

## An inept and flawed peace

Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War* (John Murray, 2003)

Reviewed by **Cllr Peter Truesdale**

This is a necessary book. Briskly and clearly it chronicles the proceedings of the Paris Peace Conference. And not only does it fill a gap in the market, but MacMillan strikes a judicious balance between detail and overview and has a handy way with pen portraits. Yet in performing her task MacMillan begs a number of questions.

The first question begged concerns the relationship between the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and that of Versailles. Brest-Litovsk shed brutal clarity on the German war aims (or what the German war aims had become by 1917). Can there be any doubt that a similarly Carthaginian peace settlement would have been imposed on the western front in the event of victory by the Central Powers?

By contrast the peace settlement devised by the allied powers was a ramshackle affair with local deals stitched up, former promises called in and secret deals half acknowledged. Brest-Litovsk was imposed by the victor on a vanquished but still functioning state. The same was not true of the peace determined at Paris: an armistice had been arrived at but Austria-Hungary had effectively disintegrated and Germany was convulsed by actual or threatened revolution. Furthermore, Brest-Litovsk was imposed by a state effectively controlled by the victorious military. By contrast the victorious European powers at Paris had publics exhausted by war with no stomach for the further military adventures necessary to impose a settlement upon the chaos of central Europe and the Balkans.

General Wilson admirably captured the dilemma of the peacemakers when he said to Lloyd George: 'It really is no use abusing this or that small state. The root of the evil is that the Paris writ does not run.'

General Wilson certainly proved wiser than his presidential namesake. It is hard to warm to Woodrow Wilson. He is reminiscent in his headstrong rectitude of that other diplomatic disaster of the twentieth century, Neville Chamberlain. Was Woodrow Wilson's judgement fundamentally flawed? Surely we must answer 'Yes'. The racial and language mosaic of middle Europe did not afford the redrawing of boundaries and the creation of new independent states without the creation of many new minorities. One might make allowances for Wilson's failure to recognise the structural differences between Moravia and Michigan, but his failure to secure the effective support of the Senate was inexcusable.

At least Wilson had, in the Fourteen Points, a coherent, if wrongheaded, vision of the Europe that he wished to see. Britain and France, on the other hand, lacked both the power to inflict a truly Carthaginian peace on Germany and the vision to forge a more peaceful and consensual Europe.

Another contrast with the past that suggests itself is with the Congress of Vienna. While arguably forged under more favourable circumstances, the Vienna settlement was more durable than that of 1919 – and certainly proved a more effective restraint on the former aggressor and disturber of European peace.

MacMillan rightly warns against judging the 1919 settlement in the light of its subsequent failure: 'It has become a commonplace to say that the peace settlements of 1919 were a failure, that they led directly to the Second World War. That is to overestimate their power.' She is technically correct but the incoherence of the process she describes in the body of the book only increases the suspicion that the peace was flawed and inept. The sixteen-page chapter on 'The End of the Ottomans' captures this beautifully and displays MacMillan's singular eye for incisive and amusing quotes.

MacMillan's chronicle of what happened will stand for a generation. The subject is now crying out for a more detailed study of the diplomatic roots of the settlement and a higher-level strategic analysis.

*Cllr Peter Truesdale is Leader of Lambeth Borough Council.*

