The centenary of the 1918 Armistice provided a perfect occasion to reassess the historical consequences of the First World War. To this end, the 2018 Annual Conference of the Max Weber Foundation, which took place at the German Historical Institute in Washington on March 22-24 in cooperation with the American Historical Association (AHA), the National History Center (NHC), and the German Historical Association (Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands, VHD), set out to reassess the postwar settlement's global repercussions. The conference was opened on the evening of March 22 by SIMONE LÄSSIG (GHI Washington DC), HANS VAN ESS (Max Weber Foundation) and DANE KENNEDY (National History Center), who highlighted the legacies of the Great War, including the principle of national self-determination, the redrawing of borders, decolonization and forced migration, and noted new research trends and the need to reassess the war’s legacies.

In his keynote lecture, JÖRN LEONHARD (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg) presented a tableau of questions and developments at the end of the war. He started with different perspectives on the signing of the Versailles Treaty in June 1919, including such aspects as solemn diplomacy, guilt, and punishment of war crimes. He then examined the combination of continuities and discontinuities that became characteristic of the postwar settlement. The war efforts had provoked rising expectations in all societies and states involved, while the realities of the peace settlements, shaped by compromise, lead to massive disillusionment. Leonhard also highlighted key aspects of the contradictory postwar moment such as competing ideas of world order, the demise of monarchical empires in continental Europe, a selective application of the principle of national self-determination, violence unleashed by the principle of ethnic homogeneity, and the tension between the economics and the politics of settlement. He focused on five strands of such legacies: First, the continuity of violence despite the end of state warfare; second, the transition from languages of loyalty to the ethnicization of politics; third, based on Reinhard Koselleck’s model, the reversal of spaces of experience and horizons of expectation; fourth, the competing visions and revolutions of rising expectations, especially when it came to minorities; and, finally, the new tension between nationalism and internationalism. In his conclusion, Leonhard argued that World War I must not be seen as a coherent and monolithic historical entity that has its „before“ and „after“ but as a series of events and developments characterized by continuities as well as discontinuities.

JESSE KAUFFMAN (Eastern Michigan University) reassessed the Peace of Brest-Litovsk by challenging the ways in which German and American historiographies have dismissed the document. He sought to reconsider the peace agreement by laying out how their intervention in the Ukraine drew Germany and Austria into this regional conflict. In the following paper, on the politics of recognition at the Paris Peace Conference, LEONHARD SMITH (Oberlin College) showed how, after the major political shifts at the end of the Great War, the recognition of states emerged as an important question for international law. Examining the cases of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and post-Ottoman Turkey, Smith stressed the tension between the constitutive and the declarative theory of recognition. Next, TOSH MINOHARA (Kobe University) presented a longue-durée analysis of the contentious issue of the „racial equality clause” that Japanese delegates pushed, unsuccessfully, to get included in the League of Nations Covenant. Prior to the Great War, Japan had...
been marked by westernization, modernization and economic growth. Military victories, especially over Russia in 1905, had elevated Japan’s national pride. By proposing a racial equality clause in Paris, Minohara argued, the Japanese government was responding to legislation discriminating against Japanese immigrants in California. The peace settlement and legislation in the following years led to a turn away from westernization.

The conference’s second panel combined perspectives on the principle of self-determination in European and colonial territories. ROBERTA PERGHER’s (Indiana University) paper explored the place of “others” in Fascist Italy’s colonial territories in Libya and in Northern Italy, both territories in which Italian claims to sovereignty were questioned. She argued that, appealing to the principle of self-determination, the fascists developed massive resettlement schemes to claim Italian sovereignty over the contested territories. MIKLÓS ZEIDLER (Eötvös Loránd University) analyzed the centrality of territorial revisionism in Hungarian nationalism after the treaty of Trianon and pointed to its highly religious varnish. Hungary’s suffering was linked to the passion of Christ, while the neighboring countries were equated with Judas and the Allies with Pontius Pilate. Such ideas were infused into Hungarian schools by a mandatory school prayer “I believe in one Hungary ... in the resurrection of Hungary,” constructing pride, national conservatism and religious traditions as collective memory.

In the first of a two-panel series, NORIKO KAWAMURA (Washington State University) began by noting that the Japanese felt humiliated by Wilson and then offered an analysis of the post-World War I search for a new order in the Pacific. She traced how the group of pro-western politicians in Japan shrank after the Washington treaty imposed limits on Japanese naval power in the Pacific. This treaty slowed down naval mobilization for about a decade, but in its shadow a total war mentality against the U.S. arose. In the following presentation, DONAL HASSETT (University of Bristol) examined how the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of colonial soldiers during the Great War changed the relationship between France and its colonies. He showed how the „blood tax“ of soldiers from the colonies nourished hopes for reforms and the granting of full citizenship rights throughout the empire. While the French state promoted a narrative of imperial unity, activists in the colonies used the experience of war in a variety of ways, ranging from equal rights claims to nationalist visions.

