KENNETH INGRAM

YEARS OF CRISIS

An Outline of International History

1919–1945

LONDON

GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD

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by Kenneth Ingram

THE NIGHT IS FAR SPENT

SEX MORALITY TOMORROW

GUIDE TO THE NEW AGE

CHRISTIANITY—RIGHT OR LEFT?

TAKEN AT THE FLOOD

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BETWEEN THE WARS

CHAPTER 1

THE POST-WAR SETTLEMENT IS DRAWN UP

Background of the Peace Conference

THE period between 1918 and 1939 will be regarded by the historian of the future as invested with an extraordinary significance. He will realise that these are the years when a serious attempt was made to bring security to the world, and he will ask why this attempt should have proved so ignominious a failure, leading finally to the catastrophe of a second war. He will also realise that this is the kind of question which cannot be answered by simple and single explanations. It is not enough to claim, as some people too easily assume, that the failure was due to the decision of the Allies to conclude the Armistice prematurely, before Germany was sufficiently crushed: or, conversely, that she was treated too harshly; that the League of Nations was an impracticable ideal: or that the League would have provided the remedy had not the victorious Powers been disinclined wholeheartedly to make use of it. Some of these contentions may be comparatively justified. But history is a net-work of issues, and historical problems such as these are far too intricate to lend themselves to the type of rough-and-ready analysis which dogmatically minded people love to apply. The causes which produced the 1939 disaster do not lie conveniently near the surface. We shall have to weigh carefully and judicially the evidence which the events of these crucial years present, and only when we consider that we are in full possession of the relevant facts form our conclusions.

There is no doubt whatever that in 1918 the prevailing desire on the part of all the nations was to find a way of establishing permanent peace. The belligerent countries had emerged from an exhausting and devastating struggle: they had experienced the grim realities of the horrors of modern warfare. None of the neutrals had been unaffected by the upheaval and they were soon to be affected more

intimately by post-war dislocation. The motive for discovering a lasting settlement was therefore genuine enough, but from the first we can discern two distinct and largely conflicting theories as to how that settlement could be reached. The former of these theories was based on the belief that Germany was the sole guilty party, that she alone constituted the menace of war, and that she must therefore be reduced to utter impotence. This standpoint was represented mainly in French political circles. President Poincaré took the extreme view that Germany must be virtually wiped off the map, and Premier Clemenceau, though slightly less rigid in his opinions, advocated a wholesale disarmament of the enemy forces and territorial dismemberment. In Britain a general election had been won by Mr Lloyd George on the strength of the policy advocated by Lord Northcliffe: Germany must be bled white, she must pay to the "last farthing" for the damage she had caused to the devastated areas. A wave of indignation was sweeping across Britain which in its more extravagant forms expressed itself in such demands as that the Kaiser should be brought to trial and hanged. No one who glances through the columns of the leading English newspapers at the time of the Armistice can fail to observe the symptoms of an abnormal emotion which was infecting even those in responsible authority, which was certainly reflected by the majority in the new House of Commons, and which no doubt was itself a result of the strain and privation of the war-years.

We are bound to recognise how deeply this trend of emotional bitterness and disillusionment coloured the British political outlook in the Armistice period. In France, this same attitude was due perhaps less to emotional tendencies than to an uncompromising and calculating realism. This was not the first time that France had experienced the impact of the ruthless Prussian war-machine. To men like the veteran Clemenceau it was desperately necessary to deliver a final knock-out blow to Germany now that she lay prostrate; and unless we are able to appreciate the solid reasons for this standpoint we shall fail to understand the fundamental antagonism between it and the body of opinion which supported President Wilson and the Fourteen Points. This rival body of opinion was no less widespread. It had

found expression in the British Labour Party's peace manifesto of 1918 and in a small book which Mr H. G. Wells [1] had written earlier in the year. It was significant that when Woodrow Wilson landed in England, and whenever indeed he appeared in public, he was given by the war-weary crowds an enthusiastic demonstration. He was greeted no less fervently as the prophet of a new world by the crowds in Paris. But his authority rested on much more than popular acclamation. The principles which he had been enunciating since January 1918 had been accepted by the German Government under Prince Max of Baden in October. The enunciation of these principles had encouraged Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria to surrender unconditionally. They had led the Serbs, the Croats, the Czechs and the Slovenes to revolt against the imperialism of Vienna. The Allies, with certain reservations, had expressed their willingness to make the Fourteen Points the basis of a peace-settlement, and it was largely in the belief that this would be the nature of the treaty which had encouraged the enemy to sue for peace rather than prolong a hopeless but desperate resistance.

