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Patrick O. Cohrs. *The Unfinished Peace after World War I: America, Britain and the Stabilisation of Europe, 1919-1932.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xiv + 693 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-85353-8.

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The Noble Work of Appeasement in Europe?

There is, of course, a reverse continuum between the constant flow of scholarly publications on *The Origins of the Second World War* (to refute, bolster, or nuance A. J. P. Taylor's pioneering 1961 work) and consequences of the Treaty of Versailles (the debate being whether it could have been revised sufficiently and in time to prevent the resumption of hostilities)–the continuum of the "Thirty Years Crisis," as it is sometimes called. Whatever the title indicates, the bulk of Patrick O. Cohrs's superbly researched book bears on the years 1923 (the Ruhr crisis) to 1929 (the first settlement at The Hague), with the familiar staging posts: the Dawes Plan (1924), the Locarno Pact (1925), and the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928). The discussion concentrates on the four protagonists of what he calls "the Euro-Atlantic peace system": the three victorious ex-allies–Britain, France, and the United States (though technically the United States had had a special status as "Associated Power" only)–and the vanquished Germany (p. 155). Like all authors on these subjects, Cohrs had to decide what knowledge of the events covered he could assume from his readers, and he chose to err on the side of safety; the text ranges from the obvious (at least for the person likely to open his forbidding tome) to the little known.

Unsurprisingly, we have an introductory chapter on the bickering between the first three, with the adumbration of a recurring scenario between the wars, namely David Lloyd George, Britain's prime minister, ostensibly playing the "honest broker" between President Woodrow Wilson and the French premier, Georges Clemenceau. The campaign for or against ratification by the U.S. Senate is extensively covered elsewhere, and the author rightly does not dwell on the minutiae of the proceedings. Instead, Cohrs concentrates on the outcome and its devastating effect in France. For the next two decades, French policy sought substitutes for the Anglo-American guarantees of the country's security in the face of German *revanchards*. The intentions of the *revanchards* were taken for granted by Marshal Foch and the High Command (themselves staunch French *revanchards* before 1914, of course), and only magnified the objective fact of the demographic and economic imbalance between France and Germany. When the U.S. Senate rejected the settlement and its part of the guarantee with it, Lloyd George automatically withdrew his pledge for military

support to France.

Cohrs has prima facie little positive to say in favor of the Republicans who dominated U.S. politics after the First World War. This is not to say that the Democrats had a broader perspective; for Cohrs, they were as isolationist as their rivals, but they were not in power. A particular villain in Cohrs's rogue gallery is Senator William Borah of Idaho, the chairman of the influential Foreign Relations Committee from 1925 and, outside the administration proper, one of the main opponents to Versailles and the League of Nations. All secretaries of state, and indeed all presidents, were careful not to offend him–"Borah was especially dreaded by [Calvin] Coolidge"–not that they wanted to, we are told, because they shared his sense of superiority toward these backward European nationalists across the Atlantic (p. 311). Cohrs cites Frank B. Kellogg telling President Coolidge in 1924 that he was glad that their country was " 'not bound by any obligation to maintain the political integrity and independence of all the turbulent nations of Europe,' " as well as Herbert Hoover (then secretary of commerce), who argued in private in 1926 that "'the Poles had never been able to govern themselves"' (pp. 203, 319). In 1931, now president of the United States, Hoover described the Polish Corridor in another private conversation as the "'unstable spot of Europe and the world"' (p. 598).

Hoover was not wrong, of course, but Cohrs's documentation constantly shows the contradiction between the correct diagnosis that the world was in poor shape after 1918 and the attitude of the Republicans in power, who craved for a *Pax Americana* (a phrase used repeatedly in the book) without giving themselves the means to enforce it. Or, rather, Cohrs relentlessly exposes the fallacy of their reasoning. Failing to extrapolate from their own narrow nationalism and not seeing that in the American case there conveniently was no contradiction among political nationalism, economic nationalism, and prosperity, they refused to accept that many or most Europeans were driven by a form of political nationalism that blinded them to the likely economic rewards of putting an end to their quarrels. "Republican elites relied on the force of economic necessity and what was taken to be a well-understood all-European interest to be included in a US-led zone of prosperity" (p. 298).

