

THE GREAT ILLUSION: WHY THE PARIS PEACE TREATIES OF 1919 WERE DOOMED TO FAILURE

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Abstract. *The study aims to explain why the Peace Settlement of 1919 was doomed before it was even created and why it was further undermined, on one hand, by its own failure to include in the League of Nations, as keystone of post World War order, the "troublemakers" Germany and Russia, on the other hand, by Wilson's failure to bring the US in the League's fold. As the 1919 Peace of Paris created four groups (winners of the war and benefactors; losers and revisionists; opportunists; isolationists), it could not lead to true international harmony or balance of power.*

*Based on impressive vintage and current sources, quoting especially Raymond J. Sontag's considerations exposed in his *European Diplomatic History 1871–1932*, the study shares a rather pessimistic view, debating concepts belonging to ethics and philosophy of history, highlighting unresolvable paradoxes, antitheses and dilemmas. But even in cases when history does not serve as a real *magistra vitae*, historians are nevertheless compelled to view it realistically, never giving up hope in ideals and aspirations for morality.*

Keywords: Paris Peace Treaties of 1919, failure, Romania, League of Nations, Woodrow Wilson, Constantin Kirițescu, Raymond J. Sontag

INTRODUCTION¹

The American historian Oron J. Hale once described the period preceding World War I, 1900–1914, as the era of „The Great Illusion”².

This description applies equally well to the post World War I epoch which was based on the Wilsonian illusion that the Great War had been a war to end all wars. In fact, within two decades Europe and then the whole world was plunged once more into conflict, one that, incredibly, dwarfed the excesses of World War I, and then continued into four more decades of „cold war” teetering on the brink of nuclear disaster.

Elsewhere, I have described the opportunities and problems of the post-World War I era as the pursuit of „the New Normal”³. My purpose here is to

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² Oron J. Hale, *The Great Illusion, 1900–1914* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971).

³ See Paul E. Michelson, „Greater Romania and the Post-World War New Normal”, in Victor Voicu, ed., *Lucrările conferinței internaționale România și evenimentele istorice din perioadă 1914–1920. Desăvârșirea Marii Uniri și întregirea României*, București, Edit. Academiei Române, 2018, p. 83–124.

explain why the Peace Settlement of 1919 never had a chance, being doomed before it was even created and then further undermined by its failure to include at the outset the „troublemakers”, Germany and Russia, in the League of Nations which was the keystone of the post World War order, and Wilson’s failure to bring the United States into the League fold.

To avoid some of the usual anachronisms that such a discussion often entails, the paper tries to „look forward” from 1919, from the perspective of the 1920s and early 1930s, prior to the outbreak of the World Crisis and the subsequent accession to power of Hitler in 1933 that changed everything and indeed made failure look to be a foregone conclusion. From our present vantage point in 2018, how could it be otherwise when we know the end of the story? Or when we know the political, economic, cultural, social, philosophical, and psychological collapse and chaos that ensued after 1930, and that in the 1930s democracy would disintegrate almost everywhere in Europe, idealism would come to be ridiculed, and tyrannies would be established over the majority of the face of the earth, followed by World War II, the Holocaust, and the Cold War.

In the final analysis, however, it will be seen that fatal flaws lay at the heart of the matter from the start... and even before. Whether recognizing such in the 1920s would have led to another outcome will remain an unanswerable historical „what if?”.

TOWARD A NEW NORMAL

In 1924, Constantin Kirițescu concluded his history of Romania in the Great War with a look at what lay ahead, conveniently providing us with an outline of the difficulties that faced Romania in reaching a new normal⁴. Though the seemingly-impossible dream of national unification of most of the ethnic Romanians in Southeastern Europe into a single state had been achieved, Romania had emerged from the war considerably bloodied.

The economic and human costs of World War I and their resultant difficulties were obvious from the outset⁵. The historian Eugen Weber sketches the tale of the general carnage:

⁴ Constantin Kirițescu, *Istoria Războiului pentru întregirea României 1916–1919* (București: Tipografia România Nouă, 1924), vol. II, p. 643–653. Kirițescu (1876–1965) was not a professional historian, but was the long-time Secretary General of the Romanian Ministry of Public Instruction, and represented Romania in the League of Nations, Education Section.

