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7 speakers (Theo Mayer, Hew Strachan, Margaret M., Patricia O., Garrett Peck, Katherine Akey, Mike Shuster)

[0:00:07]

**Theo Mayer:** Welcome to the World War I Centennial News Podcast, episode number 128. The podcast is about then. What was happening 100 years ago in the aftermath of World War I. And it's also about now. How World War I is being remembered, commemorated, discussed, taught, and learned. But most importantly, the podcast is about why and how we'll never let those events fall back into the mists of obscurity. So, join us as we explore the many facets of World War I, both then and now. As we come up on the centennial of one of the most significant and consequential events, World War I, we've put together this special edition of World War I Centennial News. Instead of a series of segments and stories, this week, we've dedicated the entire episode to reviewing, exploring, and discussing the Paris Peace Conference and the resultant Treaty of Versailles. To do this, we've gathered a special group of experts, noted historians, authors, and to represent the listeners, a citizen historian to explore this very significant process and treaty. What happened? Why? Is what we learned in schools what happened 100 years ago? And what are some of the consequences? It's going to be a very informative experience this week on World War I Centennial News, the Doughboy podcast, brought to you by the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission, the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, the Starr Foundation, and the Doughboy Foundation. I'm Theo Mayer, the chief technologist for the commission and your host. Welcome to our Treaty of Versailles special. Since this past February, a century after a global peace conference was convened in Paris, we've been presenting, exploring, and discussing the events that transpired. This has been especially true with a series of reports presented by Mike Shuster, former NPR correspondent and the curator for the Great War Project blog. Mike's exploration of these past weeks has been fascinating, horrifying, confusing, and generally, pretty amazing. His reports have inspired us to put together today's show to explore, summarize, and maybe clarify what happened 100 years ago. As the host of this show and not a historian, just a guy who's had the privilege of exploring World War I with some of the smartest subject matter experts in the world for a nonstop 127 weeks, seeing the process of making peace has been more befuddling than following the process of making war. Granted, the war was total madness and insanity, but inconceivable to me, the process of making peace seems even stranger. So, let me set this up. 100 years ago, in November the previous year, an armistice is achieved on the Western Front. Months, maybe even years earlier than expected, apparently and largely on the premise of a visionary and high principled concept, for ending the conflict and ushering in a new world order, built on the ashes of this cataclysmic conflict, a concept infused deeply with the democratic ideals of self determination, rule by the people, for the people, with open and free cooperation among and between all nations, an amazingly progressive vision, architected by the American Woodrow Wilson administration and commonly known as Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. Now, 100 years ago this month, the Treaty of Versailles is signed on June 28th, 1919, five years to the day after a 19-year-old kid named Gavrilo Princip gets all hyped up and shoots Austria's crown prince, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and sadly, also his wife, which somehow gets everybody to start killing each other for the next four-and-a-half years. But that's not as strange or bizarre as what happens now. What we're going to explore today with some real experts is how we managed to devolve from an armistice premised on the visionary and high principled concepts of Wilson's Fourteen Points to an imposed, punishing, blameful, perhaps impossible foundation for a new carving up of the world. To the victor go the spoils. So, to introduce you to each of our guests, the first question to them is going to be: considering today's subject, what do you think a good name for this episode would be and why? Starting with our first guest from the United Kingdom, Sir Hew Strachan, a Scottish-born British military historian, well known for his work on the administration of the British Army and the history of the First World War. Sir Hew is currently Professor of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews, but before moving to St. Andrews, he was Professor of the History of War at All Saints' College at Oxford. Sir Hew, nice to have you back on the show.

[0:05:50]

**Hew Strachan:** Thanks so much, Theo. Good to be on.

[0:05:53]

**Theo Mayer:** So, what do you think would be a good name for this exploration and why?

[0:05:58]

**Hew Strachan:** Well, like many people, I'm sort of caught between two names. One name would be "Peacemaking is Considerably Harder than Going to War in the First Place." But I think the other title, for me, would be, "The 11th of November 1918 was Not the End of the First World War," although many of those who assembled in Paris to make the peace thought it was, including Wilson, including Lloyd George. There was a sense in their respective countries that the world ended with the armistice of Germany, not with the peace settlement.

**[0:06:28]**

**Theo Mayer:** Thank you. Well, next from Canada, I'd like to welcome Professor Margaret MacMillan, Professor of History at the University of Toronto and Emeritus Professor of International History at the University of Oxford. Professor MacMillan is the author of *The War that Ended Peace* and also, very apropos to our discussion, a book called *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference 1919 and Its Attempt to End the War*, which won the 2002 Samuel Johnson Prize. Professional MacMillan, we haven't had the pleasure of having you on the show before, but your name and quotes from you come up all the time. Really nice to have you with us.

**[0:07:07]**

**Margaret M.:** Thank you for having me on.

**[0:07:09]**

**Theo Mayer:** Okay, same question to you: exploring the shifting sands from war to armistice to peace treaty, what do you think is a good name for this episode and why?