Now, one way of creating that zone could have been a general writing-off of all debts between the four victors (Italy having a lesser stake). Britain had borrowed 4.7 billion dollars from the United States, and France four billion and the same sum from Britain, in the belief that, as the French phrase went (curiously Cohrs uses many French expressions but not this one), "l'Allemagne payera" (Germany will pay–from the reparations imposed by the victors, like France had had to pay after its defeat in 1870). The policy of the Coolidge and Hoover administrations, however, was to adamantly refuse this "nexus"–at least until the general crumbling of the European economies by 1931 made American insistence idle ("the *de facto* abolition of all transatlantic intergovernmental debts" [p. 576]).

It took some time for American policy to readjust from President Wilson's personal involvement in the details of European affairs during the interallied negotiations in Paris in the winter and spring of 1918-9 to the new Republican "aloofness" (another recurring word in the book). For Cohrs, it is on the occasion of the proposed settlement of the Franco-German conflict over reparations, which had led the French army to enter the Ruhr area (as it was technically entitled to do under the treaty) in 1923, that one "saw the first formal representation of the United States in Europe since the Paris peace talks," naturally on their own terms (p. 160). The French (and Belgian) attempt to force the Germans to pay in kind (coal, mostly) had led to a general outcry in Britain and the United States, and a conference was finally convened in London to try to settle the dispute.

This brings us to the first element of what the publisher's back-cover blurb calls the book's "highly original and revisionist analysis of British and American efforts to forge a stable Euro-Atlantic peace order between 1919 and the rise of [Adolf] Hitler." For Cohrs, "London has been interpreted as the first high-point of shortsighted Anglo-American appeasement after 1919 that, with the pursuit of narrow financial interests, eroded the Versailles system," but, he argues, it can be seen (as he does) as "the starting-point for the emergence of a viable Euro-Atlantic peace system" (pp. 154, 155). He agrees with the British Labour prime minister's judgment at the time–but much derided later–that " 'this agreement may be regarded as the first Peace Treaty, because we sign it with a feeling that we have turned our backs on the terrible years of war and war mentality' " (p. 182). Cohrs strives to show that France's discomfiture in leaving the Ruhr and thereby de facto accepting the demise of the sanctions system provided by Versailles was of little consequence. Far more important was that the London agreement, which "ended Germany's post-war isolation," "was the first agreement after 1918 not imposed by the victors on the vanquished," and, by its links with the Dawes Plan on Reparations, was the first element in

"Europe's nascent *Pax Anglo-Americana*," symbolized by the Locarno accords of 1925 (pp. 183, 182).

Cohrs's central "revisionist" thesis is that the descent into renewed war was not inevitable in spite of Anglo-American (American, in fact; for Cohrs, British policy, whether Liberal, Conservative, or Labour, was largely a *suiviste* one) rejection of political and military entanglements in continental Europe. Considering that through the 1920s the Republican American administration believed that, holding the sinews of war, it could impose its own version of peace in Europe by financial sticks (officially insisting on repayment of the last cent due by the Europeans) and carrots (unofficially inciting friendly private bankers like J. P. Morgan Jr. or Andrew Mellon to offer loans to the more recalcitrant governments if they behaved), Cohrs finds it remarkable that so much progress was achieved before the Great Crash, which wrecked all these efforts. In his view, "the new mode of politics inaugurated in 1924 shaped Franco-German relations until the decline of 1929-32" (p. 183). And the beauty of it was that "this obviously involved sacrifices for the French and Germans, not for the mediating Anglo-American powers," which made the process acceptable to the American government (p. 183).