⁵ For the era of World War I, see Glenn E. Torrey: *Romania in the First World War 1914–1919: An Annotated Bibliography* (Emporia KS: Emporia State Research Studies, 1981); *Romania and World War I. A Collection of Studies* (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies, 1998); and *The Romanian Battlefield in World War I* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011). For the diplomacy leading up to the war, see Gheorghe Cliveti, *România și „Alianțele Germane” 1879–1914* (Iași: Edit. Junimea, 2015) and *România modernă și „Apogeul Europei” 1815–1914* (București: Edit. Academiei Române, 2018). From the avalanche of recent work on the War, see Lucian Boia’s provocative *Primul Război Mondial. Controverse, paradoxuri, reinterpretări* (București: Edit. Humanitas, 2014); Ioan Bolovan, Gheorghe Cojocaru, and Oana Mihaela Tămaș, eds., *Primul Război*

„When the Great War was ended, all agreed that there had been – there could be – no other like it. The world could never again bear such a toll ... Of the 74 million men who had been mobilized during the war, about 10 million died in battle; almost as many were taken prisoner, of whom some 10 per cent died in captivity; millions more – perhaps three times the number of the dead – were wounded, many of them crippled for life. Finally, in 1918–1919, a vast influenza swept through a cold, hungry, weakened world, killing about twice as many people as the war had done”⁶.

The material toll was nearly incalculable in terms of the billions spent on war materiel, further billions lost in the destruction the war had wrought. As the historian Felix Gilbert wrote: “An entire generation rotted on the battle fields. Modern warfare does not lead to a survival of the strongest or the best. Many who might have been leaders in the coming decades never returned from the war”⁷.

For Romania, the costs and casualties of the war need only be noted briefly. According to Kirițescu, Romania had nearly 220,000 military deaths, 36,000 registered war invalids, 56,000 war widows, 48,500 war orphans, and perhaps 300,000 civilian deaths. Later estimates put Romanian casualties as high as 800,000 deaths and missing persons⁸.

Economically, there were the costs involved in financial obligations undertaken by the Romanian state to prepare for the war, for the conduct of the war, (devastation, loss of the Romanian treasure, export losses, military costs, etc.), the costs caused by the war (economic instability, inflation, demographic deficits, expenses of the German occupation), and the costs that resulted from the peace settlements, support for war widows and orphans, pensions assumed from lands previously not part of the Romanian Kingdom, and so forth⁹.

Mondial. Perspectivă istorică și istoriografică / World War I. A Historical and Historiographical Perspective (Cluj-Napoca: Academia Română, Centrul de Studii Transilvane / Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2015); Claudiu-Lucian Topor and Alexander Rubel, eds. „*The Unknown War*” from Eastern Europe. *Romania between Allies and Enemies (1916–1918)* (Iași / Konstanz: Edit. Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza / Hartung-Gorre Verlag, 2016); the compilation of facsimile documents and illustrations edited by Bogdan Bucur, *Cartea de aur a Centenarului Marii Uniri*, with an introduction by Bogdan Murgescu (București: RAO, 2017); Vasile Pușcaș, *Marea Unire 1918. România Mare. Acte și documente* (Cluj-Napoca: Edit. Studia, 2018); and Paul E. Michelson, *Romania and World War I, 1914–1918: An Introductory Survey*, „*Revue Roumaine d’Histoire*, vol. 55 (2016), Nr. 1–4, p. 61 ff., which includes an extensive but selective bibliography.

⁶ Eugen Weber, *A Modern History of Europe. Men, Cultures, and Societies from Renaissance to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 858.

⁷ Felix Gilbert, *The End of the European Era, 1890 to the Present*, second edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), p. 164.

