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mag. hist.

The Paris Conference as a Meeting Place of Cultures, Ideas, and Civilizations – An Interview with Professor Michael S. Neiberg

Professor Michael S. Neiberg
(foto: autor)

About Prof. Neiberg:

Professor Michael S. Neiberg is an American historian, currently Professor of History and the Chair of War Studies at the US Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He is well known for his studies of the First and Second World Wars, the Treaty of Versailles, and twentieth-century military history. Professor Neiberg has been a Guggenheim fellow, a founding member of the Société Internationale d'Étude de la Grande Guerre, and a trustee of the Society for Military History. Some of his famous works include *The Treaty of Versailles:*

A Concise History, *The Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America*, *Potsdam: The End of World War II and the Remaking of Europe*, *The Blood of Free Men: The Liberation of Paris, 1944*, *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of War in 1914*, *The Western Front, 1914-1916*, etc. His latest book is *When France Fell: The Vichy Crisis and the Fate of the Anglo-American Alliance.*

1. The Peace Conference in Paris after the First World War was a significant event for both warring sides. In 1919, Paris became the capital city of Europe and the entire world. Politicians, diplomats, statesmen, soldiers, and journalists came to Paris just to be a part of the Peace Conference. In terms of size and importance for the post-war world, can we compare the Paris Peace Conference with any conference held before or after it?

I don't think so. The Paris Peace Conference went on for six months; it touched on every part of the world. People from every part of the world came – journalists, observers, people like Ho Chi Minh, and an incredible collection of people were there. There had been no peace conference before that in terms of size and importance. The Congress in Vienna wasn't even close to the size, the glamour, the attraction to journalists of this one. This was something quite different, never done before and notably never done again since.

2. We can't speak of Versailles without mentioning the so-called Big Three if we put aside Vittorio Orlando, so: David Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, and Woodrow Wilson. They decided on every important issue at the Peace Conference. How much say in the decision-making process did the smaller states and their delegations have? Did great powers and the Big Three decide about their afterwar destinies, of course, considering their own political goals?

There were some occasions where the smaller states had an outsize role. Japan, which was not a small power, but didn't participate so much in the First World War, had enough power and influence to get its voice heard. Romania did extremely well, partly because its diplomats were on the same page as the great powers and they knew what they were trying to accomplish. A larger Romania better fit in with British and French interests by serving as a kind of bulwark to the Russians. However, I think you can argue that, in general terms, it was British, French, and American interests that dominated. Not that they always agreed on what those interests were, but they had the sufficient economic, military, and political power to redraw the borders of Europe, to recreate the natures of governments in Europe. They had a tremendous amount of power. So, the minor states were able to influence the system only to the extent that they could work through the great powers in most cases.

3. Different cultures and civilizations from all over the world came to Paris – from Japan to the United States. Culture and cultural heritage in Paris were associated with political messages, and perhaps the most famous example is the dressing of T. E. Lawrence in a traditional Arab

costume. What did Lawrence want to achieve with it? How did other powers, especially Britain, view Lawrence's behavior?

T. E. Lawrence had a vision of an independent Arab federation of states under Faisal and his family. When he found out about the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided the Middle East between the British and the French, he was furious. He saw it as a betrayal of everything that the British had promised to the Arabs. So, he came to Versailles dressed in an Arab headdress to make the point that the British had made promises to the Arabs through something called McMahon-Hussein Correspondence. Lawrence wanted Britain to honor those obligations and not see the Arab parts of the Ottoman Empire merely as pieces to add to the British Empire.

Most British officials thought that Lawrence had gone native and identified too much with Arab interests and not enough with British imperial interests. The photograph of him and Faisal in Versailles is one of the most reproduced from the Conference. There is Lawrence in his British uniform with an Arab headdress kind of showing the two sides of his personality and the things that he was trying to accomplish.

4. At the Peace Conference, it can be noticed a kind of conflict between Western and Eastern civilizations. This is best illustrated in Japan's Racial Equality Proposal, which the so-called civilized West rejected. What are the reasons for rejecting the Racial Equality Proposal? How did West civilization treat East civilization at the Peace Conference?

