

The Versaille Peace Treaty and Post Conflict Resolution in Europeand The World

THEOPHILUS, OYIMEADEJUMO
Department of Political Science
University of Calabar, Nigeria
E-mail: theophilus@unical.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

The contemporary world is pregnant with a lot of battles. More often than not, these wars end with post-conflict resolution mechanisms. This paper examines the ‘unfair’ treatment meted out to Germany by the League of Nations at the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919, in the aftermath of World War 1. From the fundamental premise, the paper addresses the following questions among others: what were the terms of settlement? Was the settlement fair to Germany and how did this endanger the world security architecture? How did Germany see the settlement? Anchored on the realist approach as theoretical framework, the paper posits that war appears, from this dominant realist perspective, not as abnormal but as being pre-eminently normal in international politics, especially where a country’s security is at stake. The paper recommends among other things, that in post conflict situations, victorious powers should not be allowed to dictate the terms of settlement, thus being a judge in their own case.

Key words: Versailles peace treaty, International politics, Security dilemma, New world order, Post-conflict peace building, Sovereignty of nations.

Introduction

The Versailles treaty has been cited by many commentators and practitioners of international politics and relations as the embryo that metamorphosed into the world international system as we see it today. What is the structure of the contemporary international system? What indeed is the Versailles treaty and what were its terms? Were the terms fair and just to all the parties concerned? How did the Versailles peace settlement endanger world security? What economic implications did the treaty pose on Germany? Lastly, what clues can be found for answering these questions? Some of these questions have been answered in very interesting ways by scholars, writers and observers of international politics. This paper seeks to broaden the debate on this subject and other ancillary issues, as it introduces a personal assessment of the conflict.

Studies have shown that the late 19th and 20th century birthed and accelerated the emergence of multilateral institutions and agencies such as the League of Nations, UNO, AU, EU and the Arab league among others. Propelled by phenomenal development in technology and the growth of transnational forces and transnational relations, the global system has been caught up in what scholars term “turbulence in world politics” (Rosenous in Bassey 2012: 446). Bassey C. O., for instance, in his study on the theories of war and peace, has established a connection between the phenomenon of wars and the preconditions for peace. He notes that, “the phenomenon of war, as we are all painfully aware, has been a recurrent decimal in human history and that is why the expectation of its occurrence has brought about the development of a formidable array of defence establishments (military institutions) by states in the global system for both defensive and offensive purposes” (Bassey, 2012: 266).

Today, the contemporary world is characterized by a lot of wars. For instance, the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, the Korean war of 1950s, the never – ending Israeli-Palestinian war, the Syrian civil war, the American led war in Afghanistan, the Iran - Iraqi war, as well as the American – led “operation desert storm” against Iraq, among others, buttress this point. What is peculiar in all these

wars, however, is not only the amount of devastation of properties and inestimable extermination of world population but that, more often than not, these wars end with post conflict resolution mechanisms (PCRM).

However, Howell Kellan, while examining the paradox of post-conflict resolution mechanism in *The Bear will not Surrender*, argued that most post-conflict resolutions end by putting the world in serious jeopardy. This view of course corroborates the speech delivered by the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, on the 24th October, 2014, challenging American interest in Russian politics. In the words of Putin, “all systems of global collective security now lie in ruins. There are no longer any international societal guarantees at all, and the entity that destroyed them has a name: The United States of America” (Howell, 2014: 2).

Thus, at the end of World War I, the Versailles Peace Treaty emerges as one of such conflict resolution mechanisms meant to forestall the outbreak of future wars and to engender lasting peace in the world. The terms of the Versailles peace treaty however empowered the allies and allied powers to examine the cause of the war and determine the terms of settlement. The treaty blamed Germany for starting the war. Germany, which at the time was already devastated by the experience of the war, had no choice but to accept full responsibility for initiating and executing an aggressive war (Ellman, 2002). It is the intention of this paper to address the issues arising as a consequence of the security dilemma in the world, as a result of the historical and complex nature of the global system dominated by state actors with multiple challenges.