⁸ Silviu Hariton, *Asumarea politicilor sociale de către stat în România. Cazul invalizilor, orfanilor și văduvelor de război (IOVR) după Primul Război Mondial*, „*Arhiva Moldaviae, Supliment I*” (2014), *Studii de istorie socială. Noi perspective*, edited by Constantin Iordachi and Alin Ciupală, pp. 119–120. See also Ioan Bolovan and Sorina Bolovan, *The Impact of World War One in Transylvania*, „*Romanian Journal of Population Studies, Supplement*”, 2009, pp. 611–628. Stephen Pope and Elizabeth-Anne Wheal, *The Dictionary of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), p. 104, put Romanian civilian casualties at 500,000.

⁹ Hariton, *Asumarea politicilor sociale*, 2014, pp. 118–119. For contemporary analyses of the effects of the war, see Gr. Antipa, *L’Occupation ennemie de la Roumanie et ses conséquences*

According to Kirişescu, this meant that a period of „convalescence” would be needed, a time of recuperation from a nightmarish war fought on three fronts in which military fatalities constituted 3% of the population, second only to the losses of France. And, though war in the West had ended with the November 1918 armistice, Romanian troops continued to fight until well into 1919, occupying Budapest until November and other parts of Hungary until January 1920, because of the Bela Kun-led communist revolution in Hungary. The human, material, and psychological consequences of the war would persist for some time in the Romanian lands.

The difficulty was that Romania didn't really have the time or opportunity for convalescence. The old cliché, „Time waits for no one”, is right on the money. Their tasks could be compared to trying to change the tires on your car, while continuing to drive down the highway. The world has a depressing and disconcerting habit of moving on, usually from one crisis to another; indeed, sometimes it appears that the new normal is a continual abnormal: the revolutionary changes set in motion by the Great War would not allow for any pauses to catch one's breath¹⁰.

Kirişescu identified the post-war international order as one of the principal areas of concern in 1924. While there were many signs that some countries (such as Austria and Bulgaria) were accommodating themselves to the new circumstances, it was clear that both Hungary – whose post-war motto „Nem, Nem, Soha!” („No, No, Never!”) pretty much summarized their attitude to the new Europe – and Bolshevik Russia, which had merely changed its despotic and imperialist label – remained recalcitrant and intractable¹¹. Romania would have to seek its own solutions to defend hard won gains.

Fortunately, we have at our disposal a first class contemporary study of diplomacy published in 1932 before our views of this era could be forever colored by Hitler's takeover in Germany. This was Raymond J. Sontag's *European Diplomatic History 1871–1932*¹².

économiques et sociales (Paris / New Haven CT: Presses Universitaires de France / Yale University Press, 1929), p.164–170; and Gh. Ionescu-Şişeşti, *L'Agriculture de la Roumanie pendant la Guerre* (Paris / New Haven CT: Presses Universitaires de France/Yale University Press, 1929), pp. 102–121. Antipa estimated that Romania lost 12% of its population to the War, possibly a little high, but concludes „Malgré tout, le peuple roumain a été entièrement récompensé de toutes ses peines par la fait d'avoir atteint son idéal national.” (p. 168).

¹⁰ On the consequences and significance of the war, see René Albrecht-Carrié, *The Meaning of the First World War* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

¹¹ Interestingly, Kirişescu does not mention Germany as an external issue.

¹² New York: The Century Company, 1932. Sontag (1897–1972) was a distinguished American historian and at the time a professor of history at Princeton University. Later he was the mentor of my professor Barbara Jelavich at the University of California, Berkeley. For a classic, somewhat idiosyncratic treatment of the era originally published in 1937, see E. H. Carr, *International Relations Between the Two World Wars, 1919–1939* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1947); and Henry L. Roberts, *International Relations Between the Wars*, in Henry L. Roberts, *Eastern Europe: Politics, Revolution, and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 57–74. Forty years later, Sontag revisited this era in a volume he wrote for the William Langer-edited *The Rise of Modern Europe* series, entitled *A Broken World, 1919–1939* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). It would be more than just an interesting exercise to compare this „looking back” book with the „looking forward” version utilized in this study.

