

INTRODUCTION

From a European perspective, the twentieth century may be defined as the historic era that began with the First World War in 1914 and came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989-1991.

The European system of a balance of power, based on the juxtaposition of sovereign states since 1648 and on competition between nation-states defining their identity in national cultural terms in the nineteenth century, collapsed in the First World War. It perished on the killing fields of Verdun, Ypres and in the trenches running from the Swiss border to Flanders, during four years of cruel and senseless warfare.

From our perspective of post-1989 Europe – after two world wars, East-West division and Cold War – even this statement appears to be open to question. Did the statesmen, who decided on war in 1914, still adhere to the principles of such a security order? Had such an order, characterised by mutual restraint and by carefully balancing power by counter-veiling power, ever been operating in European politics? Can it be maintained that such an order had existed from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 to the second half of the nineteenth century? Can it still be argued that the European balance of power only ceased to function following Italian unification, the Austrian-Prussian war and the proclamation of German unity in Versailles?

The agreed inauguration date for the European balance of power system, the Peace of Westphalia, can hardly be conceived as a product of restraint and a blue-print for a future order. It brought the thirty years war to an end, but no war until the First World War had wrought so much devastation, suffering and chaos as the thirty years religious wars. The “new” order of Westphalia inaugurated a system of juxtaposed sovereign states – the basis for modern international law – but restraint was not its guiding principle.

Its guiding principle was *raison d'état* practised by Richelieu in France, or later *Realpolitik* practised by Germany when it replaced France as the dominant power on the European continent. Both Richelieu and Bismarck would agree that the principle underlying their diplomacy was not restraint but power politics to be no longer restrained by a common moral code. *Raison d'état* or *Realpolitik* meant that states conducted policy in disregard of ethical norms, applicable to normal human relations. Power was their guiding principle and when power politics after the French revolution came to be conducted in the name of nation-states, they generated the very drives – humiliation, nationalism, revenge – that would make a system of balance of power, characterised by mutual restraint, an illusion. The political and military doomsday machine that finally led to the First World War was the outcome and not the failure of *Realpolitik* and *raison d'état*. *Realpolitik* – if ever realistic in competition between sovereigns and dynasties – could only lead to total war in an age of nationalism, technology and mechanised warfare. After the First World War, a European security order could be established only on radically different principles. The fury of the war had been too great to allow for traditional peace treaties, by which the new balance of forces could be written into international law.

Peace-making after the First World War was dominated by three rival concepts for a post-war international order. The victorious West-European powers – Britain and France – wanted to restore the balance of power system, but with a vengeance against Germany and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The United States, which had entered the war in 1917 on the side of the West European Allies, wanted to replace the old European order by a new, democratic world order based on the principles of democracy, collective security and national self-determination. Soviet Russia, which – following the Bolshevik revolution – had made a separate peace with Germany, wanted to promote communist world revolution. The Great War and the Peace-making in Versailles are the subject of our first chapter. As Bolshevik Russia was excluded from the Conference and the Central Powers were to wait for an imposed outcome, the terms of

the Peace Treaties were determined by four Western leaders. What they presented to the world was full of contradictions. American ideas for a new world order found their way into the Covenant of the League of Nations, but were contradicted by the harsh terms imposed upon the Central Powers. The new historic era that began with the Great War, would be an American century, but the United States did not become a member of the new League of Nations.

Left to their own devices, the European powers failed to build a new system for collective security, as is the subject of chapter 2. French and British traditional balance of power policies drove Germany in the arms of Soviet Russia. After Hitler's rise to power, the two Western democracies no longer had sufficient moral strength to resist the totalitarian assaults on the "order of Versailles."

For years, the United States remained aloof of European politics, as will be reviewed in chapter 3. The mood of America toward the European world and an international legal order was both isolationist and ambivalent. When President Roosevelt gradually prepared America for involvement on the side of the Western democracies, he would again, like President Wilson, call upon the American ideals for a new world order.

The Grand Alliance, the subject of chapter 4, was both a necessity and a shocking partnership. Nazi-Germany was defeated and the League of Nations was replaced by a stronger new United Nations Organisation with the United States as its leading member-state. At Yalta and Potsdam, the Western powers could not prevent Stalin from extending totalitarian repression to the Elbe.

The Second World War, won by the Grand Alliance between the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union, left Europe with a "choice" only between two rival designs for world order. The Soviet Union of Stalin in 1936 had given up world revolution in favour of socialism in one country. In 1945 Stalin extended totalitarian rule to Eastern Europe and Eastern Germany. The drive for world revolution was revived as the ideological justification for territorial and totalitarian expansion. The United States took the

lead in organising the free world on the basis of American, Wilsonian principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. Containment of Soviet expansion, the subject of chapter 5, evolved into a dynamic counter-attraction by the organisation of Western cooperation.

The Soviet design for Europe failed, externally because of successful American containment, Western cooperation and European integration; and internally because of successful civil resistance in East and Central Europe. After the crumbling of the Berlin Wall and the transition to democracy in East and Central Europe, Western cooperation according to its American design, appeared to be the model and the attraction for a peaceful international order into the twenty-first century until the "war on terror" would seriously weaken Western cohesion, as we shall review in chapter 6.

Western cooperation in the twentieth century has shown remarkable and surprising resilience and strength. Despite the Cold War, the nuclear arms race, the intellectual temptation of communism and the many foreign policy weaknesses of the democracies, it has survived an extra-ordinary cruel and dangerous century of total war and totalitarian repression.

Still Going Strong?

After the Second World War, the states of Western Europe realised that Europe could be constructed only by mutual agreement, as all other efforts had failed.

After the Second World War, the United States and Western Europe realised that neither *Realpolitik* – a system of power politics – nor a Grand Alliance between democracies and a totalitarian power could assure security and peace in Europe. Security and peace required an alliance of democracies built on Wilsonian principles and joint containment of Soviet expansion.

The end of the Cold War in 1989 confirmed the wisdom of the new post-war policy. The policy of containment, indeed, had been a holding operation. It enabled the United States and

Western Europe to develop Western cooperation, not simply as a defensive Alliance but as a dynamic counter-attraction to the Soviet design for Europe and the world. Neither *Realpolitik* nor East-West détente but Western cooperation, founded on the principles of democracy, individual freedom and the rule of law, made the difference. Its attraction inspired civil resistance in the Soviet system and convinced the states in East and Central Europe after their liberation that their security requires participation in Western cooperation and European unification.

The way in which the United States responded to “9/11” with the declaration of a “War on Terror” may well have weakened Western strength and attraction. Still, America is a country capable of re-inventing itself as the world could observe when Barack Hussein Obama was sworn in as President on 20 January 2009.