

AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK

It's unfair to think the peacemakers of 1919 could have prevented the Second World War

Margaret MacMillan

31 January 2009 The Vancouver Sun

We all think about the past in shorthand - the storming of the Bastille or the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Such events stand in for great turning points, whether they be the French Revolution or the Great Depression.

The Paris Peace Conference of 1919, which began 90 years ago this month, is such a symbol.

Yes, people say sadly, those peacemakers who met in Paris for all those months in 1919 were such incompetents and fools, even such villains. Far from bringing peace in the wake of the First World War, they made such a mess of things that the weary and unlucky world slid inexorably towards another dreadful war in 1939.

Shorthand of this sort is often wrong because it oversimplifies and leaves out nuances. It is, however, hard to counter. The Paris Peace Conference was not directly responsible for the Second World War or for the appalling crew, from Hitler to Stalin, who caused such havoc to their own societies and to western civilization.

The peace settlements of 1919 did not last forever, but was that the fault of the peacemakers? Many people even today would say it was, but I take issue with that view.

Before we award the statesmen in Paris, including our own Sir Robert Borden, gold stars or black marks, we should remind ourselves what they confronted. The world, especially in Europe, had been turned

upside down and inside out. Old borders had vanished and a host of new nations clamoured for their places on the maps. Russia had had a revolution and was in the middle of a civil war. Austria-Hungary, the great empire which encompassed the many nationalities at the centre of Europe, had disintegrated. Seemingly stable societies like Germany were in chaos, and revolutionary upheavals threatened even Britain and France. Trade and production had collapsed and people all over Europe were starving. The peacemakers were not trying just to draw up terms for the defeated; they were trying to run and remake much of the world.

The range of problems was huge and so, too, were the pressures on them. It may not have been reasonable but it was understandable that the Allied publics wanted both a better world and someone to blame and to punish for a war that had brought destruction and death on a scale far beyond what anyone had contemplated in 1914.

Germany, so most thought at the time, had started the war. Could the Allied statesmen have ignored their own public opinion? That doesn't usually work well in democracies.

Later in the 1920s and 1930s opinion changed, thanks at least in part by strenuous efforts of the Germans to prove that they were as innocent or as culpable as any other nation. The war had just happened to them all like the Black Death or the Great Influenza

epidemic. In fact the question still remains an open one; recent research, by German historians among others, shows a picture closer to the one that many people had in 1919 Germany had, by its reckless and provocative behaviour, and its encouragement of an equally reckless Austria-Hungary sent Europe down the road to the 1914-1918 war.

Perhaps we should admit, even so, that there was no point in trying to punish Germany after 1919, that it was far more important to get Europe's economy going again to remove at least some of the causes of political and social unrest. That is what the great economist John Maynard Keynes argued, and he was right.

Suppose Germany had not been obliged to pay reparations to the winners (and in the end it never did pay all that much); suppose it had

been allowed to have a large armed forces; suppose it had been allowed to unite with a reluctant Austria. Would Europe have been a happy and stable place?

I would argue almost certainly not. To begin with, the Germany that emerged from the war was an unhappy and deeply divided country. Many on the right, the old-style conservatives in the army or the bureaucracy or the fanatical racial nationalists, never accepted the new Weimar republic and did their best to destroy it.

Paradoxically, that Germany was also potentially very powerful. Its infrastructure was largely untouched by the war; it had a large and educated population; and, even without Austria, it was the biggest country in Europe east of the new Soviet Russia. Europe had had a "German question" before the war and it still had one. How did it deal with a strong Germany at its heart, and, moreover, many of whose citizens did not accept that their country had lost the war and resented its loss of dominance in Europe?

And that was not the only difficult legacy left by the war. The Russian Bolsheviks who now controlled one of the world's largest countries did not want to be part of any stable liberal international order. Rather they wanted to bring it down and stir up revolution worldwide. Ethnic nationalism, too, was rampaging through Europe, demanding states based on a single people. Yet how were the peacemakers to draw fair boundaries when the populations were so mixed? Whatever they did, they were bound to leave ethnic minorities outside the homeland and grievances festering away. Much of this was beyond the power of the peacemakers to change.

When you look at the world of 1919 the conditions for a lasting peace were not promising. Even so, the 1920s were a period of hope. Because we know how the story ended in 1939 we tend to ignore the successes of the new League of Nations, the gradual reintegration of Germany into Europe and the amelioration of some of the objections it had to the Treaty of Versailles, or the recovery of the international economy. Europe's statesmen worked hard to build a stable world order and they were helped by outside powers, Japan, for example, and the United States (don't believe the stories of a profound American isolationism.) Even Soviet Russia was behaving more like a normal power.

The world might have moved, with the inevitable ups and downs, towards a prolonged period of peace had it not been for the economic crisis of the 1930s. The Depression gave encouragement to the enemies of democracy both domestically and internationally. Before we hold the peacemakers in Paris accountable for the horrors of that second war, we should remember that there were other later actors - Hitler, Mussolini, or the Japanese militarists - who exercised their power to decide for war or for peace.

We should also ask ourselves whether we could have done any better in the face of the huge challenges of 1919. Even great power, which the Allies possessed, has limits when it comes to changing the world, something worth remembering as U.S. President Barack Obama takes office and the world grapples with today's problems.

Margaret MacMillan is warden of St. Antony's College, Oxford, and a professor of history at the University of Toronto. She is author of Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World.