

Christopher Luvisi
Whitman-Hanson Regional School District
A More Perfect Union: Third Year
August 24, 2011

Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World

Margaret MacMillan's book on the World War I Peace Conference, appropriately titled *Paris 1919* thoroughly explores the complex negotiations which helped to both restore order following the most destructive war the world had ever seen and at the same time sow the seeds of World War II. It has often been said by historians that the Treaty of Versailles was nothing more than a twenty year armistice and after reading MacMillan's book that famous quote becomes abundantly clear. Before deconstructing *Paris 1919*, it is helpful for those looking to sample the book to read the first paragraph of the introduction,

For six months in 1919, Paris was the capital of the world. The Peace Conference was the world's most important business, the peacemakers its most powerful people. They met day after day. They argued, debated, quarreled and made it up again. They created new countries and organizations. They dined together and went to the theater together, and between January and June, Paris was at once the world's government, its court of appeal and its parliament, the focus of its fears and hopes. Officially, the Paris Peace Conference lasted into 1920, but those first six months are the ones that count, when the key decisions were taken and the crucial chains of events set in motion. The world has never seen anything quite like it and never will again.¹

MacMillan uses the relationship between America's Woodrow Wilson, France's Georges Clemenceau and England's Lloyd George as the focus of her book, but the perspective of all nations present in Paris is analyzed. Perspective is perhaps the most appropriate word one can use to summarize MacMillan's work, as she explores in great detail what each nation hoped to obtain from the peace conference and why. This essay has two purposes; first, to demonstrate

¹ MacMillan, Margaret. *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*. New York: Random House, 2002. P: i

MacMillan's impressive use of perspective and second, to describe how reading this book has enhanced my ability as an educator including examples of possible lesson plans.

When Woodrow Wilson departed for Paris on December 4, 1918 he possessed the loftiest ambitions for peace. Wilson, who won re-election in 1916 under the campaign slogan "He kept us out of the war" was thrust into the role as commander-in-chief following America's entry into World War I. Suddenly, the man who kept Americans out of war had to convince his country that America was fighting for a noble cause. This would be "The war to end all wars," the victory that would "make the world safe for democracy" and these convictions were brought to life through Wilson's Fourteen Points. Wilson and his Fourteen Points received a warm embrace from the Parisians, "His train pulled into the Luxembourg station, which had been festooned with bunting and flags and filled with great masses of flowers. As guns boomed across Paris to announce Wilson's arrival, the crowds started to press against the soldiers who lined the route."² This excerpt, I believe, demonstrates MacMillan's use of emotion. Paris after World War I was a highly charged atmosphere and the author does a very good job of conveying that to the reader.

Wilson was admired for his determination to achieve world peace. Wilson's convictions, however, would not be as warmly received by those statesmen seeking either the fruits of war, even retribution. MacMillan provides a number of major issues which America, France and England had differences, but perhaps none were as important as what to do with Germany. In the section "The German Issue" several chapters are dedicated to showing the major disagreements which existed within the Supreme War Council.

The Allies agreed that Germany should both be punished for its role in starting the war as well as prevented from possibly starting a war in the future. Clemenceau wanted to strip Germany of the Rhineland, speaking to Wilson's chief aid, Colonel House days before Wilson

² Ibid. P: 16.

arrived, Clemenceau remarked, “France would never be content unless it was secured against a repetition of 1914 and... this security could only be given by drawing the frontier against the Rhine. France had the right to expect that if there was to be another war, it should not take place on French soil.”³ Wilson, possessing a more objective vision than his French counterpart recognized that such strict peace terms may only lead to another war later on down the road.

Wilson had difficulty bending to Clemenceau’s demand regarding French ownership of the Rhineland. Although Wilson does recognize in the eighth of his Fourteen Points that “All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored” he only offers the return of Alsace-Lorraine, leaving out the Rhineland.⁴ MacMillan explains France’s historical claims, but also offers Wilson’s rebuttal “You base your claim on what took place a hundred and four years ago. We cannot readjust Europe on the basis of such conditions which existed in such a remote period.”⁵ The Germany issue therefore became symbolic of a French and American diversion with respect to how to proceed. MacMillan paints Wilson as a visionary, perhaps more idealist than pragmatist, committed to preventing another world war. Clemenceau meanwhile is depicted as an angry, cunning politician seeking revenge.

Outside of Alsace-Lorraine and other German land, war reparations was perhaps the most divisive issue surrounding the Peace Treaty. One representative of the American Treasury in Paris has said “The subject of reparations caused more trouble, contention, hard feeling and delay at the Paris Peace Conference than any other point of the Treaty.”⁶ France still harbored great resentment toward Germany over the harsh treatments endured following the Franco-

³ Ibid. P: 174

⁴ Ibid. P: 496

⁵ Ibid. P: 195

⁶ Ibid. P: 180

Prussian War of 1870-1871, including 5 billion in gold francs and forfeiture of Alsace-Lorraine.⁷ France had lost almost an entire generation of men, how does one begin to put a price tag on such destruction? MacMillan expresses empathy regarding the position of France and Germany using logical statements from Lloyd George such as “Somebody has to pay. If Germany cannot pay it, it means the British taxpayer has to pay.”⁸ The issue was, however, very complicated. As MacMillan states,

What should be included in the reparations bill therefore assumed great importance because of affected sharing out the spoils. France had suffered the most direct damage, Belgium the next most, but Britain had spent the most. There were also intense debates over the question over how much Germany could pay. If the figure were set too high, the German economy might collapse, which would not help British exporters. If too low, Germany would be getting away lightly; it would also recover more quickly, a prospect that worried the French.⁹

Overall, MacMillan’s ability to dissect the “Germany Issue” while capturing the anger and emotion of the French, pragmatism of the British and idealism of the Americans provides for a rich perspective.

When reading any book of history it is important to be thinking of how I can transfer the knowledge I have gained to my students. There are a number of ways in which *Paris 1919* could be adapted to the classroom. One particular way in which the book could be implemented is by dividing it up into various sections and then assigning students roles to research and then ultimately debate. For example, regarding debt repayment, students would be broken up into Germany, the United States, France and Britain (depending on class size other countries may be assigned). Then, each would read Part Four - “The German Issue” (pp: 157-194). Students would be given time for additional research to expand upon classroom discussion over German debt.

⁷ Ibid. P: 162

⁸ Ibid. P: 180

⁹ Ibid. P: 181

The goal, however, would be for each group to argue the solution from the historical perspective of the country which they are representing. This approach could be done with all seven sections of MacMillan's book. In all, the sections grapple with the post-war questions surrounding Russia and the Bolsheviks, the Balkans, China and Japan, the Middle East and other important topics as well. Each section offers several countries that are most impacted or involved with the respective issue and the model outlined through Germany could be adapted to any of the topics discussed by MacMillan.

Finally, MacMillan does a superb job of simplifying the content explored in each chapter. The Peace Conference consumed so many countries, each with their own complex approach to each problem presented at the conference. MacMillan does not overwhelm the reader she explores each issue separately, with the relationship between Wilson, George and Clemenceau serving as the most consistent theme of her book. Overall, I found the book highly informative and perhaps most importantly adaptable to the classroom.

Bibliography

MacMillan, Margaret. *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*. New York: Random House, 2002.