It is possible for us, at this distance of time, to perceive how radically incompatible were the Wilson policy and the idealistic opinion which supported it with the standpoint which regarded a complete subjugation of Germany as the prime necessity. Many of the Fourteen Points and the 'Principles,' 'Ends' and 'Particulars' which accompanied them were framed in such general terms that they could be subjected to very different interpretations; but the liberalism which they expressed was obvious enough. The main features of the Points were that covenants of peace should be 'openly arrived at': that there should be absolute freedom of navigation outside territorial waters both in peace and war: that all economic barriers between the nations should be removed: that 'adequate guarantees' should be 'given and taken' so that national armaments should be reduced 'to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety': that there should be 'free and impartial adjustment of colonial claims' on the principle 'that the interests of the populations must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the Government whose title is to be

[1] *In the Fourth Year of the War.*

determined ' : that all Russian territory should be evacuated and the Soviet Republic given ' unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy, as well as welcomed into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing ' (her treatment by other nations being the ' acid test ' of their goodwill) : and that there should be set up ' a general association of nations under specific covenants.' The other Points referred to specific territorial adjustments, including the restoration of Belgium, Alsace-Lorraine, the Balkan States, a readjustment of Italian frontiers ' along clearly recognisable lines of nationality,' ' secure sovereignty ' for the Turkish portions of the Ottoman Empire, and Polish independence with access to the sea.

The Allies are sometimes accused of having formally assented to the Points and then of violating many of their essential conditions. It must be remembered, however, that when President Wilson replied to the Austrian and German overtures for peace, on September 15th and October 4th respectively, he reminded both these Governments that since the Fourteen Points had been drafted subsequent events had modified them. The Allies unreservedly ruled out the claim of freedom of navigation, and had also insisted on November 5th that there must be ' restoration ' by the enemy of all invaded territory, and that such ' restoration ' must be taken to mean compensation for all damage caused by the aggression of Germany by land, sea and air. Germany had unreservedly accepted the Wilson qualifications on October 12th. Meanwhile, the provisions regarding Austria-Hungary were nullified by the fact that before the armistice-terms had been negotiated that empire had broken up. The Allies had no longer to deal with a single enemy Power in the case of Austrian territory, but with seven legatees, Italy, Serbia and Rumania among them. The case of Rumania surely deserves a special mention. Having followed a military strategy of her own, against the advice of the Allied Command, she had been soundly beaten by Germany and compelled to capitulate. Two days before the Armistice she re-declared war on Germany and was thus enabled to appear at Versailles in the role of gallant victor.

Still, however vague and however amended the Points, the Wilsonian principle embodied a conception of a world-order far in advance of anything which had as yet been propounded by a responsible statesman: and it was this vision of a new world which stirred the emotions of the multitudes. What they imperfectly appreciated, and what President Wilson certainly failed to realise, was the inherent antagonism of these ideas to the policy for which Poincaré and Clemenceau stood. Wilson seems to have been entirely unaware of the opposition which he would have to encounter. Most Englishmen in that winter of 1918 probably believed that it would be possible to make Germany pay to the last farthing, to crush her financially and politically, and yet at the same time to build up a system which must depend on the co-operation of every national Government—on the goodwill of the defeated Powers, that is to say, just as much as upon the integrity of the Allies.

Woodrow Wilson lost the first round of the contest. The Peace Conference met on January 18, 1919, in Paris—on Poincaré's own ground—a fatal choice for Wilsonian purposes. No representative of Germany or of her defeated allies was summoned, and Russia was similarly excluded. It was evident at the outset that little progress would be made if the delegates of the fifty-three Allies and Associated Powers were to debate each issue in public. A Council of Ten was therefore entrusted with the task of drawing up the treaties, consisting of the premiers and foreign ministers of the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy and Japan. In effect, therefore, Wilson's first Point which insisted that the covenants of peace should be 'openly arrived at' was thrown overboard. The real work was to be carried out behind closed doors.

The moment that the Council settled down to its labours it was clear that the agenda raised many highly controversial problems, and Wilson began to realise the enormous difficulties which lay in his path. He therefore changed his tactics and pressed for an immediate consideration of the last Point—the creation of a League of Nations. Unfortunately, although a far-sighted theorist, he soon realised that he had no proposals to offer as to the practical form such a league should take. Colonel House, his assistant, presented the scheme for an international secretariat, which

should serve as a clearing-house for international reforms, as well as the establishment of a permanent Court. General Smuts pressed for a 'mandate' system of administering colonies. Lord Robert Cecil added a clause which gave the Great Powers a majority on the League Council. Léon Bourgeois advocated an international army, but this proposal was rejected.