Theoretical foundation

The big questions in the study of international politics can best be understood when appropriate theories are applied (Keohane, 2007). Therefore, the conceptual and analytical framework of this study is anchored on realism. Scholars such as Thomas Hobbes, Jonathan Haslam, Niccolo Machiavelli, Kegley, Hans Morgenthau, Kenman, among others, are of the view that the epistemic value of realism is rooted in the assumption it makes. First, that states are the only actors in the international system; and second, that the international environment is anarchic in nature. This sense of anarchy is not that it lacks order or is chaotic, but that it lacks a world government with the capacity to guarantee the security of states. In a bid to guarantee their security, bolster their own security and political power, states engage in arms buildup. This explains why Morgenthau defines international politics as the struggle for power. It must however be emphasized that the lack of a world government as mentioned earlier does not imply the absence of international law, but the extent to which states accept or reject international law depends on the extent to which they are willing to accept the consequences of such acceptance or rejection (Morgenthau, 1993).

The aim of realism to this study is to show that, in post conflict situations, states will do everything in their power to safeguard their own security. For the purpose of pushing this argument, it would be necessary to examine the case of Germany as a classical illustration. The Versailles peace settlement stipulated as follows: (a) that Germany must relinquish several of its territories and demilitarize the Rhine land (b) the treaty imposed economic sanctions and levied heavy reparations on Germany (c) Many Germans perceived the treaty, especially Article 231, which declared Germany responsible for the war as a humiliation; and lastly (4) German security was threatened by the “harsh” treatment and the League could not guarantee German security. This explains Hitler’s rearmament drive and other steps he took to make Germany great again. However, since nation-states will always seek power (i.e. in terms of military capability), states will at any given point in time try as much as possible to build arms. Therefore, when Hitler and his Nazi party rose to power in 1933, they felt that Germany had no security system. The military terms of the Versailles peace treaty reduced the German army to a small professional force of only 100,000 men. Germany lost all her colonies and was forced to accept the blame for starting the war and therefore had to pay reparations of 6.6 million pounds, hence Hitler’s rearmament drive (Ellman, 2002: 4) in order to restore the country to status quo ante.

From the above, it can be said that realism is the most favorable theoretical bulwark upon which this paper can be anchored. For one thing, it provides a better explanation for the cause of the Second World War, which in this case results from the harsh treatment meted out to Germany arising from the Versailles peace treaty, for another, it points the direction to which the problem could have been resolved. The thesis here is that victorious imperial powers should not be allowed to negotiate

the terms of peace settlements in post conflict management situations. This will forestall the entrenchment of “the winner takes all” syndrome in international politics.

The Versailles Treaty of 1919: What is it?

The treaty of Versailles came at the end of World War I, between the axis and the allied powers. The war in the east ended with the defeat and collapse of Russian empires and German troops occupied large parts of Southern and Central Europe with varying degrees of control, establishing various client-states, such as the kingdoms of Poland and the United Baltic Duchy. However, when the war ended in 1918, France and other victor-nations were in a desperate situation regarding their economies, security and social standards. The Paris peace conference of 1919 was their chance to punish Germany for starting the war. “The war must be someone’s fault and this is a very natural human relation” (Wilkinson & Hughes, 2004).

Accordingly, the treaty which the allies signed with Germany at the end of the First World War, has had a bad reputation ever since. John Maynard Keynes the economist, however, observed that, though it was stupid, vindictive and short-sighted, most writers of history and the public have followed his lead ever since. Many have blamed the treaty for driving Germany into misery, thereby creating the circumstances which led to the rise of Hitler and ultimately for starting the Second World War in 1939. As succinctly noted in a private discussion in 1939:

Hitler declared Britain the main enemy to be defeated and that
Poland’s obliteration was a necessary prelude to that goal.

The eastern flank would be secured and land would be added to Germany.

“I shall brew them a devil’s drink”, he said. (Boobbyer, 2000).

Thus, the expansion of military power and territories has been considered by most scholars as indispensable to the preservation of the basic (“core” and “context-specific”) values in which their survival as socio-political entities rest. Similarly, in terms of crisis management, considerations of military power have acted as counters in diplomatic bargaining, so that in any serious dispute, diplomacy becomes a “trial of influence and strength, including military strength, even though it is also a test of wits and skill”. (Modelski, 1993).

However, it is our view, and that of a number of scholars of history who have worked in this area for some years, that the treaty was not all bad. Germany did lose the war after all. Reparations apparently imposed a heavy burden but Germany only paid a portion of what it owed. Perhaps, the real problem was that the treaty was never really properly enforced, so that Germany was able to rebuild its military and challenge the security of Europe all over again (Victor, 2011).