With the London agreement and the consensual adoption of the Dawes Plan, he suggests, the American administration was reassured; it was possible to keep official American political aloofness while oiling the works of continental reconciliation with promises of "private" loans under the counter. This explains why this successful approach was continued in Washington until the American economy was itself in deep trouble after 1929, the most visible result being the Locarno Pact of 1925. At the time of the negotiations for its terms–the most spectacular being Germany's official renouncement of force to further its territorial claims in exchange for French acceptation of Germany as an equal power in the League of Nations–"American agents never engaged in direct mediation between London, Paris and Berlin" (p. 224). And, according to Cohrs, "the most powerful agent of U.S. interests in Europe in 1925 was FRBNY [Federal Reserve Bank of New York] Governor [Benjamin] Strong," with Secretary of State Kellogg "retaining a detached position throughout the European negotiations" (p. 223). Needless to say, in practice, tremendous American pressure was brought to bear on the obdurate French and German governments, with Austen Chamberlain "spurring Franco-German *rapprochement*" (p. 268).

There was, therefore, a lot of hypocrisy in President Coolidge's message to Congress on December 8, 1925, when he said that " 'the Locarno agreements represent the success of this policy which we have been adopting, of having European countries settle their own political problems without involving this country' " (p. 272). Of course, technically the president was right, but he was playing on the definition of "political." Still, for Cohrs, only the result counts: "what gained contours was a Euro-Atlantic peace system whose *de facto* preeminent power was the United States. The latter would become a tacit, often elusive, yet not only financially crucial player in Locarno politics until the Great Depression" (p. 269). In other words, pace President Coolidge, the United States did, in fact, play an active (if not always visible) role in European politics–and a positive one in Cohrs's eyes–establishing or at least approving an "unfinished peace order" in the mid- and late 1920s (p. 281).

The last part of the book is devoted to the other main elements in this "unfinished peace order": the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, which "would mark the greatest extent of US engagement on behalf of war-prevention ... before ... the post-war planning of the 1940s"; the Young Plan of 1929, part of the "last 'grand bargain' after World War I"; and The Hague settlement of the same year, "the last significant settlement premised on the politics of London and Locarno before Hitler came to power" (pp. 472, 531, 547). By then, Cohrs's "revisionist" point is made: 1924-5 constituted a turning point in the U.S. (actual as opposed to avowed) return in Europe. Slowly, bit by bit, Versailles was being dismantled and the new peace order, the *Pax Americana* (the "Anglo" in the initial phrase, *Pax Anglo-Americana*, disappeared by then) was emerging, with extremely positive consequences for the European continent.

Whatever American authorities might say in public against "political" commitments in Europe, their active underhand economic interventionism had obtained considerable results by 1929, notably by firmly anchoring the new German Republic to the Western democracies, Cohrs suggests. He indirectly supports the validity of the American "economic" approach with the *a contrario* reasoning that he uses to describe the crumbling of the "unfinished peace order" when, in the face of the consequences of the Wall Street Crash, Britain and the United States "revert[ed] to self-preservation approaches–approaches geared to the protection of seemingly more immediate national interests" (p. 574). Then, "they no longer had the means to keep Germany linked with the 'western system.' In this sense, the World Economic Crisis *turned into* a fundamental crisis of the system of London and Locarno

and made it disintegrate" (p. 575). When an economically weakened United States started to follow a policy of financial (on top of the usual "political") retrenchment, the fate of the "nascent *Pax Anglo-Americana*" was sealed, since it had primarily relied–as the American administration always insisted it should do–on bribing European leaders with the prospect of loans.

This is, of course, a very seductive thesis, supported by abundant evidence in the form of impressive footnotes, with ample references to sources in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. The sense of unease when one reads this impeccably coherent narrative comes from the fact that it is all very much "history from the top," with governing elites almost in complete control of the decision-making process in all four countries. Admittedly, Cohrs occasionally alludes to popular opinion, but he generally concentrates on elite opinion. And, I would argue that, at least in France and Germany, popular opinion must have played a far higher role than he indicates.[1] The *anciens combattants* (ex-servicemen) were a considerable nuisance, because they formed a largely unsophisticated mass easy to manipulate by demagogues of the Right and the Left, and the more enlightened French and German elites did not have the time to persuade them–they urgently needed their votes to ward off the extremists, and they could not afford to dismiss their pressing demands for redress. The book does not focus enough on the enormous constraints that weighed on the bourgeois French and German leaders–often of their own making during the war, admittedly. Thus, whereas in Britain cries of "Hang the Kaiser" died down soon after 1918, "l'Allemagne payera" had become such an ingrained conviction among unsophisticated French voters (like the idea that Germany was surrounded by irreducible enemies intent on enslaving its people and denying it its legitimate *Lebensraum*, East and West, had among unsophisticated German voters) that the more moderate politicians dared only express their qualms at their electoral peril.

