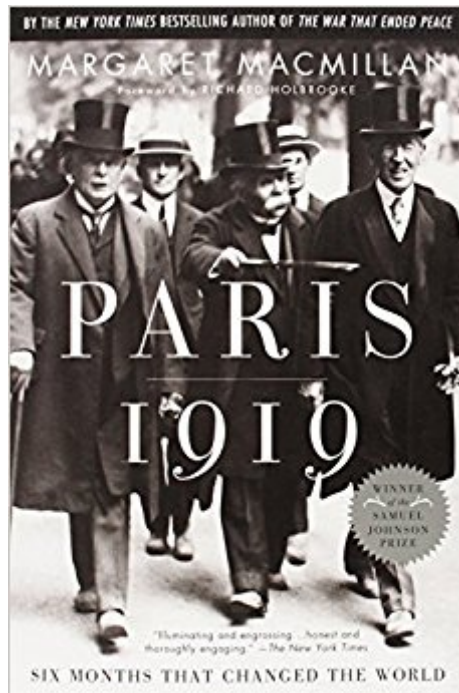


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Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed The World



Synopsis

National Bestseller
New York Times Editors'™ Choice
Winner of the PEN Hessel Tiltman Prize
Winner of the Duff Cooper Prize
Silver Medalist for the Arthur Ross Book Award of the Council on Foreign Relations
Finalist for the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award
For six months in 1919, after the end of the war to end all wars, the Big Three—President Woodrow Wilson, British prime minister David Lloyd George, and French premier Georges Clemenceau—met in Paris to shape a lasting peace. In this landmark work of narrative history, Margaret MacMillan gives a dramatic and intimate view of those fateful days, which saw new political entities—Iraq, Yugoslavia, and Palestine, among them—born out of the ruins of bankrupt empires, and the borders of the modern world redrawn.

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Customer Reviews

For the last couple of weeks, since finishing "Paris 1919", I have grappled with writing a review that would do justice to a book that is not only excellent reading, but also has the potential to reshape the way a reader views current events. Rather than wait longer for the writing muse who refuses to appear, I will take the more direct approach and simply write, "Buy this book and read it. It will afford you a greater understanding of international events unfolding in the world today." Margaret Macmillan is an exceptional history writer: engaging, direct and interesting (sometimes even funny), but also a wide-ranging thinker who sees and explains the vast sweep of history as well as the apparently minor ripples. She juggles the enormous cast of characters in the drama that unfolded in

Paris, 1919 and explicate the myriad brought to the major players at the peace conference. Her knowledge of world history and her ability to explain it concisely are fully illustrated in her explanations of the various ethnic claims for land and self-rule individual; her ability to compare and contrast these claims is extraordinary. She quickly reduces the Big Five to the Big Four, as the Four themselves did when they eliminated the Japanese representative from most of the debate and negotiation - he could barely follow the mostly English conversation anyway. Her descriptions of the Big Four (who eventually operated, without Italy, as the three), though apparently honest and precise, are hardly flattering: *Wilson, preoccupied with his Fourteen Points and convinced that all would be well if the peoples of the world were allowed to practice self-determination (even though the definition varied depending upon the case and people) *Lloyd George, determined to expand the British Empire at all costs, but who proved, ultimately, to be the mediator between Wilson and Clemenceau *Clemenceau, torn between extracting vengeance on Germany (in the form of reparations and a land buffer) and expanding French holdings *Orlando, whose overwrought, weeping behavior eventually embarrassed the other three and led them to exclude him from many major decisions, eliciting further weeping and an eventual walk-out (followed by a less-than-noble return) That these four thought they could accomplish the multi-pronged task they assigned themselves - to deal with the defeated Germany, to establish national boundaries that would help ensure future world peace and to establish an organization to help enforce that peace - now seems naïf. As Ms. Macmillan illustrates, the participants appear to believe they could accomplish their goals. However, as she also illustrates, time and again, as each the discussion on question reached a stalemate, the Four either delayed a final decision or deferred the question to a committee for further study. As a result, many decisions remained unresolved while others had less-than-satisfactory solutions. She neatly and convincingly debunks the theory that the financial burden placed on Germany as part of the war reparations was a major factor leading to Hitler's rise and WWII. Not only were the reparations significantly less than those Germany extracted from France after the 1870s Franco-Prussian War, but Germany never paid the WWI reparations and, indeed, indulged itself in such tactics as scuttling part of its navy rather than turn it over to Britain. On the other hand, she reinforces the argument that Germany did not feel compelled to accept terms of an agreement that were enforced rather than negotiated - and were determined to avenge the humiliation their representatives endured during the conference. This is an extremely interesting book and, as another reviewer has mentioned, a real page-turner. Read it. (Do note that Wilson's Fourteen Points are in an appendix at the back of the book. Ms. McMillan refers to them often and it is very helpful to have them close at hand.)

