


An Evaluation on the Effectiveness of the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations between 1919 and 1922

Onur Ağkaya* 

Research Article

* Assoc. Prof. Dr., Bilecik Şeyh Edebali University,
Bilecik/TÜRKİYE
onuragkaya@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-3044-5978

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness and underlying determinism of the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations between 1919 and 1922. These were two pivotal historical developments that shaped international politics in the aftermath of the First World War, which was hoped to be 'the war to end all wars.' During this period, economic considerations emerged as the primary determinant of realpolitik. In particular, the economic dominance of the United States of America played a critical role in shaping the power dynamics among the victorious states responsible for drafting the Treaty of Versailles. From 1922 onwards, the international system began to shift from the unilateral hegemony of the British Empire to a Pax Anglo-Americana structure, driven in part by U.S. involvement and strategic interests. Although the League of Nations was conceived as a mechanism for fostering international cooperation and preventing future conflicts, it ultimately fell short of its ambitions due to insufficient resources and limited political backing. Drawing on a close analysis of the political and economic dynamics of the period, this study asserts that the Treaty of Versailles failed to restrain Germany and, instead of establishing a stable international system, contributed to further disorder. The study contends that this failure was attributed to diverging political visions among the victorious powers and the erosion of the pre-war capacities, which undermined any cohesive post-war settlement.

Keywords: Treaty of Versailles, League of Nations, First World War, international system, United States foreign policy

Versay Antlaşması'nın ve Milletler Cemiyeti'nin 1919 ve 1922 Arasındaki Dönemde Etkinliği Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme

Araştırma Makalesi

* Doç. Dr., Bilecik Şeyh Edebali Üniversitesi, Bilecik/TÜRKİYE
onuragkaya@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0003-3044-5978

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ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Versay Antlaşması ve Milletler Cemiyeti'nin 1919 ve 1922 yılları arasındaki etkinliğini ve belirleyiciliğini analiz etmektedir. "Tüm savaşlara son veren savaş" olması umulan Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nın ardından, uluslararası siyaseti şekillendirmesi düşünülen iki önemli tarihî gelişme olmuştur. Bu dönemde, realpolitik belirleyen unsurların başında ekonomik unsurlar gelmiştir. Bilhassa, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nin ekonomik üstünlüğü, Versay Antlaşması'nı hazırlayan galip devletler arasındaki güç dinamiklerinin şekillenmesinde belirleyici bir rol oynamıştır. 1922'den itibaren, uluslararası sistem, büyük ölçüde ABD'nin müdahil oluşu ve stratejik çıkarları doğrultusunda, Britanya İmparatorluğu'nun tek taraflı hegemonyasından Pax Anglo-Americana bir yapıya dönüştürmüştür. Her ne kadar, Milletler Cemiyeti, uluslararası iş birliğini teşvik etmek ve gelecekteki çatışmaları önlemek amacıyla tasarlanmış olsa da sınırlı kaynakları ve yetersiz siyasi destek nedeniyle hedeflerine ulaşamamıştır. Dönemin siyasi ve ekonomik dinamiklerine yönelik kapsamlı bir analiz temelinde bu çalışma, Versay Antlaşması'nın, Almanya'yı dizginleme hedefinden uzakta kalarak istikrarlı bir uluslararası sistem inşa etmek yerine daha fazla düzensizliğe yol açtığı sonucuna ulaşmıştır. Çalışmada, bu başarısızlık, savaş sonrası düzenin tutarlı bir biçimde kurulmasını engelleyen, galip devletler arasında farklılaşan siyasi vizyonlara ve savaş öncesi kapasitelerinin aşınmış olmasına atfedilmektedir.

Keywords: Versay Antlaşması, Milletler Cemiyeti, Birinci Dünya Savaşı, uluslararası sistem, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri dış politikası

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Introduction

The First World War, which was expected to be ‘the war to end all wars,’ had profound political and socio-economic impacts during the interwar period. The collapse of four major empires in the aftermath of the First World War left states in profound financial distress, compounded by widespread uprisings, the absence of adequate social welfare systems, devastating epidemics, the scars of battlefields, and the presence of millions of veterans, the wounded, orphans, and widows. By the end of the war, approximately eight million soldiers had perished, seven million civilians had been permanently disabled, and fifteen million individuals had been wounded to varying degrees. As Paul Kennedy, emphasises the majority of these casualties were drawn from ‘the people in the prime of their productive life.’¹

Despite the immense human suffering caused by the First World War, the outbreak of an even more catastrophic global conflict merely two decades later remains a central question in historical scholarship. Historians continue to explore this paradox through a wide range of interpretative frameworks and analytical approaches.² In the studies focusing on the post-First World War period, the general assumption emphasises the Great Powers’ failure to prevent the upcoming war. Evaluations of this period mainly focus on the causes that led to the Second World War and identify these as ‘the shortcomings of the peace agreements; the global economic crisis; Nazi expansionism, and Japanese expansionism in Asia.’³ In a nutshell, the Treaty of Versailles and its deficiencies are regarded as the main reasons that epitomised the failure of international politics following the First World War and paved the way for the Second World War.

