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H-Diplo has commissioned reviews of the Makers of the Modern World Series (Haus Publishing), which concerns the Peace Conferences of 1919-23 and their aftermath. The 32 volumes are structured as biographies in standard format or as specific national/organizational histories.
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H-Diplo Review Essay on:

Alan Sharp. *Consequences of Peace: The Versailles Settlement: Aftermath and Legacy* (Makers of the Modern World series). London: Haus Publishing, 2010. Maps, photographs, notes, chronology, bibliography, index. ISBN: 9781905791743 (\$19.95, cloth).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **William R. Keylor**, Boston University

Alan Sharp, now Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Ulster, has devoted a good part of his distinguished scholarly career to explicating the peace conference that terminated the First World War.¹ Several years ago he launched an extraordinarily ambitious scholarly project on this important historical topic in partnership with the Haus Publishing Company in London. Titled “Makers of the Modern World: The Peace Conferences of 1919-1923 and Their Aftermath”, this series comprises biographies of all the major and many of the minor participants in this critical turning point in the history of Europe and the world. The dramatis personae of these volumes comprise not only the “Big Four” who dominated the decision-making process in the proceedings—Woodrow Wilson of the United States, David Lloyd George of Great Britain, Georges Clemenceau of France, and Vittorio Orlando of Italy—but also secondary figures such as Paul Hymans of Belgium, Karl Renner of Austria, and V.K. Wellington Koo of China. Sharp himself contributed the volume on Lloyd George, which was followed by contributions by a sterling roster of specialists who limned the other members of this fascinating cast of characters.²

¹ His *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking after the First World War, 1919-1923* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, second edition, 2008) holds its place as the best short treatment of the peace conference.

² Alan Sharp, *David Lloyd George: Great Britain* (London: Haus Publishing, 2009).

The volume under review represents the series editor's assessment of the long-term repercussions of the handiwork of the peacemakers of 1919-1920.³ In it Sharp steps back from the day-to-day deliberations and decisions exhaustively examined in the individual biographies to situate this instance of international statecraft within its historical context. The very title of the series betrays his conviction that the proceedings in Paris decisively shaped the future of the world for many decades to come. After offering a comprehensive overview of the issues that confronted the peacemakers, Sharp isolates several main themes that emerged during the conference and proceeds to demonstrate how they continued to resonate for the remainder of the twentieth century and even into the first decade of our own century. In order to keep this review within reasonable bounds, I will put aside his lucid discussion of such issues as the protection of ethnic and religious minorities, disarmament, the definition and prosecution of war crimes, and other products of the 1919 peace conference to concentrate on three components of the Versailles legacy that occupy a major portion of this book.

The first of these three themes that Sharp addresses is "The German Problem." From 1871 to 1945 Europe was faced with the perplexing challenge of how to prevent the militarily powerful, economically productive state in the center of Europe from dominating the entire continent. The two world wars of the twentieth century were largely fought over that issue. Sharp puts his finger on the major reason for the failure of the Versailles system to prevent the reappearance of "The German Problem" after the Great War. President Wilson's negotiation of an armistice with officials in Berlin based on his Fourteen Points before the advancing allied forces had reached German territory sowed the seeds for two misperceptions within defeated Germany that sprouted after the peace treaty was signed and would eventually lead to its demise. The first was the widely held belief that the armistice was a negotiated agreement among equals rather than the surrender of a battered army in full retreat. This myth was reinforced when the defeated German soldiers returned home in an orderly fashion after having fought the entire war on enemy territory. In short, it was widely but erroneously believed that the German army, which had earlier vanquished the Russian enemy in the east, fought the British, French, and Americans to a draw in the west. The peace treaty that was imposed on the Germans in the spring of 1919 was a victors' peace rather than a negotiated compromise between two belligerent states that had signed a truce to end more than four years of bloodshed. From the German point of view, therefore, *any* loss of national territory and *any* financial obligation to repair the damage done by the army in the field were entirely illegitimate and should be resisted at every opportunity. Sharp correctly asserts that "it is difficult to envisage any treaty concluded on the premise of German defeat that the Germans would have accepted as just and appropriate" (p.49).

