

Jörn Leonhard, Der überforderte Frieden. Versailles und die Welt 1918–1923, München (C. H. Beck) 2018, 1531 S., 88 Abb., 15 Kt., ISBN 978-3-406-72506-7, EUR 39,95.

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In January 1918 – the war had not ended yet – the Vienna paper »Der Morgen« published a cartoon that showed the »Babylonian peace tower«: on it and around it a plethora of political leaders, citizens, slogans, and banners compete for attention. They demand, for example, »democracy«, »freedom of the seas«, and in the background, we can spot a campaigner calling for »Africa to the Africans«. Readers can find this cartoon and an interpretation of it in Jörn Leonhard's awe-inspiring monumental history of peace making after the First World War (p. 133).

If there is one argument this book makes, it is encapsulated by this cartoon: it shows that peace making was a dynamic, contingent process, and that »Paris«, as a shorthand for the peace conferences, does not capture the complexity of what was happening at the time or of what Leonhard calls the peace making's »polycontextuality«. In this remarkable and impressive book, based on an admirable command of literatures in different fields and, in several languages, Leonhard weaves a rich historical tapestry that combines ordinary people's experiences with the reality of diplomatic negotiations. He shows how, in trying to make peace, the experiences and language of war, and often the practice of violence, remained present.

The history of the Paris peace conferences has long been a projection point for concerns about contemporary problems. From Arno J. Mayer's 1967 book that tried to place the Versailles conference at the beginning of a Western politics of containment against Soviet Russia to Margaret Macmillan's »Peacemakers« (2001) (probably the best single-author, single-volume study until the publication of Leonhard's volume) that was clearly placed in the context of the breakdown of the Cold War international order in Europe¹. Leonhard has set himself a much more ambitious task than previous authors, and he fulfils that task admirably: he presents us with a global history of the Paris peace conferences, their pre-history and their aftermaths that is nonetheless attentive to local contexts and issues; it is a history that it is as well versed in diplomatic offices in, say, London or Rome as in analysing protests in rural Anatolia; and Leonhard seems as well acquainted with the social history of the Finnish civil

¹ Arno J. Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918–1919*, New York, NY 1967. Margaret Macmillan, *Peacemakers. The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, London 2001.



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war and the history of the Moroccan independence movement during this period as with more mainstream topics of diplomatic history; not least, the book combines an overall argument with a historian's emphasis on contingency and process. The result of Leonhard's approach is a book that probably every historian would like to have written: its learning and knowledge are stupendous; there is rigorous conceptual analysis coupled with story telling and insightful anecdotes; and the book can be read from cover to cover as well as serve readers as an encyclopaedia which they can mine for information.

The book has the weight and proportions of a doorstopper that will keep readers' terrace doors open even during a hurricane. Using the book in that way would be a travesty, though, as it would lead to a destruction of a wealth of information and intelligent interpretation. There are plenty of details on its 1531 pages (including 77 pages of endnotes and 94 pages of bibliography of which many non-specialists and probably even specialists in certain aspects of the peace negotiations will have not been aware) and that readers can explore with an excellent 77-page index. For example, this includes discussions of the impact of the German-Russian Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on Georgia and central Asia; the removal and later re-construction of the Ketteler Arch in Beijing, and the different meanings this assumed and discussions it provoked in China at different historical junctures (pp. 419 and 928). We can also read about how Cologne mayor Konrad Adenauer issued a request to citizens on 11 December 1918, following an order by the chief of the British military police, to put the clocks back an hour, to be aligned with Greenwich Mean Time (p. 460).

Leonhard has structured his book chronologically, beginning with the discussions about war and peace aims from 1916 onwards and the »crisis-like transformations« of societies in the last years of war (p. 18) that continued into the post-war. Ten chapters, plus an introduction and a conceptual discussion at the end, discuss how socio-economic transformations as well as the contexts of mass democracy, the breakdown of empires and the collapse of the European balance of power system influenced developments until around 1923. The Paris peace conferences themselves become »hopeful moment of synchronisation in a polyphonic chorus of transition« (p. 540). The final chapters tackle the aftermath of the conference and reactions to them.