Building upon this body of interpretations, the present study formulates the central research question: What were the principal factors that led to the failure of the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations? In addressing this question, it offers a historical re-evaluation of these factors within the specific political, economic, and diplomatic dynamics of the post-First World War period between 1919 and 1922. This study seeks to offer a new perspective by arguing that interpreting the interwar period merely as a phase in which states that felt wronged or marginalised prepared for revenge, while the victors attempted to maintain balance, provides only a partial explanation of the international system. Such a reading tends to overlook the broader structural and dynamic factors shaping the global order. Similarly, attributing the outbreak of the Second World War solely to the failure of the League of Nations and the lack of commitment from major powers such as the United States and Soviet Russia reflects a deterministic view. This perspective neglects a wide range of other critical factors, including the imperial ambitions of certain states—such as Japan—which perceived the postwar settlement, particularly the Treaty of Versailles, as insufficient for fulfilling their strategic objectives.

The first part of the study tackles the aims and demands of the belligerent states in the First World War and other states indirectly affected by the war during and after the Paris Peace Conference. The second part interprets the legal nature of the Treaty of Versailles, assesses the effectiveness of the League of Nations, and further analyses the inclusiveness and efficiency of the organisation. The third part evaluates the post-Versailles era up to 1922 and identifies

¹ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. (New York: Random House, 1987), 278.

² Anthony Adamthwaite, ‘Historians at War.’ *The Origins of the Second World War: An International Perspective*, Editor Frank McDonough (New York: Continuum, 2011), 507–509.

³ Andrew Heywood and Ben Whitham, *Global Politics*. 3rd Edition. (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 44.

the symptomatic historical cases that could be interpreted as precursors to the Second World War.

1. The Treaty Versailles as a 'Punitive Peace Agreement'

This section of the study discusses the dynamics of the international system and the great powers' policies during and after the Paris Conference, held in the run-up to the Versailles Treaty. Both before and after 1919, the most pressing challenge to the functioning of the international system was the absence of a balance of power. At the Paris Peace Conference, this imbalance was evident: there was neither a strong enough Britain to unilaterally assume global responsibility, nor a coalition of states capable of forming a stabilising alliance akin to the Holy Alliance of the 19th century. Nevertheless, when they acted together, Britain and the USA were the two powers that could change, transform, and impose the rules of international politics in Europe on other states. The economic power of the USA was at a level that could complement Britain's military and political power.

Despite being one of the victors of the war, Britain did not emerge stronger. In fact, managing its vast pre-1914 empire became increasingly difficult, weakening its ability to maintain effective control. However, France was not as influential as it had been during the *grande nation* era of Louis XIV and Napoleon; its international position and power declined after 1870.⁴ At the Paris Conference, held in this context, the different visions and demands of the states produced a 'lack of system' rather than a system. In this context, Versailles was not considered a 'peace agreement' in its complete sense; however, it brought more disorder than order.⁵

The most fundamental and explicit shortcoming of the Paris Conference in the short term was that after Russia withdrew from the First World War, the remaining Allies could not agree on how to treat Germany and where this country would be positioned in a new, sustainable European order. On the other hand, Bolshevik Russia did not participate in the negotiations, and the place of this state within the system could not be determined. Moreover, Britain and France provided military and financial support to the anti-Bolshevik struggle during this period.⁶ In this case, Sharp's view that 'there was no Soviet Russian government with which negotiations could be initiated' does not seem very valid.⁷ The architects of the peace intentionally postponed many issues, such as diplomatic isolation of Bolshevik Russia, which left such a vast territory and population outside the international system.

During the Paris Conference, the differences in vision and interests between the US, Britain, and France became explicit. US President Wilson aspired to render the globe a safer place for democracy, granting nations the right to self-determination⁸ and collective security under the League of Nations, and establishing a democratic Germany as soon as possible. British Prime Minister Lloyd George sought peace and complete recovery under the moderation of the Great

⁴ David Stevenson, 'France at the Paris Peace Conference: Addressing the Dilemmas of Security.' *French Foreign and Defence Policy 1918–1940: The Decline and Fall of a Great Power*, Editor Robert Boyce (London: Routledge, 2005), 10–29.

⁵ Patrick O. Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace After World War I: America, Britain and Stabilisation of Europe, 1919–1932*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 20–22.

⁶ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 22.

⁷ Alan Sharp, 'The Versailles Settlement: The Start of the Road to the Second World War?' *The Origins of the Second World War: An International Perspective*, Editor Frank McDonough (New York: Continuum, 2011), 15–33.

⁸ It is also important to highlight that Vladimir I. Lenin explicitly addressed the principle of national self-determination—namely, the right of nations to 'freely determine their own fate'—in his seminal 1917 work *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

Powers. French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau longed for security and to establish a new balance of power against Germany.⁹ Wilson and Lloyd George knew that a balance could not be established without integrating Germany into the system; however, France's political vision, financial situation, and public patience, which had suffered the war heavily on its soil, were fragile.¹⁰

Germany was excluded from participation in the Paris Peace Conference, with no negotiations involving the German delegation. Consequently, the German population referred to the Treaty of Versailles as the *Diktat von Versailles*, emphasising their perception of the treaty as an imposed and unjust *diktat*.¹¹ Germany and Austria were recognised as the only parties that resorted to war under the Treaty of Versailles and were accused. Therefore, those who wanted peace were portrayed solely as the victors. For example, the Treaty of Paris (1814), which emerged under similar conditions, showed both warring parties as volunteers for peace. As Steiger points out, there was 'not even a single phrase that included peace' in the Treaty of Versailles.¹² The prohibition of the unification of Austria and Germany was contrary to the principle of self-determination.¹³ According to the Saint-Germain and Trianon Treaties, Austria and Hungary were separated; Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was established were founded. Finland and Ukraine remained independent, as the new Baltic states were established with the agreements.¹⁴

According to Article 227 of the Treaty of Versailles, the trial of German Emperor Wilhelm II was ordered.¹⁵ This regulation is considered the forerunner of the right to try individuals as war criminals under the Article 53 of the United Nations Charter and the Nuremberg Trials.¹⁶ On the other hand, despite its deficiencies, the League of Nations was an essential step towards establishing and maintaining peace. War had not yet been banned; however, the Council was given the authority to intervene in resolving disputes, and a forum was established to facilitate the peaceful resolution of disputes.

