

Parergon



This year is the centenary of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the Treaty of Versailles being one of the treaties formulated as part of the peace negotiations at the end of the First World War. The Treaty of Versailles ended the state of war between the Allied powers and Germany, laying the guilt for the war on “the aggression of Germany and her allies”, one of which was Turkey, or more accurately, the Ottoman Empire. Far from Paris and Versailles, one of the beneficiaries of the Conference was Japan, at the expense of another ally, China.

At the beginning of the First World War China took control of the German-administered Shandong Peninsula. In 1915 Japan, which had joined the Allied Triple Entente in 1914 with the provision that it could take over Germany’s Pacific territories, demanded control of the previously German-influenced territories in China, the corrupt if not weak Anfu government capitulating to the Japanese threat of force. In 1917 China declared war on Germany, with the condition that Shandong be returned to Chinese control, and the presumption that the Allies would win the war. The Treaty of Versailles Article 156 in fact saw administration of the German concession of Shandong transferred to Japan, following its prior demands. Statesman Vi Kyuin Wellington Koo refused to sign the treaty, the Chinese delegation at the Paris Peace Conference being the only nation that did not sign the Treaty of Versailles at the signing ceremony. An extreme sense of betrayal and humiliation led to major demonstrations of hostility, and nationalism, especially the May Fourth Movement, which precipitated the fall of the incipient Chinese Republic’s government, and prejudicing relations with the West.

The May Fourth Movement was a student political, cultural, anti-imperialist movement that emerged in Beijing, advanced by what was perceived as their government’s ineffective response to the Treaty of Versailles, Japanese territorial aggression and Western powers’ indifference towards China. On 4 May, 1919, thousands of Beijing university students protested in Tiananmen Square at the Gate of Heavenly Peace. Following arrests and other altercations news of the demonstrations spread

quickly throughout the country, with protests being duplicated in other major cities. Workers and merchants joined the demonstrations, such that after several weeks the Chinese economy was nearly crippled. Under intense public pressure, the Beijing government acceded to the protesters' demands, with the entire cabinet resigning (leading to the Chinese delegation in Paris unwilling to sign the Treaty). The May Fourth and its associated New Culture Movement introduced an anti-imperialistic, patriotic mood into Chinese life, decisively retreating from its cultural past, encouraging a shift towards political mobilisation and a revolution in social attitudes towards a mass base, away from traditional intellectual and political elites (while generating multiple proponents who opposed its anti-traditionalist directives), thus creating a precarious political landscape for the next thirty years.

Another Paris Peace Conference treaty, that of Sèvres (signed in 1920), marked the beginning of the partitioning and dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire (c. 1299-1923). Non-Turkish territory was given over to Allied administration, notably the creation of the British Mandate for Palestine and the French Mandate for Syria and The Lebanon; France, Greece and Italy established "zones of influence", along with the creation of international, Kurdish and Armenian zones. Constantinople, now Istanbul was occupied by the Allies. The Ottoman Sultanate was abolished in 1922. Much like in China, the terms of this treaty incited hostility and nationalist feeling amongst the Turks, igniting the Turkish War of Independence, with Mustafa Kemal Ataturk leading the Turkish National Movement to defeat the Allied proxy armies in 1923. At Lausanne that year, another treaty ended the conflict, Turkey giving up all claims to what was left of the Ottoman Empire for Allied recognition of its sovereignty within its new borders. The collapse and partitioning of the Ottoman Empire led to the rise of Western Powers in the Middle East and brought about the creation of the modern Arab World, and its share of globally felt travails since.

While the expanse of postmodernism has determined an industry of critical judgement upon the moral relativism of assumptions of Enlightenment rationalism, and centuries of European colonialism and imperialism (if not all Western principles and values), focusing especially on the consequences of the rule and exploitation of colonised people, and the social, cultural and political narratives surrounding both coloniser and colonised, commensurate dissection of other historically parallel empires seems to be less abraded; apparently such obloquy being only of a unidirectional compulsion. In contrast, as an example, the Ottoman Empire, though well catalogued by East and West, has not sustained the same level of critical opprobrium by either, nor with much inclination to do so (think Edward Said; and if too penetrating, such an approach is currently legislated against as "insulting" nation and national identity; think Orhan Pamuk, 2005); a similar but infinitely more repressive omnipresence affects the post-1989 Chinese Dragon; compellingly, both Turkey and China are hankering for their halcyon days pre-Western hegemony.

The events of 1919 reverberate in their centenary. A resonant line can be drawn from the events in Beijing on 4 May that year to the Communist Revolution and the proclamation of the People's Republic of China thirty years later in 1949; to 4 June forty years later, again at Tiananmen Square; and again another thirty years later in the streets of Hong Kong. The Treaty of Lausanne (rather than those of Versailles and Sèvres) presents a similar sonorous line to ongoing events in the Middle East. Turkish President Erdogan challenged its covenants in 2017 and 2018, stating "over time all treaties need a revision," while the principles of a fifty-year constitutional document signed between Great Britain and the People's Republic of China in 1997 continue to be eroded. This year the *Venice Biennale* proposed "may you live in interesting times" (supposedly a Chinese curse).

History underscores The Contemporary.