SETTLEMENT AND UNSETTLEMENT: THE ENDS OF WORLD WAR I AND THEIR LEGACIES 2018 ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE MAX WEBER FOUNDATION

Conference at the German Historical Institute Washington DC (GHI), March 22-24, 2018. Conveners: Max Weber Foundation, GHI Washington, American Historical Association (AHA), the National History Center (NHC), German Historical Association (Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands, VHD). Participants: Mustafa Aksakal (Georgetown University), Madeleine Dungy (European University Institute), Hans van Ess (Max Weber Stiftung, Bonn), Leila Fawaz (Tufts University), Carole Fink (Ohio State University), Donal Hassett (University of Bristol), Madeleine Herren-Oesch (University of Basel), Axel Jansen (GHI), Jan C. Jansen (GHI), Anna Karla (University of Cologne), Jesse Kaufman (Eastern Michigan University), Noriko Kawamura (Washington State University), Dane Kennedy (National History Center), Simone Lässig (GHI), Jörn Leonhard (University of Freiburg), Adele Lindenmeyr (Villanova University), Michele Louro (Salem State University), Jamie Martin (Georgetown University), Regine Mathias (University of Bochum), Tosh Minohara (Kobe University), Nicholas Mulder (Columbia University), Roberta Pergher (Indiana University), Barbara Potthast (University of Cologne), Volker Prott (University of Melbourne/Aston University), Laura Robson (Portland State University), Aviel Roshwald (Georgetown University), Birgit Schäbler (University of Erfurt/Orient-Institut Beirut), Paul Schweitzer-Martin (University of Heidelberg), Claudia Siebrecht (University of Sussex), Leonard Smith (Oberlin College), Jeremi Suri (University of Texas at Austin), Heidrun Tempel (German State Department), Elizabeth Thompson (American University), Adam Tooze (Columbia University), Sean Andrew Wempe (Washington State University), Miklós Zeidler (Eötvös Loránd University).

The armistice of November 11, 1918, is widely commemorated as the end of World War I, but that event was only part of a protracted process with far-reaching consequences. A series of peace treaties, starting with Brest-Litovsk in 1918 and continuing through Lausanne in 1923, brought the war to a stuttering conclusion. With its institutes, the Max Weber Foundation is present in a number of places that played a major role in the shaping of the postwar order, such as Paris, Moscow, Istanbul and Tokyo. The centenary of the 1918 Armistice thus provided the perfect occasion for the 2018 Annual Conference of the Max Weber Foundation, which took place at the German Historical Institute in Washington, DC and set out to reassess the postwar settlement’s global repercussions.
The conference was opened on the evening of March 22 by Simone Lässig, Hans van Ess and Dane Kennedy, who highlighted the legacies of the Great War, including the principle of national self-determination, the redrawing of borders, decolonization and forced migration, and noted new research trends and the need to reassess the war’s legacies. In his keynote lecture, “Overburdened Peace: Competing Visions of World Order in 1918/19,” Jörn Leonhard presented a tableau of questions and developments at the end of the war, laying the groundwork for many subsequent discussions at the conference. He started with different perspectives on the signing of the Versailles Treaty in June 1919, including such aspects as solemn diplomacy, guilt, and punishment of war crimes. He then examined the combination of continuities and discontinuities that became characteristic of the postwar settlement. The war efforts had provoked rising expectations in all societies and states involved, while the realities of the peace settlements, shaped by compromise, lead to massive disillusionment. Leonhard also highlighted key aspects of the contradictory postwar moment such as competing ideas of world order, the demise of monarchical empires in continental Europe, a selective application of the principle of national self-determination, violence unleashed by the principle of ethnic homogeneity, and the tension between the economics and the politics of settlement. He focused on five strands of such legacies: First, the continuity of violence despite the end of state warfare; second, the transition from languages of loyalty to the ethnicization of politics; third, based on Reinhard Koselleck’s model, the reversal of spaces of experience and horizons of expectation; fourth, the competing visions and revolutions of rising expectations, especially when it came to minorities; and, finally, the new tension between nationalism and internationalism. In his conclusion, Leonhard argued that World War I must not be seen as a coherent and monolithic historical entity that has its “before” and “after” but as a series of events and developments characterized by continuities as well as discontinuities.