**[0:07:18]**

**Margaret M.:** Well, I think both the titles Hew Strachan had were good, but I think we could use the very apropos phrase that Georges Clemenceau, the French Prime Minister, used when he said, "Making peace is harder than waging war," and I think that's true. I think what we might also ask ourselves is, would we have done any better or could we have done any better? I think it's very easy to see the peace conference in very stark terms, which I think is wrong. Woodrow Wilson, the idealist, versus the cynical realists from Europe, which I think is a complete mis-assumption about the Paris Peace conference. And I think we have to remember what it is they were dealing with. As Hew Strachan pointed out, war kept on going. I mean, there really wasn't peace in Europe and the Middle East until early in the 1920s. And they had a great many problems before them, and I'm not sure anyone, no matter how clever and how powerful, could have solved them all.

**[0:08:03]**

**Theo Mayer:** Next from Camden, Maine, award-winning biographer Patricia O'Toole. She's a former professor of the School of the Arts at Columbia University, and a fellow of the Society of American Historians. Also very apropos to our discussion, one of her books is *The Moralist: Woodrow Wilson and the World He Made*. Professor O'Toole has also written books about Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Adams, which was a finalist for a Pulitzer. Patricia, welcome back to the podcast.

**[0:08:35]**

**Patricia O.:** Thank you for having me back, Theo.

**[0:08:37]**

**Theo Mayer:** Okay, the same question to you, maybe you'll answer it in a Wilson voice. What do you think is a good name for this episode and why?

**[0:08:45]**

**Patricia O.:** Well you guessed what I'm going to do. I'm going to choose a phrase from Wilson. On his way to Europe, he was very worried about what was going to happen, and he said to one of his aides that he foresaw a tragedy of disappointment, that great expectations had been set up for the peace conference, and with his Fourteen Points he had played a large role in setting those expectations. And he was wondering whether they could measure up to what the world was now seeming to want from the peace conference.

**[0:09:17]**

**Theo Mayer:** We have two more guests for this wonderful gathering. From Arlington, Virginia, author and U.S. Army veteran Garrett Peck, whose seventh book is *The Great War in America: World War I and its Aftermath*. Garrett, welcome to the podcast.

**[0:09:32]**

**Garrett Peck:** Thank you, Theo.

**[0:09:33]**

**Theo Mayer:** Okay, Garrett, exploring the devolution of ideals at the Paris Peace Conference, what do you think is a good name for the episode and why?

**[0:09:41]**

**Garrett Peck:** I had thought of a couple different ideas around what we might actually call this podcast. To Margaret's point here about how people view the peace, especially the peace process, you know, John Maynard Keynes

referred to this as a Carthaginian peace. He was very adamantly opposed to the end peace treaty, and that might be a little bit harsh, but ultimately I do look upon the peace as being something that leads to the next war, the fact that it didn't resolve the issues that was supposed to be resolved and, 20 years later, boom, we get the next war. So essentially it's kind of the failure of the ability to make peace with each other.

**[0:10:12]**

**Theo Mayer:** Thank you, Garrett. And our final guest is artist, World War I photography expert, and former line producer for this podcast who helped me develop the show, Ms. Katherine Akey. Katherine, in this gathering, you represent the knowledgeable and passionate citizen historian. It's fitting and wonderful to have you back on the show for this event.

**[0:10:31]**

**Katherine Akey:** Yeah, it's great to be back! Feels like coming home.

**[0:10:34]**

**Theo Mayer:** Okay, you get the same question. What's a good name for this episode and why?

**[0:10:39]**

**Katherine Akey:** Well, the first thing that sort of came to my mind is the phrase "What's past is prologue," which is emblazoned on the National Archives here in D.C. That I bike by several times a week. It's also a phrase that's commonly used by the military when discussing similarities between wars throughout history, but it's originally from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, and its original context really points to a setting of the stage both literally and narratively. And when I think back to this, as everyone's pointing out, very nuanced, very complicated bit of negotiations that went on 100 years ago, it's hard to understate how relevant all of those maneuverings and decisions are to our current geopolitical landscape.

**[0:11:26]**

**Theo Mayer:** Well, I think that was a pretty wonderful and revealing way to get everybody introduced, and I also want to thank each of you for taking the time to speak to our listeners. Okay, let's jump into it. Professor O'Toole, let's start well before the Paris Peace Conference, about a year prior actually, with the Fourteen Points delivered in a speech by Wilson in January of 1918. With Wilson as one of your study subjects, could you quickly provide some perspective on the Fourteen Points? How did they come about and what was the idea?