If Great Britain and France had accepted the Racial Equality Clause then many arguments in their Empires would have been undermined. So, they couldn't accept the Clause because then they couldn't justify governing large parts of Asia and Africa. Woodrow Wilson's political system in the United States was, of course, based on racial segregation as well so he couldn't accept it either. There was an attitude that Woodrow Wilson personified better than anybody else. He argued that some states had reached the level where rights and privileges like self-government belong to them, but some states aren't there yet. There is a way to understand Woodrow Wilson, especially through racialized and racist lenses that make something like the Racial Equality Clause a very important symbol. It is also true that the Japanese were sure that the British, the Americans, and the French would never be able to accept the Racial Equality Clause. So, they knew when the West rejected it, they could go to people in Asia and say: 'See, these people aren't fighting for principles, they are fighting for the same Imperialism they are always fighting for.'

The security issue in East Asia was at the heart of the problem between the West and the East. One issue is what will happen to former German possessions in East Asia and the most controversial of these in the United States is the Shandong peninsula, which had been under German control before the First World War. Japan wanted to take control of it, but most Americans wanted to see it come under Chinese control because if one follows the principle of self-determination, it is Chinese. Nevertheless, Woodrow Wilson wanted to give it to the Japanese, which caused tremendous anger among American

politicians. Many of them considered resigning, while others were completely disillusioned. The other issue is the future status of China. China itself had just come out of the revolution and it was not a nation-state in a sustained sense because of warlordism, where various regions were controlled by warlords. Plenty of people in Europe saw warlordism as a potential cause for massive instability in East Asia. So, East Asia was a major concern at the Paris Peace Conference, especially if the Soviet Union and Bolsheviks began to move their interest down in Asia. It was a region that people recognized from the start could be very unstable, but they couldn't agree on what their response should be and how they should solve that problem.

5. US military aid near the end of the war can't be ignored. What was the perception of that war by the American general public before and during the American intervention? Did they think that war is a European problem or the world's problem? Can we pinpoint the event that pushed the United States into the First World War?

Until early 1917, most Americans were content to see the war as a European problem. The Zimmermann telegram changed that because Germany wanted an alliance with Mexico and Japan against the United States. Then the war became about the United States. Other events happened in spring 1917, such as the Russian Revolution, which is important. I think that by the spring of 1917, even if Americans weren't fully enthusiastic about the war, the majority had concluded that neutrality was not working and that they needed to be involved. Where they disagreed quite strongly was what the American position should be at the end of the war. Should the United States do what Woodrow Wilson wanted to do and remake the entire world from the ground up or should the Americans say: 'We have secured our safety from the Germans who were the real enemy here. What happens after is something we don't want to have a major role in, and we don't want to do it through something multilateral like the League of Nations.' So, you can think about it like an hourglass. There was a great disagreement in 1914 when the war began. By the time you get to the spring of 1917, those options had narrowed significantly, and as soon as you get to the end of the war in 1918, the options of what to do open up again. Therefore, the fight about the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations was so intense in the United States.

6. Can we say that the United States is the only real winner in the First World War if we consider that the United States took Great Britain's place as the only real-world power?

The only other country, besides the United States, you want to put as the only real winner in the First World War is Japan, which emerged from the war with very weakened states around it. Japan also developed an imperial ideology that the Japanese prefer to call co-prosperity that can run through Tokyo and not just through London, Paris, and Berlin anymore. So, there is a way that you can see that as a geopolitical win for the United States and Japan. But I like Churchill's phrase that victory and defeat come to look so much like one

another that it can become hard to tell the difference. There were plenty of Americans who came out of the First World War believing that the United States had lost. They put so many people and so much money into a cause, but the political process of making peace had made the world less safe and that had to be understood as a loss. That's where you begin to understand the motives of American isolationism.

7. Until Paris, American presidents did not interfere in the world or European events, and they didn't travel outside the United States so much. How did American citizens and politicians view Woodrow Wilson's departure for the Paris Peace Conference?

Woodrow Wilson's departure for the Paris Peace Conference was a definitive change. There was a majority who supported Wilson and thought that it was a good idea that he went to Paris, but they did not expect him to stay there for six months. Those who objected thought that this was inappropriate for the president, and the Republican presidents that followed Wilson in the 1920s were careful not to do anything that looked like this. It remained a point of contention for a very long time inside the United States, but it is certainly not a point of contention anymore because American presidents are expected to travel, engage, and represent the United States to the world personally. However, in that period it was expected that lower-level officials, even below secretary of state, would represent the United States in Paris. It was a major symbol that Woodrow Wilson was trying to send that the United States was present, that it would be involved, and that the United States would be involved at the highest levels. Nevertheless, it was controversial when he did it.