According to Steiger, the first steps towards universal international law, shaped by the participation of multiple states, were taken through the Treaty of Versailles. However, punishment and unilateralism prevailed in Versailles instead of 'reciprocity and forgiveness.' Germany was held solely responsible for the war. The signing of separate agreements between the victors and the defeated was a practice adopted by the winning coalition to strengthen its power.¹⁷ Steiger further argues that peace was achieved under unfair conditions. He expresses this by stating that, although international law in 1919 aimed to ensure peace, it ultimately led to 'disappointments.'¹⁸ Lesaffer also draws attention to the fact that the Treaty of Versailles was 'the first punitive' peace between sovereigns since the Middle Ages, because it dealt a

⁹ Margaret Macmillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*. (New York: Random House, 2002), 28-31.

¹⁰ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 23, 24.

¹¹ Heinhard Steiger, 'Peace Treaties from Paris to Versailles.' *Peace Treaties and International Law in European History: From the Late Middle Ages to World War One*, Editor Randall Lesaffer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59-99.

¹² Steiger, 'Peace Treaties.'

¹³ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 61.

¹⁴ Erik Goldstein, *Wars and Peace Treaties 1816-1991*. (New York: Routledge, 1992) 44-46.

¹⁵ 'The Versailles Treaty', <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/partvii.asp> (A. D. 18.11.2024).

¹⁶ Mathias Schmoeckel, 'Consent and Caution: Lassa Oppenheim and his Reaction to World War I' *Peace Treaties and International Law in European History: From the Late Middle Ages to World War One*, Editor Randall Lesaffer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 270-288.

¹⁷ Steiger, 'Peace Treaties.'

¹⁸ Ibid.

severe blow to independence of the defeated states.¹⁹ However, the treaty also marks the first major step towards the era of international organisations. As one of the concrete examples of this, Article 13 of Part II of the Treaty of Versailles regulated the establishment of the International Labour Organization.²⁰

Morgenthau contends that a postwar balance of power capable of containing Germany was never successfully established.²¹ From this perspective, President Wilson failed to grasp the necessity of power politics in reconstructing the international order after the war. In contrast, France prioritised its national 'security' over seeking revenge or punitive measures. Its principal objective was to obtain concrete guarantees to deter any potential future aggression by Germany. In this context, France sought an alliance similar to the classical balance of power; however, this search was incompatible with the collective security approach. At the same time, the border arrangements demanded by France for Upper Silesia and Danzig contradicted the principle of self-determination.²² From the British perspective, Poland would strengthen France's position against Germany.²³ When the Curzon Line was drawn between Poland and Soviet Russia in the East, Poland was left facing Soviet Russia and Germany in the West. However, these were overly optimistic expectations regarding the power and capacity of this state.

The Rhineland, the Polish-German border problem, economic reconstruction, and reparations, and the pacification of Europe were expected to be resolved at the Paris Conference. However, these issues proved insoluble in the short and medium term.²⁴ After the Paris Conference, one of the participants, John Maynard Keynes, highlighted the 'impossibility of the payment system and the injustice suffered by Germany' in his study titled *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*.²⁵ As Cohrs argues, during the redrawing of borders, the seeds of future conflicts were being sown, whereas a status quo prepared for war management should have been established in the Balkans.²⁶

Concerning the world's other major powers, from China's perspective, despite all the humiliations of imperialism, China took the West as an exemplary model. However, the 'May Fourth Movement' was the culmination of the events for China. Around 200,000 Chinese had immigrated to Europe to work during the First World War and were now returning to their country.²⁷ The Chinese statesmen felt they had been wronged and then looked more sympathetically at the Soviets who had published the secret agreements. China did not sign the Treaty of Versailles but became a member of the League of Nations.²⁸ According to the

¹⁹ Randall Lesaffer, 'Introduction', *Peace Treaties and International Law in European History: From the Late Middle Ages to World War One*, Editor Randall Lesaffer (New York: Cambridge University Press 2004), 4.

²⁰ 'The Versailles Treaty.'

²¹ Hans Joachim Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 4th edition. (New York: Knopf, 1967) 4-27.

²² Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 49, 50.

²³ Piotr S. Wandycz, 'Poland and the Origins of the Second World War', *The Origins of the Second World War: An International Perspective*, Editor Frank McDonough (New York: Continuum, 2011), 374-393.

²⁴ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 46.

²⁵ Sharp, 'The Versailles Settlement', 21-24.

²⁶ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 25.

²⁷ Peter Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution 1895-1949*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) 155.

²⁸ Thomas W. Burkman, *Japan and The League of Nations: Empire and World Order (1914-1938)*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii's Press, 2008) 83.