The second of the two „Empires after the War“ panels began with SEAN ANDREW WEMPE’s (Washington State University) presentation on colonial German responses to the Treaty of Versailles and the „colonial guilt“ discourse. Reminding us that Germany had been the third largest colonial power after England and France, the paper showed how Germany was ostracized from the European „civilization mission“ of colonialism. While German colonial rule was condemned as especially gruesome by the Allies, German colonial activists wrote revisionist histories of German imperialism stretching from the Crusades to the Hanse and their own time. From these narratives they derived moral superiority and advancement, and also sought to use the League of Nations as a forum for German colonial revisionism. LEILA FAWAZ (Tufts University) then delivered a moving talk on World War I and the reshaping of daily life in the Eastern Mediterranean. She showed how strongly the Great War impacted the Middle East and its borders. To this day, commonly accepted narratives that could form a shared memory for the purposes of identity are missing.

The conference’s second day concluded with a panel discussion at the Residence of the German Ambassador to the United States. After introductory words by the ambassador, Peter Wittig, the evening’s panel discussion was led off by ADAM TOOZE (Columbia University) with a brief keynote. Tooze showed how no state was fully satisfied with the outcome of the 1919 negotiations. Although Wilson envisioned peace without victory, this project failed, not least due to domestic and economic pressures. JEREMI SURI (University of Texas at Austin) questioned the U.S.-centrism of Tooze’s interpretation of the 1918-19 situation and the implication that the United States was the only global player that could have assured a better outcome. In-
stead, Suri suggested an interpretation that would focus more strongly on how diplomacy failed due to larger socio-political transformations from the end of the nineteenth century to the postwar period. AVIEL ROSHWALD (Georgetown University) called attention to the ambiguities of the postwar settlements, especially with regard to the idea of ethnic nationalism enshrined in the League of Nations system and the gap it created between reality and promise.

The conference’s third day began with the fifth panel. MADELEINE HERREN-OESCH’s (Universität Basel) paper characterized the postwar system as one that was designed to facilitate the circulation of goods, but not of people. Her analysis of ethnographic maps, population exchange, and the role of citizenship and passports demonstrated that although contemporaries regarded refugees and stateless people as evidence of temporary dysfunction, they had become a structural feature of the new world order. Herren-Oesch argued that these elements of disentanglement should be taken as a starting point for a „global history from below.” Next, MICHELE LOURO (Salem State University) examined Jawaharlal Nehru, the future prime minister of India, and his numerous links to antiimperialist networks in interwar Europe. Whereas Nehru is usually interpreted from a national, India-centered perspective, Louro stressed the deep and lasting impact that the experience of international comradeship and anti-imperial internationalism left on Nehru’s political thinking and action. In the panel’s final paper, CLAUDIA SIEBRECHT (University of Sussex) investigated the role of youth education within the activities of the League of Nations. Exerting a moral and emotional appeal, the League tried to promote a change in mentality towards a more international world by targeting younger generations. These strategies can be understood as nation-building on an international level.

In the sixth panel, ANNA KARLA (Universität zu Köln) examined the material dimension of reparations and the importance of deliveries in kind as a form of reparations. Explaining the involvement of the German building industry in projects of material reconstruction throughout Europe, she argued that these deliveries were burdensome for Germany but also a chance for the German economy to rebuild international business ties and create jobs. In the next paper, MADELEINE DUNGY (European University Institute) investigated the discussions about labor migration in the International Labor Organization (ILO) as well as the Economic Committee of the League of Nations. While both organizations took on questions of labor migration, a highly controversial topic of the time, their course was largely marked by different forms of inaction. As a result, circulating property and money were often better protected in the interwar era than moving people. In the panel’s final presentation, NICHOLAS MULDER (Columbia University) addressed the place of economic sanctions as one of the League of Nation’s means of peacekeeping and traced their role back to the spirit of blockade during the war. Whereas, before the Great War, sanctions had only been part of active warfare, the blockade against Germany was not lifted when fighting ended in 1918 but only terminated with the signing of the Versailles Treaty in 1919. Afterwards, Russia became an object of experimentation for economic warfare.

