germany’s commitment to democracy were made just as that country (as some of the President’s advisers recognised) was taking “remarkably swift and decisive steps towards the establishment of a new republican order” (411-412).

The issue here is not whether Wilson was insincere in expressing his views, but whether these views inspired the policy decisions he made, or should be seen as an accompaniment of them; if the latter, it would not be the first time that the views he expressed about the causes of the war and its most desirable outcome had changed as his policy altered course.9 Wilson was in no way unique in his responsiveness to changing political circumstances. Lloyd George’s attempts in the Fontainebleau Memorandum, and more particularly after the publication of the draft treaty, to secure a more moderate settlement reflected the judgement of the Prime Minister and his colleagues that the general “feeling” of British public opinion was changing; a perception that the result of a by-election in April 1919 seemed to confirm (677-681, 844-849).

If those negotiating the treaty made their decisions in response to external pressures, explanations for the outcome must focus on the causes of these pressures, rather than seeking the reasons for their actions in some relatively autonomous intellectual process. Adopting this approach takes us back to familiar ground. In his concluding appraisal of the failure of the Paris conference to produce a stable settlement, let alone the “nucleus of a system that could be expanded into a new, more viable Atlantic concert of democratic states,” Cohrs stresses that the central problem was the failure of the Versailles treaty to gain any legitimacy in Germany (881-885). Persuasively, if also conventionally, his earlier analytical narrative provides a thorough demonstration that the fundamental reasons for this were: the determination of France to weaken Germany in a lasting way; the reluctance of Britain and the United States to make any binding commitment to French, let alone European, security; the scale of reparations demanded by Britain and France; and the refusal of the United States to accept any linkage between this and repayment of the debts owed by its wartime allies. In an extensive Epilogue that reprises his earlier book,10 Cohrs shows how, following the Ruhr crisis of 1923, these problems were addressed, through negotiations in which the German foreign minister, Gustav Stresemann,

---


© 2023 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US
played a full part, by the London Reparations Accords of 1924 and the Locarno Treaty of 1925. But while these agreements notably reduced European tensions, the fragility of the triangular international payments system they created was revealed by the 1929 crash, the response to which confirmed the strength of the consensus in Washington that American policy should be governed by the nation's own interests, narrowly defined, rather than by an assumption of a “hegemonic” responsibility for the international system as a whole.

Such a wider conception of the nation’s interest came to govern US policy only after a “learning process” resulting from the events of the later 1930s and 1940s. The many elements of contingency involved in that fraught and momentous period of world history cast doubt on the essentially teleological meta-history that shapes Cohrs’s book—that the “Atlantic Order” established after 1945 was the destined end-point of international politics from the 1860s on. Yet, if the Schroeder-derived perspective does little to increase or alter our understanding of the broad trajectory of Atlantic history in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, the depth and breadth of Cohrs’s scholarship does illuminate more specific issues. One of these, interestingly, relates to a previous reinterpretation of the 1919 peace conference in the light of post-1945 events. In the 1950s and 1960s, scholars such as Arno J. Mayer and N. Gordon Levin, Jr. attributed the actions of Wilson and other Western leaders to their concern with the threat of Bolshevism. While acknowledging that the seizure of power in Hungary by the Communist revolutionary Béla Kun caused brief consternation in late March 1919, Cohrs argues persuasively that the danger of wider support for Communism, particularly in Germany, did not significantly influence the actions of British and American policymakers, but was “instrumentalised” by them (and also the Germans themselves) as they sought to moderate French demands (765-767, 784-787). Cohrs also provides a further corrective to John Maynard Keynes’s still influential caricature of Wilson as a “blind and deaf Don Quixote” by observing that the American president “had developed a rather nuanced understanding of the more fundamental geopolitical challenges that the victors had to confront in Europe,” and by describing the constructive and influential role Wilson played in establishing a Polish-German border that “went remarkably far towards constituting the best possible outcome that could be obtained under the circumstances” (670, 738-740). For such well-judged assessments and many more, it is to be hoped that this book’s inordinate length will not deprive it of the readership and historiographical influence it ought to have.

---

11 International politics in these years is, of course, the subject of an enormous scholarly literature but for a study that focuses particularly on this process, see my A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's Global Role (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2015).


