Chapter 9
The Settlement

The Allied statesmen who came together in Paris in January 1919 to make the peace settlement were in a very different situation from their predecessors at Vienna in 1814. They did not have a free hand to reshape the world in conformity with the principles of order and justice, or of national self-determination, or even of the traditional balance of power. They were responsible to electorates still in the grip of war fever whose passions and prejudices could not be ignored. In any case, the mounting chaos in Central Europe in the wake of the collapse of the Russian, Austrian, and Hohenzollern empires made it doubtful whether any stable regime existed east of the Rhine with which peace could be made at all.

Germany

The conference itself revolved around a tacit duel between President Wilson, who perhaps unwisely attended in person, and the French premier Georges Clemenceau. Each had a different agenda. That of Wilson was to create a new world order under the auspices of a League of Nations, to the creation of which he devoted his best endeavours; only to see his work destroyed when the United States Congress refused to participate in the League on the terms he demanded. That of Clemenceau, with the whole-hearted support of his countrymen and initially his British allies, was so to reconstruct Europe that Germany could never threaten

her stability again. As we have seen, France with her population of now barely forty million faced a Germany sixty-five million-strong with a far greater industrial power and potential than France could ever command. The counterweight on which France had relied before 1914, the Russian Empire, had vanished, taking billions of francs' worth of investment with it. In the French view, therefore, everything possible had to be done to weaken Germany. In the east the maximum territory should be taken from her to build up new nations in a *cordon sanitaire* under French influence, both to ward off the encroachments of Bolshevism from the east and to take Russia's place as an instrument for the containment of German power. In the west, not only should Alsace and Lorraine with their valuable ores be restored to France, but the coal-rich Saar basin should be added to them. Further the Rhineland, the German territories on the left bank of the river, should if possible be detached from Germany altogether to constitute an autonomous state or group of states under French protection as a glacis to cover the French frontier. This the British would not accept, arguing that such a protectorate would be simply an Alsace-Lorraine in reverse, a cause of constant friction. They agreed only to the demilitarization of the left bank of the Rhine and of the right bank to a depth of forty miles, with an Allied military presence remaining pending the full payment of reparations. Ownership of the Saar coalfields was to pass to France, but the territory was to be administered by the League of Nations for fifteen years, when its destiny would be settled by plebiscite. It was a reasonable settlement, to be confirmed by the Locarno Agreement of 1924, and one not in itself likely to provoke another war.

Germany's eastern frontiers presented a far more difficult problem. One of Wilson's fourteen points had stipulated the restoration of independence to Poland, which had since the end of the eighteenth century been partitioned between Germany, Russia, and the Austrian Empire. The core of the new Poland was the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, ethnically predominantly Polish, but recognized as part

of the Russian Empire since 1814. The Russians were now in no better position to contest its independence, or that of their former Baltic provinces Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, than were the Austrians to retain their Polish lands in Galicia. But the Polish regions of Germany – Upper Silesia, Posen, and West Prussia – were another matter. They had been thickly settled by Germans for generations. Worse, the new Poland had been promised access to the sea, which could be provided only by making over to her the lower Vistula valley, whose population was mixed, and the port of Danzig, which was almost entirely German. That involved dividing Germany from East Prussia, which was widely regarded as her historic heartland. The settlement was probably the best that could be achieved without the massive 'ethnic cleansing' that would take place in 1945, but the Germans never concealed their intention of reversing it at the earliest opportunity.

In addition to accepting these losses of territory, Germany was required to disarm, to surrender her overseas colonies, and to pay heavy reparations to her victorious enemies. Her army was reduced to 100,000 men and deprived of 'offensive weapons' such as tanks. Her General Staff, demonized by Allied propaganda, was disbanded; her air force was abolished; her naval building was confined to vessels of less than 100,000 tons displacement. This, so the victors argued, would 'render possible the initiation of a general limitation of the armaments of all nations'. It did not, and its failure to do so was to be used by the Germans when they denounced those restrictions and began rearming fifteen years later.

Germany lost her colonies as a matter of course, but, since the Allies under Wilson's leadership had renounced 'annexations', the powers that acquired them (mainly Britain and her overseas dominions) did so as 'mandates' on behalf of the League of Nations. The Allies had likewise renounced the 'indemnities' that defeated powers normally had to pay to their conquerors. Instead they demanded 'reparation' for the damage inflicted on their civilian populations.

Initially this definition had been intended to apply to the populations of the occupied and devastated areas of France and Belgium, but the French and British rapidly extended it to cover not only such marginal expenses as interest charges on war loans and general costs of reconstruction, but pensions to disabled soldiers and to the orphans and widows of the dead in perpetuity – a sum so huge that it could not even be computed. The peace conference referred the whole matter to a Reparations Commission that was to report in 1921. Meanwhile the Germans had to pledge themselves in advance to accept the Commission's findings, and to make a down payment of twenty million marks. The Allies would keep their military forces on the Rhine to enforce payment and have the right to reoccupy German territory in the event of default.

