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Reviewed by **William R. Keylor**, Boston University

The Demonization of Versailles

Sally Marks has devoted a significant portion of her scholarly career to probing the complex details related to the peace settlement of 1919 in Europe. Her path-breaking studies of the reparation sections of the Treaty of Versailles, in particular, have shed light on an excruciatingly complex topic that had long suffered from gross misrepresentation, exaggeration, and outright falsification.¹ She has also addressed other important features of the peace treaty with Germany after World War I, such as its territorial and disarmament clauses. In this article she provides a pithy and useful summary of the principal themes highlighted in her earlier scholarly work. The occasion of this new contribution was the publication of the most recent study of the Versailles Treaty and its consequences by the late Norman Graebner and Edward Bennett (who passed away after the volume was published).² The two authors were historians of American foreign relations, so their book concentrates largely on the role of President Woodrow Wilson in shaping the post-World War I settlement. They did not rely much on British, French, or German sources to provide a genuinely international perspective on this critical turning point in the history of the world.

¹ See, among others, Sally Marks, "Reparations Reconsidered: A Reminder," *Central European History*, 2 (1969), 356-365; Sally Marks, "The Myth of Reparations," *Central European History*, 11, (1978), 231-255; Sally Marks, "Smoker and Mirrors: In Smoke Filled Rooms and the Galerie des Glaces, in Manfred Boemeke, Gerald D. Feldman, and Elisabeth Glaser, eds., *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment After 75 Years* (Washington D.C., 1998), 337-370.

² Norman A. Graebner and Edward M. Bennett, *The Versailles Treaty and Its Legacy: The Failure of the Wilsonian Vision*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. See my review of this book in the forthcoming issue of *Diplomatic History* (advanced printing, June 6, 2013).

The Graebner/Bennet book, as Marks notes, “rehearses traditional complaints largely on the basis of old--very old—studies” (633). The judgment that it renders on the handiwork of the peacemakers at Versailles, as is implied in its condemnatory title, is a harsh one: The peace treaty with Germany after the First World War sowed the seeds for the breakdown of the European international system in the 1920s and 1930s that fully sprouted with the advent of the Second World War twenty years later. While the authors are merciless in their criticism of the American president, they also hold his Allied interlocutors in Paris responsible for the failure of the Wilsonian hope that his and the other Allied leaders’ handiwork would establish a durable structure for European peace and stability. Their book rehashes many of the old criticisms of the peace settlement that initially flowed from the pens of disillusioned minor participants in the Paris proceedings, from John Maynard Keynes in 1920 to Harold Nicolson in 1933.³

These and other early jeremiads appeared *before* the breakdown of the European order that the peace treaty had been designed to prevent. After 1945, when the terrible consequences of that breakdown were apparent to all, a new generation of scholars resumed the early critiques of the 1919 settlement with a powerful new weapon furnished by the wisdom of hindsight. The challenge was to explain why the Weimar Republic, representing one of Europe’s most advanced civilizations, collapsed after a mere fourteen years and gave way to a successor regime that plunged the Continent into the abyss of barbarism. All of the horrors that afflicted Europe from 1933 to 1945 could be traced back to the decisions made by Woodrow Wilson, Georges Clemenceau, and David Lloyd George in Paris in 1919: The advent of the Hitlerian regime in Germany; the collapse of the European security system from 1933 to 1939; the outbreak of the Second World War; the death of at least twenty million Europeans (half of whom were civilians); and the Holocaust. According to this familiar litany, the vindictiveness of the victors toward the vanquished in 1919 (particularly in the reparation and territorial clauses of the peace treaty) virtually guaranteed that Germany would seek to overthrow the Versailles system as soon as it acquired the military power to do so. Had Germany been treated fairly by the peacemakers in Paris, Hitler would have remained a marginal misanthropic agitator without a following. Europe would have been spared the catastrophic events for which he is remembered.⁴

Sally Marks’s article neatly distills the arguments that she (and other historians who have carefully examined the relevant primary sources) have advanced in order to challenge the

³ John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York, 1920); Harold Nicolson, *Peacemaking, 1919* (London, 1933).

⁴The most recent work in this genre is David A. Andelman, *A Shattered Peace: Versailles, 1919 and the Price We Pay* (New York: 2008). The author apparently dusted off his 1965 senior honors thesis at Harvard and updated it with his observations as a distinguished *New York Times* correspondent. See my review of the book in *Columbia Magazine* (Summer 2008), <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Summer2008/reviews.html>.

