Boundary Changes in Europe After the First World War

VERDICT ON VERSAILLES

It is tempting for the historian of today, fortified with the wisdom of hindsight, to render a negative judgment on the Paris Peace Conference and the five treaties with the defeated powers that were signed in various Parisian suburbs in 1919–20.* The last great diplomatic gathering of comparable importance, the Congress of Vienna, had established a framework for international order that had prevented the outbreak of a Europe-wide war for a century. The Peace of Paris collapsed within a generation, ushering in a terrible cycle of totalitarianism, genocide, and war on a scale previously unimagined. Nonetheless, it must in fairness be recorded that the Treaty of Versailles proved to be a failure less because of the inherent defects it contained than because it was never put into effect. It is impossible to imagine a Germany that had been compelled to fulfill its treaty obligations in their entirety endangering the peace of Europe. Effectively reduced to a token force and excluded in perpetuity from the Rhineland, the German army would have posed no military threat to France or the newly independent successor states to the east. Payment in full and on schedule of the relatively modest reparation sum fixed in May 1921 would doubtless have defused France's anxiety about its precarious economic condition and probably would have considerably reduced Franco-German tension. Archival evidence of a genuine French desire to cooperate economically with Germany, particularly in the critical metallurgical sector (where French iron ore complemented German coking coal), suggests an opportunity for Franco-German reconciliation that was tragically lost.

It is difficult to conclude from a brief review of the territorial losses suffered by Germany after the Great War that the Versailles Treaty was unduly harsh on that score (see map on p. 92). The cession of Alsace-Lorraine to France merely restored the status quo ante of 1870 and was never seriously disputed by anyone of consequence in German official circles. The loss of the Baltic port of Danzig and the "corridor" connecting it to Poland was more objectionable because it separated the German province of East Prussia from the main body of the nation and therefore caused considerable inconvenience in regard to overland transportation to the severed province. But such inconvenience was nothing in comparison to the economic disadvantages that would have been suffered by a landlocked Poland. Furthermore, the formation of the corridor was scarcely a blatant violation of German nationality claims since a majority of its inhabitants were Polish. Nor did it entail the loss of valuable natural resources that could not easily be compensated elsewhere. The same may be said for the cession to Poland of Upper Silesia, a coal-mining region of mixed Polish-German nationality. Coal output in the Ruhr and Saar covered Germany's domestic needs as well as its reparation obligations to France. Without the coal mines of Silesia, Poland would have been compelled to import enormous quantities of this expensive but essential fuel at a time when that fragile new state was struggling to put its financial house in order. Together with minor border rectifications to the profit of Denmark and Belgium, this constituted the totality of German territorial amputations after the war. Germany lost less territory at the peace conference than did any of its allies save Bulgaria. If any of the defeated nations deserved to complain of immoderate territorial losses, these were the shrunken

* The Treaty of Versailles with Germany, the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye with Austria, the Treaty of Trianon with Hungary, the Treaty of Neuilly with Bulgaria, and the Treaty of Sèvres with Turkey.

Versailles

states of Austria, Hungary, and Turkey. But their complaints were of no consequence because they had ceased to be great powers and had lost all chance of regaining their former stature. Germany's treatment at Paris in 1919 was considerably less severe than the project for postwar European reorganization that had been endorsed by all significant political forces in Germany during the war and had been partially implemented in Eastern Europe after the collapse of Russia through the provisions of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Despite its decisive military defeat, Germany emerged from World War I as potentially the most powerful nation on the continent. Its industrial heartland, in contrast to that of victorious France, survived undamaged and intact because the war had been fought beyond its frontiers. Its territorial losses did not decisively curtail its capacity for recovery as did those of its hapless allies.

Similarly, the final reparations obligation imposed on Germany hardly constituted the barbaric exploitation that German publicists made it out to be. The London Schedule adopted in May 1921 reduced Germany's total reparation bill so drastically that it could have managed the payments with but a moderate reduction of domestic consumption. That the German government, and the German people, refused to accept the reparations schedule and the economic sacrifices it entailed had little to do with the country's "capacity to pay." Rather, it reflected the German belief that *any* reparations, like *any* diminution of national territory, was by definition unjust. They were judged to be unjust because of the prevalent tendency to deny that Germany had lost the recent war. Its armies in the east had defeated the Russian colossus and thrust it back out of Europe, according to plan. Its armies in the west had marched home in orderly formation after their leaders had negotiated what had been fraudulently advertised as an armistice based on the principle of "no annexations, no indemnities." There had been no destruction or military occupation of German land during the four years of the war. Under such conditions, it comes as no surprise that the German people proved responsive to the allegation, repeated ad nauseam by a succession of national leaders after the war, that their fatherland had been deceived and betrayed by the victorious Allies. When all was said and done, the critical shortcoming of the Versailles Treaty was not that it was unjust and unworkable but that the Germans thought it was and were able to win widespread support for that view at home and abroad, particularly in Great Britain and the United States.

Once Anglo-American confidence in and support for the peace settlement of 1919 evaporated, the burden thrust on France and the other continental beneficiaries of the treaty gradually became unbearable. In time the new political order in Europe took on the appearance of an unstable system. By preserving intact the political and economic structure of the German Reich while surrounding it with a collection of politically immature, militarily vulnerable, economically unstable states, the peacemakers had mandated a potentially explosive imbalance of power on the continent. The presence of substantial German-speaking minorities in the eastern successor states and the German majority in the new Austrian Republic constituted a perpetual temptation to the advocates of German irredentism. Their plaintive pleas for the liberation of their oppressed compatriots and the recovery of this "lost" territory challenged the legitimacy of the political settlement of postwar Europe long before Hitler embarked on his campaign to revise it. With Russia temporarily absent from Europe, the only effective deterrent to German revisionism would have been the preservation of the wartime

coalition of the United States, Great Britain, and France, fortified by the presence of the inter-Allied military force in the Rhineland. As we shall see, the disintegration of the victorious diplomatic coalition at the beginning of the postwar decade and the premature disappearance of the military deterrent force in the Rhineland at the end of it removed the sole practical means of enforcing the treaty that was supposed to keep the peace in Europe for all time.