

British Observer Sisley Huddleston's Account of the Opening of the Paris Peace Conference *18 January 1919*

The Peace Conference formally opened on Saturday, January 18th, in the Salle de l'Horloge at the French Foreign Ministry. But for some weeks before there had been a mustering of statesmen from the four corners of the world in Paris, and the French capital, which with its comings and goings of statesmen and generals had for so long been the Capital of the War, was prepared to become the Peace Headquarters.

think that the strongest criticism that can be made of the Allies is that they permitted two months to slip away before they even proceeded to consider the peace which the armistice promised.

There were two things to do, each of which depended on the other. One was to make a temporary treaty which would give us a working relationship with Germany. The other was, not only to make peace in the diplomatic sense, but to pacify Europe. We increased our difficulties with Germany by the long delay. We could in the first flush of victory have imposed our maximum terms almost without protest on the crushed people; and it would have had an excellent effect to modify them later on. But we muddled, because Clemenceau wanted one sort of peace, Lloyd George another, and Wilson a third.

We got in each other's way.

The fact is that the Foreign Offices could not agree. The conflict on the question of admitting Russia was particularly heated between the British and the French. The Quai d'Orsay, which is singularly blind to realities and sometimes allows itself to be manoeuvred by foreign reactionaries, declared hotly against Mr. Lloyd George's and Mr. Balfour's views that Lenin should be invited to make peace and send delegates to Paris.

This inability to come to an accord on the most elementary matters pursued the Allies; and it was no wonder that Mr. Wilson, who had been in France for nearly a month, wasting his time, protesting now and again to M. Clemenceau, grew very impatient, and urged an instant beginning.

At this time the contradiction between the point of view of the American President and that of the French Premier was flat and flagrant. A deadlock was threatened at the outset. The two men remained courteous, but there was certainly no friendly feeling between them.

"If you can persuade me that your plans are better for the peace of the world, I am willing to listen and to learn," said Mr. Wilson. "And if you can persuade me, so much the better," replied M. Clemenceau. "Only - you cannot!"

The scenery, the stage setting, was not very impressive in those rainy days of January, when Paris was drenched in constant showers. There is no season of the year when the city looks more dismal. The leafless boulevards and the wet pavements reflecting faintly at night the feeble illuminations make a picture without colour. But in the busy interiors of the buildings that were devoted to the preparations for peace there was an almost feverish activity.

The Pressmen from all parts of the world gathered in great clouds ready to swarm down upon any one who could furnish them with the smallest tit-bit of information. Motorcars dashed

to and fro under the leaden skies, stopping at the door of this hotel and at the porch of that Government Department.

The last touches were put to the arrangements. The papers stacked in prodigious number were classified. Facts and figures about almost every country in Europe, and statistics about every continent of the world, were available.

In short, the supreme moment had arrived when the most immense consultation of Powers and of peoples that the world has ever seen was about to begin.

If you had occasion to come within the shadow of these buildings, whose placid front concealed such prodigious labour and such stupendous compilations, you felt the gravity of the coming events. There were assembled those upon whose wisdom or folly, upon whose vigilance or blindness, upon whose goodwill or antipathies, the whole future of the world hung.

The fate of mankind was poised by a thread. When you came into the sphere of these proceedings you could not avoid a feeling of awe at the terrible responsibilities shouldered by the statesmen, as they were yesterday shouldered by the captains of the Allies and of their associates.

The British took up their quarters in the Hotel Majestic and in the Hotel Astoria - two huge establishments which are close to the Etoile. The strictest guard was kept, lest there should be a betrayal of secrets. What secrets there were left to betray after the members of the Conference had given away all they knew - except their own quarrels, and those too, wherever it suited them to hint that Mr. So-and-so was preventing an agreement on such-and-such a subject - I really do not know.

For my part, I never learnt of anything of any importance through official channels that I had not known before either by personal contact with some member or through the newspapers. There never was such a ridiculous bogy as this fear of publicity, and I am only surprised that the Press did not laugh it to scorn.

There were not only men from the Foreign Office but men from Scotland Yard, and the emptying of the waste-paper baskets was a highly important business!

In these buildings the delegates lived and worked and played - for the social side of life was developed by the younger folk at the Hotel Majestic. If it was permissible to dance on the eve of Waterloo it was surely permissible to dance on the eve of Versailles; and the amateur theatricals and the concerts and the dinner parties and the afternoon teas in the Hall of the Hotel Majestic made peace-making a fairly pleasant job, provided you were not too busy.