long-reigning orthodoxy about the 1919 peace settlement. It would take too long to do justice to all of the points that she makes in this review article, so I will confine myself to the most salient ones: The first is that the patient archival work of historians in the 1970s and 1980s, after the British and French records for the period under review had been opened, has produced a scholarly consensus regarding the status of the 1919 peace settlement. That consensus rejects the orthodox interpretation in favor of a much more nuanced assessment of the peace settlement after the Great War. It demonstrates that the peace treaty with Germany was much less harsh and vindictive than critics since Keynes and Nicolson have alleged, that the Weimar Republic could have coped relatively easily with the financial obligations and territorial losses imposed upon it by the peace treaty, and that the Versailles system collapsed not because of its oppressive features but because the German public was led by its leaders to believe that it was unjust and therefore should be resisted at every turn and dismantled at the earliest opportunity.⁵ As Marks observes, “While the Four [Wilson, Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and Orlando] imposed losses and constraints upon Germany, many of them temporary, they allowed it to remain Europe’s greatest state politically, economically, and potentially militarily...” (658). The Weimar Republic—long before Hitler came to power—refused to accept the fact that Germany had lost the war because the war had been fought outside German territory and the defeated German army was permitted to march home in formation instead of scuttling home in abject defeat. The vanquished power was deluded into believing that it had signed an armistice rather than a capitulation. In short, the German people were led to believe that their military forces had fought the French, British, and American armies to a draw in the west and then signed a truce in the expectation of being treated leniently at the peace conference on the basis of the liberal principles of Wilson’s Fourteen Points. As Marks reminds us, the failure of the allies to drive home to the German people the reality of their army’s total defeat on the battlefield gave rise to the *Dolchstoss* (“stab in the back”) myth and the widespread belief—again long before Hitler took power—that since Germany had not lost the war, the severe restrictions placed upon it by the peace treaty were unfair. This in turn became the source of bitter resentment and the demand for revenge.

Marks is at pains to emphasize a number of salient points about the peace settlement that have been overlooked or deemphasized by the proponents of the “Carthaginian Peace” school of historiography.

She points out that the territorial settlement, which deprived Germany of 13% of its territory, 10% of its population, and 13.5% of its economic potential, in fact involved the transfer of much German land that “was French, Walloon, Danish, or Polish in population

⁵That consensus was first unveiled in Boemeke, Feldman, and Glaser, *op. cit.* This book brought together the proceedings of an international conference commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Treaty of Versailles in May 1994 at the University of California at Berkeley that was attended by twenty-seven historians from Germany, France, Great Britain, Switzerland, and the United States (including Marks and myself). The essence of this scholarly consensus was presented to the general public in Margaret Macmillan’s best seller, *Paris, 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York, 2002).

and culture” (652).” Those forced territorial cessions were much less that the huge swath of territory that Germany wrested from Bolshevik Russia in the March 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and planned to force France and Belgium to cede if Germany had won in the west. The prohibition of the political unification of Germany and the German-speaking rump of the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire, though clearly a violation of Wilson’s hallowed principle of national self-determination, was for Marks a perfectly understandable means of preventing a revival of a Greater Germany. The same was true for the German-speaking borderlands of the new state of Czechoslovakia that the Germans called the Sudetenland. The incorporation of these territories into postwar Germany would have had the perverse effect of rewarding the defeated power with territorial acquisitions that would strengthen it if it ever sought to reverse the outcome of the war.

The Reparation clauses of the treaty—on which, as noted, Marks has written extensively—have given rise to the most egregious and long-lasting myths associated with the peace settlement. Her main insight about reparations—which has been highlighted by Mark Trachtenberg⁶ and others—is that the Allied leaders in Paris were caught in a terrible dilemma: they recognized that post-war Germany would be incapable of bearing the enormous financial burden of rebuilding the territories ravished by its armies during the war. But they also knew that their publics had been led to expect Germany to pay for the entire cost of reconstruction and would cashier any head of government who settled for anything less than full payment. They therefore resorted to a masterly sleight-of-hand: Under Article 231 of the peace treaty, Germany would be required to acknowledge full responsibility for the damage done. Article 232 would concede that Germany could not be expected to pay beyond its capacity. Thus, the Allied publics would have the satisfaction of knowing that Germany would be required to accept responsibility for the damage caused by its military forces in northeastern France, Belgium, and elsewhere. The Weimar Republic should have been relieved to learn that it would not be required to pay a war indemnity or the actual costs of the war, as France had after 1871 at the end of a war in which no German territory had been damaged. Germany should also have been pleased to note that the reparation bill would be based not on the total amount of damage caused but rather on Germany’s economic wherewithal to pay. But Marks notes that no amount of reparation payment would have been acceptable to the leaders of the Weimar Republic because such payments were erroneously connected in the mind of the German public with the widespread myth of the “war guilt clause.” As she has reminded us in her earlier work, the word “guilt” does not appear in the notorious Article 231, and virtually identical language was included in the treaties signed with Germany’s allies. Yet the myth of the “war guilt clause” unilaterally imposed on Germany, which was propagated in the early 1920s by Weimar officials and opinion makers, has stood the test of time and continues to find its way into histories of the peace settlement.

⁶ Mark Trachtenberg, “Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference,” *Journal of Modern History*, 51 (1979), 24-55; *Reparations and World Politics: France and European Economic Diplomacy, 1916-1923* (New York, 1980).