Chinese policymakers, the US did not adhere to the Fourteen Principles either.²⁹ The Chinese demanded equality at the Paris Conference, but they were ignored.³⁰

Similar to China, Japan considered the issue of 'racial equality' more critical than the question of German colonies.³¹ When it could not get what it wanted at the Paris Conference on this issue, Japan announced that it would not sign the draft agreement if Germany could not retain its colonies in China. The Japanese openly viewed the League of Nations as a continuation of the old order, a tool in line with the interests of the United States and its allies, and an imposition of Anglo-American culture. The Twenty-One Demands they addressed to China during the First World War once again revealed that Japan's vision was both regional and expansionist.³² Under normal circumstances, the Covenant of the League of Nations conflicted with Japan's principle of imperial independence and with the Meiji Constitution. Japanese decision-makers were strict practitioners of *realpolitik*; however, they were wary of diplomatic isolation. Japan's decision to join the League of Nations was primarily driven by pragmatic and strategic considerations. Unlike the United States, which chose not to become a member, Japan opted for membership to safeguard its interests in the Shandong Peninsula and prevent the loss of territorial claims.³³

2. The Idea of the League of Nations as a Guarantor of Peace and War

South African Prime Minister Smuts proposed the idea of the League of Nations.³⁴ The League's peaceful conflict resolution mechanism was based on arbitration when necessary and on the principle of collective security — that is, the assistance of all other members to any state under attack. Thus, the League would function as a group of powerful nations guaranteeing world peace. In a more profound sense, the League of Nations expressed the moral power of world public opinion. The idea that emerged here was that the stronger states would take special responsibility. According to Smuts, '*The stronger could defend the rights of the weak.*'³⁵ In this respect, the League embodied the institutionalised responsibility of the great powers within the international system.

According to Wilson, '*the League's fundamental priority should be equality of rights.*'³⁶ In a private letter in 1917, Wilson stated that they could impose their ideas on their allies because they would be '*financially in our hands.*'³⁷ The only partner he needed to share his vision with was Britain. Wilson interpreted the League as an organisation whose mission was to guarantee its members' territorial integrity and political independence, and whose functioning was to be free of debate.³⁸ At this critical historical juncture, Wilson sought to appeal directly to global public opinion by undermining the traditional institution of diplomacy, both during and after the First World War. Grounded in the belief that outdated diplomatic practices had significantly contributed to the outbreak of war, Wilson's calls to dismantle the old order resonated with civil society organisations, such as the American Society for the Defense of

²⁹ Zarrow, *China in War*, 156–157.

³⁰ Burkman, *Japan and The League*, 21.

³¹ Macmillan, *Paris 1919*, 316–318.

³² Macmillan, *Paris 1919*, 328.

³³ Burkman, *Japan and The League*, 211–212.

³⁴ Macmillan, *Paris 1919*, 88–90.

³⁵ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 35–36.

³⁶ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*. (New York: Simon&Schuster, 1994) 227.

³⁷ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 224.

³⁸ Ruth Henig, 'The League of Nations: An Idea Before Its Time', *The Origins of the Second World War: An International Perspective*, Editor Frank McDonough (New York: Continuum, 2011), 34–49.

Peace and the 'League of Nations' in Britain, as well as with broader public opinion. Consequently, both British policymakers and influential pressure groups were inclined to support closer cooperation with the United States.³⁹

On the other hand, Wilson embodied the pinnacle of altruism, believing that Americans were a 'chosen' exemplary nation whose duty was to bring peace and righteousness to the Old World.⁴⁰ The world would only be better if it took the 'American example' for itself.⁴¹ This transformation and redefinition of international politics were felt throughout the international system after 1919. However, Wilson also sought to apply the Monroe Doctrine and the dynamics of American domestic politics to international conflict resolution.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the post-1919 international system, it is essential to assess the influence of the Third International and its executive body, the Comintern, which were both established in March 1919. Lenin, who regarded war as the only viable means for the 'spread of capitalism'⁴², called for the transformation of the 'imperialist war' into a civil war.⁴³ In the period preceding the Paris Peace Conference, he strategically appropriated one of Woodrow Wilson's most progressive principles—the right to self-determination⁴⁴—thereby positioning himself as a more credible figure in the eyes of 'resentful' nations like Soviet Russia and China, both of which exposed and condemned the existence of secret treaties. For Lenin, the next stage of the 'permanent revolution' was to be carried forward in the East.⁴⁵

The League of Nations was envisioned to have a Five-Power Executive Council comprising five powerful states—Britain, the United States, France, Italy, and Japan. Lord Cecil considered this mechanism the foundation of the League. The 'harmony of the Five Great Powers' was the institutional embodiment of great-powers cooperation.⁴⁶ The Secretariat would deal with administrative, humanitarian, economic, and social activities, as well as the protection of the rights of minorities in sixteen European countries and in the Middle East. At the same time, the Hague-based International Court of Justice and the International Labour Organization would be incorporated into the League of Nations. Wilson's vision of a world order based on the League could be accommodated with Britain's new hegemonic position.

The Covenant of the League of Nations acknowledged war as a persisting reality. The struggle against the aggressor was mentioned; however, how the aggressor's power would later be determined was not clearly defined. Yet, when the League was founded, the aggressor power was apparent: Germany. The League of Nations recognised the legitimacy of self-defence; however, it left an open door for the occupying side to claim it was acting in self-defence.⁴⁷

³⁹ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 29.

⁴⁰ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 30.

⁴¹ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 33–34.

⁴² Vladimir I., Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, (London: Penguin Books, 2010) 188.

⁴³ Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, Editor Gabriele Wight and Brian Ernest Porter (New York: Holmes&Meier, 1992) 225.

⁴⁴ For an in-depth comparative analysis of the differing interpretations of the principle of self-determination as articulated by Wilson and Lenin, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39–43.

⁴⁵ Isaac Deutscher, *The Unfinished Revolution: Russia 1917–1967*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 20.

⁴⁶ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 42.