In this work, Sontag argued that „statesmen during the two generations we survey were trying to solve a riddle: how can desirable changes in the international *status quo* be effected, undesirable changes prevented, without recourse to war?... The riddle is to-day, as in 1871, unanswered”¹³.

The League of Nations¹⁴ was an attempt to solve this riddle and Romania heavily invested in the League, in the Little Entente composed of Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia (1920–1938), and in the Balkan Entente composed of Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey (1934–1938) in trying to make the League viable¹⁵. Unfortunately, the thesis of this paper is that the establishment of a „new normal” in international relations was doomed from the outset¹⁶.

The 1919 Peace of Paris did not lead to true international harmony or a renewed balance of power, but rather created four groups: those who „won” the war (call them the benefactors of the Peace Settlements; those who „lost” the war (call them the revisionists); those who sought to achieve greater advantage under the post-1919 state of affairs (call them the opportunists); and those who sought to withdraw from the continuing struggle for mastery (call them the isolationists)¹⁷.

¹³ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. VII.

¹⁴ On the League of Nations, see George Scott, George, *The Rise and Fall of the League of Nations* (London: Hutchinson, 1973); and F. S. Northedge, *The League of Nations: Its Life and Times, 1920–1946* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986).

¹⁵ See the papers in Oldrih Tuma and Jiri Jindra, eds. *Czechoslovakia and Romania in the Versailles System* (Prague: Institute for Contemporary History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 2006). The contribution of Nicolae Titulescu, permanent representative of Romania from 1921 to 1936 to the League of Nations, and twice, 1930 and 1931, President of the League Assembly, and Romanian foreign minister numerous times between 1927 and 1936, deserves emphasis here. From a voluminous literature, see Ion M. Oprea, Nicolae Titulescu (București: Edit. Științifică, 1966); I.M. Oprea, *Nicolae Titulescu's Diplomatic Activity* (București: Edit. Academiei Române, 1968); and W. M. Bacon, Jr., *Nicolae Titulescu și Politica externă a României, 1933–1934* (Iași: Institutul European, 1999).

¹⁶ This is also the conclusion of Edmond Taylor, *The Fall of the Dynasties. The Collapse of the Old Order, 1905–1922* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1963), p. 371 ff.

¹⁷ On Romania at the Paris Peace Conference, see Sherman David Spector, *Romania at the Paris Peace Conference: A Study of the Diplomacy of Ioan I. C. Brătianu* (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies / Romanian Cultural Foundation, Iași, 1995), originally published in 1962. See also C. Bittern, Ion Călăfeteanu, Eliza Campus, and Viorica Moisuc, *România și Conferința de Pace de la Paris (1918–1920): Triumful pincipiului naționalităților* (Cluj-Napoca: Edit. Dacia, 1983); and Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu and Doru Tompea, *România la cele două Conferințe de Pace de la Paris (1919–1920, 1946–1947). Un studiu comparative* (Focșani: Edit. Neuron, 1996). For the League era, see Mihai Iacobescu, *România și Socieatea Națiunilor 1918–1929* (București: Edit. Academiei Române, 1988); Emilian Bold, *Diplomația de Conferințe. Din istoria relațiilor internaționale între anii 1919–1933 și poziția României* (Iași: Edit. Junimea, 1991). On the Paris Peace Conference generally, see *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States. Vol. 13: The Paris Peace Conference 1919* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1947); H.W.V. Temperley, ed., *History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, six volumes (London: Frowde / Hodder & Stoughton, 1920–1924); René Albrecht-Carrié, *A Diplomatic History of Europe Since the Congress of Vienna* (New York; Harper and Row, 1958), p. 361–384; Arno J. Mayer, *Wilson vs. Lenin. Political Origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917–1918* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1964); Arno J. Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking. Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918–1919* (New York: Alfred J.

Eugen Weber has written:

„The treaty has been criticized for its harshness, for its weakness, for its unrealism, for its lack of idealism. Yet it... might have worked had statesmanship made it work. The real point about it, as about any treaty, is that it was a compromise, whose virtues or weaknesses would come out in its application. And it was the latter that triumphed. «Peace», quipped Clemenceau, „is only war pursued by other means”¹⁸.