On March 23, the conference’s series of panels began with a panel on “Treaties and the Making of the Postwar Order.” In the first paper, Jesse Kauffman reassessed the Peace of Brest-Litovsk by challenging the ways in which German and American historiographies have dismissed the document. He sought to reconsider the peace agreement by laying out how their intervention in the Ukraine drew Germany and Austria into this regional conflict. Both powers aimed to halt the Russian empire’s disintegration and to support their own war efforts.
in the West. In contrast to these short-term goals, Kaufman acknowledged that the long-term goals are harder to trace because the border situation between Russia, Poland, and the Ukraine remained complicated. In the following paper, on the politics of recognition at the Paris Peace Conference, Leonhard Smith showed how, after the major political shifts at the end of the Great War, the recognition of states emerged as an important question for international law. Examining the cases of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and post-Ottoman Turkey, Smith stressed the tension between the constitutive and the declarative theory of recognition. Next, Tosh Minohara presented a longue-durée analysis of the contentious issue of the “racial equality clause” that Japanese delegates pushed, unsuccessfully, to get included in the League of Nations Covenant. Prior to the Great War, Japan had been marked by westernization, modernization and economic growth. Military victories, especially over Russia in 1905, had elevated Japan’s national pride. By proposing a racial equality clause in Paris, Minohara argued, the Japanese government was responding to legislation discriminating against Japanese immigrants in California. The peace settlement and legislation in the following years (e.g. the United States 1924 Immigration Act) led to a turn away from westernization. The Japanese felt rejected and humiliated by the West, and turned increasingly towards pan-Asianism.

The conference’s second panel, on “Wilsonianism and its Discontents,” combined perspectives on the principle of self-determination in European and colonial territories. Roberta Pergher focused on Fascist Italy and the rights of others, while Miklós Zeidler examined revisionism as a means of nation-building in interwar Hungary. Pergher’s paper explored the place of “others” in Fascist Italy’s colonial territories in Libya and in Northern Italy, both territories in which Italian claims to sovereignty were questioned. She argued that, appealing to the principle of self-determination, the fascists developed massive resettlement schemes to claim Italian sovereignty over the contested territories. Zeidler analyzed the centrality of territorial revisionism in Hungarian nationalism after the treaty of Trianon and pointed to its highly religious varnish. Hungary’s suffering was linked to the passion of Christ, while the neighboring countries were equated with Judas and the Allies with Pontius Pilate. Such ideas were infused into Hungarian schools by a mandatory school prayer “I believe in one Hungary... in the resurrection of Hungary,” constructing pride, national conservatism and religious traditions as collective memory.
In the first of a two-panel series on “Empires after the War,” Noriko Kawamura began by noting that the Japanese felt humiliated by Wilson and then offered an analysis of the post-World War I search for a new order in the Pacific. She traced how the group of pro-western politicians in Japan shrank after the Washington treaty imposed limits on Japanese naval power in the Pacific. This treaty slowed down naval mobilization for about a decade, but in its shadow a total war mentality against the U.S. arose. In the following presentation, Donal Hassett examined how the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of colonial soldiers during the Great War changed the relationship between France and its colonies. He showed how the “blood tax” of soldiers from the colonies nourished hopes for reforms and the granting of full citizenship rights throughout the empire. Different models and ideas were developed in Algeria, Madagascar and Senegal. While the French state promoted a narrative of imperial unity, activists in the colonies used the experience of war in a variety of ways, ranging from equal rights claims to nationalist visions.

The second of the two “Empires after the War” panels began with Sean Andrew Wempe’s presentation on colonial German responses to the Treaty of Versailles and the “colonial guilt” discourse. Reminding us that Germany had been the third largest colonial power after England and France, the paper showed how Germany was ostracized from the European “civilization mission” of colonialism. While German colonial rule was condemned as especially gruesome by the Allies, German colonial activists wrote revisionist histories of German imperialism stretching from the Crusades to the Hanse and their own time. From these narratives they derived moral superiority and advancement, and also sought to use the League of Nations as a forum for German colonial revisionism. Leila Fawaz then delivered a moving talk on World War I and the reshaping of daily life in the Eastern Mediterranean. She showed how strongly the Great War impacted the Middle East and its borders. To this day, commonly accepted narratives that could form a shared memory for the purposes of identity are missing. The discussion highlighted that the problems of missing memory and narratives also affect textbooks used in schools.