**[0:11:55]**

**Katherine Akey:** Well, the United States had entered the war about eight months before, and he was always... Even from 1914, he was thinking about the peace that would come after the war. So this was kind of the summa of his ideas developed throughout the war, kind of his vision for what the peace ought to be. And 8 of the 14 points had to do with various territorial settlements and boundaries and things like that, but the big 6 ideas that he wanted to get across, they were all things that he thought would revolutionize the conduct of world affairs. So one of them was open covenants of peace openly arrived at, and that was a jab at various secret treaties that the Allies had made during the war promising spoils of war if they won. Another of his ideas was freedom of the seas, even in wartime. He wanted free trade for nations who were committed to world peace, and he thought that the world's armies and navies should be large enough for self defense but no more. So that involved serious disarmament there. And he wanted an adjudication of colonial claims that would give consideration to the interests of the subject populations. He was not a fan of colonialism at all. And the final thing, the biggest one, was the League of Nations, which would be charged with preserving the territorial integrity and political independence of all the member states and keeping the peace that would ultimately be made. So those were his main points.

**[0:13:27]**

**Theo Mayer:** Okay, Sir Hew, a military history question for you. Before that, was there, or what was the concept plan or vision of how this war might end? Or was there ever such a concept?

**[0:13:39]**

**Hew Strachan:** Well, the short answer to that is probably no. One reason is nobody knows quite where this war is going to end. Remember it's not just being fought where the United States will make its major contribution, and that is in France; it's being fought on other fronts as well. It's not unlikely, and indeed does in fact, end on those other fronts before it ends on the German front, on the front in France. So how is the ending of the fighting on one front going to impact on the conduct of the war on other fronts? And each of the armistices, when they come, is essentially a building block towards the ending of the war overall and is done sequentially. So geographically there's an issue, and there's also an issue in time because nobody quite expects Germany of all countries to end the war quite as quickly as it does. The Allies, from the entry of the United States to the war in April 1917, know that they will win this war eventually provided they don't lose it in the short term. And for much of 1918, it looks as though they might lose it in

the short term. Even though the United States is in the war, the American expeditionary force is not going to get to France in significant numbers until 1919. From the Allies' point of view, that is the likely year, or possibly 1920, when the war will end. And when it starts ending earlier than that in autumn 1918, the statesmen simply aren't ready. The Fourteen Points, after all, is not an agreed program for ending this war. It is one man's view of this war and seen by Woodrow Wilson as a possible way of shaping this war. But this is a coalition conflict, and each of the Allies has its own view, especially when of course the United States is not actually at war with either the Ottoman Empire or Bulgaria, and only declared war on Austria-Hungary at the end of 1917. So there are countries here who have a voice in how this war will end who are fighting countries different from those which the United States is fighting. So in a way, nobody's ready. There is no plan. And the armistices, when they're negotiated, are essentially recognitions that there needs to be time to think through what the final solution might look like. I'm paraphrasing a bit, but Allenby, who's the British commander on the Palestine front, when he realizes that he's achieved a significant victory over the Ottoman army in September 1918 signals the British Foreign Office as to what the possible terms for the end of the war might be if the Ottomans were to seek an armistice. And the reply comes back from Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, and I paraphrase his account, I don't remember the exact words, but it's to the effect, "I really don't know." And this is only a month away, of course, from the time when the Ottomans will seek an armistice.

**[0:16:21]**

**Margaret M.:** This is Margaret. I mean, I think there were ideas about what the world should look like. Should I use Woodrow Wilson's ideas? Lenin and the Bolshevik in Russia had ideas. And foreign offices, in different countries including of course in the defeated nations, such as Germany, had drawn up wishlists of what they'd like to get. But Hew Strachan I think is absolutely right. None of that adds up to any comprehensive plan for peace, and that was going to be one of the things they were going to have to start dealing with very soon after the armistice.

**[0:16:47]**

**Theo Mayer:** Okay, so the shooting stops on the western front, and we know the fighting continues a lot of places. That's a discussion for another day. Okay, an open question to the panel. How did Paris and Versailles become the designated locations for the conference? And do you have any thoughts about how this decision might have sewn some of the seeds of the outcome?

**[0:17:08]**

**Margaret M.:** Go ahead, Hew.

**[0:17:09]**

**Hew Strachan:** No, no, Margaret's much better qualified to speak on this than I am.

**[0:17:13]**

**Margaret M.:** I'm sure I'm not. I think the peace conference was never held at Versailles. It's often misleadingly called Versailles, but Versailles just was where the German treaty happened to be signed, and various other suburbs of Paris like Versailles were where the other treaties of the other defeated nations were signed. The peace conference itself was held in Paris. Woodrow Wilson and David Lloyd George, the prime minister of Great Britain, did actually not want to have it held there because they felt that the mood would be wrong. The French had suffered enormously in the First World War, and their mood, as you can imagine, was quite hostile towards Germany, and they felt it would be much better to have a peace conference at somewhere like Geneva. But Georges Clemenceau, the French Prime Minister, absolutely insisted. He pointed out that the French had lost a huge number of men. They lost more men in proportion to their population than almost any other country in the First World War, and he said, "We have to have it Paris." And of course what he was very conscious of was that the German confederation had fought a war against France in 1870-71, and that treaty and that submission of France had been done at Versailles. And so I think for him having the conference in Paris was hugely important, then signing that treaty at Versailles with Germany was hugely important.