⁴⁷ Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, Editor Hedley Bull and Carlsten Holbraad. (London: Continuum, 2004) 111.

Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations introduced the ‘mandatory system,’ which ended the expansion of imperial powers across the African continent.⁴⁸ According to the article, Iraq and Palestine, the remaining territories of the Ottoman Empire, were placed under the mandate of Great Britain, except for Syria, which was placed under the mandate of France. These states, which were classified as ‘Group A,’ would remain under the mandate of these two powers for a short period of time, until they could govern themselves independently.’ The tropical ethnic groups of Africa, defined as ‘Group B,’ would be governed by Europeans for a few decades — a period not fully specified — until they achieved economic and political development. Togo was placed under the administration of France and Great Britain, Cameroon was assigned to France, Tanganyika to Britain, and Ruanda-Urundi to Belgium. Finally, it was decided that the peoples referred to as ‘primitive’ by the Western powers — particularly those living in the Pacific and Southwest Africa — would be placed under the mandate system ‘for a few centuries, if not forever.’⁴⁹ Accordingly, Southwest Africa was assigned to the South African rule, New Guinea to Australia, Samoa to New Zealand, and the Marshall Islands, Carolines and Marianas to Japan. Louis argues that ‘the C mandates’ were regarded by states as buffer zones against potential threats.⁵⁰

From the British and French perspective, a referendum in Syria, Palestine, or Iraq could not have been expected to yield positive results. The principle of self-determination, which was inherently ambiguous, would have produced negative consequences for the great powers had it been applied to South Africa.⁵¹ In this context, the approach towards the ‘savages,’⁵² who were considered unable to govern themselves and which had prevailed since the 17th century, was reflected in the ‘C’ mandates. As Burkman aptly notes, states considered mandates as forms of territorial annexation.⁵³ France’s provision of troops from the ‘B’ mandates constituted a striking example of this perception of mandates held by states.

The United States and Soviet Russia did not become members of the League of Nations. Britain and France continued to lose power. The Quadruple Alliance at the Paris Conference had quickly disintegrated; Italy, arguably a great power,⁵⁴ had also withdrawn from the agreement. Those who made the peace at Versailles knew that conflicts were inevitable after the conference. Therefore, it was necessary to establish the rules and mechanisms to manage conflicts. However, by excluding Germany from the system in the first place, it became impossible to achieve a sustainable framework for managing conflicts.⁵⁵ Indeed, France’s demands and domestic political pressures were influential in the decisions taken against Germany.⁵⁶

Henig argues that the League was not inherently flawed; however, its goals were excessive and overly optimistic.⁵⁷ Oppenheim also states that the Council, in its existing form, could not constitute a society of all states, but rather one dominated by the Great Powers. Accordingly,

⁴⁸ ‘The Covenant of the League of Nations’, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp (A. D. 19.11.2024).

⁴⁹ Roger Louis, ‘The Era of The Mandates System and the Non-European World’, *The Expansion of International Society*, Editor Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 201-213.

⁵⁰ Louis, ‘The Mandates System.’

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Steiger, ‘Peace Treaties.’

⁵³ Burkman, *Japan and The League*, 72.

⁵⁴ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall*, 205–208.

⁵⁵ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 47.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Henig, ‘The League of Nations.’

the League of Nations could not become a state, a federal state, or a federation of states.⁵⁸ According to Wight, the absence of Russia from the League of Nations would have more severe consequences than that of the United States. This was because, in a Europe without Russia, it did not seem possible to create a balance of power. The events in Russia rendered the country a source of uncertainty for the Western powers, and at times even a 'myth,' beginning with the Paris Conference.⁵⁹ As mentioned before, the Allies' initial response was to support the anti-Bolshevik struggle in Ukraine, and troops were deployed to several regions within Russia.⁶⁰

Germany would also frequently resort to 'revolutionary blackmail' by drawing the attention of the Allies to strikes and uprisings within its territory. Kissinger considers it understandable that Soviet Russia, which had concluded a separate peace treaty with Germany aimed at the total elimination of statehood, was not invited to the Paris Conference.⁶¹ Trotsky had already conducted direct propaganda against German soldiers during the peace talks in 1917.⁶² Russia's sincerity was not trusted, and expansion was regarded as inherent to revolutions, much like that of revisionist powers.

3. The Post-Versailles Order and the Footsteps of War

According to Taylor, a war between Britain, France, and Germany was already inevitable by the time the Treaty of Versailles was signed. Accordingly, the main reasons for the instability following Versailles were regarded as, first, the United States' avoidance of responsibility; second, the diverging policies of Britain and France; and finally, Germany's non-recognition of the treaty.⁶³ France's veto against Germany was exercised at Versailles; however, later, with the Locarno Pact and the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, France would be compelled to take more concrete steps.

Germany considered the agreement 'the final triumph of old-fashioned power politics and a dying idea of the imperialist and capitalist tendency to punish Germany.'⁶⁴ The Germans regarded the agreement as a shameful peace *diktat* imposed upon them. International propaganda was launched, particularly by the founding elites of the new Weimar Republic, asserting that Germany had been wronged.⁶⁵

It is widely assumed that the Treaty of Versailles paved the way for the Second World War. According to this line of reception, 'the agreement aimed to punish rather than to make peace.'⁶⁶ The real question that arises at this point is to what extent Germany — which did not experience the war on its own soil — actually lost the war, and whether the punishment envisaged by the treaty could prevent a new conflict.