Wilson, however, succeeded in his main purpose: the 'Covenant' of the League was accepted by the Conference. On February 14, 1919, he left Paris for four weeks. In his absence it was decided that even the Council of Ten was too unwieldy, and a smaller body, consisting only of Wilson, Lloyd George, Clemenceau and Orlando—the Italian prime minister—was substituted. The effect of this reconstitution was to place Clemenceau much more in the centre of the picture than before. Wilson and Lloyd George could speak no French, Orlando could speak no English: but Clemenceau spoke both French and English. Moreover, Wilson betrayed an amazing ignorance of European geography: he apparently thought that Prague was in Poland, and he certainly imagined that the Southern Tyrolese were Italian. It is, indeed, one of the major tragedies of Versailles that Wilson's personality was so ill-equipped for the role of prophet. Clemenceau openly despised him as a sentimental romanticist. Wilson's mind worked slowly and he was so contemptuous of compromises that he would often prove unreasonably obstructive on unimportant issues. He stood very much on his dignity when he was opposed. A contemporary journalist has described him as having "the glacial geniality of a head-master receiving his assistants on the first day of a new term."

Clemenceau, on the other hand, held most of the trump-cards and played them ably. He knew exactly what he wanted, and had ready by his side all the practical details required for the fulfilment of his aims. He wanted an old-fashioned victor-and-vanquished treaty, such as Germany herself would have imposed and had indeed imposed on Russia at Brest-Litovsk. He suspected Wilson's sentimentalism as an influence which would result in leniency towards the enemy and thus enable the enemy to play havoc with Europe when the opportunity again arose. Clemenceau,

moreover, was cute enough to realise that Wilson was in one respect in an extremely weak position: the American Congress would never tolerate any commitments on the part of their President which would involve the United States in serious European obligations. Clemenceau had also put Wilson in his debt by supporting him against a scheme of Marshal Foch to march through Germany against Russia. He had supported Wilson even further by turning down Poincaré's proposal for the creation of a buffer State in the Rhineland. Clemenceau had also a hold over Lloyd George. The British Prime Minister had been returned to power at the 1918 Election expressly on the programme of relentless financial pressure on Germany. There was no doubt as to the mood of the new House of Commons, and this fact, Clemenceau reckoned, should effectually prevent any tendency on the part of Lloyd George to advocate a policy of undue liberalism. Orlando, as representative of Italy, was interested primarily in the satisfaction of his own country's claims. He was therefore largely in Clemenceau's pocket, for, if Italy was to receive her share of the plunder, it must be the stern French policy which prevailed and not the idealism of the American President, who might well be prepared to squander the spoils in the interests of his visionary schemes.

Italy, indeed, proved to be a serious obstacle in Wilson's path. His programme, as we have seen, included the principle of open covenants, and therefore a renunciation of the old method of hidden diplomacy and secret treaties. But on his arrival in Paris he learnt for the first time that the Allies had already compromised themselves by signing the secret Treaty of London in 1915. The Allies had, in fact, bribed Italy to enter the war by offering bigger prizes than the Central Powers were prepared to give. Germany had promised her only a further part of the Trentino: but the London Treaty allotted her a full share of the Trentino, the Tyrol as far as the Brenner, Trieste and Istria, the Dalmatian coast except Fiume, and a share in both the Turkish Empire and the German colonies in Africa.

We shall have occasion presently to consider further the effect of these offers on subsequent Italian policy. But at the moment it may be well to pause here so as to form a clear mental picture of this opening scene in the international

drama. The four chief actors dominate the scene, for they had been entrusted with no less a task than that of laying the foundations of the post-war world. As we form our picture we can hardly fail to reflect that this was a setting far from favourable for the achievement of the order which Wilson had vaguely envisaged. The setting was that of a chamber with locked doors. The atmosphere was riddled with intrigue. The builders of the new order which was, in Wilson's words, 'a world made safe for democracy,' were animated by no common enthusiasm: they were the protagonists of two fundamentally antagonistic conceptions. Clemenceau's was the more powerful personality: Wilson was too weak and too ill-equipped with the necessary information to put up an effective resistance. A new world requires a revolution, but the revolution was not as yet even on the horizon. Pre-war statesmen and traditional ideas were still in the saddle.

Effect of the Peace Settlement on Germany and Russia

The task which confronted the Peace Conference was more colossal than any agendas which previous peace conferences had had to face. In addition, those who were responsible for redrawing the map of Europe were conscious of a desperate need for haste. Armed forces were at large in the central and eastern portions of the continent, establishing *de facto* frontiers. No less than twenty-three wars were being waged. An influenza epidemic, thriving on starvation and semi-starvation conditions, was raging over large areas of the continent. This situation could only, it was felt, be relieved by the publication of the peace terms at the earliest possible moment. The incentive to hurry played further into the hands of the French statesmen. For, if the terms of peace were to be drafted rapidly, it was the concise French plan which offered itself as the remedy rather than the endless delays which would be occasioned if the Wilsonian proposals were to be considered adequately.

It will be more convenient to refer to these chaotic conditions in greater detail when we come to consider the effect of the treaties upon the various countries concerned. But it is necessary to note at once two features of Allied policy during the Armistice period which were to react