8. One of the most important documents of the Peace Conference was Wilson's 14 points. Does this document outline Wilson's idealized view of the world, or was its realization possible at that moment in history? Did his idea of self-determination create more conflicts than it needed to resolve?

The 14 points came before the Peace Conference began. I think it was a statement of Woodrow Wilson's strategic war aims and what he wanted to fight for. It was controversial from the beginning. Georges Clemenceau, the French prime minister, famously said: 'God Himself was content to give us just 10 points.' There were many things in it that Europeans didn't like.

I tend to think that Wilson came to Europe with a very misguided view of what Europe was and what it had been for the last century. He came with a very American viewpoint that if you created states that reflected the will of the people and were based on written constitutions that looked like the American Constitution that everything would be fine. Vittorio Orlando, the Italian statesman, yelled at him at one point and said: 'Go try this in the Balkans!'. It simply won't work. So, I think Wilson came in with an attitude that can be described as arrogant or self-important that if you had reformed these European states on the American models, you could have at least temper down the kinds of conflicts that created the First World War in the first place. He wasn't so much wrong as completely misunderstanding the situation that he was trying to deal with.

The question of national self-determination sounded good as a principle, but once the great powers of Europe started to try and figure out where Poland began and ended, what people deserved to have their nation-states, and what people didn't, then they started to run into real problems. The group that probably suffered from this the most were European Jews which not only didn't get their state, but they didn't end up with real political representation in any state, so the post-war period became a very nationalistic period where you had groups like European Jews who were outside that process. So, the idea of national self-determination seemed very good as a statement of interest, but it was very difficult to do on the ground.

9. How was the Peace Conference perceived by the wider American public? Was the Peace Conference important to Americans? Was the news from Paris followed with anticipation?

Americans followed what was going on in Paris very closely. Some of them liked the ideas that Wilson was putting forward, but many were very unhappy. Theodore Roosevelt, the former US president, and a very important man in the US Senate Henry Cabot Lodge were adamantly opposed to what Wilson was doing. Right from the beginning, there was a moment where Wilson understood that it was one thing to get a diplomatic agreement with Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and the other diplomats, but then he'd have to convince the US Senate to ratify this Treaty as the Constitution requires. That is going to be a much more difficult process. Many historians believe he attempted to get the American peoples' support so that they would pressure their Senators to support the Treaty. That led to a series of strokes that Wilson had right at the end of his second administration. So, yes, Americans were following very carefully what was going on in Paris, but not all of them approved of what he was doing.

10. Were American politicians satisfied with the Treaty of Versailles? Why did the U.S. Congress refuse to ratify the Treaty? Did Versailles push the United States toward isolationism?

There were several objections to the Treaty of Versailles. Some of them, when you look back from the hundred years, looked legitimate, and some of them were political because people didn't like Wilson, so they chose not to like the Treaty. But there were some legitimate objections. There was no protection for the Monroe Doctrine and America's self-proclaimed right in Latin America. Henry Cabot Lodge argued that the Treaty was unconstitutional because the League of Nations could commit American forces to one side of a conflict, and it could order American troops into a conflict. Lodge argued that the only body that can do that by the US Constitution is the US Congress. There were those in the US who went by the name of "Irreconcilables" who refused to sign the Treaty under any circumstances, and there was a substantial group of people who said that if Wilson went back to the Europeans and renegotiated parts of it, they would be open to considering it. So, there were three general groups of people: those who were for it the way it was written, those who were against it the way it was written, and those who wanted to see it revised. It is hard to

know how big those groups were, but it certainly seems that, without revising the text of the Treaty there was not enough support to get it to go through.

The concept of isolation was an important one. That term in 1919 and the early 1920s didn't mean to ignore the outside world and pretend it wasn't there. That term meant something more like what we would call unilateralism - that the US would operate in the world in the way it wanted to, ignoring things like the League of Nations and multilateral frameworks, and there is even a story which I can't confirm that the White House returned all mail that came from the League of Nations back to Geneva unopened. They wanted to say that the US doesn't want to have anything to do with this multilateral approach to foreign affairs. This is part of the American viewpoint toward the outside world even today – how much the US should solve problems by itself and how much the US should be involved with groups like the World Health Organization, the United Nations, the World Trade Organization. The United Nations after the Second World War was far less controversial to Americans because it contained the Security Council veto system, but in 1919, maybe most Americans did not want to belong to an organization that could tell them what to do.