On the question of Germany's capacity to pay, Marks is merciless in dissecting and disproving the various claims of penury. "There are those, not all German, who claim that reparations were unpayable," she observes. "After 1871, France, with a much smaller economy than Germany's fifty years later, paid nearly as much in two years (by French estimate) to liberate its territory as the Weimar Republic paid from 1919 to 1932" (644) She points out that "Germany's tax rates [in the 1920s] were abnormally low and remained so....Raising taxes would have provided ample funds, as the Dawes Committee discovered. Weimar could have borrowed from the citizenry, as France did after 1871." Moreover the postwar German economy "was intact, having been spared devastation and denudation [which the major reparation recipients France and Belgium had experienced.] There were lavish social subsidies, unmatched by the victors. A fiscal and monetary housecleaning would have facilitated foreign loans" which were forthcoming with the Dawes Plan in 1924 (645). With American bank loans pouring into Germany during the second half of the 1920s while the reparation bill was periodically revised downward, the German economy took off and the German government easily made its reduced reparation payments until the advent of the Great Depression and the drying up of American loans. In the end, as Stephen A. Schuker has shown, the Weimar Republic actually paid no net reparations at all, discharging its reparation bill with the proceeds from American bank loans and then defaulting on both reparations and foreign debts in the Great Depression.⁷ So much for the claim that the 'burdensome' reparations requirement of the peace treaty led to the collapse of the German economy and the advent of Hitler.

In the end Marks recapitulates what she regards as the two fatal flaws in the way the victors in the Great War brought that conflict to an end and then attempted to lay the groundwork for a lasting peace. The first was the failure of the Allies to bring home to the Germans the reality of the total military defeat they had recently suffered, which enabled the Weimar leaders to perpetuate the myth that their country had not lost the war and therefore deserved to be treated as an equal by the other powers in Paris.⁸ Such a misconception by the defeated power "depends on its perception of its circumstances, and that perception partly depends on what the victors do. In 1814-15, the Russian tsar and army wintered in Paris....In 1870-71 German troops paraded through the Arc de Triomphe and the German Empire was proclaimed in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Each time, defeat was self-evident and accepted" (653). In 1918-19 "the defeated power was not humiliated; instead, it was able to delude itself about the war's outcome." And she clinches her argument on a caustic note: "An Allied march down the Unter den Linden would have

⁷Stephen A. Schuker, *American "Reparations" to Germany, 1919-1933* (Princeton, N.J., 1988).

⁸ Marks dismisses one of the recent contributions to the historiographical literature of the "Carthaginian school," Patrick O. Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace after World War I: America, Britain, and the Stabilization of Europe, 1919-1932* (Cambridge, 2006), whose references to "Versailles, the impossible peace" and "the ill-founded peace of 1919" are rooted in the "basic complaint" that "the loser was not treated as a victor" (633).

humiliated Germany briefly, but in retrospect that might have been a small price to pay” (653).⁹

The second flaw in the peace settlement was the failure to develop adequate enforcement machinery to give teeth to the stringent obligations that would be forced on defeated Germany. “[N]either Wilson nor Lloyd George wished to engage in enforcement, and they prevailed,” she remarks. “Evidently they did not see that imposing a victor’s peace without the will to enforce it presaged problems (641).” After the (temporary) withdrawal of the United States and Soviet Russia from the European scene and Great Britain’s reversion to its prewar policy of focusing on imperial, naval, and commercial concerns outside Europe while promoting a Franco-German balance on the Continent, the French were left with the responsibility unilaterally to enforce the peace settlement. This they were in no position to achieve, particularly after the occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 brought down upon them the wrath of everybody. By the advent of the Nazi regime in 1933, most of the key provisions of the Versailles Treaty—notably the disarmament and reparations sections—had been systematically violated. The territorial provisions would fall in the course of the next six years.

Time will tell whether what I have called “the demonization of Versailles” will finally succumb to the archive-based discoveries of scholars and the lucid summary of those findings in Margaret Macmillan’s work.¹⁰ But as Marks’s review and her earlier work suggests, the shopworn image of the 1919 peace settlement as having sowed the seeds for the next European war is like a cat with nine lives that—to mix a metaphor-- refuses to give up the ghost.¹¹

William R. Keylor is Professor of History and International Relations and Director of the International History Institute at Boston University. He has written widely on the history of international relations in the twentieth century, the history of modern France, and the history of Franco-American relations.

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⁹ On the obliviousness of the Allies to Germany’s military collapse and social and political chaos, see David French, “Had We Known How Bad Things Were in Germany, We Might Have Got Stiffer Terms’: Great Britain and the German Armistice,” in Boemeke, Feldman, and Glaser, *op. cit.*, 69-86.

¹⁰ William R. Keylor, “Versailles and International Diplomacy,” in Boemeke, Feldman, and Glaser, *op. cit.*, 489.

¹¹Royal J. Schmidt, *Versailles and the Ruhr: Seedbed of World War II* (Leiden, 1968).