**[0:18:16]**

**Patricia O.:** I just want to add the Clemenceau actually fought in the Franco-Prussian War in the 1870s, so these things were much more immediate to him than they would have been to Wilson and Lloyd George, and so it was personal as well as I think a feeling for France itself.

**[0:18:33]**

**Garrett Peck:** France had been attacked twice basically in four decades by the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War, and then again in 1914, so it's a very, very sensitive topic to the French.

**[0:18:41]**

**Hew Strachan:** Yeah, I was just going to say one of the recurrent topics in French military exchanges, particularly in 1918, 1919, is Wilson really doesn't understand the depth of feeling in European politics or indeed how the balance of

power is operated within Europe. For them, that lack of grasp, which the big vision if you like of the Fourteen Points reveals. The contrast of course is that many French people, as opposed to French statesmen, are extraordinarily welcoming of Wilson. He's a national hero when he arrives, and they do see him as bringing a vision of a new world order. The challenge for everybody when they finally meet in Paris, of course, is to jump from the realities of a war which has been extraordinarily destructive, to a vision in one bound, because Wilson's arrival in Paris means that they've got a ticking clock. They can't have a protracted negotiation because the president can't be away from Washington too long. And as well as the location it seems to be very important that the president decides to be there himself rather than, say, entrust the negotiations to Colonel [inaudible] or somebody else and to have emerged later, because the result is that the timeframe, particularly for the peace treaty with Germany, is just far too tight.

[0:19:54]

**Theo Mayer:** Garrett, your book is a good wide view of the U.S. In World War I. From your context, Wilson decided that he will personally lead the U.S. Delegation in Paris. And in the preface of your book, you ask the interesting question: how different might things have been if Wilson had delegated the Paris peace negotiations? Could expand on that?

[0:20:16]

**Garrett Peck:** Sure, Wilson believes that he has to be the one who has to negotiate this into the treaty itself. I view this in many ways as kind of hubris, this belief that only he can actually negotiate this. He doesn't particularly get along with his Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, and therefore when he goes to Paris it's Wilson himself who de facto is serving as his own secretary of state. And the negotiations themselves are not really his strongest point. He's only served as an executive, but he's never ever been part of a parliamentary government. He's never served in the legislature. So the whole sausage making around how you negotiate, whether it's a law or a peace treaty, isn't necessarily his strongest point.

[0:20:55]

**Patricia O.:** I just want to add to what Garrett said about negotiation not being his strongest point. I would say it was his weakest point. He detested negotiation. He always had. He thought that if you were a real statesman you would maybe get advice when you had a big challenge, and then you would think your way through to the best solution, and then you would sell it to Congress or whoever you had to sell it to with a very powerful speech. And he had succeeded as president for the first six years with that strategy on the domestic front, and I think he thought he could do that in Paris as well. He didn't like negotiation because negotiation involved compromise, and therefore in his mind you would end up with something that was less than ideal. He also, as a negotiator, I mean it's kind of a fundamental. When you're six years old, and your mother says you have to help with the dishes, your next thought is, "What can I get for doing this?" Like, "Can I go to the movies after we're done with the dishes?" And Wilson, in the negotiation, France or Britain would say they wanted X, and he would say, "Well no you can't have X. That's egregious." And he would say again that they couldn't have it, and they would say again that they were going to have it, and finally he would just capitulate. So he never did the thing of saying, "Well, if you're going to have X, then you have to give up Y." So he put the United States at a terrible disadvantage by not entrusting the negotiations to someone else.

[0:22:26]

**Garrett Peck:** To add to that point there, for one, it's actually not the job of the president to negotiate peace treaties. There's actually a whole State Department that does this actually for the president, or sometimes the U.S. Trade representative and so on. But Wilson believed that he had to go negotiate this peace treaty and I think in part because Theodore Roosevelt, who was his big political rival had earlier negotiated a peace treaty at the Russo-Japanese War.

[0:22:49]

**Theo Mayer:** I have another how-things-would-have-been-different-if question. The Germans were explicitly excluded from participating in the conference. First of all, why was that? And in hindsight was that a good idea?