“How the Modern Atlantic and Global Order Were Transformed: On My Interpretation of the Long Twentieth Century”

I am very grateful for the stimulating comments and thought-provoking critiques of The New Atlantic Order assembled in this roundtable. And I thank Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse very much for putting it all together, and Charles Maier for his admirably balanced and thoughtful introduction. In the following, I shall respond to those points and aspects I found most important or most intriguing: 1) the usefulness of my proposed conception of the “long” twentieth century (1860–2022), and the relationship between the modern Atlantic and global order (in response to Andrew Preston and John Thompson); 2) the decisive actors, processes, and systemic requirements of peacemaking after the First World War, the relevance of Bolshevism, and my challenge to the notion of a “short” twentieth century centered on the Cold War (in response to Jennifer Siegel and Thompson); and 3) the purpose and perspectives of my book’s epilogue (in response to Beatrice de Graaf).

The Transformation of the Atlantic and Global Order in the Long Twentieth Century

The New Atlantic Order indeed challenges hitherto dominant narratives of how the modern international system changed, notably Eric Hobsbawm’s influential account of a “short” twentieth century and others that focus on the pivotal relevance of the Cold War. No less, it challenges all those accounts that stress the decisive impact of the global “balance of power” and cyclical struggles between older and newer empires, which culminated in the antagonism and between the American and Soviet “super empires.”

My book seeks to advance a different, more comprehensive interpretation, and it seems useful to clarify it here. Essentially, it aims to cast fresh light on more profound, longue durée, and essentially dialectic transformation processes in the spheres of international, transnational, and domestic politics that came to recast the modern international order. And, crucially, it aims to illuminate what I consider fundamental learning and orientation processes in these spheres, both individual and collective. It concentrates on what I view as the ever more vital Euro-Atlantic sphere of international relations. But it is written with a consistent commitment to analysing the wider global context and examining how far the constitutive practices, rules, and norms of international politics, and order, were remade not only in the newly crucial transatlantic context, but also on a global scale.

It is to this end that I propose a new conceptual framework, which is designed to transcend not only conventional periodisation but also previous interpretative strictures: the framework of the “long” twentieth century. What do I mean by this? In my interpretation, the long twentieth century began in the 1860s. For it was then that a new world-historical constellation emerged after the Vienna system of 1815, which had been the superstructure of the nineteenth century’s international order, had begun to disintegrate in the wake of the Crimean War. And it most likely ended around the “turning-point year” 2022—when the post-Cold War international system, which had become the closest approximation of an (of course never entirely) rule-based world order, began to dissolve—or could perhaps be renewed. In short, my interpretative approach is intended to elucidate in one overarching framework not only how the long twentieth century’s two world

---

wars, and the Cold War, originated, but also how, and why, the Atlantic and the global order actually came to be transformed before, during, and after these wars (1-8, 16-40).

More precisely, I argue that it was from the 1860s that far-reaching structural and systemic changes converged: the industrial revolution; the expansion of modern capitalism and the globalisation it spawned; and the concomitant formation of modern states with their new mobilisation capacities. Crucially, this spurred a globalising and ever more unlimited competition between expansive imperial powers, involving not only a reconfigured European pentarchy, which now included Bismarckian Germany, and a modernised Meiji Japan, but also a rising American world power that indeed played a prominent part in the imperialist “great game.” This “struggle for the survival of the fittest world power” massively affected the entire world, subjugating most of it to imperialist domination. And it made an eventual general war not inevitable, but ever harder to avoid. I also show that important countervailing forces emerged, chiefly the Socialist International and liberal internationalists who sought to civilise power politics by strengthening international law; but they could never wield decisive influence. What proved critical was that when the July Crisis escalated, the British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey and the other pivotal—and hardly sleepwalking—political actors no longer had mechanisms like the earlier European Concert, or indeed the mind-sets, to salvage peace (41-168).2

Reassessing it in terms of its global impact, I argue that what now ensued, the Great War, was not the “original catastrophe” of the short twentieth century, but rather the crucible of the long twentieth century, both for transatlantic and world order.3 Essentially, what it engendered should be understood not as a linear but rather as a dialectical process that reached a first decisive stage at the Paris Peace Conference (as will be elaborated below), but then unfolded over more than five decades. This is what I seek to capture for the first time. It was a process not just of trial and error but indeed of successive deeper learning in response to two global wars and one massive world economic crisis in-between. And it was through this process—which of course reached beyond the transatlantic sphere—that the international system was fundamentally transformed, not just in terms of the distribution of authority and power but also with a view to the principles, rules, practices, and understandings governing international politics.