The League of Nations lacked the power and will to achieve the goals it had envisioned. Collective security could not go beyond being an abstract concept. The reports it prepared on arms reduction were not binding on member governments and thus rendered the League

⁵⁸ Schmoeckel, 'Consent and Caution.'

⁵⁹ Macmillan, *Paris 1919*, 67–86.

⁶⁰ Stephen J. Lee, *European Dictatorships 1918–1945*, Fourth Edition (New York: Routledge, 2016) 44–45.

⁶¹ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 260–263.

⁶² Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879–1921*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 357–361.

⁶³ Cited in Frank McDonough, 'Introduction', *The Origins of the Second World War: An International Perspective*, Editor Frank McDonough (New York: Continuum, 2011), 3.

⁶⁴ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 51, 52.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Sharp, 'The Versailles Settlement.'

dysfunctional. Additionally, the states viewed the territories placed under trusteeship through the Permanent Mandates Commission as new colonies. In a speech to the House of Commons in 1939, Stafford Cripps defined *Britain's Middle East policy* in the 1930s and 1940s as 'the extension of the British Empire by treaties rather than conquest.'⁶⁷

Kennan argues that Wilson had to make political concessions to France to establish the League of Nations. He describes Wilson's 'optimistic' policy as the illusion of an interstate community that did not exist in reality.⁶⁸ Despite being seen as a 'stubborn theorist' and an example of unsuccessful politics within the system after 1919, Wilson's ideas of a stable liberal world order, collective security and self-determination remained the founding principles of the new order after 1945.⁶⁹

As a result, the era of 'European international law' came to an end with the 1919 Paris Conference. However, the conference constituted the first step towards a universal system of international law. At the same time, non-European powers—effectively the United States and formally Japan—determined the fate of the European powers for the first time. Therefore, the system shifted from a Eurocentric system to a transatlantic axis of power.

French diplomat Jules Cambon described Versailles as merely an '*improvisation*' (a temporary arrangement), while General Foch famously called it as a twenty-year armistice.⁷⁰ While concerns about 'German revenge' increased in France following the Paris Conference, public opinion in Britain increasingly believed that Germany had been mistreated. For instance, Keynes, who had attended the Paris Conference, argued that the 'imposed peace' on Germany would destroy Germany itself and the economy of the entire continent. Germany, held solely responsible for the war under Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles and excluded from the peace negotiations, soon attracted widespread sympathy through propaganda claiming that it had been mistreated.

Meanwhile, France found itself in a 'war atmosphere' due to the non-payment of reparations, and Europe was increasingly seen as drifting back into classical power politics. France, unable to secure the support of the US and Britain, sought to guarantee its security through alliances with Poland and Czechoslovakia that explicitly targeted Germany. While France was still seeking security against Germany, the divergence of opinion between the US and France had deepened. In other words, the Versailles crisis persisted.⁷¹

Beginning in 1920, the structural problems generated by the Treaty of Versailles continued. The Arab territories of the Middle East, formerly under Ottoman rule, were placed under British and French control through the mandate system. For Britain, maintaining dominance over Egypt—because of its strategic control over the route to India—and securing access to Iraq's oil reserves were of critical geopolitical importance. Egypt was granted independence in 1922; however, Britain's control over Egypt's foreign affairs continued. The Sykes-Picot Agreement, the San Remo Conference of 1920, and the Balfour Declaration of 1917 had largely shaped the Middle East. After 1920, in addition to the Arab uprisings, Palestine became a region that Britain struggled to control during the interwar period.⁷² At the same time,

⁶⁷ Louis, 'Era of The Mandates.'

⁶⁸ George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy 1900–1950*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951) 46.

⁶⁹ Wight, *International Theory*, 121.

⁷⁰ Sharp, 'The Versailles Settlement.'

⁷¹ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 69, 70.

⁷² T. G. Fraser, 'The Middle East and the Coming of War', *French Foreign and Defence Policy 1918–1940: The Decline and Fall of a Great Power*, Editor Robert Boyce (London: Routledge, 2005), 325-341.

Gandhi's revolutionary movement in India gained momentum. The 'Indian Army' was as essential to Great Britain as the navy; as the country was gradually losing power, giving up control there was out of the question.⁷³

Meanwhile, colonised and subjugated societies closely followed the armed resistance in Anatolia by the Turkish national movement under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, that rejected the Treaty of Sèvres. This resistance posed a major challenge to the legitimacy of the international order imposed by the post-First World War settlement. The new states envisioned by the Treaties of Versailles, Saint-Germain, Trianon, and Sèvres were established without consideration of the aspirations and interests of the populations inhabiting those territories. As a result, these treaties not only ignored local agency but also led to the emergence of numerous minority groups who suddenly found themselves becoming citizens of foreign states.⁷⁴ Accordingly, these agreements generated new areas of conflict and acute humanitarian crises.

Following the withdrawal of the United States from active involvement in European affairs, Britain was compelled to address the issue of reparations in a way designed to appease France and accelerate the process of Anglo-French rapprochement. Germany, as Britain's largest trading partner and a pivotal actor in the reconstruction of a stable European order, had to be reintegrated into the international system without delay. Under these conditions, German inclusion became imperative for the restoration of European equilibrium. Meanwhile, Soviet Russia remained diplomatically isolated, and France actively sought to establish an anti-Soviet alliance.