[0:23:02]

**Margaret M.:** Well, that wasn't the intention. What the Allies thought they would do is meet in Paris in January for about a month and hammer out the terms that they would agree on, and then they would present those terms to Germany. And they thought they'd sit down and have a full-scale negotiation with Germany and the other defeated nations. That is how other peace treaties had been negotiated. The model they had in mind I think above all was the Congress of Vienna, which in 1814 and 1815 ended the Napoleonic Wars, and that was a negotiation between the two different sides. And what happened is it took them so long to agree on the peace terms to be offered to Germany. It was very, very difficult. There were a great many fights. Italy walked out at one point. The Japanese threatened to walk out. The Belgians threatened to walk out. And the Chinese eventually did walk out; at least they refused to sign the peace treaty because they didn't like some of its provisions. And so by the time they'd actually got all the articles of the treaty agreed upon, they thought, "We cannot reopen this again and negotiate with Germany because we may

not be able to get any sort of agreement at all." The agreement was so fragile that they didn't dare open it again, and this is something of course the Germans came to resent bitterly. They felt the treaty was a dictated one. They called it a diktat. They felt they hadn't been able to negotiate, and when they eventually came to Paris, they did have all sorts of crates of material they'd been preparing, and they found that they simply were told, "Here are the terms; take it or leave it. You can raise any objections in writing. You have two weeks to do it." The problem really I think was that this was not intended. It was just something that happened. The peace conference slipped, almost imperceptibly, from a preliminary peace conference, which is what it was called in January 1919, into the real thing.

[0:24:32]

**Theo Mayer:** Okay, let's consider that part one. We've presented a vision for a peace. We've stopped the shooting on the western front based in part on that vision. We've picked a place to work out a post-war world. And the delegations are coming to Paris to do that. That's a good setup. Katherine, as the representative for the listeners, what have we learned? Any thoughts so far?

[0:24:53]

**Katherine Akey:** Well, two things stand out to me as really, really important to how this ends up playing out, and that's personality and home politics. The elections that go on in the U.S. And in the UK leading up to the treaty and the negotiations, and then the personalities, like we're discussing Wilson and his strengths and his weaknesses and his egos and concerns, and Clemenceau's past, and the sort of collective memory of the Franco-Prussian War for the French. It's a little disappointing, I suppose. You don't want to be cynical about geopolitical negotiations, but personality has so much to do with how they work out, and I think that that's a really interesting and hugely important part of how this all ends up getting resolved.

[0:25:42]

**Theo Mayer:** Okay, let's dive into part two. Margaret MacMillan, one of the things you wrote was that, as the powers at the peace conference got together, pretty quickly they realized the scope and the scale of what they'd taken responsibility for. You wrote, "Old ruling structures had collapsed. Allied occupation forces and allied representatives were being drawn in to take their place. There was little choice. If they didn't do it, no one would, or worse: revolutionaries might. Now Europe and much of the world is in a state of collapse." Can you expand on that and the position the Allies and the U.S. Find themselves in?

[0:26:21]

**Margaret M.:** Well, I think that's certainly how people felt at the time, and it's very difficult when you're living through the middle of turmoil to be able to say, "Oh, no, it's all going to be okay." Lloyd George actually was more sanguine than some of them, but what had happened of course was that Austria-Hungary had collapsed, and that had left a collapse of also an economic structure. And so food wasn't moving around. Supplies weren't moving around. Railways weren't working properly. In Vienna, people were starving, I mean, one of the richest countries in the world. And you also had sporadic, and sometimes quite sustained, outbreaks of revolutionary activity, which people in those days tended to call sort of anarchism or Bolshevism. I mean, they weren't really quite sure what was behind a lot of it. But there was a real fear, I think, that European society, and perhaps society further afield, were going to plunge into even more turmoil, that the end of the fighting, and as Hew pointed out quite rightly not all the fighting had by any means stopped. But the end of the major part of the war did not bring peace, and in many cities there were violent insurrections. And so I think there really was a feeling that they had a great deal to deal with, and that also puts them under pressure. They felt they had to get some sort of peace settlement quickly because otherwise things might go on deteriorating.

[0:27:25]

**Theo Mayer:** That brings up a good point. Sir Hew, many of the people think of the Red Scare as a post-World War II, Cold War phenomena, but the Bolshevik revolution plays a huge role right now all the way to the point of the Allies getting ready to send troops back into harms' way. Could you address that?

[0:27:42]

**Hew Strachan:** Yup. Many historians argue that the Cold War begins in 1917, not after the Second World War, precisely for the reasons that you suggest. And the phrase at the time was that the Bolsheviks are now more of a threat than the Bosch, referring of course to the French term for the Germans. And part of the reason for that, again, begins during the war itself when this fear of collapse at home, the fear that the Allies might not win the war before they themselves have undergone a revolution similar to that which has occurred in Russia, means that they're very concerned about mood at home, the mood on the streets, the possibility of revolution in their own countries. And, as a result, they are directing their attention just as much to the appeal of socialism, the appeal of the Bolsheviks, as they are to the defeat of Germany. And that is really part of the context, too, in which Wilson issues the Fourteen Points. The Fourteen Points are in some ways addressed to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, because they had called for a peace without annexations and without indemnities and so shattered the idea that the liberal democracies had the best way