It seems necessary to emphasise, though, that I do not claim that the international system that finally superseded the “disorder” of globalising imperialism—alas, only after a second world war—ever developed into a fully-fledged “new world order” in the sense of becoming a functioning and legitimate system of order, security, equitable rights, and development prospects for the entire world. I do argue, however, that what came closest to constituting the nucleus of such a rule-based and essentially liberal order was the unprecedented Atlantic peace system that was constructed after 1945 on the pillars of the European Recovery Program and the North Atlantic Alliance. The far-reaching cooperation between the novel American hegemon and the states of Western Europe—including Western Germany—that created this system was unquestionably influenced by the escalation of the Cold War. But, as I seek to show, on a deeper level it was decisively shaped by learning and reorientation processes that can be traced back at least to the Paris Peace Conference. These gave rise to an unprecedented Atlantic community, a system of collective security, peaceful conflict resolution, democratic government, civic rights, and social-democratically restrained liberal capitalism, buttressed by countless transnational networks. What seems most remarkable about this novel system is that, although it was challenged from without and within, and although its members did not always live up to its proclaimed norms and ideals, notably in the era of the Vietnam War, it overall proved impressively durable and legitimate. And it also came to constitute the core of the nascent, though soon constrained, global system

of states that was to be built under the aegis of the United Nations and the institutions of Bretton Woods (4-8, 34-7, 999-1005).

Yet I by no means assert that this evolving Atlantic order was or became “coterminous with world order,” as Andrew Preston suggests. Rather, I seek to illuminate, on one level, how the transatlantic order was transformed in the age of two world wars, one shattering world economic crisis, and one unprecedentedly far-reaching Cold War—and how eventually what I regard as a novel Pax Atlantic system was built. On another level, I pursue a wider analysis of how and why the global international system was recast in the long twentieth century, aiming to understand what impact these transatlantic processes had on the transformation of world order (999-1005). My broader argument is not that the Atlantic system of the post-Second World War era was so perfectly constructed that it simply could be globalised as soon as the impediments of the Cold War had fallen away. Rather, I seek to illuminate a wider and more complex process. I argue that systemically the Pax Atlantic system indeed emerged as a necessary and vital core structure of a rule-based global order. Yet in a global context it is then clearly crucial to explore a more far-reaching question. It is the question of how far it was possible not merely to build on Atlantic understandings but to develop them further—in cooperation with the world’s other major and smaller states and societies—and how far it was thus possible to advance not only towards a modern global concert of states but indeed towards a global community. Seeking to answer this question, I consider it particularly vital to appraise to what extent fundamental western or Euro-Atlantic double-standards and notions of civilisational hierarchy and exclusivity persisted, or only changed in a limited way. And I consider it equally vital to analyse how far this hindered advances towards a more sustainable and mutually legitimate world order, or even made them impossible.

Thus, I mainly seek to make clear that what was achieved in the Atlantic community after 1945 could not simply be extended to Eastern Europe or globalised after 1989. Rather, it now became even more imperative than before to foster inclusive and integrative efforts, to work towards an architecture of rules and norms for a global order that could be deemed effective and legitimate not just in “the West” but indeed by actors from all regions of the inherently interdependent modern world. Naturally, this has to be assessed not just from the perspectives of Atlantic actors, but also from a multiplicity of global, non-Atlantic vantage-points. And I am happy to say that all of these “bigger picture” themes will be elaborated in the book on which I am now working. Conceived as the third and final part of a trilogy, it seeks to open up new perspectives on the making of the Pax Atlantic and the transformation of world order in the second half of the long twentieth century (1933-2022). While I greatly appreciate Andrew Preston’s insightful comments, I trust it is understandable that I would rather not prematurely give away here what exactly I shall argue there.