³ The final date in the series refers to the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) with Turkey, which supplanted the Treaty of Sèvres (1920). But the five treaties with the defeated powers at the Paris Peace Conference were concluded in 1919-1920.

In dealing with the Second World War he skips over the lessons learned from the “stab in the back” myth that circulated in the Weimar Republic long before the rise of Hitler: Roosevelt and Churchill, who had served in their respective governments during the Great War and the peace conference, were intent on avoiding a repetition of the mistakes made in the autumn of 1918. They insisted on a policy of unconditional surrender during the war against Nazi Germany. They authorized the massive aerial bombardment of German population centers not only for military purposes but also to bring home to every surviving German citizen the reality of total defeat. There would be no negotiations for an armistice, no successor German government to replace the Third Reich in the hopes of securing more lenient treatment, and a military occupation of the entire country to prevent the emergence of a Fourth Reich.

During the Cold War “The German Problem” was temporarily resolved by the partition of the defeated country, first into four occupation zones and then into two mutually hostile states. After the end of the Cold War and German reunification, it was thought that “The Problem” had finally been solved through the embedding of Germany in a united Europe. “What we seek is a European Germany, not a German Europe” announced West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher on the eve of reunification (cited on p.41). That goal was even more cherished by the French policymakers who scrambled to revive the flagging European project and transform the loosely linked European Community into the European Union a year after the two Germanies were united. Two decades later the specter of a thoroughly European Germany’s forging a *de facto* German Europe—this time through commercial and financial rather than military means—seems a distinct possibility.

The second enduring achievement of the post-World War I peace settlement that Sharp addresses is perhaps the one for which the Paris Peace Conference is best remembered: The bold new idea of replacing the old system of competitive alliances as a means of deterring aggression by one state against another with the system of collective security embodied first in the League of Nations and then in the United Nations. Sharp passes over the gaping chasm between the high expectations of the founders of those two international organizations and their actual record as guardians of peace and security in the world. “[B]oth the League and the UN have helped to transform the norms and conduct of international relations,” he asserts, “and represent a remarkable evolution from pre-1914 diplomacy” (p. 72). One is tempted to ask the question “Did they really?” In the two decades after the peace conference the principal beneficiary of the 1919 settlement, France, sought to preserve it not by working the corridors in Geneva but rather by reverting to the familiar pre-1914 practice of forming bilateral alliances outside the League—with Belgium in 1920, Poland in 1921, Czechoslovakia in 1924, and the Soviet Union in 1935. The utter inability of the League to respond to clear-cut cases of Japanese and Italian aggression in the 1930s confirmed that the old system of exclusive regional alliances to deter or respond to aggression, rather than Wilson’s cherished “world alliance” of all member states of the League, was back in fashion (or rather had never vanished from the world scene). The Grand Alliance of the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and their junior partners during the Second World War—ironically labeled the “United Nations” by Roosevelt—continued this trend as the League slipped into insignificance. In the post-World War II period, article 51 of the United Nations Charter enabled the two superpowers

during the Cold War to forge exclusive regional alliances—NATO, the OAS, CENTO, SEATO, ANZUS, the Sino-Soviet alliance, the Warsaw Pact, etc.—while the UN was shunted into the background during the Cold War. A third world war was averted not by the institutionalization of the Wilsonian principle of collective security, as originally hoped by the founders of the successor to the League, but by an updated version of the old balance of power—renamed the balance of terror in the nuclear age—that Wilson thought he had consigned to the dust bin of history.

The third theme that Sharp addresses is perhaps the one that has had the most lasting impact on the world since the end of the First World War. That is the principle of national self-determination, which Sharp appropriately labels in the subtitle to chapter four “Wilson’s Troublesome Principle.” The German problem has been solved. Since 1945 Europe has never again had to worry about a militaristic, expansionist Germany riding roughshod over its neighbors. Collective security has disappeared from the international scene as a means of preventing aggression. But the principle of national self-determination has continued to inspire groups across the globe to seek emancipation from the domination of another group. The expansion of the United Nations from its original 51 members to the current 193 with the recent admission of the South Sudan demonstrates the enduring power of that principal to reshape the international order.