This book is highly interesting due to the rich detail in which the author relates the history of the peace-making after World War I. Much to the reader's joy she devotes a lot of attention to the settlements in the non-European parts of the world, in what is a lively treatment of the issues in 1919 and the subsequent events. What in my opinion is the major shortcoming of the book, is that the purpose it has been written for becomes so apparent all along. The book should be termed "Paris 1919. An apology". Highly critical on all other settlements (the farther away from Europe, the more critical the author allows herself to be: see Turkey, Palestine, China), she asserts that "Versailles is not to blame". Indeed, the author too easily jumps to conclusions. The most widely cited conclusion of her book is that the reparations forced upon Germany are not to blame for the rise of Hitler and WW II. Indeed events of 1919 never can be fully the reason for subsequent events say in 1933 or 1939. But it would be interesting to learn how much these events in 1919 were responsible for later developments. This would require a detailed study of the period 1919 to 1939 and one can only wonder how an author writing about a few months of peace negotiations in 1919 could ever come to a sensible conclusion about this issue! It is appalling to see that the author is even being applauded for this "research". In fact, the only supportive argument the author offers, is that Germany until 1932 only had paid a comparatively small amount of its reparations - as if any debtor would relish about the (small) amount paid so far instead of the (much larger) sum outstanding! The facts are never presented by the author, only her conclusions. Indeed every study of this issue shows the devastating impact on German public opinion, as the reparations were constantly present due to endless negotiations - 24 conferences alone until 1924 - and new plans for repayment. E.g. the plan of 1929 still asked for yearly instalments that would have continued until 1988 (!). One can imagine what would happen to Iraqi oil reserves in the next 70 years - i.e. until 2073 - if the Big Three had a say. The peacemakers in Paris in 1919 were a failure. Contrary to the hopes and inspirations of all the people of their age (victorious and defeated alike), they failed to establish new principles for peacemaking choosing to follow Wilson's principles where they fit the victors and to ignore them where they might have fit the defeated. There are two sets of piece treaties: the "just treaties", those that enforce the will of the victors according to certain, broadly fair principles and those that are imposed largely against the will of the defeated and which subsequently have to be kept with force. The "just peace" was not achieved, indeed there were not even negotiations with the defeated nations (producing calamities such as this, where Wilson only finds out after having agreed to the Czechoslovak borders that some 3 million Germans were also living there, indeed even more numerous than the name-giving ethnic Slovaks! "Why Masaryk - the

Czech president - has not told me", Wilson famously asked). So the peace had to be a forced one, one that needed to be kept with force. The author actually mourns that Germany was not more severely defeated in 1918 and expresses regret that the allies have not marched upon Berlin. With the same reason she might ask herself who actually won the first World War? Was it really France, which on its own would have been defeated in 1914 already? Or in other words: Why at all should US-soldiers fight for France having coal mines in the Saar area? No new world order was established in Paris in 1919, instead the principle that the stronger nation imposes its will on others was once again confirmed. A discussion of the peacemakers of Paris 1919 should also include a reference to these other peacemakers (or "appeasers" as they now are called), those of 1938. Applying exactly the same principles as their fellows in 1919 Chamberlain & Co. gave away what was "just" in terms of the then prevailing equilibrium of power: E.g: exactly those 3 million Germans of the Sudetenland about which Wilson only learned so late in 1919. The Treaty of Versailles is indeed to blame. Like this other Treaty with the Turks at Sèvres it called for a revision. In the case of Turkey, due to the swift recovery of Turkish forces under Atatürk, the dictated Treaty of 1919 was never implemented and later on was substituted with a negotiated one, leaving Turkey intact in almost exactly its present borders. Unfortunately for Europe and for Germany especially, the person that - as Atatürk undid the Sèvres treaty - undertook to undo the Versailles treaty was Adolf Hitler. The Versailles Treaty asked for its revision, through war (WWII) or negotiations, so out of line it was with the actual balance of power and broad principles of justice. This is its ultimate failure and it is for this that "Versailles" and the peacemakers of 1919 can be blamed. But certainly they cannot be blamed for Hitler and his mass murders - nobody actually ever did. So the book is a must read due to the facts presented and the lively picture it draws of those critical months, but should be read with great care when it comes to the far-reaching conclusions, not supported neither by facts nor by subsequent history.

There's an old adage that posits that the real outcome of a war is to teach one to hate one's allies more than one's enemies. Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World by Margaret MacMillan and Richard Holbrooke outlines why this old adage exists. The book covers the 6 month period in mid 1919 where the victorious allies of WW I converged to carve up the spoils of war and how this exercise set the stage for most of the subsequent conflicts of the 20th century. While the book focuses on the Big Three Personalities of this exercise--Wilson (United States), Lloyd George (Great Britain), and Clemenceau (France) who dominated the critical aspects of the Paris Peace Conference--this focus doesn't detract from providing an encompassing review of

the entire process as well as a detailed analysis of the devastating results of the conference. It delineates all too clearly how the best intentions can be overwhelmed by both insatiable avarice as well as unencumbered and unchecked egos in conflict. This is a timely book. As we are poised to invade Iraq and effect "regime change" it would be wise to look at a previous exercise in managing post war victory to be reminded of both the complexities as well as the risks involved in such an undertaking. Although an expressly historical tome, this is a well written and fast paced read. Probably the best historical work I read in 2002. Highly recommended.

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