With the Great War, the certainties of the 19th century vanished. The „map began to change convulsively... as if drawn on water”. Sontag wrote. This raised fundamental questions, including:

„How might the map be once more securely drawn? How might the world resume the comparatively orderly existence so violently interrupted in 1914? How might the world have assurance that there might never be another such catastrophic struggle?... A host of plans, some fantastic, some claiming the verification of experience, were offered to cure the world’s woes”¹⁹.

My first point is that since the Germans did not surrender unconditionally – as Bulgaria (September 30), Turkey (October 30), and Austria-Hungary (November 3) had, the Armistice of November 11, 1918 had as its basis „a peace based on ‘Wilsonian’ principles”²⁰. Sontag summarizes these: „Democracy, nationalism, and a world commonwealth were the three cardinal points in Wilson’s program ... The World must be made safe for democracy ... Following on democracy there must be self-determination. Every people must be allowed to freely choose its own political allegiance. Nationalism must be carried to its logical conclusion”²¹.

These turned out to be desiderata that were impossible to achieve as each nation advanced arguments based on conflicting historical, ethnic, strategic, economic, and cultural claims. And, what was worse, the Allies often deviated from the principle of „self-determination”. When such „arguments... worked against the claims

Knopf, 1967); George Goldberg, *The Peace to End Peace. The Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969); Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking in Paris, 1919* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991); Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 218 ff; Manfred Boemke, Gerald D. Feldman, and Elisabeth Gläser, eds., *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment After 75 Years*. Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1998; Margaret Macmillan, *Paris 1919. Six Months That Changed the World*, with a foreword by Richard Holbrooke (New York: Random House, 2002); and Norman A. Graebner and Edward M. Bennett, *The Versailles Treaty and Its Legacy: The Failure of the Wilsonian Vision* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Weber, *Modern History of Europe*, 1971, p. 862. For a telling account of 1919, see Harold Nicolson’s *Peacemaking 1919* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965), which contrasts „As it seems today”, p. 3–211, with „As it seemed then,” p. 215–371, based on the author’s diary while at Paris from January 1919 to June 28, 1919. The diary concludes: „... success, when emphasized, was very beastly indeed. Celebrations in the hotel afterwards. We are given free champagne at the expense of the taxpayer. It is very bad champagne. Go out on to the boulevards afterwards. To be sick of life”. (p. 371)

¹⁹ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 255–256.

²⁰ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 256, 261–262.

²¹ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 256–257.

of the enemy”, Wilson supported them, but when same arguments favored Germany, Austria, or Hungary, they were disregarded²². The same was true for Italy’s Orlando, who advanced „remarkable, almost naïvely, inconsistent” arguments for Italy’s program: with strategic considerations being urged over self-determination, then self-determination being urged over strategic arguments. „Strategy, self-determination, history, economics – each in turn used to slay one of the others, always to the advantage of Italy”²³. Multiply this by the number of participating countries and one gets an idea of why such arguments were endless and irreconcilable.

The idea that the League would resolve conflicts by satisfying the „legitimate aspirations of all nations” fell by the wayside even before the peace settlements were developed, as Allied governments worked behind the scenes in violation of Wilson’s celebrated 14 Points²⁴. „It speedily became apparent that good-will could not be hoped for”²⁵.

And, as Keynes later noted: „Wilsonian dogma” led to „the paradox that the first experiment in international government should exert its influence in the direction of intensifying nationalism”²⁶. Wilson thought that nationalism and democracy were inextricably intertwined: this was „a tragic mistake”²⁷.

My second point is that Wilson also mistakenly thought that the recalcitrance of Allied leaders was not shared by their peoples. However:

After the armistice... it was soon obvious to most thinking men that the leaders were more, rather than less, moderate than the people they represented. While the conflict raged, and the issue hung uncertain, Wilson’s ringing declarations heartened men; the fighting over and victory won, Wilson’s words lost their appeal. The lofty edifices of ideas and self-sacrifice he had erected was swept away in flood of hate, cynicism, and nationalism ... men forgot their dreams of good-will and became obsessed with blind vindictiveness ... The demand for vengeance was universal ... hang the Kaiser and make the Germans pay”²⁸.

²² Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 280–281.

²³ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 282.

²⁴ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 257–259.

²⁵ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 262.

²⁶ John Maynard Keynes, *A Revision of the Treaty, being a sequel to The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 11. This was a followup to Keynes’ *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1920), a book published in at least eleven foreign translations, including Romanian: *Urmările economice ale Păcii* (București: Editura Viața Românească, 1920). (The book was reviewed by C. Krupenski in *Arhiva Pentru Știință și Reform Socială*, Vol. 2 (1920), p. 383–385.) On Keynes’ work, see W. Carr, *John Maynard Keynes and the Treaty of Versailles*, in A.P. Thirwall, ed., *Keynes as a Policy Adviser* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), p. 77–108. For a rebuttal to Keynes, see Étienne Mantoux, *The Carthaginian Peace, or The Economic Consequences of Mr. Keynes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946). Though Keynes’s arguments are not always sound, and were, as R.C.K. Ensor writes in an introduction to Mantoux’s book, often „over-clever”, „the fact is that Keynes’ views were widely shared.

²⁷ John A. Lukacs, *The Great Powers and Eastern Europe* (New York: American Book Company, 1953), p. 13.

²⁸ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 262.

Though it is true, as Eugen Weber points out²⁹, that the Germans had set the tone with the punitive peace terms they had imposed on the Russians at Brest-Litovsk (February 18/March 3, 1918) and on the Romanians (April 24/May 7, 1918), this does not exculpate the Allies from renegeing on their Wilsonian promises. When the Germans pointed out that the proposed treaty had shifted from Wilson's wartime declarations: "that the war was not against the German people, but only against the Imperial government... President Wilson was... unaffected. The appeal to his own words merely irritated him. He examined the German contentions, but on the basis of proved German guilt – guilt, not of the ruling class, but of the nation. The terms, he contended, were hard, 'but the Germans earned that. And I think that it is profitable that a nation should learn once and for all what an unjust war means in itself'³⁰.

Later, Wilson had second thoughts on the German treaty: „The document had conveyed a slight feeling of inadequacy. It would not prove satisfactory to the future historian"³¹.

Or, for that matter, would it prove satisfactory to future German and other politicians such as Herr Hitler. And Wilson's close advisor, Edward M. House noted that staging the signing of the German treaty at Versailles, while an impressive gesture to French desires for revenge, was completely „out of keeping with the new era which we profess an ardent desire to promote. I wish it could have been more simple and that there might have been an element of chivalry, which was wholly lacking"³².

As a result, „The armistice agreement was broken, and there was scant chance that the pre-armistice agreement, with its promise of a peace of reconciliation, could be kept ... The war had overtaxed man's idealism ... Men and women had had enough of sacrifice, enough of feeding on hopes; now they would grasp at the tangible benefits, benefits seized at no matter what cost to other men". Thus it was that „Before the peace conference assembled, the whole basis of the treaty with Germany had been changed, unconsciously changed"³³ perhaps, but fatally changed nevertheless and was, in effect, dead in the water.

In the end, the Peace Conference itself was characterized by unresolvable dilemmas. As Sontag wrote, „Every delegation had an inflamed public opinion at its back demanding the impossible. The popular demands could not be disavowed without a domestic crisis; they could not be insisted upon without disrupting the Conference ... Wilson was the only delegate to defy opinion at home, and the United States was the only great power to refuse ratification"³⁴.

Looking back in 1932, Sontag concluded with considerable understatement: „Discontent with the territorial settlement has since 1919 smoldered beneath the surface of European politics, flaring up only occasionally. Undoubtedly, this

²⁹ Weber, *Modern History of Europe*, 1971, p. 860.

³⁰ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 288–289.

³¹ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 290.

³² Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 292.

³³ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 264–268.