The Incipient Transformation of the International Order: The Wider Significance of the First World War and the Reordering Processes of 1919

At the core of what I wish to show in The New Atlantic Order is that both the extent and the eventual failure of the remarkable reordering efforts of the Paris Peace Conference—and of the long-misunderstood 1920s—can only be properly grasped if they are placed, and reinterpreted, in the wider context of the long twentieth century. What I thus seek to answer in a new and more comprehensive way are two fundamental questions: why these efforts could only become a limited and ultimately unsustainable first attempt to replace the still Eurocentric global “(dis)order” of high imperialism; and why their result was not a radically altered “new world order,” but only an as-yet fragile and truncated new Atlantic order, which nonetheless had an immense global significance (Part IV, chapters 14-21).

As my book hopefully makes clear, it is vital to understand that the Great War caused not only the collapse of the Wilhelmine, Habsburg, Czarist, and Ottoman empires but also, more fundamentally, the breakdown of the entire European and global imperialist “order” of the pre-war period. Further, it catapulted the United States into a new position of international responsibility for which it was not prepared, making it not only the
key economic and creditor nation but also the world’s decisive political power. And the war of course also ignited a wider global struggle between the claims of the remaining empires, especially Britain and France, and the aspirations of anti-imperial nationalists in the “colonised world” for self-determination (16-8, 171-88, 299-348). But the catalytic conflict also led to an unprecedentedly fierce political and ideological “war within the war,” which also chiefly became a transatlantic battle about the shape of the postwar order. This spurred a deeply polarising ideologisation of international politics—first a clash of the western ideas of 1776 and 1789 and the German ideas of 1914, then a clash between US President Woodrow Wilson’s progressive Americanist aspirations for a peace to “make the world safe for democracy,” British and French counter-visions, and the call of the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin for a revolutionary new order. As I show, the Great War thus fomented exaggerated and conflicting expectations about what peace was to be made, which eventually culminated in the massive moral-ideological conflict between the western victors and the vanquished Germany both over who was responsible for the catastrophe and over what now constituted a “just peace” (189-266, 809-77).

Against this background, I argue that the pivotal challenge in 1919 was neither to create a radical “new world order,” which was impossible, nor, as has often been claimed, to establish a new, viable global balance of power by imposing restrictive terms on the defeated powers. Nor were economic and financial peacemaking the decisive task. Rather, the only realistic path towards a more durable international order was political. The (relatively) most powerful peacemakers—Wilson, the British prime minister David Lloyd George, the French premier Georges Clemenceau and their key advisers—had to initiate, as far as possible, an inclusive negotiating and reordering process. For only such a process could accommodate the most relevant interests and expectations and thus lead towards what was most urgently required at this juncture: a fundamentally reformed, integrative peace order and peace terms that could be deemed legitimate by all the main actors, not just the victors. In systemic terms, the key lay in creating the nucleus of a novel Atlantic concert of democratic states as the key mechanism of a new Atlantic order, which in turn could become the nucleus of a new global system and the novel institution of the League. To be effective, such a concert had to comprise not only the United States, Britain, and France, but also the fledgling Weimar Republic. And while it could eventually be extended to Japan and other key powers, finding a modus vivendi with the Bolshevik regime remained a longer-term task (18-22, 322-33).

It seems worth stressing that I do not interpret the transformation and learning processes that then actually occurred or at least began at the Paris Peace Conference as either marking tremendous progress or as ideotypical in any way. In fact, I show that they often were characterised by misguided ideas, harder lessons not learned, and persistent hierarchical assumptions about civilisational advancement and self-determination. Above all, my book seeks to bring out why it was not possible to found a more inclusive global system of order and, instead of a victors’ institution, a more universal League of Nations. Not least, such limitations manifested themselves in the way in which the victors set up the League’s neo-colonial mandate system for the Middle East and beyond. But the Paris Peace Conference nonetheless reset the stage for the longer and violent struggles for self-determination and decolonisation, which would then culminate after 1945 (317-22, 573-76).