After 1919, the economic dimension of international relations acquired an unprecedented level of significance in shaping the global order. By 1920, the United States held substantial financial claims—amounting to \$9.5 billion from France and \$4.2 billion from Britain—highlighting its emerging role as a pre-eminent economic power in the postwar international system.⁷⁵ The economic system had become a complex web of financial dependencies in which the United States provided credit to Germany; Germany paid (or failed to pay) war reparations to France and Britain, and these two countries paid their debts to the United States. Therefore, Germany and Russia first had to establish political rapprochement centred on economic cooperation. Initially, limited treaties were proposed to France at the Cannes Conference and later at Genoa, but without success.⁷⁶

Britain attempted to address Europe's ongoing problems without US support at the Cannes and Genoa Conferences. The failure of the United States to join the League of Nations also reduced the League's value in Britain's eyes. During these two conferences, the Rapallo Agreement, signed between Russia and Germany, had already significantly damaged Britain's

⁷³ For a study that narrates the case of the Indian soldiers fought in the World War I see Claude Markovits, 'Indian Soldiers' Experiences in France During World War I: Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front', *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia*, Editor Heike Liebau et al. (Boston: Brill, 2010), 25-54.

⁷⁴ Edward H. Carr, *International Relations Between The Two World Wars: 1919–1939*. (Hong Kong: Macmillan, 1947) 4-13.

⁷⁵ Denise Artaud, 'Reparations and War Debts: The Restoration of French Financial Power, 1919–1927', *French Foreign and Defence Policy 1918–1940: The Decline and Fall of a Great Power*, Editor Robert Boyce (London: Routledge, 2005), 88-105.

⁷⁶ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 71, 72.

prestige. However, the Genoa Conference was crucial, as it marked the first time since 1919 that Germany re-entered the international arena.⁷⁷

British political decision-makers realised that Britain could no longer act as the world's policeman and that the *Pax Britannica* had ended. At the same time, France's new Prime Minister Poincaré acted decisively on matters concerning his country's security and reparations. The decision to occupy the Ruhr region on March 8, 1921⁷⁸, only accelerated France's diplomatic isolation—perhaps because, as Cohrs notes, the US and Britain had already determined their attitudes towards France ever since the Paris Conference.⁷⁹ During this period, the Italian nationalist intelligentsia, who had failed to obtain their desired gains at Versailles, also directed their resentment towards France in 1920.⁸⁰

The divergent interpretations that states ascribed to the League of Nations became especially evident during the deliberations of the Geneva Council in December 1920. These differences became most evident in debates over Article 10, which was criticised for lacking a precise definition of the term 'aggressor.' At the same time, it was requested that Article 16, which was vague about the economic sanctions to be applied to the 'aggressor', should be clarified. According to Carr, it was unsurprising that France, urging a concrete guarantee against Germany, would continue to put pressure on Britain until 1923.⁸¹ During these three years, known as the Geneva Spirit, a platform emerged where smaller states could put pressure on great powers and where 'international norms' were established, thanks to the League of Nations.⁸²

The Permanent Mandates Commission commenced its activities in 1921. In the fourteen territories placed under the mandate system, regular reporting on governance practices was instituted. Mandate oversight also incorporated a social dimension: provisions were made to include at least one female member in discussions concerning the conditions of women and children. In addition, a representative from the International Labour Organization was involved in evaluations related to labour conditions. These measures reflected a broader effort to institutionalise international oversight and humanitarian standards within the mandates system. The commission aimed to monitor the administrative practices of the mandatory powers; however, many difficulties were encountered in practice. One of the most essential features of the Permanent Mandates Commission was its commitment to the principle of 'preserving culture.'⁸³ In this respect, the Permanent Mandates Commission maintained the ethos of responsibility towards the colonies that had begun with the Congo Charter. Wight points out that the Permanent Mandates Commission was a more effective institution than the United Nations Trusteeship Commission. Unlike the Trusteeship Commission, the Permanent Mandates Commission appointed experts, not politicians.⁸⁴

Although the United States did not join the League of Nations, this did not mark a complete retreat from European affairs or global politics. Its engagement was evident in a series of

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ John F. V. Keiger, 'Raymond Poincaré and the Ruhr Crisis', *French Foreign and Defence Policy 1918–1940: The Decline and Fall of a Great Power*, Editor Robert Boyce (London: Routledge, 2005), 49-70.

⁷⁹ Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace*, 74.

⁸⁰ Pierre Gullien, 'Franco-Italian Relations in Flux, 1918–1940', *French Foreign and Defence Policy 1918–1940: The Decline and Fall of a Great Power*, Editor Robert Boyce (London: Routledge, 2005), 148–162.

⁸¹ Carr, *International Relations Between*, 28-29.

⁸² Henig, 'The League of Nations.'

⁸³ Burkman, *Japan and The League*, 126-127.

⁸⁴ Wight, *International Theory*, 79.

initiatives, beginning with the 1922 Washington Conference and continuing through the 1924 Dawes Plan and the 1929 Young Plan.⁸⁵ While the Senate's refusal to ratify the Treaty of Versailles reinforced the image of American isolationism, the United States in practice pursued an active diplomatic agenda and did not hesitate to take on significant economic responsibilities. As Cohrs notes, despite remaining outside the League, the United States adopted a notably pragmatic and '*realistic economic policy*.'⁸⁶

After 1922, the United States' policy of peaceful change was rooted in a reconfiguration of international norms and practices, largely shaped by the Wilsonian vision of global order. Within this framework, the concept of 'cooperation' transcended conventional understandings of alliances or political integration, and instead emphasised the broader principles of mutual understanding, institutional dialogue, and rule-based engagement in international affairs. As Cohrs argues, in the aftermath of the Washington Conference, the United States sought to establish a *Pax Americana* based on goodwill and reciprocal respect, deliberately avoiding the use of military force.⁸⁷ From this point onward, the international system increasingly evolved into a *Pax Anglo-Americana*, shaped by the converging interests and diplomatic leadership of both the US and Great Britain.