Wilson foresaw the explosive nature of his cherished principle as he observed the first repercussions of it in Paris: “When I gave utterance to those words [that all nations had a right to self-determination] I said them without the knowledge that nationalities existed, which are coming to us day after day....You do not know and cannot appreciate the anxieties that I have experienced as a result of many millions of people having their hopes raised by what I have said” (cited on page 101). The principle was of course restricted to white people only at the end of the Great War. When representatives from the non-Western world petitioned the peacemakers to apply it to their own circumstances, they got nowhere for the obvious reason that their colonial oppressors were sitting at the conference table alongside Wilson.⁴ Sharp notes that in the region where it *was* applied—Central and Eastern Europe—this hallowed principle had to be violated by the peacemakers if the newly created states of that region were to be accorded a decent chance to survive and prosper. Poland required a port on the Baltic and access to it across former German territory while Czechoslovakia needed the German-speaking Sudetenland to establish secure border defenses. The security of the latter country also required that the rump state of Austria be prohibited from joining Germany. As I have noted elsewhere, had the principle of national self determination been scrupulously applied at the peace conference of 1919, defeated Germany would have acquired more territory than Hitler was able to do by diplomatic intimidation in the second half of the 1930s.⁵

⁴Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵William R. Keylor, “Versailles and International Diplomacy,” Manfred F. Boemeke, Gerald D. Feldman, and Elisabeth Glaser, eds., *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment After 75 Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 492.

As Sharp reminds us, the redrawing of Europe's borders after the Great War reduced by half the number of people living in a state in which they were not the majority ethnic group (p.108). But Hitler was later able effectively to exploit the principle of national self-determination on behalf of the millions of Germans living under alien rule in order to dismantle the territorial settlement of 1919 by peaceful means before resorting to military force. The legacy of the principle has been a disruptive one, leading to secessionist movements across the globe that challenged the very legitimacy of states with large ethnic minorities. As Sharp notes, the peacemakers of 1919 never dared to consider the solution to the problem of ethnically heterogeneous states that was implemented after the Second World War: forced population transfer, from the expulsion of millions of Germans and German speakers from Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1945 through the bloody partition of British India in 1947 to the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in the 1990s.

In his concluding chapter Alan Sharp offers a final evaluation of the peace settlement after the Great War. Rejecting the harsh and unmitigated condemnation of Versailles that began with the diatribes by disillusioned participants in the proceedings such as John Maynard Keynes and Harold Nicolson and continued to dominate the public perception of the peace settlement for many decades to come, Sharp ends with a much more modulated and judicious judgment. "There can be no doubt that the settlements they [the Versailles delegates] constructed were flawed and had substantial faults," he concedes, but continues on to observe that "[I]t is difficult to see how this could be otherwise, given the situation at the time. Nonetheless there were positive aspects of the Treaties for which those who negotiated them should be given credit" (p. 218). He concludes with an explanation for the ignominious failure of the Versailles system, which broke down within a generation. It did not survive because the extraordinary challenges its architects faced—reconstructing a Europe torn apart by four years of combat amid revolution, starvation, and nationalist fervor—simply overwhelmed the resources at their disposal. Above all, they lacked the means of enforcing their dictates, particularly after the withdrawal of the United States and the refusal of the Weimar Republic to accept the fact that its predecessor had indeed lost the war and deserved the penalties that traditionally result from military defeat. Sharp's even-handed evaluation of the peace settlement after the Great War coincides with that advanced by Margaret Macmillan, who relied on numerous scholarly monographs published in the 1970s and 1980s that concluded that the failure of the Versailles system was due less to its harshness toward Germany than to the German refusal to accept it and the allies' inability to enforce it.⁶

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⁶ Margaret Macmillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003).

(Sixth edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) and *A World of Nations: The International Order Since 1945* (Second edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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