---


© 2023 The Authors | CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 US
My analysis thus accentuates that, though remarkable in many ways, the negotiations of 1919 clearly did not yield the best possible compromises under adverse circumstances. Because their approaches to peace and order remained irreconcilable in crucial respects, and because the challenges were so immense, the victors only struck very tenuous compromises on the most fundamental issues. This applied to the key question of postwar security—where only a fragile hybrid system of Anglo-American guarantees and League-based collective security could be forged. It also applied to the interdependent problems of reparations and postwar reconstruction. And it held true for the massive challenge of reorganising post-imperial Eastern Europe, where clashing national claims and victors’ priorities made it impossible to forge a stable new status quo on the basis of “self-determination.” Nor could the western powers agree on an effective approach towards the Bolshevik regime in the midst of an on-going Russian civil war (650-716, 717-764, 765-787).

Most consequential, however, was the victors’ mishandling of the crucial German question. The principal defeated power was not radically punished or diminished, yet nor was it accommodated; instead, it was initially ostracised from the new order. Crucially, the principal peacemakers clung to the premise that as leaders of the victorious and most civilised powers they had the right to impose a “stern” but “just” peace. And this prevented any serious negotiations with the vanquished and thus any advances towards a potentially more durable peace of accommodation and a more viable Atlantic concert of democratic states, which also bound the German republic to mutual guarantees and commitments. That ultimately a humiliating victors’ peace was forced on Germany and the other defeated powers meant that the nascent Atlantic order of Paris had immense legitimacy deficits. It was not accepted by the vanquished—or the Bolsheviks. Nor, of course, was the Versailles system accepted on a global scale, particularly not by all those whose aspirations for self-determination had been thwarted. This was to have far-reaching consequences throughout the long twentieth century (809-877, 878-900).

On My Approach: An Unprecedented Range of Actors, a Transformed Playing-Field of International Politics and Salient Learning and Reorientation Processes

While hoping to capture the transformative drama of politics, war, and peacemaking, my book is essentially written in an analytical, essentially systemic mode. Its architecture and its aspiration to offer not only a new interpretation but also a more comprehensive approach to international history are, admittedly, ambitious (29-40). One of the reasons for the book’s scope is that I want to show not only how radically the international system changed, but also how massively the range of both governmental and non-governmental actors expanded in the long twentieth century. What I mean here is the multiplicity and diversity of actors who brought their different concepts, visions, and interests to the fore and sought to shape the rules and outcomes of international politics. Both the First World War and the Paris Peace Conference had a decisive and overall cathartic effect here. All of this altered the playing-field of international politics dramatically.

One of my core interests here is to illuminate the impact of sometimes very limited or even pathological, but often also remarkably constructive and forward-looking, learning processes on which these actors embarked. I thus reappraise how far they learned to cope with the massive crises and wars of their time—and how far they found ways to solve ever more complex problems they confronted. Special attention is paid to the political room to manoeuvre they had and the fundamentally changing and inter-, trans-, and intra-national conditions and constraints they faced.

In a wider context, my books indeed aims to show in a new way not only that but also how and why the reigning ideas and norms, the constitutive ground-rules and institutions, and, indeed, the culture of international politics were transformed in the first half of the long twentieth century. This particularly applies

---

7 Lloyd George speech, 12 September 1918, The Times, 13 September 1918.
to approaches to security and the politics of security in an age of increasingly total war, from initially dominant balance-of-power conceptions to new conceptions of concerted and collective security. To be recognised here is the novel interdependence of international, transnational and domestic politics that came to characterise this century, which became an age not only of ever more all-encompassing systemic competition—between liberal, authoritarian and communist visions—but also of expanding democratisation. As my book emphasises, this meant that during the First World War, at the Paris Peace Conference, and in the critical 1920s, the protagonists not only had to learn to forge sustainable international rules and agreements, but also find ways to legitimise them in various, often highly polarised, democratic force-fields of domestic politics. In turn, this created immense challenges, which have become a defining feature of world politics ever since.8

Unquestionably my work has benefited immensely from many years of fruitful exchanges with the eminent and greatly missed scholar Paul W. Schroeder, whose ground-breaking work redefined our understanding of the Vienna international system and European politics in the nineteenth century.9 But as Paul would have been the first to point out, my approach is quite distinctive from his, and goes beyond it in crucial respects, notably in its emphasis on learning, Atlantic and global perspectives, and the expanding requirements for a modern international equilibrium. Not least, this of course owes to the fact that I seek to capture the most fundamental transformation processes of a world radically different from that in which the more aloof protagonists of the Congress of Vienna operated.