Just before the Genoa Conference, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Georgia handed over control of their foreign affairs to Mosco. In this way, Soviet Russia was showing signs of expansion. The Baltic Conference held in March 1922, which was considered unsuccessful, reinforced this perception. In 1923, Ukraine, Belarus, and Transcaucasia reaffirmed that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics would manage their foreign relations.⁸⁸ At the same time, domestic political shifts within these states set the stage for broader changes that would disrupt the balance of the international community. In June 1922, German Foreign Minister Rathenau was assassinated.⁸⁹ This incident revealed the extent to which nationalism had intensified in Germany. On November 8, 1923, Hitler attempted his first 'unsuccessful coup.'⁹⁰ France's occupation of the Ruhr proved that exerting excessive pressure on Germany would drive the country toward political radicalism.

After Mussolini came to power on October 30, 1922, Italy began to pursue an aggressive policy, annexing Fiume to its territory in 1923 through a *fait accompli* and occupying the Greek island of Corfu in the same year. The policy of appeasement followed by Britain after Greece's application to the League of Nations is one of the most important indicators of the prevailing belief that sacrificing small powers was necessary to maintain the balance of power in the international system.⁹¹ As Togliatti rightly points out, the political decision-makers of the time failed to grasp that the structures of the fascist movements in Germany and Italy differed fundamentally, nor did they recognise the danger these movements posed for the years to come.⁹²

⁸⁵ Manfred Jonas, 'American Isolationism and the Coming of the Second World War', *The Origins of the Second World War: An International Perspective*, Editor Frank McDonough (New York: Continuum, 2011), 429-445.

⁸⁶ Patrick O. Cohrs, 'A Pivotal Power: The United States and the International System of the Inter-War Period', *The Origins of the Second World War: An International Perspective*, Editor Frank McDonough (New York: Continuum, 2011), 446-465.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Lee, *European Dictatorships*, 50.

⁸⁹ Martin Kitchen, *A History of Modern Germany 1800-2000*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 229.

⁹⁰ Kitchen, *Modern Germany 1800-2000*, 233.

⁹¹ Wight, *Power Politics*, 214.

⁹² Palmiro Togliatti, *Lectures on Fascism*. (New York: International Publishers, 1976) 2-3.

The Independence Movement in Türkiye emerged in 1919 and successfully concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. During the conference, the struggle between Britain and Soviet Russia—particularly over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles—demonstrated that Russia was slowly recovering, was no longer isolated, and remained a power to be taken seriously. At the same time, the Treaty of Lausanne marked the end of the most violent resistance the Versailles System had encountered.

Conclusion

This study has argued that the Treaty of Versailles not only failed to establish a stable international order in the aftermath of the First World War but also actively contributed to systemic disorder between 1919 and 1922. In this period, Britain misjudged France's efforts to restrain Germany and secure binding guarantees, interpreting these initiatives as an attempt to assert continental hegemony. Conversely, from France's perspective, Britain's stance was perceived as a strategy to expand its continental influence by leveraging its superior economic position.

Simultaneously, a public narrative emerged, particularly in Britain and the United States, that Germany had been unfairly treated by the peace terms. Yet this perception did not prevent the rise of nationalist movements within Germany following the occupation of the Ruhr, which paradoxically emboldened German ambitions rather than subdued them. In parallel, the United States took decisive steps towards achieving its global strategic aims, and from 1922 onwards, the international system gradually began to take shape within a *Pax Anglo-Americana* framework.

A core argument in this study is the central role of economic and financial devastation following the First World War as the primary determinant of international politics in the early interwar years. The war debt and reparation issue not only shaped the policies of the victorious states towards Germany but also redefined *realpolitik* by placing economic considerations at the heart of diplomatic decision-making. The establishment of the League of Nations, while conceptually significant as an institutional effort to promote international cooperation, ultimately suffered from a lack of consensus among the victorious states regarding its purpose and function. Its lofty aspirations were starkly at odds with its limited means and support. As its ineffectiveness became increasingly apparent, imperialist and fascist regimes initiated military aggression and territorial expansion with impunity, actions the League was ostensibly created to prevent.

This study underscores the often-overlooked economic dimension as a key variable in the failure to secure a lasting peace. Just as Britain's dominance during the era of *Pax Britannica* rested as much on economic primacy as on naval power, the post-war order required a coherent and credible economic vision. However, the United States—viewing international politics through the lenses of commerce and managerial efficiency—was unable or unwilling to offer the kind of systemic leadership that continental Europe required. The gap between American economic pragmatism and European political expectations undermined disarmament efforts and left the international order precariously exposed. Consequently, the ideal of collective security was gradually abandoned, and realist calculations returned to dominate states' behaviour, laying the groundwork for the eventual outbreak of the Second World War.

Finally, the study draws attention to a critical precedent established by Article 227 of the Versailles Treaty, which called for the prosecution of Kaiser Wilhelm II. This provision laid

the foundation for the legal framework underpinning the prosecution of war crimes, later formalised in Article 53 of the United Nations Charter and exemplified by the Nuremberg Trials. The enduring legacy of these legal innovations remains salient today, as illustrated by recent developments such as the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. These legal instruments, rooted in the post-Versailles international order, continue to shape debates on international law, conflict resolution, and transitional justice – ensuring the Treaty's relevance across a range of disciplines in the social sciences.

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