³⁴ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 272.

discontent will assume greater importance as time goes on”³⁵. Indeed. Add to this the Reparations problem and the War Guilt clause, and the international conflagrations that burst out in the 1930s seem less and less unexpected and more or more almost inevitable. Later, Hajo Holborn would write that Locarno and other diplomatic endeavors merely papered over the cracks in the Treaties of Paris, resulting in „a last Indian summer before the blizzard of the world economic crisis struck in 1931. Nobody foresaw that Europe, politically and economically, lived on borrowed time”³⁶.

And what of the League of Nations? After 1918, „... what idealism men had left centered in nationalism”. According to Sontag, the prevailing view was that „national freedom must not be surrendered to the tyranny of a league of nations. On the one hand, a league would not provide security; on the other hand, it would impair national independence”. And, though France was obsessed (rightly it turned out) with security under the new normal, „Neither England, nor America was worried about the problem of security ... neither England, nor America [apart from Wilson] saw the need for the protection of an international league. England was indifferent... [and] America was hostile to Wilson’s ideal”³⁷. The result was that the League simply lacked authority, both moral and material. The League Covenant’s provisions „gave every guarantee against aggression which words could give”³⁸ and no more.

An American journalist, F.H. Simonds, asked in a 1931 study of the first decade after 1919, „Can Europe Keep the Peace?”³⁹. By then, the clear implication was that it could not.

US Secretary of State Robert Lansing had already foreseen this in 1919, writing in a confidential memorandum of June 21, 1919:

„Whatever impression these new frontiers make upon others and whatever satisfaction they may derive from the work which has been done, my own impression is that we have «Balkanized» the territories extending from the Baltic to the Aegean and from the Aegean to the Euphrates and the Caspian Sea ... instead of reducing the area of political instability, where the jealousies and hatreds of the various nationalities are as inflammable as now and liable to take fire on the slightest pretext, the area has been enlarged many times ... the consequences are that we have left a mass of small, covetous and quarrelsome nations. Along the boundaries of these little independent states there are sections inhabited by peoples whose blood is alien to their allegiance and who really desire union with a neighboring state which covets the territory occupied by them. Here is a ceaseless cause of trouble and unrest. For a time open rupture may be avoided, but it will

³⁵ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 283.

³⁶ Hajo Holborn, *The Political Collapse of Europe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 131, 135.

³⁷ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 265. Of course, „Security was peculiarly a French problem ... with a chain of allies in the East who would be bound to her by fear of Germany [and the Soviet Union], France would regain and perpetuate the supremacy Napoleon had won”.

³⁸ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 277–278.

³⁹ Frank H. Simonds, *Can Europe Keep the Peace?* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931).

certainly come in the near future, because each country with alien population within its borders will seek to impose its nationality upon these aliens through the means of education, social usage, political practices, and religious teaching ... No one, who has given thought to these questions, can view them without apprehension to the future... All those evils of nationalism, which cursed the world during the 18th and 19th centuries, are again dominant over these peoples impelling them to prey upon one another. The boundaries, which have been marked on the new map are certainly in many cases artificial. They will continue only so long as the dissatisfied grumbling nations feel themselves too weak to change them ... When one of these nations is confident of its strength and believes it can take and hold contiguous territory, we may expect a new conflagration in Europe”⁴⁰.

This pessimistic view was shared by the influential and well-informed American writer, Herbert Adams Gibbons, in his 1923 study *Europe Since 1918*⁴¹ and in his 1923 *Introduction to World Politics*⁴² Gibbons wrote:

„Out of the Peace Conference and the welter of policies that followed it students of international affairs have learned one thing, if nothing else: to distrust the efficacy of formulas to improve relations among nations ... The Paris Peace Conference conclusively proved that there had been no conversion of statesmen from their faith in traditional foreign policies to the widely heralded and much vaunted principles of «self-determination», «rights of small nations», «making the world safe for democracy», «a durable world peace», and «the League of Nations». No effort was made to repudiate the Prussian idea that «might goes before right», and it was soon evident that the war fought to liberate subject peoples had resulted in the destruction and ruin of some of them and in bringing out in the rest of them the bad traits we condemned the Germans for showing ... On one point, however, all must agree. The Treaty of Versailles, and the other treaties modeled after it and dependent upon it, have failed to bring peace to Europe and the world”⁴³.