As a consequence of this volte-face, Germany was charged with the sole responsibility of starting the war. The War Guilt clause was the first step towards a satisfying revenge for the victor countries: France against Germany. France understood that its position in 1918 was only “artificial” and “transitory”. Thus, Clemenceau, the French Prime Minister at the time, worked to gain French security via the Treaty of Versailles. Below are the instruments of the 1919 Versailles Peace Treaty.

- a) The Second World War which began in 1939 was in some respect merely a continuation of the First World War. Germany was never satisfied with the settlement at Versailles. For instance, the military terms of the treaty were even more severe. In addition to the fifteen-years occupation of the left bank of the Rhine and the demilitarization of a zone thirty miles wide on the right bank, the Allies sought in all possible ways to prevent Germany from ever again becoming a major military power. They forbade her from building offensive weapons, such as airplanes and submarines, and they limited the German army to a small professional force of 100,000 men.
- b) Germany lost all her colonies (Alsace-Lorraine, West Prussia, Eupen, Malmedy, Saar, and the Cameroons etc.), which she gained during *welt politik* to the League of Nations with a mandate to be run by Britain and France.
- c) Germany was forbidden to unite with Austria and lost Danzig and Anschluss which she captured from France earlier. Upper Silesia was divided between Germany and Poland according to the result of a referendum organized by the League. Also lost to the League was Saarland, which was to be run by the League for 15 years and then a referendum was to be held.

- d) The War Guilt Clause states that Germany should accept the blame for starting the war. Therefore had to pay reparations of 6,600million pounds for damages caused by the war. However, having to accept the blame really angered many Germans, as they saw the war as the result of everyone's mistake.
- e) Another humiliating condition was the ban from positioning Germany's soldiers into the Rhineland next to France, which made the industrial area of Ruhr very vulnerable. Overall, Germany lost about 10% of its industries. The treaty was neither lenient enough to appease Germany, nor harsh enough to prevent it from becoming the dominant continental power again. The treaty placed the blame, or "war guilt", on Germany and Austria-Hungary, and punished them for their 'responsibility' rather than working out an agreement that would assure long term peace (Morgenthau in Robert, & George, 2008; Linge, 2009; Synder, 2010; and Aboh, 2014).
- f) The treaty provided for harsh monetary reparations, separated millions of ethnic Germans into neighbouring countries, territorial dismemberment, and caused mass ethnic resettlement. In an effort to pay war reparations to Britain and France, the Weimar Republic printed trillions of Marks, causing extreme high inflation of the German currency (Aboh, 2014; Synder, 2010). The treaty created bitter resentment towards the victors of World War I, who had promised the people of Germany that United States President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points would be a guideline for peace. However, the United States played a minor role in World War I and Wilson could not convince the Allies to agree to adopt his Fourteen Points. Many Germans felt that the German government had agreed to an armistice based on this understanding, while others felt that the German Revolution of 1918-1919 had been orchestrated by the "November Criminals" who later assumed offices in the new Weimar Republic (Olsen, 1988).

Economic Implications of the Versailles Treaty of May 1919

With the disarmament of Germany's armed forces and import/export restrictions put in place, millions of German soldiers had now lost what was their only source of employment, resulting in no income to feed, clothe, or in severe cases even house their families. However, soldiers were not the only ones driven into this dilemma. As much of Germany's economy was built on the production and exportation of arms, it would not be surprising to know that businessmen built great empires specifically producing goods for the armed forces. These business empires came crashing down after the Treaty of Versailles was signed. Since companies require demand in order to produce, in this case, the great demand that was once there no longer existed, this sent a cluster of workers into unemployment. As unemployment and business closures rose exponentially, there was simply not enough employment to go round, leaving many families at the brink of poverty (Linge, 2009). Included in the Treaty were the great territorial losses that the country had to suffer, with Germany losing 13% of its former land which catered for approximately 6 million people. The terms of the treaty ceded Alsace-Lorraine to the French, West Prussia and Posen to Poland. As a result of votes in 1920-21, other areas were also lost, such as Eupen and Malmedy to Belgium and Upper Silesia to Poland. With the loss of these territories came the loss of some of Germany's most mineral rich areas, including the Saar Basin and Upper Silesia. Understandably, German industrial production notably decreased. Some of the worst affected including coal production, as a result of losing its richest coal territory, and steel production. Seriously adding to the toll that the economy was already suffering, one of the goals of the allies was to isolate Germany from the rest of the world (Aboh, 2014). The Treaty reduced Germany to a pariah nation, something the country had never experienced before, but was forced to get used to, as the Treaty was designed to ensure this condition for as long as possible. This desperate act proved to be quite disastrous for Germany, as when money is printed off that the government does not have value, money goes down and prices go up. In this case hyperinflation had occurred. The hyperinflation affected people in different ways but the worst hit was the middle class whose savings and businesses were destroyed (Robert, 2007).