Nevertheless, it is not at all fair to speak scornfully of this army of officials. They really worked after their fashion exceedingly well. They prepared reports, they put the text of documents in shape, they did the fagging for the British team.

Only - the delegates afterwards disregarded what they had done and much of their work was wasted. There was an early outcry about their numbers, but it must be remembered that it was difficult to estimate how large a staff would be required; and, besides, a number came over for only a week or two.

A tribute should be paid to the many girl assistants, who in docketing and filing were superior to the men. Responsible positions were given to women. The uniforms of the young girl messengers soon became familiar to Parisians and were celebrated in song.

Most of the decisions with regard to the methods of procedure were taken in the week preceding the Conference proper. It was arranged that the big Powers alone were to lay down the

general lines and the smaller States to be called in afterwards, while the enemy Powers were to come in at the end of the deliberations to receive their sentences at Versailles.

There was a feeling in some quarters that it would have been better that everybody should have been united in a big conference to agree first on the principles to be applied, and to work out the details in smaller groups. Questions of procedure cannot be regarded as trivial. They have gone very far to make the results of the Conference what they are.

The opening day recalled an event which coloured the subsequent history of Europe. It was the anniversary of that day in 1871 when the German Empire was proclaimed by an army of invasion in the Chateau at Versailles. It was consecrated by the theft of two French provinces, and, as M. Poincare said, was thus vitiated from its origin by the fault of its founders.

Born in injustice, it ended in opprobrium. The scene in the Salon de l'Horloge at the Quai d'Orsay when the seventy delegates met for the first time was an impressive one.

The Salle is magnificent, a suitable setting for the drama which was then begun. Looking out on the swollen Seine was M. Bratianu, the Rumanian Premier, in company with M. Pashitch of Serbia. All the Balkan problems which had been hitherto insoluble seemed to be represented by these two men.

The picturesque figure of the Emir Feysal, son of the King of the Hedjaz, with his flowing turban falling on his shoulders, reminded one of the tremendous differences of opinion and of interests in the Near East. M. Dmowski and M. Kramarcz, from Poland and from Czecho-Slovakia, evoked the difficulties and the troublous times ahead of the new States.

One foresaw the Adriatic quarrel when Baron Sonnino entered. M. Venizelos incarnated Greek aspirations and M. Vandervelde carried us in imagination to suffering Belgium. Marshal Foch, Mr. Wilson, President Poincare, Mr. Lloyd George and M. Clemenceau formed a group whose points of view it seemed hardly possible to reconcile. After all, when one looked and remembered "so many men, so many minds," it seemed hopeless to expect that they could all be satisfied.

I think in view of the subsequent results it is as well to recall the salient passage of M. Poincare's speech.

"You will," he said, "seek nothing but justice - justice that has no favourites - justice in territorial problems, justice in financial problems, justice in economic problems."

"The time is no more when diplomatists could meet to redraw with authority the map of the Empires on the corner of a table. If you are to remake the map of the world it is in the name of the peoples and on condition that you shall faithfully interpret their thoughts and respect the right of nations, small and great, to dispose of themselves, provided that they observe the rights equally sacred of ethical and religious minorities."

"While thus introducing into the world as much harmony as possible, you will, in conformity with the fourteenth of the propositions unanimously adopted by the Great Allied Powers, establish a general League of Nations which will be a supreme guarantee against any fresh assaults upon the right of peoples."

How far has this purpose been fulfilled? He would be a bold man who would pretend that the high mission has been carried out without deflection and without conspicuous failures.

The actual representation of the Powers, big and little, was not settled without many protests, and it is now no secret that great discontent was aroused by the allocation of the number of seats to each nation.

Mr. Lloyd George soon found an opportunity for his gift of conciliation, since there was indeed much that was arbitrary in the arrangements dictated by material interests.

The first intention that Belgium should have fewer representatives than Brazil displeased many commentators. The British delegation was regarded as unfair, since Canada, Australia and India, and other parts of the Empire, helped to strengthen the British point of view.

The question of the Dominions was certainly a difficult one, for they are entirely British, and yet could not be assimilated. It was obvious that separate representation was due for their great and gallant part in the war, but the clear-sighted French observed the preponderance of the British element thus given, and asked for (and were refused) representatives from Algeria, Cochin-China and Morocco.

The Jugo-Slavs, as such, were not to have a place. The Serbians, who, with their neighbours composing the new nation, were to have so much to say with regard to the Italian claims, had two representatives, and could not therefore speak for three nationalities. The differences among the Asiatic nations were even more fundamental.