On the other hand, even in 1932, Sontag held on to a note of hope: „there was the League of Nations. To that men pinned their hopes. It might be that when passions subsided, when nations counted the cost of war, the League Covenant

⁴⁰ Robert Lansing, Confidential Memorandum on „The New Map of the World”, June 21, 1919, from the Confidential Memoranda of Secretary Robert Lansing, Robert Lansing Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC, published in Gerhard L. Weinberg, ed., *Transformation of a Continent. Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis MN: Burgess Publishing Company, 1975), p. 148–149.

⁴¹ New York: The Century Company, 1923, which had a chapter on Romania. Gibbons had been a student in Paris at the same time as the renowned Romanian historian N. Iorga and later lectured at Iorga’s summer school.

⁴² New York: The Century Company, 1923, which included chapters on the Paris Peace Conference, at which he was present, on world politics and the Treaties of Versailles, St. Germain, Trianon, Neuilly, and Sévres, on the continuation conferences, and on why „The Reestablishment of Peace” has been „Prevented by Unsatisfied Nationalist Aspirations and Divergent Policies of the Victors (1918–1922)”.

⁴³ Gibbons, *Europe Since 1918*, 1931, p. 599–600.

might become more than a scrap of paper ... We are to-day watching the events in the new story unfold themselves. As yet the outcome is uncertain. [It is true, however, that] in 1928 men thought they had with long travail, climbed from the valley of despair to the mountain slopes whence the dawning of a new and happier age could be seen. In 1932 we are again in the valley; the visions of 1928 seem only a deceptive mirage. Black night seems once more closing over Europe. Possibly men will soon be lifted to a more pleasing vantage point. Then the gloom which must pervade a story told in 1932 will be seen as fantastic as the buoyant optimism of 1928 seems today”⁴⁴.

Meanwhile, the League of Nations issued a ten-year assessment study which concluded that all was well, and getting better⁴⁵.

CONCLUSION

In fairness, it has to be recognized that the League of Nations accomplished a good deal, especially in the areas of health and intellectual cooperation. As Hugh Seton-Watson wrote in 1975, „The new governments in the new states, or at least in several of them, quickly set out doing some admirable things ... Nevertheless, looking back at the period as a whole, and considering how it began and how it ended, the picture remains more somber than bright... though we must never forget the achievements...”⁴⁶. Unfortunately, things were based on peace treaties that were doomed to failure. And it cannot be denied that the League and the new states failed where it counted most and where the most had been expected from them: in the establishment of a new, peaceful, and stable world order.

However, one must ask „Can anything be learned from all this?” The young French historian Étienne Mantoux – who was killed just eight days before the end of World War II – wrote in 1944: „Following upon the failure of idealism in 1919, there is now in full swing a revulsion towards the other extreme. *In contraria currunt*. To-day, our new-fangled Machiavellians’ doctrines, deduced from rigorously «scientific» observation, lead to the conclusion that what is most *likely* to happen is that the Dragon will eat Saint George every time; that whenever he does, it is just too bad...”⁴⁷.

Let us learn from the past to enlighten and view the present realistically, but let us never give up our hope in ideals and aspirations for morality. One might be justified in being a short run pessimist, but in the long run we much remain optimistic.

⁴⁴ Sontag, *Diplomatic History*, 1932, p. 300, 303.

⁴⁵ League of Nations, *Ten Years of World Cooperation*, with a Foreword by Sir Eric Drummond, Secretary-General (Geneva: Secretariat of the League of Nations, 1930), XI + 467 p.

⁴⁶ Hugh Seton-Watson, *The “Sick Heart” of Modern Europe. The Problem of the Danubian Lands* (Seattle WA: University of Washington Press, 1975), p. 27–28.

⁴⁷ Étienne Mantoux, *The Carthaginian Peace*, 1946, p. 201–202.