The full implications of these demands were to be brilliantly denounced by Maynard Keynes in his philippic *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. Eventually they were to be fudged; but not before the Germans were able to lay on them the blame for all the economic disasters that were to overwhelm them. But even more unacceptable was the justification given for imposing reparations at all – the alleged German responsibility for causing the war in the first place. The Germans still believed almost without exception that the war had been imposed on them by their enemies, and that all their sacrifices over the previous five years had been in a noble cause. Further, many felt that they had not been defeated at all. They had, it was argued, been deprived of the victory that was their due only because they had been cheated by the Allies over the Armistice terms and 'stabbed in the back' by *Reichsfeinde*, socialists and Jews, who had exploited the difficulties of the moment in order to seize power. Even for those who did not accept this myth of a *Dolchstoss* (stab in the back), the continuing legitimacy of any German government would depend on its capacity to modify the servitudes imposed by the treaty, if not abrogate them altogether. It was to be Adolf Hitler's success in doing this that was to win him such widespread support.

Austria-Hungary

The dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy left an equally bitter legacy. The Austrian half of the Monarchy lost, in the north, to Czechs who joined their Slovak cousins from Hungary in a Czechoslovak Republic that contained, in the Sudetenland on its western frontier, a worrying minority of Germans. In the south they lost the Slovenes, who with their Croat cousins from Hungary linked their fortunes with the Serbs in a clumsily entitled 'Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes', later to be renamed Jugoslavia (south Slavia). They lost their Italian lands south of the Alps, including Trieste, their main port on the Adriatic; but the territories promised to Italy on the eastern shores of the Adriatic were now in the possession of the 'liberated' Jugoslavs, who themselves had claims on Trieste and its hinterland. The German-speaking rump that was all that remained of Austria initially tried to join the new German republic to the north, but this was forbidden by the Allies. So Austria remained independent for a further twenty years until 1938, when an *Anschluss* was achieved, to universal popular acclaim, by one of her former citizens, Adolf Hitler. The Hungarians lost not only the Slovaks to the north and the Croats to the south, but the province of Transylvania in the east to a greatly enlarged Rumania, suffering an ugly little civil war in the process. The right-wing dictator who emerged from the mêlée, Admiral Horthy, refused to admit that the abdication of the Habsburgs had been valid at all and declared that he ruled merely as regent on their behalf. He continued to do so until he was himself overthrown at the end of the Second World War.

Turkey

As for the Turks, initially they were treated as harshly as the Germans. Not only did they lose their possessions in the Arabian peninsula to new states under French or British control – Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Transjordan – but they were invaded by Italian forces staking claims to Adalia under the Treaty

of London of 1915, and by Greeks staking claims in Thrace and regions in Anatolia, especially Smyrna (Izmir), where there was a substantial Greek minority. Popular resentment at this diktat brought to power a new regime under Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, which drove the Greeks out of Anatolia and threatened to do the same to British forces occupying the Straits. After three confused years a settlement was reached at Lausanne in 1923, leaving Turkey in sole control of Anatolia and the Straits – with guarantees for their demilitarization – together with a foothold on Europe in eastern Thrace. The Greek population of Smyrna was brutally expelled, and disputes between Greece and Turkey over possession of islands in the Aegean continued until, and beyond, the end of the century.

The peace settlement at Versailles has had a bad press, but most of its provisions have stood the test of time. The new states it created survived, if within fluctuating frontiers, until the last decade of the century, when the Czechs and Slovaks peacefully separated and Jugoslavia, always volatile, disintegrated and threatened new wars in the process. The Franco-German frontier was stabilized. 'The Eastern Question' arising from Turkey's presence in Europe was solved for good. But 'the German Question' remained unsolved. In spite of her defeat, Germany remained the most powerful nation in Europe, and determined to reverse the settlement at least of her eastern frontiers. France's attempt to restore a balance was doomed by ideological mistrust of the Soviet Union, by the weakness of her allies in East Europe, and by the profound reluctance of her people ever to endure a comparable ordeal again. The British were equally reluctant: their domestic and imperial problems, combined with the dreadful image of war that increasingly haunted the popular imagination, led successive governments to seek a solution in appeasing German demands rather than resisting them. As for the United States, their intervention in Europe was widely seen as having been a bad mistake, and one never to be repeated.

When the terms of the treaty were announced, a prescient British cartoonist depicted Wilson, Lloyd George, and Clemenceau

emerging from the Paris peace conference, one saying 'Curious: I seem to hear a child weeping.' And sure enough, hiding behind a pillar, there was a little boy crying his heart out, with the words '1940 Class' inscribed over his head.