On October 29, 1929, the Wall Street Stock Market collapsed, sending disastrous financial effects worldwide. Particularly hard hit was Germany, who by this time was borrowing money from America in order to rebuild her industries and pay reparations. An overall sense of horrification, humiliation, bitterness, resentment, desperation, anxiety and as mentioned earlier, betrayal was cast

over the German society in reaction to the Treaty of Versailles. No one thought it was not right that Germany should take all the blame for World War I, and as a result pay reparations, which made everyday life a struggle for many. It was this Germany-wide anger among the people that made them willing to unite under any leader that would go against the treaty, a leader like Adolf Hitler, who could take the bull by the horns and damn the consequences.

The Treaty of Versailles was an unsatisfactory compromise with little chance of ensuring an enduring peace. Each of the “Big Three” had different aims which had to be modified in order to reach an overall agreement and the Germans were not even allowed to take part in the negotiation. The treaty was flawed to the extent that instead of preventing future wars, it made a future war inevitable. The Treaty of Versailles was the basic cause of the Second World War, the Holocaust and the Cold War. Why? Because it was a treaty made without thought of fairness or consideration as to what its effects might be. Instead, the treaty created an alien system of democracy that was never more than stable and which, because of the constitutional flaws, allowed Germany to be torn apart by extremist political parties like the Communist and worse still Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party. In effect, it put Germany in a situation it could not get out of, with unworkable political systems as well as economic and social problems just waiting to explode, hence the Nazi and their scapegoating of the Jews became much easier (Jerome L. Blum et al., 1970). Had the Treaty been fair, balanced and just, it is likely Germany would never have become embroiled in starting a Second World War, nor would Hitler have risen to power, and so the Holocaust may never have happened. Even though the “Big Three” ultimately had different goals in terms of achieving peace, what is clear from the terms of the Treaty is that France had one main aim – revenge, whereas the USA wanted money, and Britain, it could be argued, wanted a fair resolution that would prevent future conflicts. What they all failed to take into account was that in order for a treaty to be successful, everybody has to have the same aims and goals (Serge Lancel, 2010).

The Rise of Hitler’s Nazi Party and Specific Policy Directions

In Germany, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party rose to power in 1933. The Germans were desperate for someone to turn around their economy and restore their national pride. Hitler offered them hope and, as soon as his regime was consolidated, he took little interest in domestic policy. His sole concern was that Germany becomes sufficiently strong to realize his long term geopolitical goal of creating a German empire that would dominate Western Europe and extend deep into Russia. In a first step toward this goal, he made a de facto revision to the 1919 Peace Treaty of Versailles by ceasing to heed its restrictions on German rearmament. Soon after becoming Chancellor, Hitler ordered that secret rearmament, which had been in progress since the early 1920s, be stepped up. Later in 1933, he withdrew Germany from the League of Nations to reduce possible foreign control over Germany. The British delegation made a number of attempts to persuade her to return to the League, but these only angered France (who saw the action of Britain as an attempt to sell-out), ending in April 1934, with the so-called “Barthou Louis Barthou” announcing that France would no longer play any part in the League’s Conferences, but would look after its own security in whatever way necessary. This was a success for Hitler because:

- a. It wrecked the Conference
- b. It left him free to rearm however he wanted
- c. It drove a wedge between the France and the Britain
- d. British politicians, while trying to persuade Germany to stay in the conference, had agreed in principle that the arms clause of the Treaty was too harsh on Germany.

Polish Chief of State, Joseph Pilsudki signed a treaty with Germany not to go to war with each other for the next ten (10) years. This was soon followed by a trade treaty; Hitler liked these bi-lateral treaties between his country and other powers. This arrangement: (i) left his Eastern border safe and gave him time to rearm; (ii) undermined the principle of collective security of the League; after the treaty, Poland actively neglected the League; (iii) divided the countries allied against him, and (iv) when he was ready, he simply invaded Poland anyway. In principle therefore, Hitler’s policy of rearmament did not only increase Germany’s armed forces, but made him very popular at home, destroyed the Versailles Treaty, undermined the principle of collective security of the League and drove a wedge between all his enemies (Wettig, 2008).