The conference’s second day concluded with a panel discussion at the Residence of the German Ambassador to the United States. After introductory words by the ambassador, Peter Wittig, the evening’s panel discussion was led off by Adam Tooze with a brief keynote on “1918: The Botched Entry into the American Century.” Tooze showed
how no state was fully satisfied with the outcome of the 1919 negotiations. Although Wilson envisioned peace without victory, this project failed, not least due to domestic and economic pressures. The keynote was followed by a panel discussion with Aviel Roshwald and Jeremi Suri, chaired by Heidrun Tempel. Suri questioned the U.S.-centrism of Tooze’s interpretation of the 1918–19 situation and the implication that the United States was the only global player that could have assured a better outcome. Instead, Suri suggested an interpretation that would focus more strongly on how diplomacy failed due to larger socio-political transformations from the end of the nineteenth century to the postwar period. Roshwald called attention to the ambiguities of the postwar settlements, especially with regard to the idea of ethnic nationalism enshrined in the League of Nations system and the gap it created between reality and promise.

The conference’s third day began with the fifth panel, on “Internationalisms.” Madeleine Herren-Oesch’s paper on the coincidence of densification and disentanglement characterized the postwar system as one that was designed to facilitate the circulation of goods, but not of people. Her analysis of ethnographic maps, population exchange, and the role of citizenship and passports demonstrated that although contemporaries regarded refugees and stateless people as evidence of temporary dysfunction, they had become a structural feature of the new world order. Herren-Oesch argued that these elements of disentanglement should be taken as a starting point for a “global history from below.” Next, Michele Louro examined Jawaharlal Nehru, the future prime minister of India, and his numerous links to antiimperialist networks in interwar Europe, where he also became a leading member of the League against Imperialism. Whereas Nehru is usually interpreted from a national, India-centered perspective, Louro stressed the deep and lasting impact that the experience of international comradeship and anti-imperial internationalism left on Nehru’s political thinking and action. In the panel’s final paper, Claudia Siebrecht investigated the role of youth education within the activities of the League of Nations. Exerting a moral and emotional appeal, the League tried to promote a change in mentality towards a more international world by targeting younger generations. It tried to influence school curricula and organize Christmas card exchanges between countries. These strategies can be understood as nation-building on an international level.

The sixth panel focused on “Post-war Economies / Labor and Economy after the War.” Anna Karla examined the material dimension
of reparations and the importance of deliveries in kind as a form of reparations. Explaining the involvement of the German building industry in projects of material reconstruction throughout Europe, she argued that these deliveries were burdensome for Germany but also a chance for the German economy to rebuild international business ties and create jobs. In the next paper, Madeleine Dungy investigated the discussions about labor migration in the International Labor Organization (ILO) as well as the Economic Committee of the League of Nations. While both organizations took on questions of labor migration, a highly controversial topic of the time, their course was largely marked by different forms of inaction. As a result, circulating property and money were often better protected in the interwar era than moving people. In the panel’s final presentation, Nicholas Mulder addressed the place of economic sanctions as one of the League of Nation’s means of peace-keeping and traced their role back to the spirit of blockade during the war. Whereas, before the Great War, sanctions had only been part of active warfare, the blockade against Germany was not lifted when fighting ended in 1918 but only terminated with the signing of the Versailles Treaty in 1919. Afterwards, Russia became an object of experimentation for economic warfare.

The conference’s final panel focused on the interwar problem of minority protection. Volker Prott portrayed the League of Nations as incubator for ideas and asked why the League failed to secure peace. One reason was the lack of hard power to enforce rules. This was evident in the minority treaties monitored by the Minority Section of the League, which relied on informal mechanisms and expert resolutions. Next, Laura Robson argued that there was an imperial genealogy of the postwar minority protection regime. According to Robson, the imperial prototype of the minority system was to be found in the capitulatory privileges imposed on the Ottoman Empire by the Great Powers throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Instead of constituting a step towards internationally guaranteed human rights, the legal regime of minority protection should be understood as a postwar recasting of nineteenth-century imperial practices in a language more appropriate to the interwar era.

In the round-table discussion that concluded the conference, Barbara Potthast commented on the conference from the perspective of Latin American history, noting how the Great War was a catalyst for social, cultural, political and economic developments in Latin America. Elizabeth Thompson emphasized the need for historians to question
agency in history and reiterated the different perspectives on the League of Nations, taking the Islamic world into account while pointing to the thwarted efforts by Syrian nationalists in 1918-19 to build an independent and modern state. Leonard Smith underscored the importance of two questions. First, what did “the world” actually mean in the interwar period? And second, who were considered a “people”? Adele Lindenmeyr noted that Russia had barely been mentioned at the conference although it had been an engine of unsettlement and had given rise to a new ideology that posed a powerful alternative to the West. The concluding discussion revealed how many aspects of the legacies of the Great War remain to be analyzed, including the history of emotions and examining the effects of damaged honor, studying the role of religion for states and nationality, and taking pacifism seriously as a global project of the time.

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