The Bolshevik Factor, the “Short” Twentieth Century and the Significance of the Cold War

How significant the Bolshevik revolution and the rise of global communism were for the transformation processes I am analysing remains one of the most intriguing questions. As Jennifer Siegel helpfully points out, I do not disregard this revolutionary force and they ways in which it contributed to creating such a different world in the long twentieth century. But it might be useful to explain why I have nonetheless concluded that “the Bolshevik factor” has been overrated, especially for the era of the First World War yet also, in crucial respects, for the transformative period after 1945. As I see it, this can be attributed to an entirely understandable preoccupation of influential scholars, from Arno Mayer and Eric Hobsbawm all the way to Arne Westad, for whom the global Cold War became the central conflict and question of their time, and of the twentieth century. Yet, as I see it, this led them to place too much emphasis on it and to construct a kind of teleology: from the essentialised battle of “Wilson versus Lenin” to the inevitable confrontation between US-led liberal capitalism and Soviet-led world communism, and eventually “communist-capitalist” China, after 1945.10 Most recently, Westad has offered a powerful and sophisticated new account of the global Cold War that even locates its origins in the late nineteenth century.11

In The New Atlantic Order, I too emphasise that the rise of social democratic, socialist, and communist visions of modern order can be seen as one of the defining features of the dawn of the long twentieth century. Indeed, they came to be among the most important attempts to respond to the novel challenges this century posed—in competition not just with liberal and progressive but also with monarchist and authoritarian

---

8 While I of course take into account both more established and more recent works on international politics, security and other aspects I deem most relevant, I do not think that the latest or most fashionable is necessarily also the most illuminating. As manifested in the book, I find engagement with classic works and thinkers like Christian Meier, Golo Mann, Max Weber, George F. Kennan, Raymond Aron, Hannah Arendt, and Thucydides often more beneficial for grappling with fundamental questions of war and peace, politics and order, 32-40.


11 Westad, The Cold War.
visions. But in contrast to pre-eminent Cold War scholars I argue that the struggle between Wilson’s bid for a “new world order” and Lenin’s bid for a Bolshevik world revolution was not the central conflict in the era of the Great War. While it indisputably played an important role, the key relevance of the Bolshevik challenge during the salient reordering processes of 1919 and the 1920s was indeed of a tactical political nature. In short, Wilson, Lloyd George, and their successors, as well as the representatives of the struggling Weimar Republic, invoked the “spectre of Bolshevism” to further their essential peace aims and, in the German case, to prevent the imposition of a draconian settlement—and later to ensure Germany’s inclusion in the nascent Atlantic order (see especially chapters 7 and 18).

Thus, as I show throughout the book’s relevant parts, the decisive struggle of this formative phase was never that between Wilson and Lenin. Rather, it raged first between western-progressive and German imperial-authoritarian visions and then, indeed, between Wilson’s aspirations to create a progressive Atlantic peace and competing British and French visions for a reformed Atlantic order that protected enduring imperialist interests. In the novel constellation of 1919, not only Wilson, but also Lloyd George and Clemenceau, were far more powerful actors in the core reordering processes than Lenin and the Bolshevik regime, even though the transnational ideological influence of communism was unparalleled. And in the 1920s the Soviet Union initially was so absorbed by its inner consolidation that it did not (yet) become a decisive international force when the successors of the negotiators of 1919 managed to lay the groundwork for a reformed Atlantic order that now accommodated Germany and bolstered the Weimar Republic’s inner stabilisation and western integration. This only changed when, under the impact of the World Economic Crisis, the nascent order of the 1920s disintegrated while the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin pushed forward his brutal “modernisation”—and then of course through the Second World War. But it is important to stress that what now escalated was yet again a wider systemic competition, broadly speaking between western liberal-capitalist systems and not only Stalin’s totalitarian communism, but also the Italian Duce Benito Mussolini’s Fascism, Japan’s militarist-imperial ambitions, and Hitler Germany’s barbaric bid for a National Socialist “new order.”

