

Symposium on the centennial anniversary of the Peace of Versailles: verdicts and revisitations

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One momentous day in June 1919 is often remembered, contrastingly, in the technicolour of its ambition and attempted modernity, or the foreboding monochrome of its destructive, self-delusion. However, the chromatic spectrum of the treaty's reality, both in its own time but also in its enduring legacy, highlights the peace project's formidable complexity. Just as the haze of the summer of 1914 is so compellingly captured in the tragic remembrances of pre-war tennis matches in Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*,¹ so the vision of 1919 bathes in seasonal shimmers and phosphorescent flashbacks that cannot help but be the product of emotion rather than cool dissection. However, the peace process born of the Great War remains an exercise in revelation, as public international lawyers continue to interact with it well into the 21st century. Yet, there is (as perhaps there has always been) a distinct unsettling at how the peace settlement's suffocating old-world tropes jostle with the first pangs of a new, scarcely recognisable, international society in the livery of the League of Nations. Like Mrs Dalloway, our various disorientating encounters with these events—these past, these living events—force us to reckon with the roles of time, faith and doubt in our discipline.

The four contributions included in this symposium for the *London Review of International Law* deliver a series of discerning, insightful explorations of the peace settlement's birdsong. They were presented at an afternoon workshop held at the London School of Economics and Political Science on Tuesday 8 October 2019. The workshop was followed by a most stimulating lecture that same evening by Margaret MacMillan, Professor of History at the University of Toronto and Emeritus Professor at the University of Oxford, entitled 'Ending Wars and Making Peace: The Paris Conference of 1919 Re-examined'.² The intention in commissioning these four contributions for the *Review* was for public international lawyers to take another good look at

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¹ V Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (Victor Gollancz, 1933).

² An audio recording of the lecture is available at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/lse-player?id=4746> (last visited 1 July 2020).

the Peace of Versailles one hundred years on from its negotiation and adoption, and to chase leads that had somehow escaped international legal thought and imagination. In this exercise, we favoured approaches that were fresh, angular and unexpected—contextualizing the text, for example, or questioning the treaty’s subconsciousness, its private life, its pre-life, its after-life. How could a treaty coming forward from such an upturning of societies, from such horror which had cost and damaged so many lives, not itself be an artefact produced by those conditions, those people? Given all of this, how could that treaty ever realize the future?

We believe that each of the four contributions presented here do not disappoint on our original brief—either in the angle (or angles) they have pursued or in terms of the elegance of their composition and the deep consciousness they exhibit about the legal writer’s craft. From Kate Miles’ revisitation of the visuality, the almost cinematic quality, of ‘one of those living, breathing moments’ of international legal history, to the pre-history of Versailles that affords ‘fourteen ways of looking back’ as presented by Dino Kritsiotis, from the ‘visions’ of institutional autonomy for the League of Nations recalled by Nigel White, to Thérèse O’Donnell’s ‘historically situated aesthetics’ of the actual designing of the Treaty of Versailles, these thoughtful and provocative interventions demonstrate that it really is never too soon—or too late—to make an appointment with history, to revisit and to revisit purposefully anew.

We are fully appreciative to the editors of the *Review* for looking so energetically upon the proposal we sent to them in the first quarter of last year and for each act of assistance they have given to us since in order to bring this project to timeous completion. We do hope that it is a project that accords with the best traditions of publishing work ‘that aligns the study of international law with the wider effort to understand current conditions—their creation and reproduction, realities and possibilities, pasts and alternative futures—for the sake of emancipatory change’, the unabashed ambition set out in the very first editorial of the *Review* some seven years ago now.³ Throughout, our hope as editors has been that, both individually and collectively, these offerings will in some small way emancipate minds, and make us think again about what we think we already know about that fateful international agreement of June 1919.

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³ M Craven, C Drew, S Humphreys, A Lang & S Marks, ‘The *London Review of International Law* Begins’ 1 *London Review of International Law* (2013) 1, 4.