The conference’s final panel focused on the interwar problem of minority protection. VOLKER PROTT (University of Melbourne / Aston University) portrayed the League of Nations as incubator for ideas and asked why the League failed to secure peace. One reason was the lack of hard power to enforce rules. This was evident in the minority treaties monitored by the Minority Section of the League, which relied on informal mechanisms and expert resolutions. Next, LAURA ROBSON (Portland State University) argued that there was an imperial genealogy of the postwar minority protection regime. According to Robson, the imperial prototype of the minority system was to be found in the capitulatory privileges imposed on the Ottoman Empire by the Great Powers throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Instead of constituting a step towards internationally guaranteed human rights, the legal regime of minority protection should be understood as a postwar recasting of nineteenth-century imperial practices in a language more appropri-
ate to the interwar era.

In the round-table discussion that concluded the conference, BARBARA POTTHAST (Universität zu Köln) commented on the conference from the perspective of Latin American history, noting how the Great War was a catalyst for social, cultural, political and economic developments in Latin America. ELIZABETH THOMPSON (American University) emphasized the need for historians to question agency in history and reiterated the different perspectives on the League of Nations, taking the Islamic world into account. LEONARD SMITH underscored the importance of two questions. First, what did „the world“ actually mean in the interwar period? And second, who were considered a „people“? ADELE LINDENMEYR (Villanova University) noted that Russia had barely been mentioned at the conference although it had been an engine of unsettlement and had given rise to a new ideology that posed a powerful alternative to the West. The concluding discussion revealed how many aspects of the legacies of the Great War remain to be analyzed, including the history of emotions and examining the effects of damaged honor, studying the role of religion for states and nationality, and taking pacifism seriously as a global project of the time.

Conference Overview:

Simone Lässig (GHI Washington DC) / Hans van Ess (Max Weber Foundation) / Dane Kennedy (National History Center): Welcome remarks

Jörn Leonhard (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg): Keynote „Overburdened Peace: Competing Visions of World Order in 1918 / 19“

Panel 1 Treaties and the Making of the Post-war Order
Regine Mathias (Ruhr-Universität Bochum), chair

Jesse Kauffman (Eastern Michigan University): Brest-Litovsk at 100: Re-evaluating a Misunderstood Peace

Leonard Smith (Oberlin College): The Politics of Recognition at the Paris Peace Conference

Tosh Minohara (Kobe University): Elusive Equality: Japan’s Leadership and the Postwar Issue of Race

Panel 2 Wilsonianism and its Discontents
Jan C. Jansen (GHI Washington DC), chair

Roberta Pergher (Indiana University): Fascist Italy and the Rights of Others

Miklós Zeidler (Eötvös Loránd University): Revisionism as a Means of Nation Building: The Characteristics of Hungarian Revisionism between the World Wars

Panel 3 Empires after the War (part 1)

Birgit Schäbler (Universität Erfurt / Orient-Institut Beirut), chair


Donal Hassett (University of Bristol): Contesting the Colonial Culture of Victory in the French Empire

Panel 4 Empires after the War (part 2)

Mustafa Aksakal (Georgetown University), chair

Sean Andrew Wempe (Washington State University): A Question of Respectability: Colonial German Responses to the Treaty of Versailles and „Colonial Guilt“


Panel discussion at Residence of the German Ambassador Peter Wittig

Adam Tooze (Columbia University): Brief keynote „1918: The Botched Entry into the American Century“

Heidrun Tempel (German State Department), chair

Aviel Roshwald (Georgetown University)

Jeremi Suri (University of Texas at Austin)

Panel 5 Internationalisms

Axel Jansen (GHI Washington DC), chair

Madeleine Herren-Oesch (Universität Basel): The Coincidence of Densification and Disentanglement: An Alternative History of the
Twentieth Century

Michele Louro (Salem State University): Nehru, India and Global Anti-Imperialism between the World Wars

Claudia Siebrecht (University of Sussex): „Universal Conscience“ and Lasting Peace: League of Nation Youth Education in the 1920s and 1930s

Panel 6 Post-war Economies / Labor and Economy after the War

Jamie Martin (Georgetown University), chair

Anna Karla (Universität zu Köln): Reparation Policies Reconsidered: Material Reconstruction after World War I in Europe and Beyond


Nicholas Mulder (Columbia University): The Birth of Economic Sanctions from the Spirit of Blockade, 1918–1920

Panel 7 Minorities

Carole Fink (Ohio State University), chair

Volker Prott (University of Melbourne / Aston University): Taming Wilsonianism: The League of Nations and Territorial Conflict after Versailles

Laura Robson (Portland State University): Capitulations Redux: The Imperial Genealogy of the post-WWI „Minority“ Regimes

Concluding discussion

Adele Lindenmeyr (Villanova University), chair

Leonard Smith (Oberlin College)

Barbara Potthast (Universität zu Köln)

Elizabeth Thompson (American University)