out of this war. It might well be that revolution is a better way out of this war, particularly if you just go back, territorially at least, to the status quo ante. And that concern then works in with yet another concern, and you referred to the dispatch of Allied forces to the east. This is motivated partly by anti-Bolshevism, but also in 1918 itself by the need to resuscitate the eastern front. When the Bolsheviks seek a peace settlement with Germany in 1918, what they're doing is precipitating the collapse of a very important front, second perhaps to the western front by 1918, but integral to Allied strategy because what it means is that Germany and Austria-Hungary, in particular, have to face in two directions, have to face east and west at the same time and so divide their forces. So the intervention in Russia, which can be construed as anti-Bolshevik, is also very profoundly wrapped in the strategy of the First World War. When the armistice with Germany is agreed in November 1918, then that might conceivably have been a moment to reintegrate Russia into the great power system. But crucially, in 1918-1919, precisely because the Bolsheviks are seen as a continuing threat, and the possibility of revolution is seen as a continuing threat, precisely for that reason the Russians are not included in the negotiations. The argument is that they signed their peace treaty at Brest-Litovsk with Germany in March 1918, and therefore they're not in the war. And the fact that they're not in Paris in 1919 means that a very significant player in terms of the future of Europe and indeed the future of the world is simply absent from the table when many other far less significant players are represented.

[0:30:33]

**Theo Mayer:** Patricia O'Toole, in the midterm elections of 1918, Wilson's Democratic Party loses both the House and the Senate, who then insist that Wilson include them in the delegation to Paris, but he decides not to do that, and he virtually excludes the new party in power. What explains that? And how big of a mistake was that?

[0:30:54]

**Patricia O.:** It was a fatal mistake. It basically set up the Senate's failure to ratify the treaty, and with that failure of course came the very sad development that the United States would never enter the League of Nations, and the League of Nations of course was Wilson's great dream for peace in the world. One of the things that was on his mind was this was his eighth. He thought that he would succeed. He thought that the noise that the Republicans in the Senate were making, and their unhappiness about his exclusion of them, he thought that would just disappear once they saw the treaty. And the reason he thought that, the principal reason, is that the Senate had never failed to ratify a peace treaty. So he thought that, okay, they can go ahead and let off steam and talk all they want, but in the end, they're going to ratify the treaty. It was unthinkable to him that they wouldn't. So this was a terrible decision on Wilson's part.

[0:31:52]

**Theo Mayer:** Patricia mentioned Wilson's 14th point: a global organization that would stand above all national governments in international affairs, which could arbitrate and mitigate international conflicts, a league of nations. And Wilson's vision was that it be integrated into the peace treaty as a core component. Once again around the table, good idea? Bad idea? And why?

[0:32:15]

**Garrett Peck:** I think ultimately it was a bad idea. In fact, just given the political considerations within the United States, the Republicans told him from the outset, "You need to keep these two issues separate. We'll have two different treaties, one for the League of Nations, and the other for the peace."

[0:32:28]

**Hew Strachan:** I think I'd agree with that. I think the peace treaty's complicated enough without throwing League of Nations into the mix. And of course if you take the 1945-46 parallel, the establishment of the United Nations is not part of the terms imposed on Germany, so one thing at a time probably would have been a better way to go. On the other hand, the League of Nations has enormous purchase into thinking about how the world will be organized both then and of course in its resuscitated form after 1945. And many U.S. Presidents have remained essentially exponents of that aspect of the Wilsonian vision.

[0:33:00]

**Margaret M.:** Yes I agree, and of course it was a further reason for Germany to hate the treaty. I mean, they hated it anyway, but they were asked to sign a treaty setting up an organization which they weren't initially allowed to join.

[0:33:10]

**Theo Mayer:** Another one of the Fourteen Points that causes huge conflict, the idea of self-rule by a people of a region, a lot of people took this seriously to great consternation, frustration, and pain, like Korea, who believed that this was an idea whose time had come only to be brutally disabused of that idea by the ruling Japanese. Was the existing power structure just unprepared for this idea to become real? Professor MacMillan.

[0:33:38]

**Margaret M.:** Well, at some points, the idea is it wasn't very clear what Wilson meant. No, people were used to the idea that peoples declaring themselves to be nations would try and push for independent states and a clearly defined piece of territory, but what Wilson seems to have meant was people having a right to govern themselves, and he didn't believe that necessarily meant independence. When Irish nationalists tried to come and see him to ask for independence for Ireland, to ask him to support it, he said no. He said, "You have democratic government. You already have self government."

**[0:34:05]**

**Hew Strachan:** I would just add that this just throws fuel on the fire in terms of the opportunities which the breakup of four major empires, the Ottoman, the Austria-Hungarian, the Russian, and the Germans, the opportunity for [inaudible] national self determination to be implemented is great as a result of that collapse. And yet of course the demarcation lines for these new states, if they are to be created as states, is simply not there. And that's a principal reason why the fighting continues at least till 1923 and makes the whole business of making peace so hard to achieve.

**[0:34:39]**

**Theo Mayer:** Open treaties and territory, another one of the Fourteen Points. No secret deals, but a whole bunch of secret deals were made between and among the Allied nations in picking sides in the conflict. The Italians ultimately walked out over this, and the new world order devolves into a giant argument about how to slice up the new world among the victor nations. Who would like to address that?