The book concentrates on what the Anglo-American elites (like the French, for different reasons) saw as the major powder keg of Europe, the unresolved Franco-German dispute. This is after all only adhering to the agenda set out in the subtitle, but it was not the only one. Cohrs, following the example of the Anglo-American elites who are the subject of his book, only occasionally alludes to another, potentially more dangerous powder keg, that of Poland, because it involved the Russian Bolshevik pariah, completely estranged from "the Euro-Atlantic peace system" of the 1920s.

Anticipating the words of his half-brother Neville Chamberlain in September 1938 over the Sudetenland dispute–"a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing"–Austen Chamberlain warned in 1925: " 'No British Government would ever risk the bones of a single British grenadier' for the Polish Corridor" (p.215). But Cohrs does not seem to draw the full implications when he writes that "his views reflected a widely held attitude in the Conservative government" (p. 215). The Lloyd George Liberals were by now the worst enemies of Versailles, as the Labour Party had always been. In other words, whatever the ostensible progress toward dÃ©tente imposed by the Anglo-American political and financial elites on the democratic governments of France and Germany in the 1920s (as documented in the book), the unsophisticated masses who ultimately held the key thanks to their votes had arguably remained largely impervious to this "unfinished peace order." Dependence for national survival on New York bankers probably only fuelled anti-American resentment in a working class under the converging impact of highly influential Communists and patriotic leagues. Unfortunately, though Hitler and the Nationalist press do briefly figure in the last pages, Cohrs has little or nothing to say on Communist responsibility in the determination of uncompromising attitudes, at least in France (the Socialist "class collaborationists" of Weimar being little better than Hitler's Fascists in the propaganda of the Comintern in the 1920s).

When in 1925, before Parliament, Austen Chamberlain spoke of the Locarno process as " 'the beginning, and not the end, of the noble work of appeasement in Europe,' " he was right for the thirteen years to come, but he could not know, of course, that under his half-brother's premiership the "noble work" was to become a dirty word (p. 325). This could lead to a misunderstanding because the dust jacket indicates that the author "concludes that the 'unfinished peace' of the 1920s prefigured the terms on which a more durable peace could be founded after 1945." Cohrs obviously does not suggest that the post-1945 settlement was based on "the noble work of appeasement in Europe."

On top of constituting an excellent guide to archival material, the book has a twenty-four-page bibliography of secondary sources, and a detailed index. As befits a work of academic research, it includes proper footnotes, not awkward endnotes. The map is better than nothing, but it is not very clear as far as pre-1914 German frontiers in the East and Russian frontiers before Brest-Litovsk are concerned. The proofreading is not perfect,

but few slips are expected considering the size of the text and the multiple languages used by the author (which I must say include many arcane Latin phrases). This is an important book, which will probably lead to further publications intent on refuting what is likely to become known as "the Cohrs thesis"–so much the better since this is how our knowledge and understanding of these extremely complex questions gradually improve. I would not recommend the volume for undergraduates, because most would not see the forest for the trees, but there is no doubt that specialists of twentieth-century history, diplomatic history, and international politics, as well as scholars interested in research on the two world wars will find in it a lot to stimulate their reflection. All university libraries should naturally have a copy.

Note

[1]. For France, see for instance, a recent study by Anne-Monika Lauter, *Sicherheit und Reparationen: Die franzÃ¶sische Ãffentlichkeit, der Rhein, und die Ruhr (1919-1923)* (Essen: Klartext, 2006). See also Christopher Fischer, review of *Sicherheit und Reparationen: Die franzÃ¶sische Ãffentlichkeit, der Rhein, und die Ruhr (1919-1923)*, by Anne-Monika Lauter, *H-France* (February 2008): `http://www.h-france.net/vol8reviews/vol8no29fischer.pdf`.

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