11. Almost four years have already passed since the centenary commemoration of the First World War and Peace Conference in Paris, which has been marked by numerous commemorations, scientific papers, books, and congresses. Has the American general public expressed an interest in the First World War and Peace Conference in Paris on this occasion and did that interest decline almost four years after commemoration?

We had several very nice events here in the United States – academic and a few public events. I attended many events in local libraries and talked with general audiences and people who wanted to know more about the First World War and Paris Peace Conference. I think COVID stopped the momentum of all of that and the nature of American politics in the last few years drew much attention away as well. So, if you went into the bookstore for a while, you might have seen displays of First World War books, but very quickly they were about the American election and COVID. I'm not sure how successful we as a group of scholars were in changing the viewpoint of Americans about the war, although I do think we are starting to see a more sophisticated understanding. We are starting to see people no longer attempting to divide the First World War from the Second World War, looking at the one as a tragedy, and the other as a success. The passage of time certainly helps with that. I think all of that is natural and normal, but we historians sometimes complain about it. The First World War is worth studying whether there is a centennial coming up or not, but centennials do have the capacity to focus people's attention.

12. What is the legacy of the Treaty of Versailles throughout the rest of the 20th century? Is the Peace Conference in Paris relevant for today's Europe, the World, and the United States?

The significance of this debate over the Treaty of Versailles does open questions that you will see in every American and political debate about the way

America should interact with the rest of the world. Should the US do so through multinational organizations, or should we do it unfettered by those organizations? Both points of view exist today. Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations brought that debate to the forefront of American politics. There was a point during the Cold War where most Americans agreed it was best to be multilateral as long as we can control those multilateral organizations so that NATO or the UN can't harm the US. Now we are seeing a new discussion that some of these multinational organizations are not consistent with American interests and that America might be better off operating on its own. That is surely one legacy of the Treaty of Versailles. The other legacy – as I argued in a book about the Potsdam Conference in 1945 – is that American politicians stopped ending wars with big treaties because it meant a fight with the Senate, compromise, and other problems. So, Potsdam didn't produce a postwar treaty the way the First World War did and there have been no postwar treaties ending wars since 1945 because in American law a treaty has to be approved by the US Senate. It is just easier not to do it that way. The Iran nuclear agreement that is being negotiated right now is a case of this problem. The Obama administration defined it as a treaty. That meant that the US Senate can interfere with it, which it did. So, there has been a debate about the best way to legally end a conflict. As a result of Versailles, we don't end it with a formal treaty document anymore.

The Peace Conference in Paris is relevant for today's Europe, the world, and the United States. It established the modern American relationship with the rest of the world that we are still dealing with one hundred years later. The fundamental issues of how you form a state, how you decide what the constitutionality of that state should be, what kind of government should the state have, how much interference should one state be able to have in another state – these are all questions that the Treaty of Versailles opened up. The Treaty of Versailles also dealt with labor issues, environmental issues, agricultural issues, and so on. All of those questions were opened up by the Treaty of Versailles and remain a part of our political discourse now.

13. If we take everything we discussed about the Peace Conference in Versailles into account, can we say that the Peace Conference was truly a meeting place of cultures, ideas, and civilizations in 1919?

There is no doubt about that! People from literally all over the world were there because they tried to either learn more about what was happening in Paris or tried to influence what was going on in Paris. Some of the most famous people of that time were there like John Maynard Keynes, the great British economist who will return to the Potsdam Conference at the end of the Second World War, Ho Chi Minh was there, and so on. It is a truly important event in history, and I think it is worth revisiting it, thinking about it, and studying it.

Pro Tempore

ČASOPIS STUDENATA POVIJESTI BROJ 17 2022.

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**Časopis studenata povijesti,
godina XVII, broj 17, 2022.**

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Tisak
Studio Moderna d.o.o.

Naklada
Tiskano u 100 primjeraka.

ISSN: 1334-8302

Izdavanje ovog časopisa financirano je novcem dobivenim na natječaju za studentske projekte Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu i sredstvima koje je ustupio Odsjek za povijest Filozofskog fakulteta.

Redakcija časopisa Pro tempore iskreno zahvaljuje Odsjeku na financijskoj podršci.

Časopis se ne naplaćuje.

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