**[0:35:04]**

**Margaret M.:** Well, I think Wilson couldn't expect to make peace entirely on his own, entirely on his own terms. I think there was a certain amount of resentment, understandable perhaps among the Allies, that he had gone ahead and broken an armistice with Germany on the basis of the Fourteen Points without really consulting the rest of them. He very consciously said the United States was an associate, not an ally. But his vision was, although shared by I think a lot of the Europeans, was not the only set of considerations that were there. I mean, the French badly needed security. You can understand why they were thinking about it. The British wanted to protect their empire. And so different nations had different interests.

**[0:35:36]**

**Theo Mayer:** Okay, Professor O'Toole, could you talk to us about what's happening to Wilson personally during all this? Wilson heads out to Europe to lead this himself, and I'm sure that he had a personal self-image of being the global peacemaker. And now we get into the nitty gritty; it's all getting pretty ugly. So what's happening to Wilson the man?

**[0:35:57]**

**Patricia O.:** I read with great attention, it was like reading a really good thriller, the minutes of the Council of Four, their deliberations, and after having read other accounts about how badly he fared with Clemenceau and Lloyd George, in particular, I was expecting to find him much more passive than he was. But he argues with great force and with great intelligence, but he just didn't know how to prevail when other people stood their ground. And it's taking a huge physical toll on him. There's a moment in April where he's sick for a few days, and it's kind of presented as it might be pneumonia; it might be the flu. And then there's quite a bit of thought. There was gossip at the time from insiders that he had actually suffered a small stroke. So it's very, very hard on him. As the conference went on, he looked increasingly gaunt and not at the top of his game, and he wasn't.

**[0:36:53]**

**Theo Mayer:** We've gone through nearly five months of contentious, difficult, a compromising process resulting in a draft structure for a League of Nations, a barely disguised neocolonialism carving up of the spoils of collapsed empires, and a really punitive treaty that blames and punishes Germany in really harsh terms, so harsh that even some of the Allies are squeamish about it. How does this line up with your vision of what happened in Paris? Sir Hew?

**[0:37:22]**

**Hew Strachan:** The four months, five months, six months that is required to put the peace treaty together, we've referred to this already as so short that, not until you have the final deal, if you like, are people fully aware of the impact of the content. And yet there is no time or no opportunity to go back and renegotiate that, to tone it down, to rethink issues. And as a result, when the deal is put to the Germans, there is a not unreasonable expectation they will turn around and say no, they will not accept these terms, despite the fact that they're being given no other option. In other words, the armistice will be what the armistice says it is, simply a temporary halt in the fighting while negotiation takes place. And if negotiation fails, then the war will be resumed. So I think that sort of conditionality of the whole process continues beyond June 1919, not least because of the realization that it's not a deal that the Germans can

readily accept. And that in itself undermines the capacity of the peacemakers to enforce the peace treaty when it is challenged. I don't see any inevitability between 1919 and 1939. What I do see is disagreement among Allies as to how the treaty should be enforced, and that in itself is a principal reason for its failure.

**[0:38:40]**

**Theo Mayer:** Okay, a final question around the table. As we look at the key lessons that we can take away from this, as people and as a world, what would you put at the top of the list for us to remember?

**[0:38:53]**

**Margaret M.:** Oh, I don't know, because they were dealing with problems of such a scale, and they were dealing with such a turbulent landscape, and they're also dealing with a Germany which remained strong. I mean, it had been defeated, and that was of course something the Germans had difficulty in accepting, and they had been defeated on the battlefield, but it still remained a very strong power. What would have been better is to do what they did I suppose at the end of the Second World War, but the circumstances are very different, and that came only after the absolute defeat of Germany and Japan. And the Allies were not prepared to do that in 1918. They didn't want to have to resume fighting. And I think they were really anxious to get whatever deal they could. My own view is the treaty was not as harsh as some people think. I mean, it was certainly portrayed as such, but I think in time the Germans could have learnt to leave with it, and in fact they manage to renegotiate a number of its clauses including about reparations in the course of the 1920s.

**[0:39:40]**

**Hew Strachan:** Just picking up what Margaret's just said, it's worth pointing out of course that in some ways other countries were treated more harshly than Germany. Hungary would feel that particularly, and still feels it to this day, and yet we don't link the Treaty of Trianon, the terms which were imposed on Hungary, as leading to a subsequent war. And what that suggests to me is that here's a peace settlement which actually is extraordinarily ambitious and perhaps needs to be extraordinarily ambitious given the scale of the problems they're having to deal with, and to that extent is not necessarily founded in the realities of the situation at the time. But it has given us a vocabulary for the international order and for how we might like to see it, at least in ideal terms, to which we still cleave. And that is extraordinarily important. It's something we tend to lose sight of. Whatever Wilson did wrong, he also managed to establish ideas about the transfer of America's Manifest Destiny to the rest of the world, which still shape the international order, and to which other countries are still prepared at least to pay lip service and to give some support.