Finally, as outlined above, I do not dispute that the escalating antagonism between the United States and the Soviet Union, and what eventually turned into global Cold War, had a seminal impact on the transformation of the global and especially the Euro-Atlantic order after the Second World War. But, as I argue in The New Atlantic Order and hope to substantiate in my next book, this impact was indeed more catalytic than defining. In many ways, the Cold War mainly propelled learning and reorientation processes—in the direction of the European Recovery Program, NATO, and the novel Atlantic community—that were already underway in the 1940s. These were essentially driven by efforts to draw deeper and broader lessons from the catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century and the failure of previous peacemaking endeavours, notably that of 1919. But the Cold War antagonisms unquestionably changed both the Euro-Atlantic and the global playing-field. They altered the overall conditions, particularly for legitimising more far-reaching US commitments to security and economic recovery in Europe—and later for the way in which key US and European decision-makers behaved in global politics (999-1005).

The Epilogue

If pursued with judgement and care, counterfactual approaches can indeed provide eye-opening historical perspectives. But I do not consider this approach very helpful with a view to the central arguments my book seeks to advance. As I hope to have shown, these can best be substantiated, not by conjectures with the benefit of hindsight about what could have happened or could have been done, but rather by accentuating the openness of historical processes. Even more essential is a consistent effort to make clear how actors at the time—with the mindsets and experiences they had, with what they knew and did not know, with their expectations and ways of looking towards the future—formed their ideas, made their decisions, and pursued what they deemed the most viable course of action. On these premises, my book examines in considerable depth and breadth what I consider the most salient contemporary debates and the pivotal struggles between
different visions of peace and order. And it brings out both why more progressive or constructive ideas so often remained marginalised, and why certain conceptions and strategies then actually came to shape, and indeed to transform, the international order and the prevalent norms and rules of international politics.

Naturally, this is done above all in the four main parts of the book. The purpose of the epilogue is by nature different, namely to highlight the most essential arguments and developments—here, between the aftermath of the Paris Peace Conference and the Great Depression. But fortunately I have written an entire book on *The Unfinished Peace after World War I* in which all of these questions are covered in greater depth. Building on it, the epilogue of *The New Atlantic Order* seeks to show in a wider context that the contested victors’ peace of Paris by no means marked the end but rather a fraught “beginning of a beginning” of attempts to forge a viable Atlantic and global order for the long twentieth century (901-998).

Analyzing the profound initial postwar crisis, and the conflict between different responses to it, I argue that particularly after the cathartic Ruhr conflict of 1923, the post-First World War era became not a “time of illusions” but rather a remarkable period of advances and learning in the sphere of transatlantic and global politics. For it was now that not only a burgeoning community of non-governmental internationalists but also key policymakers and decisionmakers, like US Secretary of State Charles Hughes and later the European statesmen Aristide Briand, Gustav Stresemann, and Austen Chamberlain, succeeded in drawing fundamental lessons from the shortcomings of 1919 and initiating essential reforms of the Versailles system. These manifested themselves not only in the 1922 Washington Conference’s treaties on naval arms control and a more forward-looking East Asian *status quo* but also, and chiefly, in the Locarno security pact of 1925. Crucially, the Locarno settlement gave rise to a widened Euro-Atlantic concert at the heart of a reformed League of Nations, which finally also included the Weimar Republic and was later complemented by the—more symbolic—Kellogg-Briand Pact to Renounce War of 1928 (933-960, 961-998). In my assessment, the need for a fundamental reinterpretation of what was initiated and achieved in the 1920s, both in the inter- and non-governmental spheres of international politics, has gained essential ground in recent international and transnational historiography. At the end, however, my epilogue nonetheless has to summarize why the advances of this formative period, impressive though they were, could not be consolidated into an international system that was robust enough to master the shockwaves of the World Economic Crisis.

Yet let me end on a hopeful note. I have been happy to see that ever since its publication, *The New Atlantic Order* and the distinctive interpretation it proposes have sparked such stimulating and far-ranging debates, not only among seasoned scholars but also and especially with younger historians, international relations specialists, and political scientists. This does give me some hope that my book will not be consigned to history just yet. And I trust that the contributions to this roundtable, which I have appreciated very much, will further energise these debates.

---