Lessons for Europe

In post-conflict situation, conflict management should be based on equity and fairness. However, at the end of World War I, the reverse was the case as the peace treaty of Versailles was an unsatisfactory compromise with little chance of ensuring an enduring peace. Each of the 'Big Three' had different aims which had to be modified in order to reach an overall agreement and the Germans were not even allowed to take part in the negotiations. Germany was humiliated, the French didn't feel completely secure, the British had wanted the re-establishment of trade more than anything else and the Americans had to give up on their idea of self-determination where Germany was concerned. All this, in our opinion, was a recipe for disaster. The treaty was flawed to the extent that instead of preventing future wars, it made a future war inevitable. Why, because it was a treaty made without thought of fairness or consideration as to what its effect might be. Instead, it created an alien system of democracy that was never stable and which, because of constitutional flaws, allowed Germany to be torn apart by extremist political parties like the Communists and the Nazi party led by Hitler. In effect, it put Germany in a situation it couldn't get out of, with unworkable political systems and economic and social problems just waiting to explode (hence the Nazis and their scapegoating of Jews became much easier). Had the treaty been fair and balanced, it is unlikely that Germany would have been embroiled in starting a Second War, nor would Hitler have come to power and so the Holocaust may never have happened.

The treaty was an aberration. The Allies couldn't agree amongst themselves what to do with the defeated Germany and ended up accepting a document that was agreed begrudgingly by some of the major nations involved in its construction. Something created so quickly and in an environment as hostile as the immediate aftermath of the bloodiest war of all time, was bound to be filled with clauses created more through fear and anger than forgiveness, compassion and a desire for rebuilding relationships and really ensuring long lasting peace.

Conclusion

War is universally recognized as one of the most complex problems presently confronting the human race, especially in the context of the revolution in new technologies and the fabrication of weapons of mass destruction now used in warfare. Multiple attempts throughout history to control or eradicate war have necessitated the concerns of the basic philosophical questions: what are the causes of war and what are the preconditions for sustainable peace? (Bassey, 2002). However, the disaffection with the micro-level analysis (human nature and the state) of war causation has generally heightened the emphasis placed on the "anarchical" nature of the international system as the root cause of conflict among nations. This is the "Power Security" hypothesis, which argues basically that in a world system of competing nation-states, the "basis of diplomacy and of all contractual obligations beyond the boundaries of the state rests on the capacity to use violence, both to protect the state and to protect interests in the face of opposition from other states". War thus appears, from this dominant realist perspective, not as abnormal but as being preeminently normal in international politics. Security only exists when a state possesses the capacity to fight successful wars against any potential aggressors. For example, hardly any of the European statesmen or their policy planners predicted prior to 1939 the profound systemic changes (configuration and outcome: nuclear, bipolarity, the emergence of socialist China, decolonisation, the concomitant decline and subordinate status of such former imperial powers as Britain, France and Spain) brought by World War II and the atomic and thermonuclear revolution. The "watershed event" (to use E. H. Carr's phrase) itself – World War II – as historians constantly remind us, was not unconnected with the unforeseen rise of Nazi Germany, German rearmament and the rise of Japan as a dissatisfied and military-aggressive power.

For policy and academic reasons, however, the future of the international system will continue to be the subject of extensive debate, as the unrestrained exercise of formidable military and economic power resources by the coalition of western powers and the rise of counter-hegemonic forces and movements committed to resistance shapes the direction of transnational and international relations in the 21st century.

We recommend that in future, victorious imperial powers should not be allowed to negotiate the terms for peace settlement in post-conflict management situations. The common concern for the

rulers of the 'Big Three' was not fair to a wounded Germany, but the spectre of working-class rebellion at home, encouraged by the 1917 revolution in Russia. A crippled Germany was not in the interest of the USA in particular, due to her dominant geographical position in Central Europe. As noted earlier, the endemic nature of the wars in the global society and the imperative of managing the growing complexity of the multi-state system have led to the development of novel approaches of a collective nature for conflict control and containment. From the "Concert of Europe" through the "Hague System" to the "League of Nations" and the "United Nations", the challenges have remained the "rationalisation, focalisation and consolidation" of techniques and methods for mediating state relations with each other in the anarchical world of international politics. In addition to this, there is still a chance to construct a new world order that will avoid a future world war. This new world order must of necessity include the United States – but can only do so on the same terms with everyone else, subject to international law and international agreement, refraining from all unilateral actions, in full respect of the sovereignty of other nations.

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