**[0:40:47]**

**Patricia O.:** One of the things that has always puzzled me, and maybe Garrett and Hew and Katherine could take this up, is why does this idea persist that the harshness of the treaty caused World War II? We've talked about this this morning, and it seems that no one who's in the panel agrees with that notion, and yet you talk to other people who know a little bit about World War I and a little bit about the treaty, and they're just sure that this treaty was the cause of World War II. So why are we still stuck with that idea? Any thoughts?

**[0:41:18]**

**Garrett Peck:** I do think that the treaty, at least from my point of view, did lead to World War II, especially given how Germany was treated at the peace table. Part of that is the expectations that they have around the Fourteen Points. No other country had laid out their war aims, but Wilson does this, and in fact of course there's actually 25 points. And the Germans begrudgingly go along with it. They're like, "Okay, we can agree to a peace if this is what it is. We'll agree to all these points." And then of course there's the, "Oh yes, and also you have to agree to these things as well," like the war guilt clause and whatnot. Another big factor in this is, through the armistice terms, the German Army has never actually surrendered. Even though they've lost the war militarily, they're wholesale fleeing back to Germany, but the army simply disbands. There's no actual surrender document. And so then you get revisionists like Adolf Hitler who come out and say, "Hey, we didn't lose the war. We never surrendered." And he immediately starts plotting Germany's revenge. So in many ways, I look upon World War II effectively as Germany's revenge for the way that they were treated in World War I. They expected a harsh but fair peace treaty, and that's not what they got.

**[0:42:19]**

**Katherine Akey:** I feel like from my perspective something that gets overlooked, of course history is defined by your vantage point, right? Growing up in America, what we're taught about World War I is very different than, say, what Germans growing up today would be taught about World War I, but I remember being shocked as a young adult at finding out about air raids in World War II on German citizens and Japanese citizens. And similarly, I feel like my understanding of the impact of World War I on citizens was so limited coming into this before I came more of a citizen historian, I suppose, and I think that that has so much to do with the continued political fallout of the '30s and the '40s. And I think it's hard to underestimate the trauma that this war had not only on French citizens who lost 25% of their men aged 18 to 40, but on German citizens who had suffered hunger and starvation and economic deprivation, and

continued to do so. Mike Shuster, your series of reports over the past months was really the catalyst that stimulated us to create this roundtable, so after having listened through this, do you have any closing thoughts?

**[0:43:36]**

**Mike Shuster:** It is still such an enormous subject to grasp and feel confident about any of the decisions that were made, and I'm left with questions of a counterfactual what-if. I'm not sure that I can add anything more than that.

**[0:43:50]**

**Theo Mayer:** Well, thank you, Mike. And that leads me to want to close the show with a quote from one of our recent guests, Ron Nash, a Senior Education Fellow from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. In our interview with us, he said, "When we talk about history, the root word of history is historia, which is inquiry. I think that not enough people understand that history is not just studying some information about the past, but it's a constant asking of questions that lead to possible answers, and then reframing those questions and more questions and more answers." It's in this spirit that we convened this roundtable, and I want to thank everybody who so generously took their time to join us in our asking of questions, exploring possible answers, and causing us all to reframe the questions for a complex but important subject. On behalf of our listeners, our sponsors, the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission, the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, the Starr Foundation, and the Doughboy Foundation, thank you. We were joined today by military historian Sir Hew Strachan, Professor of International History Margaret MacMillan, Woodrow Wilson biographer Professor Patricia O'Toole, American history author Garrett Peck, citizen historian and artist Katherine Akey, and former NPR correspondent and World War I blogger, Mike Shuster. Thank you to the production team, Kat Slazlow, the line producer for the show, Mac Nelson and Tim Crow, our interview editing team, Dave Kramer, researcher and writer, Jay Almisho, research assistant and web support, and I'm Theo Mayer, your producer and host. The U.S. World War I Centennial Commission was created by Congress to honor, commemorate, and educate about World War I. The commission's programs have been to inspire a national conversation and awareness about World War I, including this podcast. We've brought the lessons of 100 years ago to today's educators, their classrooms, and the public. We've helped to restore World War I memorials in communities of all sizes across the country. And yet to be completed, we're building America's national World War I memorial in Washington, D.C. The commission's founding sponsor is the Pritzker Military Museum and library. The podcast, and a full transcript of the show, can be found on our website at [www1cc.org/cn](http://www1cc.org/cn). Now you'll find World War I Centennial News in all the places you get your podcasts, even on YouTube, asking Siri, or asking your smart speaker by saying, "Play W-W One Centennial News podcast." The commission's Twitter and Instagram handles are both @WW1CC, and we're on Facebook at WW1Centennial. Thank you for joining us. And in closing, we'd like to ask you for your help in keeping the story alive for America by helping us build the World War I memorial in Washington, D.C. You can do that by texting the letters WWI or WW1 to the phone number 91999. You can make a contribution of any size. Thank you.

**[0:47:16]**