Leonhard's principal focus is on Europe, but the book's overall perspective is truly global, including sections on the impact of peace making at Paris on Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the Americas. He develops a more complex picture than that of a »Wilsonian Moment« (Erez Manela). Instead, he highlights how the Paris conferences – and Woodrow Wilson himself – often served as a reference point that meant different things to different people in different societies. We also learn from Leonhard, how the nature of nationalism changed itself in the process, and how it was not always opposed to colonial rule but at time worked together to achieve its aims, creating a number of conflicts in its wake, as Leonhard shows with reference to a number of examples, ranging from Vietnam, to India and Madagascar. If there is one theme that



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this reviewer found a perhaps bit under-developed it is the role of pacifists and their movements, which is handled only relatively briefly.

It is impossible to do justice to the richness of Leonhard's account within the confines of this review. It is instead worth mentioning a number of themes in Leonhard's book. First, Leonhard contrasts contemporaries' lack of awareness of connections with our own interpretations – not to chide contemporaries for their ignorance, but to highlight how complex a task historical interpretation really is.

Second, Leonhard emphasises the importance of grief and grieving, of experiences of victimhood and sacrifice for making and sustaining peace for both victors and vanquished. There is, for example, Abel Faivre's harrowing image from France, published in »L'Echo de Paris« in November 1918, in which a mother and her child mourn the death of their husband and father, with the caption asking: »Does Daddy know we are the victors?« (p. 314). And there is the discussion on the »moral economy of recognition« (Leonhard following Nicolas Beaupré, p. 556) among soldiers which places Friedrich Ebert's famous line from December 1918 that »no enemy has overcome you, [German soldiers]« in a transnational and comparative context. Readers can also find an impressive discussion on the impact of this »moral economy of recognition« on the negotiations and the negotiators, for example when French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau wants five heavily injured soldiers with maimed faces at the signing of the peace treaty, but thus excluded the civilian sacrifices and victims (pp. 1032–3). Not least, Leonhard also shows how such nationally different experiences created a problem of mutual empathy among the negotiators, even those on the same side of the table.

Many will pick this book up in the context of contemporary discussions about the failure or viability of our own so-called »liberal international order« and look for ready answers. Leonhard explicitly cautions against learning from history and developing causal models of peace making. Nonetheless, his book has an important message. It serves as a sobering reminder that all those who believe that an international order can be made through blueprints and memoranda are in for a rough ride. It has long been a very strong consensus in the literature on the Paris Peace Treaties that they were a failed opportunity.

But the message of Leonhard's book is that asking for opportunities and failures means asking the wrong question. Instead, he emphasises the contemporaneity of many different experiences, expectations and projects, and he demonstrates how they were part of a global context, but at the same time deeply embedded in local structures. There was, for example, no singularity of meaning behind Wilson's call for »self-determination«. The term could refer to both nationalist or even ethnic self-mobilisation and democratic representation. This happened against the transformation of concepts of international peace making from being focused primarily on balance of power thinking that highlighted the absence of war to more ambitious goals that connected peace to certain political, social, and economic security functions of states (p. 1275).



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The book shows how the Paris treaties were negotiated against the odds of personal and national distrust among the negotiators, victors and vanquished, but with serious intended and unintended consequences. Leonhard shows us that the problem with much current thinking about creating world order, liberal or otherwise, is that one cannot simply design it on the drawing board – it will crash against reality – or involve the need to use violence to impose it, countered by more violence to reject it. In fact, Leonhard demonstrates superbly how the results and legacies of the war fundamentally challenged pre-war conceptions for domestic and global order, and how what »order« meant was contingent upon local conditions if not even personal perceptions. Political scientists and others looking for an over-arching theory of peace making may not like this interpretation. But they should engage with its interpretative richness.

It is hoped that, like Leonhard's equally impressive »Pandora's Box«, this volume will soon be translated into English². If you want to read one book on peace making, and the First World War in particular, you should make it this one. In a nutshell, it offers a deep, rich, intelligent and thoughtful discussion – the best available by quite some margin – of how difficult it is to make peace after war.



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²Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora. Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*, München 2014; ders., *Pandora's Box. A History of the First World War*, Cambridge, MA 2018.